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The Poet and His Background

The poems

For the purposes of this book, the phrase ‘the Gawain-poet’ means the author (or conceivably authors)\(^1\) of the four poems which make up British Museum MS Cotton Nero A. x, art. 3. None of the four poems is known in any other manuscript; they are anonymous, and no author’s name can convincingly be attached to them; there are no contemporary references to them;\(^2\) and so, but for the chance survival of this single manuscript, we should not even know of the existence of what are generally agreed to be four poems among the finest in Middle English literature. In the manuscript the poems are without titles, but since they were first printed by the nineteenth-century scholars Sir Frederick Madden and Richard Morris they have generally been known as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, *Purity* (also called *Cleanness*), and *Patience*. All four are written in alliterative verse, but there are great differences among them in literary form. *Patience* and *Purity* are written continuously in long unrhymed alliterative lines, which sometimes seem to fall naturally into groups of four.\(^3\) *Pearl* is in shorter alliterative lines divided into intricately rhymed twelve-line stanzas, the stanzas in turn being linked into groups of five by repetitions of words and phrases. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is once more in long unrhymed lines, but these are divided into groups of irregular length, each concluding

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\(^1\) See below, pp. 32–40.

\(^2\) There is no reason to suppose that the ‘Anteris of Gawane’ mentioned by Andrew of Wyntoun in about 1420 as being by ‘Huchown of the Awle Ryale’ is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For this suggestion, see G. Neilson, *Huchown of the Awle Ryale* (Glasgow, 1902).

\(^3\) In the manuscript quatrains are marked off by ticks in the margin, and the division into quatrains is retained by some editors. But I do not believe that the poems themselves fall into quatrains regularly enough to justify this. For discussion, see M. Kaluza, ‘Strophische gliederung in der mittelenglischen rein alliterirenden dichtung’, *Englische Studien*, xvi (1891–2), 169–80; and Mabel Day, ‘Strophic Division in Middle English Alliterative Verse’, *ibid.*, lxvi (1931–2), 245–8.
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with five short rhymed lines (the ‘bob and wheel’). The poems also differ considerably in their subject-matter. Here, too, Patience and Purity stand together, each being a homily concerned with the virtue of its title, but illustrating it chiefly through examples taken from Scripture of the opposite vice. But whereas Patience is only 531 lines long, and deals solely with the story of Jonah and the whale, Purity has 1,811 lines and takes in three main stories exemplifying the punishment of impurity, namely Noah and the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Belshazzar’s feast. Pearl belongs to a quite different medieval genre, that of the dream-poem, and gives what purports to be a first-person account of a vision of the other world, in which the narrator meets again a maiden from whom he has been separated by death. It is 1,212 lines long. And Sir Gawain and the Green Knight belongs to yet another medieval genre, that of chivalric romance. It is 2,530 lines long, and it tells of Gawain’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge to a beheading game, of his temptation in a strange castle, and of the unexpected dénouement in which these two stories are linked.

The manuscript containing these four poems is generally dated at about 1400. All four are written in the same hand, but the number of scribal errors makes it impossible to suppose that this is the author’s. The dating of their language is difficult, but it probably belongs to the second half of the fourteenth century. The late fourteenth century is also suggested by such internal evidence as the costumes, furnishings, armour and architecture described in the poems. All in all we may assume that the poems date from, say, the period 1360–95.1 This is to say that they belong to the greatest period of medieval English literature, that great flowering in the second half of the fourteenth century which includes Chaucer, Langland, and Gower: the period when, for the first time since the Norman Conquest, there existed a cultivated English reading public which would support the production of imaginative literature written in its own language. One aspect of this fourteenth-century development was the movement known as the Alliterative Revival. From about 1340–50 onwards we find, alongside the rhyming, metrical poetry written in the South East by poets such as Chaucer and Gower, a considerable number of poems, mostly anonymous, written in largely unrhymed alliterative verse, and originating in areas more to the North and West. The best-known and probably, in its own time, the most

1 These are the limits suggested by E. V. Gordon, ed. Pearl, p. xlv.
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popular of these is *Piers Plowman* by William Langland, a Westcountryman writing in London. Among other major works in alliterative verse, all dating from this period, are *Winner and Waster, The Parliament of the Three Ages, William of Palerne, The Wars of Alexander, The Destruction of Troy*, and the *Morte Arthure*. All of these, except possibly the last, seem to derive from the West-Midland area, and it is almost certain that the *Gawain*-poet also wrote in that area. For some time scholars have been agreed that the dialect of all four poems is the same, and that it belongs to the North-West Midlands (that is, roughly, the area including South Lancashire, Cheshire, West Derbyshire, Staffordshire and Shropshire). The Green Chapel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* appears to be in this area, and the poet shows some knowledge of its topography. The earliest known owner of the manuscript is Henry Saville, a sixteenth-century gentleman from Yorkshire, which is near the right part of the country. More recently, Professor Angus McIntosh has argued that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be more narrowly localized as belonging to ‘a very small area either in S.E. Cheshire or just over the border in N.E. Staffordshire’.

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These poems, then, originate in an area remote from the metropolis and from the cultural influences which, especially under Richard II, radiated from the royal court, and they are written in a dialect and a type of verse which belonged to their own locality. A modern reader might well suppose that such poems could only be clumsily provincial pieces of work, possessing, no doubt, their own local strengths, but essentially naïve and unsophisticated. Some medieval readers might have shared this supposition. John of Trevisa, a Cornishman writing in 1387, shows to what a striking extent the cultural magnetism and cultural snobbery of London and the South already existed in the fourteenth century. He writes:

Al the longage of the Northhombres [i.e. Northerners], and specialych at York, ys so scharp, slyttyng, and frotyng, and unschape, that we Southeron men may that longage unnethe understonde. Y trowe that that ys because that a bath nygh to strange men and aliens, that speketh strangelych, and

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also bycause that the kynges of Engelond woneth alwey fer fram that contray; for a buth more yturnd to the south contray, and yef a goth to the north contray, a goth with gret help and strengthe. The cause why a buth more in the south contray than in the north may be betre cornlond, more people, more noble cytés, and more profytably havenes.¹

Chaucer too was likely enough to dismiss a town or village in this barbarian North as being ‘Fer in the north, I can nat telle where’, and to look on an inability to compose alliterative verse as being a natural and indeed admirable characteristic in a southerner:

But trusteth wel, I am a Southren man,
I kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf,’ by lettre.²

In point of fact, however, this persistent anti-northern prejudice is a poor guide to the true nature of the Gawain-poet’s work. To us, writing in northern dialect implies a deliberate provincialism, which, even if chosen out of affection rather than contempt, suggests a patronizing attitude towards what may patronizingly be called local ‘culture’—an attitude like that expressed by the editor of the first separate edition of Patience:

It is necessary to harmonise our feelings with the atmosphere of the story or to approach it as a tale of wonder. Animated by such a sympathy, those who delight in the naïve charm of happy primitive faith will read with novel interest the story of Jonah related over five centuries ago by a Lancashire poet.³

In the fourteenth century it was still possible for dialects other than that of London to be literary languages, at least in their own areas, and to be written not, as another editor of Patience suggested, for ‘simple folk’,⁴ but to create works of high art for aristocratic patrons. There is direct evidence to this effect in the case of one poem of the Alliterative Revival, William of Palerne. This is a romance translated from the French, and the translator both near the beginning and again at the end asks his audience to pray for the ‘Erl of Herford, Sir Humfray de Bowne’:

² In the first quotation the speaker is the Reeve (Canterbury Tales, i [1], line 4015); in the second, the Parson (Canterbury Tales, x [1], 42–3).
³ Patience, p. vii. This passage is reprinted from the first edition of 1912.
⁴ Patience, ed. I. Gollancz (London, 1913), gathering B, f. 4v.
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For he of Frenshe this fayre tale fercst dede translate,
In ese of Englysch men in Englysch speche.¹

The Bohun family are known as patrons of fine manuscripts, some of which still survive; alliterative poems, too, were evidently among the luxury objects with which such fourteenth-century aristocrats brought beauty and entertainment to the lives of their families and courts. In general, there is every reason to suppose that the Alliterative Revival was fostered in the courts of great aristocrats of the West Midlands—men who may also, like the most powerful of them all, John of Gaunt, have held estates in other parts of the country, and have been closely in touch with the royal court in London.² About such provincial art there was nothing unsophisticated. We cannot place the work of the Gawain-poet in any specific court, as we can William of Palerne, but there is plenty of evidence in the poems themselves to indicate the courtliness of their milieu.

One kind of evidence lies in the nature of the manuscript itself. It is not a lavish example of scribal and pictorial art, like the surviving Bohun manuscripts, or like some English literary manuscripts of the early fifteenth century—the Ellesmere Canterbury Tales, for example, or the Corpus Christi Troilus and Cresside. It is workmanlike without being elegant; but it does contain no fewer than twelve illuminations. These in turn are somewhat careless and clumsy, and are sometimes very closely related to the passages they are supposed to illustrate—the one showing the Green Knight’s arrival at Camelot, for example, does not depict either his greenness or his long hair. But Father Gervase Mathew has convincingly argued that the very presence of these illuminations suggests that the manuscript we have is a copy of something grander, something more like the Bohun manuscripts:³

Only the illuminations suggest the kind of manuscript of which it is a copy: slovenly executed, with figure-work curiously out of proportion, they are yet obviously related to the new experiments in the representation of natural scenery and of architectural background which marked sophisticated French court art at the turn of the century; they can be best explained as the clumsy copies of larger illuminations in a contemporary manuscript

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de luxe. On such an hypothesis the lost original behind the Gawain manuscript was...commissioned by a magnate of wealth.

We do not really need, however, even to look at the manuscript in order to see that it belongs to the courtly culture of fourteenth-century England (which was only part of an international culture radiating from the great courts of Western Europe). The poems themselves show everywhere a confident and detailed knowledge of courtly ways of life. We can see this at its most obvious in their treatment of the externals of life. Even when they are dealing with the remote world of the Old Testament, these poems, like all the art of the Middle Ages, ‘medievalize’ it—not deliberately, of course, but because medieval people imagined the past almost entirely in terms of the present. The past, then, is brought up to date, depicted in terms of the social world known to the artist and his public. The world depicted in the Gawain-poet’s work is frequently that of courts: of King Arthur and Sir Bertilak in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (a pair of courts, one southern and one northern, tantalizingly suggestive of those of Richard II and of whichever lord was the poet’s patron); of Belshazzar in Purity; and the ‘court of the kyndom of God alyve’ (445) in Pearl. This last may surprise us; but the poet, in a way characteristic of the Middle Ages, persistently sees heaven itself as an ideal court, the ideal of which earthly courts are imperfect copies. This is seen most explicitly in Purity:

He is so clene in his horte, the Kyng that al weldez,
And honeste in his housholde and hagherlych served,
With angelez enorled in alle that is clene,
Both wythinne and wythouten, in wedez ful bryght. (17–20)

In these courts described by the Gawain-poet, every detail rings true. What he offers is not the debased and exaggerated view of aristocratic life, seen from below stairs, that we find in medieval popular romances of the kind Chaucer parodies in Sir Thopas; it is the view of someone who knows courtly life through and through, and whose picture can be confirmed in detail not only from other works of art such as manuscript illuminations but also from hald contemporary records of aristocratic life such as the Registers of John of Gaunt.\(^1\) We find this in the detailed descriptions of clothing and armour, especially in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; or in

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such details as the description of Sir Bertilak’s castle when Sir Gawain first sees it, glimpsed amid the forest, ‘As hit schemered and schon thurgh the schyre okez’ (772). It is a castle in the latest French fashion, elaborately pinnacled and chimneyled, exactly like the one in the illustration of September in the *Tres riches heures du duc de Berry*.

A similar knowledge is shown in the descriptions of great feasts in *Purity* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The reader who knows anything of the Gawain-poet’s work will remember the feasts at Camelot and at Sir Bertilak’s castle, and so I quote instead the less familiar but no less brilliant description of Belshazzar’s feast in *Purity*:

> When alle segges were ther set, then servyse bygynnynes,
> Sternen trumpen strake steven in halle,
> Aywhere by the wowes wrasten krakkes,
> And brode baneres therbi blusnande of gold;
> Burnes berande the bredes upon brode skesles,
> That were of sylveren syght, and served therwyth,
> Lyfte logges therover and on lote corven,
> Pared out of paper and poynted of golde,
> Brothe baboynes abof, besttes anunder,
> Foles in foler flakerende bitwene,
> And al in asure and ynde enaumayld ryche,
> And al on blonkken bak bere hit on honde.
> And ay the nakeryn noyse, notes of pipes,
> Tymbres and tabornes, tulket among;
> Symbres and sonetez ware the noyse,
> And bougounz busch batered so thikke. (1401–16)

Here the luxury and decorative ingenuity of the late-medieval feast are perfectly captured, along with a vigour which is often absent from medieval descriptions, with their tendency to mere enumeration—a vigour centring in a delight in noise, the mingled blarings and warblings drowned at last in the almost brutal rhythm of ‘bougounz busch batered so thikke’. And, incidentally, these decorations of the food, ‘pared out of paper’, make it clear what the poet was thinking of in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when he said of the castle that Gawain saw through the trees, ‘pared out of paper purely hit semed’ (802). Food-decorations like castles, castles like food-decorations: it is true indeed that in this courtly ‘decorated’ style, ‘the aesthetic ideal of the visual *continuum* blurs any distinction
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between major and minor arts. They all speak the same language’. And for this visual and plastic language the Gawain-poet has invented a perfect verbal equivalent. But there is something more than an effect of intricate decoration in such feast scenes. Feasts are extremely common in medieval romance, chiefly no doubt through their importance in aristocratic life. This importance derived not only from the opportunity they gave for luxury and display—conspicuous consumption—but also from their function as a kind of social sacrament, a symbol of the vital bonds by which society is held together. A feast is not simply eaten, it is enacted as a kind of social ritual, in which everything must be done with propriety, according to a set pattern. This is an aspect of aristocratic life which the Gawain-poet seems clearly to have known and felt from the inside. The meal must begin at the right time; the social hierarchy must be reflected in the seating; the very washing of hands before the meal is a significant act, a rite of purification, to be performed ‘worthily’:

Alle this mirthe thay maden to the mete tyme;
When thay had waschen worthyly thay wenten to sete,
The best burne ay abof, as hit best semed. (Gawain, 71–3)

The same decorum, though somewhat perverted, is observed even in the pagan wickedness of Belshazzar’s palace:

When the terme of the tyde watz towched of the feste,
Dere drown tho thertho, and upon des netten,
And Baltazar upon bench watz busked to sete…
Thenne watz alle the halle-flor hiled with knyghtes,
And barounes at the sidebordes bounet anywher,
For non watz dressed upon dece bot the dere selven,
And his cleare concubynes in clothes ful bryght. (Purity, 1393–1400)

There follows the service of the first course, with the appropriate music, ‘with crakkyng of trumpes’ (Gawain, 116). There is no lack of mirth at these feasts, but it is not the disorderly mirth of peasants (as depicted somewhat later in Breughel’s paintings), but ‘manerly merthe’ (Gawain, 165); not the spontaneity of animals, but a truly human order. And, of course, the power with which this courtly decorum of feasting is felt and expressed by the Gawain-poet makes all the more shocking the sudden breaking of decorum by some un-

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2 Cf. Purity, lines 89–92 and 114–16.
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expected interruption, whether the appearance of the Green Knight at Camelot or the hand writing on the wall at Babylon.¹

Another aristocratic entertainment of which the Gawain-poet shows a knowledge that bears witness to his inwardness with aristocratic life is the hunt. Like the feast, the hunt is a common theme of medieval poetry; and, like the feast, it is both an entertainment and something more than an entertainment: it too functions as a sacrament, a ritual by which violent energies are at once expressed and contained. Hunting was felt to be the most characteristic activity of the medieval aristocracy, the appropriate means by which in peacetime the aggressive instincts of what was still theoretically a warrior class might be given a dignified outlet. A useful outlet, too: wild animals really were enemies to a society based on agriculture, which is why Piers Plowman tells a representative of the knightly class that his role in the community must be to:

go honte hardiliche to haeres and to foxes,
To bores and to bочек that breketh adoune menne hegges;
And faite thy fawcones to culle wylde foules;
For thei comen to my crost my corn to defoule.²

Moreover, the hares, boars and bucks, if not the foxes, provided good food. The hunting scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight show not just the common medieval love of hunting but an intense concern for technical perfection in every aspect of the hunt—a concern that the rite should follow exactly the order laid down in such missals of the chase as the Master of Game composed by the Duke of York in the early fifteenth century. There is a proper way of doing everything, even cutting up the dead beast, and knowledge of this way is a prerogative of the aristocracy and their skilled servants. Thus on the first day’s hunting, after the slaughtered deer have been heaped up, it is the men of highest rank who organize the breaking up, and they have it done ‘as the dede askez’, in the right way:

¹ One might compare the intrusion of Banquo’s ghost into the decorum of the feast at Forres, as a result of which Lady Macbeth can tell her husband: ‘You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting/With most admired disorder’ (Macbeth, iii. iv. 108–9). The significance of feasts as a ‘life-force’ in Shakespeare has been discussed by G. Wilson Knight (The Imperial Theme [London, 1931]). In this, as in much else, Shakespeare is drawing on and enriching a medieval inheritance.
² Piers the Plowman, ed. W. W. Skeat (London, 1886), C. ix, lines 28–31. For ‘bockes’ (bucks), B, for which Skeat has probably used a better manuscript, reads ‘bocikes’ (badgers).
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The best bowed ther to with burnez innoghe,
Gedered the grattest of gres that ther were,
And didden hem derely undo as the dede askez. (1325–7)

The breaking up of the deer is completed ‘by resoun’ (1344), and on
the next day the boar is disembowelled ‘as nightly bisemez’ (1612).
For the appropriate performance of such ceremonial acts, skilled
acolytes are needed, and the aristocracy are assisted by ‘lerned’
servants (1170), such as the ‘wyye that watz wys upon wodcraftez’
(1605) who disembowels the boar. An important part of their skill
consists in knowing the right technical names for such things as horn
and bugle calls, and the various parts of the inside of the dead
animals. The technical vocabulary—words such as mote, slot,
gargulun, wesanunt, avanters—from, as it were, the liturgy of this
aristocratic sacrament, and knowledge of it marks off the ‘lerned’ by
birth or training. Malory in the fifteenth century was to attribute the
invention of the techniques and terms of hunting to Sir Tristram:
as the booke seyth, he began good mesures of blowynge of beestes of
venery and beestes of chaace and all maner of vermaynes, and all the
tearmys we have yet of haukyngge and hantynge.

And so, he continues:

all jantyllmen that beryth olde armys ought of ryght to honoure sir
Tristrams for the goodly tearmys that jantylmen have and use and shall
do unto the Day of Dome, that thereby in manner all men of worship may
discover a jantylman frome a yoman and a yoman frome a vylayne.1

To judge the matter in these terms, we may conclude that the
Gawain-poet was a ‘jantylman’ writing for ‘jantylmen’; certainly,
in being learned in the lore and language of hunting, he is fully
identified with the aristocratic society for which he wrote. He
delights in his learning, and the hunting scenes in Sir Gawain and
the Green Knight, quite apart from their functions in the economy of
the poem as a whole, joyfully celebrate the society he knew.2

His knowledge of aristocratic life is not confined to such vivid
externals as feasting and hunting. It extends to the finer details of
everyday behaviour, and to the values by which that behaviour was

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2 The poet’s knowledge of hunting is studied by H. L. Savage, The Gawain-Poet:
Studies in his Personality and Background (Chapel Hill, 1956).