

# Reappraising Gawain: Pagan Champion or Christian Knight?

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I first discovered the work of J.R.R. Tolkien over thirty years ago. But it wasn't through the books for which he is justly famous, but through his scholarship that I first knew of him. I used his edition of the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1967) done in collaboration with E.V. Gordon, long before I learned, from a friend of "a rather odd book" called *The Lord of the Rings*. Once I had my hands on that my life was never quite the same again, and though I regret that he never seemed to set as much value on the Arthurian traditions of this country as in the *Tales of the North*, I have never forgotten that my interest in Gawain – the character whom I want to talk about today<sup>1</sup> – was awoken by my reading of Professor Tolkien's work, and I like to think that he would have approved of the subject at least – if not of its conclusions!

It's my personal belief, incidentally, that the character of the Green Knight – in both his otherworldly guise and as his alter ego Sir Bercelak – of whom more in a moment – influenced Professor Tolkien in the creation of two characters in his own writings – those of Beorn in the *Hobbit* and Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings*. Though both these characters function very differently from the Green Knight, their power and larger-than-life characteristics seem to me to reflect those of the medieval characters very closely. This is of course only a personal opinion, and it awaits someone – perhaps one of you out there – to make a textual comparison between the two.

But now to Gawain – who is, in fact, probably the single most popular hero in the entire Arthurian cycle. He is the subject of some 40 texts, in four languages, and plays a major role in 95% of the rest of those great tales. Yet, despite this popularity, a curious contradiction exists concerning the way in which he is portrayed. In the Celtic texts which record his earliest exploits, Gawain is a hero of tremendous

stature and abilities. He "never came home without the Quest he had gone to seek" it says in the *Mabinogion* story of "Culhwch and Olwen". "He was the best of walkers and the best of riders. He was Arthur's nephew, his sister's son, and the first among his companions." (Gantz, 1976) Elsewhere, in that marvellous collection of Celtic story-themes known as the *Triads*, we are told that Gawain is among the "Three Fearless Men of the Island of Britain", and that he was "the most courteous to guests and strangers." (Bromwich, 1961) In a later text, he very nearly becomes the Emperor of Rome (Day, 1984).

And yet, in the Middle Ages, from the 13th century onwards with few exceptions, a very different image is projected. Here, in texts like the *Prose Tristan* (Curtis, 1963 & 1976) and the *Queste del Saint Grail* (Matarasso, 1969), Gawain is cowardly, discourteous, and something of a libertine. He is persistently criticised and unfavourably compared with other knights such as Lancelot and Percival. Finally, in Malory's great book *Le Morte D'Arthur* (Malory, 1966), he is portrayed as a murderer, capable of fanatical hatred leading to a bloody vendetta.

How did this come about, and more importantly, why did it happen at all? Of what crime, or association, was Gawain guilty in the eyes of the Medieval clerks and romancers, which called for this systematic blackening of his character?

The usual answer, from those who have noticed the phenomenon, is to say that Gawain was displaced from his position of superiority by other heroes – most notably Lancelot, who became the best of the Round Table Fellowship at the expense of earlier figures, such as Gawain. To a certain extent this is true, but I believe there is another reason, which I outlined in a book about Gawain in 1990.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was given at Oxonmoot 1994.

Put simply, I believe that Gawain was a unique figure within the Arthurian tradition, who represented the last dying strains of an ancient theme – one which dated back to the very earliest days of Celtic story-telling, and which incorporated even earlier religious beliefs. Gawain, I believe, was the Champion of the Goddess.

It is difficult to say with any degree of certainty just what the Celts understood by the term Goddess, or what, for that matter, it meant to people in general during the Middle Ages. Celtic religious beliefs are still little understood, though we do know that they worshipped deities of wood and water, sky and sea – indeed that each of the elements was of prime importance to them. So that when they spoke of “Goddesses” they were probably thinking of what we would call an abstract principle of nature, represented in the form of a woman.

The best example of this is the Goddess of Sovereignty, with whom Gawain, as we shall see, has a particular relationship. For the Celts, particularly the Irish, the concept of Sovereignty, as of Kingship, was of a unique kind of link with the earth itself. Thus the King was believed literally to mate with the Goddess of the Land – the otherworldly representative of the particular area over which he reigned. Without the sanction of Sovereignty thus gained he could not rule wisely or honestly, nor could the Kingdom remain strong or virile. This is all part and parcel of a much older idea concerning the sacredness of the land itself – which perhaps in some distant Foretime gave birth to the people who walked upon it – hence the concept of Mother Earth – or perhaps I should say, in this company “Mother Middle Earth”?

By the period of the Middle Ages much of this had been forgotten – or at least re-assimilated. The fact remains that it takes many hundreds of generations for a new set of religious beliefs to supersede an earlier stratum, and that while the process is taking place a situation exists in which the shadowy forms of earlier traditions mingle with those of the new.

This is the situation which existed during most of the time the Gawain romances were being composed, in the period between the beginning of the 12th and the end of the 14th centuries – and reactions to it came in two

distinct forms. There were those who took the stories that came to them, mostly from wandering singers and story-tellers, and who simply turned them into Medieval romances by dressing them in the fashions of the time. And there were those who saw these same stories as an opportunity to put forward the tenets of Christianity in a unique form, and who recognised the “pagan” origins of much of what they saw. It is to these writers that we owe the degraded view of Gawain, who saw in him a Champion of the old ways and therefore sought to discredit him in the eyes of the world.

In considering this view we must not allow ourselves to forget that the subject of belief, of faith and theological teaching, was much more to the fore in educated society than it is today. Yet it was among the so-called “ordinary” people that the stories that went into the making of the Matter of Britain originated. In the process of becoming literary creations, they underwent a considerable degree of change and adaptation – to suit both the era and the audience.

Thus, since the majority of that audience was made up of knightly or noble classes, who loved to hear about chivalrous deeds above everything, so the epics of the Middle Ages concerned themselves with battles and tournaments and single combats. And when later on the concept of Courtly Love appeared on the scene, so that element too was tossed into the melting pot to add its flavour to an already heady brew.

The final element was the religious one – evidenced by the sudden outbreak of interest in the Grail story, which until the beginning of the 12th century had existed as part of an obscure collection of Celtic tales and Christian apocrypha, but which by the end of the 14th Century had become one of the most important, most widely written about themes of the time.

I have gone into all this in some detail – though it is still only a generalisation – in order to lay the ground for what I want to say about Gawain. Because he seems to me to be a prime exemplar of the kind of thing I have been talking about. He began life as a simple Celtic hero, became one of the best loved and most complex figures in the Arthurian cycle, and ended up as a dark and negative character a world away from his origins. Even the authors who chose him for

their hero – or who found him almost forced upon them – did not wholly understand him. Hence their often ambiguous attitude to his character, which resulted in what becomes, at times, a misinterpretation of the facts.

Sometimes the treatment of Gawain is almost burlesque – as in the Medieval story of *Meraugis de la Portlesgues* (Busby, 1980). Here, Gawain is discovered, having defeated an earlier incumbent, as Champion to the Lady of the Castle. Meraugis, had he succeeded in defeating Gawain, would presumably have taken on the same role – since we are told that whoever becomes the champion must remain there until a better man appears.

This is a very ancient theme indeed. You'll find it summarised conveniently in Fraser's *Golden Bough* (1978) in the heading "Rex Nemorensis" or King of the Wood. It dates back to a time before history when the idea of annual kingship was still practised. In this, the chosen candidate, having undergone various tests and trials – including his mating with the reigning Queen – became king for a year. At the end of that time he had to battle with a new contender, a combat which he was not allowed to win. So a new King was appointed and the whole cycle began again.

Gradually, the period of rulership became extended. The Old King perhaps found substitutes who fought and died on his behalf. Only the Queen, the earthly representative of the Goddess, continued her uninterrupted reign, watching the cycle of champions come and go. Eventually, the role of the champion likewise became subtly altered, merging with that of the King himself and extending beyond the boundary of a single year. It is this role which I believe Gawain inherited from the many nameless heroes who had gone before. It was to ensure his continuing fame, and at the same time cause him to be steadily degraded into the unsympathetic figure we find in Malory and elsewhere.

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So much for the theory. What textual evidence can we find to support it? There is, in fact, a considerable amount, but before we look further

at this we should pause for a moment to reflect on Gawain's origins.

I have stated already that the earliest references are in a Celtic story and tradition. Here he is known as *Gwalchmai*, the Hawk of May, and earns a considerable reputation as a hero. However, it is his relationship to Arthur which is most often emphasised. He is generally described as being the son of Arthur's sister and King Lot of Orkney – the name of his mother being variously given as Anna, Gwyar, Morcades, and finally Morgause, which continues unchanged into the time of Malory.

Each of these ladies has an interesting history. Gwyar, whose name appears in several early texts, is believed to derive from an ancient Celtic word which has the meaning "to shed blood". The great Celtic scholar Sir John Rhys thought this probably meant that Gawain's mother had at one time been a Battle Goddess – and this is born out by the identification of Morcades/Morgause (Rhys, 1888). Both derive, by a complex series of mythic relationships, from the figure of the Irish War Goddess known as the Morrigan. She it was who became an implacable enemy of the hero Cuchulainn, eventually engineering his death where all others had failed. This in itself is significant because it can be proved that Gawain derives many of his heroic abilities from Cuchulainn: while the Morrigan has also metamorphosed into an even more famous character from the Arthurian legends – Morgan le Fay. This, as we shall see, is also significant.

So, we have, at the beginning of the Middle Ages, a character whose adventures were still only circulating orally, but who was soon to become a great literary hero, who derives many of his abilities from even earlier heroes, and whose mother may well be a Goddess of War.

With these elements in mind it is not really surprising that the first major appearances of Gawain in Arthurian literature, show him as a brilliant soldier, and a valiant knight – for as such he is portrayed in both Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1958), the *Bruts* of Wace and Layamon (1962), and the various anonymous Welsh chronicles which derive from them. The first signs we have of the direction which Gawain's career is about to take come in a much neglected Latin romance known

as *De Ortu Waluuanii nepotis Arthurii* or *The Rise of Gawain, Nephew of Arthur* (Day, 1984).

The title itself is important, because not only does it emphasise the importance now attached to the fact that Gawain is Arthur's nephew – rather than the son of Morgause, Morcades or Anna – thus indicating the failure of the later writer to recognise the importance of matrilinear descent – but also because it is also prophetic of the literary rise of Gawain.

*De Orto Waluuanii* tells a strange and extraordinary tale of Gawain's youthful exploits – how he was abandoned by his mother (here called Morcades) after she bore him illegitimately to Lot. Given into the care of some rich merchants, he is taken to Europe where a fisherman steals him again – along with a considerable treasure – and brings him up as his own son. After a few years the fisherman travels to Rome and sets himself up as a wealthy nobleman. He soon comes to the attention of the Emperor and becomes his close confidant. His son (Gawain) is enrolled in the Emperor's personal guard and rises quickly through the ranks, astonishing everyone with his grace, courtliness and bravery. Finally, the fisherman turned courtier falls ill and, near to death, confesses all, handing letters to the Emperor which prove that Gawain is the rightful nephew of King Arthur.

More adventures follow, as Gawain goes from strength to strength, being adopted by the Emperor, leading his armies against various enemies, defeating a pirate Queen, and finally, on the death of the Emperor, being offered the throne of the Empire. At this moment news comes from Britain of the Saxon invasion, and Gawain decides to lead a relief force to help Arthur. In Britain of course his real identity is revealed, and he decides to remain there, already beginning to prove himself a worthy knight.

This is an extraordinary story by any standard, and the brief summary given here scarcely does it justice. It shows to what extent writers at this point saw Gawain as an exemplary hero – and indeed there is a tradition which continued to see him in this light, despite an increasing number of texts which take a contrary view. It seems that the belief in Gawain as a representative of something important refused to die. In one version of the *Prose Tristan* (Curtis,

1976) – the most strongly anti-Gawain text of any – one reader or owner of the volume systematically crossed out the hero's name and substituted that of his less popular brother Gaheries! (An early form of censorship!)

Three texts which present Gawain in a wholly positive light – and which incidentally carry our argument to something like a triumphal conclusion, are:- the Middle-English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Tolkien & Gordon, 1967) – probably the most famous and well-known of his adventures – and of course edited by Professor Tolkien; the less well-known but no less remarkable poem *The Marriage of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnall* (Hall, 1976), and a Middle High German poem by Heinrich von dem Tulin called *Diu Crone* or 'The Crown' (1966).

The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is so familiar it scarcely needs summarising here. But just to recap briefly, you may remember that the Green Knight, a monstrous green skinned figure clad in green clothes and riding a green horse, rides into the hall at Camelot one Christmas and proposes a "game". He will submit to being struck a blow with his own huge axe on condition that he then be allowed to return the blow. At first no-one is prepared to take up the challenge, but when the Green Knight mocks the assembly and Arthur himself is preparing to go forward, Gawain requests that he be allowed to take the King's place. He strikes off the Green Knight's head, but sees him pick up the grisly object and hears him repeat his challenge – only that now it is to be postponed for a year. Gawain spends the time uneasily, then sets out, and after a long and arduous journey arrives at the castle of Sir Bercelak de Hautdesert, who makes him welcome and tells him that the Green Chapel, where his return meeting with the Green Knight is to take place, lies only a few miles distant.

For the three days which follow, the time leading up to the end of the old year, Gawain remains indoors, resting from his journey and reflecting on the coming encounter. He is entertained by Lady Bercelak, who while her husband goes every day to hunt game for the table, enters Gawain's bedroom and does her best to seduce him. Always in the most polite and courtly fashion, Gawain refuses her – until

on the last evening before he is due to leave he accepts a green baldric (or sash) which the Lady assures him will protect the wearer from any harm.

Next morning Gawain sets out for the Green Chapel and arrives to find the Green Knight whetting his axe. The “game” takes place, but after feinting twice the Green Knight only nicks Gawain’s neck with his axe. He then reveals that he is in fact Sir Bercelak, who had been enchanted into his monstrous shape by “Morgue the Goddess”, a hideously ugly hag whom Gawain had seen at the castle but failed to recognise as a danger. The two feints and the nicked neck are because Gawain accepted kisses from Lady Bercelak on two occasions and finally agreed to wear the green baldric. Returning to Camelot Gawain tells his story and the knights unanimously decide to wear green baldrics themselves, in token of Gawain’s courage!

Here, the Green Knight is clearly an otherworldly character, an elemental and magical being whose appearance at the Winter Festival marks him out as such – as do his colour and his ability to retrieve his head after Gawain’s blow. This theme, the Beheading Game, has been traced without much question, to Irish mythology. The nature of the “Game” itself, which is clearly a partially confused memory of the old annual kingship, and the presence of ‘Morgue’ the Goddess – or, as we know her better, Morgan le Fay, is also significant. That her real standing was recognised is made evident from this ascription, which is also repeated by Giraldus Cambrensis in his *Speculum Ecclesiae* (Baring-Gould, 1872). We have already seen that this same character, who is little more than a spiteful enchantress in most Arthurian literature, can be traced back to Morrigan the Battle Goddess. It is also more than likely that she was at one time Gawain’s mother – which gives one pause for thought, since the lovely Lady Bercelak is clearly also an aspect of the hideous Morgane in the poem. But let us leave that for a moment until we have looked at another text, *The Marriage of Gawain and Dame Ragnall*.

This poem, which dates from the 14th century but is probably based on a much earlier text, tells a remarkable tale of love and enchantment, in which Gawain is tested to the utmost and comes through with flying colours,

and in which he also establishes himself as the Champion of the Goddess.

There are two versions of the story, but the best known tells how, when Arthur was out hunting, he became separated from his companions in the magical woods around Tarn Watheling. There he encountered a powerful enchanter named Gromer Somer Jour, whose name is itself not without significance. Threatening to kill Arthur, Gromer gives him a chance to save his life by discovering the answer to a question: What is it that women most desire? He must return a year hence with the answer or face the consequences. Arthur returns to court and takes Gawain into his confidence. The two set out in search of answers, and in the year which follows collect sufficient to fill several books! Then, on his last journey before the year is up, Arthur encounters a monstrously ugly woman sitting by the roadside apparently waiting for him. She tells him that she knows the correct answer, but will only give it if Arthur promises to marry her to Gawain. Trusting in his nephew’s honour Arthur agrees and returns to the court with the hag, who is called Ragnall. Though clearly taken aback Gawain agrees to fulfil the bargain, and preparations for the wedding are put in motion. Guinevre tries to persuade Ragnall to have a quiet ceremony, but she insists on a full-scale celebration. The Court mourns Gawain as though he were about to go to his death, and Arthur sets off to keep his rendezvous with Gromer. There he gives the books of answers he and Gawain had collected but the enchanter throws them aside. Then Arthur gives Ragnall’s answer and with a cry of rage Gromer admits it is correct – though he curses his “sister”, who is the only one who could have told the King.

Back at the court the wedding of Gawain and Ragnall is celebrated, and after a dinner in which Ragnall astounds everyone by her appalling table manners, the couple are escorted to the bridal chamber and left alone. Gawain can scarcely bear to look at his bride, but when she demands a kiss he courteously and gently obliges – to find that he now hold in his arms a beautiful woman! She explains that she was enchanted into this shape by – yes, you guessed it – Morgan le Fay, and that Gawain must now make a further decision – whether he will have



her fair by night and foul by day, or vice versa. Struggling to envisage the outcome of either decision Gawain finally tells Ragnall that she must be the one to decide, since it affects her just as much as him. With a cry of joy Ragnall declares that the final part of the spell is now undone – for Gawain has, of course, given her the thing that women most want – sovereignty, which in this instance, as in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* (1912), which as you will have recognised tells much the same story – the sovereignty described is that of the woman over her husband (an important factor then as it maybe still is). The underlying meaning however, and of obvious importance to our theory, is the other sense of sovereignty, as something given by the Goddess of the land to her Kingly Champion.

Now in this story we have a similar situation to that which we found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. There is the otherworldly challenger who must be met with again in a year (and in the case of Gromer Somer Jour, whose name means Man of the Summer's Day, we are right back in the ancient myths of Seasonal battles for the Maiden of Spring). Then there is the ugly old hag, who is under the enchantment of Morgan. And the question of Gawain's fidelity, upon which the whole tale revolves. Also, I do not think we will be stretching matters too far if we see in the foul and fair aspects of Ragnall the foul and fair aspects of Lady Bercelak, who is, of course, also Morgue the Goddess.

So you will see the point we have arrived at. Within the structure of these two poems, both of which originated in a part of the country – the West Midlands – rich in ancient culture and Goddess lore, in which Gawain is rigorously tested by the earthly representatives of a Goddess. A test which involves the question of sovereignty in *Gawain and Ragnall*, and of the yearly test of the Beheading Game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The combination of these two gives us a scenario in which Gawain is tested by the Goddess, passes her trial, and receives as his reward her favours – marrying or mating with her just as the ancient Year Kings once did in order to win their tenure as her Champion.

By extension this leads to a further understanding – that Gawain, as Arthur's closest relative, his sister's son (long recognised among the Celts and elsewhere in the ancient world as a most potent relationship), is standing in for Arthur himself as Champion of Britain's sovereignty! So whether we see Gawain as Morgan's son, as her Champion, or her lover – in each of which roles we have seen him, and which recur in other texts not discussed – he is still fulfilling the same ancient archetypal role, as the Kingly Champion of the Land.

Just how clearly the medieval authors recognised these facts we cannot say with any degree of certainty. That they knew something of the truth is indicated by the manner of Gawain's gradual descent from hero to murderer and libertine. Yet even in the latter case, where he is consistently portrayed as light of love, as being unable to remain faithful to any one woman for more than a day – even here we can see a reflection of his original role. He who was the servant and Champion of the Goddess of course loved all women, but as her earthly representatives. To the medieval, and especially the Christian interpreters of the story this could only be seen in the way it was, by making Gawain an opportunist who played upon his fame and good looks to enable him to bed as many women as possible. Only in a few romances, such as those we have examined here today, did a distant echo of his original role remain, embedded in the marvellous adventures of the Round Table knights.

In short, the answer to the question posed in the title of this talk: is Gawain a Pagan Champion or a Christian Knight? is that he is both, and that neither is mutually exclusive of the other since both roles are shown to overlap at almost every point.

One final thought. The greatest adventure open to the Round Table chivalry was the Quest for the Grail – itself a symbol which draws upon both Pagan and Christian imagery. In every single Arthurian text save one, where the details of this quest are related, Gawain is excluded from the final achievement, which is left to Percival or Galahad. The one exception, the *Diu Crone* of Heinrich von dem Tulin, makes Gawain the unequivocally successful candidate. Nor should we be surprised to discover that this

text, written in the 14th Century, contains some of the most primitive Grail material. The suggestion being, as far as I am concerned, that at one time this adventure also had Gawain as its hero, and that the symbolism was once again correct – for the Grail, whatever else it may have become, began life in the Celtic traditions as a Cauldron of Rebirth and Inspiration belonging to the Goddess. Surely proof enough of Gawain's original role, if more is needed.

I can think of no better way to end than by reading to you a version of an anonymous medieval poem translated by Professor Tolkien himself. He gave it the title "Gawain's Leave-Taking" and it was printed in the posthumous collection of modern English versions which include his own rendition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1975).

### Gawain's Leave-taking

Now Lords and Ladies blithe and bold,  
To bless you here now am I bound:  
I thank you all a thousand-fold,  
And pray God save you whole and sound;  
Wherever go you on grass or ground,  
May he you guide that nought you grieve,  
For friendship that I here have found  
Against my will I take my leave.

For friendship and for favours good,  
For meat and drink you heaped on me,  
The Lord that raised was on the Rood  
Now keep you comely company.  
On sea or land or where'er you be,  
May he you guide that nought you grieve.  
Such fair delight you laid on me  
Against my will I take my leave.

Against my will although I wend,  
I may not always tarry here;  
For everything must have an end,  
And even friends must part, I fear;  
Be we beloved however dear  
Out of this world death will us reave,  
And when we brought are to our bier  
Against our will we take our leave.

Now good day to you, goodmen all,  
And good day to you, young and old,  
And god day to you, great and small,  
And grammercy a thousand-fold!  
If ought there were that dear ye hold,  
Full fain I would the deed achieve—  
Now Christ you keep from sorrows cold  
For now at last I take my leave.

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## Bletchley Junction

"For my part, I cannot convince myself that the roof of Bletchley station is more 'real' than the clouds."

Some of us nowadays may find ourselves baffled by Tolkien's reference here, which occurs in the essay "On Fairy Stories". Why did he use this particular station as an example and not Oxford station, or Paddington, for the matter of that? The explanation is actually quite straightforward.

In the years between the two world wars, and also no doubt during and before the first one, the journey between Oxford and Cambridge was normally made by train. It apparently almost

always involved an interminable delay at Bletchley Junction. So much so, in fact, that "Bletchley Junction" became a standing joke, no doubt equally so at both universities, as representing a sort of limbo between the One Place and the Other. By the time *The Lord of the Rings* came to be completed, the day of the motorist was come, and eventually there was no train service of any kind provided between Oxford and Cambridge. But the legend lingered long afterwards.

John Ellison