

## THE 'UBI SUNT' THEME AND 'SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT'

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ALTHOUGH the central meaning of this romance is the testing of a Christian Knight, its rich fabric contains much material from contemporary and traditional literature, as well as from folklore. It is the intention of this note to draw attention to the possible presence in the whole of an elegiac strand which is suggested unobtrusively.

In the poem Gawain is first shown on the level of Courtly Love, to be

*þat fyne fader of nurture* (l. 919)<sup>1</sup>

and, as a Christian

*Carande for his costes* (l. 750)

(i.e. religious observances). He is also capable finally of a perfect confession,<sup>2</sup> as Bertilak points out,

*pou art confessed so clene, beknown of þy mysses,  
And hat; þe penaunce apert..* (ll. 2391-2)

And yet he is only one knight, albeit the paragon of the Court, and that body may still have imperfections, despite the testing of Gawain on the three levels or on the three sets of values, the rules of the pastime or courtly game, the rules of 'courtoisie' and the rules of the moral law, based on the Catholic faith.

It is possible to detect in the poem a certain note of doubt as to the present moral quality of the court and the behaviour of Gawain does not really dispel this. The suggestion of mutability, a falling off from an earlier ideal, is contained in a number of questions, and, occasionally, answers, which make use of the 'ubi sunt' formula, so favoured by mediaeval writers.

The initial question which is interesting in this context is that put by the Green Knight upon his entrance:

*þe fyrst word þat he warp, 'Wher is', he sayd,  
'þe gouernour of þis gyng?'* (ll. 224-5).

Although an answer comes later (ll. 252, ff.), there is a distinct pause,

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from the edition of the poem by J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon (O.U.P.), 1925, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Burrow, John: 'The Two Confession Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Modern Philology*, Vol. LVII, No. 2, Nov. 1959, pp. 73-79.

enabling us to reflect that Arthur is indeed *sumquat childgered* (1.86). After the king has offered the stranger 'fair sports' (*pure laykeȝ*, 1.262) or even 'actual combat' (*batayl bare*, 1.277), these alternatives are rejected since

*Hit arn aboute on þis bench bot berdlez chylder* (1.280).

There then follows the offer of what will be *in þis court a Crystemas gomen* (1.283), a challenge (ll. 291-300), which is not accepted at first. This prompts a scornful comment which implies that the Court has fallen on evil days:

*'What, is þis Arpureȝ hous', quop þe þenre,  
'þat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?  
Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,  
Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?  
Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of þe Rounde Table  
Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wyȝes speche,  
For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!'* (ll. 309-315).

In the body of the poem Gawain himself is tested on the several levels mentioned above. When at the trysting place he flinches before the first blow, the Green Knight's remarks have some reference beyond his adversary's recoiling:

*'þou art not Gawayn', quop þe gome, 'þat is so goud balden,  
þat neuer arȝed for no here by byllie ne be vale,  
And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmeȝ!  
Such cowardies of þat knyȝt cowpe I neuer here.* (ll. 2270-2273)

He also suggests that this behaviour is cavilling (*kauelacion*, 1.2275), a word which unfortunately reminds us of the courtier's rebuke of Arthur's quixotic acceptance of challenges – *cauelaciounȝ on Crystmasse gomneȝ* (1.683).

Later Bertilak explains the use he had made of his wife

*I sende hir to asay þe* (1.2362);

and subsequently adds that Morgan la Faye had sent him to try them all:

*Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle  
For to assay þe surquidre, ȝif hit soth were  
þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;* (ll. 2456-58).

*Assay* catches up *asay* in 1.2362, and *surquidre* echoes *sourquydrye* of 1.311.

Taken together, these several quotations from the full text show a testing of Gawain, who is not found wanting on any serious moral issue, and a questioning of the present stature of the Round Table. While the

Court is not specifically condemned, its nature is questioned at l. 224 and ll. 310, ff., and a number of the verbal echoes suggest an implicit querying of its present nature and whether all the members could measure up to Gawain.

There was some particular stress on the 'Ubi sunt' theme in the West Midlands or South-West,<sup>3</sup> as is evidenced by the *Sayings of St. Bernard* (M.S. Harley 2253, lines 121-44) *A Luue Ron*, by 'Frater Thomas de Hales', *Of Clene Maydenhod* and the *Debate between the Body and the Soul* (also M.S. Harley 2253). It is not far-fetched to discern some use of the theme in this West Midland poem, also. Although there is no specific parallel for the interpretation of what is essentially a pair of rhetorical questions (l. 309, ff.) as a lament, the several passages, taken together, do suggest that the poet is implying a moral censure on King and court for all their light-heartedness.

As a token of their regard for Gawain

*Vche burne of þe broþerbede, a bauderyk, schulde haue,  
A bende abelef hym about of a bryzt grene, . . (ll. 2516-17).*

But this is worn and it is frankly trivial alongside the following:

*Now þat bere þe crown of þorne,  
He bryng vus to his blysse! (ll. 2529-30).*

In so many ways the Knights are shown to be attracted to outward show, while the King rejoices in foolish quibbles and oaths. Every act of Gawain's is a condemnation of the formal behaviour of the Court which is never particularly concerned with the inner religious meaning of chivalry.

<sup>3</sup> See (1) Brook, G.L. (Ed.): *The Harley Lyrics – The Middle English Lyrics of Ms. Harley, 2253*, (1956), p.15.

(2) Wells, J.E. *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1400*, (1916), pp. 389-90.