

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Anonymous, ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*** (ca. 1375-1400) (A, 112-164)

Of the author of *Sir Gawain* we know as little as of the author of *Piers Plowman*. What conclusions we can draw are again based on linguistic evidence, and point to the area of the northwest midlands. From the tale the author creates here, in the alliterative verse which roots this English in the traditions which predate the Norman Conquest—the dividing line (1066 A.D.) separating Anglo-Saxon from Anglo-Norman England—we see that the author is deeply engrained in the Arthurian traditions which ruled much of mediaeval literature. Arthur and his Knights, in their ancestral home of Camelot, maintain the twin traditions of chivalry and knighthood, under the sign of the Cross and the Holy Virgin.

Question: Honor and Quest in the High Middle Ages

The question of the day is: *What is Sir Gawain really in search of? Why does he accept the original Beheading proposal, and who after all is the Green Knight?* The pentangle on Gawain's shield is a pointer toward *the truth*, the driving concept for this courteous chivalric knight, a kind of paragon of the values of his time. (Truth, as you see, means both the way things are and, in the sense of that time, *troth*, fidelity or trust—in this case to the True Religion and to King Arthur's court.) The lovely seductress tries in vain to win Gawain away from his purpose, though in the end he triumphs. *But over what? And to what avail?*

Comparative Literature: The place of Christianity in the text before u

1. The place of the Christian religion, in the thinking and writing of the Middle Ages, cannot be overstated. We have already encountered the Christian world in the Pardoner, the Nun's Priest, and the Parson of Chaucer; in all which tales there runs a thread of irony; in *Piers Plowman*, and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For further understanding, of how Christianity integrates into mediaeval literature, you might want to look at the scholarly work of C.S. Lewis, himself a Christian and mediaeval scholar. (Cf. *The Discarded Image*; Cambridge, 1964).

2. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* invokes what literary scholars have often called archetypal patterns; in this case, say, the patterns of the heroic chivalric quest, that of Gawain, and of the ritual beheading and survival of the Green Knight. These patterns are typical lines of narrative, which occur in multiple texts and which seem to derive from fundamental forms of human experience. Suggestion: look into the notion of archetypal forms in literature, both as they are discussed in the psychologist Carl Jung, and in the critical classic by Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (1934).