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# Sir Gawain and the challenge episode in Middle English analogues

A comparative study of the fantastic

**Supervisor**
Ch. Prof. Marina Buzzoni

**Assistant supervisor**
Ch. Prof. Massimiliano Bampi

**Graduand**
Silvia Bruno
Matricolation number
843875

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# *Table of contents*

The present work offers a comparative study of the fantastic element in three Middle English romances, namely *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Greene Knight*, and *The Turke and Sir Gawain*: the texts were chosen in light of some common motifs, namely the challenge and the beheading, which the three versions display with rather different results, in terms of treatment of the supernatural.

Tzvetan Todorov's approach to the fantastic will offer the theoretical basis of the present analysis, for the fantastic is defined, in Todorov's terms, as a literary genre in which a supernatural, or apparently supernatural, event invades a situation of ordinary life, therefore causing hesitation over the apparent lack of explanation for said event: the challenge motif, indeed, may be ascribed to this definition. Todorov's approach, however, was based on 18th-century literature and social context, which was more similar to modern-day society and beliefs than to the Medieval times: subsequently the purpose of the present comparative study is to attempt to analyse works pertaining to the Middle Ages using Todorov's idea of the fantastic.

The first chapter of the present work will focus on Todorov's approach, by giving a brief overview of the most pertinent aspects of the scholar's work on the fantastic and attempting to apply it to Middle English literature.

Subsequently, the focus will shift to a contextual and content analysis. The second chapter, indeed, will highlight the fundamental features of Middle English

romance and proceed inductively to the more specific case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, by discussing characteristics, sources, and analogues. In the second part of the chapter the discourse on the fantastic in the Middle Ages will be better analysed, and fantastic and symbolic elements which figure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will be identified and discussed.

Once the theoretical and historical contexts have been exhaustively presented, the work will be centred on the comparative analysis, using Susan Wittig's adaptation of the tagmemic approach to Middle English romance. A detailed account of the episode structure of the three works will be presented, so it may become the basis for the structural comparison and of the fantastic element, which will be discussed in the final part of the chapter. Some reasons for the differences and similarities among the three works, and in the application of Todorov's approach to them, will be tentatively offered, with regards to aim of the narrative and implicit audience.

## 1. THE FANTASTIC: TODOROV'S ANALYSIS

### 1.1. INTRODUCTION A LA LITTERATURE FANTASTIQUE

Literary theorist and author of several essays, Bulgarian scholar Tzvetan Todorov (Sofia 1939- Paris 2017) is best known for his contribution on the diffusion and revival of formalist studies in Europe, within the structuralist wave in the nineteen sixties. After moving to Paris in 1963, he became student under semiotic philosopher Roland Barthes and dedicated his research to Russian formalism and the structuralist methods for the analysis of the narrative, so to elaborate a science of literature which could analyse and study the laws and abstract properties governing it. Among his most important works appear *Théorie de la Littérature*, published in 1965 and *Littérature et signification*, in 1967.[1] Considered a prelude to his studies on linguistic symbolism, his work which most interests our analysis concerns structuralist criticism and the treatment of the supernatural element in literature: titled *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique*, it was published in 1970 and contains an analysis of the fantastic which is rather more exclusive than its analogues.[2]

In this chapter, the first concern in Todorov's analysis, regarding the definition of genre and the inclusion of the fantastic in the group of literary genres, will be reported. Subsequently three conditions of existence of the fantastic, namely hesitation, identification, and non-allegorical nor poetic reading, will be listed and analysed, preceding an overview of the direction that the literary work might

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[1] (Todorov' Tzvetan nell'enciclopedia Treccani)
[2] (Authors: Todorov, Tzvetan: SFE: science fiction encyclopedia 2018)

follow when the fantastic ceases to exist. Then, the system of the fantastic will be given attention, and, lastly, the functions of the supernatural according to the Bulgarian scholar will be described. This brief overview of Todorov's work on the fantastic will be a starting point for the following analysis of contents.

## 1.2.    THE FANTASTIC AS A LITERARY GENRE

Tzvetan Todorov, in *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique* (1967), defines the fantastic as a literary genre, in which ordinary situations are interrupted by events which apparently cannot be explained according to the laws of nature and thus create an uncertainty, which is generally common to the characters and the – implicit – reader.[3]

In order to study the fantastic as a literary genre, Todorov claims it necessary to begin with a more general characterization of literary genres and literary studies. A literary study starts from the assumption that the literary text is both a combination of features common to other, pre-existing literary works and a transformation, an evolution of said system of literary works. Subsequently, a literary study is to be led in two opposite directions: from the literary text to the literary genre, and from the literary genre to the literary text itself.[4] Indeed, Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, names this as one of the chief characteristics of a literary study, as Todorov reports:

> Poetry can only be made out of other poems, novels out of other novels. Literature shapes itself and is not shaped externally… everything that is new in

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[3] (Todorov, The Fantastic: a structural approach to a literary genre 2007, 25)
[4] (Todorov 2007, 6-7)

literature is a reworking of what is old… self-expression in literature is something which has never existed.[5]

Furthermore, a literary genre can be defined by three main aspects, namely verbal, syntactic, and semantic. The first aspect concerns words and sentences: it leads to two groups of problems about the properties of the utterances, and the author and reader of the text.[6] The syntactic aspect defines how the different parts of a text are related, in a logical, temporal, or spatial sense. Lastly, the semantic aspect concerns the themes of a literary work: Frye stipulates that, however many the themes of literature can be, there is a limited number of universal themes which are always included and can transform and combine to create all the rest.

In summary, Todorov claims that for a theory of genre to be acceptable, the presumed genres must find evidence in some or all texts, while the genres found in history of literature must correspond to a coherent theory: that is, to define literary genres there must be a dual effort to continually associate concrete phenomena and abstract theory.

Let us now return to the fantastic and its definition. The most important part of the definition of fantastic is uncertainty: when the familiar world of the character, which is also familiar to the reader, is interrupted by events that are unexplainable within the laws of said world, the character, and the reader with them, are confronted with a choice between two solutions: on the one hand, the

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[5] (Todorov 2007, 10)
[6] It is important to keep in mind that the two entities (author and reader) should be interpreted as implicit author and reader.

event can be explained through illusion or imagination, therefore leaving the laws of the world unaltered; on the other hand, the event can be accepted as real, and thus explainable with laws that are not known to the character and the reader.[7] In the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green knight*, for example, the giant-like appearance of the Green Knight could be explained as an illusion of the senses, or by accepting that he is not part of the world as we know it: the solution, however, maintains its ambiguity until the end of the text.[8]

The period of time between the appearance of the supernatural and the choice of one or the other solution defines the fantastic: a hesitation, an uncertainty between real and imaginary, uncanny and marvellous. Uncanny and marvellous are indeed the two neighbouring genres of the fantastic, in relation to which the fantastic must be defined.[9] Many scholars, such as Castex, Louis Vax, Roger Caillois, have attempted to give an exhaustive definition of the fantastic; however, Todorov's definition, which is derived from that of Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov[10], has the advantage of focusing on the choice between the two possible explanations, defining the fantastic as more of a dividing line between the genres adjacent to it, than a substance, and is therefore more suitable in terms of richness and appropriateness.

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[7] (Todorov 2007, 25)

[8] In fact, only at the very end of the text will a plausible solution be presented to Gawain and the reader.

[9] (Todorov 2007, 25)

[10] The Russian critic seems to suggest that the uneasiness and uncertainty created by the fantastic can be attributed solely to external causes to the self, rather than to psychological reasons, an idea which supports Todorov's theory that when the fantastic ceases to exist it is in favour of either the marvellous or the uncanny.

## 1.3.    Conditions of existence of the fantastic

Works pertaining to the fantastic genre begin with an ordinary situation, one which does not violate the laws of nature: in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this stage is represented by the Christmas banquet at King Arthur's court. Afterwards, something strange happens, that is an unexpected intrusion, which might, nevertheless, be rationally explained by means of coincidence: the appearance of the Green Knight at court, as strange as the intruder can seem, is not as unexplainable as the following development, one which can no longer be explained by the laws of the natural world. In Sir Gawain's story this is the beheading scene.

The beheading scene, nevertheless, does not put an end to the fantastic: hesitation persists among both Gawain and the court, nobody is convinced of the supernatural nature of the event, but at the same time the apparent inexplicability of said event prevents the characters from giving it a completely realistic, acceptable interpretation.

Todorov insists that, while it is the hero who hesitates, such hesitation must be experienced by the implicit reader as well, as, just like the hero, the reader cannot know the truth, which could put an end to the fantastic, for knowledge of the truth leads one to make a choice between marvellous and uncanny. Thus, due to their own ambiguous perception, the implicit reader of a work of the fantastic is plunged into the world of the story. This is the first condition of existence of the

fantastic: the reader must hesitate, because were they informed of the truth, the fantastic would cease to exist.

Hesitation can be perceived with regards to our understanding of the events: the question is not whether the events have in fact occurred, but whether we understood them correctly; this is the kind of uncertainty which leads to a choice between real and illusory, which is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s case. Indeed, Gawain, Arthur and the court have no doubt of the actual presence of the Green Knight in the court. In other situations, however, the characters are uncertain whether the events are real or just a product of the mind: in this case, hesitation occurs between real and imaginary.

In a text, hesitation is often represented through the use of the imperfect tense and locutions such as 'I almost believed'. Their function is to maintain the uncertainty in the writing as well, for without them the effect of the fantastic would disappear. In our text, the Green Knight is described as monster-like and not a monster, as resembling a half-giant, but not actually as being one: the poet leaves great space to interpretation.

The second condition proposed by the Bulgarian author is not considered obligatory, that is, it may not be fulfilled, but is nevertheless the case of most works pertaining to fantastic literature. The reader is supposed to identify with the protagonist or a character of the story, so that they can find representation of their

hesitation in the text.[11] In other words, most fantastic works include one or more characters who hesitate in front of inexplicable events; however, there are some exceptions, works in which the characters are either convinced of the reality of the supernatural events or of their illusory character.[12]

Todorov posits one more condition, which concerns the interpretation of the text. In fact, no text can be ascribed to the fantastic if it is read as poetry or with an allegorical interpretation, because the reader knows they are not to be interpreted in their literal sense, whether because they are supposed to be mere verbal sequences and nothing more (poetry), or because they are to be understood as having a whole different meaning (allegory).

Fear felt by the characters – and consequently experienced by the reader – is considered a necessary condition of the fantastic by many scholars. For instance, Todorov quotes H. P. Lovecraft:

> A tale is fantastic if the reader experiences an emotion of profound fear and terror, the presence of unsuspected worlds and powers.[13]

The Bulgarian scholar admits that fear is often connected to the fantastic, which is quite justifiable considering fear is the primary emotion linked to the intrusion

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[11] As will be considered later in the text, following  Omar Khalaf's analysis in *"I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake": una lettura todoroviana del Sir Gawain e il cavaliere verde*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, by virtue of the fact that it is a medieval text, is partly an exception to this condition. (Khalaf 2011)

[12] It is the case, Todorov reports, of *Véra* by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam

[13] (Todorov 2007, 35)

of something one does not understand; nonetheless, in his analysis, it is not considered a necessary condition.

Todorov claims that the end of the fantastic results in the aforementioned fall into the uncanny or the marvellous. In his work, however, he only refers to texts pertaining to the 18th-century literature, the age of the Gothic novel, or later. This poses the problem of how to apply such a recent theory to works which belong to a much further period of time, considering that it is more difficult to understand what the implicit reader of a Medieval author could be like, as Jacques LeGoff[14] and Paul Zumthor[15] state. As far as the Medieval times are concerned, one can only make assumptions based on what has been transmitted to us. Omar Khalaf, for instance, proposes one further category, the magic, following the lines of discourse of the aforementioned scholars[16]. Given that magic was indeed part of everyday life in the Middle Ages, Khalaf asserts that Todorov's concept of marvellous could not have existed then, as, often, it matched the wide-spread view of reality: following Le Goff's remarks, this peculiar kind of Medieval "everyday" marvellous includes exceptional situations which are nonetheless encased in the laws of nature, which are indeed marvellous, but not as extraordinary as they would be considered in another period of time. The subtle line which constitutes the fantastic, viewed as a limit between the uncanny and the marvellous, is continuously crossed by Medieval authors, in light of the

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[14] (Le Goff 1988)
[15] (Zumthor 1972)
[16] (Khalaf 2011)

ephemeral character of the boundaries between natural and supernatural in the Middle ages.[17]

## 1.4.    TRANSITORY SUB-GENRES

Resuming Todorov's analysis, the scholar asserts that the fantastic may be defined as a boundary, situated on the limit between the marvellous and the uncanny, and thus only in relation with the two. However, the limit line is not always clear and there are works which can be located in between the fantastic and the uncanny, on one hand, and the fantastic and the marvellous on the other hand; therefore, Todorov posits the existence of two transitory sub-genres, namely the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvellous, which include works where hesitation covers a long period in the timeline of the story, but still ends in one or the other neighbouring genre.[18]

In the fantastic-uncanny sub-genre, the events appear to be supernatural in the first place, although by the end of the story they receive explanations which put an end to the fantastic and re-establish the reality of the world in which the characters live. The events might have occurred by accident, coincidence, tricks, or illusions: this is the realm of the dichotomy real/illusory, where the events have actually happened and may be explained rationally. The real/imaginary opposition, on the contrary, concerns all explanations having to do with dreams, drugs, and madness, therefore attributing the events to the imagination rather

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[17] (Khalaf 2011)
[18] (Todorov 2007, 45)

than reality. It must be noted that explanations pertaining to the real/illusory group are not always the most probable and might seem less probable than excuses breaking the rules of nature as we know it; nevertheless, this does not disrupt the analysis of the fantastic to this point, as probability refers to internal coherence in a genre, while the fantastic is, again, a state of hesitation and uncertainty experienced by the reader and the characters.

On the other hand, in works pertaining to the uncanny, the events described provoke reactions of fear and incredulity, but they can be explained by the laws of the world we live in. As it applies to a great number of works, this definition could be criticized for being too vague, but Todorov states that it is as broad as the genre can be, with it being only limited on the side of the fantastic.

The fantastic-marvellous includes all fantastic narratives in which the character – and the reader – accept the supernatural. Only certain details will determine whether the works are ascribed to the fantastic-marvellous or the pure marvellous. One of the features of the fantastic-marvellous is the series of strange events, which could still be explained rationally: it culminates in a supernatural event that can't be accounted for through the laws of nature, locating the story into the fantastic-marvellous.

The pure form of the marvellous is characterized by the lack of distinct boundaries: the characters – and the implicit reader with them – do not react in a particular way to the supernatural events and the nature of the events is the focus of the marvellous, rather than the attitude. Undoubtedly, an example of the pure

marvellous are fairy tales, where the characters' reactions to supernatural events suggest that the setting is not the world we live in, and it does not answer to the laws of our nature: the supernatural elements are indeed part of everyday life in a fairy tale world, as they do not cause any surprise in the characters nor the reader.

The boundaries of the pure marvellous can be further defined if one identifies the types of narrative in which the supernatural can be explained, and therefore does not fully disrupt reason. In the hyperbolic marvellous, the events are considered supernatural because the dimensions mentioned in the descriptions are greater than the ordinary, similarly to the description of the Green Knight as a half-giant in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[19] The hyperbolic marvellous, nevertheless, can be accounted for through means of illusion, fear or simply allegorical interpretation. In the exotic marvellous, the setting in which the supernatural events take place cannot be located by the implicit reader, who, consequently, might not question them for not being part of the world they live in. This can also be connected to the Arthurian legends, as, while the modern reader might relegate these stories in the pure marvellous in virtue of magic and supernatural beings, the Medieval reader could consider the Arthurian world, whose exact location was not specified. As for the last two categories, the instrumental marvellous and the scientific marvellous, the supernatural is explained through technology which is probable, although not yet developed in

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[19] It is worth noting, however, that one might argue that the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* uses said description only in order to create the hesitation typical of the fantastic

the period, in the former case, or thanks to laws of nature not yet acknowledged by contemporary science: this is the case of science-fiction works.

### 1.5. THE SYSTEM OF THE FANTASTIC

Todorov further claims that a literary text can be considered a system in its functioning, as there are necessary relations between all of its parts: the reconstruction of a literary work from its structure should be possible and all of the features of said text should be influenced by the modification of one of them. From this follows that the uncertainty created by the fantastic should modify in a way or another the whole text, on all of its levels.[20]

The structural unity which results from the above-mentioned presupposition is achieved by means of three properties of the texts. The first one, which is proper of the utterance itself, concerns figurative discourse and rhetorical figures, which are often interpreted literally rather than figuratively. It is the case of the hyperbolic marvellous, where the supernatural might appear as the ultimate extension of a figurative image: Todorov asserts that *"exaggeration leads to the supernatural".[21]* In other cases, the figurative expression is realized in a literal sense by the intervention of the fantastic: for instance, a simile about death and love, by the end of the story might actually become reality, with love having the same consequences as death. Further, there can be a synchronic relation between figurative discourse and rhetorical figures, on the level of function rather than

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[20] (Todorov 2007)
[21] (Todorov 2007, 77)

etymology: the appearance of a supernatural event at the end of the story is accompanied and preceded by comparisons and figurative or idiomatic expressions, which designate said supernatural event when they are taken literally. In other words, the author creates a path of expressions which culminates in the occurrence of the foretold event. These relations help us understand how the fantastic and figurative discourse are intertwined: the supernatural can only exist in language, and language is the only mean to conceive the supernatural.[22]

The second property concerns the act of uttering, that is the speech act. That means it has to do with the narrator, and subsequently the second condition posited by Todorov: the represented narrator is the most suitable narrator in the fantastic genre because he is together part of the story and outside of it. In other words, while a non-represented narrator would plunge the story into the realm of the marvellous at the very first occurrence of the supernatural element, a first-person narrator, who is at the same time character of the story and someone the reader can identify with, is allowed doubt, hesitation and uncertain reactions, and therefore can create the atmosphere for the fantastic. The case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is, once again, an exception, due to its origin in the Middle Ages: the narrator is someone who found a book and wishes to transmit its story, thus, he is both in the story and outside of it, and the narrator himself experiences the fantastic.

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[22] (Todorov 2007)

Lastly, the third property comes from the syntactical aspect of the story. Penzolt claims that one of the features of a fantastic story is the gradual crescendo of supernatural influence in the real world, although this gradation is not always followed: not even in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can we find such a gradation, as the most supernatural scene, the beheading, is to be found at almost the beginning of the story. Todorov, however, seems to partially agree with Penzolt's theory: he asserts, nonetheless, that what should interest the study of a genre is temporality, not a regular gradation which is not found in all of the works pertaining to the fantastic. That is, the fantastic, like the detective story but more than other literary genres, requires a precise process of reading: if the reader reads a fantastic book, but already knows how it ends, the fantastic will not exist, for the ambiguous situation will not be generated for lack of doubt. This is how Todorov explains the difference between the first and the second reading of a fantastic story: the reader does not identify with the narrator anymore, and can exercise meta-cognition to identify the strategies used to create the fantastic.

Todorov moves on with his analysis to speak of the third aspect identified by Frye: the semantic aspect. The supernatural event is considered semantically if compared to other elements which can be similar or contrasting, but, nonetheless, have no direct relation to it. As Todorov puts it:

> In speaking of an uncanny event, we do not take into account its relations with the contiguous events, but its connections to other events, remote in the series but similar or contrasting.[23]

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[23] (Todorov 2007, 91)

## 1.6. FUNCTIONS OF THE FANTASTIC

By looking at the role of the fantastic in a literary work, Todorov posits three main functions: creating a particular reaction in the reader; maintaining an atmosphere of suspense and permitting a complicated organization of the plot; almost tautologically allowing the fantastic to become reality inside the language. With regards to the third function, Todorov assumes that to study the themes of the fantastic, one ought more generally study literary themes, for they are contiguous, and that the main feature of the fantastic is the exaggeration, the superlative. From his assumptions, Todorov goes on to explain the difficulties of thematic criticism, in particular the lack of means to analyse literary structures and the dangers of exiting the realm of literary criticism and entering other sciences in order to find categories.[24]

Witold Ostrowsky, as mentioned by Todorov, proposes, in his *The Fantastic and the Realistic in Literature: Suggestions on How to Define and Analyze Fantastic Fiction* a theory according to which the themes of the fantastic are identified on the basis of the transgressive behaviour with regards to a schema including eight main elements:[25] what is different from other categorizations is the abstract level on which Ostrowsky builds his theory.

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[24] (Todorov 2007)
[25] (Ostrowski 1966)

Todorov's strategy for the study of themes is derived from the application of a technique which allows prudence, so as not to fall into the danger of making a list or putting so much attention on the reaction that the very nature of the supernatural event disappears. The groups of themes are obtained by dividing them on the base of their compatibilities and incompatibilities, whence the themes which are together and can appear together are combined: this can be considered the stage of description. Once this stage is done, the so-called stage of explanation, that is the interpretation of the classes themselves, begins.

Lastly, in a change of perspective, acquiring the point of view of literature in general, Todorov tries to define the functions of the fantastic, and identify a literary and a social one of the supernatural: the literary function has to do with the fantastic as a reaction to the supernatural, whereas the social function concerns aspects of the supernatural itself.

With regards to the social function, Todorov claims that the fantastic is used so as to describe and discuss topics which are generally considered taboos, and risk being censored: authors use the fantastic to avoid condemnation, for it is easier to speak about certain events pertaining to the sphere of sexual excess, crime and madness, if it is the devil who acts through them. In other words, as Todorov claims:

> The function of the supernatural is to exempt the text from the action of the law, and thereby to transgress that law.[26]

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[26] (Todorov 2007, 159)

As far as the literary function is concerned, Todorov identifies three main functions, without considering the one concerning the allegorical use: that is, when the fantastic is used allegorically, the author's intent is to communicate an idea. The three other functions are pragmatic, semantic and syntactical. Pragmatically, the supernatural is used to create disturbance and suspense in the reader; semantically, the supernatural exists to manifest and designate itself as real; syntactically, as already mentioned above, the supernatural is used to aid and support the development of the plot. In other words, the syntactical function can be directly connected to all literary works, for supernatural elements tend to accompany many of the greatest narratives in history.

The author states that at the core of every narrative are essentially two types of episode, of which one describes a situation of stability or instability, and the other the transition between the two situations. In fact, the features of an elementary narrative are a situation of equilibrium which is disrupted by an event, which causes the equilibrium to break, and thus the beginning of the quest of the hero aimed at restoring a stable situation. At the end of the story, the equilibrium is re-established, although it is slightly different from the beginning of the story, for the hero has changed in their quest. This may be applied to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the equilibrium is interrupted by the appearance of the Green Knight and Gawain is the hero who departs in order to re-establish the equilibrium; at the end of the story, Gawain succeeds in his quest, but, upon his return, he is changed, and tarnished with guilt, symbolized by the green girdle. As in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in an elementary narrative the supernatural is

introduced to interrupt a stable situation and cause the hero to leave to re-establish the equilibrium.

Therefore, Todorov asserts, the supernatural is called into the narrative in order to break the established law and cause a quick modification of the narrative, which has become static due to the fixed rule. The transgression of the law, then, becomes the linking point thanks to whom the social and literary function of the fantastic can coincide.

## 2. CONTEXTUALIZATION AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

### 2.1. ROMANCE TRADITION AND THE FANTASTIC

Medieval Romance tradition in England owes a lot of its fame to continental romances, especially considering the Anglo-Norman conquest in 1066 and the subsequent influence the French court and tastes had on the English culture. With this knowledge in mind, the following chapter will analyse romance tradition in Middle English and its peculiarities in audience, manuscript tradition, style and contents.

The issues that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* brings to light as to the differences and similarities with the French tradition, and how the poem can be considered one of the most illustrious works in the English literature, will be listed and carefully analysed. Special attention will be given to the sources and analogues of the poem, that is the Gawain popular romances which rose to fame in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Subsequently, the fantastic element will become the focus of the analysis of contents: Todorov's analysis of the fantastic will be related to the Middle Ages with its issues linked to the distance in time; then, the main themes and sources will be listed, as well as the functions and origins of the supernatural in the romance tradition.

Lastly, a more insightful analysis of the fantastic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will be carried out, with careful attention to the elements which carry the most symbolic value.

## 2.2. Chivalric and Romance tradition in Middle English

### 2.2.1. Romance in England: social context

In 1066, after the battle of Hastings, William, Duke of Normandy, was crowned king of England. Although romance tradition in England is thought to start about two centuries later[27], W. R. J. Barron, in his book *English Medieval Romance* (1987) considers that, due to the merging of the English and French cultures, England was linked to the development of the genre since its very beginning.[28] Indeed, for the two centuries following the Battle of Hastings, one might consider England and France closely interlinked, for both language and politics were reunited in the Anglo-Norman court, whose language soon became the language of aristocracy – and thus of power and prestige – and whose dynasty came to reign over both England and part of France, including the northern provinces, where the early romance was born. Subsequently, literature produced in Northern France and England was closely related, with patrons, both male and female, supporting writers and authors from both places.

Despite the development of a previous, standardized literature in Anglo-Saxon vernacular in England, the Norman conquest caused a shift in prestige: French and Latin were used in official documents and for administrative purposes, whereas English was the language of the greater mass. Indeed, if an Englishman wanted to

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[27] Derek Pearsall, in his essay *The development of Middle English Romance* (Pearsall 1988), considers 1240 as the initial date of development, as that is the date which scholars think the Cambridge MS fragment Gg 4.27 – which includes the earliest known Middle English romances, King Horn and Floris and Blauncheflur – dates back to.
[28] (Barron 1987)

improve their status, the first thing they would have to do was learning the language of the conquerors, as the English language was reserved for the lower classes, such as peasantry. This had a great effect on literature as well: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, that is *History of the Kings of Britain*, was written in Latin and, though it is not a romance, it may be included in the story of romance, for epic history is the main theme of the work, and it gave romance authors a great source of inspiration for the stories and legends, as a sort of background of their works, especially with regards to the Matter of Britain. As a matter of fact, it was Geoffrey of Monmouth who took Celtic hero Arthur and made him into the King Arthur of the tales. Successively, it was an Anglo-Norman translator of Geoffrey's works, Wace, who added an account of his knights and the Round Table, in his *Brut*, which dates around mid-twelfth century. It was from these stories that the narrative space of the romances was created: the Round Table, in fact, made the creation of new stories about its knights possible. [29]

The situation of Anglo-Norman linguistic dominance lasted up until the thirteenth century, when politics began to change, bringing modifications to the linguistic system as well: due to a surge of nationalism, English slowly began to replace Anglo-Norman in education, administration, and official documents. This process culminated in the fifteenth century, with the establishment of English as national language. As for the literature, the early fourteenth century saw the rise of translations and adaptations of French in all genres, and, during the reign of

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[29] (Cooper, The English Romance in Time 2004, 26)

Richard II, writers could very well take inspiration from Latin and French tradition, but used the English language in their works. [30]

### 2.2.2. Knighthood at the centre of romance

Romance and chivalry can be considered two inseparable entities throughout the life of the genre. In fact, the main characters of most, if not all romances, are also the primary exponents of chivalry, that is knights, whether the plot might be concerned with the process leading to knighthood or other themes such as battles, quests for chivalric virtues or adventures. [31]

The final form of chivalry, the one that reached the modern times through the romances, took shape in a fictional world that was both realistic and imaginative at the same time: chivalric stories took inspiration from historical battles, the supernatural world, psychological studies on love, etc., which constructed the ideal knight.[32] Romances represented an ideal of chivalry and knighthood which was hardly matched by its real counterpart: attaining chivalric virtues was not easy, and the quests narrated by the romances demonstrated what the knights should aspire to in terms of ethic and morals, rather than their real condition.

Three were the main requirements of a knight, according to Sir William Segar, who wrote an account of chivalry at the beginning of the 17th century.[33] The first

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[30] For a short account of the political shifts which affected language in England, see Barron, *English Medieval Romance*, pg. 48-51

[31] Richard Barber in *The Knight and Chivalry. Revised edition*, (R. Barber 1995) gives an accurate and detailed account of chivalry in the Middle Ages

[32] (R. Barber 1995, 105)

[33] (Cooper 2004) cites *Sir William Segar: the Book of Honor and Armes* (1590) *and Honor Military and Civil* (1602). Segar's account was written because of his roles as herald and then Garter King of Arms, which explain his interest in Chivalric rituals.

and primary is virtue, not just in the ethical sense, but more importantly in the social one. Secondly, a knight should be wealthy: although the ideal knight should not be so on the base of wealth, knighthood was expensive and was usually reserved for noble men – this is proven true in romances as well, where knights are generally either noble or illegitimate heirs of noblemen. The third and final requirement is prowess in practice: bodily strength and ability to fight; this requirement, though necessary in the life of a knight, was rather less important than the other two.[34]

Helen Cooper claims that the function of the knight in a Christian community was to fight:[35] although violence and aggression were not part of the Christian ethic, the fighting man was to protect and support the King, the Church, the weak, and, more generally, those in need.[36] It is up to modern people's discretion to believe this rule was always observed. In times of peace, besides, knights catered their need for aggression and violence through hunts and tournaments.[37] Tournaments played an important role in the romances: in tournaments the main character could demonstrate their prowess and superiority, but not without social responsibilities. Indeed, fighting in tournaments, in the romances, did not allow the knight a desire to kill, and needed a just cause, whether it be saving the honour of the court, the lady, or their own, etc. Challenges, such as the one the Green

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[34] (Cooper 2004, 43)

[35] (Cooper 2004)

[36] Richard Kaeuper, in his essay *The societal role of chivalry in romance*, gives a rather different analysis of the figure of the knight: violence and bloody fights are generally regarded by romance authors and historians as a valorization of the chivalric persona, as are the calls for restraint that are imposed on them. (Kaeuper 2000)

[37] (Cooper 2004, 41)

Knight proposes in the text analysed below, can also be included in this topos: although, when presented at the beginning of the story, it does not seem to pertain to a social nor ethical ideal, at the end it becomes rather clear that the challenge was aimed at showing the faults of King Arthur's court and how much the knights had lost the virtues for which they were famous.

### 2.2.3. Manuscripts, authors and their audiences

Romances that have survived up to the modern times are preserved in manuscripts: in parts of anthologies, compilations, or, in rare cases, as single texts. Although manuscripts largely devoted to romances were generally the norm, there are cases of manuscripts which contain generically diverse compositions.[38]

Sylvia Huot in her essay titled *The manuscript context of Medieval romance*, argues that reading romances in the original manuscripts is a remarkably different experience from reading them in modern editions. She writes:

> The medieval manuscript shapes out encounter with the text in a way quite different from that of a modern edition; and it often bears the personal reactions of generations of past readers, a material reminder of the communal nature of literary reception.[39]

Manuscripts usually contained decorations, such as miniatures, illustrations, rubrics to help the understanding of the narrative, etc. Not only that, scribes might also make use of decorations or notes to call the reader's attention to certain

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[38] Cotton Nero AX, which contains the romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and three other alliterative poems, namely *Pearl*, *Purity*, and *Patience*, offers an example of this kind of manuscript.
[39] (Huot 2000)

words or passages. Differences in the making of manuscripts generally reflect the differences in the cultures of origin: the case of French and English manuscripts is exemplary, for the former were much more decorated than the latter. Nevertheless, manuscripts are also evidence of the level of wealth of the patrons, made explicit in the number and luxury of the decorations and the material used.[40]

Multiple versions of the same story may appear in different manuscripts, and no two versions of a story are identical: differences might range from minor scribal errors or variants, to more explicit and significant reworkings, which might even lead to divergences so great that the two versions can hardly be considered the same story anymore.[41]

Although scholars lack direct information on the actual audience of English romances, a lot can be said about who the romances were aimed at, by looking at the forms in which they have survived. Barron, in *English Medieval Romance*, claims that comparing the manuscript compilations of Middle English romances to contemporary French manuscripts tells a lot about their implicit readers, as well. English romance compilations were more modest, as opposed to the rich decorations and precious materials used for French manuscripts. Scholars may infer, from this difference in the material quality of manuscripts, that the social context of Middle English romances was primarily popular, probably aimed at the

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[40] (Huot 2000)

[41] This is why editions are so important: with a number of witnesses the scholar can build a critical edition and try to reconstruct the original codex. The Cotton Nero AX manuscript contains the only surviving copy of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and as such that version is called codex unicus.

new English-speaking bourgeoisie, as opposed to the courtly context of French and Anglo-Norman copies.[42] Further, in agreement with Barron, Pearsall also posits the Middle English romance audience to come from a lower or lower-middle class, the emergent bourgeoisie, whose tastes in entertainment were satisfied by approximately the same material as the higher classes, but in English.[43]

John Burrow, in *Medieval Writers and their work*, argues that the Middle Age writers were not professionals;[44] there is no certain knowledge of their primary occupation, writes Barron, although the works demonstrate a good level of literacy, leading scholars to believe them to have had some sort of clerical education, and to have written romances in their free time.[45]

A writer in the Middle Ages could be involved in the creative process of inventing original stories but also the processes of copy and translation of other extant texts, mainly from the French culture. The atmosphere of uncertainty that permeated England at the time made it so the writers, who still included marks of their originality in the texts, would try and preserve the existing knowledge: the success of the French romances envisaged the popularity of the modes and

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[42] Precisely due to the quality of the manuscripts, the number of remaining copies can hardly reflect the popularity of English and French romances: French manuscripts were more precious and preserved as family heirlooms, whereas English texts were more likely to be found in Monasterial contexts, next to ecclesiastical works, and many were lost during the Dissolution of Monasteries around 1536 (Barron 1987, 54)

[43] (Pearsall 1988, 12)

[44] Even an author the likes of Geoffrey Chaucer could be considered an amateur, in the sense that his official career as a writer is not attested. (J. A. Burrow 1982)

[45] (Barron 1987)

patterns in English as well, especially if one considered that the emergent bourgeoisie would aspire to resemble their French counterpart. [46]

Generally, Middle English writers were anonymous, and are nowadays identified by the name of their works: it is the case of the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, who is referred to as the 'Pearl poet', from the name of one of the other works which the romance was preserved with, or the 'Gawain poet'. In other cases, scholars refer to writers as authors or 'Anon'. Not much information is given about the authors in the romances, and Burrow argues that this is because, similarly to Medieval sculpture and architecture, written works were considered public and thus impersonal.[47] It is nevertheless important to note that not all writers were anonymous: some of them could write their information, or include a title to their romance, in the incipit, at the end of their works, or inside a prayer to God or Saints, for favours; others, secular authors especially, included the name of their patrons, in an attempt to gain favours from them.[48]

### 2.2.4. Elements, motifs and sources

Multiple versions of about 80 poems, written between 1225 and 1500, were preserved and have got to the modern times: many had French or Anglo-Norman antecedents, although the material was used in a rather different way. Cooper writes that English romances better attained to the morality of orthodox

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[46] (Barron 1987, 56)

[47] Middle English writers were in this sense much different from their French contemporaries, such as Chrétien de Troyes, who usually took credit for their works.

[48] (J. A. Burrow, Writers, audiences, and readers 1982)

Christianity, in which adultery and sexual intercourse outside marriage did not figure; many of the romances showed greater devotion to religion and often included God-given trials, which the hero must endure, before restoration, usually achieved with the help of Providence; emotions were communicated through actions or explicit statements; fantastic elements appeared less usually than in their continental counterparts; on the whole, the different take on the continental material reflected the different audience to which it was aimed, the different social context, etc.[49] Barron, indeed, talking about the literary tradition in late Medieval England, denies passive dependence of the English tradition on French and Latin models, because of the good quality of contemporary works in English that have reached the modern times.[50]

Although disagreements among scholars about the definition and classification of romance as a genre or mode are quite current nowadays[51], an approximate classification of the romances can be made according to the stories which they tell. In the medieval tradition of 'matters', scholars recognize four subject-areas, namely the matter of Rome, with Classical sources, the matter of Britain, which follows the adventures of Arthur and his court, the matter of France, that is the story of Charlemagne, and the matter of England, which retells English, British, and

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[49] Cooper also compares these romances to the rise of the bourgeois novel, in that it represents the "downward social penetration from the French-reading aristocracy to the gentry and to townsmen." (Cooper 2004, 30)
[50] (Barron 1987, 52)
[51] In his work, Barron gives a short but adequate explanation of such disagreements, which spun from the great variety in form and content, but also the inability to establish basic, agreed-upon characteristics of the genre. (Barron 1987)

Celtic legends.[52] The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, of course, belongs to the matter of Britain.

War, battle and courtly love were among the most widespread themes of Medieval romances. Not only this: the romances give scholars an insight into life in the Middle Ages, and as such cannot be considered as merely imaginative literature. Real and ideal often intertwined in the stories and there existed a "two-way traffic" – as Richard Kaeuper writes in *The societal role of chivalry in romance: northwestern Europe* – between people in the real world and the works of literature. In fact, with knights being just below nobles in the societal scale, romance literature, whose main focus were indeed knights, was to become the locus where social issues could be debated and explicated. [53]

### 2.2.5. A formal and stylistic overview

As discussed above, the diversity which permeates the English medieval romance makes it difficult to complete a specific categorization: area of origin, length, and style vary a lot from one romance to another, although one may argue that most Middle English romances were written in verse. Barron claims that the early romances were more or less faithful translations of Anglo-Norman texts, and

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[52] About the matter of England, however, Derek Pearsall argues:
> It is possible to believe that such stories as these had wide currency in popular oral tradition, and at the same time admit that when such stories came to be written down, they would be written down as translations from available sources and not records of oral tradition.

This is to say that the stories included in the matter of England were available through the lenses of French and the French culture, as it was the available source, rather than from the primary sources of oral transmission. (Pearsall 1988)

[53] (Kaeuper 2000)

maintained the original structure of four-stress couplets, with octosyllabic verses.[54] Another widespread early style was the tail-rhyme stanzaic form, which consists of stanzas in which the rhyme is repeated in a shorter line, after an interval of two lines.[55] The later period of life of the romances saw two opposite directions: on the one hand, writers would create long prose versions; on the other hand, degenerate versions had the style of abbreviated ballad forms. In the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a literary stream called 'alliterative revival' arose: *Sir Gawain and the Green knight* is considered one of, if not the, most famous works belonging to this tradition.

Derek Pearsall indicates that the division into four-stress couplet romances and tail-rhyme romances may be connected to another sort of division, less stylistic and more content-related, in 'epic romance' and 'lyric romance':

> The former more prosaic, realistic, historical and martial, the latter more emotive, more concerned with love, faith, constancy and the marvellous.

While in French this difference can be observed in evolutive stages, from the 'chanson de geste' to the 'roman d'aventure', and finally the 'Breton lai', in English this sort of layering happened simultaneously, which is the reason for the great variation in forms.[56]

One of the most striking and noticeable stylistic features of the Middle English romance is conventionality, that is redundance: many romances display a pattern

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[54] (Barron 1987)
[55] Barron exemplifies the tail-rhyme stanzas as "aa b cc b dd b ee b". (Barron 1987, 54)
[56] (Pearsall 1988, 16-17)

in their style, which shows repetition, both of the alliterative kind and of whole lines. The reason for this peculiar feature, which is common in Middle English romances but is generally not found in other continental versions, has been the centre of scholarly debates for many years. Common convention to a number of romances is the use of formulae, which are usually associated with the oral tradition. Milman Perry defines a formula as:

> A group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions in order to express a given essential idea.[57]

Even though formulaic units can be an indication of the oral composition of a text, it does not mean that all romances were composed for oral performance by old-school 'jongleurs', whose audience were illiterates. Barron claims that, rather, the formulaic structure of romances indicates a cultural and social preference, according to which reading aloud was a common habit and authors were lead to please the ears as much as the eyes: formulae and conventions in general were, in sum, used to give a rhythm to the text, add rhymes and fill out empty lines. This explains how, despite not being composed for oral, mnemonic performance, Middle English romances include direct addresses to the audience, calls for silence and attention, blessings and benedictions, etc.[58]

## 2.3. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* WITHIN MEDIEVAL CHIVALRIC ROMANCES

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[57] (Parry 1930, 80)
[58] (Barron 1987, 55)

### 2.3.1. Gawain's character in the chivalric tradition

Often referred to as a relative of Arthur, possibly his sister's son and thus his nephew, Sir Gawain is the knight of the Round table who is generally linked to courtesy, as well as masculinity, adventure and competition. In the early tradition, that is in the chronicles of the history of Britain, it was Gawain, rather than Lancelot, who was King Arthur's first and principal knight, rather than Lancelot, a position which he retained in the English alliterative tradition.[59]

As Thomas Hahn argues, in his essay titled *Gawain and popular chivalric romance in Britain*, the origins of this character are mythic and belong to the Celtic, Irish, and Welsh tradition, where Gawain is identified with superhuman figures or deities, linked to the strength and power of the sun.[60] In the earliest works about him, Gawain is portrayed as a traditional champion, rather than a popular hero, and his name may derive from the Celtic Walwanus, the Irish Cuchullinn, or the Welsh Gwalchmai mab Gwyar[61]: indeed, Welsh translations of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* confirm the match.[62] Geoffrey of Monmouth's masterpiece tells the story of a knight, called Walgainus, who has similar strength to a solar god, and is the original owner of Excalibur, which is a sun-weapon. Despite his folktale-hero appearance, he is among the closest knights to Arthur.[63]

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[59] (D. Brewer, English Gothic Literature 1983)
[60] (Hahn 1995)
[61] Gwalchmai is portrayed as a man of action, which is relatable to Gawain's character in the romances.
[62] (Hahn 2000)
[63] (R. W. Barber 1961)

In the early twelfth century, thus, Gawain already enjoyed popularity among readers of British traditional legends and folktales, but his inclusion in Geoffrey's *Historia* – which is dated around that time – and the preeminent role he played beside Arthur enhanced his fame among learned Latin readers as well.[64] It is with the rise of the chivalric romance in English and French that Gawain became a literary and chivalric hero. Indeed, in describing his character, Hahn claims:

> In Chrétien's *Lancelot* and *Perceval*, and especially in *Yvain*, Gawain stands as a foil to heroes motivated by consuming erotic or religious drives. […] Gawain persists as the prototypical knight, bodying forth the chivalric and Arthurian ambience as he pursues, from one romance to the next, the attractions of open-ended, opportunistic errancy.[65]

Furthermore, Barron argues that with the rise to fame of Chrétien de Troyes and his romances, Gawain became a fundamental character in the stories: not only did he embody all the knightly virtues, he became a model of chivalry and courtesy, to the point where he was considered the basis of comparison for young aspiring knights, in prowess and skill in arms as well.

In the French tradition, Gawain's exemplary role denied him real personal development and, as true chivalry lost its appeal, so did his character: indeed, explains Barron, the French 'Gauvain' turned out to be treated with irony and satire.[66] Contrary to the French tradition, the English culture created what Hahn

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[64] Indeed, in the years following the publication of Geoffrey's *Historia*, the Latin *De Ortu Waluuani* – in English *Gawain: the early years* –appeared, recounting the life and adventures of young Gawain. (Hahn 1995) and (Hahn 2000)

[65] (Hahn 2000, 219)

[66] (Barron 1987, 159) Hahn, however, argues that Gauvain in French literature later became a somewhat treacherous character and even, in some cases, a villain.

calls a cult for Gawain, in that he retained his status as loyal knight and model of chivalry throughout: he was the exemplary young man, constantly ready for new adventures.[67]

Besides being a secondary, but still fundamental, character in English romances such as *Arthur and Merlin*, and *Sir Perceval of Galles*, Gawain's role as "unblemished paragon of chivalric virtue" became explicit in the fourteenth-century romances titled *Ywain and Gawain*, and *Libeaus Desconus*. Gawain also appeared in the alliterative poem *Morte Arthure*, where his death at the hands of his half-brother Mordred earned him a eulogy by his slayer and the tears of King Arthur, both recognizing his person as the "supreme exemplar of valiant manliness".[68]

The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with its literary relatives, became even more popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the knight's popularity was transmitted in a number of genres, from the more continental chronicle narratives and romances with known textual sources, to the more modest 'popular' romances, which provided scholars with the knowledge that the episodes gathered in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were part of a cluster of romances, which largely survive in later copies.[69]

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[67] (Hahn 1995)

[68] (Hahn 2000, 221)

[69] (Hahn 1995) mentions *Layamon*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, and Malory as chronicles, while the romances directly linkable to a textual source are *Yvain and Gawain*, *Libeaus Desconus*, etc.: in all of the narratives mentioned in this note, Gawain plays a relatively smaller role than in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

### 2.3.2. The author and the manuscript

Although his identity is unknown, scholars have been making hypotheses about the Gawain-poet for a long time, basing their theories on general characteristics and comparative analyses. Indeed, the authorship of the romance is to be analysed in a broader context, which must include the three other poems of the manuscript, since all four texts were supposedly written by the same scribe's hand.[70] The similarity of several descriptive passages in all four texts, the correspondence of the dialect used, the verbal and stylistic parallels, and the fact that they were all unified in one manuscript, hint to the correctness of the theory.[71] The dialect in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written would suggest that the author lived in the North-West Midlands, possibly Derbyshire.[72]

The religious and ecclesiastical elements and the spiritual atmosphere of the four poems have led scholars and critics to believe the Gawain-poet was a priest or cleric belonging to some minor order. The same elements, however, can also, more simply, indicate an ecclesiastical education, as Gordon and Tolkien point out, for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, on the other hand, displays great familiarity with, and especially delight in, courtesy and chivalric values and virtues, and

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[70] A good argument for the single authorship of the four poems is the one given by Dorothy Everett in *Essays in Middle English Literature*:

> It seems easier to assume a common author than to suppose that two or more men writing in the same locality and the same period, and certainly closely associated with one another, possessed this rare and, one would think, inimitable quality. (Everett 1955)

[71] (Gordon and Tolkien 1952, xviii)

[72] This hypothesis, taken from (D. Brewer 1983), however, must not be taken lightly, as the dialect might refer more to the scribe than to the poet. Moreover, (Duggan 1997) claims that, while the scribal dialect is rather homogeneous, the poet tends to use elements from more than one dialect in order to accommodate the alliterative and verse demands.

thorough knowledge of noble life and leisure time. Furthermore, the author's skills in describing hunting scenes, courtly and aristocratic life and architecture, and knightly attire, could suggest that, were it true that the author was a clerical, he may have been a chaplain for some noble family as well. Derek Brewer argues that, given his knowledge of lay life, the Gawain-poet might have been a provincial *miles litteratus*, that is a knight, squire, or member of the minor gentry, with a good level of education: this social status would indeed explain his choice of using English alliterative verses, so the work could satisfy the small gentry.[73] The only certainty about the Gawain-poet's life, which can be inferred from allusions to, and citations from, learned and foreign literature, is probably that he was, as Gordon and Tolkien phrase it, "a man of learning and genius". [74]

Only one copy of the narrative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has survived in a codex unicus: the manuscript, which is now part of the collection of the British Library, is the MS Cotton Nero A.x, rather small in size and, to Edwards' words, "unprepossessing".[75] Its importance and uniqueness consist in the fact that it is the only surviving manuscript collection which only contains alliterative poems: in order of appearance in the collection, *Pearl*, *Cleanness* (also titled *Purity* in other works), *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. [76] The history of the manuscript is only recorded as an appearance in the library catalogue belonging

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[73] (D. Brewer 1983)
[74] (Gordon and Tolkien 1952, xx)
[75] (Edwards 1997)
[76] (Edwards 1997, 197)

to Sir Robert Cotton, in the seventeenth century; speculations of earlier belongings cannot be proved and thus remain so, speculations.[77]

Interestingly, the manuscript includes twelve illustrations, thus divided: four appear before the beginning of *Pearl*, two between *Cleanness* and *Patience*, and four in *Sir Gawain*, of which one at the beginning and the rest at the end. The peculiarity of these pictures lies in the fact that there are more than any other existing contemporary Middle English romance manuscript, and only two other ones, namely the *Auchinleck* manuscript and the *Bodley 264* do include illustrations.[78] The illustrations once led scholars to believe the manuscript was created in the fifteenth century rather than the fourteenth, due to some details about the style of clothing which were not available in the fourteenth century; however, it has been proved that the illustrations were added later into the manuscript and thus give little evidence as to the dating of the manuscript.

In the manuscript, the text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is divided into four fitts, signalled by the use of initial large capitals, while sub-parts are identified thanks to a slightly bigger initial letter than the rest.

### 2.3.3. The sources

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[77] (Edwards 1997) gives a short but accurate account of the hypotheses surrounding the history of the manuscript. The final line of *Sir Gawain*, 'Hony soyt qui mal pence' is the motto of the Order of the Garter, founded in 1348 by Edward III: this gives an earliest possible date of transcription of the manuscript, although there are uncertainties over whether the inscription was copied at the same time as the text. Among important names linked to the manuscript is the Stanley family of Staffordshire, which is believed to have commissioned the manuscript.
[78] About the latter two, (Edwards 1997, 210) claims:
> These are large compilations, very elaborately prepared and seemingly the result of careful organization of the work of scribes and artists into close sequences of activity. [...] this was not the case with the Cotton manuscript.

Considering that some critics in the past were not convinced of the attribution of the structure of the poem to a single English author,[79] scholars nowadays agree that the sources for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* cannot be reconstructed to one single story, but rather its author created such a complex and unified structure by intertwining different elements and themes. Indeed, even though the identity of the poet is unknown, it is possible to infer from the text that he was familiar with both popular folklore and the English and French romance tradition, and especially the works of Chrétien de Troyes.[80]

The sources of the narrative can be thoroughly analysed if one distinguishes the two main themes which can be reconducted to earlier stories: the beheading game, as a consequence of a challenge, and the temptation theme. Both can be linked to the Celtic traditional folktales and their combined form, such as in this poem, is only found in two later closely related English works.[81]

The challenge episode, and the subsequent beheading game, finds its earliest representation in the Celtic legend of *Fled Bricrend*, that is *Bricriu's Feast[82]*, whose manuscript is written in Middle Irish and dates back to the beginning of the twelfth century: the story, however, is thought to be much older,[83] reaching as far as the eighth century. Elisabeth Brewer talks about two different versions of this episode, of which one seems to be a better source for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

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[79] It was suggested that the poem might have derived from an original narrative which got lost.
[80] (E. Brewer 1997, 243)
[81] (Gordon and Tolkien 1952)
[82] (Olson 1914) offers a good summary of the story, of which the beheading game is just an episode.
[83] (Gordon and Tolkien 1952, xii)

similarities include the beheading scene – and the following departure of the villain carrying his head – and the three rather harmless blows given in return the following day – though not year as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s case, followed by the praise to the protagonist, for his courage and prowess.[84] The magical element, typical of folktales, is symbolized by the figure of Terror, the huge, shape-shifting villain, who defies death and seems to be able to reattach his severed head to his body.

The Celtic version of the challenge was subsequently transmitted to the French tradition, although Gordon and Tolkien argue that tracing the exact process is impossible and that none of the extant versions can be considered an immediate source.[85] It is nevertheless notable how the French romance tradition influenced the composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to the point where Kittredge's claim of existence of a now lost French story is quite plausible,[86] as Gordon and Tolkien underline: the insistence on the courteous behaviour hints to it, as do the use of French idioms and expressions, and the details in common with French analogues.[87]

There are several narratives which contain one or another version of the challenge episode and some of them include a hitting rather than beheading game. A possible French model for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* might be an

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[84] (E. Brewer 1997)
[85] (Gordon and Tolkien 1952) also claim that at least two lost romances must be assumed in order to create a fluent tradition: the earliest translation of the Celtic challenge narrative and a retelling of that, which might have been the direct source for the Gawain-Poet.
[86] (Kittredge 1960)
[87] (Gordon and Tolkien 1952)

episode included in the thirteenth-century *First Continuation* of Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval and the St. Gral*, which dates around the end of the twelfth century. The *Livre de Caradoc*, despite being part of this redaction, appears to be hardly pertinent to the rest of the story, suggesting that it was once an independent poem; thus, it is common among scholars to speak of it as a text not subjected to the context of the rest of the redaction.[88] Despite its divergences from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, of which the most obvious is the main character, who is Caradoc rather than Gawain, the poem has many details in common with the Cotton-Nero AX version, in particular the appearance of the challenger, who is portrayed as a tall knight dressed in green.[89] There is nothing supernatural in the appearance of the knight in the *Livre de Caradoc*, a detail which departs from the Irish version, where the challenger is a giant, and is closer to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s knight, who is pictured as presumably half-giant. Another difference can be found in the return-blow scene: the stranger is twice stopped before striking a blow by Arthur and Guinevere, and, at last, only harmlessly hits Caradoc, before the mysterious knight is revealed to be the protagonist's father and Caradoc is told he was saved by his bravery and faith.[90]

Another French version of the beheading game is found in *La Mule sans Frein*, where a churl[91] challenges Gawain to cut off his head on condition that he can do

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[88] (Kittredge 1960, 26)

[89] This detail is only attested in Sir Frederic Madden's report of the text, while Charles Potvin's version only alludes to a tall knight on a tawny steed. (Kittredge 1960)

[90] (E. Brewer 1997)

[91] In one of the Oxford English Dictionary entries for the term churl, it is defined in antithesis to someone noble in rank, a gentleman, or a courteous man.

the same to the knight the following day. Upon returning the following day, the churl spares Gawain thanks to the knight's loyalty and the keeping of his promise.[92] Kittredge, in *A study of Gawain and the Green Knight* (1916), argues that the point of greatest divergence from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is surely the provenance of the challenger, who is here a churl rather than a knight, and, though more advanced in manners, resembles the Irish giant in appearance. Moreover, this version maintains other details of the challenge which are lost in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Livre de Caradoc*.[93] This suggests that, although *La Mule Sans Frein* undoubtedly comes from the Irish version of the challenge, which is the same source as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Livre de Caradoc* version, it might be part of a different branch, and might have a, now lost, direct source which deviated from the Irish version in a different way than the direct source of the other two. With regards to the beheading game, in *La Mule sans Frein* it is subordinate to a greater motif, that of the enchanted city, saved by the hero who performs some task to break the spell. Here, magic permeates the narrative, but it is a different kind of magic, and corresponds to Todorov's definition of the marvellous, rather than the fantastic: while it appears to be a normal situation for the hero, the reader locates the events of the narrative outside of the natural world from the beginning.

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[92] (E. Brewer 1997)

[93] (Kittredge 1960) Identifies these further details as the challenger's proposition, which closely resembles the Irish giant's offer, and the incident of the elongation of Gawain's neck so it can fit the block on which it may be cut off: this scene does not appear in the other versions.

There are two episodes in *Perlesvaus* which recall the beheading game: in one of them Gawain is the protagonist, while in the other it is Lancelot, and both interpret the beheading with great freedom. Although it is worth mentioning the first episode, it does not recount the narrative of the challenge and beheading, but rather only narrates the story of Gawain and a lady, who tells him she wants to behead three knights, namely Gawain, Lancelot and Perceval so she can lie in four tombs in her chapel with them forever. The challenge and beheading episode is otherwise told in two non-contiguous chapters, whose main character is Lancelot rather than Gawain[94]. The two parts are separated so to account for the passing of a year between Lancelot's blow and the return blow he must suffer. The narrative, which Kittredge considers "oddly sophisticated"[95], appears only remotely similar to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s version, but nonetheless has many common details which hint that the two versions are somewhat related. The most striking difference, however, is the complete avoidance of magic in *Perlesvaus*: the poet seems to have made an attempt to rid the tale of all supernatural elements, so the knight that proposes the beheading to Lancelot is not immortal but dies as a consequence of the beheading, and it is his brother who takes his place; further, there are no mentions in the romance of enchantments

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[94] (Kittredge 1960, 52-54) gives an extensive summary of the narrative. For the purposes of this analysis, it is sufficient to know that, while riding in the woods, Lancelot comes across a waste city, where he encounters a knight who asks him to cut off his head or have his own cut off, and in a year's time he must return to the city to receive the same deed. Lancelot agrees and the knight's body, without the head, falls dead on the ground. In a later chapter, Lancelot returns to the city to keep his promise, and meets another knight, who demands that the protagonist goes through what his brother went through on that day the year before, before recognizing Lancelot and falling to his knees asking for mercy. Lancelot's return has saved the city and freed the people.

[95] (Kittredge 1960, 54)

which have enslaved the population of the city and the surrounding area, but rather Lancelot's return allows the city and the people to come back to their life and out of their hiding places. Just as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* magic plays a fundamental, though hidden, role in the narrative, so in *Perlesvaus* it is apparently inexistent: in terms close to Todorov's analysis, one could say that this story belongs to the group of uncanny narratives at most.[96]

Of other versions of the beheading game, the *Humbaut* is worth mentioning, as the narrative is curiously modified: indeed, Gawain is the protagonist of the episode, together with a knight called Humbaut, and the challenger is a "tall and black, ugly and hideous" villain, who, as Humbaut explains, gives Gawain a choice: he should strike a blow and immediately after receive one back, or vice versa. Gawain accepts and strikes the first blow, sending the villain's head far from his body, and later restraining the two parts from reuniting, so the death of the villain is irreversible.[97] The episode resembles that of *La Mule sans Frein*, although, in this case, the author borrowed from folklore the motif of the fight against an enemy who can reunite the severed head and the body: to kill such a creature, the hero must either destroy the head or keep the two parts apart until death. Kittredge argues that the insertion of the challenge is due to an attempt by the author to enrich the story, although the modification of the challenge in such a way results in a sort of failure in loyalty on Gawain's part: contrary to all other versions, he

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[96] (Kittredge 1960, 56) talks about false-reasonableness in account of this version, a term which can be reconducted to Todorov's definition of uncanny.
[97] A complete summary with context can be found in (Kittredge 1960, 61-63)

does not subdue to his part of the deal and breaks his promise.[98] Thus, this version of the challenge does not appear to be directly related to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but it is of interest in showing another kind of treatment of Gawain's character, which is not a celebration of loyalty and courtesy but rather of violence, skill and wisdom. Similarly to *La Mule sans Frein*, this narrative is set in an other-world, where marvels are typical, and neither of the two knights appear to have a reaction which would suggest the intervention of the fantastic: we are, once again, in the realm of the marvellous.

Generally, the temptation motif is not associated to the Challenge, safe for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and two later versions contained in the Percy Folio. It is however to be observed that the temptation is a recurrent theme in the Gawain narratives, such as in *Le Chevalier à l'epée*, *Hunbaut*, *Perceval* and its *Continuations*, *Perlesvaus*. The merit of the Gawain-poet lies in the skilful adaptation of the two motives so that one is the reason of the existence of the other, and vice versa[99]: it is indeed true that, for Gawain, resisting the lady's temptation at the castle is the only way to save his life, upon his encounter with the Green Knight.[100] Brewer, about the Gawain-poet in *English Gothic Literature*, claims that "From ancient elements he creates a new structure, mythic, yet realistic in its verbal realisation".[101]

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[98] (Kittredge 1960)
[99] (Gordon and Tolkien 1952)
[100] This is what we infer from Bertilak's explanation at the end of the romance: the two feints are to represent the first two nights of temptation, while the third blow which grazes Gawain's neck symbolizes his weakness in concealing the green girdle. (E. Brewer 1997)
[101] (D. Brewer 1983, 163)

Other motives, which the Gawain-poet included in the poem, can be found in earlier or contemporary narratives: the allusion to the mythic origins of Britain, which is claimed to descend from Trojan roots[102]; the court's celebrations of Christmas and Arthur's wish to see a marvel before the feast; the exchange of winnings, which is a typical topos of folktale narratives; the arming of the knight;[103] etc.

Although it is clear that the Bible and scriptures had an influence on the Gawain-poet, if one compares the romance with the rest of the texts in the manuscript, they will not find many correspondences leading them to believe the Bible had been a primary source for the poem. Nevertheless, a careful analysis of the poem shows that the Gawain-poet indeed tried to adapt Christian and religious ethics to a world that was mythical and folkloristic. [104]

Gordon and Tolkien argue that the quality of description and the introduction of new, original matter by the Gawain-poet are what makes the poem the "culmination of Middle English alliterative tradition" in style.[105] Furthermore, even though the existence of a French source leaves little space for argument, the

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[102] This legend can, for instance, be linked to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*, where it first appeared, but also to the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which also mentions the mythic descendance.

[103] Very common in Chrétien de Troyes' works, the arming scene *in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is to be considered among the most elaborate occurrences in literature, as Elisabeth Brewer argues. (E. Brewer 1997)

[104] Richard Newhauser, in his essay Sources II: *Scriptural and devotional sources*, gives evidence for this theory, by mentioning the liturgical elements which frame and mark the events in the romance, and their implications. (Newhauser 1997)

[105] (Gordon and Tolkien 1952, xvii)

Gawain-poet's work cannot be merely described as a reproduction, but rather it is what Gordon and Tolkien call a "fresh creation":

> His poem is as human, as skilfully diversified, and at all times as courtly as the best French romance. […] He has, further, a special gift for description, and has elaborated the whole setting with a richness of detail unusual in French romance. He handles the story with a moral sensitiveness not to be matched in any of the analogues.[106]

### 2.3.4. English popular Gawain romances

Sir Gawain is the protagonist of a group of narratives which flourished in England in the late Middle Ages. As Thomas Hahn points out in *Sir Gawain: eleven romances and tales* (1995), not only were these romances homogeneous as far as the characters are concerned, but, perhaps more importantly, they are identified as popular, a feature that distinguishes them from the rest of the 'canonical romances' which are perceived as literary. The popular character of these romances is primarily identified in the audience for which they were composed: these narratives were aimed at broad, mixed groups of readers, although the term listeners might be more correct if one considers that these poems were mainly composed for oral recitation. Indeed, the state and quality of manuscripts and texts alike, suggest that they were often carried around to be worked with, by reciters who performed in front of live, participating audiences.[107]

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[106] (Gordon and Tolkien 1952, xv-xvi)

[107] (Hahn 1995) The scholar also points out that
> Evidence that this appeal was not universal, that popular romance might be openly resisted, especially by those identified with high, literate, or official culture, survives in reactions from a variety of sources. Moreover, the worn state of several of the

The manuscripts in which these tales have survived have little in common with the luxurious and greatly decorated manuscripts of earlier or contemporary literary works, and many of them are included in later compilations such as Percy Folio, a great rescue work (now called British Library Additional MS 27879) that has preserved 192 works of variable and mostly poor quality, in the form of seventeenth century popular ballads and earlier copied texts from now-lost manuscripts.[108]

The popular character of these stories may also be observed in the episodes, motifs and anecdotes, made in the stories, which allude to folktale and traditional stories rather than more learned literary sources, as was the fashion.[109] Furthermore, the narratives and plots themselves, like those of modern-day tv series, are constructed to please the mass. In this regard, Hahn claims:

> The narratives unfold through traditional plots and reiterated motifs, glorify a popular hero whom everyone knew, and eventuate in happy endings which bring the characters within the story to terms with one another, and which reconcile the audience outside the story to the structures and ideals epitomized by a "chivalric" (or hierarchically ordered) society.[110]

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manuscripts that contain single surviving copies of these poems suggests that they were literally read to death, perhaps often before live audiences.

[108] It is believed that many more versions and stories once circulated, however, the modesty in appearance and size of the manuscripts caused them to become old-fashioned, so much that their preservation and survival were directly linked to the interest of antiquarians. It is, indeed, the case of the unknown scribe who copied the texts into a single manuscript in the seventeenth century and Bishop Percy, who retrieved and edited it in the second half of the eighteenth century. (D. Brewer 1983)& (Rogers 1997)

[109] (Hahn 2000)  Among those who used established literary sources Chaucer's name is the most resonant; the author of the Canterbury Tales is also named as one of the critics of such romances, as he used his own *Sir Thopas* as a harsh satire and parody of exactly popular romances. (Hahn 1995)

[110] (Hahn 1995)

The simple meter and alliterative form of the romances, the elements of mimicry and burlesque associated to them, all take part in the creation of a strong beat – and performance-oriented narratives – which, as Hahn puts it, "is a striking residue of the orality that marks medieval (and later) popular culture".[111] Then, the cohesion of structure, repetition, narrative form, and contents are what distinguishes these narratives from the rest. Subsequently, Gawain is the central character because he holds the narratives together through his desire for adventure rather than challenging the established authority, that of Arthur, his uncle, as Hahn correctly points out:

> Gawain plays a role; he routinely facilitates the extravagant adventures that happen around him, and does so to such an extent that one might even think of him almost as a narrative function.[112]

The fantastic element – here represented as unexpected wonders or threats – is opposed to familiar values as well as the established law: in facing it, Gawain reconciles it with the rest of society and, in many cases, aids its integration,[113] and his courtesy highlights the triumph of the contemporary social life against the threats posed by change and otherworldly novelties.

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[111] (Hahn 1995)

[112] (Hahn 1995)

[113] It is the case of the inhuman figures which, once Gawain triumphs over them, turn into courteous knights and ladies and are even admitted into King Arthur's court. Hahn concludes that:
> These happy endings produce a "magical resolution" typical of romance: in this world of unmotivated marvels and fulfilled wishes, social interests quite opposed in the "real world" move into alignment. The stirring portrayals of triumphant courtesy and justice vindicated that mark the conclusions of romances potentially work to hold their diverse audiences together, to reproduce in them the feeling of integration that the narrated transformations dramatize, and to effect a sense of social cohesion (not at all dependent on social reality) that enables the established order to prevail. (Hahn 1995)

Hahn in is essay *Gawain and popular chivalric romance in England*, proposes to divide the extant popular romances into two sub-groups, on the basis of content.[114] The first sub-group of romances includes *The Greene Knight*, *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, with its ballad form *Carle of Carlisle*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and its ballad form *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, *The Awntyrs of Arthur*, and *King Arthur and King Cornwall*: in these tales the main adventure concerns inhuman creatures, shape-shifters, and giants, against whom Gawain fights and wins, subsequently transforming them thanks to his courtesy and bravery. The rest of the tales, namely *The Avowying of Arthur*, *Gawain and Gologras*, and *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, belong to the second sub-group, where Gawain faces off against chivalric villains and succeeds in turning them into allies to King Arthur.[115] Two works, namely *The Greene Knight*, *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, pertaining to the first sub-group, will be analysed in the next chapter.

### 2.4. THE FANTASTIC IN MEDIEVAL ROMANCES

#### 2.4.1. Todorov's theory in the Middle Ages

Todorov posits that the identification of the reader with a character is a generally followed, although non-necessary, condition for the existence of the fantastic and that, when the fantastic ceases to exist, it transforms into uncanny or marvellous. Applying his theory to Medieval romances can result quite difficult, considering that the evidence about life and society in the Middle Ages comes

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[114] (Hahn 2000)
[115] (Hahn 1995)

from assumptions made upon literary texts or other forms of art. Indeed, one cannot identify who the implicit reader of a Medieval author might have been, and neither, claims Paul Zumthor in *Essai de Poétique Médiévale*, can one describe with a good degree of certainty what effect a literary work had on its audience: in other words, time has erased the chances of creating a relation between the reader and the culture in which the work was thought and created, and, because the modern reader lives in their own culture, the Medieval literary work appears atemporal, out of the limits of time.[116]

Nevertheless, one should not forget that some Medieval romances were written with a didactic aim, and a moral one. In this sense, exerts Jeff Rider in his essay *The other worlds of romance*, while the aristocratic society described in literary works cannot be considered a materially faithful representation of the real Medieval aristocracy, it can indeed prove useful in terms of giving the modern scholar some however general suggestions about attitudes, interests, longings, ambitions, concerns, and values.[117] Kieckhefer, in *Magic in the Middle Ages*, adds, in fact, that the setting of the romances was indeed a projection of the author's own everyday life, with customs that were familiar to the medieval audiences: knights, tournaments and battles were recognizable to the contemporaries, as they lived in the same way.[118]

Subsequently, Rider claims that:

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[116] (Zumthor 1972)
[117] (Rider 2000)
[118] (Kieckhefer 1989, 106)

Thanks to the significant continuity between medieval literary practices and modern ones, something of this implicit identification between the audience and the aristocratic society at the heart of romance survives for the modern reader.[119]

In other words, despite being so far from the society in which the modern reader lives, and being linked to a very different culture than the modern one, the aristocratic society can, in literary works describing it, become the modern reader's own society, allowing identification with the work's characters and causing the fantastic to come into existence and be considered as such.

Furthermore, Kieckhefer writes with regards to the functions of lapidaries, that analysing such books as manuals would be crossing the limit between instruction and entertainment: to the medieval audience, the sensation of wonder caused by such works could have been a reason enough to read or listen to them for entertainment, with no intention to use the works as didactic manuals.[120] This can in a way apply to marvels in Medieval romances as well: one can conjecture that medieval audiences found the worlds depicted by romances to be outside the familiar world of their experience, and as such unreal, but knew the marvels often acquired more meaning than just that of elements in the stories. As Khalaf speculates in his essay, although uncanny and fantastic events, and enchantresses with their magic, were in a way considered possible in the Middle Ages, their appearance would not have failed to leave Medieval people awestruck and bewildered, so it was still possible to achieve hesitation.[121]

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[119] (Rider 2000, 115)
[120] (Kieckhefer 1989, 105)
[121] (Khalaf 2011)

### 2.4.2. The origins of the supernatural

What medieval audiences were not familiar with in the romances were the supernatural elements – characters, creatures and worlds which were out of the ordinary, and rituals and objects filled with magic and marvellous properties.

The sources for supernatural elements from which the medieval authors took inspiration were several, and could be used to create faithful copies of motifs and scenes, or as tools to create new ones. Generally, the major sources were oriental and classical mythology, Christian lore, and Germanic and Celtic tradition; elements from these were at times mixed and ideas were borrowed and modified until it became difficult or even impossible to establish one source or the other. In the introduction to his book *The Other World according to descriptions in medieval literature*, Howard Rollin Patch writes something than can be extended to the whole of the supernatural world in medieval romances:

> Parts of an earlier idea may be borrowed, certain elements in several descriptions taken over, until the precise channel of transmission is thoroughly obscured. Perhaps it is never quite safe to draw a definite conclusion about sources, immediate or remote.[122]

Oriental and classical mythology provided elements in the shape of creatures, places and objects, which appear in the romances. Medieval works give proof that Greek, Roman, and Egyptian writings about magic and the supernatural were directly or indirectly available to authors, who could take them and manipulate

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[122] (Patch 1950, 1)

them for their aims.[123] Often the events narrated in classical writings, such as Homer's Odyssey, were considered historically correct: magic herbs and rituals performed in Roman and Greek works were at times believed to be true and sparked arguments on their veracity. Further, Corinne Saunders explains that classical culture inspired Medieval writers through astrology: indeed, stars and planets were believed to influence the lives of people and the course of history.[124]

The Bible is another source of episodes of miracles and wonders, which are generally attributed to divine power, although some passages can be interpreted as worked by other powers than the divine; nevertheless, magic is generally condemned as demonic and a trick of the devil, as opposed to miracles, driven by the power of God.[125] Saunders claims that the Christian supernatural world was inhabited not only by God and Christ, but also by spirits, such as angels, demons and ghosts, who influenced the lives of humans through visitations, dreams, visions, miracles and prayer, or demonic interventions and temptations when concerning evil.[126]

Another important source of inspiration came from the Germanic tradition in the form of magic runes, and runic inscriptions, which travelled through time in the Nordic culture, for example in sagas, where magic was done predominantly through words.[127] Lastly, medieval authors took inspiration from Celtic tradition

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[123] (Kieckhefer 1989, 21)
[124] (Saunders 2010)
[125] (Kieckhefer 1989, 33)
[126] (Saunders 2010)
[127] (Kieckhefer 1989, 48)

by including in their stories fairy creatures, whose relations with humans were a popular motif in the Irish tradition, and druids. In chivalric romances, fairies show ambiguous loyalties, that is to say, they can represent both good and evil, paganism and Christianity.[128]

Kieckhefer affirms that magic in romances can be found in objects, and lists four categories. Firstly, there are herbs and unguents with healing powers, distributed mostly by women who might have a secondary role in the stories, but nonetheless appear when the hero needs a helping hand. The second group concerns love potions, sometimes made by abandoned women to gain back or destroy their lover, or produced to make two characters fall in love with each other.[129] Thirdly, magic might take the shape of precious gems and stones, generally set in rings, which might have protective powers.[130] Lastly, the romances include magic artifacts with supernatural properties, objects which resemble those actually present in courts, but with properties that make them marvellous.[131] One might regard the girdle given to Gawain by the lady of the white castle as one: the lady, in fact, claims the object to have magical properties and protect the wearer from dangers and death; it is, nevertheless, important to remember that, in the end, both Gawain and the audience find out that the girdle's function is rather opposite than protective, as its concealment is the very reason for harm.

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[128] (Kieckhefer 1989, 53)
[129] This is exemplified by the story of Tristan and Iseult
[130] An example of this is the ring Rimenhild gives Horn in the romance *King Horn*, although it is not clear whether the ring has actual magic powers or is just a psychological reminder of Horn's love for Rimenhild, which helps him in battle.
[131] (Kieckhefer 1989, 106-7)

Magic objects, claims Kieckhefer, could be described with irony and often had rules for using them, such as Excalibur's rule that only the true ruler can extract it from the stone in which it is has been lodged. Said objects are often gifts from fairies, although the Christian re-writings of stories often transformed them into things that are holy, the most prominent example being the Holy Grail in *The quest of the Holy Grail*, which is to say the chalice used by Christ in the Last Supper, which was thought to have many magic properties.[132]

### 2.4.3. The functions of the supernatural

The presence of magic and supernatural elements, and of other worlds with different laws than the familiar ones, had two main functions, namely a narrative one and one of definition or identity for the courtly aristocracy. The narrative function could itself differentiate into three sub-functions: setting the story going, keeping it going, or changing its direction.[133]

The intervention of the supernatural often appears at the beginning of a story: in many cases, the peaceful and joyous atmosphere of the court, usually represented by a banquet or gathering, is disrupted by the appearance of a supernatural element, which is perceived as a threat to the court and its well-being. Said intrusion may bring challenges for battle or, more mysteriously, psychic threats.[134] The start of the story might also be caused by the coming to

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[132] (Kieckhefer 1989, 108)

[133] (Rider 2000, 120) This is also mentioned by Todorov with regards to the fantastic, as stated in paragraph 1.6

[134] such as the one in *Sir Orfeo*, where Queen Heurodis is threatened of abduction in a dream by a fairy-like king: her actual abduction the following day, despite King Orfeo's efforts to protect her, results in the latter's departure from the kingdom and the launch of the story.

light of covert issues or faults within the aristocratic society, which would not have been discovered were it not for the intervention of the supernatural. This is the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the appearance of the Green Knight and his challenge show how King Arthur's knights have lost their prowess and courage: the episode sets the whole story in motion, for Gawain begins a journey to maintain his promise to the Green Knight and regain the prestige for King Arthur's court. The intrusion can also be attributed to an object.[135] In cases where the story is already set going by another scene,[136] the supernatural element might intervene in order to change the course of the events, so the story becomes more interesting, and the solution can be brought about.[137]

The supernatural element was also used by romance authors in order to give the aristocracy an identity, define it and represent what they should aspire to, both materially and morally. This is why supernatural characters or objects were often endowed with ideals, values and qualities, or on the contrary lacked them completely, or only those who had said qualities could use such objects. In other cases, supernatural elements could be representation of the desires of the aristocratic society, whether those were carnal, acquisitive or utopian. Furthermore, an aristocratic society could be defined in negative, that is to say that the supernatural element could represent what the aristocratic society was

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[135] This is the case in *Lai du cort mantel (Lai of the Mantle)*, where the fairy-made mantle, by showing the faults of the whole court, leads its participants in a journey to address said issues, reduce the shame attached to them, and improve the bonds between one another, while ultimately providing a model for all, in the form of the singled-out faithful lady or couple
[136] It is the case of Lanval's decision to leave Arthur's court in *Lanval* by Marie de France
[137] (Rider 2000, 117-120)

not, thus reinforcing its identity: the supernatural characters were, indeed, often

antithetic, in physical appearance, in origins, in religion, in culture, etc.

## 2.5.    THE FANTASTIC AND SYMBOLISM

### 2.5.1.   Fantastic and realistic elements in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

William Goldhurst defines *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a study of

paradoxes:

> Basically, *Gawain and the Green Knight* is a complex of antitheses; at its heart is
> the technique of juxtaposing or combining opposite and contrary moods,
> characters, settings and actions.[138]

This is also true if one considers the narrative mode, which is a continuous

passage from realistic to fantastic and vice versa: indeed, the poet's intention was

to present a narrative dense of supernatural elements in a way that was as realistic

as possible, through naturalistic terms and descriptions. As Frans Diekstra points

out in his essay *Narrative mode and interpretation of Sir Gawain and the Green*

*Knight*, the absurdity of the plot is reinforced in several elements, such as the

challenge, the shape-shifting Green Knight and his miraculous recovery after the

beheading, Morgan Le Fay's character, etc. while the realism is strengthened by

the faithful representation of chivalry in the fourteenth century: castles, banquets,

hunts, hospitality, detailed accounts of courtly behaviour and description of

places, etc. In the scholar's opinion, realism is supported to such an extent that

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[138] (Goldhurst 1958, 61)

the moment the fabulous and the supernatural enter the realistic world they create reaction of shock and incredulity, both in the characters and the reader. [139]

This is the point which connects the poem to Todorov's analysis of the fantastic. The realism the Gawain-poet was able to recreate is "heightened and idealized"[140], and hardly compares to the reality of the Middle Ages: Diekstra refers to Medieval romances as "mirrors of chivalry", meaning that these works represent a reality in which characters live in a state of almost escapist and utopian perfection, which impeccably reflects a model which the audience should look up to, imitate and set as their standards. Nevertheless, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there are details, descriptions, passages which are so magisterially realistic that they lead the audience[141] to include the events into their own world: in such a case, then, hesitation, over whether the supernatural elements do or do not belong to the real world, can indeed be created.

If one considers the geographical mentions and the landscape descriptions in the romance, they will find themselves into the lands of fourteenth-century north-west England and North Wales. Indeed, while the first scene of the poem takes place at Arthur's court at the site of Camelot, in the non-specific realm of Logres, Gawain's journey to the Green Chapel leads him through places which at once lose their otherworldly halo, safe from the mention of dragons and supernatural

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[139] (Diekstra 1990)
[140] (Diekstra 1990, 58)
[141] Possibly, the correct term should be implicit audience, because, as discussed above, the modern audience places the Arthurian legends and works in a world that is undoubtedly not the real world. The Gawain-Poet and his audience, however, might locate the events inside their own world, a hypothesis which is reinforced by the attention given by the poet to topographical details.

creatures, and gain such features which Boitani describes as "individualized and sharply focussed".[142] In this regard, Ralph Elliott points out:

> The formulae of conventional *descriptio loci* are replaced by closely observed topographical details described in words drawn from the poet's own north-west Midland dialect.[143]

The authenticity of the descriptions is further enhanced through the use of the poet's own dialect, and of topographical words which can be understood only if one relates them to those places the words are describing: the places of the poem, though vague and not easily recognizable for the modern reader, might have created, in a fourteenth-century audience, such vivid images that no difference would be noticed between reality and these descriptions.[144] Even the unclear description of the Green Chapel, and of the aura of mystery it emits does not convey the impression of an imaginary place, as Brewer claims, but rather resembles the description of something that the audience is familiar with and, thus, can easily recall.[145]

Admittedly, there is no reason for us to believe that the poet described real locations, but the impression of identifiable settings alone would still suffice for the reader to react with hesitation at the appearance of the supernatural: the reality or apparent reality of the landscapes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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[142] (Boitani 1982, 63) in (Elliot 1997)
[143] (Elliot 1997, 105)
[144] (Elliot 1997) and (Wilson 1976)
[145] (D. Brewer, Gawain and the Green Chapel 1948)

creates an effect by which even the fantastic events and creatures encountered can be real. In other words, as Edward Wilson states:

> Gawain's journey from Camelot takes him, then, gradually, inexorably, and, as it turns out, insidiously, from one kind of world to another, from a literary one to one which is apparently our own.[146]

The exemplary representation of courtesy also contributes to create the, though heightened, realistic atmosphere which permeates the poem. The attention given by the poet to details such as conversational exchanges and social etiquette in general, also represents an attempt to faithfully recreate the contemporary society. Some of the most exemplary scenes in the poem in terms of courtesy are certainly the bedroom scenes, in which the Lady of the castle, the only character in the romance without a name, tries to seduce Gawain: here, courtesy is skilfully highlighted in the courtliness with which Gawain refuses the temptations of the lady.

One last element which reinforces the realistic narrative are the scenes in which feasts and banquets, hunts and everyday activities are represented and ordinary actions described. At Arthur's court, the Christmas feast is a supreme example of courtesy and realism: it follows tradition in its most minute particulars, from the wait for something interesting to happen, which is traditionally a call for adventure in chivalric romances, to the decorum of the court, visible in the hierarchical seating plan.[147] Further, the meticulous descriptions of the hunting scenes, which

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[146] (Wilson 1976, 115)
[147] (D. Brewer 1997)

contain specific details of the strategies and procedures, also support the realistic atmosphere in which the poet so skilfully enfolds the poem: as Anne Rooney asserts in her analysis of the hunts, in many alliterative poems the hunting scenes stand as symbols of "secular courtly life and indulgence"[148], which supports the above-mentioned exemplary courtly feature.

With the fulfilment of the first condition comes the issue of whether Todorov's second condition is respected as well. Identification happens because Gawain is the hero of the romance, and the hero is an image of the reader's self in an idealized form. Gawain is human, yes, but the best a human can be; he is not perfect, but closer to perfection than any human can ever be, and is, thus, a model for the reader to reflect on, a figure which everybody should try to imitate and identify with.[149] The only scene which depicts Gawain – and Arthur's court – coming to face to face with a supernatural event is the beheading scene. The preceding part of the poem, in fact, functions as a climax culminating in this scene: the appearance of the Green Knight, as described by the poet, creates great hesitation among the court, and the reader as well, something which is greatly heightened by the poet's use of approximative locutions, which maintain the sense of ambiguity between natural and supernatural.[150]

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[148] (Rooney 1997)

[149] With regards to this, (Diekstra 1990, 69) claims that:
> "The 'human' quality is effected by the art of the poet, who has presented Gawain not as an abstract aggregate of virtues, but as perfection realised as the result of a dramatically presented series of tests and conflicts."

[150] Examples of these locutions are sentences beginning with "He seemed" or "It was almost as if, etc

It is quite difficult to consider such an allegorical and symbolic text as free of allegorical or poetic interpretations, so the application of Todorov's analysis to this text might not appear successful. About supernatural events, however, Todorov asserts that:

> On the one hand, nothing permits us to give immediately an allegorical interpretation to them; on the other hand, they are actually given as such, we are to represent them ourselves, and not to consider the words which designate them as merely a combination of linguistic units.[151]

If one considers the supernatural event of the beheading as such, without allegorical implications, then all conditions of existence of the fantastic are met, and the poem can indeed be considered a work of the fantastic.

### 2.5.2 Symbolic meaning and interpretation

The complex and antithetic character of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is highlighted in the many elements which acquire symbolic value, and which can be interpreted in several, often ambiguous and ambivalent ways. As Robert J. Blanch suggests in his article *Games poets play: the ambiguous use of color symbolism in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"*, the Gawain-poet uses ambiguity to create greater suspense and give characters an aura of mystery – the same mystery which, as in the case of the Green Knight, would create the feeling of hesitation and uncertainty typical of works of the fantastic. Blanch proposes that the audience of the poem would have been familiar with literary conventions and traditional meanings, so the ironic and elusive use of symbols and meanings by the

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[151] (Todorov 2007, 32)

poet may be considered his own attempt to conceal the scope of the narrative and undermine the certainties which the audience might have about the story. [152]

THE GREEN KNIGHT

Among the elements most invested with symbolic meaning, and possibly the most considered by scholars, is the green colour associated to the intruding knight at Christmas in Arthur's court. Introduced in line 150, indeed, green pervades the narrative and references to it throughout the text are several: Brewer in his essay *The Colour Green* counts fifty-three appearances of the word in the poem, of which forty-four used for the description of the knight and his possessions, five for the lady's girdle, two for grass, one each for spring and the green holly branch.[153]

Ambiguous and conflicting interpretations have been given to the Green Knight by scholars and critics. The scholarly interest to this matter is justified by its insistence, and its constant appearance, even in the description of the complexion of the stranger: indeed, not only are his garments and armour green, but also his skin, hair, horse, axe, etc. and everything is refined with gold, except the eyes, which are described as burning of a bright red colour.

An early interpretation finds its roots in folklore and mythology: promoted by critics such as John Speirs and E. K. Chambers, the hypothesis claimed that the Green Knight was connected to nature. He was seen as a vegetation-god or life-giving spirit, connected to the cycle of life and death of nature during the year:

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[152] (Blanch 1976)
[153] (D. Brewer 1997)

William A. Nitze suggests that the Green Knight is a symbol of "the annual death and rebirth of the embodied vital principle"[154]. Although this interpretation is also supported by the fact that the appearance of the Green Knight in the story happens at a year's difference, Brewer sustains that this idea might have sprung as a result of the "wider cult of nature and neo-paganism common in English literary circles in the earlier part of the century".[155] E. K. Chambers' claim that the Green Knight could be assimilated to the figure of the Green Man was also debunked by the fact that, contrary to such a being, the Green Knight is not an inarticulate creature living in the woods: clearly brute and violent, his utterances, appearance and attire demonstrate that he is also courtly and sophisticated. Further, at the end of the poem the Green Knight is revealed as being Bertilak, who has proven to be a civilised and urbane host in his castle.[156]

The shape-shifting property of the Green Knight has caused its association to fairies and Otherworldly creatures. Green, indeed, is often linked to the fairy world, and many are the references to green clothes in the literature describing fairies. With regards to this, Brewer refers to Katharine Briggs' work *A dictionary of Fairies, Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies and other Supernatural Creatures*, in which she suggests that, due to the connection with the fairy world, green is

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[154] (Nitze 1936, 351-66) as quoted in (Blanch 1976)
[155] (D. Brewer 1997, 181)
[156] (Goldhurst 1958)

considered an unlucky colour:[157] Brewer objects, however, that there is no

evidence connecting such beliefs to Medieval times.[158]

Although green complexion could be a sign of disease, recorded in two

chronicles from the late twelfth century,[159] it cannot be the case in this particular

work, as the Green Knight does not show signs of poor health: a rather more

intriguing hypothesis is that the Green Knight could be the personification of

Death, as A. H. Krappe and Heirich Zimmer have proposed. This solution could

prove significant in the fact that the Green Knight appears immortal, in his

surviving a severed head, and could lead to the interpretation, given by both

critics, of Gawain's journey as not only a search for the Green Knight in an

unknown realm, but also as an attempt to overpower Death in its own land.[160] The

end of the poem itself, however, deprives this solution of credibility, as Gawain

does not encounter death, but rather judgement for his deeds, and a benevolent

kind of judgement, too.

Lastly, the green colour was associated to the Devil itself, despite and partly

thanks to the many favourable Medieval connotations of green. Brewer claims "It

[green] is the Devil's hypocritical device to mislead people about his wicked

intentions".[161] The red eyes could also be a piece of evidence in favour of this

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157 (Briggs 1976)
158 (D. Brewer 1997)
159 (D. Brewer 1997) reports the two cases recorded by Ralph of Coggeshall, a chronicler from Essex, and William of Newburgh, from Yorkshire. In both, the cause of the greenness seems a deficiency disease called chlorosis, easily cured with a balanced diet.
160 (Krappe 1938) & (Zimmer 1948)
161 (D. Brewer 1997, 184). In the same paragraph, Brewer mentions that green is also the colour of huntsmen to deceive their preys, just like the Devil does with human souls.

hypothesis, as Blanch reports that they represent the Devil, although Medieval sources are also in favour of red as a symbol of fierceness and strength. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the deceiving and devious function could be attributed to the Green Knight, for his intentions were never concealed, and, again, the revelation of the Green Knight's real identity cannot be related to symbolism concerning the Devil.

The significance that the poet might have wanted to give to the colour of the Green Knight is likely to lie in its ambiguous meanings and interpretations, rather than a single one. After all, the Green Knight himself is complex and antithetic, and the uncertainty which pervades its interpretation nowadays might have been just as confusing in the Middle Ages, which could only contribute to the aura of mystery around the character, and lead the audience into a sense of hesitation over whether the intruder could be readily judged as real or supernatural, a villain or not. This ambiguity is also resonant in the juxtaposition of green and gold, which highlights and symbolizes the opposite nature of the Green Knight/Bertilak: nature and civilized courtesy, brute force and chivalric virtues, are blended in the same character. Brewer concludes his essay on the green colour with the following words:

> As such the very greenness of the Green Knight allows him to be absorbed into some natural world, yet points also to a sense of its ultimate mystery, its forces beyond our knowledge, though not, if we carry ourselves well, out of our control.[162]

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[162] (D. Brewer 1997)

ARMING SCENES: PENTANGLE AND GIRDLE

Two arming scenes are represented in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the first one, before the beginning of his journey, is a long and meticulously written passage, in which the description of Gawain's shield dominates the scene. Brewer in his essay titled *Armour II: the arming topos as literature*, remarks how the importance of such a scene is amplified by the fact that Gawain's adventure in the poem would not require an armour: it becomes a symbol of his knighthood, his readiness to face danger, and his bravery. The moral implications, added by the poet to the scene, create a deeper, more realistic effect than in any other representation of this topos.[163]

The first arming scene contains original elements and associations which are unique to the Gawain-Poet, up to his time: indeed, it is the first time that a shield is given so great attention in the romances, and even the appearance of the pentangle in association to Gawain is unique to this poet.[164] Both sides of Gawain's shield are decorated: on the inside it has a portrait of the Virgin Mary, for spiritual protection; the outside is decorated with the pentangle, the geometric figure of a five-point star whose lines connect and form a never-ending line, that is the endless knot, as the poet calls it, in his digression in the text. Both elements have explicit religious valency and are considered a symbol of the interconnection of

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[163] (D. Brewer 1997)
[164] (Cooper 1997)

Christianity and courtly life. In Nick Davis' essay *Narrative form and insight*, the scholar asserts:

> It is generally agreed that this passage places courteous and chivalric commitment in a wider context of Christian commitment. […] it (the pentangle) signifies both inter-human bonds and the human bond with God, on the principle that these are indissolubly connected.[165]

The pentangle's first and main interpretation, shared by most scholars and proved correct by the poet himself in the lines following the mention of the blazon, is that it is a symbol of truth,[166] which Priscilla Martin, among others, identifies as the central virtue of the poem.[167] Elisabeth Brewer, in *The sources of Sir Gawain*, asserts that not only was the symbol associated to Salomon, but it was also used to guard off evil spirits; further, it appeared in the Pythagorean tradition as a symbol of health, and in neo-Platonist and Gnostic writings as a symbol of perfection. Orthodox Christian numerology defines number five as the number of Man, for his five senses make him sin and Christ's five wounds redeem him.[168] Indeed, the five points of the emblem symbolise Gawain's virtuous qualities, as Brewer illustrates in *English Gothic Literature*, translating what the poet brilliantly described in his text:

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[165] (Davis 1997, 345) The scholar also wrote a more exhaustive account of the symbolism and interpretations connected to the pentangle in a 1993 article titled *Gawain Rationalist pentangle* which appeared in number 12 of the periodical *Arthurian Literature* (Davis 1993)

[166] The poet explains that the figure is a symbol created by Solomon to represent truth and loyalty.

[167] (Martin 1997) Speaking in a similar but broader context, (J. A. Burrow 1971, 86) claims that:
> If the poem were to be called any such [abstract] thing, it should be called *Truth.*

[168] (E. Brewer 1997)

He is faultless in his five 'wits' (i.e. senses); has never failed in his five fingers; puts all his trust in Christ's five wounds; takes courage from Mary's five joys; and as his fifth five has always practised generosity, fellowship, cleanness (i.e. chastity), courtesy and pity.[169]

This description is also a foreshadowing of Gawain's adventure at Bertilak's castle and at the Green Chapel: there, he will be tested and the above-mentioned qualities will be challenged.[170] Indeed, if the pentangle's endless line symbolises the virtues of a Christian knight and his personal integrity, then failure or lack of one of said qualities would result in a chain reaction which would mine the integrity of the whole figure and thus the knight himself. Diekstra asserts, then, that Gawain's reaction to understanding his faults is natural, and the mortification and shame he demonstrates are to be expected from the knight whose emblem is the representation of such perfection.[171]

Criticism has frequently put the pentangle in opposition to the girdle, which is the dominant element of the second arming scene. The green garment is gifted to Gawain by the lady of the castle, who tells the knight that it has magical properties which can save one's life and protect him from all harm. Explicitly enough, the garment is the result and thus the symbol of the temptations which Gawain goes through in Bertilak's castle, and, before leaving the Green Chapel, Gawain asks to keep it and wear it as a symbol of his shame, his fault, and his lack of loyalty; upon his return to Arthur's court, however, the king and the rest of the knights take it

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[169] (D. Brewer 1983, 159)
[170] (Boitani 1982)
[171] (Diekstra 1990)

as a symbol of his victory, over death and over the Green Knight. Despite the explicitness of the meanings of the girdle, its interpretations tend, once more, to be conflicting, if not opposing: what is certain, nonetheless, is that the same garment which was supposed to preserve and protect Gawain's life turns out to be the very cause of the harm suffered at the hand of the Green Knight and of the shame Gawain feels, and his only source of weakness.

Helen Cooper argues that even though the Lady's words when she gives Gawain the girdle assure him that it is a magic object, its powers are neither confirmed nor denied in the rest of the poem: it is not treated the same way as Excalibur or other magic objects belonging to the romance tradition and, even if it was, its ability to render its wearer invulnerable would differentiate it from the rest, for in invulnerability there is no need for fear, and thus no need for courage and prowess. Gawain himself does not trust the girdle's powers, but takes it and conceals it nonetheless, thus lacking in loyalty and truth. In the last point stand Gawain's fault and his failure, as the scholar asserts:

> The girdle's lack of supernatural qualities finally serves to measure, not how far Gawain has progressed beyond what any mortal could manage, but his failure to advance, to become supra-human.[172]

Gawain's humanity, then, resides in his attachment to life, his lack of faith and subsequent uncertainty about the fate God has reserved for him, and in his survival instinct. In other words, he does not live up to the standards of the

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[172] (Cooper 1997, 291)

pentangle, which he substitutes with the green girdle as his emblem.[173] Even though he is absolved, first by the Priest, then by the Green Knight himself, and finally by his own court, henceforth, he will retain the girdle, as a symbol of his shame. Cooper so expresses her argument:

> Gawain may, as the Green Knight tells him, be like a pearl among white peas, but in his own eyes and so far as his own standards proclaimed in the pentangle are concerned, he is a failure.[174]

In part, the opposition between pentangle and girdle stems from their origin: the former appears to be a natural sign, due to its mathematical basis, while the latter appears arbitrary, even in the meanings it bears for the different characters. Moreover, while the pentangle is a fixed and rigid figure, unchangeable, the soft girdle is pliable and mutable, and for this reason, again, arbitrary: in the words of Sandra Pierson Prior:

> The poem's view of Gawain follows the same pattern as his signs. From the idealized Christian knight … [to] a fallible human being, whose goodness is a matter of dispute.[175]

MORGAN LE FAY

The actual reason of existence for the whole narrative of the romance is found in Morgan le Fay's hate towards Guinevere and her will to demonstrate that her brother's court was not as faultless as it was generally believed: the appearance of the Green Knight, indeed, is planned so to deprive Arthur's court of their *wyttes*,

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[173] (Boitani 1991)
[174] (Cooper 1997, 291)
[175] (Prior 1994, 123) as quoted in (Martin 1997)

that is their ability to act as human beings, and to test their prowess. Morgan's

presence in the text, however, is limited to a nameless appearance as the ancient

woman, when Gawain meets the ladies at Bertilak's castle, and a brief mention

when the Green Knight reveals his identity to Gawain and explains his motifs. If

one compares her to the other characters in the romance, they will soon find out

that Morgan le Fay is possibly the only one who has no psychological depth, due

to the nature of her being an entity whose only role in the narrative is to act as its

driving force.[176] On her being the driving force of the narrative, Helen Cooper

argues that "neither in narrative detail nor in import does his [the poet's]

explanation fit with the rest of the poem".[177] She asserts that, in his explanation,

Bertilak does not suggest that Morgan's role could go further than wanting to test

Arthur's court, but instead it is him and his wife who orchestrated the temptations.

The typical ambiguity which pervades the poem is also present in Morgan's

character. She is a healer, a practitioner of learned arts and natural magic, but at

the same time she is a goddess, and, through her education by Merlin, who,

though generally depicted as good-willed, is the offspring of an incubus, her arts

are ascribed to 'nigromancy', that is dark magic. Though her character is usually

represented as beautiful and seductive, here the poet has chosen to separate the

two functions of the enchantress and the temptress in the two ladies of the castle:

Morgan the enchantress is the ugly and evil dame, while Bertilak's wife, the

temptress, is beautiful and desirable. Corinne Saunders, in *Magic and the*

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[176] (Boitani 1991)
[177] (Cooper 1997, 289)

*Supernatural in Medieval English Romance*, so concludes her brief discourse on this duality in the poem:

> The duality captures the two sides of the otherworld, fascinating and fearful, generous and threatening – and the double-edged nature of otherworldly gifts.[178]

Kieckhefer in *Magic in the Middle Ages* describes her character as "at times nurturing and helpful" but "mainly a thorn in Arthur's side".[179] Since there is ample evidence that Morgan's role was added by the Gawain-Poet himself, who was acquainted with the romance tradition and wanted to include such a central character to other romances in his own, it is possible that the poet added her to conform to the tradition, including his own explanation of her story so her motives could be more credible. She is described as a pagan goddess, which for a poet devoted to Christianity equals to being a demon, thus mysteriously evil. Her aspect in comparison with the lady, moreover, fixes the image of the evil enchantress in the reader and audience: as Friedman states in his article *Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet gives the particularized description of the ancient dame sufficient space in the narrative, so as to emphasize her ugliness and thus give confirmation that her character is evil, even though he makes no direct allusions.[180]

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[178] (Saunders 2010, 197)
[179] (Kieckhefer 1989, 111)
[180] (Friedman 1960)

3.    FORMAL ANALYSIS

  3.1.    A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FANTASTIC ELEMENT

The comparison of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to other works, related to
it in terms of plot and characters, demonstrates that the text distinguishes itself:
while the length of the text gives a primary hint, it is the attention to details, the
depth of descriptions, and the skilful adaptation of two distinct stories into one
perfectly intertwined plot that make it so unique in its genre. Further, *Sir Gawain
and the Green Knight* represents the fantastic and supernatural element inside a
realistic world in such a way that it may well be ascribed to Todorov's theory of
the fantastic: the same cannot be claimed about the two analysed poems, that is
*The Greene Knight*, which is considered a corrupt version of *Sir Gawain and the
Green Knight*, and *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, in which only the challenge element
is proposed, but which, nevertheless, presents an interesting take to the
representation of the supernatural element.

  With such a premise, and with the contextual information gathered in the
previous chapter, the present one aims to analyse the three texts, so that the
differences in terms of the fantastic, as interpreted by Todorov, may be better
observed. Once these differences have been observed, some reasons for their
existence will be considered.

  The analysis is to be carried out within the framework of tagmemics, taking
inspiration from Susan Wittig's adaptation of the tagmemic approach, usually

applied to linguistics, to the study of Middle English romances.[181] The tagmemic

belief that language is made up of emic units – which have "particular and

distinctive significance within a given system"[182], and which are distributed into

patterns of slots that may be filled with  similar elements – is applied to Middle

English romances, in particular to formulaic language, and in general to their plot

structure. Thus, the texts will be analysed in terms of episode structure, that is the

biggest emic unit considered by Wittig; subsequently, the episodes will be broken

into smaller units, that is scenes, motifemes, and smaller components. Some

typical formulaic verses will be analysed as well, in their context.

The tagmemic approach is useful in a comparative context because the division

of the texts in smaller units of content allows us to simplify the comparative

process, and highlight and compare features of the texts which may not be easily

distinguished from the rest of the work in the analysis of the whole: thus, it

becomes possible to study how themes and motifs are reworked in different texts

and propose some reasons for such reworkings.

The translation of selected verses offered in the footnotes is mine, unless

otherwise specified.

### 3.2.    THE EPISODE STRUCTURE OF SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

PART I

- Lines 1-36: Exhortation motifeme

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[181] (Wittig 1978)
[182] (Wittig 1978, 38)

The poem opens with an exhortation motifeme, whose components include an introductory history of the beginnings of Britain, founded by Felix Brutus, after the siege and destruction of Troy, an introduction to King Arthur and the adventure that will be told, and the nuclear exhortation where the poet asks the audience and readers to pay attention.

- Lines 37-490: Challenge episode

While in many Middle English romances the challenge is of minor importance and is treated as a motifeme inside the greater battle scene, in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* it has much greater importance, to the extent of being considered an episode, which subsumes two scenes: the challenge, from line 37 to line 338, and the battle, from line 339 to line 466.

The challenge scene opens with a scene setting motifeme (lines 37-129), where the poet describes the merry situation of Arthur's court gathering at Christmas, which is interrupted by the arrival of an intruder, that is the Green Knight. A hundred-verse long, detailed description of the intruder is given (lines 130-231): the focus is on his size – which makes the audience, and the poet as well, hesitate on his origins as a human being – and the peculiar shade of green with gold decorations which pervades all his figure, his garments and his horse. The whole court falls silent with fear and astonishment, while the Green Knight asks to speak to the king. The nuclear challenge motifeme (lines 250-338) follows, in which the Green Knight challenges the court to a beheading game: he will take one blow from one of the knights with his great axe, on condition that the same knight will

receive an equal return blow on New Years the following year. Upon the muted reaction of the court, the Green Knight tantalises them, asking about often talked-about bravery and prowess of Arthur and his knights: Arthur accepts the challenge out of wounded pride, and stands up to take the axe and give the knight the blow.

The battle scene begins with the introduction of a new character, who will be the protagonist of the tale: in the service motifeme (lines 339-374), Gawain stands up and courteously asks that he may be the one accepting the challenge, in stead of Arthur. It may be considered service for Gawain steps in for his king in order to restore the honour and reputation of Arthur and the whole court. A combat motifeme (lines 375-465), nuclear to the scene, follows: after asking Gawain for his name and repeating the terms of the challenge, the Green Knight uncovers his neck and prepares for the blow, which severs his head. Rather than falling dead, the Green Knight's body stands, takes up the head and, upon everyone's bewilderment and fear, reminds Gawain of their deal and tells the knight to find him at the Green Chapel in a year's time.

The end of the episode pictures the court resuming their banquet in amazement, after the Green Knight has left the hall.

PART II

- Lines 531-762: Separation episode

The separation episode generally occurs as a consequence of the rupture of father-hero ties: either because of the death of the father, or because of betrayals or irregular birth. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a sophisticated exception to

this, as Gawain's exile is a consequence of the challenge itself and the knight leaves court, and begins his adventures, to restore the honour of the court, rather than to restore patrimony. Separation is introduced by an extensive and masterfully constructed account of the passing of time and seasons (lines 491-531), followed by a scene where the knights of the court express their grief before Gawain's departure (lines 532-686): it embeds one of the most famous and well-known scenes of the poem, that is the arming of the knight (lines 566-665). A travel scene (lines 687-762) concludes the episode, just before Gawain arrival at the Good Knight's castle.

The scene denominated 'arming of the knight' is the first of two arming scenes and has great thematic and symbolic importance in the poem, as was stated in paragraph 2.5.2. Gawain prepares for his journey to the Green Chapel in an almost ceremonial way: the garments and armour are made of luxurious material, and even his horse, Gringolet, is prepared with the finest attire. The poet devotes half of the scene to the description of Gawain's shield, which has a portray of the Virgin Mary on the inside, and a pentangle on the outside, a five-point golden star which stand out against the red shield.

The travel scene is an account of Gawain's journey up North by himself, in which the knight has to face marvellous creatures and, most of all the cold weather, which to the poet's opinion, is Gawain's greatest challenge. The end of the scene is marked by Gawain's prayer that he might find shelter and a place where he can attend the Christmas service.

- Lines 763-1125: Adoption episode

Chained with the preceding episode, adoption begins with Gawain's arrival at a castle and the description of the building (lines 763-802). A reception scene (lines 803-841) follows, while the nuclear scene of the episode, where the Good Knight becomes some sort of foster father figure to Gawain, hence the identification as an adoption episode, comes after. The poet goes on to describe the Christmas eve service (lines 928-941), Gawain's encounter with the ladies of the castle (lines 942-994), and the banquet at Christmas and the following days. The description of the two ladies is, as typical of the poet, quite detailed, and puts them on opposing sides of the spectrum: one is young, beautiful, and luxuriously dressed, the other is old, bearing the signs of age, and more modestly dressed.

The scene identified as 'deal' (lines 1029-1125) pictures Gawain wanting to set for his journey to the Green Chapel: the Good Knight tells him that he is rather close, and insists that the knight stay at his castle until the new year; when Gawain, relieved, accepts, the Good Knight makes a deal with him, that he shall lay and rest in the castle the three following days, while the Good Knight and his men go hunting, and, upon his return, they shall exchange their day's winnings.

- Lines 1126-1997: Testing episode

The testing episode is made up of three equivalent sequences of scenes: the hunting scene, which depicts with astounding realism the Good Knight and his men hunting in the woods, and embedded in the scene a more domestic sort of hunting, where the lady of the castle becomes the hunter and Gawain the prey, in

a temptation game which will be revealed as a test of Gawain's courtesy and loyalty. Following each hunting scene is the exchange of winnings. The hunting is considered a domestication of real battle, much like tournaments, as mentioned in paragraph 2.2.2.

In the first hunting scene (lines 1126-1364), the Good Knight and his men hunt a deer, while back at the castle the lady's hunt for Gawain ends with a courteous kiss (lines 1178-1318). During the exchange of winnings (lines 1365-1411), Gawain compliments the knight's hunt and kisses him in exchange, withholding, however, who the kiss comes from. The second hunting scene (lines 1412-1622) portrays the hunt for a wild boar, while at the castle (lines 1468-1560) the lady tempts Gawain but he only accepts two kisses, which he later exchanges with the Good Knight, in the exchange of winnings (lines 1623-1687). In the third hunting scene (lines 1688-1923) the Good Knight and his men hunt a fox, while in Gawain's room at the castle (lines 1731-1875) the lady tempts the knight once again, but Gawain resists: when the lady offers him a ring as a sign of her love, Gawain refuses, but he falls for the temptation when the lady give him a green silk girdle, which she claims has powerful defensive qualities and will protect its wearer from wounds. The lady also gives him three kisses. In another embedded scene in the third hunting, Gawain goes to the chapel for confession, which is an act of self-restoration, as he believes himself absolved from his sins. In the third and last exchange of winnings scene (lines 1924-1959), the Good Knight gives Gawain the fox and Gawain gives him in exchange three kisses, but keeps the green girdle for himself, thus failing in keeping his word and respecting his part of the deal.

In the final part of the episode (lines 1960-1997), Gawain takes leave from his good host and the ladies, on New Year's eve, the night before his departure to find the Green Chapel and fulfil his promise to the Green Knight.

- Lines 1998-2521: Restoration episode

The restoration episode opens with a description of the weather on New Year's day (lines 1998-2005), followed by the second arming of the knight scene (2006-2064), a shorter unit than the first one, but equally as important in the poem: where in one the shield and the pentangle are the focal features, in the other the green girdle, which contrasts so much with the red, takes the most attention.

The poem continues with a travel scene (lines 2065-2167), in which Gawain and the Good Knight's servant ride closer to the Green Chapel: in a sort of fourth temptation, the servant tries to convince Gawain, for his own good, to renounce his promise and run away, although the knight, proving his strength of character, answers that by God he will not act like a coward. Thus, he receives the directions to reach the Green Chapel.

The following battle scene (2168-2184) opens with Gawain's arrival at the Green Chapel and his encounter with the Green Knight (lines 2168-2234), and his preparation to battle (lines 2235-2258), which, however, is rather a repetition of the terms of the Green Knight's deal. Three blows are struck by the Green Knight: the first time (lines 2259-2279), Gawain flinches a little, so the Green Knight teases that he is not the courageous Gawain of his reputation; the second time (lines 2280-2304), while Gawain does not move, the Green Knight only feints his blow

and teases Gawain again, who answers furiously. The third blow gives Gawain a slight wound and causes the knight to react and draw his sword for battle.

Two remaining scenes complete the episode and form its nucleus: two restoration scenes, so divided because the first one (lines 2331-2474) concerns Gawain's restoration at the eyes of the Green Knight, that is Bertilak, the Good Knight of the castle, and the other one (lines 2475-2518) concerns his restoration back at Arthur's court.

Longer than the second one, the first restoration scene includes the revelation of Bertilak's identity and motives, whereby the knight reveals that it was Morgan le Fay, disguised as the old lady at the castle, who orchestrated everything, and that the lady of the castle has tempted Gawain in accord with him: Gawain would not have received even the slightest wound, had he been loyal until the end and had he given the girdle to the knight, on the third night of exchange of winnings. Conscious of his fault, Gawain asks that he may keep the girdle, as a mark of his weakness and sin, and Bertilak, though the knight is absolved of all his faults, grants it to him.

The second restoration scene depicts Gawain's return to Arthur's court with the girdle, symbol of his shame and his misfit. The court, however, welcome Gawain a hero, one who survived certain death, and decide to wear the girdle as a symbol of his victory and bravery.

- Lines 2522-2530: end of poem and prayer

The end of the poem recalls its beginning: the poet repeats the link between

the story and Brutus, and ends the poem with a prayer.

### 3.3. Two popular Gawain romances analysed

#### 3.3.1. The Greene Knight

Part of the collection of Arthurian works contained in the post-medieval Percy

Folio Manuscript (BL Add. MS 27879), *The Greene Knight*[183] is a retelling of the

story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to which it is clearly related: despite

several changes to the plot, which render it both different from the Gawain-poet

version and at times contradicting in itself, the main elements and many details in

common are easily recognizable, and are evidence that the author of *The Greene*

*Knight* had knowledge of the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or, as

Kittredge suggests, its lost French original.[184] Although many scholars negatively

assert that the text was an adaptation written from memory, a condensation of

the literate form of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the elements included in the

present version of the tale make it interesting enough to conduct an analysis on

its own and in comparison to its predecessor.[185]

The formal comparison to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is generally

unfavourable for this short version, as the Gawain-poet's skilful construction of

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[183] This version is so-called by Thomas Hahn to distinguish it from the Gawain-poet's version. Some scholars such as Kittredge use the title *Green Knight*, while others such as Gillian Rogers call it *The Grene Knight (GrKn)*: given the absence of a title in the manuscript, the great variety in the spelling of the title is not surprising.
[184] (Kittredge 1960) includes a quick yet exhaustive view on the possibilities of derivation of this romance from the English or the French version.
[185] (Rogers 1997) makes a case for it by analysing the differences between the two versions.

the plot and the attention he lent to details made the work one of the most

illustrious pieces in Middle English literature; nevertheless, the technical ability of

the author of *The Greene Knight* is not to be underestimated. The story is told as

a romance in the 6-line tail-rhyme structure, which follows a rhyming scheme of

aabccb. The narrative flows easily from one stanza to the next – with tail-lines

fulfilling their functional role of carrying it forward – and patterns of alliteration

improve the musicality of the text, which includes formulaic and stereotyped

elements and phrases.[186] Because of the last point, as Thomas Hahn has

suggested, this version might be considered as written purely for oral recitation,

given the marks of orality and the division in two fitts, which might recall the

performance sessions.[187]

Diverging from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Greene Knight* opens with

a short picture of Arthur's court, before moving the setting to Sir Bredbeddle's

castle in the West Country, where the author makes the reasons and actions that

lead Sir Bredbeddle to become the Green Knight and test Gawain explicit: his wife

is madly in love with Gawain, even though she has never met him,[188] so his

mother-in-law, Agostes, who is a witch, instructs Bredbeddle.[189] Subsequently, the

Green Knight arrives at Arthur's court, is welcomed by a porter and awaits outside

the hall until he is let in: the challenge proposal is followed by Kay's outburst, then

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[186] (Rogers 1997)
[187] (Hahn 1995)
[188] A common motif in the romances with Gawain as protagonist is that of the woman being in love with the knight she's never seen.
[189] One of the great deviances of *The Greene Knight* from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the substitution of Morgan le Fay's character with the mother-in-law, Agostes, who is only mentioned at the beginning of the story.

reprehended by Gawain.[190] Before the beheading game can take place, the Green

Knight is courteously invited to dinner. After Gawain's blow, which severs the

Green Knight's head and the latter's departure, the court is depicted grieving

Gawain, who cheers them up and the feast can continue: this is the end of fitt 1.

Fitt 2 begins with Gawain's departure from court, and his journey and arrival at

Bredbeddle's castle. After dinner, the host proposes a game of sharing of winnings,

similar but not the same as the exchange of winnings in *Sir Gawain and the Green

Knight*,[191] but here the game only lasts one day, and so does the temptation by

Bredbeddle's wife, who gives him three kisses and a white silken braid. As with the

hunting days, the author reduces the number of return blows or feints from three

to one and Bredbeddle, after explaining his motives to Gawain, makes his request

of joining the knight on his journey back to Arthur's castle.

TAGMEMIC ANALYSIS

Even though the Percy Folio manuscript is considered to have been written in

the seventeenth century by an unknown scribe, the occurrences and the language

of the story of *The Greene Knight* date it back to the first half of the fifteenth

century.[192] The structure of the poem presents many elements of Middle English

romances, particularly as far as narrative structures are concerned: the tagmemic

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[190] This is an element which diverges from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but is consistent in other chivalric romances and often defines Gawain and Kay's relationship.
[191] The difference is notable because in a game of exchange of winnings, retaining one of the gifts equals cheating and dishonesty, while in a game of sharing equally the gifts, retaining some for oneself is not a fault in loyalty. In *Greene Knight*, when Bredbeddle accuses Gawain of dishonesty, he has no ground for such accusation. (Rogers 1997)
[192] (Rogers 1997)

analysis below will highlight some of these features. The number of the lines and the quotations are based upon Thomas Hahn's edition which appeared in his 1995 work *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*.[193]

- Lines 1-35: Exhortation

The poem opens with an exhortation motifeme, typical of Middle English romances, which begin with a call for attention to the audience – the obligatory component of the motifeme, and two optional components, the synopsis and prayer. In the case of *the Greene Knight*, the exhortation is found in line 1, while the rest of the motifeme can be ascribed to the synopsis, as it describes the history of Britain and the situation at Arthur's court during the Christmas period. The allusion to Britain's glorious past which is present and so richly developed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, occupies here the space of seven lines, and only mentions the unity of England, Scotland and Wales under Arthur, and his driving the enemies out of the isles.

- Lines 35-246: Challenge episode

As in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the challenge is not a mere scene but an episode. As such, it cannot be analysed in terms of motifemes composing it, but rather of scenes and smaller components.

The first part of the episode, lines 37-90, is dedicated to Sir Bredbeddle and the West Country: this scene will be called plan, for the nuclear component is the plan

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[193] (Hahn 1995), in turn, bases his edition on the Folio but uses Frederic Madden and Frederick Furnivall's editions as well.

motifeme. The plan motifeme is usually employed in scenes such as the Death of the father type-scene: like other elements of this episode, it will be treated as a scene. Indeed, the challenge episode in *The Greene Knight*, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, can be considered quite similar to the type-scene death of the hero's father, for the primary function of both scenes is to set the narrative in motion, and set the bases for the separation episode, so the structural similarity is to be expected.

> Now of King Arthur noe more I mell,
> But of a venterous knight I will you tell
> That dwelled in the west countrye.(lines 37-39)[194]

The lines above are an allomotif of the now-we-leave-and-turn-to motifeme: there is a change of topic, from Arthur's court in the exhortation motifeme to the above-mentioned Sir Bredbeddle.

Successively, a scene-setting motifeme (lines 40-54) can be found, where the poet gives information about Sir Bredbeddle's situation: a man of great strength and beauty, he had a wife whom he loved, but who had fallen madly in love with Sir Gawain, even though she had never met him. Agostes, the lady's mother, is described as a witch who could transform knights and servants and change their appearance.

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[194] Now I will speak no more of King Arthur,/ But I will tell you of a daring knight/Whose court was set in the west country.
 (Hahn 1995) asserts that Bredbeddle's court is located in the northwest Midlands, near the Welsh border.

The nuclear component, the plan motifeme, depicts the mother-in-law instructing sir Bredbeddle to go to Arthur's court in disguise.

An interesting point is raised by Bredbeddle's answer to Agostes: he will go to Arthur's court to do as his mother-in-law asked him, and to prove "Gawaines points three-." The three points that Bredbeddle wants to test Gawain on are his courtesy, his boldness, and his hardiness: there appears to be an allusion to the pentangle's symbolism in the way Bredbeddle speaks, for, as appointed above, the five-point star can be understood as representing Gawain's virtues.

Lines 73-108 serve as a linking scene, whereby Bredbeddle, disguised as the Green Knight, arrives at Arthur's court and, having announced himself and requested to see the king, waits for permission to enter the hall. Two motifemes can be easily identified: the arming of the knight motifeme (lines 73-84), which alludes to the overall greenness of Bredbeddle's armour and horse; the riding motifeme (lines 85-90) which formulaicly narrates Bredbeddle's arrival at Arthur's court as the Green Knight.

An example of the so-called minstrel tag is reported below: it is a sort of interruption of the narrative by the author, who, like the minstrel, talks directly to the audience:

I dare itt safelye sweare. (line 84)[195]

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[195] I dare swear it with certainty

Lines 91-108 represent the arrival of the knight and the reception at court, while the nuclear component of the challenge episode, the challenge scene, occupies lines 109-162. The first motifeme – which will be called the challenge motifeme, lines 109-150 – constitutes the nucleus of the scene, where the Green Knight proposes a beheading game to the court. Highlighted by the author, contrary to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is the courtesy which pervades the conversation between King Arthur and the Green Knight: the poem, indeed, tends to ignore the attempt of its analogue to create an aura of mystery and hesitation around the intruder, who is not portrayed as a fantastic creature half man and half giant, and, though shape-shifted, maintains his chivalric values and courteous manners. The stylized and formal character of the narrative and the motifeme are heightened with formulae of introduction of speech:

>  And spoke with voice cleere (line 111)[196]

>  The king he sayd full still
>  Till he had said all his will (lines 121-122)[197]

Not only are there formulae of introduction of speech, the conversation between Arthur and the Green Knight is quite remarkable in its formulaic structure, which permeates the motifeme. There are descriptive formulae such as the Green Knight's self-introduction, which is a repetition of what the porter tells

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[196] And spoke with a clear voice
[197] The king remained quiet/until he [the Green Knight] has said all he had to say.
This instance does not actually introduce speech, but does indeed seem a formulaic element functional to the organization of discourse.

Arthur in line 104, and a number of formulae consisting of a noun and a relative clause:

I am come hither a venterous knight (line 116)[198]

To prove poynts in thy pallace
That longeth to manhood in everye case (lines 118-119)[199]

Among the lords both old and younge
That worthy beene in weede (lines 134-135)[200]

A knight that is doughtye of deed. (line 144)[201]

In the first two instances of noun and relative clause formula, it develops on two lines: in the first one the noun is mentioned, while the second one is fully occupied by the relative clause. On the contrary, the third instance represents the same formula in one line only, where the first half of the verse is occupied by the noun, and the relative clause is in its second half.

The following motifeme may be considered a reworking of the boastful challenge motifeme, which will be called the 'boastful answer': Sir Kay, who is known in the romances for his impulsive and impetuous behaviour, promptly jumps up, threatening to cut the Green Knight's neck in two, but is silenced by the court, who tell him to remain quiet. This part is not present in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the presence of this character in the present version might possibly

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[198] I have come here as an adventurous knight.
[199] To test your court on virtues/ that are appropriate to every man
[200] Among the lord, both old and young/that are dressed in a worthy manner
[201] A knight that is worthy of the deed

suggest the *Greene Knight* poet's intention to follow the stereotypes of romance and Middle English romance in particular, something which the Gawain-poet, who was more interested in giving his characters emotional and psychological depth, did not focus on.

After the challenge scene and the Green Knight's mockery, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the narrative shifts to a scene of service, where Gawain accepts the challenge in place of Arthur and thus has to restore the honour of the king and the whole court. In the *Greene Knight*, the scene (lines 163-186) is quite different: the author writes that everyone in the court was willing to participate in the game, but Gawain immediately went to Arthur and asked that he could do it, on the base of their kinship. There is great deviance among the two versions: while in one the honour of the whole court is in danger, the other poses no threat to the honour of anybody, and Gawain simply appears to be a knight ready for adventure, rather than one who is surprised and astonished but fights his instinct to save the reputation of King Arthur and his knights. If in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the above-mentioned first condition of existence of the fantastic, that is hesitation, is fully respected, on the other hand in *Greene Knight* no hesitation is perceived, not even by the reader, who knows well that there is witchcraft behind the Green Knight's appearance: this difference will be better investigated in paragraph 3.4.

Arthur grants Gawain's request, but not before commanding that the banquet begins and the Green Knight attends as a guest; only after dinner will the game take place. Once more, this is a departure from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,

where Arthur explicitly refuses to begin his feasts before experiencing something marvellous. A banquet motifeme follows, where the author again highlights the courtesy of the Green Knight.

As in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the battle scene (lines 187-210) is nested in the challenge episode, and includes the act of the beheading. The first stanza (lines 187-192) may be considered a re-elaboration of the single-combat motifeme, nuclear to the scene, composed of three typical elements: the naming of the knights that is Gawain and the Green Knight; their encounter, which is re-elaborated as the knights preparing for the blow, for the Green Knight lays down his head while Gawain takes the axe in his hands; the exchange of blows, or rather of one blow, that is Gawain's, followed by the severed head falling from the body of the Green Knight. The following verses (lines 199-210) contain a repetition of the challenge terms: after seizing his head, the Green Knight, far from being dead, hops on his horse and reminds Gawain and the court of their bargain. Indeed, lines 207-210 compose an allomotif of the threat motifeme, where the Green Knight repeats his threat to Arthur, rather than to Gawain.

What is possibly the most interesting part of the scene in our analysis is the reference to the fantastic in lines 199-204, reported below:

> All had great marvell, that they see
> That he spake so merrilye
> And bare his head in his hand.
> Forth att the hall dore he rode right,
> And that saw both King and knight

And lords that were in land.[202]

In this stanza, the present version of the story makes reference to the longer poem: if up until this point the appearance of the Green Knight could be easily explained and provoked no hesitation, now his magic ability to survive such a blow creates marvel in all the spectators.

While in many other romances the final motifeme of the battle scene is the reward, where the hero is awarded the lady's hand in marriage, in this narrative grief follows the battle scene. After the poet redundantly alludes to the supernatural nature of the Green Knight's survival and the role of the witch in the deed, lines 214-234 describe the reaction of the court to the battle scene:

> Sore sicke fell Arthur the King,
> And for him made great mourning
> That into such bale was brought.[203]
>
> The Queen, shee weeped for his sake;
> Sorry was Sir Lancelott du Lake,
> And other were dreery in thought
> Because he was brought into great perill.
> His mightye manhood will not availe,
> That before hath freshlye fought. (lines 214-222)[204]

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[202] Everybody had great marvel when they saw/ that he spoke so easily/ and carried his head with his hand./he rode forward to the hall door,/[something] which the king and knight [Arthur and Gawain] saw/ and so did all the lords that were there.

[203] Arthur the king fell very sick,/ and grieved greatly for him/who was brought into such trouble.

[204] The queen cried for his sake;/Sir Lancelot du Lake was sorry,/ and others had sad thoughts in mind/because he was brought into great danger./His mighty manhood would not help [him]/[with] which [he] had eagerly fought before.

The above-reported lines are instances of the predicate formulae used for expression of grief, while lines 223-234, reported below, describe Gawain's attempt to comfort the court. These lines demonstrate what was claimed in paragraph 2.3.1, that is Gawain's status of model of chivalry and his constant readiness to go on adventures and face the unknown, which persisted in the English romance tradition:

> Sir Gawaine comfort King and Queen
> And all the doughtye there bedeene.
> He bade they shold be still,
> Said, "Of my deede I was never feard,
> Nor yett I am nothing adread,
> I swere by Saint Michaell!
>
> "For when draweth toward my day,
> I will dresse me in mine array
> My promise to fulfill.
> Sir," he saith, "as I have blis,
> I wott not where the Greene Chappell is:
> Therfore, seeke itt I will!"[205]

Two stanzas dedicated to the celebrations and feasts follow, after which the knights collectively swear to avenge Gawain and burn all the west country, were he killed.[206]

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[205] Sir Gawain comforted the king and queen/ and all the worthy folk gathered together./ he requested that all of them be quiet,/ said: "I was never afraid of my death,/nor am I frightened of anything,/I swear by St. Michael!

"For when the day comes close,/ I will wear my armour/ and fulfil my promise./Sir – he said – as I hope for
heaven/ I don't know where the Green Chapel is:/ therefore I will seek it!"

[206] (Hahn 1995) suggests that the burning of the west country is evidence for the anachronistic status of the poem, as burning and devastation, though typical of chivalric warfare in the Middle

- Lines 247-258: Now-we-leave-and-turn-to and fytte division

Two discours motifemes mark the end of part one of the narrative: the poet uses them to change the setting of the story, and to signal the passing of time, as part two opens with Gawain's departure from the court in search for the Green Chapel. The now-we-leave-and-turn-to motifeme (lines 247-254) describes the situation at Bredbeddle's castle, where his people ask him about his deeds, but he does not reveal anything.

> Full well he wist in certaine
> That his wiffe loved Sir Gawaine,
> That comelye was under kell. (lines 253-55)[207]

The lines reported above are another instance of descriptive formula: wiffe in this case, is the noun, upon which line 255, the relative clause, is dependent. What is interesting is the intrusion of another name, the of Sir Gawain, which, due to proximity, in modern English would be the natural antecedent of that: the formulaic structure, however, given its established form and restricted paradigm, allows for no doubt as to which noun the relative clause depends on.

The fytte division motifeme (lines 255-258) contains a call to the audience for attention and a one-line synopsis of what the audience will hear in the second part.

- Lines 259-294: Separation

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Ages, were not characteristic after the thirteenth century in the west country, although they persisted until after the Middle Ages in the North.
[207] He knew for certain that his wife loved sir Gawain,/Who was so beautiful under [her] caul (cap)

Similarly to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *Greene Knight* as well, the separation episode is not induced by the death of the hero's father, as is typical of many romances, but rather by the challenge itself: Gawain's departure is due to his chivalric obligation to fulfil his promise and search for the Green Chapel. The driving motif is not the denial of patrimony, property or kinship, but rather Gawain's moral obligation to guard his and the court's honour and reputation.

Contrary to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, where the episode is 271-lines long and descriptive of Gawain's journey, the separation episode in *The Greene Knight* occupies only 35 lines.

Expulsion (lines 259-294) is the only scene in this episode. While in other romances it is in sequence with the death of the hero's father typescene, or the irregular birth typescene, in this case it stands alone following the challenge. Three motifemes are recognizable in the scene: the exile (lines 259-264); the arming of the knight (lines 265-276); the riding (lines 277-294).

As a consequence of the difference in driving motives than the usual separation episode, the exile motifeme is revisited: it contains formulae of expression of grief, describing what the king, queen, and the court are feeling.

The scene shifts to Gawain's arming before his departure. Where the Gawain-poet gives an accurate description of each component of the armour and especially focuses his attention on the shield, the pentangle, and their significance, the *Greene Knight* author only alludes to Gawain's armour, and briefly describes his horse in concrete terms, with valuable embellishments and "of a furley

kind".[208] The author uses the term 'furley' three more times, in lines 280, 284, 347, and in all occurrences but line 274, the term defines what Gawain sees or experiences but cannot explain through the laws of the natural world; the occurrence in line 274, located mid-description, between the allusion to valuable stones and metals and Indian silk, seems to refer to the luxury of the decorations on the horse.

Twice in the motifeme the author makes use of predicate formulae to underline his attaining to the truth of facts:

> I tell withouten scorne. (line 270)
> I tell you this tale for true. (line 276)[209]

These are generally called minstrel tags, in that the minstrel, performing the poem to an audience, interrupts the narrative with his comments or remarks. Often considered evidence for an oral performance theory, due to their fixed pattern, they might be interpreted as supporting the structural and metrical level of the poem, in that they complete the stanza and fill the rhyme scheme.

The riding motifeme occupies the two final stanzas of the episode. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* this part is skilfully developed in order to emphasize the realism in the narrative, using real place names, thanks to which the contemporary reader could retrieve and visualize Gawain's journey, as mentioned above in chapter 2.5.1; in *The Greene Knight*, on the contrary, the brief description does

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[208] The horse was of marvellous kind. Line 274
[209] I tell [this] in all seriousness
I tell you this story as it is

not mention any place names except the Green Chapel in line 287, which is not to be considered a realistic topographical indication. This deviance from the Gawain-poet's version demonstrates that, where the Gawain-poet uses individualized and specific geographical indications, thus attempting to situate the narrative in the real world, the *Greene Knight* author makes greater use of fixed formulae, that is adverbial phrases of place, as in line 282, below, showing no intention to create realism, but rather to adhere to the tradition.

By brimes and bankes soe broad.[210]

- Lines 295-431: Adoption

In the typical romance episode structure, after the separation comes the adoption: since in the separation episode the hero loses their ties with their kinship, in the adoption episode they are welcomed in another family, where the father becomes a sort of foster father to the hero. In *The Greene Knight* the sequence separation-adoption is present, and Gawain, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is welcomed into Sir Bredbeddle's castle.

In both Green Knight narratives, the hero, Gawain, is not adopted by the good knight at his castle, but he is nevertheless welcomed inside and treated as an honourable guest.

In the *Greene Knight*, the adoption scene, nuclear to the episode, occupies lines 295-359: three motifemes can be distinguished, namely adoption, banquet, and

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[210] By the waters (rivers and lakes) and broad shores

pledge. In the adoption motifeme (lines 295-312) Gawain is welcomed by a "gentle knight"[211], who will be recognized as Sir Bredbeddle, in his castle, upon his request for lodging.

The banquet motifeme, immediately following (lines 313-353), is an artifice to introduce Gawain to the lady of the castle, who makes a quick and rather uneventful appearance with her maids: no conversation is present, only hasty gazes during the meal, after which the lady and her maids retire. Sir Bredbeddle brings forward the conversation with Gawain, who does not know that he is talking to the Green Knight himself, entrusting his host with his story. Lines 336-341, reported below, represent another instance of intrusion of the narrator into the narrative:

> For his words that were soe smooth,
> Had Sir Gawaine wist the soothe,
> All he wold not have told:
> For that was the Greene Knight
> That hee was lodged with that night,
> And harbarrowes in his hold.[212]

Subsequently, the author returns to Gawain and Bredbeddle's conversation, where the latter tells Gawain about the Green Chapel and its master, without revealing his real identity.

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[211] Line 296
[212] In reply to his [Sir Bredbeddle's] words that were so polished,/had Sir Gawain known the truth/he would not have said everything:/because that was the Green Knight/that had given him refuge for the night,/and resided in that castle

The last motifeme in the scene, which coincides with its last stanza, will be called the pledge motifeme (lines 354-359). Here, Gawain and Bredbeddle swear to share their winnings with one another, after Bredbeddle goes hunting and Gawain stays in the castle. As mentioned above, at the beginning of our analysis, this is a game of parting – not exchange – of winnings:

> He said, "We two both sworn wil be
> Whatsoever God sends you and mee,
> To be parted on the mold." (lines 357-359)[213]

The testing scene, greatly reduced in comparison to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is composed of an introductory part, which might correspond to a scene setting motifeme (lines 360-372), where the author depicts Gawain laying in bed and the witch, that is the lady's mother, waking her daughter to tell her about Gawain's identity and take her to him.

The following motifeme is the nucleus of the scene, which may be called temptation (lines 360-404). The three-day temptation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is compressed into one day, when the lady gives Gawain three kisses and asks for his love, but Gawain resists, on the basis that he does not want to cause harm to such a gentle host as her husband, because he must accomplish his mission. Asking about his journey, the lady tells Gawain that nobody could do him harm if he let her be his guide and accept her token of love, a white silken lace, which she claims will protect him.

> Sir Gawaine spake mildlye in the place:

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[213] He said, "We will both swear to part on earth whatever God sends you and me

He thanked the Lady and tooke the lace,

And promised her to come againe. (lines 402-404)[214]

As one can notice in the lines reported above, there is no trace of the hesitation

nor interior conflict that Gawain experiences in the longer version. In this instance,

as in others, it is quite noticeable how the author of *The Greene Knight*, by cutting

off the elaborate dialogue and insightful introspection of *Sir Gawain and the Green*

*Knight*, strips the narrative of psychological depth and maturity: where the

Gawain-poet had given a symbolic meaning to the green girdle, the *Greene Knight*

author puts the scene back into typical romance structure, as the lace, in this

scene, is equally an ordinary token of love as Rymenhild's ring could have been for

Horn in *King Horn*.

The hunting scene might be the one suffering the most from the comparison

with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the realism created by the Gawain-poet,

with his accurate descriptions and his wide knowledge of hunting, is almost

inexistent in the Greene Knight. Six lines (405-410) compose this scene, which is

reduced to a list of what Bredbeddle was able to hunt and what he was not.

The final scene of the episode (lines 411-431) may be called the sharing of

winnings: it is composed of one nuclear motifeme, the sharing of winnings, and

three formulaic lines regarding the passing of time.

The nuclear motifeme covers lines 411-428 and, again, in comparison to *Sir*

*Gawain and the Green Knight*, demonstrates a very different narrative technique,

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[214] Sir Gawain spoke courteously in the place./he thanked the lady and took the lace,/and promised her to come back again.

which may be considered poorer; nevertheless, it is indeed a consequence of the shrinking process executed in the testing and the hunting scenes. Bredbeddle shares his meat with Gawain, who kisses his host three times, but retains the lace.

> That was all the villanye that ever was
>
> Prooved by Sir Gawaine the gay. (lines 427-428)[215]

The lines reported above represent one of the points where the Greene-Knight author becomes incoherent: if the deed between Sir Bredbeddle and Sir Gawain instructed on the sharing of winnings, as mentioned above, then Sir Gawain's act of keeping the lace for him should not be counted as a "villanye", although one might consider the secrecy as a fault in loyalty, and thus in courtesy.

Lines 429-431 depict the passing of the night after the sharing of winnings. Lines 431, reported below, is a widely used formulaic phrase of time, which occurs in many romances, either in the same form or slightly modified.[216]

> Till morrow itt was day. (line 431)[217]

- Lines 432-509: Restoration

In many Middle English romances, the restoration episode concludes the narrative: *the Greene Knight* makes no exception to the rule.

Similarly to the battle scene at the beginning of the narrative, the first scene of the episode, that is the battle scene (lines 432-491) comprehends the return blow

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[215] That was the only villainy/which Sir Gawain the gay committed

[216] (Wittig 1978, 28) mentions it among the most frequent time phrases, used as whole-verse formulae.

[217] Until the following day came

that Sir Gawain should receive from the Green Knight. The first motifeme may be identified as an allomotif of the riding motifeme, composed of a leave-taking element, in the first stanza, when Gawain leaves Bredbeddle's castle. What is interesting is how the author insists on Gawain's act of thanking the lady and taking the lace, phrasing the verse in roughly the same way as in the testing scene, thereby causing the effect of redundancy to become even greater.

> He thanked the Lady and tooke the lace, (line 403)
> Hee thanked her, and tooke the lace, (line 435)

Two other components make up the riding motifeme: the obligatory riding slot, and the arriving slot, when Gawain finds the Green Chapel, covered in ivy. Lines 438-440 represent all that remains of Gawain's internal struggle over the lace, which in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* pervades the narrative ever since the lady gives it to him: they are the only part of the romance in which Gawain shows himself hesitant over whether to use the lace, and even his hesitation does not concern the righteousness of the act, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but rather his obliging to what the lady has told him.

> Ever more in his thought he had
> Whether he shold worke as the Ladye bade,
> That was soe curteous and sheene. (lines 438-440)[218]

The Green Knight is depicted sharpening a broad sword, whose screeching sound attracts Gawain's attention.

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[218] He was even more undecided/whether he should act as the lady told him/who [the lady] was so courteous and radiant.

Line 456 opens the combat motifeme (lines 456-491), which, possibly even more than the first combat motifeme at the beginning of the narrative, is not an ordinary allomotif. The nuclear component, the exchange of blows, is realized as a light blow which leaves only a little graze on Gawain's skin. Where, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, three blows are aimed at Gawain, and only the last one grazes his neck, here, customarily, only one blow is aimed, which reunites Gawain and the Green Knight's reactions to the three blows: the Green Knight accusing Gawain of flinching; Gawain's ferocious response that the blow he had to take in return was only one; the Green Knight's explanation, which is here considered to belong to another motifeme. Clearly, the incoherent character of the narrative, which was observed above, shows itself again in this motifeme and makes the scene more difficult to analyse.

The last motifeme of the scene can be identified as a confession motifeme (lines 468-497), although it does not pertain to any sort of love scene.[219] Here, the Green Knight informs Gawain of the testing and that he knows that Gawain was not loyal; further, Sir Bredbeddle explicitly tells Gawain that, had the lace never been worn, he would not have suffered any blow. No mention is made of Bredbeddle's process of transposition to Green Knight or his survival after the beheading blow, nor to Agostes being the primary cause of everything: the magic element makes no appearance in this last episode, whereas in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* it is a

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[219] The confession motifeme is usually grouped with the promise and plan motifemes in love sequences, where the hero confesses his love for another character to their helper and the helper offers their help, so they make up a plan. (Wittig 1978)

central motif. This strengthens the hypothesis that the author had no intention to recreate the fantastic element, so to speak in Todorov's terms, for the marvellous is considered an almost ordinary side-element.

The last scene of the episode and the romance (lines 492-509) includes a riding motifeme, which might also be identified as a procession motifeme (lines 492-497): indeed, Gawain and the Green Knight both ride back to Arthur's castle, which might be considered the nuclear component of a procession motifeme, despite the scant number of participants.

The other motifeme, nuclear to the scene, is the restoration (lines 498-509), interrupted by the narrator's account of the reason why the Knights of the Bathe wear the lace: Gawain is welcomed back into his court, whose members are pleased to see him alive. Similarities and differences from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* demonstrate that they are related but not through strict ties: Gawain's desire to wear the lace is mentioned in *the Greene Knight*, but nothing more is said about its symbolic value of shame and penance.

- Lines 510-516: End of poem with prayer

The author concludes the poem following the formulaic romance tradition, with a prayer to God that all who have heard the story might go to Heaven.

3.3.2. The Turke and Sir Gawain

*The Turke and Sir Gawain* is a largely neglected piece of popular Arthurian literature, partly due to the mutilated condition in which the only surviving copy

of the poem was found. Like *The Greene Knight*, it survives as part of the collection

of Arthurian stories belonging to Bishop Percy, in the Percy Folio Manuscript (BL

Add. MS 27879), although only about half of each page has got to us, while the

rest was likely used to light fires:[220] about six six-line stanzas are missing from each

page. As a consequence, half of the formerly 700-line long poem is missing; the

plot, nevertheless, can be reconstructed based on the context and can be enjoyed

thanks to the narrative flow and what Thomas Hahn calls "its saturation in

traditional plots and motifs".[221] As Kittredge claims in his brief account of the work,

included in *A study of Gawain and the Green Knight*, the work is with little to no

doubt to be considered as a being originally written around the beginning of the

fifteenth century at the latest[222]: the present text, however, as Hahn explains, can

be dated around the early sixteenth century in the North or North Midlands,

according to the language and spelling[223].

Following the typical structure of Middle English romances, the text of *The

Turke and Sir Gawain* is divided into tail-rhyme stanzas, on the basis of the aabccb

rhyme scheme, with some scattered exceptions throughout the poem.[224] Features

and details in the story suggest it was composed for oral recitation. The missing

parts of the poem, in the edition used for the following analysis, are substituted

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[220] On this regard, (Hahn, Sir Gawain: eleven romances and tales 1995) claims that the dilapidated state of the manuscript is due to the ripping out of half pages to start fires, but also to the ill treatment the volume had undergone before Bishop Percy's rescue.
[221] (Hahn 1995)
[222] (Kittredge 1960)
[223] (Hahn 1995)
[224] Some stanzas and rhymes, as (Hahn, Sir Gawain: eleven romances and tales 1995) underlines, are defective.

with brief summaries – written by editor Thomas Hahn – that offer speculative interpretations of the lost sections: these summaries will be treated as part of the text, and thus analysed in terms of episode and scene structure, as far as the edition allows for it. Kittredge claims that the plot can be identified as belonging to a popular tale of the type of a märchen, that is a folk tale, probably of Celtic origins, which was modified with 'Arthurian paraphernalia'.[225]

Richard Barber, in *Arthur of Albion*, refers to it as the first of several poems in which the beheading incident concerns the same hero. If compared to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it quickly proves to be lacking in quality of description and background contextualization, the distinctive mark of the Gawain poet's work. Barber thus comments such austerity:

> It does not involve more detail than is absolutely necessary to the plot, in which the whole interest of the story lies.[226]

Together with the simple tone of language and the minimal attention to refining touches, such austerity might suggest that the audience of the poem was rather humble, as Kittredge asserts: this aspect contributes to the idea of an adapted folktale.[227]

Despite having some traits in common with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the shorter *Greene Knight*, this work distances itself considerably from the

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[225] (Kittredge 1960)
[226] (R. W. Barber 1961, 107)
[227] (Kittredge 1960)

plot of the former two: the episodes which may be considered similar will be taken as a focal point for the interpretive analysis proposed below.

*The Turke and Sir Gawain* opens with the intrusion court of a Turke in Arthur's,[228] who presents the knights with a challenge: to mutually exchange a blow. After a boastful answer from Kay, Gawain accepts the challenge, although only the knight's blow to the Turke is given – this coming from speculation, as the passage is missing – while the return blow is to take place at a later time. Subsequently, Gawain leaves court with the Turk, and embarks on a journey which will test his chivalric virtues and values. In many occasions the Turke will take Gawain's place in fighting the enemies and perform services to Gawain, up until the end, when, after taking the return blow to Gawain[229], he demands that Gawain behead him. In virtue of his courtesy and prowess, Gawain accepts and the stroke which should behead the Turke breaks a spell which turns the Turke back into a Christian knight. The final part of the story sees the knights back into Arthur's court, where the Turke, now identified as Sir Gromer, offers Gawain the kingdom of the Isle of Man, although the latter refuses: the crown will thus be given by Arthur to Gromer.

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[228] The character might be identified as an alien figure, a Pagan warrior, and a dwarf, since he is described as 'not tall but broad'. Turks and Saracens often appear in the Old and Middle English literature as the enemies, the conquerors, the others: in this case, the character's identification as a Turk aids the audience to recognize his status as the villain of the story, although the poem will often challenge this view.

[229] While (Hahn 1995), in his interpretation of the missing half page, suggests that the Turke does not take the return blow at Gawain, (Kittredge 1960) asserts that it is rather probable that the blow, just as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is struck, but only lightly, or at least Gawain prepares to receive it: personally, Kitteredge's opinion seems more correct, as, he claims, "Gawain's faithfulness to his word is a condition of the disenchantment, and the Turk is now ready for the final act." (Kittredge 1960, 123)

Thus, in *Turke and Sir Gawain*, the intruder has rather different motives for his challenge, than the Green Knight's aim to test the court and frighten Guinevere. The adventure on which Gawain embarks with the Turke has nothing to do with sexual temptation, but rather tests Gawain's courtesy and loyalty.

As it may be noticed in the brief synopsis above, several elements in the plot are more conservative than in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, as far as typical Arthurian stories go: the ending, especially, conforms to the widespread motif of the reward, where a knight is offered the land he has conquered, as a reward for his service.

TAGMEMIC ANALYSIS

Following the same method used for *The Greene Knight*, *The Turke and Sir Gawain* will be analysed in terms of episode structure, following a deductive path, and thus proceeding from episodes to scenes, motifemes, and, lastly, to formulae, as far as the text allows for it. The mutilation of the manuscript and the later date of composition, indeed, complicate the process.

- Lines 1-9: Exhortation

As was the case with *The Greene Knight* and as typical of popular Arthurian romances and orality-oriented poems, the text opens with the exhortation motifeme.

The first two lines constitute the nuclear element of the motifeme, that is, indeed, the exhortation, whereas lines 3 to 9 compose what might be called a

synopsis, or, rather, a scene-setting component: the author introduces the knights of Round Table and their fame among England and its inhabitants. Interestingly, the text lacks the third typical element of the exhortation motifeme, that is the prayer component: considering the underlying interest for Christianity and the dichotomy Pagan-Christian, which represents a focal theme in the plot, one would expect such a poem to begin with some allusion to religion, which, however, is missing.

- Lines 10-150: Separation episode

The episode includes not only the above-reported lines, but also the missing half pages of which Hahn has given speculative summaries:[230] on the basis of Kittredge's assumption that 36 lines are missing from each page of the manuscript[231], the total number of missing verses in the episode would be 144, bringing the total number of lines in the episode closer to 285, although it is important to keep in mind that there might be transcription mistakes, for instance, so that lines might have been added or subtracted by the scribe.

The first divergence from the two Green Knight romances occurs on structural level: contrary to the other two works, where the challenge was considered a whole episode, in *Turke and Sir Gawain* the challenge is merely a scene nested inside the separation episode, occupying lines 10 to 36: it is functional to the setting off of the adventure, but it is not part of it, and neither is it considered with

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[230] (Hahn 1995)
[231] (Kittredge 1960, 119)

such importance as in the two Green Knight works. Some speculative reasons will be offered in the following paragraph.

The warrior intruding into the court of King Arthur is a stranger, a foreigner, described as short and broad, who resembles a Turke, that is a Pagan. No formal introduction is granted to the henceforth so-called Turke and the author spends no more than three verses (lines 13-15) for his description. In other words, there is no trace of the frightened but courteous introduction of Sir Bredbeddle by the porter, as in *The Greene Knight*, or the long and detailed description of the Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The verses, nevertheless, recall the systems which constitute formulaic language, consisting of verbal and metrical correspondences. Reported below are lines 14-15, where the fixed *both … and …* slot and a variable noun slot can be noticed:

> And like a Turke he was made
> Both legg and thye; (lines 14-15)[232]

The nuclear motifeme of the challenge scene is the challenge motifeme, which occurs in lines 16-19: the Turke proposes his game to the court, asking whether one of the present knights will agree to exchange blows. Despite being nuclear to the scene, the motifeme lacks the structural development which it is given in other scenes of the type.

The following motifeme constitutes evidence that the text follows the English tradition of stories about Gawain. The boastful answer motifeme, which is also

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[232] And both his legs and thighs resembled those of a Turk.

present in *The Greene Knight*, sees Sir Kay as opposite in temperament to Sir Gawain: the former delivers his answer to the Turke's proposal in the form of a boastful threat, which occupies lines 19 to 27, only to be courteously reprehended by Gawain, in lines 28 to 33. Almost so as to underline the opposition between the Turke and the knights, Kay and Gawain's speech is introduced by predicate formulas of introduction of speech:

> Then spake Sir Kay, that crabbed knight, (line 19)
> Then spake Sir Gawaine, that worthy knight, (line 28)[233]

The motifeme ends with the Turke asking that the better of the two knights come forward.

At this point in the text the first missing half page appears, so that nothing certain may be exerted about the trading of blows, except that 36 lines are used for the account and that Gawain certainly strikes his blow: however, it is uncertain how much force the knight puts into his blow and no evidence for the presence or absence of a beheading is given.[234] According to the summary, we might speculate that there might be a single combat motifeme, where Gawain strikes a blow to the Turke while he is to suffer the return blow at a later time. Upon speculations, one may guess that the single combat motifeme contain other optional components such as the bidding to battle, the carnage, or the listing of weapons, etc.

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[233] Then spoke Sir Kay, the irritable knight, /Then spoke Gawain, the noble knight,
[234] It ought to be said that in the surviving text no reference to an early beheading is given, so it is probable that the blow does not severe the head of the Turke in this first encounter. (Hahn 1995) also points out that the exchange of blows apparently occurs without weapons, which would make the hypothesis of a beheading rather difficult to support.

The following scene, which occupies lines 37 to 65, may be considered an allomotif of the type-scene expulsion of the hero, for Gawain leaves with the Turke in order to fulfil his promise. It is, however, a revisited scene: Gawain does not leave court because some sort of kinship pattern has been destroyed or some patrimony has gone lost, as is generally the case, and neither does he leave because the honour of the court has been doubted, similarly to the Green Knight narratives; he partakes in the journey to guard his own honour and prowess, the latter of which is doubted by the Turke, who claims he will be three times as terrified as any man ever was on earth, when he comes back to court, after the journey.

The nuclear motifeme of the scene, that is the expulsion motifeme, is realized in lines 42 to 47, whereby Gawain and the Turke take leave from the court to embark on a journey together. Demonstrating again why he is the model of courtesy and prowess, Gawain does not retreat at his opponent's threatening and challenging words, but rather claims that he will always face the adventures, jousting or tournaments that will cross his path.

With an action formula of the leave-taking kind, in line 48, the text moves to a briefly developed arming motifeme: according to lines 49 and 50, reported below, Gawain prepares to leave, although no trace is left of the long and detailed description of the arming of the knight which is so predominant in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Sir Gawaine made him ready bowne,

His armor and his steed.[235] (lines 49-50)

The following lines, 51 to 65, may be considered a travel motifeme, whose nucleus is line 51. The rest of the motifeme, while optional, appears to be rather important for the outcome of the plot: during the journey northwards, Gawain becomes hungry, so the Turke tantalises the knight over the easy life at court and admits that he would like for Arthur and the other knights to be tested as well. It is at this point that the motif of the challenge becomes rather more similar to the green knight's intentions in the two Green Knight narratives.

The first testing scene occurs in the separation episode, while the rest of the testing scenes appear in the following episode, when the two travellers have been welcomed in a castle. The present scene, nevertheless, may be considered Gawain's preliminary test, as Hahn mentions in his edition.[236] It occupies lines 66 to 76, although a missing half-page is included into the scene as well.

Gawain is led by the Turke into a hill which opens and closes behind them. It is the first surviving allusion to the supernatural in the text, to which Gawain reacts with fear.

The earth opened and closed againe –
Then Gawaine was adread.[237] (lines 67-68)

Not the hill but the stormy weather is Gawain's preliminary test, which he apparently endures in the missing half-page. The rest of the missing text, possibly

[235] Sir Gawain got ready for travel,/[prepared] his armour and his horse.
[236] (Hahn 1995)
[237] The earth opened and closed again -/The Gawain grew frightened.

reconstructed thanks to lines 75 and 76, appears to contain the instructions that the Turke gives Gawain, in view of their arrival at a castle.

The Banquet scene, from line 78 to line 112 and at least part of the following missing half-page, sees Gawain and the Turke entering a seemingly deserted but splendid castle, where tables are prepared with all sorts of food and drinks. The Turke refrains Gawain from taking all the food, but instead brings him what he judges safe, bidding him to eat and prepare because long time will pass and his strength will be greatly tested before he can eat again. Subsequently, Gawain asks the Turke to give him the return blow and let him go, but the Turke denies him, and asks the knight to follow him on a journey to the Isle of Man.

A travel scene occupies the remaining lines of the separation episode, from line 113 to 150, possibly ending in the following missing half page. Gawain and the Turke travel by boat to the Isle of Man, and the poet introduces, by words of the latter, the adventures that await the two: the Turke talks about the King of Man, his group of giants and an abnormally large tennis ball, but reassures Gawain that he will help the knight when needed. The scene might be considered a transitional part of the poem, closing one episode and foreseeing the following: given that it is located around the middle of the text, the scene might precede a now-we-leave-and-turn-to motifeme or a fytte-division motifeme, which are usually used to mark the division of a story and work on a structural level.[238]

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[238] (Wittig 1978, 61-62). It is, however, important to remember that the occurrence of said motifemes is merely speculative and in no way certain, for this is the only surviving version of the text, from which editions have been elaborated.

- Lines 151-267: Adoption episode

The adoption episode begins at some point into the fourth missing half page and occupies lines 151 to 267. Together with the following episode, that is the restoration, it forms the nucleus of the text: the Turke and Gawain are welcomed into the castle of the King of Man, and the knight is thrice tested and thrice helped by the Turke.

Considering that the King of Man is overtly hostile to Arthur and his court, his role does not become that of a foster father to the hero, so the main feature of the adoption episode might appear modified; nevertheless, the knight is welcomed into the King of Man's court, and asked to sit at the banquet table, which, in view of the loose criteria of identification of episodes, could be sufficient evidence for the categorization.

After their arrival into the castle, Gawain and the Turke are received into the hall, where the King of Man demonstrates his wrath against Arthur and his court, but most of all against the clergy, thereby reinforcing the idea of a pagan king who hates on Christianity. Successively, the king invites Gawain to sit with him, but the knight courteously refuses, claiming that a knight errant should not sit in a hall before adventures are seen.

This scene is nuclear to the episode, and occurs in lines 151 to 174: while the words with which the King of Man receives Gawain may not be courteous, the sultan does welcome Gawain in his court and, by asking him to sit down, in a way he adopts the hero into his court. Further, the King of Man indeed demonstrates

that he does not approve of Arthur's religion, but shows no hostility towards the knight.

Hidden in this scene there may probably be a critique to the clergy by the poet himself:

> And that Bishopp Sir Bodwine
> That will not let my goods alone,
>  But spiteth them every day?[239] (lines 154-156)

> "He preached much of a Crowne of Thorne;
> […]
> I anger more att the spiritually
> In England, not att the temporaltie,
> They goe soe in theire array.[240] (lines 160-162)

Indeed, the words of the King of Man resemble the criticism which the Christian and Catholic Church has received many times in history: he criticizes the incoherence between what the members of the clergy preached and the opposing lifestyle they used to lead.

While the first testing scene occurred in the separation episode and, as mentioned above, was a preliminary test for Gawain, the present and the following two scenes will display the King of Man's tests for Gawain, which would be better defined as games, adventures and marvels such as Arthur awaits in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

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[239] And [how is] that bishop Sir Baldwin/who does not let my goods alone,/but spoils them everyday?

[240] He preached about a crown of thorns (i.e. Christ's poverty and humility)/ […]/ I anger more at the clergy/ in      England, not the lords,/ [as] they go around in their lavish clothes.

Testing scene 2 occupies lines 175 to 191. It opens with the entrance into the hall of a great crowd of giants bringing in the tennis ball which the King had asked at the end of the adoption.

> With it came a hideous rout
> Of gyants great and plenty;[241] (lines 176-177)

Lines 176 and 177, reported above, represent the intrusion of the supernatural in a generally ordinary sequence of events, at least up to this point in the narration: in Todorov's terms the supernatural in this scene might be considered hyperbolic marvellous, as the feature which is out of the ordinary is the huge size of the giants and tennis ball. Indeed, the giants are described as one and a half times higher than Gawain and inhumanly huge, as underlined in verse 188, where the poet claims that no man in all England could be able to carry the giant tennis ball.

Line 180, reported below, is one of the few examples of descriptive formulas of the type of minstrel tags, in which the author intrudes into the text with comments and such.

> I tell you withouten nay.[242] (line 180)

The game of tennis between Gawain and the giants, much greater than him, ends with the knight's victory, thanks to the help of the Turke, who also stabs one of the giants. Most of the game occurs in the missing half page, although the results are clear when reading the remaining lines of the scene. Upon Gawain and

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[241] With it [the tennis ball] came a great crowd/of many huge giants;
[242] I tell you without a doubt.

the Turke's victory, the king is astounded, but promises that Gawain will be better tested, before he goes.[243]

In the third testing scene appearing in the poem, Gawain is asked to lift a giant fireplace standing in the centre of the hall. The test seems so impossible to carry out to Gawain that, filled with dread, the knight asks the Turke, who is now called Gawain's 'boy', to complete the task for him.

Beginning with verse 192, the scene ends at some point into another missing half page, when the Turke wins the second game. Similarly to the second testing scene, the presence of the supernatural does not spark in the characters any doubt with regards to the reality of the situation: Gawain's reaction to the test is fearful, but there is no sign of hesitation, and, rather, he calls to God before asking the Turke to complete the task, as the reported verses display.

> Sir Gawaine was never soe adread
> Sith he was man on midle earth,
> And cryd on God in his thought.[244] (lines 213-215)

The fourth and last testing scene begins at some point into the sixth missing half-page and may be considered finished on verse 267, just before the seventh missing half-page. Gawain is accompanied by the King of Man to the last challenge,

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[243] It is worth reminding that the proposed analysis is based on (Hahn 1995), although the summary proposed by (Kittredge 1960, 119-120) claims that the tennis game is followed by another game, including the use of an axel-tree, with which the Turke stabs one of the giants, and only then occurs the third testing scene. Following such plot, then, one would speculate the intrusion of another testing scene.

[244] Sir Gawain had never been so scared / in his whole life, / and cried to God in his mind.

while the Turke follows them, clothed in a garment of invisibility, and, again, takes the game upon himself.

The scene includes a boastful threat motifeme, which occupies lines 224 to 231. Although, as already mentioned above, a boastful threat motifeme is normally found in battle scenes, it is fitting here as well: the testing might by all means be considered some sort of domesticated battle scene, such as the tournaments which occurred in real-life medieval courts (see paragraph 2.2.2 above). Another component which is generally found in battle scenes is the disguise motifeme: here too it is found and coincides with the stanza from line 232 to 237. The Turke is clothed in a wonderful, that is marvellous, invisibility garment, which however, does not appear to be a situation out of the ordinary.

The King of Man leads Gawain and the invisible Turke into a room in which a cauldron full of molten lead stands, and next to it a fierce giant holding a huge fork. The Turke, having revealed himself, lifts the giant and throws him into the cauldron, holding him down with the fork until death. Gawain then tells the king that he is to convert to 'our law', that is Christianity, or he will find death: upon refusal, the Turke seizes the King and throws him into the cauldron as well, therefore putting an end to the tests and the perils.

- Lines 268-331: Restoration episode

As already mentioned, it is difficult to fit the episode structure of *The Turke and Sir Gawain* into the criteria given for medieval romances, because of its estimated later time of composition. The present episode, which may be called the

restoration episode, does occur in line with the usual episode-linking pattern separation-adoption-restoration, but only if one allows looser criteria for the analysis than, for example, the structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In other words, there occurs a restoration, but not as much of Arthur's court's honour, or Gawain's honour, which was not technically destroyed, as of the true identity of the Turke, and peace and safety in the Isle of Man.

The episode begins in the seventh missing half-page, after the death of the King of Man at the hands of the Turke. The first part of the episode, contained in the missing half-page, appears to have Gawain and the Turke move to a different part of the castle to free some prisoners.

Starting in the missing half-page, the service scene is considered to end with line 298. Gawain is ready to take the Turke's return blow, which, however, is not delivered[245]: instead, the Turke takes a golden basin and a sword, and asks that Gawain behead him, in exchange for what the Turke has done for the knight.

> Take here this sword of steele
> That in battell will bite weele,
> Therwith strike of my head."[246] (Lines 274-276)

> He drew forth the brand of steele
> That in battell bite wold weele,
> And there stroke of his head.[247] (Lines 286-288)

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[245] This according to (Hahn 1995), while (Kittredge 1960)'s summary of the missing half page claims: "The Turk then gives Gawain the buffet, but so lightly as not to hurt him". The divergence in the two scholars' versions are to be attributed to the lack of evidence for one or the other hypothesis. Nevertheless, in this case, Kittredge's assumption seems to be more valid, if one considers similar version of the challenge topos.
[246] Take here this sword of steel / that will cut well in battle / with it strike off my head."
[247] He took the sword of steel /that would cut well in battle / and with it stroke off his head.

The verses reported above are two instances of a formulaic relative-clause system, whereby a noun, in this case sword or brand, is modified by a relative clause occurring in the following verse. The almost identical occurrence of the verses in a single scene may suggest the importance of the described action in the story. The Turke asks that Gawain behead him and, while the knight refuses in the first place, he is successively persuaded by his companion's words, which make use of Gawain's courteous honour. Indeed, the Turke insists on the base of the services he has given to Gawain in their journey and, with Mary's intercession, of what will happen, which is not revealed to Gawain until the deed is done.

The service scene, thus, finds its nuclear and only component in Gawain's performance of the task the Turke has asked him, after the testing scenes have established his worthiness. While, in other Middle English romances, the narrative unit called service is considered an episode, in which the hero performs a task in order to win the hand of the lady, or to become worthy of knighthood, in *The Turke and Sir Gawain* the unit may be considered a scene, nested into the restoration episode, for the result of the performance of the task is the breaking of a spell and the restoration of the Turke to knighthood.

> And when the blood in the bason light,
> He stood up a stalwortht Knight
> That day, I undertake,
> And song "'Te Deum Laudamus' -
> Worshipp be to our Lord Jesus

That saved us from all wracke![248] (lines 289-294)

The reported stanza represents the focal point of the present analysis: the breaking of the enchantment, which results in the transformation of the Turke from pagan creature – a dwarf – to courteous knight, who sings Christian songs with gratitude towards God and Gawain. The supernatural element, then, is tightly connected with religion: one might postulate a close relation with the above-mentioned opposition of demonic magic and divine miracles (see paragraph 2.4.2), or Paganism and Christianity, and so on. Furthermore, the transformation of the Turke into a knight can be considered from the point of view of courtesy. Indeed, one may analyse and compare the words addressed by the Turke to Gawain before and after the transformation, in the present scene and the following: Sir Gromer, who is the liberated knight, speaks more courteous words than the Turke, liberates the other captives, and offers to sit at the table and eat with Sir Gawain, something which the Turke never did.

The above-mentioned transformation of the Turke into Sir Gromer appears to have reawaken the people in the castle: indeed, Gawain and Gromer encounter and liberate them in the restoration scene, which begins with verse 298 and ends with verse 331. The two knights return to King Arthur's court with the liberated ladies, who are reunited to their husbands: as a result, the men give thanks to the king and offer their royalty to him. The loyalty feature is common to other popular Middle English romances, as mentioned in paragraph 2.3.4.

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[248] And when the blood fell into the basin / He [the Turke] stood up as a valiant knight / I dare say / And sang " Te Deum Laudamus - / worship be to our Lord Jesus / That saved us all from ruin.

Two stanzas from line 320 to 331 constitute an unusual reward motifeme: while no marriage is offered to the hero, that is Gawain, Sir Gromer does ask King Arthur that the knight is awarded the now king-less kingdom of the Isle of Man. Gawain refuses, because being king is not his desire, and instead proposes that the kingdom is given to Sir Gromer.

Other instances of the reward motifeme feature three components, of which one is optional and the others obligatory, as Susan Wittig explains:

> The agreement of the spectators that the hero has won the prize (optional and peripheral); the awarding of the lady's hand in marriage (the offer is obligatory, although the hero may not accept it because of a prior engagement); and the awarding of the lady's land (also obligatory [...]).[249]

While the lady's character does not exist in this particular romance, one may well consider the present unit a reward motifeme, provided that the marriage is disregarded: the agreement that the hero has won the prize does not occur, but nevertheless, the rewarding does take place, as a re-elaboration.

- Lines 332-337: End of poem with a prayer

The end of the poem is of the formulaic-type: the motifeme's first component signals the end of the story, in lines 332 to 334, while lines 335 to 337 contain a prayer, whereby the poet asks God that the audience, who like to hear such stories, have a long and good life.

### 3.4. INTERPRETIVE AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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[249] (Wittig 1978, 100)

The analyses which were carried out in the preceding paragraphs will be the basis for the interpretive comparison of some of the differences in the three works, as we will attempt to offer an interpretation of the fantastic element in said Middle English analogues. The aim of the present paragraph is to identify and underline some of said differences, in terms of content and structural elements in the analysed texts, and give evidence for the application of the Todorovian analysis of the fantastic to the works.

### 3.4.1. Structural interpretation

There are several aspects which may be taken into account when comparing the three selected texts. The first and most evident distinction to be made is between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Greene Knight* on one hand, and *The Turke and Sir Gawain* on the other: while the first two share a very similar plot structure on the whole, to the point where scholars believe that *The Greene Knight* might be a relatively corrupt version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Turke and Sir Gawain* only shares with them the initial presence of the challenge and the beheading motif, whereas the plot develops in its own way.

The similarity in plot structure between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Greene Knight* may be easily accounted for, by the fact that the two are clearly linked: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has been preserved in only one manuscript, and little evidence of its popularity at the time of composition has been found, but it is quite probable that the rate of distribution of the work was remarkable, and so were the reworkings of its plot. Therefore, the earlier date of

composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* than *The Greene Knight* would suggest that the latter is a reworking of the former, or some later version, indeed, which may be based on a reworking; another option, that both works descend from a common antecedent but do not share a common history, is also probable, although less likely than the others, for *The Greene Knight* contains elements and expressions which are so similar to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, that they appear to have been taken from it. Nevertheless, it is clear that the two texts are closely related. Further, the sophisticated style and refined language of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may suggest that it was intended to be read by a literate audience, part of the middle class or higher: such a speculation may also be proven by the importance given, at the beginning of the work, to building a prestigious past for the English land, which would allow the noble people of England to feel part of a history, that is both illustrious and longstanding. The manuscript in which *The Greene Knight* occurs, on the contrary, is thought to contain romances and other works which may be considered 'popular', that is, marked for orality and intended for mixed audiences: the foremost aim of the work was, then, entertainment for all people, and the work was most likely recited by memory, rather than for reading pleasure, and possibly even orally transmitted, in the first part of its existence. Such a premise may help us to identify the reason why *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is so much longer and more detailed than *The Greene Knight*: orality and mnemonic processes would become difficult if not impossible with such a text as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, whereas *The Greene Knight*, while maintaining a very similar plot structure, is better suited for

such a function: not only are marks of orality more present, but the development of the plot itself is easier to remember.

*The Turke and Sir Gawain*, on the other hand, only shares some elements of the plot with the other selected texts in the present work. Like *The Greene Knight*, it appears in the Percy Folio manuscript, a notion which, together with the presence of traditional elements scattered in the plot and other details, would suggest that *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, as well, was intended for oral recitation and entertainment.

It is worth considering that some of the elements of the plot, which are common to the three texts, have a great rate of occurrence in many texts: indeed, for instance, the challenge motif, which is a focal point of the present analysis and will be better analysed in the following section, does not appear only in the three selected works. It is a traditional motif, which occurs in many works that are older than the date of composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and is proper of folktales and legends, as mentioned in paragraph 2.3.3. It is not absurd, then, to propose that both the Gawain poet and the anonymous authors of the other works took inspiration from an ancient popular tale, to mark the beginning of their hero's adventures with a challenge and a subsequent beheading game. Further, the challenge motif is a suitable one to begin a heroic story, in that it tests a group of people out of which the hero will distinguish himself: it becomes the first of a series of tests which will reveal the best – or worst, or even both, as in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – of the hero's character and personality.

### 3.4.2. The challenge episode

If the challenge is considered by itself, it becomes easy to notice that the first big difference between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Greene Knight* on one hand and *The Turke and Sir Gawain* on the other, is that, in the first case, the challenge is a bigger unit, an episode, than in the second case, where it is a scene which is part of the separation episode. The reason for this difference might reside in the fact that, for the Green Knight plot, the challenge is a fundamental motif, which is not only the starting point of the story, but also the cause for its carrying on, to the point where the challenge becomes the adventure itself: indeed, the theme of the challenge appears several times in the plot, and the Green Knight's game becomes a shadow that haunts the hero, in his journey from the beginning to the very end. On the contrary, the challenge in *The Turke and Sir Gawain* has a smaller role, for it appears as a mere test to decide which knight will be chosen for the following, greater adventures, and the completion of the game and keeping of his word become the main reason for Gawain to follow the Turke throughout their journey. The difference might indicate that the challenge motif has a different origin or source with regards to the two narratives. Indeed, *The Turke and Sir Gawain* might be more closely related to, or even a descendant of, *La Mule sans Frein*, which is mentioned in paragraph 2.3.3: the social provenance of the challenger is more similar to the French version, than to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as is the subordination of the challenge to a greater motif, that is the enchanted city in *La Mule sans Frein* and the enchanted kingdom in *The Turke and Sir Gawain*.

Therefore, if one considers the minor role that the challenge plays in *The Turke and Sir Gawain* when compared to the Green Knight narratives, it becomes clear that the unit could not have the same importance in the two plot developments, so that in the Green Knight narratives it is one of the highest emic units, whereas in the *Turke and Sir Gawain* it becomes part of a larger unit, that is, a different episode.

If one considers the smaller components of, or relating to, the challenge episode, or to the episode which subsumes the challenge scene, the exhortation motifeme of each work offers a different point of comparison: there is hardly trace in *The Greene Knight* and *The Turke and Sir Gawain* of the Gawain poet's historical introduction, that is the connection between Troy's epic history and the founding of Britain. Rather, *The Greene Knight* merely mentions the composition of the British Island, to turn to Arthur's court, while *The Turke and Sir Gawain*'s introductory focus is on Arthur and the court alone. From the very beginning, therefore, the Gawain poet's intention seems clear: to emphasize the glorious past of modern-day Britain, and its historical importance, by giving it an illustrious and legendary ancestor, so that the deeds he is about to tell may become more resonant. Further, such a prestigious, epic introduction may also be considered a way of setting the story into a realm that is not entirely real and natural, although it is not supernatural either, especially in the medieval mindset. The aim of the two Percy Folio narratives, on the other hand, does not seem to be intended to emphasize the prestige of England, for the popular stories are better suited for entertainment, as mentioned above.

The appearance of the intruder is another crucial point of distinction among the three texts: while in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and in *The Turke and Sir Gawain* the Green Knight, or Turke, is first introduced in the story when he enters Arthur's court, in *The Greene Knight* the author spends several lines to construct a background of the intruder, so the causes and motives for which Sir Bredbeddle makes his appearance at Arthur's court and tests Gawain are clear from the beginning. This would suggest that the author of *The Greene Knight*, in re-working the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, found that the aura of mystery that surrounds the Green Knight was not a fundamental element of the plot, but rather a shortcoming that had to be corrected, by giving the intruder a backstory which would satisfy the curiosity of the audience and erase the effect of hesitation. Other evidence for this intention may be that the author emphasizes that everyone at court was willing to take on the challenge, which is a rather different reaction to the intruder than in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the audience is motionless in fear and does not dare accept the Green Knight's game. Further, one might infer from this addition that the Greene Knight author's intentions were to emphasize the link between this story and the romance tradition, by using the traditional motif of the lovesick lady for a knight she has never met; the same intentions are revealed in the addition of Sir Kay's boastful answer to the challenger, which would otherwise be useless for the purpose of the plot. By adding both motives, on the contrary, the poet also adds a dramatic effect: similarly to modern-day fiction and tv series, the bad-tempered character and the

noble motive in the background story of the villain may be considered as means to make the work more appealing to the masses (see paragraph 2.3.4).

Further, the Gawain poet spends about one hundred verses for the description of the Green Knight, elaborating every detail possible and making him such a focused figure, as no other character is in the whole work, while in *The Greene Knight* and *The Turke and Gawain* the intruder is merely introduced, with quick allusions to his physical appearance in the former, and three verses depicting him as a dwarf in the latter. The Gawain poet's Green Knight is, then, peculiarly detailed, almost as if its audience was expected to create a vivid image of him in their mind[250]: possibly, no other character would have needed such a description in the text, because the audience was somewhat familiar with all except the intruder. The Gawain poet's intention may also have been to have the – implicit – reader become participating audience at court, thereby improving the effect of identification with the characters: the Green Knight is as much an unknown, ambiguous and threatening figure for the court as he is for the reader, for, despite the vividness of the image, neither can learn about the intruder more than what the eyes can perceive.

The ambiguity of the Green Knight, and the hesitating reaction he provokes in the court, are also represented in the level of courtesy used in the conversational exchange between the Green Knight and Arthur, who is very careful as to how to relate to the stranger. Arthur, indeed, fails to recognise the Green Knight as one

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[250]The essay on the stylistic interpretation of the challenge episode, included in (Borroff 2010), makes such a suggestion, that the Green Knight is the only focused character in the narrative.

at first, but cautiously welcomes him as a man, a warrior, and only after the Green Knight has introduced himself does the king call him 'sir courteous knight' (line 276). Marie Borroff, in her stylistic analysis of the challenge,[251] suggests that the cautiousness might be due to the unfamiliarity and unpredictability of the Green Knight, for he is not clearly identifiable as one. In *The Greene Knight*, on the contrary, courtesy is shown to the intruder from the very beginning: the stranger introduces himself to the porter as a 'venterous knight' (line 94) and the exchange is exquisitely courteous on both parts, perhaps with the exception of Sir Kay's boastful answer; the exception, however, is simply explained if one keeps in mind Sir Kay's role in Middle English popular romances as the belligerent knight, whose rude behaviour serves as a tool to emphasize Gawain's courtesy. In *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, possibly because the knightly nature of the intruder is hidden by enchantment, making him appear as a Turke or dwarf, or someone of lower rank still, no courteous conversation is engaged and, apparently, no courtesy is shown to him: indeed, on the first occasion in their journey, the Turke brings it up to Gawain and scorns him (lines 57-65).

The motives which lead the intruder to propose his challenge as a game may be considered as an interesting comparative point of analysis: indeed, the three texts present the challenge as the effect of distinct causes and motives. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Green Knight claims he has arrived into court because he has heard of the reputation of Arthur and his knights, and wishes to

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[251] (Borroff 2010, 93-104)

see for himself: the challenge, then, is a test of prowess, which is ultimately taken on by the knight who is considered to be the bravest and closest to perfection. Later in the narrative, when Bertilak reveals his true identity, Gawain discovers that the arrival of the Green Knight into court was a plan devised by Morgan Le Fay to frighten Guinevere: the challenge and beheading, as well, are said to have been planned so Guinevere would be frightened to death upon seeing the severed head. Then, the challenge in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may be considered either as a trial set by the intruder to test the court, or a bitter attempt to damage the queen. The testing element seems rather plausible, for fitt III, which takes place at Bertilak's castle, reprises the testing motif, with the Lady of the castle trying to find Gawain faulty in his courtesy and loyalty. Nevertheless, neither of the two motives is found in the remaining two narratives: in *The Greene Knight*, as already mentioned, the reason why the Green Knight appears at court is to test Gawain himself and his qualities, on behalf of Bredbeddle's wife, who loves him; in *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, on the other hand, the aim of the challenge is to isolate and identify the most suitable knight to help break Sir Gromer and the Isle of Man free of the enchantment. While the driving motives of *The Greene Knight* and *The Turke and Sir Gawain* appear as the sort of theatrical and dramatic cause which may be found in modern fiction, the motives in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* demonstrate a rather subtle criticism, one which becomes explicit at the end, when both Gawain and the court appear at fault: Gawain has lacked in loyalty in his game with the Knight of the Castle, and thus shows that not even the model of chivalry and courtesy can attain perfection; on the other hand, Morgan le Fay's

plan against Guinevere demonstrates that not even Arthur's court is free of disputes, a fact which is more problematic seen as the mastermind of the threat is the king's sister.

A final point to be highlighted in the present analysis, with regards to content, is represented by the reaction of the court to the intruder, which will serve as a linking element with Todorov's approach to the fantastic. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the aura of mystery around the Green Knight, the above-mentioned ambiguity about his character, and his sudden appearance at court, all contribute to provoke surprised and astonished reactions among the audience, who seems to have a hard time believing the intruder is a human being: indeed, the description of the Green Knight offered by the author serves the purpose to heighten the aura of mystery even in the reader. The reaction to the intruder, thus, reveals that hesitation is indeed present in the Gawain-poet's version of the challenge, where the author emphasizes and insists on the dubious response: as a matter of fact, at first, nobody volunteers to take on the challenge, and only after Arthur accepts, in order to save the court's honour, does Gawain intervene. The audience, in other words, has various and ambiguous reactions to the unknown intruder, and all of them create hesitation: they are cautious, bewildered, astounded, scared, but also curious and wondering. In *The Greene Knight*, on the other hand, the intruder is treated as a knight, who is a guest at court and proposes a game: the only curious feature about the intruder is the green hue of his armour, for he is not described as half giant. Further, the increasing tension, which is almost palpable in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in the climax toward the

beheading scene, is not present in *The Greene Knight*, where, after the challenge

has been taken on by Gawain, Arthur bids both opponents to enjoy the feast and

banquet before the game can take place.

> Now the Greene Knight is set att meate,
> Seemlye served in his seate,
> Beside the Round Table.
> To talke of his welfare, nothing he needs:
> Like a knight himselfe he feeds,
> With long time reasnable.[252]

Lines 175 to 180, reported above, are exemplary of the different treatment of the

intruder in this text: the warm welcome and the invitation to dine with the rest of

the court are matched in courtesy by the description of the Green Knight's

manners, which are knightly and proper: the author insists on the noble and

courteous status of the intruder, and emphasizes manners in a way that the

Gawain poet does not. The difference is once more explained by looking at the

audience intended for the works: the Gawain poet writes for an audience whose

manners are courteous, and who does not need explicit demonstrations of

courtesy, while the author of *The Greene Knight* writes for a larger audience, one

that is later in time as compared to the Gawain poet, thus the courteous

interactions between knights are hardly part of everyday life for them. Like the

resumption of the banquet, the boastful answer given by Sir Kay to the intruder is

also present in *The Greene Knight* but not in the earlier version: of course, if in *Sir*

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[252] Now the Green Knight sits at dinner / properly served in his seat, / beside the Round Table. /
to talk of his satisfaction, he needs nothing more: / he eats with knightly manners, /leisurely.

*Gawain and the Green Knight* the court is astounded and uncertain about the nature of the intruder, even such a character as Sir Kay would not answer with arrogance, something which the lack of superhuman or mysterious halo in *The Greene Knight* allows. *The Turke and Sir Gawain* displays a different kind of treatment and reaction to the intruder, who is spelled to resemble not a knight, but a Turke or dwarf, and thus not worthy of the courtesy and manners reserved for knights. This would be the easiest explanation to the reaction that Sir Kay and Sir Gawain have in response to the challenge: both imply that the intruder is not powerful nor sane, but rather foolish, and there is no trace of hesitation or confusion as to whether the intruder is a human or superhuman being.

### 3.4.3. The challenge and Todorov's approach

If one considers the elements and motifs of the challenge, ascribing it to the Todorovian approach to the fantastic appears to be rather simple. The initial situation of natural order, represented by the feast at Arthur's court, is interrupted by the arrival of an intruder, who proposes a challenge, which results in the severing of the head of said intruder and, despite this, he is able to walk away from the court, with his head in his hand. While the Arthurian world is imaginary and not historically attested, the setting of the challenge is rather realistic, an idealized mirror of the courtly society which populated French courts and, therefore, was fashionable in England as well: thus, one may well compare the imaginary world of Camelot to a real world, a faraway kingdom, which becomes, at times, background of supernatural events. An important element for the analysis of the

challenge in terms of the Todorovian fantastic is represented by the conclusion which Omar Khalaf reaches in his *"I haf sen a selly I may not forsake": una lettura todoroviana del Sir Gawain e il Cavaliere Verde*: he proposes a new category, the magic, which would fit the medieval imaginary and which could reunite the two opposites proposed by Todorov – that is the uncanny and the marvellous – by stating two conditions: that the fantastic may be considered a constant presence in the Middle Ages, and that both worlds may coexist and influence one another.[253] Such knowledge may help us stretch the Todorovian idea of the fantastic so that it may be applied to the challenge.

As to the possibility of studying the challenge, as represented in the three analysed works, within the Todorovian approach to the fantastic, the first task is to investigate whether the three versions may or may not fit the conditions posed by Todorov. As far as the first condition is concerned, it commands that the reader must hesitate and must not be convinced of the reality or unreality of the event. It was mentioned above that neither Arthur, Gawain, nor the court are convinced of the nature of the intruder in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; they are hesitant, but they are not the only ones: the language, words, and expressions used by the author with regards to the Green Knight and his actions all constitute and represent an ambiguous figure, which the reader themselves may find hard to identify and classify as real or supernatural. A blatant example may be found in line 140, reported below:

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[253] (Khalaf 2011)

Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were,[254]

Even after the beheading has taken place, the court, and the reader with them, are not guided towards a certain solution for their hesitation: no explanation is given, which could direct the mind towards one or the other choice between uncanny and marvellous, except in the very end of the poem, where Bertilak tells Gawain that it was all a magic trick of Morgan le Fay. Even then, the solution of the dilemma – whether the events may be explained as uncanny or marvellous – is ambiguous and uncertain. With regards to the first condition, then, the existence of the fantastic is proven. The second condition of the fantastic, according to which the reader must identify with the protagonist, or one of the characters, is partly met thanks to the realistic atmosphere which the Gawain poet was able to recreate (see paragraph 2.5.1): the reader may feel as if they were one of Arthur's guests at the feast, and overlook the scene as if seating in the court. As for the third condition of the fantastic, which states that the reading of the event must be neither poetic nor allegorical, no characteristic of the poem suggests neither kind of reading, especially if one considers the implicit reader contemporary to the author. Further, the modern reader who intends to analyse the work in terms of the fantastic may well reject any interpretations connected to allegory or poetry. The challenge episode in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* respects all three conditions of the fantastic.

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[254] Half a giant on earth I hold him to be. Translation by Marie Borroff in (Borroff 2010)

As for *The Greene Knight*, the background story added by the author at the beginning, where Agostes the witch and her abilities are mentioned, cancels the feeling of hesitation which the challenge scene is supposed to provoke: even if one postulates Khalaf's claim that in the Middle Ages magic was believed possible in real life, but still created some sort of hesitation[255], the background story and the warm welcome reserved to the intruder still appear as obstacles for the realization of an actual feeling of hesitation in the implicit reader, whether medieval or modern. The work, then, fails to satisfy the first condition of existence of the fantastic, and, as a result, Todorov's approach cannot be applied to the work.

As far as *The Turke and Sir Gawain* is concerned, the missing half-page prevents an actual study of the fantastic in the challenge from completion, although the offered summary claims that the trading of blows does not include a beheading scene – which is, however, present at the end of the story – and the text which immediately follows the missing half page does not mention a severed head, nor a bewildered reaction. The lack of an even apparently supernatural event would thus exclude the challenge in the present work from any sort of analysis of the fantastic. The uncanny element, nevertheless, is vastly relevant in the plot, as the succession of tests including giants and the broken enchantment give evidence. The language used by the anonymous author, moreover, does not include locutions which would keep the reader in both the real and imaginary world at once: it simply describes supernatural events as if they were not uncanny but

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[255] (Khalaf 2011)

rather ordinary. This feature would locate the work among the subgenre of the pure marvellous, listed by Todorov, where the supernatural is presented as ordinary and provokes not reaction in the characters and implicit readers.

The aim of the works, that is to entertain a diverse audience in terms of social classes, may help us understand the reason that *The Turke and Sir Gawain* and *The Greene Knight* are not located into the realm of the fantastic in Todorov's terms: their role may have been similar to that of modern day fairy tales and fiction, in that they may contain some sort of moral or rather didactic element, which in both works is that courtesy and loyalty are to be practiced in all circumstances, but their main interest is telling a story that is appealing, likeable, and able to distract and amuse the audience. On the other hand, not only does *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* fulfil all conditions of the fantastic, but may be analysed in terms of function of the fantastic according to Todorov. If the social function of the supernatural is to exempt a work from censorship and the law, then, in a work that was aimed at a high-born and literate audience, who indeed knew and was educated through courtesy, the Gawain poet was able to include the above-mentioned subtle criticism to the courtly society, without it being too explicit.

# 4. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the present work was to conduct a comparative study of the fantastic element in Middle English romance, with the evidence offered by the challenge episode in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – which is, indeed, considered one of, if not the, most sophisticated works of Middle English romance – and two popular analogues, both found in the Percy Folio, titled *The Greene Knight* and *The Turke and Sir Gawain*. The main reason of choice of the three works is that not only do they share the challenge and beheading motif, but the main character is the same in all three texts, although several differences have emerged, which have made the comparison rather interesting.

The theoretical context of the analysis of the fantastic was Tzvetan Todorov's approach, which the scholar expounded in his book titled *Introduction à la literature fantastique* in 1970. Therefore, the first chapter of the present work has offered an outline of the passages of Todorov's work which most interest our analysis of the fantastic element, and attempted to adapt said notions so they may be used in the analysis of works pertaining to such a different historical context as Middle English literature.

The second chapter was divided into sub-chapters, following an inductive approach: the first one delineated the historical context of Romance tradition in Middle English, while the second one analysed the literary character of Sir Gawain and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a literary work, considering the author and the manuscript, the sources and later Middle English analogues. The third and final

sub-chapter was dedicated to the treatment of the fantastic element in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with particular attention to the symbolic value of some elements.

The comparative analysis of the three works was carried out in the third chapter, which comprises an outline of the episode structure of each text, on the basis of the tagmemic approach which Susan Wittig adapted from linguistics to the philological study of Middle English romances, and which has proven useful to divide the text into smaller units, for an easier comparison.

The comparative analysis was paired with an interpretive one, so the similarities and differences in the three works were identified and some reasons were given for them. Indeed, as was noted in the analysis, most differences found not only in the structure of the texts, but also and especially in the selection of themes and contents, may be reconducted to a functional difference between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the two analogues: evidence found in the structure, themes and language used in the former, suggests that its implicit audience was composed of literate people, belonging to the middle class or the new, English-speaking nobility, and that the aim of the work was not just entertainment but a moral one, to remind the audience or readers that, although courtesy and loyalty were virtues that always had to be respected, even to the most courteous of knights – the model of courtesy and chivalry, perfection was unattainable; in this, the Gawain-poet included a rather subtle criticism of the chivalric lifestyle itself, judging it unreachable for humans. The appearance of *The*

*Greene Knight* and *The Turke and Sir Gawain* in the Percy Folio, on the other hand, suggests that they were made for entertainment purposes, mainly. Indeed, written in a less intricate and lower style and language, the themes and motives selected in the two texts were closer to tradition, despite being composed later in time, than *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The entertainment purpose of the two Percy folio narratives was proven, for instance, by the lack of realism and, in contrast, the presence of elements, such as the lovesick lady and Sir Kay's boastful answer, which add a dramatic effect and renders the plot more appealing to the masses.

With such premises the appearance of the fantastic in Todorovian terms was investigated in all three works, although only *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was finally considered a work of the fantastic, on the basis of it respecting all three conditions posed by Todorov and fulfilling the social function that Todorov described proper of the fantastic.

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