

The Medieval Period, Day Seven

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Vote for how to use the Website!

Create a profile and post your choice by next Tuesday (Oct 3).

- A. The choice of how to use the student profiles space could be left undefined—each student could do what he or she thinks would contribute most to both personal and classmates' learning
- B. Each student could use her or his profile space to keep a running log of responses to and questions about each week's reading, and comment on each others' logs
- C. Each student can choose and assemble an on-line presentation of a relevant topic

Syllabus Change!

No comparison reading will be assigned.

Instead read both Parts III and IV for Thursday.

Re-read the poem for Tuesday.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

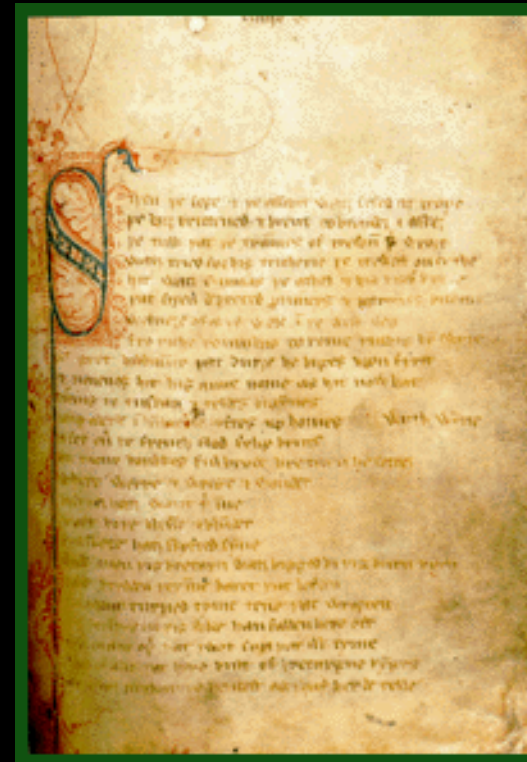
- At the beginning is the past...
 - What is the past of *SGGK*?
 - How does it compare to the past in *Beowulf*, the *Chronicle*, and *The Life of Saint Margaret* ?
 - What mood does this invocation of the past set for the poem?

Inventing Gawain

- Gawain/Wawain might have originally been the name of an Irish hero, passed on through Welsh tradition as Gwalchmai [May Hawk] or Gwalchwyn [White Hawk].
- 8-9th c. Irish epic *Fled Bricrend* [*Bricriu's Feast*] features beheading game between Cuchulain and Uath [Terror], who is described as a *bachlach* [churl]. Father of Cuchulain is Lug (Welsh Lloch, English Lot).
- Gwalchmai is the hero of Bleheris's Welsh poetry (now lost).
- 12-13th c. French romance *Livre de Caradoc* there is another instance of the beheading game, very similar to the one in *SGGK*
- Other 12th c. French Arthurian romances by Chretien de Troyes feature Gawain as a character
- 12th c. British chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth ranks Gawain first among Arthur's knights. William of Malmesbury (d. 1143) claims Gawain's tomb is in Pembrokeshire.

Looking at British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.X.3

SIPEN þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,
þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondez and askez,
þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt
Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe:
Hit watz Ennias þe athel, and his highe kynde,
þat siþen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicom
Welneȝe of al þe wele in þe west iles.
Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyþe,
With gret bobbaunce þat burȝe he biges vpon fyrst,
And neuenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;
Tirius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes,
Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes,
And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus
On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez
 wyth wyne,
Where werre and wrake and wonder
Bi syþez hatz wont þerinne,
And oft boþe blysse and blunder
Ful skete hatz skyfted synne.



Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

■ Manuscript Form

British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.X.3

Single manuscript, with *Pearl*, *Patience*, *Sir Orfeo*

No given title

Order of the Garter's French Motto written at end:

“Hony Soyt Qui Male Pence”

[“shame be on one who thinks ill of this”]

Order of the Garter

Edward III founds order c.1347

Formally constituted for coronation
of Henry IV in 1399

Revived in 18th c.

Today, 24 knights plus
the monarch



Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

- Genre
 - Romance (Breton Lay)
- Form
 - Alliteration + Rhyme
 - Stanza shape: Bob and Wheel
 - Irregular Line and Stanza Length, 101 Stanzas
- Language:
 - Dialect of Midlands (Cheshire and Lancashire) vs. Southeast England (London and Westminster)
 - Middle English vs. Modern Translation

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Middle English, Stanza II end

If ȝe wyl lysten þis laye bot on littel quile,

I schal telle hit astit, as I in toun herde,

with tonge,

As hit is stad and stoken

In stori stif and stronge,

With lel letteres loken,

In londe so hatz ben longe.

Tolkein's Translation, Stanza II end

If you will listen to this lay but a little while now,

I will tell it at once as in town I have heard

it told,

as it is fixed and fettered

in story brave and bold,

thus linked and truly lettered,

as was loved in this land of old.

What Happens?

■ Part I (stanzas 1-21)

The poet explains that since Brutus founded Britain, it has had no more honored king than Arthur, and this lay will tell of his court's wildest adventure. The Green Knight enters right before a Christmas feast at Arthur's court and proposes an exchange of blows with his axe, mocking the court when no one immediately accepts. Arthur steps forth but Gawain requests the challenge. He swears to seek the Green Knight and bear a return blow a year and a day later if the Green Knight tells him where to seek after Gawain deals him a blow. Gawain slices off the Green Knight's head with the axe; the Knight picks up his head and tells Gawain to seek his return blows at the Green Chapel a year later on New Year's day before riding away. Arthur's court hangs the axe upon the wall and feasts.

■ Part II (stanzas 22-45)

Seasons pass. After All Hallows' Eve, Gawain arms himself, attends mass, and sets out to seek the Green Knight. He bears the symbolic pentangle on his shield. He travels through wild lands, fighting on the way, and asking everyone where he can find the Green Chapel. Alone on Christmas Eve, he prays for a night's lodging where he can attend Christmas Mass and crosses himself three times. He then sees a strong castle, is admitted by the porter, and welcomed by the lord. At dinner he reveals he has come from Arthur's court, in the chapel, he meets the lady of the castle with her companion. They talk by the fire and the lord organizes games to amuse his guest. Gawain sits beside the lady at the feast on Christmas day but tells the lord he cannot stay as he must seek the Green Chapel. The lord informs him that the Green Chapel less than a day away and Gawain agrees to stay. The lord tells Gawain to stay in the castle with the lady, while the lord hunts, with the condition that they exchange with each other at night what each one gains during the day.



What does the pentangle represent?

Stanzas 27-28

1. five senses
2. five fingers
3. five wounds of Christ
4. five joys of Mary
5. five virtues: free-giving, friendliness, chastity, chivalry, piety

Next Time: Group Work!

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

