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A Re-Hearing of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"

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As J.A. Burrow has recently reminded us, Middle English literature "requires the silent reader to resist, if he can, the tyranny of the eye and to hear. Certain of the writings ... make a further requirement. They treat the reader, not just as a hearer, but as an audience or group of hearers" (*Medieval Writers* 1). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is such a poem, a literate composition designed for oral performance, bearing the imprint of a poet skilled at once in manipulating a text and using it to affect his audience in ways outside the scope of the oral poet. It is with this dynamic between text and audience in mind that I approach the process of "re-hearing" *Sir Gawain*. In doing so I hope to achieve some clarification of what Tolkien referred to as one of the "structural failures" of the poem the failure of Mary, Gawain's protectress, to receive any further acknowledgement after Gawain twice asks her help, during his journey and in the final temptation scene.

Studies of structural repetition (Howard 1964, 430-33; Burrow 1966, 87-97) and numerological patterning (Hieatt 1968, 129-31; Eckhardt 1980, 141-55) demonstrate the Gawain-poet's ability to exploit the spatial and temporal control afforded by the technology of writing (Ong 1971, 23-27). As Kent Hieatt has shown, he consciously uses numerological patterns. Line 2,525, the last long line of the poem, echoes the opening line and reinforces

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the emphasis given to five and twenty-five in the description of the pentangle. In a similar manner, notes Hieatt, in the "companion poem *Pearl*, the line that echoes the first line of the poem is 1,212, and 12 is probably the significant numerical structure in the poem" (Eckhart, 1980, 65-78). While such numerological structuring would of course go unnoticed by an audience during performance, its existence gives us a picture of a poet able to apply a fairly sophisticated process of organization to the physical text. In this paper I will examine another method of textual structuring, one which deals primarily with color patterns rather than numerical sequences, though predictably the two appear to be interrelated.

The poem deals almost exclusively and abundantly in reds and greens. Red, the color of Gawain's symbol of perfection, the red-gold pentangle on a red field, appears ten times (see the specific reference to the word "red/rede" indicated on the chart); and green (again, as expressed in the word "grene"), associated with the Green Knight and ultimately a symbol of Gawain's imperfection, appears fifty-one times (Hieatt's study indicates that multiples of five indicate perfection, while imperfection is signaled by the addition or subtraction of the number one).

Independent of numerological studies, a possible precedent for linking color with thematic structures in composition exist in the colors or styles of rhetoric, the ornaments of diction used to embellish an argument or as figurative methods of referring to outward

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Patters of Color Structuring in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"

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appearances that are not always to be trusted.

How does the Gawain-poet use color to structure his text? Despite the lavish use of red and green, he juxtaposes these colors or mentions them in consecutive lines only twice. The first pairing occurs in Fitt I (see diagram) on New Year's Day, just after the Green Knight has entered Arthur's court and stands surveying the assembly, waiting for someone to accept his challenge:

And runishly his red ighen he reled aboute,

Bende his bresed browes, blikkand grene. (303-04)

Only on this one occasion is Bertilak associated with both colors, as he stares out of red eyes under bushy green brows. And only once is Gawain associated with both red and green, in the second pairing of the two colors a year later, in Fitt IV, again on New Year's day: just before leaving Bertilak's castle to complete the challenge he accepted on the earlier occasion, he ties the green girdle across his "royal red" velvet coat with its embroidered pentangle:

The girdel of grene silk, that gay wel besemed,

Upon that royal red clothe that rich was to shewe (2035-36)

The word red is first encountered in the Green Knight's red eyes, and its last occurrence is marked by the tying on of the girdle.

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Green is ever present. It occurs 25 times in the first Fitt ("grene," see diagram), inevitably calling to mind the numerological patterns, as do the five reds in Fitt II. It is in the second Fitt that Gawain becomes closely linked with the color red. He bears his red pentangle on his shield, red gold on a red background, and on his coat; his horse's armor has red studs, and his bedroom in Bertilak's castle has red-gold bed-curtain rings. But the fifth and final red of the second Fitt is linked not to Gawain but to his temptress, Bertilak's wife. Just as the Gawain-poet never gives her a name, he never allows her to acquire definition in terms of his color structuring. Instead, she shares the red color already so strongly connected with

Gawain. All of the characters who appear within the critical red-green pairings are thus related to a color: Gawain (and his temptress) to red, Bertilak to green in his secret existence as the Green Knight, Morgen Le Faye (who appears on the first evening of the castle visit) to the yellow of age, and a potential and possibly explicit association between blue and Gawain's protectress, Mary.

Yellow and blue emerge only once each, but this very singularity is made conspicuous by the dominance of the surrounding reds and greens. The yellow, wrinkled cheeks of the aged Morgen are juxtaposed with the youthful red of Bertilak's wife. The explicit contrast of youth and extreme age recalls the myth of Morgen as an old crone who assumes a young body in order to seduce and enchant the Knights of the Round Table (Tolkien 1967, 129).

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The third Fitt contains five greens, again echoing the pattern of repeated fives, and it is here that Gawain chooses green over red. In stanza seventy-three, during the third temptation scene, he rejects a red ring offered him by his temptress, but when she then presents the green girdle a few lines later he weakens and, in the following stanza, accepts it (see diagram; the presence of red and green in the same stanza at this key moment may have significance in terms of the overall pattern, but in the present discussion we reject it as a direct red-green pairing because the words occur in non-consecutive lines).

The poem's final primary color, blue, is encountered a few stanzas later, on the last evening of Gawain's stay in the castle when he appears in blue immediately after his confession. Why is this particular moment chosen to associate Gawain with a new color, one traditionally linked with faithfulness and spirituality? Burrow sees it as an ironic commentary from the author:

for his one act of duplicity Gawain wears blue the traditional color of faithfulness occurring here and nowhere else in the poem. (1966, 112)

But beyond the symbolic link to faithfulness which caught Burrow's attention, we detect grounds for ascribing an additional significance to Gawain's appearance at this key moment in the poem. During the century before *Sir Gawain* was written, the Virgin Mary had come to be portrayed almost exclusively in blue. While her blue cloak was

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rare in paintings and illuminations before 1300, during the next century the situation reversed itself, and she appears cloaked in blue in virtually every artistic portrayal, while at the same time the Cult of the Virgin vastly increased the frequency of these artistic representations (Coulton 1946:264-65). There is a high probability, therefore, that the audience of *Sir Gawain* would have visualized the earlier reference to Mary on Gawain's shield as a figure robed in blue, and it is tempting to infer that we are now meant to perceive Gawain's change to a blue robe as a manifestation of his conscience. Having brought his character through a succession of circumstances calculated to provoke uneasiness after confession, the poet externalizes Gawain's inner disturbance by this evocation of the conspicuously absent protectress. Just as the red of Gawain's Christian virtues is balanced by the green of Bertilak's unholy powers, the yellow of the pagan goddess Morgen, who appeared on the first evening of his visit, may well be balanced here, on the last evening, by the blue of the Christian Virgin. At any rate, the color structuring of the poem emphatically highlights Gawain's appearance in blue directly after confession.

As twentieth-century silent readers, we are unqualified to evaluate what was intended or accomplished by this fleeting moment of blue. Supportive evidence is lacking in the text itself, but may be discovered in the response of the poem's fourteenth-century audience. As I mentioned at the outset, the *Gawain*-poet spoke to "an audience or group of hearers." When his character makes his virtuoso appearance in blue, the poet is

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assailing that audience with a virtual cloud of allusive and elliptical imagery. In order to look for evidence of Mary's reappearance, we need to identify this audience more fully. The fourteenth-century reader-listeners were products of a long-standing penitential tradition and were well-informed in such basic doctrinal issues as examination of conscience, sorrow for sin, and making proper restitution for wrong (Ackerman 1958, 257). In other words, they possessed active consciences and expected Gawain, with his five-fold sets of virtues, to behave in a manner thoroughly outlined in penitential literature. The conscience that this audience shares with the poem's hero is a historically-limited phenomenon, a consequence of Christianity in general, and more specifically the *Omnis utriusclue sexus* decree of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which required annual confession of sins before a priest (Braswell 14). Conscience was without counterpart in the ancient world of Greek oral epic, which may be illustrated by comparing *Sir Gawain* with Homer's *Odyssey*. Both poems contain scenes in which the heroes retire to bed facing potentially sleepless nights, with crucial confrontations to face in the morning. As Odysseus lies in bed reliving the Cyclops adventure, a conscience plays no role in his mental state. He feels no guilt for the deaths of men who had begged him to leave the ominous cave of the monster, but recalls this incident as a former victory, for encouragement. This memory quiets his mind, or *thymos*, and only his body remains restless, tossing and turning in a purely kinesthetic anticipation of the morning's conflict until Athena comes, at once a divine model of

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rationality and an extension of Odysseus' own rational powers, and allows him to sleep.

Two thousand or so years later, when Gawain finally retires to bed on this final evening, he has enough on his mind to make him toss and turn as well, although we are never explicitly told that he does so. He has narrowly avoided seduction by his host's wife, broken a vow to that host, and very probably jeopardized his eternal soul on the eve of almost certain death. Like Odysseus, Gawain has cause to reflect on guest/host relationships that fail to follow customary expectations, but, unlike Homer, the *Gawain*-poet withholds from us the thoughts in his hero's mind at this moment, commenting tersely that he is ignorant of how well his hero slept, while acknowledging that the poor fellow does have rather a lot to think about:

If he ne slepe soundily, say ne dar I,

For he had much on the morn to

minne, if he wolde, in thought (1991-92)

Although the direct intervention of Athena in the *Odyssey* contrasts strongly with the much less tangible presence of Mary that I postulate in *Sir Gawain*, the role of each dovetails precisely with contemporary audience expectations. Athena is an externalized manifestation of the faculty of rational choice and thus *chooses for Odysseus*. Mary's more ambiguous presence evokes, for the fourteenth-century audience, a vivid impression of the unstated yet necessarily active workings of Gawain's conscience.

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Gawain must *choose for himself* and come to terms with his own decision.

In *The Medieval Sinner*, M.F. Braswell notes that the older formulaic (and more nearly oral) plots, were "never concerned with the interior processes of sin or with the complicated motives behind a real repentance", whereas:

the penitential tradition began to produce characters who were richer and more resonant.... Rather than playing a peripheral part in the action, the sinner became the central focus of the work of art, his interior nature shaped by the penitential manuals and drawn from the mental processes defined by scholastic debate. (1983, 69)

The new, more deeply self-conscious individual was reflected in a more complex level of characterization. Gawain's dilemma can exist in fiction only because the Gawain-poet knew that most of his audience had at least considered, on occasion, making equivocal confessions themselves, and so would be in sympathy with the tormented hero.

With this overview of audience expectations, then, we can consider their state of mind in more detail. What inflection does the performer adopt when reading of the events surrounding Gawain's confession, and how does the audience respond? At about two hours into a two-and-a-half hour performance, they are in all likelihood having a wonderful time. After what must have been quite a

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robust appreciation of the three bedroom scenes, they see Gawain accept and hide an object which could easily affect his host in a manner similar to the way Desdemona's handkerchief affected Othello, and which beyond that has supposed magical powers incompatible with his Christian beliefs. They then see him go to confession, and come back shriven clean enough to face doom on the following morning. He may well face doom, not in a figurative sense but in a real one, and in the minds of at least some of the audience, he may well *not* have been shriven clean enough. If our modern debate over whether or not Gawain made a bad confession (or, more recently, if it was bad, *how bad* was it?) is any indication, the audience at this point is likely to be rather divided in its loyalties and increasingly vocal; and those members who are not so quick at picking up on the obvious will be helped along by the reactions of those who are.

And then there is the fox hunt. Burrow has discussed the poet's technique of using the commonplace pattern of three occurrences with a significant break in pattern on the final repetition. The three bedroom scenes have alerted the audience to this aspect of his narrative technique; now, during the time that Gawain accepts the girdle, makes his confession and reappears in blue, Bertilak is carrying out his third hunt. He is hunting a fox, not a valuable quarry, as were the deer and boar of the first two excursions, but a rather worthless catch. What emphasis does the performer, playing up to his audience, give to the reference to the fox as a "thief" just before the scene in which Gawain accepts

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and hides the green girdle, or to the reference to this same fox as having lost his "saule" in the stanza following Gawain's supposed absolution? How if at all does he promote the parallel between Gawain's unaccustomed appearance in blue just before Bertilak gives him the pelt of the fox who has lost not only his external covering a red covering, as we all know but his soul as well? The opportunities for winks, knowing looks and expressive intonation are abundant.

Does the performer give any special emphasis to the five mentions of the name "Mary" throughout the castle visit, only one of which is not an exclamation? Her name occurs in this poem with a frequency completely out of proportion to the other poems of the Nero manuscript (it is mentioned twice in *Pearl*, in reference to the Virgin herself and not as an ejaculation, and nowhere else). Line 1942, in which Bertilak greets Gawain after the fox hunt, begins "'Mary,' quoth that other man..." If we apply the principal of Stanley Fish and others, that wherever possible the mind will create closure, for a split second here Bertilak appears to be addressing the blue-robed figure before him as "Mary."

Perhaps the strongest argument of all for Mary's appearance at this moment, however, is the growing anticipation generated by her absence, both for the audience (and the critics), and, in a kind of dread sense, for Gawain himself. She is already in the thoughts of the audience because she has been identified in the poem as his protectress, and they accordingly expect Gawain to be thinking of her as well. He has called on Mary's aid

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twice, once while lost in the forest and once nearly lost in the clutches of the temptress; now, facing the loss of the Christian's greatest possession, his soul, he is silent. But he is wearing Mary's colors.

Gawain is silent, but the audience obviously is not. The author has very good reason to step out of his normally aloof narrative mode, after he deposits his troubled hero in bed, and speak directly to them:

An ye wil a while be stille

I shall tell you how thay wrought. (1996-97)

He has anticipated an excited audience response and structured the need for the admonishment a tongue-in-cheek one into this carefully planned

narrative.

Regardless of how specific our conclusions can be, limited as they are by our inability to recreate the audience response with total certainty, it is obvious that the events surrounding the confession scene would have both stimulated the listeners and made them profoundly uneasy.

"Look at the romance conventions and patterns which would have conditioned their reaction to the events of the poem," advises A. B. Friedman:

... a medieval courtly audience would have running vaguely in the back of its mind the common pattern of a questing hero who, unlike Gawain,

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has a fulfilled amorous encounter with a goddess, nymph, fair princess or mere lady. On parting after as little as a night ... the hero receives from his grateful mistress ... a magical aid, usually a ring or girdle ... instruments of binding magic (1977, 307-09).

But religious conventions as well tug at audience associations, asserting that what appears to be an object of magic may well be an article of faith. One theme popular in medieval art concerns the young St. Thomas Aquinas, whose brothers kidnap him to prevent his entering the priesthood:

they sent a beautiful girl skilled in the whore's craft to his room to entice him with her looks, her touches, games and whatever other device she could think of. But as the saint had already accepted the wisdom of God as his spouse, he expelled the girl indignantly from his room and prayed God for the girdle of eternal chastity. Two angels appeared and put the girdle on him. (Bernen 1973, 250-01)

Some of the listeners may recall another tale about the apostle Thomas, to whom the beatified Virgin sends down her girdle as a sign of her favor (Bernen 1973, 250-51). The audience would be as likely to have such medieval religious legends "running vaguely in the back of its mind" as the more secular and courtly anecdotes. Like the red and green contrast, the religious and secular myths

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compete, and the audience's uneasiness will remain until its source is removed, and Gawain achieves the self-knowledge required of a true penitent. This self-knowledge occurs not after the first confession, with its unsettling images and innuendos, born of unresolved contrasts, but at the green chapel, when Gawain himself describes his mistake. As soon as Gawain tied the green girdle across his red pentangle, the color structure of the poem shifted out of the world of contrasts, back to one of undisturbed green no longer given specific definition by its former contrast with red. Green is simply green. The sinister chapel is an ordinary barrow or cave, the green knight a silly masquerade.

In the fourth Fitt (see diagram), the color structure's correspondence with the numerological patterns based on five and twenty-five breaks down, with one red and twelve greens, neither color in any way related to five or its multiples. But then, the five-pointed knot of the red pentangle has collapsed as Gawain's symbol, unable to withstand the loss of even one element of its five clusters of virtues. The little blood that falls on the snow after the token "tappe" on Gawain's neck, while never referred to as red, is visually powerful enough to associate itself with the first red thread beginning to unravel from that essentially fragile knot. The much tougher green one, the knotted sash, will now take its place. The story must end quickly now; along with Gawain's acknowledgement of guilt came the dramatic climax of the narrative. The audience, whose attention had been riveted to the affairs of the sinner, will be losing interest in the reformed penitent and

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getting restive. There will be no more color contrasts. The fifty-first green, appears in the baldric adopted by Arthur's court. Oblivious to the returning hero's hard-won self-awareness, they graciously ratify the new symbol in a well-bred attempt to smooth out social unpleasantness, and Gawain disappears into a bland mosaic of green-sashed courtiers.

The numerological patterns cannot influence the audience; they exist only as spatial constructs in the inert manuscript. The color structuring, however, enters into the temporal process initiated when the manuscript is read, either silently or aloud, and exerts a perceptible influence on the reader or listener. The present study was not motivated by an impulse to count color words, but rather by a suspicion that the poem's descriptive passages were exerting an influence more visual than verbal.

The author maintains this visual influence until the end of the poem. He skillfully withdraws his listeners from the kaleidoscopic and unsettling affairs of the world within the red and green pairings, and brings them to rest in the cool green shade of familiar and consistent courtly behaviour. They have been through a process. Stimulated by the intermixture of religious and secular myths as reinforced by the conscious use of color, the audience reached, during the events surrounding Gawain's confession, a high pitch of excitement, in which their exquisite awareness of Gawain's inner turmoil and uncertainty evoked, in its own turn, a fleeting awareness of his blue-robed protectress. Gawain's blue robes are one in a series of

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interacting events in the poem which serve to create this visual image. The audience's response to these events, to the extent we are able to reconstruct it, constitutes an interpretive context inseparable from the text, supplying a thematic element essential to every "re-reading," or "re-hearing" of *Sir Gawain*.

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