GAUVAIN AND GAWAIN:
THE TWO SIDES OF THE HERO

According to A. W. Thompson (1959: 215), Gerbert de Montreuil was the name of the writer who made a continuation of Chretien de Troyes' *Perceval* between 1226 and 1230. All along the approximately 17000 lines that make up the *Gerbert*- one of the names given to the poem- Perceval is again the main character and, as in the romance by Chretien, we have Gauvain playing a starring role. However, if the poet from Troyes still depicted Gauvain with much consideration, Gerbert de Montreuil seems determined to deprive the knight of any single trace of nobility: this is so to such an extent that the knight even rapes a lady (1922-25: ll. 12632-9). The fall of Gauvain is confirmed by his adventures in the Arthurian romances written later on in France. Two centuries later, at the end of the alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the hero (after an almost perfect performance) is praised as "pe fautlest freke pat euer on fote ¥ede" (1967: l. 2363). To suggest a reason for such differing points of view and to trace the ups and downs of Gawain is the purpose of the present paper.

A proper place to begin our search of Gawain might be his very first literary apparition, or better, we should say, the earliest recorded one. The anglo-norman William of Malmesbury includes in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (1125) the first reference to Gawain, if we leave aside the mentions to Gwalchmai in Welsh texts and his presence in the archivolt of Modena's cathedral. The passage referred to goes as follows:

> Tunc in provincia Walarum quæ Ros vocatur, inventum est sepulchrum Walwen, qui fuit haud degener Arturis ex sorore nepos. Regnavit in ea parte Britanniæ quæ adhuc Walweitha vocatur, miles virtute nominatissimus, sed a fratre et nepote Hengistii, de

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> quibus in primo libri dixi, regno expulsus, prius multo eorum detrimento exilium compensans suum; (Paris, 1888: 29-30)

Certainly, William of Malmesbury provides little information about the character himself, though very positive indeed: Walwen was nephew of King Arthur, a king himself and a warrior known by his prowess. Much more detailed is the reference to the hero in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniæ* (finished in 1137). In this well known chronicle Gualguanus' kinship and courage are again mentioned, but the author also adds some new information. King Loth, the hero's father, sent him to Rome to be brought up by the Pope: "Erat tunc filius predicti loth gualguanus nomine .xii. annorum iuvenis obsequio sulpicii pape ab avunculo traditus. a quo arma recepit" (1929: IX, xi).

These references from the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* are certainly enlightening about the hero's character, but so are some other episodes in which Gualguanus does not appear. It was in the first half of the XIIth century when *fin'amors* made its apparition in the courts of southern France, with its halo of delicacy and refinement. Surely G. of Monmouth knew the principles that ruled in the courts at the other side of the channel, so he decided to depict Cærleon, King Arthur's court, as the very centre of courtly armony- something Chrétien de Troyes would later on imitate in his romances.

> Quicumque vero famosus probitate miles in eadem erat, unius coloris vestibus atque armis utebatur. Facetæ etiam mulieres, consimilia indumenta habentes, nullius amorem habere dignabantur, nisi tertio in militia probatus esset. Efficiebantur ergo castæ quæque mulieres et milites pro amore illarum nobiliores, (1929: ix. xiii)

Oddly enough, Gualguanus- the knight who will embody courtesy in later romances- is left out of the picture: not a single reference is made by G. of Monmouth to this knight in any, let us say, cortly episode. As W.A. Nitze pointed, "clearly because to him Gauvain was a military leader unconcerned with the cultural or chivalric setting" (1953: 221). This exclusion of the knight from this earliest courtly Cærleon is certainly an important fact to keep in mind when studying Gawain's later fall.

The next apparition of the knight will be in the work of an Anglo-Norman writer, Wace's *Roman de Brut* (finished in 1155). Though directly inspired in the *Historia Regum Britanniæ*, Wace's romance presents quite a different Walwein. We have a clear reference to the knight's perfect modals, something merely suggested by G. of Monmouth. Walwein is not simply a brave warrior, but he is adorned with the virtues of the typical courtly knight. Therefore he is "pruz e cuneüz" (1938-40: l. 9856) and always shows "mult grant mesure" (1938-40: l. 9859). Even more important in the characterization of the knight is the fact that Wace will, for the first time in the history of the hero, talk about Walwein's attitude towards women. The knight himself, in a conversation with Cador, claims that he prefers peace to war.

> "…mult sunt bones les gaberies
> E bones sunt les drüeries.
> Pur amistié e pur amies
> Funt chevaliers chevaleries…" (1938-40: ll. 10769-72)

D. D. R. Owen (1968: 125) suspects that the germ of Gauvain's reputation as a "noble Philanderer" throbs in these lines. The key to understand this change of perspective in the presentation of the knight is perhaps obvious: Wace was sent to France to be brought up and he was - much more than G. of Monmouth-, a witness of French *courtoisie*, Provençal lyric and *fin'amors*. La¥amon, when talking in third person about the sources of his *Brut*, made the following comment:

> A third book he took and laid in the midst which a French cleric made, named Wace, who well could write, and he [i.e. Wace] gave it to the noble Alienor, who was the high King Henry's queen. (Wace and Layamon, 1962: ix)

He is obviously talking about Eleanor of Aquitaine, the most important supporter of *fin'amors*, the queen of troubadours. She and her daughter Marie of France much favoured the extension of the new fashion to romance, playing the role of benefactors to several authors who evidently wrote texts much to the taste of these ladies.

It is precisely in the work of the above mentioned La¥amon, his *Brut* (finished in 1190), where we can find Gawain again - though certainly a diffe-

rent character. This text is specially illuminating for us because in it, the knight is again essentially a warrior without much refinement. Totally opposed to Wace's was La¥amon's view, so much that R. S. Loomis makes the following remark:

> …, for this man of God [La¥amon] was a barbarian at heart. He seems to belong in a milieu where the softening influences of woman-worship and courtesy were unknown. (1959b: 107)

An illustrative instance of this is Gawain's conversation with Cador, an episode already referred when talking about Wace. This time, peace is to be preferred not because love or women, but "for peace maketh a good man work good works, for all men are the better, and the land is the merrier" (Wace and Layamon, 1962: 230). Even more in accordance with Loomis' words is Gawain's personal offering to his uncle Arthur to punish Guenevere's adultery: "…the queen I will, with God's law, draw all in pieces with horses" (Wace and Layamon, 1962: 260).

It seems clear that whenever the knight was presented by an author under French influence, as in the case of Wace, there were serious attempts to make him the embodiment of all the virtues of the new type of knight that was spreading in France, the knight lover. British authors, less exposed to these new models, remained loyal to the traditional knight, a warrior not specially fond of love affairs.

When Chrétien de Troyes decides to write his Arthurian romances he will not rely on Gauvain to make him the epitome of love chivalry. Surely because by his time there were other heroes who could fitt better in the new model, mainly Tristan and Lancelot. Chretien's attitude towards Arthur's nephew is ambiguous: while retaining his manners and his courage, Gauvain is not able to reach the new standards of knightly perfection and this progressively diminishes his excellence. Gauvain is surpassed by other knights who serve in the army of Love. Lancelot, Cligès or Erec are loyal lovers, devoted to only one lady, willing to fulfill her slightest whims. Gauvain, on the other hand, is still the most courteous of knights but his courtesy has nothing to do with love. We might easily trace the evolution of Gauvain's attitude towards women in Chrétien de Troyes' romances. In *Erec et Enide* and *Cligès* he has no relationship with women at all, as in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*. A

second step seems to be taken in the following two romances. In *Lancelot*, he holds a conversation with a lady (1958: ll. 544-9) whose name the author does not bother to mention. Lunette in *Yvain* attracts the knight but she is not able to keep his heart for more than a week. Finally, in the *Perceval*, he becomes the passionate lover who always finds a lady willing to be with him, but with no sense of fidelity on his side. Gauvain is perfect in everything but in love: in any of the referred romances he is able to culminate succesfully, that is according to the rules of *fin'amors*, a love affair. Not only his attitude does not fitt within the strict rules of *fin'amors*, but it is a serious threat to them. The basis are laid for Gauvain's degradation in the romances written after Chrétien de Troyes.

The unknown author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* did know for sure the romance tradition behind Gauvain; then the question arises: why did he still choose him as the protagonist of a story in which moral purity was necessary not to lose your head? The answer might be precisely that he knew for sure all the romance tradition behind Gauvain, including his first recorded apparitions in texts written in England in which- as we said at the beginning- the hero was undoubtedly quite favoured.

From his very apparition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1967: l. 109), Arthur's nephew is seen under a clearly favourable light: he is sitting next to queen Guinevere. This location of the knight best exemplifies his grandeur within this court, something largely confirmed by his acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge (1967: ll. 339-61). During the initial scenes in Camelot, only his uncle is superior to him; however we can not help feeling that the author is somehow trying to drive our sympathies more to "gode Gawan" (1967: l. 109) than to this "sumquat childgered" Arthur (1967: l. 86).

The court is celebrating New Year's Eve (1967: ll. 60ff) and everyone is making merry; the atmosphere invites to games and refinement. Gawain would surely be in his proper place.

> And sypen riche forth runnen to reche hondeselle,
> Áe¥ed ¥eres-¥iftes on hi¥, ¥elde hem bi hond,
> Debated busyly aboute ¥o giftes;
> Ladies la¥ed ful loude, po¥ pay lost haden,
> And he pat wan watz not wrothe, pat may ¥e wel trawe.
> Alle pis myrpe pay maden to pe mete tyme. (1967: ll. 66-71)

It seems clear that the Gawain this poem will celebrate will be the knight of courtesy, whose attachment to this virtue was widely known in England. In the lines of *Richard Coeur de Lion*, a poem dated around 1310, we find Gawain among a list of courteous knights:

> Many romances men make newe,
> Of good knyghtes, strong and trewe;
> Off theyr dedes men rede romance,
> Bothe in Engeland and in France;
> Off Roweland and of Oliuer,
> And of euery doseper;
> Of Alisandre and of Charlemain,
> Off kyng Arthour and off Gawayn;
> How they were knyghtes good and curteys,
> Off Turpyn, and of Ogier Daneys. (Madden, 1839: xxxviii)

Also Chaucer, in his translation of the *Roman de la Rose* would also write: "As fer as Gaweyn, the worthy,/ Was preised for his curtesy" (1988: ll. 2209-10). Even more famous is his reference to the knight in *The Squire's Tale* as "Gawayn, with his olde curteysie" (1988: l. 95).

Courtesy, however, will not be the only virtue that will endow this knight. Aware of the moral dangers implicit in certain interpretations of *cortaysye* (mainly adultery) the unknown author will present it as a part of a set of virtues and dispositions, all of them defined by the word *trawpe* (1967: l. 626). The poet uses the pentangle as a visible remainder of this whole, where no fissures can be found.

> For hit is a figure pat haldez fyue poyntez,
> And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oper,
> And ayquere hit is endelez; and Englych hit callen
> Oueral, as I here, pe endeless knot.
> For¥y hit acordez to pis kny¥t and to his cler armez,
> For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue sypez
> Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as gold pured,
> Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertuez ennourned
> in mote;
> Forpy pe pentangel nwe

He ber in schelde and cote,
As tulk of tale most trwe
And gentylest kny¥t of lote. (1967: ll. 625-39)

Christian and social virtues are present in the five points of the star. The emphasis on the moral excellence of the hero is a clear consequence of the Grial poems. However the poet is able to avoid the moral rigorism of Galahad and he depicts a knight that, though a good Christian, softens what might have been a too hard celibacy by the fact that he is the knight of a lady. The unknown poet surely enjoyed some of the innovations of the poetry of courtly love. Gawain, at the end of his career, will be a loyal and true *fin'amans*, the servant of the highest of ladies, the "quen of cortaysye" *(Pearl*, 1921: l. 432), the Virgin Mary. Her image is depicted in the inner part of Gawain's shield, just as William IX of Aquitaine did with the picture of one of his "amies" (Riquer, 1948: 20). Well we might put in the mouth of the Gawain, the lines from this English love poem dedicated to the Mother of God:

wip al mi lif yloue pat may,
he[o] is mi solas nyht and day,
my ioie & eke my beste play
and eke my louelongynge;
al pe betere me is pat day
? at ich of hire synge. (Brown, 1924: 13)

The fourteenth century was a good moment to return his lost nobility to Gawain, and England the best place to do so. The literature of *fin'amors*, which had treated the knight so badly, was dying away. Besides, as Maurice Valency writes (1958: 188), *fin'amors* was never at home in England. At the same time a new model of knight was pushing forward: Galahad, the Grial hero, with all his Christian virtues was replacing Lancelot. A certain nationalistic feeling might have put the final touch in the whole picture. We must not forget that a French audience would surely appreciate much more a Lancelot, than a Gauvain, who after all was a foreigner. Equally, in England it was Lancelot the one who came from a foreign country, being Gawain for the readers an old known character. As B. K. Ray states, "he is the hero of medieval romance nearest to the English heart" (1926: 4). Definitely, Gawain might regain his past honour.

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