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### The Gawain Poet

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### Abstract and Keywords

This article addresses some of the recent debates and current approaches to the poems ascribed to the so-called *Gawain* poet. It conceives of the author as an elusive voice made material in a single fourteenth-century manuscript. The article contends with the theorizing of perception, visualization, and the senses in *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness* and asks how these are related to illusions of permanence and the interactions between materiality and the immaterial in the poems. The formation of subjectivity, self, and identity—and the subject’s self-conscious and affective performance—is explored in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, querying some of the intrinsic thematic concerns that interlink the Cotton Nero poems and *Saint Erkenwald*. Ultimately the article contends with the artificial and fictive past as construed by the poems and by the modern reader.

Keywords: perception, materiality, voice, affect, subjectivity, Sir Gawain, Pearl, Patience, Cleanness, Saint Erkenwald

This article addresses the imagined voice of a single poet, carried across the divide of the “phantasmic” past—using Nicholas Watson’s words—and the fabricated modernity of our present. The voice of the illusive author is made material in a single fourteenth-century vellum manuscript, the British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x, which contains four texts: *Pearl*, *Patience*, *Cleanness* (sometimes titled *Purity*), and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *Saint Erkenwald* is also frequently attributed to the *Gawain* poet. The assumption of a single author, on which this article is based, will necessarily shape the way the poems are read. We conveniently summon the imagined author to engage with us in a dialogue, just as the ancient spirit of the judge in *Saint Erkenwald* is summoned out of his grave to discourse with the marveling spectators posing as the (fictive) “readers” of that poem’s past. The anonymity of the author (or authors) and the absence of a clear sense of cultural context, provenance, readership, and patronage leaves the modern reader with little but the text themselves, the codex in which they are preserved, and a generalized sense (often surmised) of the social and cultural milieu in which they were created. It is no surprise that the poems leave so many readers perplexed at the end, feeling that there is something intangible about them, out of their reach, and not quite understood. This

article presents some of the current debates or recent approaches to the poems. It makes no attempt to be exhaustive, and many splendid works and theoretical approaches—discussions of the theological subtext (Watson 1997; Powell 2011), of morality and allegory (Nievergelt 2011), or feminist and queer studies (Heng 1991; Stanbury 1993; Dinshaw 1994; Pugh 2005), for instance—will by necessity remain unaddressed.

A brief disclaimer is warranted at this stage to establish the premise upon which this article bases the authorial identity and coherence of the so-called *Gawain* poet (also known as the *Pearl* poet). Can one imagine multiple authors showing the sort of literary excellence and verbal craft at the same time and within the same region (as A. C. Spearing asked as early as 1970), or—given the poet's potential London connections—at the very least in the same regional dialect (Spearing 2010, 37; see also Borroff 2006, 74)? It would admittedly not be the first time literary excellence is unevenly distributed, both temporally and geographically. The *tre corone*, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, are certainly a prime example of the possibility of unique literary talent appearing in tandem in a very limited geographic region. Yet the parallel in style, rhetoric, thematic representation, and narrative dexterity of the Cotton Nero poems suggest a single author. And, in recognition of the fallibility of authorial denomination, their material context—the sole extant versions preserved together in a single manuscript containing no other texts—invites the reading of the poems as a collection, whether or not we conceive of them as the product of a historical author. In fact, John M. Bowers (2012, 11) sees their collation in the single manuscript as evidence that the works were indeed recognized as an oeuvre by the end of the fourteenth century.

While some critics have registered skepticism (Lawton 1982a, 9) and others outright rejection of single authorship (Clark 1949), the general critical consensus is that the Cotton Nero poems were written by a single anonymous poet stemming from the Northwest Midlands (Spearing 1970; Cooper and Pearsall 1988; Putter 1996; Andrew 1997; Brewer and Gibson 1997; Borroff 2006; Schmidt 2010; Bowers 2012). The sole surviving manuscript is dated around 1400 and written in a single hand and in a dialect that has been localized to northwest England, in or around Cheshire.<sup>1</sup> The manuscript is not an original and is probably separated from the original by some period of time (Edwards 1997, 198). It thus provides the *terminus ante quem* for the poems, which are generally dated to the second half of the fourteenth century (Putter 1996, 2-3).<sup>2</sup>

Critics have sought to identify the elusive author based on the thematic concerns of the poems, their dialect, and the presumed level of learning needed at the time to compose such intricate and densely allusive poems (see Andrew 1997). The poet's perceived provinciality and literary isolation was first contested by Michael Bennett (1983, 233-235). The poetical production of the *Gawain* poet has since then been located more

frequently in London—in the manner of his contemporaries, Chaucer, Langland, and Gower—or associated more broadly with the royal court, rather than the remote regions of the Northwest Midlands. Bowers (2001) seeks to locate the author among the large contingent of Cheshire men whose translocation from Cheshire to London provided the *Gawain* poet with an audience capable of appreciating the artistry and thematic density of the poems as well as their linguistic nuances. The placement of the poet within the context of expatriate Cheshiremen “whose careers in military service and royal administration had advanced them ... toward the centers of national power,” more precisely to the royal court of Richard II, seems convincing, not the least when considering the courtly subtext of the poems (Bowers 2001, 14; see also Mann 2009).

Lynn Staley’s (2000) suggestion that *Pearl* memorializes the entrance of Isabel, the third daughter of Thomas of Woodstock, into the house of the Minoreesses in London at a very young age shifts the philosophical foundation of the poem toward a more personal elegiac commemoration that is securely located in a particular cultural milieu. Staley uses the presumed connection to Isabel to argue that Thomas of Woodstock was the patron of the poem. Bowers’ association of the image of the Pearl Maiden with Queen Anne, on the other hand, refutes the designation of the Maiden as a child. He assumes the poem was conceived as a memorialization of the late queen and a celebration of the new Queen Isabelle (2001, 152–186; 2012, 114–118), which, as Alan Fletcher (2005, 166–167) notes, does not clearly explain the specific reference to Pearl’s age in the poem. Fletcher takes stock against what he considers historicist determinism, specifically Bowers’ and Staley’s interpretations of the Pearl Maiden, maintaining that simply finding analogies in Richard’s court may be reductive.

However, the main debate concerns the supposed legacy of the *Gawain* poet. *Saint Erkenwald*, also preserved in a single manuscript, British Library MS Harley 2250, copied in the late fifteenth century, has either been included in the corpus due to dialectic affiliations or excluded from it due to its absence from the Cotton Nero manuscript and its preservation in the much younger Harley manuscript.<sup>3</sup> Larry D. Benson’s (1965) stylistic analysis of the poems, arguing against the common authorship of *Saint Erkenwald* and the other four poems, has set the tone for much of the critical assumptions. Spearing (1970, 33) similarly vehemently rejects any stylistic or thematic affinities, although the clear London association of *Saint Erkenwald* versus that of the other poems—which has since been challenged—features strongly in his opposition. Marie Borroff (2006, 46), on the other hand, rejects Benson’s analysis and posits that the poems are linked by “particular and profound imaginative affinities, whose presence can be sensed beyond doubt.” Her analysis reveals an “imaginative bias,” which supports a broader thematic arch of the fallibility of humanity (63). Nevertheless, *Saint Erkenwald*

remains excluded from major overviews and introductions to the *Gawain* poet (Putter 1996; Brewer and Gibson 1997; Burrow 2001; Stanbury 2009). A. V. C. Schmidt (2010) skirts the issue but points out that “recent scholarship seems to be favouring the *Pearl*-poet’s authorship of *Erkenwald*” (370), while Bowers (2012), following Borroff, includes it in his *Introduction to the Gawain Poet*.

However, despite the dialectal affinities between the poems, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that *Saint Erkenwald* has the same authorial provenance as the Cotton Nero poems. Moreover, the latter’s inclusion in a single manuscript (notably excluding *Saint Erkenwald*) raises questions regarding the poems’ reception. That said, Borroff (2006) presents convincing arguments in support of her theory that the *Gawain* poet composed not only the four poems traditionally ascribed to him (the masculine pronoun is here used on purpose as it is highly unlikely, although of course possible, that the *Gawain* poet was indeed a woman, or that one or more of the poems was written by a woman) but also *Saint Erkenwald*. Given the lack of critical consensus and the impossibility of proving authorship one way or the other, the four poems are discussed here under the auspices of the common denominator of the *Gawain* poet. Rather than attempting to engage the elusive historical author, the categorization serves to encapsulate the poems whose representation in the Cotton Nero manuscript puts them in a specific codicological and textual context, regardless of their actual genesis. *Saint Erkenwald* is cited as necessary and appropriate but is not discussed at length, as the late-fifteenth-century provenance of the single extant manuscript copy puts it in a different codicological context, despite the similar dialectic origination and certain structural affinities with the other Cotton Nero poems.

## Perception, Materiality, and the Senses

In the late Middle Ages the senses (i.e., the physiological receptors for perception) extended beyond the individual body to encompass a profound and intimate moral component related to the medieval theological conception of sin and virtue (Woolgar 2006). In *Cleanness*, the acuity to the transience of the body and the associated cultural code of personal hygiene engenders a sense of moral hygiene. The first lines of the poem highlight the association between cleanness, filth, body, language, and God’s wrath, which underlines the thematic explication of the topic of cleanliness:

Clannesse whoso kindly cowþe comende,  
And rekken vp alle þe resounz þat ho by riȝt askez,

Fayre formez myȝt he fynde in forþering his speche,  
And in þe contraré kark and combraunce huge.  
For wonder wroth is þe Wyȝ þat wroȝt alle þinges  
Wyth þe freke þat in fylþe folȝes Hym after—(*Cleanness* 2007, ll. 1–6)

[He who commended *Cleanness*, considering her aright,  
And treated every point that pertains to her praise,  
Would find fair forms of language to further his speech  
And in the contrary course, encumbrances huge.  
For the Maker of all things is irked beyond measure  
When the folk of His following affront Him with filth. (*Cleanness* 2011, ll. 1–6)]

The entwining of the subject matter of cleanliness and filth and the poetic framing (i.e., the “fayre formez”) suggests that the substance of the poem is directly related to and, moreover, intimately interwoven with the form through which it is represented. This self-conscious representation of the linguistic medium itself (i.e., the language, verse form, and words) not only as an agent but as a figurative representation of its thematic content underlies the Cotton Nero corpus and is vital to the appreciation of the poems. Furthermore, the association between “fayre formez,” the physical body as representative of moral turpitude, and the emotive representation of God as wrathful reveals that morality, perception, emotion, and form feature both as subjects and as vital components of the engagement with and interpretation of the poem.

In fact, sensory perception features prominently in all of the Cotton Nero poems (as well as in *Saint Erkenwald*) and provides both a thematic coherence and a structural pattern to the poems. The alliterative meter is itself profoundly auditory and hence relies to a great extent on the audience’s aural perception and appreciation. Jessica Brantley (2007) notes that there is an intimate relationship between the act of seeing and the act of reading. Drawing on Michael Camille’s (1985) conception of visual writing, she points out that “both reading and seeing are venerable metaphors for perception” in the Middle Ages (317). The reader is thus closely connected to the visualizing subject of the text. Neurological research has shown that visual and sensory descriptions are actualized somatically and neurologically in the reader’s (or listener’s) body. Textual imagery activates the same neurotransmitters that are triggered when recalling an actual (i.e., experienced) event, thereby drawing on memory faculties to visualize the verbal description (Gallese 2009; Keen 2010). As James Simpson (2013) notes, the act of reading is based on moments of what he terms “recognitions,” which themselves are grounded in the processes of cognition and emotion. Such “recognitions” reflect the cognitive interactions between memory, linguistic processes, and emotion. Thus the act of reading, presented both as a textual gesture and as a hermeneutic act, itself depends to a great extent on preconceptions that “generate meaning through habitual recognitions” (31).

The sensory perceptions of Jonah in the belly of the whale and the descriptions of the visionary landscape in *Pearl*, or of the desolate landscape of the Wirral that Gawain must trudge through, are thus all mediated through the somatic experience and the memory faculties of its eventual recipient, whether medieval or modern.

Perception—albeit understood and conceptualized very differently—motivates the brilliant studies of Sarah Stanbury (1991, 2009), Claire Barbetti (2011), and Seeta Chaganti (2008). The focus on perception and visibility featured already highly in Spearing's 1970 volume, *The Gawain-Poet*, although the focus has shifted from narratorial perspective to visual perception within the poems themselves in the later works. Stanbury (2009) observes that the story of Jonah in the whale, as presented in *Patience*, produces a "geography of sensory exile" (147). Jonah's sensory perception is curtailed as he stumbles about in the pitch black of the whale's belly, focusing the reader's attention on touch, smell, and auditory perception. Yet the poem itself is highly visual as it depicts the smallness of Jonah's body inside the massive whale; a massiveness that Thorlac Turville-Petre (2010) suggests foregrounds the whale's function not as a natural being but as a symbolic one (596–597). The elaborately visual depiction of Jonah's tumble into the belly of the whale, which is moreover a masterpiece of alliterative aesthetic and auditory pleasures, stands in stark contrast to Jonah's blindness inside the whale (symbolic for his blindness while outside the whale). The text foregrounds this lack of ocular perception by having Jonah complain to God that he has been "kest out fro þy cler yʒen/ And deseuered fro þy syʒt" (*Patience* 2007, ll. 314–315) (denied the dear light of your eyes,/ And dissevered from your sight) (*Patience* 2011, ll. 314–315). The visual deprivation therefore entails not only his own optical or perceptual impairment but, more important, the metaphorical correlation between the deprivation of sensory perception experienced in the whale and the exile from God's graces.

Stanbury (2009) points out that the choice of words and the alliteration in the passage accentuate the sense of movement and tumbling (146–147). The (presumably) intentional auditory impact of the alliterative verse underscores the prominence of aurality *within* the poem as well. The voice of God is repeatedly depicted as an onslaught on the senses: "With a roghlych rurd rownded in his ere" (l. 64) (a rough summons and rude resounds in his ears) (l. 64), "þenne a wynde of Goddez worde efte þe wyʒe bruxlez" (l. 345) (then a wind of God's word whipped past his ears) (l. 345), and "þe soun of oure Souerayn þen swey in his ere" (l. 429) (then a sound from our Sovereign assailed his ears) (l. 429). In fact, God's voice is made to materialize in the text as a force that can be felt quite literally as the wind can be felt passing us by. The evocation of not only an audible but also a physically perceptible voice reveals the entwined function of sound, text, and matter in the poem. The text plays on the multiplicity of material aurality, both as it appears in the text itself and as a literary impression. The voice of God is made material

as a substantive force within the story, as words on the physical page of the manuscript, and finally as the rhythmical representation of the alliterative verse. The audience is made to visualize the stern voice (quite possibly emulated by whomever read the poem out loud) of God assaulting Jonah, its pleasure multiplied by the linguistic delivery of the alliterative verse itself.

Turning to *Pearl*, Barbetti (2011, 17) notes that the medieval perception of dreaming—uncontaminated by Freudian conceptualizations of the subconscious—construes the dream vision not as a private experience but as a formal construct that relates to the medieval conception of the universe. *Pearl* thus invites a polytemporal reading that separates the vision (and the Dreamer) from the act of remembering and writing (the narrator as “Writer”) and focuses its interpretative energy on the ekphrastic body of Pearl, the subject of the vision. Both Barbetti and Chaganti conceive of *Pearl* as a formal as well as a thematic *objet d’art*. In Chaganti’s (2008, 95–108) case, *Pearl* is considered an objectified artifact made out of ink and vellum, containing within it the devotional event of the vision, thus acting as an enshrinement unifying the visual and verbal representation. Paying homage to Fradenburg’s (1997, 218–219) reflections on the manuscript as fetishized object, Chaganti presents the material object of the text in situ as an “inscriptional object” (95). The material form itself thus guides the reconstruction of the textual representation of the dream vision as a “visually apprehended event” (100). Jessica Brantley (2013, 188) notes that the dream vision provided a literary framework to consider the tensive relationship between the material and immaterial. Already in 1967 Patricia M. Kean suggested that the “grave in a garden of delights ... is the central motif around which the twin themes of the earthly and heavenly treasure, and of mortality and regeneration are organized,” calling attention to the aesthetics of decay and preservation that infuse the poem (52). The play on the shifting meaning of the word “spot” from blemish or sin to a place signals this thematic conflict between materiality (physical blemish and the decaying body in the grave) and immateriality (understood as sin and the lack of “spot,” i.e., of a place in which the Maiden exists as she is currently beyond material existence) (Putter 1996, 148; Barbetti 2011, 48).

This dichotomy between materiality and immateriality can be found in *Cleanness* as well in the emphasis on material objects as vessels. Stanbury (2009, 145) considers this emphasis to signal an allegorical allusion to Christ’s body, or the Eucharist, explaining the vehement reaction of God to filth. Violations of God’s vessels would then be considered sacramental perversions. Spearing (1980, 299), on the other hand,—drawing on Mary Douglas’ anthropological understanding of dirt as “matter out of place”—considers the concepts of “clannes” and “fylthe” to signal a sense of divine and natural order. According to Spearing, it is therefore not so much sin that threatens the system as such but rather the disintegration of the classification of behaviors, experiences, and

species (see also Bowers 2012, 58–59). Dirt understood as disorder hence poses a threat to God’s divinely ordained order of things. This order of things, fundamental to both medieval Christian theology and fourteenth-century feudal structures came, as a matter of fact,, under threat with the 1381 Peasant’s Revolt.

The poem’s obsession with natural order is foregrounded throughout in avowals by God to “loke to kynde,/ And kepe to hit, and alle hit cors clanly fulfyllle” (*Cleanness* 2007, ll. 263–264) (look to nature,/ And conform to its course, and cleanly fulfill it) (*Cleanness* 2011, ll. 263–264) and not to commit “controeued agayn kynde contraré werkez” (l. 266) (unnatural deeds) (l. 266). This emphasis on order (nature) suggests that the underlying concern has to do with the conflict between natural and unnatural, which again is played out on a thematic scale in the conflicting shifts between the organic and inorganic. Jane Gilbert (1997, 53–58) suggests that such offences against the natural order draw on a taxonomy of gender and species, more specifically the binary oppositions between the sexes and between the human species and the ontologically different category of angels. Thus the unclean act is understood as a breach against the natural and divinely ordained classification and thereby conceived by God as a perversion of his creation and contempt against “natwre” (l. 710). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this transgressive behavior is directed at normative heterosexuality (Dinshaw 1994; Boyd 1998; Mann 2009), which Elizabeth B. Keiser (1997) considers to be the fundamental focus of *Cleanness* as well (i.e., the condemnation of homosexual desire).

The emphasis in *Cleanness* on the cosmological menace implicit in the dissolution of natural boundaries prompts the question concerning the ontological status of the Maiden in *Pearl*. The poetical emphasis on “spot” (which features as the link word in the first five stanzas of the poem) foregrounds the positioning of the Dreamer, both within the actual topography and within the paradisaical landscape of his vision. Similarly, the first word of the poem, “perle,” calls attention to the dual function of the pearl both as an aesthetic object of value (see Riddy 1997 and Barr 2000) and as the embodiment of the child—whose body poignantly lies decaying beneath the unconscious body of the Dreamer—as a heavenly being. The layers of topography (the grave with the body, the Dreamer’s unconscious body, and the heavenly Jerusalem) signal the shifting identifications throughout the poem between the apparition of the Maiden and the actual dead child. The Pearl Maiden is ephemeral, her body nonsubstantial, and so the Dreamer and the imagined vision of his daughter are separated by an ontological divide that cannot be bridged (Borroff 1982, 167; Ginsberg 1988; Putter 1996, 149).

The ontological divide is significant here as the division between the living and the dead body extends beyond the materiality of the corpus. In fact, the defamiliarization of both the heavenly city and the Maiden signals that not only is heaven inaccessible to the



Dreamer as he still belongs to the living but that to enter he must indeed *cease* to be human. The Maiden's impassive responses to the affective discourse of the Dreamer signal not only an ontological divide but moreover a discord that occurs at the level of language and its intrinsic cultural and emotive content. If heaven is a state of perpetual bliss conscious only of pleasure, as Putter (1996, 185) suggests, then there is a profound void in the discursive capacity of the Maiden. The Dreamer's discourse is deeply emotive, born out of the loss and longing for what is gone, whereas for her "this 'loss' does not exist" (Putter 1996, 189). In fact, as a two-year-old, she will barely have entered the linguistic system itself as a mortal being, which raises the question of the language of God and his heavenly realm. If language contains within it and is molded by its cultural and social content, then one may wonder at the linguistic, social, and behavioral rules that accompany the language of heaven.

Laura Ashe (2013, 390) notes that in *Pearl* the ineffability of God is conveyed through the representation of linguistic comprehension as dependent on man's moral capacity to understand God's language. The incomprehensibility of the script left on Balthasar's wall in *Cleanness* signals the linguistic divide between the heavenly voice, heard so emphatically by Jonah in *Patience* and the linguistic capacity of its recipient as a measure of his moral worth. Yet in *Pearl*, the Dreamer's inability to comprehend the moral content of the Maiden's speech derives from the fact that hers is as foreign a language to him as his is to her. His discourse is based on the human emotion of longing and sorrow, both of which are presumably alien to the Maiden. Desire is based partially on absence and hence on a lack or void, which are concepts utterly foreign to the Pearl Maiden, whose existence is defined by heavenly fulfillment and bliss. To a certain extent the object (i.e., the vision of Pearl) is generated by desire, which itself is promulgated by loss. Drawing on Kristeva's conception of language as a means of regenerating or conjuring up the past as a tangible, irrefutable present in the face of its absence, the Dreamer's loss can, in fact, only be negated by language. It is through language that the decaying body of the dead child is made material in the vision of the Pearl, only to be lost again.

Ultimately the linguistic aptitude, both as thematic concern and as obvious formal exigency, foregrounds the function of *Pearl* as an artifact. The intricate patterning and elaborate poetic arrangement reveal an underlying aesthetic objectification of poetic artistry that is shrouded in theological determinism. Pearl thus becomes an idiosyncratic symbol, not in the Saussurian sense of the arbitrariness of the *signifiant* but in the deliberate multivalency of the verbal structures within the poem. Its ideational potential (its *signifié*) is amplified by the poetic frame as much as by its content.

## Affect, Subjectivity, and the Self

The analogy between the representation of the poetic form of *Pearl* as an affective artifact and as the materialization of its devotional content draws attention to the emotive function of the poem and its sensory perceptions, and hence to questions of emotion, form, language, and interiority. The extravagance and intricacy of the form suggests that its metrical and rhetorical complexity forms an intrinsic part of the poem's meaning (Cannon 2007, 187; see also Vance 1991). While J. A. Burrow (1982) considers alliteration to be purely a "formal" requirement (52), I'd contend that with the *Gawain* poet, language itself and the alliterative patterning extend beyond a mere formal requirement of sound patterns to encompass meaning.

In *Patience*, as Stanbury has shown, the tumble of Jonah down the interior of the whale is visualized not only by means of the description of the event but also via the choice of alliterating words that convey a sense of movement in space. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the destruction of Troy is conveyed with percussive effects through alliterating plosives, underscoring through aural impression the violence and devastation of the scene (the internal plosives similarly aid in creating the sound effect): "Þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondez and askez,/ Þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt/ Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe" (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2007, ll. 2-4, my italics) (The walls breached and burnt down to brands and ashes/ The knight that had knotted the nets of deceit/ Was impeached for his perfidy, proven most true) (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2011, ll. 2-4).<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, linguistic dexterity not only provides the frame for the poetic substance but moreover becomes a subject in and of itself. The metric structure engages the reader, or audience, in a dialogue that requires a certain hermeneutic astuteness and appreciation. It is no coincidence that the crescendo of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is articulated through a series of temptations, offering Gawain sensual pleasure by means of the verbal seduction, which, as it turns out, remains only imaginary. As Gawain is lulled into a false sense of security by his verbal banter, so the reader is seduced into a deceptive feeling of hermeneutic comfort that will be revealed to be fallacious in the end. We (as readers) depart from the romance with our own necks nicked by the joyful touch of the poet's hermeneutic ax, leaving us not shamed (as Gawain is) but delighted to participate in a community of readers that have collectively been seduced by the beauty of the text and its intricate structure. Significantly, that is indeed the court's reaction to Gawain's story. The exultation of textual seduction as both subject and literary framing will motivate some of the more ingenious post-medieval literary manipulations; in Choderlos de Laclos'

eighteenth-century epistolary novel, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (an apt epithet indeed for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), and later in Nabokov's *Lolita*, in which textual dexterity and lyricism lulls the reader into identifying with the narrator only to be rudely awoken to the fact that he or she has been placed in a voyeuristic position in the abusive relationship with Lolita, resonating in some aspects the reader's relationship with Gawain.

Of the four Cotton Nero poems, most has indeed been written about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Yet Derek Pearsall (2011) admits that even after decades of scholarly work on the poem, he still finds that the meaning eludes him and that the complexity of the poem's signifying potential simultaneously opens it up for multiple theoretical and interpretative approaches (as witnessed in the flurry of feminist, ecocritical, postcolonial, and other critical studies) and negates its own interpretative finality. Perhaps the most persistently debated topic is identity and selfhood and its relation to the myriad topical and theoretical trends. Jill Mann's (1986) astute analysis of the commercial subtext that informs the deeper meaning of courtly worth and values in the text remains an unchallenged guidepost in critical approaches to the text, although David Aers (2000, 78–81) does register some hesitation in light of the poet's avoidance of contemporary discourse on production and distribution. Nevertheless, both are in agreement that value is established through a language of exchange, whether this language originates within the courtly realm of contemporary gentry and nobility (Aers) or more broadly within medieval economic philosophy (Mann). Mann's observation that "material splendour and moral worth share a common vocabulary" in the poem underscores the intrinsic associations between materiality and morality in the Cotton Nero poems (295). In *Cleanness*, richness and splendor (and significantly attire) become symbolic of inner (and specifically moral) worth, and *Pearl* obviously extends the metaphoric allusion to a conceptual framework.

As Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (2010, 415) notes, the evolution of medieval ideas of selfhood are dependent on both secular and ecclesiastical authorities. These impact the way in which subjectivities (as dependent on patronage and secular rulers) and interiorities (as formed by ecclesiastic discourse) are shaped and formed. The distinction Kerby-Fulton makes between the subject, determined by both a consciousness of selfhood and social circumstances, and its interiority, a more elusive (and partially unconscious) sense of internal psyche, is significant here. Gawain's evolution as subject is contingent on the disjunction between his subjectivity and interiority. This disjunction marks the climax of the text, but at the same time it creates a fissure in the text (much as it does in the character of Gawain) that leaves the reader bewildered concerning the meaning behind the entire elaborate ploy. The complexity of patterning and form, evident in the elaborate

numerical design of the poems (Condren 2002; Brewer 2010), leads one to believe that this is no mere accident.

If, as Lee Patterson (1991) suggests, medieval selfhood emerges out of the “dialectic between an inward subjectivity and an external world that alienates it from both itself and its divine source,” then this disjunction is fundamental to the conception and coherence of Gawain’s selfhood in the text (8). Moreover, the eye-opening disclosure at the end of the story not only affects the perception of Gawain’s external surroundings but also reshapes or realigns his interiority, signaled outward by the new emblem of the girdle. This dialectic between internal and external shapes both the subject and the narrative framework. In fact, many critics have noted that the depiction of landscape reflects Gawain’s internal emotive state, suggesting that the landscape is not a representation of factual geography (or even imaginary) but rather registers subjectively perceived sensations (Stanbury 1991, 4–5; Putter 1996, 52; Rudd 2013, 62).

The problematic ontological status of the surroundings comprises preconceptions—in a very Berkeleyan manner—concerning the phenomenological existence of the perceived object. The landscape is thus given consistency (and in fact granted permanence) via the fictive personification of Gawain as the sensory medium and the reader as the actual and eventual receiver. In *Pearl*, this empirical conception of sensory experience is foregrounded as the vision only becomes possible due to the Dreamer’s particular emotive or affective state as a grieving father. On a terrestrial plane, the prerequisite for the dream vision to take place is a state of unconsciousness, which is in turn brought about by the sorrow felt by the pre-vision narrator. On an extraterrestrial plane, the dream state is in turn the precondition for the ephemeral vision of the heavenly city. Such affective reading of topography does not negate auxiliary meanings. Helen Fulton (2010) notes that the wild landscape traversed by Gawain “represents an English view of the Welsh side of the border,” alerting us to the political (and colonial) function of the geography in the text (521; see also Tolkien and Gordon 1967, notes to ll. 691–709, 97–98). In fact, the route traced by Gawain on his way from Logres to Bertilak’s castle “crosses medieval boundaries of the Welsh march, the territory adjoining not only Wales but also the West and Northwest Midlands,” signaling the potential geopolitical subtext at play (Hill 2009, 24).

The emphasis on nature—as well as the Green Knight’s startling greenness of course—makes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* a model for ecocritical approaches. Carolyn Dinshaw (2013), in fact, notes that the text has become “the go-to text for ecocritical analysis of Middle English literature” (359). The ecological focus on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has perhaps been most fruitful where the focus is directed at the question of humanity and what it means to be human (Cohen 1999, 144–152; Rudd 2013). The

poem continually erases or redraws the boundaries between realism and marvel and between human and nonhuman. The Green Knight is automatically accorded a status of human properties, despite his peculiar and uncanny depiction, and thus elicits a prescribed code of courtesy and knightly behavior from the court and from King Arthur. The social fabric depends on the successful engagement with and execution of established codes of conduct and the appropriate linguistic script. Part of the confusion of the court results from the blurring of categorical boundaries (human/nonhuman, knight/non-knight), eliciting a feeling of the *Unheimliche*. The poem is indeed all too aware of the underlying anxiety about humanity and its opposite as the protagonist withstands each of the temptations he is subjected to but then fails (and even so only slightly) at the very last one, which has to do with the very human desire to live.

This blurring of boundaries occurs at all levels and remains at the core of the story. Helen Cooper (1997) maintains that throughout the Cotton Nero poems the supernatural is refused the status of “other” and instead “stands for something within the protagonists of each poem and therefore, given the poet’s insistent moral concern, within the reader too” (277). This internal “otherness” accords well with Michael Twomey’s (2001, 113) proclamation of an associative shift from Arthur to Morgan that occurs via the disclosure of her familial relation to Arthur and hence, by extension, to Gawain through his blood. The deconstruction of boundaries in this case occurs at the level of genealogy. The blood that forms the substance of Gawain’s corpus and determines his hierarchical social status within the Arthurian court is thus revealed to be something else than assumed, just as the Green Knight, his court, and the marvels have all revealed themselves to be less foreign, threatening, and unfamiliar than previously assumed. As it turns out, the subversive, wild, marginal (and significantly feminine) turns out to be in his own blood. While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* thus questions the stability of such presumed and perceived boundaries, *Saint Erkenwald* presents the archetypal familiarization of the Other through the image of the grave and the dead judge that is found in the midst of London. The grave’s location under the foundation of St. Paul’s Cathedral raises some alarming questions as to the very stability of the Church’s material (and spiritual) foundations. The exorcism of this otherness is accomplished by the absorption of the Other into the Christian church via the baptismal tear of the Bishop. The destabilizing body of the heathen judge significantly vaporizes the instant he is integrated into the theological structure and thus no longer poses a threat to the integrity of the social structures and ecclesiastic coherence within the poem (see also Lawton 2011, 240-243).

Finally, Catherine Cox (2005, 86) points out that identity is essentially performative and constituted by discursive signs that are subject to the interpretation of those who observe its performance. Her study interlinks Gawain with the “Judaic Other” and reveals a continual reconstitution of symbolic value throughout the text. Sarah McNamer (2007),

aligning herself with Cox's conception of performative identity, conceives of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a "script[] for the performance of historically specific emotion" (242). Taking the diametrically opposing stance to Mark Miller (2010, 216–218), who considers the poem to recognize and celebrate the potency and lure of the death drive, McNamer instead sees it as a celebration of the joy of life (252). Gawain's acceptance (and withholding) of the girdle becomes a sign not of moral fault but of the desire for life as an *affective* state. The poem thus interrogates the complex emotive and cultural scripts that underlie not only the text but chivalric culture in general.

Gawain's identity is presented as dual, or multiple, as there is a continual conflict between his perception of himself as subject within the text and his representation as a literary character within Arthurian fiction. The fashioning and reshaping of identity consequently becomes both a thematic subplot and a textual agenda; the text destabilizes Gawain's literary identity, both as a subject and as a character, calling attention to the external world of shifting Arthurian ideology and its potential political implications. The audience therefore becomes complicit in the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the fictitious Arthurian legacy. Randy R. Schiff (2011) explores this play on identity in connection with the modern enactment of national literary history, particularly alliterative literary history. Robert Barrett (2009) considers it to reflect a lack of interregional cohesion of chivalric identity. Tony Davenport (2010), Rosalind Field (1999), and Putter (1995), on the other hand, focus on the problematic relationship between insular and continental Arthurian writing, suggesting that the divide between Gawain's conception of his self and the reputed legend reveal the conflict between the "French" Gawain and the specifically "English" one.

Corinne Saunders (2013) links identity to cultural geography in an outstanding essay on margins where "landscapes, *loci*, and ideas of place are explored in terms of time and memory," signaling an affiliation between center and margins, internal and external, and nature and civilization (332). Saunders cites the Green Knight's challenge, "What, is þis Arþures hous," as a statement evoking his status as an outsider who "threatens the authority of the civilized center, the court" (338–339). The very next line in the poem signals though that the authority of the court and, by association, of King Arthur, is not the only thing that is being questioned: "'What, is þis Arþures hous,' quop þe hæpel þenne,/ 'þat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?'" (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2007, ll. 309–310) ("What, is this Arthur's house," said that horseman then,/ "Whose fame is so fair in far realms and wide?") (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2011, ll. 309–310). The Green Knight casts doubt on the veracity of the reputation of the court now that he confronts it for himself, much in the same manner as Gawain's identity will be questioned several times during the seduction scenes as he fails to live up to his fictive reputation. Rhonda Knight (2003) goes so far as to consider Gawain's identity a

“fabrication” in its entirety, “a collection of histories, codes, behaviors and ideas” that are assembled to represent the courtly history of Camelot ( 278). Gawain is thus made to come face to face with his own literary history that preexists his fictive representation in the story (see also Borroff 2011, 197). The same can be said to apply to Arthur. The subtle ironic undertone of the initial scene derives to a great extent from the fact that we are observing Arthur in his youthful reign, that is, before he should have established the reputation. The court is referred to as “folk in her first age” (l. 54) (folk in their first age) (l. 54) and Arthur as “sumquat childgered” (l. 86) (little boyish) (l. 56) and the apparent confusion of the literary characters as to how they should be behaving in a proper Arthurian story reinforces the sense of literary self-consciousness and textual illusions.

The Green Knight thus poses as a reader of the textual history of Arthurian romance and questions its accuracy once presented with its fictive characters, revealing a profound meta-fictive discourse at play throughout the text. The audience—presumably as familiar with the literary tradition as the Green Knight appears to be—would most likely have participated in and thoroughly enjoyed the meta-textual ploys. It is therefore not the Green Knight who turns out to be the Other. Rather it is the Arthurian court he encounters in the text that poses as the Other in the literary history of Arthurian romance. As readers, we are placed alongside Arthur, marveling at this strangeness, as well as with the Green Knight, questioning the legacy of Arthur and his court; this double stance destabilizes the reader’s empathetic positioning in the text. The shift from the court, as the focal point, to the Green Knight, observing the now silent courtiers (whose silence is moreover elongated by the extended description of the Green Knight following the playful ruckus of the court prior to his entrance), defamiliarizes the court itself. The shift in focalization makes us confront our reader experience as conscious “textual” subjects engaging with the Arthurian material and its literary and historical legacy.

## Historicizing the Past

Moving from “forme” to “fynisment” (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2007, l. 499), in honor of the circular form of the Cotton Nero poems themselves, we return to Nicholas Watson’s (2010) “phantasmic past” and the reminder that the “past matters, not only because it underlies the present, ... but because it remains inseparably entangled with the present” (5). Watson’s representation of the past as a body and the resulting interrogation of the ontological status of this past as body brings to the fore some of the questions that have been raised by the poems themselves regarding the past, its materiality, and finally its Otherness (6). In fact, the past features thematically within the poems as an elusive entity that threatens to dismantle the very coherence of the internal

social, theological, or hierarchical structures of the fictive realms (see also Chism 2002). The past as subject is reconstructed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, resurrected in *Pearl*, and laid to rest in *St. Erkenwald*.

The elusiveness of the past also entails the past of the texts themselves; as David Wallace (1999) reminds us, medieval texts “do not maintain urn-like integrity in entering the ocean of textual transmission” (xxi). The single copy of the Cotton Nero poems is thus merely an instance in the textual history of the texts, captured for perpetuity in its scribal form. The volatile preservation history of both the Cotton Nero poems and *Saint Erkenwald* suggests that the modern reader may indeed have only glimpsed a fragment of the “ocean” of their transmission. Bowers (2001, 188–189) makes a convincing argument that the erasure of the poems from English literary history may be the result of the shift in royal favors with Henry Bolingbroke’s usurpation of the throne. The lack of evidence of textual distribution may thus result from Henry IV’s “program of *official* forgetfulness” using Paul Strohm’s words (1998, 196, author’s italics). As Burrow (1971) wittily remarks “if Chester rather than London had become the capital centre of England, no doubt the *Gawain* poet would immediately have been acknowledged as national classic” (4).

Ultimately, the text’s “pastness”—using Simpson’s (2002) conception of a constructed pastness—underscores the fact that interpretations are shaped by our own cultural context as well as the artifact itself. The permeability of the text and its linguistic and formal constructs allow for the interpretative flexibility of multiple approaches and postmedieval reconstruction of its meaning. I am well aware of the potential accusations of anachronism in the previously posed presumptions of a readerly identity as the medieval text existed, obviously, in a culture steeped in a communal literary experience, unlike the modern private textual engagement. The same could be said about statements of subjectivity and interiority, concepts that belong to the modern invention of psychology. Yet I believe a case can be made for a conscious acceptance of the text’s multitemporality, despite its codicological and historical context. This multitemporality resides in the pleasure aroused in the reader when engaging with the text in a private and personal dialogue that is, admittedly and obviously, always informed by the social and historical circumstances of both the readerly subject and the text as subject. Thus an ecocritical reading, informed by modern environmental concerns, or a queer reading, steeped in the post-Foucauldian conception of sexuality, do not refute or negate a historicist (or posthistorical) reading despite being far removed from the immediate social context of the presumed medieval author. They can simply be said to form instances of readerly pleasures and perceptions that are informed by the particular circumstances of the reader’s critical and cultural context and his or her presumptions about the cultural and social context of the textual subject.



As Derek Attridge (2011, 681) points out, reading as an act (and as an event) entails not only the context of the work but also that of the reader and, more important, that of the reader's perception of the writer's context. The historical context of the medieval textual object is defined by its absence (its pastness in Simpson's and Watson's sense) and as such is only available to the modern reader as a reconstructed fictive reality that is modeled by modernity's conceptualization of the very past it is trying to define. Dismissing contemporary approaches to literature as an "endless and indefinite referral of signifier to signifier"—as David Aers (1992, 2) so succinctly put it in his dismissal of deconstruction—may lead one to ignore signifiers that assume meaning that is neither stable nor permanent but meaningful nevertheless upon its engagement.

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## Notes:

<sup>(1)</sup> Angus McIntosh (1963) localizes the poems based on their dialect to a "very small area either in SE Cheshire or just over the border in NE Staffordshire" (5). H. N. Duggan (1997, 242), however, notes that the disjunction between the poet's dialect and the scribe's suggests that the poet's dialectic origins are likely to be found further south in Staffordshire. Putter and Stokes' (2007) analysis places the natal dialect north of Staffordshire, in Cheshire.

<sup>(2)</sup> John Bowers (2001, 22-23) places the works firmly within the Ricardian reign, dating *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to the mid-1380s and *Pearl* as late as 1395. Michael Bennett (1997) and Jill Mann (2009) similarly find the Ricardian era to be the most likely context for the poems, although they are more cautious in linking the texts to specific historic events. Francis Ingledew (2006), on the other hand, proposes a mid-century

dating of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, linking its thematic content to Edward III's sexual proclivities, particularly the purported rape of the Countess of Salisbury.

(<sup>3</sup>) While its late preservation is of course no indicator of its writing time, Ralph Hanna (1999), 496) has noted that the poem could have been composed as late as the mid-fifteenth century, at least half a century later than the Cotton Nero poems.

(<sup>4</sup>) The manipulation of plosives is also apparent in similar passages in *Patience*, although *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* excels at the alliterative line. "Ornamental verbal density" is of course a distinctive feature of alliterative poetry and has been much discussed (Hanna 1999, 493; see also Lawton 1982b; Duggan 1997).

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