

A note on Arthurian literature: Some linguistic features of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

II: xxx-xxxii; III: XLvi-L

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RESUMEN. Tras un breve encuadre histórico y literario, este artículo intenta ofrecer un análisis filológico de dos fragmentos de *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, el clímax de la poesía aliterativa inglesa y una de las joyas de toda la literatura medieval. Se trata de mostrar algunos de los rasgos lingüísticos que puedan ayudar a que el lector consiga apreciar mejor el mundo mágico y misterioso del ciclo artúrico.

ABSTRACT. After a brief historical and literary framing, this paper attempts to offer a philological analysis of two fragments of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the climax of English alliterative poems and one of the jewels of medieval poetry. We wish our quick glance at some of its most striking linguistic features could help the reader to appreciate the magical and mysterious world of medieval Arthurian literature.



“Note” is taken here as “a brief record in writing [...] giving any kind of information, as well as a critical comment, an explanatory statement or reference, a characteristic element, etc. ...” (Collins 1979) concerning, in our case, Arthurian literature. Now, the Arthurian legend has been the subject-matter of many creative/artistic pieces of literature as well as of countless scholarly/critical studies. In fact—from lost legends, some scraps of history and much folklore—poets and writers have been telling stories about King Arthur and have fashioned one of the greatest epics in all literature, full of the world’s splendours, heroic loves and spiritual quests. Scholars, on their turn, have long pondered over the origin, development and extraordinary duration and diffusion of Arthurian literature, its real foundations, its literary values, its reflections on Continental literatures, etc. Hardly any of them, however, have devoted any of their effort to the study of its linguistic features.

The main purpose of this *note*, therefore, is not to venture a new, hypothetically superior and all-encompassing theory on the subject, but to put together some of the most well-known features that characterise it (basically the longing for historical foundations of Arthurian literature, its main theme and the blossom

of literary fantasy in so many variations); and then to offer a short linguistic analysis of eight stanzas, three in part II and five in part III of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, one of the most superb literary accomplishments of medieval English Arthurian writing, and perhaps one of the greatest poetic masterpieces of world poetry in this period.

1. ARTHURIAN LITERATURE: THEMES AND VARIATIONS

1.1. *The quest for the historical Arthur*

The magical and mysterious world of Arthurian literature is founded on the figure of an obscure Welsh princeling, about whom we know nothing for certain. Arthur may have been the last Roman general of Britain, the first of those Welsh guerrilla fighters who defied the English until well into the Middle Ages, or a Northern prince from Scotland who was later adopted by the Welsh. If there was a real Arthur, he lived in the period between AD 450 and AD 650¹.

There was a rich oral (pre-literary) tradition and most probably several stories of Arthur had largely circulated by word of mouth; but, in the world of literature, he is first mentioned by two unknown writers in the eighth and ninth centuries to refer to the hero of the battle of *Mons Badonicus*. The brief *Annales Cambriae* tell us two things about him: (i) that he fought at the battle of Mons Badonicus (AD 516 or 518), and (ii) that he was killed at the battle of Camlann (AD 537 or 539). The equally anonymous author of the *Historia Brittonum*—usually attributed to a mythical Nennius—mentions a catalogue of battles, the twelfth of which was on Mons Badonicus, “where in one day nine hundred and sixty were killed by one attack of Arthur” (quoted from Barber 1996: 7).

The major medieval source of King Arthur’s heroic legend, however, was Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136). The book begins with a long story telling how the British came originally from Troy; and how his information was obtained from “a very ancient book in the British tongue”².

Geoffrey certainly knew much of the Welsh tradition that has survived, and many of the details he mentions can be traced back to this: the names of Arthur’s weapons and many names of characters come from this source. But his portrait of Arthur is made up of material borrowed from all kinds of sources: (i) Arthur’s birth, which Merlin brings about by disguising Uther Pendragon as the husband of the beautiful Igera of Cornwall, is an echo of a similar tale in the romances

¹ The name Arthur itself is very rare in Welsh sources. The fact that it may derive from a Roman family name, Artorius, has led to all kinds of speculation. It is certain, however, that (by the nineteenth century) there was a traditional hero called Arthur.

² This is a well-known formula in medieval writing: Troy in turn had its fictional history, drawn from a book by “Dares the Phrygian”. But it is also worth remembering that the distinction between fiction and history is a modern one, and Geoffrey’s book is indeed a mixture of the two. It is not a chronicle of contemporary events, but a reconstruction of the past, using the scraps of evidence that were available (Loomis 1961).

about Alexander the Great; (ii) the vast empire which Arthur conquers is a reflection of the ambitious expansion of Norman power in the seventy years before Geoffrey wrote his book; (iii) recent historical events, such as William I's stay at York during Christmas 1069 and some more contemporary politics may have provided some of the details; (iv) returning crusaders who had been to Constantinople may have given him ideas for the description of Arthur's court at the City of Legions, including the strict segregation of women; etc.

Geoffrey did not merely write a fictional history, however; he also produced a hero-king, a ruler of the western world, who was very much his readers' ideal, and he was also in touch with the latest fashions in courtly behaviour. Like Charlemagne, after a series of wars, Arthur heads towards Rome, though he never arrives there (and never becomes emperor), since news of treachery at home came to him in his hour of triumph, and he returns to meet his death in civil war.

BETWEEN 1150 AND 1420, some fifty chroniclers used Geoffrey's *Historia* as the basis for their account of the early history of Britain, while only a handful questioned it. The most sceptical were perhaps William of Newburgh's *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (c. 1198) and Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia* (1534); but even so Geoffrey's influence was to last until the nineteenth century.

During the RENAISSANCE, more scholarly historical approaches tended to search for authentic primary sources; but—as is evident in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577)—a pronounced reservation as to the fables surrounding the Arthurian era is accompanied by lengthy recapitulations of Arthur's campaigns against the Saxons, his marriage to Guinevere, Mordred's usurpation of the realm, the consequent battle at Camlann, and Arthur's burial in a grave at Glastonbury that was rediscovered in "the daies of King Henrie the second" (Holinshed 1961: I, 13).

In the SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, in the absence of archaeological research, Geoffrey's tale was retained to fill the vacuum; and his medieval reputation as one of the *Nine Worthies* persisted as well, to the extent that Arthur was even awarded further renown and authenticity by being claimed as progenitor of the Tudor and Stuart royal lines. Even if he was somewhat belittled by those who considered the Anglo-Saxon period as the source for the growth of British common law and constitutional liberty, Arthur remained strong as a symbol for royalists: Dryden's *King Arthur* (1691) and Blackmore's *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *King Arthur* (1697), for example try to relate Arthur to the new monarch of the House of Orange³.

Most EIGHTEENTH CENTURY historians—in attempting to distinguish

³ N. Crouch's *History of the Nine Worthies*—which was first published in 1687 and had reached a fifth edition by 1759—provided a copious account of Arthur's claim to valour through a military and civil career. (Brinkley. 1932).

sharply between *truth* and the “fabulous History of pretended Victories” which have “prov’d an inexhaustible Fountain of absurd and ridiculous Things”— somewhat eroded the traditional belief in Arthur’s historicity⁴, though a considerable corpus of Arthurian history remained widely available (Jones 1944). The standard Whig *History of England* (1726-1731) by Rapin-Thoyras, for instance, rejects claims for Arthur’s European conquests or the discovery of his tomb at Glastonbury; but it still retains [from earlier medieval chronicle sources] a very detailed description of the battles fought in Arthur’s campaigns against Cerdic or against the Goths in Armorica. Arthur is said to have been born at Tintagel, crowned at Caerleon and buried at Glastonbury, after being slain by the usurping Mordred in the last battle. And even David Hume, who may be considered to represent an exemplary Enlightenment approach, and to have “had no interest in, or sympathy with, the Middle Ages”, nevertheless found the same foundation for Arthur’s heroic valour which “sustained the declining fate of his country” (Simpson 1990: 6-7).

Paradoxically, the developing interest in the Middle Ages during the NINETEENTH CENTURY at times accomplished little for Arthur’s historical position. A greater desire to study the origins of British social and political structure led to a stringent reassessment of all available historical records. In H. Hallam’s *View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages* (1818), in A. Herbert’s *Britannia after the Romans* (1836-1841) or in T.B. Macaulay’s *History of England* (1848), Arthur is basically a fable, a mythological figure, equivalent to Hercules. But T. Miller concludes his *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (1848), saying that “there cannot be a doubt about the existence of King Arthur” (Kenyon 1983, 50); and the central historical concern was summarised by J. A. Giles, who sought the middle ground in his *History of the Ancient Britons* (1847: I, 393):

Whilst we set aside fables as unworthy of serious attention, we are not justified in asserting with some incredulous historians, that no such person as Arthur ever lived and fought; still less may we compromise the claims which history justly makes ... by considering Arthur as a personification of the sun, and viewing his round table with the twelve Paladins, as a poetical description of the Zodiac with its twelve signs. (Quoted from Simpson 1990: 9).

This long quest for the historical Arthur would have, as will be shown, a significant effect on poetry and fiction. Since many historians had continued either to accept an historical role for Arthur or to transmit a considerable body of lore about him, an Arthurian subject matter had been preserved, which could be used as the basis for literary creation.

⁴ Paul de Rapin-Thoyras. 1732. *The History of England*, translated by N. Tindal, second edition, 2 vols., 1: 39.

1.2. *The blossom out of literary fantasy*

Geoffrey's success with historians was nothing compared to his success in the literary world. King Arthur's court became the setting for all kinds of legends and romances. Most Welsh legends were only recorded in the memory of the bards, and told or sung at feasts; and the belief of Arthur's survival and eventual return was present in many songs and stories about him and constantly referred to as "the Breton hope". And the stories told by such bards attracted the writers and poets of the newly developed European languages. Thus, in the 12th century the Anglo-Norman poet Wace wrote his *Roman de Brut*, a free version of Geoffrey's *Historia*, dedicated to Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine; and Layamon's *Brut*, based on Wace, appeared soon, thus becoming a chronicle providing the earliest version of the Arthurian story in English. Much more imaginative was Chrétien de Troyes, perhaps the first and one of the greatest writers dealing with our topic: to him we owe the first five Arthurian courtly romances: *Erec*; *Cligès*; *Lancelot, le chevalier à la charrette*; *Yvain, le chevalier au lion*; and *Perceval or le conte du Graal*. Writers of the 13th and 14th centuries produced a great series of romances changing Arthur's shape from a pseudo historical king to a lord of a court of heroes and lovers and to one of the greatest rulers of the world, comparable to Charlemagne or Alexander the Great; and they also hint at Guinevere's infidelity and Arthur's mysterious end. The romance writers elaborated endlessly on this and —when the possibilities of Arthur's own history became exhausted— new stories were woven in. The quest for the Holy Grail [*Old Fr. Graal*, *Med. Lt. Gradālis*, 'bowl'] became soon a central part of the cycle, introducing a Christian theme into it⁵; and separate romances such as those of Tristan and Iseult, Lancelot and Elaine, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Sir Perceval of Galles, Arthur and Merlin, Lancelot and Guinevere, etc. very often interwoven almost inseparably, so that the storyteller could move easily from one theme to another.

During the early Modern English period the new printing presses produced great number of copies of these romances, so that Arthur and his court were more popular and widely read than they had ever been before, even if intellectuals and reforming clergy were against it. Thus in *The Dictionary of Syr Thomas Elyot knyght* (1538) one can find the following entry:

Arthurus, a King of England when it was called Britannia, a man of excellent prowess in fifteen great battles against the Saxons, vanquished them, and fi-

⁵ Starting with R. of Boron the Holy Grail was actually the bowl used by Jesus at the Last Supper; some of Christ's blood had been collected in it, and then brought to Britain by Joseph of Arimathea, where it became the quest of King Arthur's knights. It would never be found: Gawain, for example, was excluded because he was too attached to worldly values. Only Galahad, the most virtuous knight of the Round Table, was destined to regain it.

nally drove the most part of them out of this realm. He subdued Scotland and Ireland, at that time being well inhabited and in culture. And afterwards he kept an honourable house of valiant and noble personages, wherein was such magnificence, that it gave occasion to Frenchmen and Spaniards to exercise their wits in advancing Arthur's majesty with incredible fables, which is no more to be marvelled at than the similar inventions and fantasies of the Greeks. (Quoted from Barber 1996: 152).

One of the attempts to produce a modern (fantastic) version of Arthur in the manner of the great classical epics was Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, for instance, in which the author portrays an "Arthur before he was a king: a brave knight perfect in the twelve moral virtues, as Aristotle had devised" (quoted from Barber 1996: 152).

As Elyot pointed out, in his *Dictionary*, Frenchmen and Spaniards exercised their wits "in advancing Arthur's majesty with incredible fables". We have already mentioned the former; and we must add that they are of the greatest importance in the diffusion of Arthurian literature throughout Europe. (Cf. Annex I: *Dissemination of Arthurian literature throughout Europe*). As for the latter, the two romances responsible for the spreading of such literature in Spain were perhaps *Tristan* and *Lancelot-Graal*, repeatedly translated into Spanish and Portuguese and often enlarged or adapted after the French versions⁶; such spreading is reflected in the *Libro del caballero Zifar* (1300), the *Libro de Josep Abarimatia* (translated by J. Vivas), the *Baladro del sabio Merlin con sus profecias* (Burgos, 1498), the *Demanda del sancto Grial con los maravillosos fechos de Lançarote y the Galaz su hijo* (Toledo, 1515), etc.

Arthurian literature was also extremely popular in Germany, probably due to the prestige of French culture; here —besides the early and extremely well-known *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach— we must mention such romances as *Lanzelet* (by Ulrich von Zatzikhoven), *Erec* and *Iwein* (by Hartmann von Aue), *Tristrant* (by Eilhart von Oberg), *Tristan und Isolt* (by Gottfried von Strassburg), etc. And the insatiable demand for them would be picked up by masters in different artistic fields: R. Wagner, for instance, took the stories of Tristan and Parzival and transformed them into modern well-known operas.

Translations and/or sagas on Arthurian literature —such as *Merlinus-spa*, *Tristrams saga ok Isöndar*, *Ivens saga Artuskappa*, *Möttuls saga*, *Erex saga*, *Parcevals saga*, etc.— can be found since the beginning of the 13th century in Scandinavia as well. The same can be said about The Netherlands where, in the same dates, we find among others *Historie van den Grale*, *Merlijns Boek*, *Perchevael*, *Lanzelet en het met de Witte Voet*, *Walewein ende Keye*, etc. And in

⁶ Actually, the *Amadis de Gaula*, written probably in the middle of the 14th century, seems to imitate the style and intrigue of *Lancelot* and *Tristan*.

Italy, during the same period, we come across such romances as *Tristano Riccardiano*, *Tavola Ritonda*, *Storia di Merlino*, ... or ballads such as *La Pulzella Gaia*, *Carduino*, *La morte di Tristano*, *Lancelotto*, etc.

The taste for romances declined later on, so that between the Restoration and the end of the 18th century scarcely any new book on Arthur was published. They somewhat reappeared due to the fashion for everything gothic or medieval and to the romantic ideals of such writers as Sir Walter Scott and Wordsworth (late 18th and early 19th centuries); and, in the Victorian period, Arthur finally became a true modern champion in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.

In the 20th century a reworking of the Arthurian stories can be appreciated in English literature, sometimes equating them to classical myths; T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for example, owes its title to one of the Grail stories.

For English writers, the culmination of the medieval versions of Arthur's story has always been Sir Tomas Malory's work, known as *Morte Darthur* after W. Caxton's edition in 1485, which has become the Authorised Version of Arthurian legend.

The hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, on its turn, has always been considered as the epitome of the medieval knight, always ready for a new adventure, the personification of gallantry and wisdom, the embodiment of the highest ideal of chivalry, moving within a limited world (with its rules of altruistic behaviour, its code of courtly love, refined manners, courtesy and pride, etc.) but perfect within these established limits.

What follows is an attempt to offer a quick glance at its most striking linguistic features which hopefully might help the reader to appreciate its literary values.

2. LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT* II: xxx-xxxii; III: xlvi-l

2.1. *A great English poem*

Gawain first appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and in William of Malmesbury's *Historia Novella* (both written in the first half of the 12th century). He is called Walgainus in the first; and in the second there is a reference to the discovery of his grave at Walwyn's Castle in Pembrokeshire. The hero resembles Gwalchmai in the Welsh legend and Cuchulainn in the Irish epics: (i) as Gwalchmai, he is Arthur's nephew, i.e., the knight of the Round Table having the longest connections with Arthur, except for Kay and Bedivere, perhaps (cf. Annex II: *Arthur and Gawain's simplified genealogy*); and (ii) he possesses many of the properties of the Irish sun-hero, basically the increase of his strength until midday and its decline thereafter. [Gawain was in fact the real

owner of *Excalibur*, which was originally a dazzling sun-weapon].

As a folk-tale hero, Gawain is the central figure of several primitive stories, some of them certainly similar to the crude reality of those days, at least until the material becomes artificial and literary.

As for the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we may say that it is the jewel of Middle English literature. In its treatment of the subject-matter and in the balance of the whole composition, in the strength of its style and imagery, in the well worked out dramatic progress and in the intricate delicacy of the dialogues (highlighting its introspective psychology in the way we may find in the novels of Proust for example), in the richness and precision of the diction (especially in the variety and beauty of its descriptions), etc. our poem represents clearly the climax of English alliterative poetry.

The only existing manuscript⁷ contains also three other poems of the same period and probably by the same writer. It has been suggested that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was commissioned by John of Gaunt, and there is certain evidence for some connection between him and the poet. The identity of the latter (generally referred to as the Gawain-poet) has long been a matter for debate: the attempts to identify him with the Scottish poet Huchown of the Awle Ryale [who wrote a popular *Morte Arthur*], or with the philosopher Strode [Chaucer's enigmatic friend], for example, are only conjectural. All one can say with certainty about him is that he proved himself an experienced artist, that he was well acquainted with courtly life, that he could read Latin and French⁸, and that he was probably a clerk in minor orders (since his later poems *Pearl*, *Purity* and *Patience* are distinctly religious in tone). All four poems are written in the Northwest Midland dialect (Lancashire), with a strong Scandinavian influence.

The poem opens with an account of the founding of Britain, and tells us that Arthur was the greatest and most honoured of Britain's kings. Arthur is at Camelot one Christmastide, and on New Year's Day, in accordance with his custom, he does not eat until some adventure has taken place; and soon a knight of huge stature duly appears riding his horse into the hall and stopping the festivities. He was clad all in green, with green hair and the horse he was riding was equally green. He demands to see Arthur, who asks him what he wants and the Green Knight challenges the best of Arthur's knights to be bold enough to give him a stroke with the great axe he carried, on the condition that later on he will accept a return blow from him in a year's time. Arthur's knights, awed by the visitor's appearance, hesitate, and the Green Knight taunts them with cowardice, so that Arthur angrily leaps forward to take up the challenge himself; but

⁷ MS Nero Ax of the Cotton Collection (British Museum), copied near the end of the 14th century.

⁸ He actually owes much to all the earlier Arthurian romances, and especially to Chrestien de Troyes' *Perceval*.

Gawain restrains him, and asks permission to undertake the adventure himself. Arthur agrees, and Gawain strikes with a tremendous blow and lops off the Green Knight's head. But the Green Knight picks up his head, mounts his horse, tells Gawain to meet him in a year's time at the Green Chapel, and gallops away.

Next All Saints' Day, Gawain is armed in preparation for his departure in search of the mysterious trysting place. After a difficult and strange wandering—riding through the kingdom of Logres to north Wales, and eventually reaching the wilderness of Wirral, by way of Anglesey, Holyhead and the coast, and after encountering dragons, trolls and giants on his journey—on Christmas Day [*first fragment*], Sir Gawain finds himself in a vast dreary forest. He kneels and prays, and shortly afterwards, a splendid castle appears. Here he finds shelter for the night. He learns that the Green Chapel is just a few miles away and accepts the lord of the castle's invitation to remain until the New Year, now only three days away. The master of the castle is to go hunting for the following three consecutive days; while Gawain is told to stay and rest, agreeing both knights to meet at night and exchange the "fortunes" the day might have brought to each of them.

Early the next morning the lady of the castle visits Gawain, still in bed, and tries to seduce him [*second fragment*]; and she will be doing the same thing during the three days on which the master of the castle hunts: first day "the terror-stricken deer darting down to the dales", second day the "baneful boar, of unbelievable size", and third day, the cunning and "devil-companioning fox".

The three scenes of hunting (handled with detailed description of the niceties of each chase) mark three degrees in Gawain's temptations: the first day, the conversation with the Lady (though insinuating) is chaste and courteous; the second day the lady is more obvious and seductive (driving him to all kinds of verbal shifts in order to maintain his chastity without showing discourtesy); and on the third, Gawain has to imitate the fox's various twists and turns in order to escape the lady's open love longing⁹.

Each night the master of the castle tells Gawain of the spoils of the chase and Gawain tells him what he has received: the first day, a kiss; and the second day, two kisses. But he conceals what he receives on the third day: a magic belt that makes the wearer proof against all blows.

On New Year's Day Gawain goes to the Green Chapel and prepares for the blow of the axe. He flinches twice and finally he holds still for the third blow. The Green Knight strikes with all his forces, but Gawain is cut only skin deep; and, when he gets up to fight back, he realises that the Green Knight is the master of the castle (who had put his wife up to making proof of Gawain's virtue).

⁹ The fox, after eluding the main hue and cry, lighted unluckily on the dog-base; and Sir Gawain falls into the "sin" of accepting a talisman from the Lady, a gift he will conceal.

Then, he goes back to Arthur's court, tells of his adventure and all decide to wear green belts in honour of Sir Gawain.

The story contains two distinct themes: (i) the Green Knight's challenge to Gawain, which is an example of a Celtic episode known as the Beheading Game; and (ii) the approaches of the hostess at the castle [i.e., the Temptation] that have been skilfully welded into one. Both are very ancient and of great renown:

(i) The earliest form of the *beheading game* story is to be found perhaps in the Irish epic of Fled Bricrend (*Bricriu's Feast*) in which Cuchulainn agrees to play the beheading game with Uath mac Imomain (Terror, son of Great Fear): Cuchulainn strikes off Uath's head and, when he comes back next day to offer his own head, Uath strikes three blows without hurting him and declares him a champion. From Ireland it seems to have passed to France, perhaps via Wales and Brittany, where at least three French romances made use of this theme, Gawain being the hero in two of them and Lancelot in the third. The common feature of all versions is a supernatural being who is beheaded without apparent harm and who strikes back in return with a harmless blow.

(ii) Three major points of resemblance to the *Temptation* story is to be found in *Pwyll* (one of the stories in the Welsh *Mabinogion*): (a) a noble huntsman who introduces the hero as guest, (b) a temptation scene in which the huntsman's wife is repulsed by the hero, and (c) a year's interval between the challenge incident and the tryst. The huntsman is also the same colour as his horse, (grey in *Pwyll*, green in *Sir Gawain*). A similar story also appears in several French romances, though none so close to the English version.

Although some scholars mention a lost French original in which the two themes were combined (Barber 1996: 114), we think that a great poet such as the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would be perfectly capable of making such a fusion. The poem's merit in no way depends on it; but rather on the subtlety with which the outcome of one part is made to depend on the other: the exchanging of spoils during the three day's hunting, which provides a motive for the slight blow given to Gawain by the Green Knight¹⁰.

The Gawain-poet brings to life all the heroic atmosphere of the Arthurian legend, the grim deeds and threatening landscapes of classical saga and absorbs into the most traditional English poetic form the best of the finesse and spirit of French romance, the result being a romance both magical and human. And he also throws over all the shadowy pagan base material the shimmering grace of his Christian consciousness (Stone 1964: 8): a Christian knight's courage, good faith, courtesy, and chastity are celebrated, to the glory of the House of Arthur;

¹⁰ Actually, Gawain conceals the girdle out of fear of his encounter on the following day, which would have passed off without incident otherwise. Thus, while the temptation arises naturally enough out of the challenge, this addition makes the issue of the challenge depend on the outcome of the temptation.

Sir Gawain—the model of knighthood—only escapes the Green Knight's blow because he refuses the lady's adulterous temptations; the *pentangle* borne on Gawain's shield is intended as a religious rather than armorial symbol¹¹; and he is frequently called "Mary's knight". The poet's didactic purpose, however, makes itself evident only at the end of the poem: the hero, faced by a superhuman task succeeded as nearly as a human being may; his peers, congratulating him on having brought them honour, adopt the green belt as the badge; but he is left lamenting himself, because the degree by which he failed to reach perfection must be felt by him to the end of his days as "a tarnishing sin".

The brilliant and subtle plot, the intended symbolism, the nicely worked-out parallels and handling of sources, as well as its moral and didactic lesson(s) may be interesting in itself, of course; but we think that it amounts to very little unless matched by verse and language. In the hands of the unknown poet, the *alliterative verse* is a mirror of mood and imagination. The least description is turned into a jewel of language, whether it be the details of Gawain's arming before his departure or the loving portrayal of the Green Knight's magical axe. The greatest passages, however, are those in which the poet depicts Nature and her ways, a theme which underlies the poem in several aspects. Some stanzas of the second part describe the changing seasons between Christmas and Michaelmas, and surpass all conventional poetry of this kind; they are followed by the harsh weather which Gawain encounters on his journey northwards ("half-slain by the sleet"), where in the sound of the words and in the rugged rhythms the very spirit of winter re-echoes [*first fragment*]. The Northern countryside in which the poet lived rises up before us in its more severe and impressive beauty. Across this background sweeps past the three days' hunting, in which the essence of the chase is exactly caught: days of exhilaration, danger, triumph and noble ritual, at the end of each a homecoming to a warm welcome and a blazing fire when the last horn has been blown [*second fragment*]. On the day of the tryst at the Green Chapel, the countryside grows grim once more: the hills are mist-mantled, there is a hoar-frost in the oak-woods, and snow in the valleys outside. And the people of this harsh, real world are equally alive; their feasts and merry-making, gaiety and good cheer has nothing to do with the delicate but artificial world of the French romances, and their language is unforced and natural, compared to studied and literary language of Chrétien de Troyes' heroes and heroines.

2.2. *The Middle English text and a Modern English parallel version*

¹¹ It is assigned to Sir Gawain only in this poem; elsewhere in Romance, his shield bears one of the usual heraldic creatures—a lion, gryphon or eagle—in gold upon green. The *pentangle* or *pentacle* (the five-pointed star) was the most important sign in magic, the quintessence of the alchemists and (in oriental and near Eastern religions) a mystical symbol of perfection. According to Jewish legends about Solomon, he used this device in his degenerate days as a protector against demons and as a guardian of health.

2.2.1. *Gawain's Journey*

XXX

- Nōw rīdeꝯ þis renk þurꝯ þe rýalme of Logres
 Sir Gauan, on Godeꝯ halue þaꝯ hym nō gomen þoꝯt.
 Oft leudleꝯ aŋne hē lengeꝯ on nýꝯteꝯ
 695 þær hē fōnde noꝯt hym befōre þe fære þat hē lýked.
 Hade he nō fere bot his fōle bi frytheꝯ and dōuneꝯ,
 Ne nō gome bot God bi gāte wyth to karp,
 Til þat hē nēꝯed ful noghe intō þe Norþe Wáleꝯ.
 Alle þe íles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldeꝯ,
 And fareꝯ ŋuer þe fordeꝯ bý þe forlōndeꝯ.
 700 Quær at þe Hōly Hēde, til hē hade eit bōk
 In þe wýldrenesse of Wyrale; wonde þær bot lyte
 Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth gōud hert loude.
 And aꝯ me frayned, as hē ferde, at frēkeꝯ þat hē met,
 If þay hade herde any karp of a knyꝯt grēne.
 705 In any grōūnde þerabōute, of þe grēne chapel;
 And al nykked hym wyth nāy, þat nēuer in her lýue
 Þay seꝯe nēuer nō segge þat warꝯ of suche hweꝯ
 Of grēne.
 þe knyꝯt tōk gāteꝯ straunge
 In mony a bōk vnbēne,
 His chēr ful oft con chaunge
 Þat chapel ęr hē myꝯt sēne.

XXXI

- Mony klyf hē ŋuerclāme in contrayeꝯ straunge,
 Fer flōten frō his frēndeꝯ fremedly hē rýdeꝯ.
 715 At vche war þe oþer water þær þe wýꝯe passed
 Hē fōnde a fōo hym befōre, bot fērly hit wære,
 And þat sꝯ fōule and sꝯ felle þat feꝯt hym byhōde.
 Sꝯ mony meruayl bi mōunt þær þe mon fýndeꝯ,
 Hit wære tō tōre for to telle þer þe tenþe dōle.
 720 Sum whýle wyth wormeꝯ hē werreꝯ, and with wolues als,

Modern English parallel version

- Now the gallant Sir Gawain in God's name goes
 Riding through the realm of Britain, no rapture in his mind.
 Often at night he happened on neither house nor host,
 Nor found placed before him the food that he liked —
 He had no comrade but his courser in the country woods and
 No traveller to talk to on the track but God, /hills/
 Till he was nearly nigh to Northern Wales.
 The isles of Anglesay he kept always on his left,
 And fared across the fords by the foreshore
 Over at Holy Head' to the other side
 Into the wilderness of Wirral, where few dwelled
 Who granted any good to God or man.
 And always as he went, he asked whomever he met
 If they knew or had knowledge of a knight in green,
 Or could guide him to the ground where a green chapel stood.
 And there was none but said him nay, for never in their lives
 Had they set eyes on someone of such a hue
 As green.
 His way was wild and strange,
 By banks where none had been.
 His mood would many times change
 Before that fame was seen.
 He rode far from his friends, a forsaken man,
 Scaling many cliffs in country unknown.
 At every bank or beach where the brave man crossed water,
 He found a foe in front of him, except by a freak of chance,
 And so foul and fierce a one that he was forced to fight.
 So many marvels did the man meet in the mountains,
 It would be too tedious to tell a tenth of them.
 He had death-struggles with dragons, did battle with wolves,

730 Sunwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarrez,
 Bþe wyth bullez and bærez, and bōrez ōperquyle,
 And etayneȝ, þat hym anelede of þe hēze felle;
 Nade hē bēn dugty and drȝze, and Dryȝtyn had serued,
 725 Dōtreles he hade bēn dēd and drēped ful ofte.
 For werre wrāthed hym not sȝ much þat wynter was
 wors,

When þe cōlde clēr water frȝ þe ciōudeȝ schadde,
 And frēȝ ēr hit falle myȝt to þe fale ērþe;
 Nēr slayn wyth þe slēte hē slēped in his ynes
 730 Mō nyȝtez þen innoghe in nāked rokkez,
 Þer as claterande frȝ þe crest þe cōlde borne rennez,
 And hēnged hēze ōer his hēde in hard iisse-ikkles.
 Þus in peryl and payne and pȝtes ful hārde
 Bī contray cayrez þis knyȝt, tyȝ Krystmase ēuen,

735
 Þe knyȝt wel þat tyde
 To Mārȝ māde his mōne,
 Þat hō hym rēd to rȝde
 And wysse hym to sum wone.

XXXII

740 Bi a mōunte on þe morne meryly he rȝdeȝ,
 Into a forest ful dēp þat fery watȝ wȝlde,
 Hȝze hilleȝ on vche a halue, and holtwodeȝ vnder,
 Of hōre ōkez ful hōge a hundred togeder;
 Þe hāsel and þe haȝborne were harled al samen,
 745 With roȝe raged mosse rayled aywhēre,
 With mony bryddeȝ vnbyȝe vpon bāre twyges,
 Þat pitosly þēr piped for pȝne of þe cōlde.
 Þe gome vpon Gryngolet glȝdeȝ hem vnder,
 Þurȝ mony misy and mȝre, mon al hym ōne,
 750 Cārande for his costes, lest hē ne keuer schulde,
 To sē þe seruy[se]l of þat Sȝre þat on þat seif nyȝt
 Of a burde watȝ borne ōure baret to quelle;

Warrd with wild trolls that dwelt among the crags,
 Battled with bulls and bears and boars at other times,
 And ogres that panted after him on the high fells.
 Had he not been doughty in endurance and dutiful to God,
 Certainly he had been slain and slaughtered many times.
 Yet the warring little worried him; worse was the winter,
 When the cold clear water cascaded from the clouds
 And froze before it could fall to the fallow earth.
 Half-slain by the sleet, he slept in his armour
 Night after night among the naked rocks,
 Where the cold streams ran clattering from the crests above
 And hung high over his head in hard icicles.
 So in peril and pain, in parlous plight,
 This knight covered the country till Christmas Eve

Alone;
 And he that eventide
 To Mary made his moan,
 And begged her be his guide
 Till some shelter should be shewn.

Merrily in the morning by a mountain he rode
 into a wondrously wild wood in a valley,
 With high hills on each side overpeering a forest
 Of huge heavy oaks, a hundred together.
 The hazel and the hawthorn were intertwined,
 And all was overgrown with hoar-frosted moss,
 And on the bleak branches birds in misery
 Piteously piped away, pinched with cold.
 The gallant knight on Gringolet galloped under them
 Through many a swamp and marsh, a man all alone,
 Afraid of missing the function of the feast day to come,
 And not seeing the service of Him who that same night
 Of a virgin was verily born to be victor over our strife.

And þærfore sýking he sayde: 'I besêche þe, Lörde,
 And Märy þat is mýldest môder sô dære,
 755 Of sum herber þær hægly I myzt hære masse,
 Ande þy matyne 3 to-morne, mækely I ask,
 And þærtô prestly I pray my pâter and âve,
 and crêde'.

He rôde in his prayere,

And crýed for his mysdêde,

He sayned hym in sýþes sære,

And sayde 'Cros Kryst me spêde!'

760

2.2.2. *The deer-hunt and Gawain's first temptation*

(PARTIII)

XLVI

Ful ęrlý bifôre þe day þe folk vprýsen,

Gestes þat gô wolde, hor grôme 3 þay calden,

And þay busken vp bilýue, blonkke 3 sadel,

Tyften hel[er] taktes, trussen her mâles,

1130 Ríchen hem þe rýchest, to rýde alle arayde,

Lêpen vp lýztly, lachen her brydeles,

Vche wýze on his way, þær hym wel lýked,

þe lêve lörde of þe lónde wat 3 not þe lást,

Arayed for þe rýdýng, with reankek 3 ful mony;

1135 Etc a sop haastyly, when he hade hërde masse,

With bugle to bent-feilde he buske 3 bylýue;

By þat any day-lyzt lêmud vpon êrþe,

He with his hæþeles on hýze horses wæren.

þenne þise cacheres þat côi þe, cômpted hor hōunde 3,

1140 Unclōsed þe kenel-dōre and calde hem þærōute,

Bloue bygly in bugle 3 þrê bare mōte;

Braches bayed þærfore, and brême noyse maked,

And þay chastyred, and charred, on chasyng þat went;

A hundreth of hunteres, as I haf herde telle,

And so, sighing, he said, 'I beseech thee, lord,
 And thee, Mary, mildest mother so dear,
 That I may happen on some haven and there hear High Mass
 And Matins tomorrow morning: meekly I ask it,
 And promptly thereto I pray my Pater and Ave
 And Creed.'

He crossed himself and cried

For his sins, and said,

'Christ speed My cause, his cross my guide!'

So prayed he, spurring his steed.

In the faint light before dawn folk were stirring;
 Guests who had to go gave orders to their grooms,
 Who busied themselves briskly with the beasts, saddling,
 Trimming their tackle and tying on their luggage,
 Arrayed for riding in the richest style,

Guests leaped on their mounts lightly, laid hold of the bridles,
 And each rider rode out on his own chosen way.
 The beloved lord of the land was not the last up,
 Being arrayed for riding with his retinue in force.

He ate a sop hastily when he had heard mass,
 And hurried with horn to the hunting field;
 Before the sun's first rays fell on the earth,
 On their high steeds were he and his knights,
 Then these cunning hunters came to couple their hounds,

Cast open the kennel doors and called them out,
 And blew on their bugles three bold notes.

The hounds broke out barking, baying fiercely,
 And when they went chasing, they were whipped back.
 There were a hundred choice huntsmen there, whose fame

1145

of þe best;

Tō trystors veunters 3ōd,
 Cōuples huntens ofkest;
 Þēr nōs for blastez gōde,
 Grēt rurd in þat forest.

XLVII

1150 At þe fyrst, quēthe of þe quest, quāked þe wylde;

Dēr drōt in þe dale, dōted for drēde,
 Hīged to þe hūze, bōt heterly þay wēre
 Restayed with þe stablye þat stōtly ascrýed.
 Þay lēn þe hertez haf þe gāte, with þe hūze hēdes,
 1155 Þe brēme bukkez alsq̄, with hor brōde paumez;
 For þe frē lōrde hade defende, in fermysōn tyme,
 Þat þēr schulde nō mon mēve to þe māle dēre,
 Þe hīndeʒ wēre hālden in, with hay and war,
 Þe dōes dryuen with grēt dyn to þe dēpe sladeʒ;

1160 Þer myʒt mon sē, as þay slypte, slentyng of arwes,
 At vche wēnde under wande wapped a flōne

Þat bigly bōte on þe brōūn, with ful brōde hēdeʒ.
 What! þay brayen, and blēden, bī bonkkeʒ þay dēʒen,
 And ay raches in a rēs radly hem folzes,

1165 Hunterez wyth hūze horne hāsted hem after,
 Wyth such a crakkande krý as klyffes haden brusten.
 What wylde sō atwaped wýʒes þat schothen
 Watʒ al tōrāced and rent at þe resayt,

Bi þay wēre tēned at þe hūze, and taysed to þe wattrez;
 1170 Þe lēdez wēre sō lēned at þe loze trysteres,
 And þe grē-hōūndeʒ sō grēte þat geten hem bylyue,
 And hem tōfyliched, as fast as frēkeʒ myʒt lōke,
 Þēr ryʒt.

Þe lōrde for blys abloy
 Ful oft con launce and lyʒt,
 And drōt þat day wyth joy,
 Thus to þe derk nyʒt.

1175

Resounds.

To their stations keepers strode;
 Huntsmen unleashed hounds:
 The forest overflowed
 With the strident bugle sounds.

At the first cry wild creatures quivered with dread.

The deer in distraction darted down to the dales
 Or up to the high ground, but eagerly they were
 Driven back by the beaters, who bellowed lustily.
 They let the harts with high-branching heads have their freedom,
 And the brave bucks, too, with their broad antlers,
 For the noble prince had expressly prohibited
 Meddling with male deer in the months of close season.
 But the hinds were held back with a 'Hey!' and a 'Whoa!'
 And does driven with much din to the deep valleys.
 Lo! the arrows' slanting flight as they were loosed!
 A shaft flew forth at every forest turning,

The broad head biting on the brown flank.

They screamed as the blood streamed out, sank dead on the sword,
 Always harried by hounds hard on their heels,
 And the hurrying hunters' high horn notes.

Like the rending of ramped hills roared the din.

If one of the wild beasts slipped away from the archers
 It was dragged down and met death at the dog-bases

After being hunted from the high ground and harried to the water,
 So skilled were the hunt-servants at stations lower down,
 So gigantic the greyhounds that grabbed them in a flash,
 Seizing them savagely, as swift, I swear,
 As sight.

The lord, in humour high,
 Would spur, then stop and alight.
 In bliss the day went by
 Till dark drew on, and night.

XLVIII

- þus layke3 þis lǫrde by lynde-wōde3 ēve3,
 And G[awayn], þe gōd mon, in gay bed lȳge3,
 1180Lurkke3 quyl þe day-lyȳt iemed on þe wōwes,
 Under covertōū ful clēpe, cōrtyned abōūte;
 And as in slomeryng he siȳde, sleȳly he herde
 A littel dyn at his dōr, and dertly upon;
 And he hēveȳ up his hēd out of þe clǫþes,
 1185A corner of þe cōrtyn he caȳt up a lyttel,
 And wayteȳ warty þiderwarde, quat hit bē myȳt.
 Hit watȳ þe lādi, loflyest to behǫlde,
 Þat drōȳ þe dōr after hir ful dernly and styllē,
 And bōȳed tōwarde þe bed; and þe burne schāmed,
 1190And layde hym dōūn lȳstyly, and lēt as he slepte.
 And ho stepped stilly, and stēȳ to his bedde,
 Kest up þe cōrtyn, and crēped withinne,
 And set hir ful softly on þe bed-sȳde.
 1195þe lēde lay lurked a ful lōnge quȳle,
 Compast in his concience to quat þat cace
 Myȳt mēve oþer amōūnt, to mervayle hym þoȳt;
 Bot ȳet he sayde in hymself: 'Mōre semly hit wēre
 To asȳe with my spelle [in] spāce quat ho wolde'.
 1200þen he wākenede, and wrōth, and tō-hir-warde tōrned,
 And unlōuked his ȳȳe-lyddeȳ, and lēt as hym wōndered,
 And sayned hym, as bi his sage þe sāver to wōrthe,
 with hānde.
 Wyth chynne and chēke ful swēte,
 1205Boþe quit and rēd in blānde,
 Ful tuffly con ho lēte,
 Wyth lȳppeȳ smal laȳzānde.

Thus by the forest borders the brave lord sported,
 And the good man Gawain, on his gay bed lying,
 Lay hidden till the light of day gleamed on the walls,
 Covered with fair canopy, the curtains closed.
 And as in slumber he slept on, there slipped into his mind
 A slight, suspicious sound, and the door stealthily opened.
 He raised up his head out of the bedclothes,
 Caught up the corner of the curtain a little
 And watched warily towards it, to see what it was.
 It was the lady, loveliest to look upon,
 Who secretly and silently secured the door,
 Then bore towards his bed: the brave knight, embarrassed,
 Lay flat with fine adroitness and feigned sleep.
 Silently she stepped on, stole to his bed,
 Caught up the curtain, crept within,
 And seated herself softly on the side of the bed.
 There she watched a loog while, waiting for him to wake.
 Slyly close this loog while lay the knight,
 Considering in his soul this circumstance,
 Its sense and likely sequel, for it seemed marvellous.
 'Still, it would be more circumspect,' he said to himself,
 'To speak and discover her desire in due course.'
 So he stirred and stretched himself, twisting towards her,
 Opened his eyes and acted as if astounded;
 And, to seem the safer by such service, crossed himself
 In dread.
 With chin and cheek so fair,
 White ranged with rosy red,
 With laughing lips, and air
 Of love, she lightly said:

XLIX

- 'Gōd morōūn, Sir Gawain', sayde þat gay lādý,
'zē ar a slēper unslyze, þat mon may slýde hider;
1210Nōw ar zē tån as-tyt! Bot trūe uus may schāpe,
I schal býnde yōw in your bedde, þat bē zē trayst'.
Al lagande þe lādý lanced þo bōurdeȝ.
'Gōūd morōūn, g[ay], quōþ Gawain þe blýþe,
'Me schal wōrþe at your wille, and þat me wel lýkeȝ,
1215For I zēlde me zēderly, and zēȝe aiter grāce,
And þat is þe best, be my dōme, for me byhōveȝ
nēde';
And þus he bōurded agayn with mony a blýþe laȝter.
'Bot wolde zē, lādý lovely, þen lēve me grante,
And deprēce your prysoun, and pray hym to rýse,
1220I wolde bōȝe of þis bed, and busk me better,
I schulde kever þe mōre comfot to karp yow wyth'.
'Nay, for sōþe, beau sir', sayd þat swēte,
'zē schal not rise of your bedde, I rych yōw better,
I schal happe you hēre þat oþer half als,
1225And syþen karp wyth my knyȝt þat I kaȝt have;
For I wēne wel, i-wysse, Sir Wōwen zē are,
þat alle þe worlde worchipeȝ, quere-sȝ zē rīde;
Your honōūr, your hēndelayk is hēndely prayssed
With lōrdeȝ, wyth lādýes, with alle þat lýf bēre.
1230And nōw zē ar hēre, i-wysse, and we bot ōure ōne;
My lōrde and his lēdeȝ ar on lenþe fāren,
Oþer burneȝ in her bedde, and my burdeȝ als,
þe dōr drawn, and dit with a derf haspe;
And syþen I have in þis hōūs hym þat al lýkeȝ,
1235I schal wāre my whýle wel, quýl hit lasteȝ,
with tāle.
zē ar welcum to my cors,
Yōwre awen won to wāle,
Me behōveȝ of fyne force
Your servaunt bē, and schale'.
1240
- 'Good morning, Sir Gawain,' the gay one murmured,
'How unsafely you sleep, that one may slip in here!
Now you are taken in a trice. Unless a truce come between
I shall bind you to your bed - of that be sure.'
The lady uttered laughingly those playful words.
'Good morning, gay lady,' Gawain blithely greeted her.
'Do with me as you will: that well pleases me.
For I surrender speedily and sue for grace,
Which, to my mind, since I must, is much the best course.'
And thus he repaid her with repartee and ready laughter.
'But if, lovely lady, your leave were forthcoming,
And you were pleased to free your prisoner and pray him to rise,
I would abandon my bed for a better habitation.
And have more happiness in our honey talk.'
'Nay, verily, fine sir,' urged the voice of that sweet one,
'You shall not budge from your bed. I have a better idea.
I shall hold you fast here on this other side as well
And so chat on with the chevalier my chains have caught.
For I know well, my knight, that your name is Sir Gawain,
Whom all the world worships, wherever he ride;
For lords and their ladies, and all living folk,
Hold your honour in high esteem, and your courtesy.
And now - here you are truly, and we are utterly alone;
My lord and his liegemen are a long way off;
Others still bide in their beds, my bower-maids too;
Shut fast and firmly with a fine hasp is the door,
And since I have in this house him who pleases all,
As long as my time lasts I shall linger in talk take
My fill.
My young body is yours,
Do with it what you will;
My strong necessities force
Me to be your servant still.'

L

- 'In gōd fayth', quoḅ Gawayn, 'gayn hit me bynkkeḅ,
 ꝑaḅ I bē not nōw he ꝑat ʒē of spēken;
 To rēche to such reverence as ʒē rēherce hēre
 I am wýʒe unworþy, I wēt wel mýseluen;
 1245 Bi God, I wēre glad, and yow gōd ꝑogt,
 At saʒe oḅer at serveyce, ꝑan I sette myʒt
 'In gōd fayth, Sir Gawayn', quoḅ ꝑe gay lādy,
 'þe prýs and þe prōwes ꝑat ꝑlēsēʒ al oḅer,
 1250 If I hit lakked, oḅer set at lýʒt, hit wēre litel daynté;
 Bōt hir ār lādyes innōʒe ꝑat lāver wer nōw þe
 Haf þe, hēnde, in hor hōlde, as I þe hadde hēre,
 To daly with dērely your daynté wōrdeḅ,
 Kever hem comfort, and cōlen her cāreḅ.
 1255 Þen much of þe garysōn oḅer gōlde ꝑat ꝑay haven.
 Bōt I louve ꝑat ilk lōrde ꝑat þe lýfte haldeḅ,
 I haf hit holly in my hōnde ꝑat al desýres,
 þurʒe grāce.
 1260 Scho māde hym sō grēt chēre,
 ꝑat wat ʒ sō fayr of face;
 þe knyʒt with spēches skēre,
 A[n]swared to vche a cace.

Taken from F. Mossé. *A handbook of Middle English*.
 Baltimore/London: John Hopkins, 1975.

- 'In good truth,' said Gawain, 'that is a gain indeed,
 Though I am hardly the hero of whom you speak.
 To be held in such honour as you here suggest,
 I am altogether unworthy, I own it freely,
 By God, I should be glad, if you granted it right
 For me to essay by speech or some other service,
 To pleasure such a perfect lady - pure joy it would be.'
 'In good truth, Sir Gawain,' the gay lady replied,
 'If I slighted or set at naught your spotless fame
 And your all-pleasing prowess, it would show poor breeding.
 But there is no lack of ladies who would love, noble one,
 To hold you in their arms, as I have you here,
 And linger in the luxury of your delightful discourse,
 Which would perfectly please them and appease their woes—
 Rather than have riches or the red gold they own.
 But as I love that Lord, the Celestial Ruler,
 I have wholly in my hand what all desire
 Through His grace.
 Not loth was she to allure,
 This lady fair of face;
 But the knight with speeches pure
 Answered in each case.

Taken from B. Stone. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.
 Penguin Books, 1971.

2.3. *Metre and alliteration*

As we understand it, a linguistic analysis of a given text should review the various traditional levels of the language [orthography, phonology, morpho-syntax and lexico-semantics] and point out whatever feature strikes us as interesting, peculiar and typical in such a text, showing how these features characterise the text both historically (considering how it shows the evolution of the language) and dialectally (considering such features against others which may be typical to other regional dialects). The Gawain-poet achieved a highly-wrought poem of great elegance and rich colour by creating a special poetic diction, in which conscious archaism played some part. Let's begin with the verse technique, since we have mentioned (cf. 2.1. above) that its *alliterative verse* is a mirror of mood and imagination.

A movement known as *Alliterative Revival*, particularly in the West Midlands and the North (between 1340 and 1450), produced poetical compositions in the traditional Old English verse pattern: with a long line divided into two half-lines (or *hemistichs*) by a pause (or *cæsura*), and united into a single line by features of similarity in sound (or alliteration).

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight consists of some 2537 lines of verse, arranged in 101 stanzas, each one varying in the number of lines (from 12 to 38), most of them long lines without any rhyme, except for the final 5 small lines whose rhyme is *ababa*.

The staple line of the poem has four metric feet and three accented alliterative words, two before the caesura and one after, as the regular pattern shown in (1) suggests:

$$(1) \left\{ \begin{array}{cccc} x & x & \mathbf{X} & y \end{array} \right\} \begin{array}{l} \longrightarrow \text{(internal rhyme)} \\ \longrightarrow \text{(order of feet in the line)} \end{array}$$

It is then a four feet line in which the third foot [3 or "X" in the diagram: the first in the second hemistich or off-verse] sets by its initial sound the alliterative theme of the line and is called the head-stave. Typically the two stressed syllables in the first hemistich or on-verse [feet 1 and 2, or "x" in diagram (1)] share the stave (or initial sound of the syllable); and foot 4 [or "y" in the diagram] played no part in the alliteration. That is actually the regular practice in our text, as exemplified in (2) below:

- (2) Nōw 'rī deʒ þis 'renk þurʒ þe 'rʏalme of 'Logres (line 691)
Pattern: { r r R l }
- Ne no 'gome bot 'god bi 'gāte wyth to 'karp (line 696)
Pattern: { g g G k }

The poet avails himself of some useful variants of this orthodox alliterative line:

(a) He often exceeds this minimum of alliterating words¹²; and so three alliterating feet are often found in the first hemistich, and even the pattern *aaaAa*, as shown in (3):

- (3) Hē 'fōnde a 'foo hym be'fōre bot 'fērly hit 'w ēre (716)
Pattern: { **f** **f** **f** **F** **w** }
- 'Dēr 'drāf in þe 'dāle 'dōted for 'drēde (1151)
Pattern: { **d** **d** **d** **D** **d** }

(b) At times, the 2nd foot of the second hemistic [4 or “y” in diagram (1)] sets the alliterative theme of the line, thus becoming the head-stave, as in (4):

- (4) And 'set hir ful 'softly on þe 'bed-'sýde (1193)
Pattern: { **s** **s** **b** **S** }

(c) The second foot of the second hemistic may also alliterate with the head-stave, as can be seen in the line reproduced in (5):

- (5) 'Richen hem þe 'rychest to 'rýde alle a-'rayde (1130)
Pattern: { **r** **r** **R** **r** }

(d) The alliteration may be reduced to one foot in each line [either the first or the second —i.e., 1 or 2 in diagram (1)— in the first hemistic] and some verses may show no alliteration at all, as exemplified in (6):

- (6) Bi `þay wēre 'tēned at þe 'hýze and 'taysed to the 'watterz (1169)
Pattern: { (þ) **t** (h) **T** **w** }
- þen 'much of þe 'garyssōūn oþer 'góldeþat þay 'haven (1255)
Pattern: { (m) **g** **G** **h** }

(e) The alliteration may sometimes be double: alliterating either one foot in each hemistich or the two feet in each hemistich separately (not among themselves), as (7) suggests:

- (7) ze schal not 'rise of your 'bedde, I 'rych yow 'better (1223)
Pattern: { **r** **b** **R** **b** }
- Bot þe 'burde him 'blessed and bi þis 'skyl 'sayde (1296)
Pattern: { **b** **b** **S** **s** }

(f) There are some restrictions on what counts as the same sound, and some concessions as well. Thus, a vowel alliterates with any other vowel or with “h”; related consonants (voiceless “f” and voiced “v”, for example) may also alliter-

¹² And only about a hundred times does he fall short of it.

ate; dominant letters in groups of consonants may also alliterate with their like or with single letters ("w", "wh"/"qu" or "p" and "sp", for instance); etc. And often the poet uses the unalliterated last word of one line to set the alliterating letter for the next, as can be observed in (8):

- (8) And he 'hēveʒ up his 'hēd 'ōūt of þe 'clīʒes (1184)
 And 'w ayteʒ 'w arlyþider'w arde, 'quat hit bē 'myʒt (1186)
 'Verayly his 'venisoun to 'fetch hym by'forne (1375)
 { And 'G[awayn], þe 'gōd mon, in 'gaybed 'lȳgeʒ (1179)
 'Lurkkeʒ quȳl þe `day-'lyʒt 'lēmed on þe 'w ōwes (1180)

We may find also the main types of metrical feet, analogous to the ones Sievers' study points out in Old English poetry (especially in the second hemistich), as exemplified in (9):

- (9) (i) 2 trochees: (long + short syllables): 'glȳdeʒ hem 'ūnder (748)
 (ii) 2 iambs: (short + long syllables): watʒ 'not þe 'lāst (1133)
 (iii) iamb + trochee: a 'knyʒt 'grēne(704)/and 'yōw 'gōd þōʒt (1245)
 (iv) I three-syllable foot + I one-syllable ft.: 'mon al hym 'ōne (749)

Most of the lines have feminine endings and enjambement is rare; but the four-syllable hemistich has become less common than it used to be in Old English; because the poet allows himself great freedom in the distribution and number of the unstressed syllables, that can be found—especially in the first hemistich—either before the main stress [=anacrusis] or after, as shown in (10):

- (10) 'Ri chen hem þe 'ry chest(1130) - ~ ~ - ~ [type (i) above]
 'Dōū teles he hade bēn 'dēd(725) - ~ ~ ~ ~ - ~ [(iv) above]
 Nade hē bēn 'duʒty and 'drȳʒe(724) (~ ~ ~) - ~ ~ - ~ [(i)]
 Intō a 'forest ful 'dēp (741) (~ ~ ~) - ~ ~ - [(iv)]

This beat of the alliterative line is only broken at the end of the stanza, which the poet rounds off with a 'bob' (one iambic foot in a line by itself) and a 'wheel' (a quatrain of three feet lines), rhyming *ababa*.

2.4. Orthographic level

As far as the spelling is concerned we think it is interesting to note, at least, the following features, some of them inherited from Old English:

2.4.1. Retention of the Old English rune yogh (ʒ)

The rune is the Irish variant of the Latin "g" and was introduced in the English alphabet when the Northumbria was Christianised by the monks who came from Iona. It occurs quite often in our text¹³, adopting the various graphemic and

¹³ One has to remember that the rune was retained particularly in the Northern regions of the country that had been christianised by the Irish monks even until well into the fifteenth century; in the Southern regions,

phonemic values underlined by several historians of the English language (Fernández 1993: 83):

(i) Semi-vowel [j] (generally written “y” in Southern dialects and, at times, “i” or “j”), though sometimes the spelling “y” may also appear with the same phonemic value, as exemplified in (11):

(11) nēzed(697), wȳze(715), ȝōd(1146), dēzen(1163), ȝet(1198), ȝēlde(1215), ...
yōw/yōu/your(1211,1224,1240,1245), yōwre(1238,1279), ...

(ii) Voiceless palatal fricative [ç] or voiceless velar fricative [χ], identical to the “ch” in today’s German *ich* and *Achtung!*, respectively, depending on whether the vowel preceding it is a palatal or a velar vowel¹⁴, as in (12):

(12) [ç]: kniçt(εz)(704,730,736), Dryçtyn(724), myçt(728), nyçteç(730),...
[χ]: þoχt(692), noχt(694), duχty(724), caχt(1185), ...

(iii) Voiced/(at times, voiceless) alveolar fricative [z]-[s]: at the end of words, be it the plural inflexion of nouns or the singular desinence of verbs in the present tense (third person singular), though sometimes an “s” may appear as well¹⁵, as exemplified in (13):

(13) Godez(692), leudlez, nyztez(693), frytthez, gromez(1127), dōunes(695), ...
rīdez(691, 714), lengez(693), watz(741, 1133), buskez(1136), ...
īles(698), wolues(720), twyges(746), gestes(1127), takles, māles(1129), ...

(iv) Voiced velar fricative [g] or [ɣ], that begins to acquire vowel quality, thus becoming the semivowel [w] which, combined with a preceding vowel, will form new diphthongs (Fernández 1993: 83, 126ff.), as in (14) [cf. 2.5.5 below]:

(14) “aɣ” = [aw]: haɣþorne(744), saɣe(1202), ...
“oɣ” = [ow] > [au]-[u:]: bōɣed(1189, ‘bowed’), droɣ(1188, ‘drew’)¹⁶, ...

(v) Voiceless labio-dental fricative [f]: in final position, standing for Old English “h” > “gh”, although other spellings may also appear (Fernández 1993: 188-9) in such words as the ones in (15):

(15) roze(745, ‘rough’), unnoze(1251, ‘enough’), ...
innoghe(730), innowe(1401), ...

(vi) Sometimes, and also in final position, with a value which is difficult to identify, since it is beginning to disappear (Fernández 1993: 189), as in the cases

however, it had been already replaced by “g” or “y”, depending on whether it was palatalised or not.

¹⁴ In these cases, as well as in the ones mentioned under (v) and (vi) below the “z” may, in other texts, alternate with “h” or “ch” (cf. Fernández 1993: 83).

¹⁵ Mossé transcribes the *yogh* with this value as a regular “z” (be it [z] or [s]). The same practice was typical soon after the introduction of the press: “z” was written “z” because it was the nearest symbol in the printing and still persists in some Scottish family names, such as *McKenzie*, for example, where the “z” was pronounced [j]. [Later on, a new orthographic pronunciation was obviously developed].

¹⁶ In both cases, sometimes the spelling “w” may occasionally appear, in such words as *druwre*(1233), *wowre*(1180), etc.

mentioned in (16):

- (16) þurȝ (691, 'through'), þaȝ (692, 'though'), hēȝe (732, 'high').
 hīȝed (1152, 'hied')

2.4.2. Retention of the Old English rune thorn (þ)

The *thorn* (þ) was a Germanic rune which persisted in English, after the introduction of the Latin alphabet, to represent both the voiced [ð] and voiceless [θ] dental fricative. Both phonological values were also conveyed by the rune *eth* (ð), a symbol of Irish origin introduced in English with the Christianisation. Abbot Ælfric, at the end of the Old English period, had established a conventional distribution of both runes: þ in initial position and ð in medial and final positions. The old rune is still very often used, as exemplified in (17):

- (17) þurȝ (691), warþe, oþer (715), þat (717), þe (718), þay (1127), haþeles (1138), ...

That was the common practice in most Northern texts, while in Southern texts—in which French influence is more evident—it had already been replaced by “th”. The Latin diagraph also appears in the text (though not so frequently); but it should be noted that the Irish runic counterpart (ð) does not appear at all, and also the fact that—even if certain patterns of use have been suggested (similar to the one initiated by Ælfric), such as “þ” in initial/medial position, “th” in final position; or “þ” only initial position, “th” in medial/final position—one cannot find any regular pattern of use; in fact, both spellings may appear indiscriminately in all positions, as shown in (18):

- (18) Initial position: þus (733) *against* Thus (1177).
 Medial position: worþe (1214) *against* worthe (1202).
 Final position: quopþ (1248) *against* fayth (1248).

2.4.3. The spelling “qu-”

The Spelling “qu-” had been introduced by the French scribes to replace the Old English combination “cw-” (Fernández 1998: 90) and occurs regularly in our text, as shown in (19):

- (19) quelle (752 < *cwellan*), quēthe (1150)/quoth (1213 < *cwēþan*), quykly (1324 < *cwicu*), etc.

But its main use, typically Northern, is to replace Southern “hw-/wh-” to emphasise its voiceless quality, as (20) may suggest:

- (20) quēr (700), oþerquȝle (722), quȝl (1180), quēre-sō (1227), etc.

Due to the French influence, the scribe uses sometimes “wh-” as well, as in (21); but both spellings seem to have the same phonetic value: [hw], [χw], [ʍ] (or Northern voiceless [w̥]):

- (21) wheȝ (707 < genit. of *hwā*), when (727), sumwhȝle (720), aywhēre (745), ...

2.4.4. *French influences*

Apart from what has already been mentioned (cf. 2.4.2. and 2.4.3.) the practices of French scribes seem evident at least in the following:

(i) In the spelling of Old English [u:] which is now represented by “ow” or “ou” (Fernández 1993: 49, 131; 1998: 90), sometimes indicating also the early change [o:] > [u:], later on shortened to [u], as can be observed in (22):

(22) *nōw*(691), *cōwpled*(1139), *yōwre*(1279), *dōūneƷ*(695), *abōūte*(705), *fōūle*(717), *dōūteless*(725).
gōūd(1208, 1213, < Old English and earlier Middle English *gōd*)

(ii) In the spelling of Old English [u] when the vowel is in contact with “m/n/v/u/w”, which is regularly represented by the spelling “o”¹⁷, though sometimes “u” may also appear, as in (23):

(23) *gome*(696, < *guma*, ‘young man’), *louied*(702), *wolves*(720), *woned*(721), *sumwhȳle*(720), *much*(726), *under*(748), *hunteres*(1144), ...

(iii) In the spelling of “y” instead of “i”, which appears in final position or in contact with a nasal; and at times in the middle of the word (representing as a rule [i:]), as in (24):

(24) a) *fremedly*(714), *fērly*(716), *duƷty*(724), *day*(1126), *kry*(1166), ...
 b) *myƷt*(712), *mony*(713), *hym*(717), *wyth*(720), *wynter*(726), ...
 c) *klyf*(713), *rȳdeƷ*(714), *yrnes*(729), *peryl*(733), ...

The traditional spelling “i” can also be found, however, to represent both [i] and [i:] in such words as *his*(729), *in*(701/710), *bī*(695), *īles*(698), *hīndeƷ*(1158), *lādī*(1187), etc.

(iv) In the practice of writing “c” (rather than “s”) in contact with a palatal vowel in order to represent voiceless [s]. The scribal practice is not used consistently yet, but “c” and “s” seems to be freely alternating already, as in (25):

(25) *servyce*(1246), *deprēce*(1219), *cace*(1196), ...; but: *servyse*(751), *rȳse*(1219), ...

2.4.5. *Some regularised standard spellings*

(i) Spellings “sch” and “ch” (the “regular” evolution of Old English “scē” and “cē”) seem to be very well established, corresponding to sounds [ʃ] and [tʃ] respectively, as indicated in (26):

(26) *schadde*(727), *schulde*(750), *schotten*(1167), *schāmed*(1189), ...
chapel(705), *suche*(707), *chaunge*(715), *rychest*(1130), *tofyliched*(1172), ...

(ii) Similar regularisation can be noticed in the spelling of [k], using the

¹⁷ Elsewhere “u” will be retained, as for example in: *ful*(711), *bulleƷ*(722), *trussen*(1129, ‘truss’), etc.

grapheme “k” before “n” and palatal vowels [e]-[i] and “c” otherwise, as (27) can demonstrate:

- (27) *lȳked*(694), *frēkeȝ*(703), *nykked*(706), *renk*(691), *knyȝt*(734) ...
cōlde, *clōūdeȝ* (727), *crest*(731), *contray*(734), *cayreȝ*(734) ...

Although a good number of inconsistencies can easily be found; the words reproduced in (28) may suffice to demonstrate it:

- (28) *karp*(696) *against calden*(1127); *klyf*(713) *against claterande*(731);
Kryst(734) *against cryed*(760); etc.

(iii) Both graphemes “v” and “u” are used are used indistinctly to represent both the consonantal [v] and the vocalic [u] phonetic values (spelling “v” usually preferred initially, and “u” in medial or final positions). Typical examples can be found in (29):

- (29) a) “u” with phonetic value [v]: *halue*(692), *ȝuer*(699), *louied* (702), *nēuer* (706).
 b) “v” with phonetic value [u]: *vnbēne*(710), *vche*(715), etc.

According to Northern scribal practice, however, “v” is occasionally written “w”, in such words as *awyse*(1389, ‘advise’), *wowche*(1391, ‘vouch’); and “w”, on its turn, may also be the spelling of [u:], as for example in *blw(e)*(1141), *trwee*(1274), *nwe*(1401) ..., as well as the spelling of the OE rune *ƿ* (“wynn”, [w]): *Waleȝ*(697), *wyldrenesse/Wyrale/wonde*(701), etc.

(iv) The regularisation of Old English rune *ƿ* (“wynn”) mentioned above has been usually made by all editors, so as to avoid confusions (with “p” or “b”). Regularisations of the kind are: the *macron*, to show vowel length; the *punctuation signs* [the full stop (.), semi-colon (;) or comma (,)] which would be only fixed with today’s values in the second half of the sixteenth century; *exclamation marks* and *inverted commas* that would only be fixed in the eighteenth century; etc. They all have been used in our transcription of the text for the sake of clarity.

2.5. Phonological level

Some of what has been mentioned under 2.4 could fit in here as well, since the spelling system (i.e., the written language) is the representation, by means of graphic symbols, of the phonetic system (i.e., the spoken language) and vice versa: phonological differences are usually represented by different spellings. We will mention here only some other features of our text, whose nature seems more specifically phonological.

2.5.1. Monophthongisation of Old English diphthongs

- (i) Following the general trend towards monophthongisation (Fernández 1993:

126 ff.), Old English diphthongs “ēo” (long) and “eo” (short) become [e:] (spelled “ē”) and [e] (spelled “e”), respectively, as shown in (30):

(30) frēnde₃(714 < frēond), bēn(724 < bēon), dēp(741 < dēop), dēre₇₅₄ < dēore), ... lēmed(1137 < lēoma), ... leve(1133 < leof), etc.

When followed by “r”, however, they have become [ɛ(:)] or [ü], [spelled “ē/e” or “u”, respectively], according to standard vowel modifications in “vowel + r-final” or “vowel + r + consonant” sequences (Fernández 1993: 140-4) and rarely when followed by “l” also, as illustrated in (31):

(31) hert(702 < heort), fer(714 < feor), ērpe(728 < ēorpe) rürde(1149 < reord), bürne(1189 < beorn), ... , schulde(750 < sœolde), ...

(ii) Old English diphthongs “ēa” (long) and “ea” (short), on their turn, become [ɛ:] (spelling “ē”) and [ɛ] (spelling “e”) according to regular evolution, and very sporadically [ü], as can be inferred from the examples in (32):

(32) hēde(700/732 < hēafod), nēzed(697 < nēah), lēpen(1131 < hlēapan), ...
üche(715 < ealc), ...

It is indeed the same spelling as the one already mentioned for the “vowel + r-final” or “vowel + r + consonant” sequences and the one found regularly for Old English “ǣ” in such words as dēd(725 < dǣde), slēped(729 < slǣpede) etc. which means that spellings “ē/e”, and “e/e” are certainly confusing (since they can represent, very often indistinctly, OE graphemes “ēo/eo”, “ēa/ea”, “ǣ/ǣ”, “īe/īe” and “ē/e”, making the reading of the text quite difficult¹⁸).

2.5.2. Development of new diphthongs

The rise of new (and more numerous) diphthongs during the Middle English period certainly counterbalances the trend we have just mentioned (Fernández 1993: 126 ff.). Many of them are the result of internal resources of English and some others enter the language through several borrowings.

(i) Native diphthongs originated either by vocalisation of “g”(palatal) and “g/ɟ” (velar) or by the epenthetic vowel before “h”, as (33) indicates:

(33) Diphth. [ei] > [ai]: frayned(703 < freġnan), slayn(729 < sleġen), ...
Diphth. [au]: auþer(702 < æġ-hwæþer) [cf. also 2.4.1 (iv) above]

(ii) The text exhibits also many diphthongs of foreign origin borrowed from French and Scandinavian, as illustrated in (34):

(34) **strau**nge(709), **chaun**ge(711), **contra**ye₃(713), **meru**ayl(718), **ve**wter(1146).

¹⁸ Note that macrons and other useful notations are usually absent in the manuscript.

abl **oy** (1174), ...
 cayre₃ (734), layke₃ (1178), trayst (1211) ...

2.5.3. *Dialectal peculiarities*

(i) Old English rounded [ǣ], which occurred before a nasal —the spelling being either “a” or “o”— may be found persisting sporadically as “a”; but more often as “o”, as in (35), still typical of modern West-Midlands dialects:

(35) gomen (692 ‘game’), forlōnde₃ (699), bōnk (700), mony (710), blonkke₃ (1128), honde (1257) ...; but and (717/-8/...), hande (1203), ...

(ii) Old English [y(:)] (= [ü(:)]) results regularly in [i(:)] (spelling “i” or “y”) in Northern dialects; and it is the regular case here as well, as shown in (36):

(36) frythe₃ (695), nykked (706, ‘neck’), lyft (698, ‘left’), ...

although sometimes “u” (typical of South East and West Midland dialects) or even “e” (typical of the South East dialects) can be found, as exemplified in (37):

(37) much (726 < *mycel*), burde (752 < *byrde*), ...
 herde (704 < *hyrde*), meryly (740 < *myr(i)ge*), ...

(iii) The tendency towards “voicing of fricative consonants” between two voiced elements was already at work in Old English. Such a tendency, which is consolidated during the Middle English period, seems well established here; so that /f/-/s/-/θ/ become /v/-/z/-/ð/ in all dialects (between two voiced elements), though the spellings only show it distinctly for the pairs “f/v” [“v” (here spelled “u”) being the voicing of “f”] and “s/z” [“z”, here spelled “3” in final position, being the voicing of “s”], as illustrated in (38):

(38) halve (692), q̄uerclāmbe (713), ēuen (734),
 frēnde₃, rȳde₃ (714), fȳnde₃ (718), worme₃, werre₃ (720),

Initially, before a voiced element, “f” and “s” become also “v” and “z” South to the Thames, in such words as *vader* (‘father’), *zenne* (‘sin’), etc.; but in Northern dialects, final “-v”, “-z”, “-d”/”-ð” are usually devoiced in unstressed monosyllables, as in: *drof* (1151), *haf* (1144), ...

2.6. *Morpho-syntactic level*

2.6.1. *The noun phrase*

One of the first things to catch our attention [when considering the morphological aspects of the text] is the fact that it has very little of the inflexional complexity of Old English texts. The reduction in number of declensions and number of cases took place earlier in the North and seems quite evident in our text

(Fernández 1993: 299 ff.). We will take a quick glance to the noun phrase and then to the verb phrase so as to proceed with certain order.

2.6.1.1. Nouns

Inflexions of nouns seem to have been completely simplified:

(i) final “-e” appearing in some instances of singular dative case, as in (39):

(39) *bi gāte*(696), *hēde*(700/732), *ēþe*(728), *lȳue*(706), *payne* (733), *wone* (739), ...

is frequently used as *diacritic* (to indicate that the vowel of the stem is long) or for *metrical reasons* (since the feminine ending originates one extra-syllable); in fact, a good number of nouns—especially those in which the vowel of the stem is short—appear in dative case, without any inflexion whatsoever, as the examples in (40) may prove:

(40) *at water*(715), *bi mōūnt*(718), *frō þe crest*(731), *in peryl*(733), *intō a forest*(741), *of sum herber* (755), *bifōre þe day*(1126), *for þe rȳdyng*(1134), *in þat forest*(1149), *wiþ hay and war* (1158), etc.

(ii) As a rule, the genitive case exhibits no inflexion either, resorting to the construction with preposition “of” instead, as can be observed in (41):

(41) *of a kniȝt grēne* (704), *of þe grēne chapel* (705), *of the tenþe dōle*(719), *of the cōlde*(747), *of þat Sȳre*(751), *þe lēve lōrde of þe lōnde*(1133), etc.

The ending “-(e)s” seems well established and regularly used throughout the text for the plural of all declensions and cases (its spelling sometimes being “z” or “ȝ”), as shown in (42):

(42) *a) Nom.* *Mā nyȝtez* (730), *þe hindeȝ*(1158), *the dōes*(1159), ...
b) Genit. *of hōre ōkeȝ* (743), *a hundreth of hunteres*(1144), ...
c) Acusat. *at frēkeȝ*(703), *tōk gātes*(709), ...
d) Dat. *on nyȝtez*(693), *bi frytheȝ* and *dōūneȝ*(695), *ōuer þe fordeȝ*, *bȳ þe forlōndes*(699)¹⁹ ...

2.6.1.2. Adjectives

Simplification in the adjective is even more noticeable than in nouns (Fernández 1993: 314ff). And actually inflexional endings of most adjectives have practically disappeared, as (43) suggests:

(43) *lyft* (698), *Hōly*(700), *gōūd*(702), *derk*(1177), *gōd*(1179), ...

The only desinence is “-e” for the plural of only some monosyllabic adjectives ending with a consonant (and some disyllabic adjectives ending with *-l/-*

¹⁹ For metrical purposes we should remember that inflectional “-e” was not pronounced in words of three syllables, when the stress fell on the second syllable.

er/-em/-en or *-y*), as in *hard*(732, sing.) versus *harde*(733, pl.), *grēt*(1159) versus *grēte*(1171), etc. By and large, however, final “-e” of adjectives—whether in the singular or in the plural—has very often diacritic value, as (44) suggests:

(44) *grēne*(704/5), *fōūle*(717), *cōlde*(727), *cōlde*(731), *unblȳpe*(746), ...

2.6.1.3. Pronouns

In personal pronouns, a mixture of forms can be observed: some typical Northern forms such as the weak form *I* both as a weak and strong form for first person singular (while Chaucer, the most conspicuous representative of Southern English, uses regularly *Ich* as the strong form), the Scandinavian borrowing *þay*(704, 707, ... for the nom. pl.) along with the typically Southern forms *hem*(748, ...) or *her*(706,...), for dative and genitive plural, respectively.

One feature which seems much more characteristic is the consolidated use of formal “*3e*” (plural of courtesy and very typical of chivalrous contexts), as opposed to “*thou*” (the regular second person singular)²⁰, a matter about which the poet is precise and even punctilious. Besides its singular use in prayer, formal *3e* was used to speak to superiors and only for politeness and on ceremonial occasions between equals, while *thou* was used among equals and in prayers; and when the norm was broken, to say “*thou*” implied some disdain (Fernández 1993: 382). One finds *thou*, therefore, in the talk between Arthur and Gawain, Gawain and the porter, and Gawain and the servant. But when Gawain says that at all risks he must keep his promise, the servant shows his contempt by using the singular, in his rudeness the *Green Knight* “*thou’s*” Arthur, and the king answers him in the same way. For host and guest the plural being the correct form, when the Green Knight has disclosed himself to be Gawain’s host, he on the whole continues to use the singular, dropping into the more ceremonious plural when he utters his mild rebuke. Gawain, overwhelmed by his discovery of the plot, uses the singular, perhaps the only mistake he makes in the whole poem. To the Lady of the castle he speaks in the plural (as does Arthur to Guinevere). She is less consistent. In the first interview she twice interpolates a tentative “*thou*” ... in the second she uses “*thou*” without any pretext, and in the third she boldly begins with it. But only once is she able to dupe him into saying “*thou*” to her.

2.6.2. The verb phrase

Inflections of the verb are the typical of the Northwest Midlands dialect: regular Northern ending “-(e)*s*/(e)*z*/(e)*3*” for third person singular present tense,

²⁰ The equivalents in Spanish are obviously *vos* and *tú* (as the average speaker would immediately argue), but the difficulty in reflecting this use in today’s English should be underlined.

combined with the Midlands “-en” for the plural, and typical “-ed”/“-de” for past tenses, as the examples in (45) can prove:

- (45) *rīde*₃(691), *lenge*₃(693), *renne*₃(731), *brayen*, *blēden*, *dēzen*(1163),
nykked(706), *woned*(721), *wrāthed*(726), ... *hade*(695), *wonde*(701), ...

Pluperfects are always formed using the auxiliary *have* (in the South the auxiliary *be* was still used as the auxiliary for intransitive verbs) or by means of the adverb *ē*r (in the Old English manner), as exemplified in (46):

- (46) *Hade herde*(704), *nade he bēn*(724), *hade bēn dēd*(725), ... *ē*r *he myzt sēne*(712), *ē*r *hit myzt falle*(728), ...

Present participles and past participles of strong verbs typically adopt Northern forms, adding “-ande” [Southern “-yng” forms, as *sȳkyng*(753, ‘sighing’) are actually very rare] and “-en” [never exhibiting the typically Southern prefix “i-”], respectively, as indicated in (47):

- (47) *claterande*(731), *crakkande*(1166), ...
flōten(714), *slayn*(729), *bēn*(724/-5), ...

The poem, like the original, was written to be declaimed; and the poet is prodigal in change of tense, so that it is rarely possible to affirm that he moves from past historic to present in order to gain dramatic immediacy.

2.6.2. Analytic resources

The loss of case endings —with the exception of the genitive— had two main effects on the syntactical structure: (i) the use of prepositions and auxiliaries increased in importance and (ii) the word order in the sentence tended towards fixed patterns [taking on structural significance as well].

(i) The use of prepositions is a regular practice, in order to indicate the function of the noun phrase, instead of doing it by means of the inflexions (as it was the case in Old English):

The periphrasis with “of” instead of the inflected genitive is used regularly, as pointed out in 2.6.1.1.(ii). And various other prepositions [*in*, *at*, *bi*, *for*, *to*, *wyth*, *of*, etc.] are also used to express the indirect object (on the analogy of French preposition “pour”) as well as the old instrumental case, and above all to express any of the circumstances typical of the dative and Latin ablative case(s) or even double preposition [especially after preposition “to” becomes the diacritic for infinitives], as in (48):

- (48) *of a knigt grēne*(704), *of þe grēne chapel*(705), *of þat Sȳre*(751), *þe lēve lōrde of þe lōnde*(1133), *bi frythez and dōūnez*(695), *bi gāte wyth karp*(696), *intō þe Norþe Wālez*(697), *on lyft half*(698), *quer þe fordez bȳ þe forlōnde*₃(699), *at þe Hōly Hēde*(700), *wyth gōūd hert*(702), etc.

carried shades of meaning from their origins or from other associations:

- (51) (i) *renk*(691 < OE *rinc*, 'strong warrior'), *fēre*(695 < *ġefera* 'companion'), *gome*(696 < *guma*, 'man'), *frēkeʒ*(703 < *freca* 'bold, insolent man'), *seġge*(707 < *secġ* 'man, messenger'), *wȳʒe*(715 < *wiga* 'soldier'), *mon*(718 < *mann* 'man'), *kniʒt*(736 < *cniht* 'knight'), *haþeles*(1138 < *hæleþ*(pl) 'hero, fighter'), *burne*(1189 < *beorn* 'hero, warrior'), *leudleʒ*(693 < OE *lēod* 'people or nation' + suffix -less),
- (ii) *lengeʒ*(693 < *lengan* 'prolong, linger'), *nēʒed*(697 < *hnāgan* 'neigh, come near'), *fāreʒ*(699 < *faran* 'go, travel'), *rȳdeʒ*(691 < *rȳden* 'ride'), *tōk gātes*(709 'took roads/ways of going'), *q̄verclāmbæ*(713 < *ofer-climban* 'overclimb'), *passed*(715), *glȳdeʒ* (748 < *glīdan* 'glide, move across'), *spēde*(762 < *spēdan* 'speed', related to *spōwan* 'prosper, succeed'), *busken*(1128, < Sc. *būask* 'busk, get ready, hurry'), *lēpen up*(1131 < *hlēapan* 'leap, run'), etc.

The vocabulary used is overwhelmingly of native origin. But some borrowings could be singled out both from Scandinavian and French origin, such as the ones mentioned in (52i) and (52ii):

- (52) (i) *cost*(750, 'observance'), *karp*(696, 'talk'), *tōre*(719, 'strong/difficult'), *nykked*(706 'move the neck'), *frq*(714, 'from'), *cayreʒ*(734, 'move forward'), *layke*(1178, 'play'), *trayst*(1211, 'assured'), ...
- (ii) *straunge*(709), *chaunge*(711), *contrayeʒ*(713), *chēr*(711), *mervayl* (718), *payne*, *peryl*, *plȳtes* (733), etc.

Some of the words used in the text have disappeared from the regular or usual native word stock, as the ones mentioned in (53), for example:

- (53) *renk*(691), *leudleʒ*(698), *gome*(696), *frayned*(703), *frekeʒ*(703), *nykked* (706), *seġge*(707), *tore*(719), *drēped*(725), etc.

which have been replaced by *noble*, *without people*, *man*, *ask/inquire*, *men/warriors*, *move the neck*, *man/knight*, *difficult*, *struck/beaten*, etc.

Others, although they may seem to have disappeared, are still in use (sometimes only in archaic, dialectal or cultivated language), as the examples quoted in (54):

- (54) *fare*(694 'the food for the journey'), *fere*(695 'companion'), *frytheʒ*(695 'enclosures'), *karp*(696 'talk/boast'), *nēʒed*(697 'neigh, come near'), *noghe* (697, 'nigh, near'), *eft*(700 'again'), *wonde*(701, 'lived/dwelled'), *gāteʒ*(709 'ways/ roads'), *flōten*(714 past part. of *fleet* 'to fade away smoothly'), *felle*(717 'cruel, fierce'), *byhōde*(717, *behove/behoo*ve 'to be necessary'), etc.

Many words are compounds, consisting of two or more single words, as exemplified in (55):

- (55) Noun + noun: *wodwos* (721), *iisse-ikkles*(732), *holtwōdeʒ*(742), *bent-felde*

(1136), *kenel-dōre*(1140), *ȝȝe-lyddeȝ*(1201), ...
 Noun + a suffix: *leudleȝ*(698), *wyldrenesse*(701), ...
 Adverb + adverb: *ȝereabōute*(705), *aywhēre*(745), *ȝiderwarde*(1186),
 Adjective + noun: *Hōly Hēde*(700), *grē-hōundeȝ*(1171), ...
 Adjective + adverb: *sumwhyle*(720), *oȝerquȝle*(722), ...
 Etc.

2.8.1. *Semantics (= "evolution of meaning")*

A few words have somewhat changed (restricted or enlarged; ameliorated or deteriorated; ...) their meanings, as in those whose evolution is detailed in (56):

- (56) *roȝe* > *rough*(745), which still maintains its sense in the text ('shaggy' or 'hairy'); but whose meaning has been certainly enlarged to be applied to 'any not smooth, uneven or irregular surface, any uncultivated ground covered with scrub, boulders, etc. as well as a rude, coarse ill mannered or violent person', etc.
- payne* > *pain*(733), 'acute physical hurt or discomfort' (from Old Fr. *peine*, Lat. *poena*, 'punishment, grief'), whose meaning has also been enlarged to include 'emotional suffering or mental distress'
- baret* > *barrat/barret(try)*(752), probably from Old Fr. *barat* 'deceit, fraud, treachery, trouble, embarrassment', whose meaning has been restricted to 'the vexatious stirring up of quarrels or lawsuits or the fraudulent practice committed by the crew of a ship to the prejudice of the owner'
- grōmeȝ* > *grooms*(1127) used, in the text, as synonymous of 'young men' (related to OE *grōwan*, 'to grow'), whose meaning has also been restricted to denote only 'a person, employed to look after horses and, at times, any officer of a royal or noble household',

3. CONCLUSION

To somehow conclude our philological analysis and summarise what we have been discussing, we could perhaps mention at least the following facts:

In spelling and phonology the text shows certain inconsistency, since it displays Old English traditions along with some French innovations.

One of the most noticeably features is its morphological simplicity [as compared to Old English texts], due perhaps to the tendency of English language (typical of all West Germanic dialects as well) to develop a peculiar stress pattern, whereby the stressed syllable of a word was generally the first one, which brought about the weakening of the non-stressed syllables, their subsequent levelling, and finally the eventual disappearance of the old complex inflexional system. Northern influence seems clear in this respect (such a process of simplification having being particularly important in this region).

Sentence patterns seem also to be quite firmly established, as well as the recourse to prepositions and auxiliary verbs to express structural relations, previ-

ously expressed in the language by means of the old inflexional system.

As regards lexicology and semantics, the integrity of English is exhibited not only through the mainly native vocabulary of the text but also through the conservation of the linguistic resources of English: word formation, figures of speech, etc.

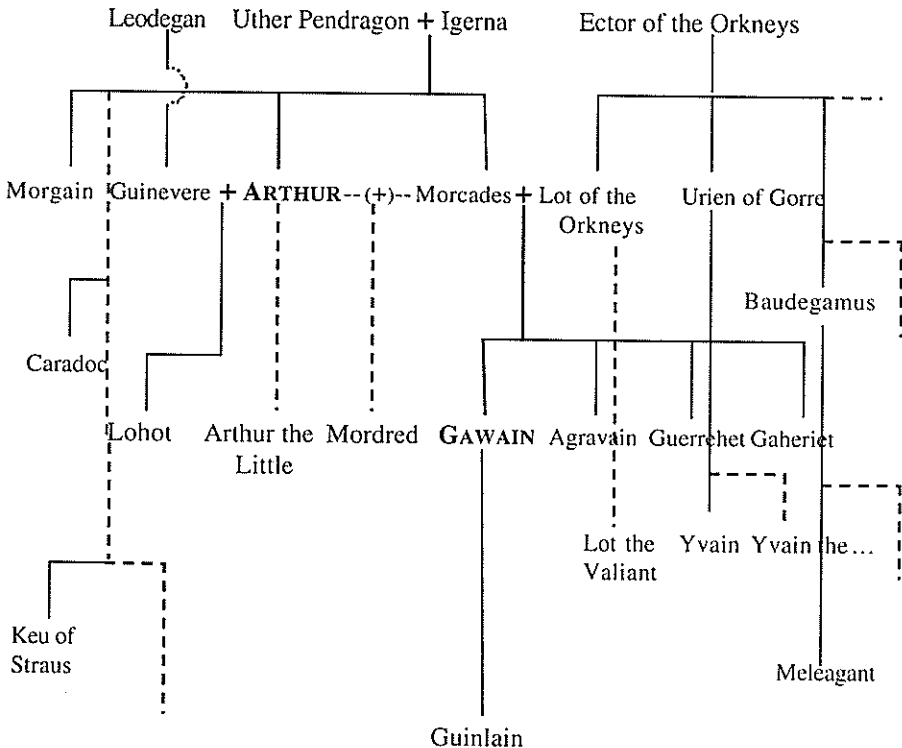
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5. ANNEXES

ANNEX I: A simplified genealogy of King Arthur and Sir Gawain
 (adapted from Régnier-Bohler 1991: LIV)



ANNEX II: *Dissemination of Arthurian literature throughout Europe*
 (adapted from Régnier-Bohler 1991: 1187)

