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A BRIEF COMPARISON OF THE KNIGHT'S TALE  
AND SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

I am indebted to Professor P. Mroczkowski for his suggestion that a comparison of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* might be interesting. The problem as it was then formulated was to attempt to learn if the chief source of differences between them was the authors' dissimilar artistic personalities or some other factor or factors.

The most obvious difference is, of course, the subject-matter. Briefly, one romance is Arthurian, the other courtly love in a setting of "matter of Greece". This in itself however, as even cursory reading of medieval romances shows, would not lead to a radical difference of treatment of the two themes.

The source of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* is of course not in dispute: Boccaccio's *Teseide*. It is interesting, however, that critics have not considered Boccaccio or Italian rhetoricians as notably affecting the whole of Chaucer's style in this Tale. Miss Dorothy Everett (1) in her illuminating chapter on Chaucer's "Art Poetical" where she comes close to a brief comparison of the two romances under discussion, reminds us of what Chaucer inherited from the *Teseide* as to subject-matter and what he rejected in actual substance and style in organizing his tale (He chiefly kept the speeches and descriptions of the temples). And she mentions, as Chaucer's mentors, only the French rhetoricians such as Geoffrey of Vinsauf and Matthieu de Vendôme. Emphasis is placed chiefly upon French rhetoricians also by Manly (2) and Muscatine (3, 4).

There have been interesting suggestions more recently notably from Larry D. Benson (5) on the French source for at least one important element, the Beheading, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as opposed to the *Fled Bricrend*, an Irish source, and from Savage (6) on possible sources in the life of Enguerrand de Coucy and circumstances connected

with his family (e. g. the Ordre de la Couronne). Benson's suggestions implement and perhaps correct the account given by Tolkien and Gordon (7). Miss Everett (op. cit.) briefly discusses the Gawain poet's reading — it turns out to be very similar to that of Chaucer. In French the *Roman de la Rose* and some Arthurian romances. If he was also the author of *Pearl*, then he had most likely read Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Boccaccio's *Olympia*. He knew the *Bible* very well, and of course was far more familiar with alliterative verse than the "Southern man", for whom it is more or less just "[...] »rum, ram, ruf« by lettre". (*Canterbury Tales*, Group I, 1, 43, in the Parson's prologue).

Apart from some French influence the chief influence upon the Gawain poet's style was of course that of the alliterative verse of England. Unfortunately there is no known manual of rhetoric extant for it. Miss Everett in the chapters on Layamon and what she calls the Alliterative Revival deals with admirable clarity with the problems of this type of verse, but does not, perhaps, convincingly demonstrate that there was an actual revival: rather a modified (she writes of "classical" and "popular" alliterative verse forms) continuation of something that was possibly never broken off. We shall, however, return briefly to this point again.

The two romances are fairly closely contemporary: *The Knight's Tale* c. 1386—1388, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1375—1400, according to their respective editors (see References).

Significant differences in cultural background not having been observed at this level, we move on to a brief account of the relative critical success of the two poems, and their respective mood, aims and rhetoric.

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Dorothy Everett has written (1):

It is well known that, in place of Boccaccio's diffuse account of the many champions who come to fight for Palemon and Arcite Chaucer describes two champions only, Lygurge and Emetreus [...] The two descriptions, though entirely different in detail, are alike in manner, suggesting the same kind of parallelism as between Palemon and Arcite, between things similar and dissimilar. In several ways this comparatively minor piece of re-organization could be said to epitomize what Chaucer does in his tale as a whole.

And it is a critical commonplace that Chaucer found in the *Teseide* an unwieldy pseudo-epic, and reduced it to a romance of rhetorical brilliance.

Yet it is a curious fact that, for all his rhetorical skill, Chaucer has confused critics, to a remarkable degree, as to the significance of the *Knight's Tale*. For Root (8), it is fatal to "ask too many questions". For Frost (9), there are three spheres of interest: the rivalry of the lovers, the ethical interests of the conflict of obligations between romantic love and military comradeship, and the "theological" interest in the patterning of the whole which serves, he believes, to demonstrate how "just providence fully stabilizes a disintegrating human situation". For Fairchild (10), there is a possible examination of the aims of the active and the contemplative life, with Chaucer using Theseus as a vehicle for his mature choice in favour of the contemplative. And for Muscatine (3 and 4) the tale is a "poetic pageant" of the knightly life, its ideals and conduct, its magnificence both material and spiritual. No matter how divided the critical ranks may be, there are certain matters on which they are all united; and it should not be difficult to show this, nor to show why, in the next few pages.

Others have already very fully commented on Chaucer's use of *occupatio* or *transitio* in ll. 875—885, 994—1000, 1187—1188, 1198—1201, 2197—2207 and 2719—2764, which usually signifies that Chaucer is here shortening some of Boccaccio's material. This has the effect of slowing down the pace chronologically, and so does the repetitious "sough I" (ll. 1995—2005, 2011, 2017).

Most of the figures used (*repetitio*, as in ll. 1721 ff., *conversio*, as in ll. 2141 and 2144, *complexio*, as in ll. 914—919, *annominatio* and *tractatio*) come within Geoffrey of Vinsauf's categories of *ornati faciles*, while the magnificent descriptions of May, temples and tournaments which need no further commentary, are categorized variously as methods of amplification: *effictio* and *notatio*, *similitudo*, *contrarium*, *digressio*. The lyric passages of Palemon, Arcite, and Emelye are dazzling displays of *divisio*, *interrogatio*, *disjunctio*, *expositio*, *exclamatio*, *sententia*, and *notatio*. Even more brilliantly constructed, rhetorically, are the speeches of the protagonists and their prayers (all three begin with *pronominatio* and have many other similarities).

The setting of the love problem by Chaucer (with the initial opposition of attitude of Palemon and Arcite, and in ll. 1347 ff.), the direct description (of the dungeon, of May, of the temples, Emetreus, Lygurge and the tournament, and finally of Arcite's funeral) and the speeches (of the women, of the rivals, of Theseus, Egeus and the divinities) together with *figurae verborum* have the same effect as the repetitions "saugh I", as Muscatine has noticed (*op. cit.* (3)). They are in one way rhetorically ideal; but if we take it that the normal aim of rhetoric is to persuade,

and tell the tale, then we must admit that Chaucer has deliberately chosen certain "colours" and used them in such a way as to pervert this aim, or deliberately chosen to leave Boccaccio's material untouched for the same reason.

Muscatine is not the first to remark that the rhetoric of the speeches is dazzling, but that they have a "non-dynamic" structure, that is, the rhetoric employed is unrelated to the dramatic situation. There is in the constant use of *effictio* and *notatio* a deliberate breach of dramatic effect. And this seems to be the point of departure for critical uneasiness.

Muscatine (4) quotes Hulbert (in „*Speculum*", XXVI 1929: *What was Chaucer's aim in the Knight's Tale?*) as follows:

In Chaucer's story there are two heroes, who are practically indistinguishable from each other, and a heroine, who is merely a name [...] it is hard to believe that anyone can sympathise with either hero, or care which one wins Emelye.

He perhaps believes that undue significance should not be attached to lines 1155—1159, and that this Märchenelement serves merely to emphasize the "balance" of the plot. This is a sincere admirer of Chaucer, one who feels that whatever Chaucer has done in the *Knight's Tale*, he has not given us, beneath the display, the characterization and dramatic development we looked for.

Frost (op. cit.) says,

The poem as a whole presents in affectionate detail three major ceremonial events: The prayers at the temples, the elaborate formalities of the tournament and Arcite's funeral.

He believes, however, that the almost excessive patterning of the tale has been done for a grander reason than display of narrative organization and rhetoric (see above).

He quotes Root (*Poetry of Chaucer* p. 163—173)

who feels that the descriptions (of battles, temples, May etc.) with occasional passages of noble reflection are the 'flesh and blood' of the poem, of which the characters and actions are merely the skeleton framework.

And he goes on

Thus the tale begins a wedding, a conquest and a funeral; and ends with a tournament, a funeral, and a wedding.

Muscatine's work has here been, like that of Frost, to demonstrate the symmetry of the *Tale*; he has also demonstrated the superfluity, from

a structural point of view, of much of the description (valuable as it may be for other reasons). Our example may be that of Lygurge and Eme-trius who are described at length while contributing nothing to the action.

Kane (11), also an admirer of the *Tale*, in spite of his enthusiasm says,

The whole strength of the *Knight's Tale* is crustaceous, external, and superficial [...] Because the essential action, the rivalry of the two young men, was so slight and simple by nature that it scarcely admitted of development, he was free to parade his classical learning, his amateur philosophizing, his astronomical lore and his finely detailed descriptions of great medieval occasions to their full advantage without harm to the story.

We need not, of course, go all the way with Kane, but it is worth remarking in passing that other English romance writers, while opportunists all when it came to displays of lore, would have, and did, attach much more importance to the story; and this even if it were a story of romantic love in the courtly tradition, never too much at home in England (cf. *Squire of Low Degree, Iwain and Gawain*).

Root (op. cit.), remarks,

If we are to read the *Knight's Tale* in the spirit in which Chaucer conceived it, we must give ourselves up to the spirit of romance; we must not look for subtle characterization nor for strict probability of action; we must delight in the fair shows of things, and not ask too many questions.

And Kane says,

But by these same tokens the *Knight's Tale* is almost all show.

What Root says is true of romance in general: but it seems to me he is pleading for a special attitude to the *Knight's Tale*. In many of the better romances, and, as we shall argue, though by no means first to do so, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we do find both subtle characterization and more or less probability of action, within the limits of romance.

I have quoted so extensively from the critics to illustrate the matters on which they seem united, and I hope by the arrangement of this part of the paper to have shown some of the grounds for a fairly widespread uneasiness and dissatisfaction with the *Tale*.

Rhetorical skill can sometimes run away with the rhetor — even the "rose of rhetoris all". If for a moment we could bring ourselves to divorce questions of scholarly partisanship from literary evaluation, we should have to censure the *Knight's Tale* as the Romantic critics would probably have done. Instead of letting the matter dictate the form,

Chaucer has let the form dictate the matter: until a great deal of what is most charming in romances and essential to this genre, has been lost. Romance resists systematization or perishes. Here, where Art dictates to Nature, it has almost been gilded and varnished away.

Chaucer, writing in an imported metre, naturally knew and respected the native alliterative tradition. His own imitation of it (ll. 2601 ff) in the *Knight's Tale* cleverly suggests the effect of the metre. The question is discussed by Miss Everett in "Chaucer's Good Ear" and "Art Poetical" (op. cit.).

The rhetoric of *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight*, for so long admired, hardly needs comment. The suitability and flexibility of the stanza, possibly invented by the poet, in which the story develops unhurriedly in the long lines, and in which "bob" and "wheel" are used to sum up or (as in ll. 487, 991, 2280) are used for special effects, is a commonplace (see D. Everett op. cit.).

The metrical skill employed to control subtle, even witty, conversation, is immense; and this smoothness of rhythm is carried through by varying the length of the stanzas so that, most often, the stanza end coincides with a natural pause. The stanzas are also often linked by repetition (repetitio, or convertio) and by alliteration, in an unobtrusive manner.

Alliteration's functions (other than purely decorative) become apparent in the poet's use alliterative words for e. g. a frightening effect, as in

Sumwhyle wyth wormes he werres, and with wolves als,  
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, that woned in the knarres,  
Bothe wyth bulles and beres, and bores othergyle.

(ll. 720—722)

or for emphasis, as in

Bot busk, burne, bi thi fayth, and bryng me to the poynt.  
Dele to me my destine, and do hit out of honde,  
For I schal stonde the a strok, and start no more  
Til thyn ax have me hitte: haf here my trawthe.

(ll. 2284—2287)

But, as with the *Knight's Tale*, the most remarkable rhetorical feature is the device of parallelism of events and descriptions. However, I submit that here parallelism is put to a more organic use. The narrative is unified because the poet concentrates on the character and actions of one hero in one adventure. So much so, that as critics have noticed, e. g. Benson (op. cit.) the poet leaves out the jealousy of Morgan for Guinevere which is the motive for Gawayne's quest, and the enchant-

ment of Bercilak and his castle as being not germane to the central interest. The events, then, are ordered in such a way as to concentrate our interest on this, while they are described with sufficient scope. And so there are three hunting-expeditions, and with each there is a visit from the lady. Gawayne strikes off the Grene Knight's head on January 1st, and in the following year on the same day encounters the Knight for his return blow. The poem begins and ends in Arthur's court, begins and ends with Gawayne's journey, and just as in the beginning we hear of Arthur's descent from Brutus, so we end with another passage of British pseudo-history.

The story itself, combining the temptation with the Beheading Game, falls into four parts: challenge and acceptance, journey and arrival, temptation, and second meeting with the Grene Knight. These four parts are linked by passages preparing us for what is to come. The Beheading theme is kept in the reader's mind remarkably throughout the Temptation episodes, for Gawayne's uneasy dreams and our whole response to the fairy-tale brightness, merriness, and comfort of the Castle make us aware it is but a temporary refuge. Whether or not the poet had French or other sources for this, credit can surely be given him for clever handling of the themes.

The poet works upon associations, as when the romance alternates between the technical terms of love-making and the technical terms for the three different hunts; and the wealth of detail is subordinate.

The principal means of uniting the Beheading and Temptation themes lies of course in the person of the Knight, the grim adventure and the Lady's attempts at love-making provide the means for the test of his character, which in Chaucer's words should be full of

Trouthe and honour, freedom and cortesy.

The principle elements tested are fidelity to the plighted word (in arriving for the blow at the appointed time, and, by implication, loyalty to the host) and physical and moral courage (in undertaking the quest, standing the blow, and refusing the lady's blandishments).

The poet clearly states the event as test of chastity in lines 1774—1775:

And more for his meschef, gif he schulde make synne

and as loyalty to the host in line 1276 and 1775 and as test of courtesy in ll. 1549—1551, 1773. These, with the test of his Beheading, amount to a complete knightly test.

The poet, while accepting the concept of chivalry, does not admit the full courtly code. It is one of the most English traits of the poem that its first concern is with Gawayne's moral conduct, not courtly love, as line 1276 clearly shows.

I wysse, worthy, wouth the wyghe, ye haf waled wel better.

What true devotee of the courtly code would attempt to dissuade a charming lady by reminding her that she has a husband, no matter how courteously?

And alle his afyance upon folde wast in the fyve woundes  
That Cryst kaght on the croys, as the crede telles.

(ll. 643—644)

He would not, probably, have altogether escaped sin

Nif Maré of hir knyght mynne

(l. 1769)

(On sin and the confession of Gawain, John Burrow is most illuminating (12)). And where, in the *Knight's Tale*, if we can accept the idea that this is a statement on the mutual relations of the Firste Moevere and the world, seen through the agency of the gods (in their function as stars, acting as Destinee or Fortune) in Gawayne no statement is necessary. Enchantments or no, Dryghten overshadows the whole unmistakably and the moral code is purely Christian. It is, then, possible to argue that the former Tale belongs to a moral and stylistic order foreign to and partially rejected by the native simplicity of the latter, rooted in the tradition of the North-West Midlands.

In the *Knight's Tale* there is confusion of meaning, and critics have not agreed on the similarity or difference in the characters of Palemon and Arcite. In *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight*, such difficulties cannot arise, partly for obvious reasons and partly because the characters seem to be flesh and blood (Arthur 86—89, Green Knight 33—35, Gawayne 1770—1774, 2363). The poet allows us to see, behind the actions, the inward fears and motivations of Gawayne, as when he dreams of the Green Chapel in Bercilak's Castle, and when he accepts the green girdle. Not only does he reveal what Gawayne thinks, but how others (Bercilak l. 2362) see him. Consequently, the moral overtones of the poem become even more apparent, for we are invited to judge Gawayne's conduct as the author does (cf. Everett, *op. cit.*, Burrow, *op. cit.*).



Additional felicities are in the descriptions of movement e. g. ll. 1182—1190, and in the cleverly-caught varying tones of Gawayne's speech. No need to remark on the poet's eye for telling details, as in his descriptions of the hunts, armour, the castle, the clothes, the comparisons between the old and young ladies (950—953). Those descriptions of things seen by the hero have this quality: that they are described for us as he would see them. The details of the construction of the castle are as would be noted by a weary traveller. The eye begins at the gate and travels down to the moat, then gradually up to the pinnacles and turrets.

The descriptions of nature too (as in lines 2003—2005) are related to Gawayne's fears and state of mind. They, more than anything in the romance remind us of the literature to which we may incline to believe this poem belongs in mood at least — the tradition of the grimness of Beowulf, of the Wanderer; here the grimness is not, of course, dominant.

Suffiseth heere ensamples oon or two,  
And though I koude rekene a thousand mo,

(*Knights Tale*) ll. 1963—1964 (13)

I propose only to deal with the utmost brevity with two descriptions: One of the lists in the *Knights Tale*, the other of the castle in *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight*, which may additionally indicate that the two romances, far from sharing the same background, are widely different.

The relevant passages are ll. 1880—1913, in the *Knights Tale* and ll. 764—802 in *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight*. Reasons of space do not permit a fuller examination of other passages.

In the first place, we see the devizing of the lists with Chaucer's eyes, for the description begins with the figure *dubitatio*, and Chaucer addresses the reader directly. The emphasis being on the uniqueness and richness of the lists, the figures of *contrarium* with *transgressio* in line 1885:

That swich a noble theatre as it was,  
I dare wel seyen in this world ther nas.

and *interpretatio* with *conversio* and *compar* in lines 1890—1893 are used,

Ful of degrees, the heichte of sixty pas,  
That whan a man was set on a degree,  
He letted nat his felawe for to see.

and this part of the description closes with an emphatic *traductio* ll. 1895—1896.

And shortly to concluden, swich a place  
Was noon in erthe, as in so little space.

The passage is noteworthy for symmetry: the list itself is round "in manere of compas", and the gates lie eastward and westward. The oratory of Venus lies to the east, of Mars to the west, and of Diana to the north. An internal symmetry is also remarkable in the following lines:

For in the lond the was no crafty man  
That geometrie or ars-metrike kan,  
Ne portreyour, ne kervour of ymages,  
That Theseus ne yaf him mete and wages.

and in

[...] auter and an oratorie, [...] maken and devyse.

This emphatic approach is continued in making sure that the reader understands the significance of the temples

In worshipec of Venus, goddesse of love,

and

In worshipec of Dyane of Chastitee.

We are not allowed to forget the cast of the "noble theatre" with the list of craftsmen, and the temple of Mars

Thatt coste largely of golde a fother.

But the vulgarity of this simplicity (both as regards money and design) is redeemed by the way we are reminded of the determining presence of Theseus.

In the description of Bercilak's castle, as I have remarked, we see the castle through Gawayne's weary eyes

As hit schemered and schon thurgh the schyre okes.

Here there is no simplicity: the castle is, we are assured by those who know, in the very latest architectural style. The size is comparable to the size of the lists,

Pycked on a prayre, a park at abute  
With a pyked palays pyned ful thik,  
That umbettese mony tre mo then two myle,

The description of something awe-inspiring in the lists comes only with the temples of Mars; here, seeing through Gawayne's eyes, we are dis-

mayed by the hard hewen stone, by the ditch and shut gates. Yet we are attracted by the "garettes ful gaye", and the barbican

A better barbican that burne blusched upon nevere,

and the gables and turrets, the chalkwhiteness, the fresh, new air, and the telling simile

That pared out of papure purely hit semed.

Rhetorically it is simple: there is, of course, the alliteration, the choice of words, some *conduplicatio* and *gradatio* and *compar*, and, as in Chaucer, one simile. There is "atmosphere" here and none in Chaucer — at least, not yet.

Granted that the purposes of the descriptions may be different Chaucer comes off less well using too many similar colours of rhetoric and leaving little to the imagination. Most of the Gawayne description is simple *notatio*.

Returning to the point about the Alliterative Revival: is it not a little difficult to believe that a poet such as the Gawain poet who was very possibly also the author of other remarkably accomplished poems, should go to the trouble of himself modifying alliterative verse, creating stanza forms and writing a considerable amount of verse in a half-obsolete "revived" metre? We here have all the marks of a creative poet who, it is possible to surmise, would have thrown over an obsolescent form and worked in the imported metre or even elaborated his own, if he were not confident of working in a living continuous tradition, which he could deliberately choose, from his knowledge of it and the imported alternative.

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Dorothy Everett remarks that the Gawain poet "throws the modifying colours of imagination" over the familiar so that it lives with a new life". The essential antithesis between the two romances surely lies in this: a Londonized South-Eastern Continental (chiefly Anglo-French) sophistication with an excessive patterning in which form at least temporarily dominates maker, versus a North-Western English sophistication with many French borrowings, in which maker dominates a highly organized form. It is an antithesis of the "colours" of rhetoric and the colours of imagination.

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