

THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE AS REFLECTED IN THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF *Sir Gawain*

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Sir Gawain, as a romance, conforms to Pickering's classification of the fortune narrative as it employs the Boethian scheme of history in narrative literature and «recounts the exploits and successes, the perils and misfortunes, renewed successes and final 'happiness ever after' of heroes, heroines in purely Boethian terms». (1) Moreover, as the hero of a typical Arthurian romance, Gawain, after seeking and accomplishing his adventures, returns to Arthur's court, which is again defined by Pickering as «the degree of success which is the normal goal of the chivalrous knight.» (2)

However, the poet reinforces this return to the court and the motif of regained happiness with various other cyclic motifs, such as, the cycle of the seasons, definitely marked with the story beginning and ending with the New Year, and cyclic and elaborate symmetrical construction of the poem. The use of various cyclic motifs and the symmetrical construction of the poem point to the poet's concern of establishing close ties between the poem's form and content.

The poet's intention of establishing ties between form and content is evident from his extensive use of symbols such as the

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(1) *Literature and Art in the Middle Ages* (Florida : U of Miami, P. 1970) 191.

(2) Pickering 191.

pentangle, the 'luf-lace', the hunts and his use of numerical construction; (3) all of which illustrate his meticulous treatment of his material, as quite unusual in the romance tradition. Similarly, the poet establishes a strict relationship between the form and the content in the Pearl. The number of the stanzas of the poem and the stylistic tie established with the repetition of a key word at the end of each stanza, echoed in the following stanza and the last and first stanzas, of the poem lead to a round structure referring us to the roundness and the perfection of the pearl and the rosary. (4)

Donald R. Howard draws attention to the fact that the cyclic view of time was emphasized especially in the fourteenth century not only through the natural cycles such as the cycle of the seasons, the sun, the moon and the generations but also through the span of time of contracts and taxation and various other concepts. Moreover, the Wheel of Fortune implies a cyclic view of events. (5) Similarly, the cyclic construction and the deliberately established symmetries in *Sir Gawain* are reminiscent of the Wheel of Fortune on which Gawain has ascended and down which he descends to experience a fall only to resume a humbler but spiritually more enlightened existence, with the Green Knight who in fact has taken over the role of Fortune.

The poet employs the medieval concept of the Wheel of Fortune, which is also recurrent in the definition given by Chaucer's Monk :

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- (3) See Donald R. Howard, *The Three Temptations* New Jersey, Princeton : Princeton UP, 1966) 223 ff. «Structure and Symmetry in *Sir Gawain*», *Speculum*, 39 (1964) : 425-433, Francis Berry «*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*» in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* ed. Boris Ford, rev. ed. 1959 Vol 1 (Penguin, 1975) 146-156, Henry L. Savage «The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain*», *JEGP*, 27 (1928) : 1-15, Muriel Ingham and Lawrence Barkley «Further Animal Parallels in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*», *ChauR*, 13 (1978) : 384-386, R. F. Fleisner «The Mystical Meaning of Five», *ES*, 46 (1965) : 45, A. Kent Heatt «*Sir Gawain: Pentangle, luf-lace, Numerical structure*», in *Silent Poetry* ed., Alastair Fowler (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 116-140.
- (4) See Ian Bishop, *Pearl in its Setting* (Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1968) 27ff., Charles Muscatine, *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer* (Notre Dame : U of Notre Dame P, 1972) 41 ff.
- (5) See *The Three Temptations* 265-266.

The harm of hem that stode in heigh degree,
 And fillen so that ther has no remedie
 To brynge hem out of hir adversete.
 For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee,
 Ther may no man the cours of hire witholde.
 Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee;

(Monk's Tale 1991-1997)⁶

In the beginning of the poem, Gawain enjoys perfect «prosperitee» in this sense, however, his fall follows. In the end, although he is welcomed at the court of Arthur, the scar of his wound and the humility he has experienced in his encounter with the Green Knight remains with him.

In the beginning of the romance, Gawain is presented as a perfect knight endowed with all the religious, martial and social virtues. During the feast, he is seated on the dais by Guinevere as an evidence of his high status among the knights of the Round Table. His virtues are illustrated by his emblematic costume before he sets out to seek the Green Knight. In accordance with the *effictio* technique the poet gives a full physical description of Gawain from head to foot. The *effictio* and the *notatio* are skillfully combined in the shield of Gawain; thus, his moral and spiritual qualities are displayed. In fact, contrary to Stephanie J. Hollis' view, who claims that Gawain's preparation is only for a physical test due to the armour he puts on, (7) we may argue that, the arming scene which follows the medieval mechanics of writing by giving a detailed *notatio* very skillfully attached to the *effictio*, the poet prepares us for a moral quest, during which the moral qualities of the knight will be tested.

The most significant items of Gawain's costume are his head-gear and his shield. The shield is described in detail. The helmet and the cloth attached to it are decorated with the medieval iconography of love (605-618) (8) reminiscent of Love's costume in the

(6) Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1957).

(7) «The pentangle Knight: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight», ChauR, 15 (1980): 267-281.

(8) All further quotations are from *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight in The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, ed. Boris Ford, Vol 1 The Age of Chaucer (1959, Middlesex: Harmondsworth, 1975).

Romance of the Rose. These decorations refer to Gawain's courtly aspects, that is, the knight as a social being. The second item of his costume, which significantly reveals his traits, is his shield. The shield bears the pentangle; the endless knot in gold. Both the endless knot and the gold symbolize the spiritual perfection which the poet projects to the bearer of the coat-of-arms. Moreover, the pentangle symbolizes the five set of five virtues that the knight embodies. The poet elaborates these five set of five virtues, symbolized by the five corners of the pentangle (640-665). Gawain derives his knightly valour and martial success from his faith, the wounds of Christ and the joys of the Virgin Mary, and as a manifestation of his spiritual devotion, he carries her picture in his shield. Gawain's «trawthe» encompasses his faithfulness to his Lord, to his liege-lord and to his word. The last set of the five virtues is related to his social conduct. The poet explicitly names «cortaysie». He has made a reputation as the «gentilest knight of lote» (639). His fame has reached the castle where he stays for a few days, before he leaves for his appointment with the Green Knight. When his identity is disclosed at the castle, there is a commotion among the guests, and their expectations are to hear about and see the exposition of the most courteous manners:

'Now shal we semlich . se sleghtes of thewes
And the teccheles termes of talking noble.
Which spede is in speche, unepurd may we lerne,
Sin we half fonged that fine fader of nature;
God has geven us his grace . godly for sothe,
That such a gest as Gawayne . grauntas us to have,
When burnes blythe . of his burthe shal sitte
and elnge.

In menyng of maneres mere
This burne now shal us bring.
I hope that may him here
Shal lerne of luf-making.'

(916-927)

The most important point about the symbolism of the pentangle is that it is an endless knot, each virtue leading to the other one and all of them forming an unbroken whole symbolizing the perfection of the knight. A breach in any one of these aspects would cause a break in the knot impairing his moral excellence.

The poet employs various items of costume and gems in portraying Gawain as an ideal knight, whom Fortune has favored. After Gawain takes up the challenge of the Green Knight to defend the honor of Arthur and the Round Table, his fortune begins to deteriorate. He, very courteously, asks King Arthur to grant him the quest in complete humility stating that he is neither the best nor the boldest of the knights, except for the noble kinsman blood of Arthur running in his veins he does not deem himself to be worthy. This is the first speech of Gawain and he displays only positive values yet. However, after he takes up the search for the Green Knight his failings begin. The spiritual pentangle that Gawain embodies begins to disintegrate. His failings that lead to one other can be studied in three aspects.

The first aspect of his failings may be related to his martial prowess. The martial status of Gawain is not developed much in the romance. His adventures requiring courage are dealt with few lines. He fights with monsters, creatures and foes, and overcomes them. The beheading game may be classified in this group also, as it involves two men of arms and the exchange of blows, hence, has the single combat motif. Gawain does not come victoriously out of this trial. He bends to receive the blow, but he flinches when the first blow comes, displaying cowardice. He gives the Green Knight a chance to insult him :

'Thou art not Gawayne,' quoth the gome, . 'that is so goud
That never arghed for no here . by hille ne be vale, halden,
And now thou flees for ferde . er thou fele harmes!
Such cowardise of that knight : couthe I never here.

(2270-2273)

As the Green Knight states, Gawain has behaved contrary to the fame he had earned formerly. The pentangle knight has failed in risking his life for knightly honor.

The second of his failings may be classified as his social conduct according to medieval deportment and code of behaviour. Gawain reaches Bertilak's castle after much hardships and is received there warmly. Although he readily discloses his identity at the castle, he fails to inquire after the host's identity or the name of the castle. He learns the identity of the lord of the castle only after the Green Knight reveals the fact that he is the same person with the

castellan and his name is Bertlak de Hautdesert. P.B. Taylor emphasizes Gawain's neglect in inquiring the name of the lord and his readiness in giving his name during his stay at the castle as both a breach of courtly behaviour and also a disadvantage according to the belief of name magic. (9) The revelation of his identity makes him vulnerable. Moreover, he is expected to live up to the standards of courtly perfection that his name and fame imply. He forces the limits of courtesy and courtly behaviour in resisting the temptations and the questioning of the lady. As far as the circumstances do not try him, Gawain is perfectly courteous as in the courtly parley after mass when he has been introduced to the lady, and offers his services to her (975-76).

During the first two temptations, the lady tests Gawain's courtesy and chastity by offering herself and demanding the most courteous of the knights to engage in love games. Gawain, in all three attempts prefers humility and humbly refuses the qualities assigned to him.

The most evident blow to his courtesy and courtly conduct comes after the three blows he receives from the Green Knight. As he jumps up seeing his blood drop on the snow without decapitation, he rudely tells the Green Knight that the blow has been payed, and as he has missed he cannot strike another blow:

'Blynne, burne, of thy bur, . . . bede me no mol
I haf a stroke in this sted . withoute stryf hent.
And if thou rechis me any mo, . I redyly shal quite,
And yeide yederly agayn, . and therto ye tryst,
and foo.

Bot on stroke here me failles
(The covenant shap right so,
Forned in Arthure's halles)
And therefore, hende, now hool!

(2322-2330)

His anger and uncourtliness are exposed by the Green knight's reply making it clear that he has no intention whatsoever of trying another

(9) «Blyse and blunder' Nature and Ritual in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,» *ES*, 58 (1969) : 168 and «Commerce and Comedy in Sir Gawain,» *PQ*, 50 (1971) : 1-15.

time; the contract has been fulfilled. When the Green Knight discloses his identity and announces the testing to be a scheme of his own device, Gawain experiences such a moral blow that in self defence he passes into a long speech in the misogynistic vein blaming woman for the misfortunes in man's life (2409-2426). Such an attack on woman as the originator of sin and arch-tempter ruins Gawain's reputation as the most courteous knight of the Round Table. This attitude is completely out of place in a romance hero who has made a reputation with his devotion and service to the lady. Moreover, he brings himself into conflict with his trappings which are the reflection of his spiritual qualities. When he slanders women, mainly alluding to the Biblical tradition, he is carrying the picture of the Virgin Mary in his shield. The pangs of self inflicted failure make him forget his courtly deportment.

Gawain's devotion to the pentangle fails yet in another aspect; his devotion to his Lord and Virgin Mary. Although he has been stated never to fail in battle drawing his strength from his faith (644-650), he does not take up this quest fearlessly. His faith is not strong enough to overcome his fear and he seeks protection in the magic girdle as opposed to the Christian faith as epitomized in the Lady's picture and the pentangle he bears on his shield. In the third temptation scene, he refuses to accept the ring saying that he has nothing worthy to give as a present to the lady. However, he accepts the girdle when its protective powers are made known to him. Hence, his sin cannot be defined as covetousness (10) but as a lack of faith in God. He gives in to fear. The proper attitude for a knight is «to be indifferent to one's life in the world but yet to preserve it, to use the world well and, yet to love it little.» (11) His life should not have been more important than his faith and his knightly valour. As in the shape of the endless knot, one failure leads to the other. He takes the magical girdle in human frailty and he keeps it, not exchanging it for the castellan's earning of the day as agreed upon in the contract. Hence, he breaches his pledge to the lord of the castle. The silence of Gawain in this matter tarnishes his virtue of «trowthe» double fold. He has not only withheld the girdle from the

(10) See Francis Soucy, «Gawain's Fault : 'Angardez Pryde'» *Chaucer*, 13 (1978) : 166-77.

(11) Donald R. Howard, «Structure and Symmetry».

lord and, thus, not kept his word but also by medieval social codes he has been disloyal to his host.

As discussed above, Gawain's qualities, as emblemized on his shield have been tested and he has failed to some degree in many. The application of the concept of Fortune and the Wheel of Fortune in the poem is realised not only through the hero's experience of deteriorating fortune and fame, but also by the cyclic construction of the poem. The cycle is implied geographically, linguistically and chronologically.

Geographically Gawain sets out on his quest from Arthur's court, he travels north into North Wales and then into fairy land. After his encounter with the Green Knight he completes his journey again at Camelot. Chronologically the romance begins with New Year and ends after the following New Year, from one winter to the other. The cycle of the seasons is especially emphasized with reference to the change of seasons (498-535). Linguistically the poem's beginning and ending echo with various repetitions, binding it to a cycle: the siege of Troy (1-2 and 2525), mention of Brutus as the legendary ancestor (13 and 2523, 2524), King Arthur 26, 29 and 2522) and the Round Table (39 and 2519).

The incidents and setting are established symmetrically in the poem. There are two courts, two lords; Arthur and Bertilak, two ladies; Guinevere and Lady Bertilak, two New Year festivities, two contracts made with Gawain, two items of costume with emblematic significance; the pentangle-shield and the green girdle, two visits to the chapel, two confessions, two arming scenes before departure. (12) These similarities correspond to each other and form the spokes of the wheel if the line of action is taken as a cycle. The wheel may be intended to signify the Wheel of Fortune upon which Gawain had ascended formerly. His failings correspond to the falling rotation of the Wheel of Fortune. The agent of Fortune exposes him to be unworthy of his fame.

The role of Fortune is taken up by the Green Knight in this case. The well known characteristics of Fortune are mutability, testing of man and trickery. The Green Knight is responsible for exposing Ga-

(12) See for further details Howard, «Structure and Symmetry» and *The Three Temptations*, 244 ff.

wain's weaknesses in the narrative and he achieves this through the use of disguise and trickery.

Fortune's prominent feature is her mutability. In some representations she is depicted as Janus headed (13) implying her ever changing favors. This element of mutability and double identity is also the skeleton of the Green Knight's character. He changes his physique to test the glory of the knights of the Round Table, and in this case the best of them. Gawain: «the faultiest freke, that ever on fote yede. / As perle bi the white pese is of pryse more, / So is Gawayne in god fayth, bi other gay knightes» (2363-2365). The changing faces of Fortune can be applied to the Green Knight both symbolically and literally. Bertilak's hue and form change in the flow of the romance: He appears first as the Green Knight; green in hue and gigantic, later in normal human form as Bertilak, and in the second beheading scene again as the Green Knight. Symbolically he represents the changing favors of Fortune.

The Green Knight plays on the gullibility of man. In both of the contracts undertaken, that is, the exchange of blows and the exchange of winnings, Gawain makes the deals without being fully aware of the probable consequences. However, in the second contract according to medieval practices he should not have been fully unaware of his vulnerability in accepting to remain in the castle instead of going hunting with the lord. Idleness was one of the seven deadly sins that led the way to other sins. Therefore, hunting was a noble activity that the knights could engage in to prevent sin. (14) Gawain would not have been subject to the temptations if he had made a wiser choice. Gawain's choice, prompted by the Green Knight, prepares his fall. The pretended innocence of Bertilak in proposing the game of exchange is similar to Fortune's treachery. Bertilak later confesses that the trials of the knight were undertaken by the lady on his bidding :

... that ilke wouen girdel,
Myn owen wyf hit thee weved; I wot wel for sothe.
Now know I wel thy cosses; and thy costes als.
And thy wowing of my wyf : I wroght hit myselfen.

(13) Pickering, plate 8b.

(14) See Marcelle Thiébaux, *The Stag of Love* (Ithaca and London : Cornell UP, 1974) 76ff.

The dual nature, that is, the disparity in appearance and reality of Bertilak's intentions resemble Fortune's practices.

The element of game that the victims, if we may say so, partake in without full recognition of the scheme, is another element that sets up the Green Knight as Fortune in the romance. In **The Consolation of Philosophy** Fortune's assuming of different faces and her distribution of favors according to her whims and

the Wheel are constantly referred to as «game» and her realm is referred to as her «playground.» (15) Similarly, throughout the romance the Green Knight is the ruling power, the instigator of games. He sets the rules and he grants favors. He is the figure who is in full authority, controlling the flow of events in the romance. He challenges the knights and finally Gawain to take up the game on his terms : «Bot if thou be so bold, as alle burnes tellen, Thou wil grant me godly, the gomen that I ask/bi right» (272-273). The second contract imposed on Gawain during his top at the castle may also be taken as a game of exchange. In this aspect the Green knight resembles Fortune, as she also rules the lievs of men.

Even in adversity Fortune may prove profitable. Boethius' *Philosophy* elaborates this situation : «there are times when she [Fortune] stops deceiving and helps man. I mean when she reveals herself, when she throws off her disguise and admits her game.» (16) This outline of action is applicable to the Green Knight's disclosure of his true identity after the three blows he deals Gawain (2445) and his revelation of the fact that he devised the temptations (2358-2361). The stroke of ill-luck causes the victim to bemoan his situation and he always finds it hard to accept it. Gawain learns the game and when the Green Knight reveals his motives for his undertakings, he is embarrassed of his failings :

That other stif mon in study . stod a gret while,
So greved for greme . he gryed withinne.
Alle the blode of his brest . blende in his face,
That al he shrank for shome . that the shalk talked.
(2369-2372)

(15) Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (Penguin, 1969) 57, 76.

(16) Boethius 76.

Gawain's shock is double fold; he has experienced a fall, a change of fortune leading to failure and he has been exposed to be less worthy than he was known to be. However, his failure has brought on self recognition and hence, a spiritual regeneration. He has trusted in his qualities and has shown human concern for his flesh. These weaknesses have caused him to breach many of his virtues, as he himself expresses :

'Lol ther the faissing, .foule mot hit falle!
For care of thy knobbe . cowardyse me taght
To acorde me with covetyse, . my kinde to forsake,
That is largess and lewte . that longes to knightes.
Now I am fawty and falce, . and ferde haf ben ever
Of trecherie and untrawthe: . bothe bityde sorwe
and care!

(2378-2384)

He has definitely benefited of his misfortune. In the future he will guard against pride and he will always keep in mind the frailty of the human flesh and hence he has achieved true humility. He promises to wear the green girdle to guard him against sin by reminding him of his frailty :

'Bot your gordel' quoth Gawayne. 'God you foryeldel
That wil I weide with good wille, . not for the winne golde,
Ne the saynt, ne the silk, . ne the syde pendaundes,
For wele ne for worchyp, . ne for the wlonk werkkes,
Bot in synge of my surfet . I shal se hit ofte,
When I ride in renoun, . remorde in myselven
The faut and the faintyse . of the fleshe crabbed,
How tender hit is to entyse . teches of filthe;
And thus, when pryde shal me prik . for prowes of armes,
The loke to this luf-face . shal lethe my hert.

(2429-2438)

In this aspect also the Green Knight carries out the duty of Fortune, as Philosophy defines it :

bad fortune.. is more use to a man than good fortune.
Good fortune always seems to bring happiness, but deceives you with her smiles, whereas bad fortune is always truthful because by changing she shows her true fick-

leness. Good fortune deceives, bad fortune enlightens. With her display of specious riches good fortune enslaves the minds of those who enjoy her, while bad fortune gives men releases through the recognition of how fragile a thing happiness is... by her flattery good fortune lures men away from the path of true good, but adverse fortune frequently draws men back to their true good like a shepherdess with her crook. (17)

This exactly defines the Green Knight's function in the romance; through his failings he has taught Gawain his true standing and, thus, he has achieved a fuller awareness of his human condition. His experiences have made him a better Christian, avoiding pride and seeking humility with a fuller recognition of man's standing between the brute and the angelic, striving for perfection but nonetheless not achieving it.

Another similarity between Fortune and the Green Knight is the nature of the awareness they arouse in humankind. What Fortune bestows upon man helps man to achieve a higher level of awareness but interestingly enough this experience is not generally shared by the community; it remains a private achievement. (18) Gawain has matured through his encounter with the Green Knight, but although he narrates his adventure and fully confesses his shortcomings, the gay court of Arthur fails to grasp the significance of the green girdle. They merely adopt the girdle as an insignia of their order. The girdle may be worn by others but Gawain is the only one to carry the scar of the wound as a sign of his failure and his recognition of his weakness.

To sum up, the cyclic thought predominant especially in the fourteenth century is also visible in **Sir Gawain**. The poet employs the cyclic view of time by setting his narrative in a span of time stretching from one winter to the other, emphasizing the seasonal and daily cycles of the sun. Moreover, he deliberately enforces the notion of the cycle by linking the beginning and the ending of the poem linguistically. Geographically the course of the action also has implications of a cycle; Gawain sets on his quest from Camelot and

(17) Boethius 76.

(18) Boethius 63.

ends it at the same location. The poet's intention of establishing the strict relation between form and content, as evident in his other works, suggests the use of another medieval cyclic concept : the Wheel of Fortune. The application of the concept is further supported by the role assigned to the Green Knight and Gawain's deteriorating status. Gawain enjoys a good reputation in the beginning of the poem as the ideal knight symbolically expressed in his pentangle coat-of-arms. Fortune has bestowed her favors upon him, but throughout the course of his trials he loses her favors, and through his misfortune comes to the realization of his human frailty. The Green Knight has been assigned various characteristics of the Boethian Fortune; he overpowers all the characters in the romance and through his trickery and changing nature exposes Gawain's true qualities. However, his guiles which cause Gawain's fall are also the road to redemption, as they bring about a spiritual awakening in the latter. Hence, the various cyclic motifs are used to establish the poem as a 'fortune narrative' with the Green Knight assuming the functions of Fortune in Gawain's fall and initiation.