

And yet 'tis strange, and very strange indeed  
 I always loved God in my foolish way;  
 Stopped to chat with Him during the busy day  
 And during sleepless nights; prayed for His lead,  
 Telling Him how I wanted to be freed  
 From Satan's heavy chains of Sin which weigh  
 On my free will filling me with dismay:  
 Sin in God's Garden is the killing weed.

Come, Jesus, save me from the grave again;  
 Enter into my body with your glory.  
 I am unworthy, but Your Word can heal  
 The many wounds that kill me with dull pain.  
 The moment has now come; repeat the story  
 of Lazarus! Yes Lord, remove Death's seal.

O God, how can so many live and die  
 Without You and Your Son, doubt your Divinity,  
 Reducing the absolute and Infinity  
 To a pseudo-metaphysical verbal lie?  
 I need You in my mind; I need You nigh  
 And far, through Time and through Eternity;  
 I need You for a Meaning and Serenity;  
 I need You down on earth and when I fly<sup>1</sup>;

I need You here, everywhere, at home, in town;  
 I need You undivided, Perfect Whole:  
 I need the Holy Ghost to shape my mind.  
 I need You most when Satan drags me down,  
 Extinguishing Your lamp to hide the Goal,  
 Then torture me with cruelty most refined.

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<sup>1</sup> Written on the 10th July 1966, while flying back home from London.

JFA. 3(1967)3(211-213)

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

by J.S. RYAN

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  
*pat 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 hatz 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 warþ, '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* (l. 86). After the king has offered the stranger 'fair sports' (*pure laykeȝ*, l. 262) or even 'actual combat' (*batayl bare*, l. 277), these alternatives are rejected since

*Hit arm aboute on pis bench bot berdlez chylder* (l. 280).

There then follows the offer of what will be *in pis court a Crystemas gomen* (l. 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 pis Arpureȝ hous', quop þæt þæt þenne,  
'þæt 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, 'þæt is so goud halden,  
þæt neuer arȝed for no here by hyllie ne be vale,  
And now þou fles for ferde er þou sele harmeȝ!  
Such cowardies of þæt knyȝt cowpe I neuer here. (ll. 2270-2273)*

He also suggests that this behaviour is cavilling (*kauelacion*, l. 2275), a word which unfortunately reminds us of the courtier's rebuke of Arthur's quixotic acceptance of challenges – *cauelaciounȝ on Crystmasse gomneȝ* (l. 683).

Later Bertilak explains the use he had made of his wife

*I sende hir to asay þe* (l. 2362);

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

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

*Assay* catches up *asay* in l. 2362, and *surquidre* echoes *sourquydrye* of l. 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 Maydenbod* 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 broperbede, a bauderyk, schulde haue,  
A bende abelef hym about of a bryȝt grene, . . (ll. 2516-17).*

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

*Now þæt 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.