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BEST OF GAWAIN: A COMPARISON OF *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT* AND THE *ROMAN VAN WALEWEIN*

This article intends to consider the Middle Dutch romance *Roman van Walewein* from a comparative point of view. The Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the body of interpretative criticism behind it, I take to be sufficiently well-known to refer to that text without much comment. What I have to say is about the *Roman van Walewein*. The approach through *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has been chosen because comparison of the two texts elicits its own questions, which may give a new perspective on the *Roman van Walewein*. I have three or four such questions.

It is, of course, rather striking that both in the Low Countries and in England the most sophisticated romance of either corpus is a Sir Gawain-romance — compared to the position of Sir Lancelot in France, Parzival in Germany, Tristan in Iceland and Italy — and that we are dealing, in both cases, with original compositions. This begs two questions: what do the two countries have in common; and why should it be Sir Gawain?

To begin with the first: In both England and Flanders the rise and development of vernacular literature is late and problematic, and involves disconnection from French sources and French culture. In both countries the central (royal) courts remain French-oriented, but they also appear to be losing interest in romances, most clearly in England in the fourteenth century.[1] Both the Gawain-texts under consideration were written for peripheral courts, with relatively more direct contact with the middle classes and more naturally with the vernacular languages and cultures.[2] Felicity Riddy has published an article recently in which she compares *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Roman van Walewein* in terms of Exchange.[3] She argues convincingly that both

[1] Van Oostrom makes a similar claim for the Court of Holland in the fourteenth century, in Van Oostrom 1987, 279.

[2] Bart Besamusca confirms this point for the *Roman van Walewein* in Besamusca 1991a.

[3] Riddy 1996.

texts reflect precisely that position, i.e. of having been written for secondary courts, which were more naturally aware of the dynamism between court and trade. She also explains the absence of redundant, non-integrated details in that light, and argues that gift-exchange plots are naturally circular.

So it is interesting to notice that the circular structures of both texts, which are usually explained as typical folktale-structures, may have a function beyond the generic choice of a folktale manner of presentation. That choice is remarkable enough in either case, as possibly indicative of an anti-courtly or anti-French attitude. The fact that the plotline of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is predominantly circular is obvious, as the references to Troy at the beginning and end of the story confirm; also the cyclicity of the seasons is markedly prominent. And the circularity of plot of the *Roman van Walewein* has been quite incontrovertibly demonstrated by P. Minderaa in his analysis of its concentric-circles structure.[4] In the light of Riddy's article we may now assume that these circular structures are possibly rooted in the social situation in which both texts were produced and were to have their appeal.

Which brings me to the second question. Sir Gawain is traditionally, it seems to me, connected with cyclic experiences — compared to the much more linear-idealistic Sir Lancelot, or Sir Kay, or Sir Galahad, Gawain 'carries' more naturally the discussions of the possibility or tenability of the linear courtly ideals in a cyclic reality. In the typical Gawain-romances it is in the cyclic 'real' world that these ideals are experienced, tested, shown as true, time and again, in ever new challenges. These are not stories of Man and Ideal. They are not stories of growth, of *enfances*, or effectiveness proved finally; but of inter-relations. And they are specifically not about the most important of the linear courtly concepts: *fin amours*.

J.D. Janssens has demonstrated on various occasions that the *Roman van Walewein* elicits comparisons with Lancelot by means of intertextual references, specifically to Chrétien's *Chevalier de la Charrette* and the *Continuation Perceval* by Gerbert.[5] He points to the parallel between the chess-set and the Holy Grail in their first and final appearances, and to the Sword Bridges, by which the reader is manipulated to conclude that Walewein is unlike Lancelot: Walewein does *not* derive his 'honor' from extatic (adulterous) courtly love, nor his inspiration from love-service. King Amoraen's providential death is typical for the

[4] Minderaa 1958.
[5] Janssens 1982a and Janssens 1989.

Roman van Walewein in that it prevents the typical dilemma belonging to the 'linear' tradition of the Lancelot-stories. The *Roman van Walewein* propagates an ideal of courtesy rooted in the service of the community, and derives its 'honor' from that. The *Roman van Walewein* does not analyze the nature of the worldly courtly ideals, but upholds these ideals as valid.[6]

Walter Haug suggested a similar intertextual contrasting between Walewein and Tristan.[7] The fetching of Ysabele for another man, the love between them, and then Walewein's refusal to leave without her, suggest a comparison along the same lines as those with Lancelot: Walewein adds love to his other virtues, but he is more constant than Tristan, both in his love and to his other obligations.

So the question 'Why Gawain?' would seem to have a dual answer. On the one hand, as possibly an original Celtic sun-god or otherwise solar figure, Gawain appears naturally in circular/cyclic stories. On the other hand, in thirteenth-century Flanders and Holland and in fourteenth-century England, he appears to be the more suitable candidate or 'carrier' for the role of *der Keerlen God* [*God of the churls*], to borrow the title of Floris V, Count of Holland. His role is that of the courtly knight projecting the worldly ideals of the aristocracy for the lower and peripheral nobility and the middle classes, involving and concerning their experiences.

Further comparison between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Roman van Walewein* shows that the openings are rather similar. In either case King Arthur's court is gathered festively together when the celebrations are interrupted by an apparition from an Other World, posing a challenge and paralyzing the court. Among Netherlandists there is some disagreement about the challenge in the *Roman van Walewein*. J.D. Janssens has always maintained that the order of King Arthur's court is threatened by an 'inordination' from outside, which has to be subdued.[8] J.H. Winkelman suggested that Arthur's court is threatened by 'inordination' from within, a weakness which Walewein's quest serves to restore.[9]

I think that comparison with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* shows that both assumptions can very well go together, because the weakness

[6] The parallel between the chessboard and the Holy Grail has also been discussed by Norris J. Lacy, in Lacy 1995.

[7] Haug 1995.

[8] Janssens 1979 and Janssens 1982.

[9] Winkelman 1986.

within is connected with the processes outside the court, where single members must assert themselves, not within the court but outside, individually: they must show there what they are worth as *men* — inside they are merely members!

The Green Knight's challenge in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reflects that clearly enough. In the *Roman van Walewein* the challenge is less clearly defined. And since I have not found any specific analysis of the function of the flying chess-set in the *Roman van Walewein* to date, I should like to make a suggestion here about a possible signification of the chess-set which might also explain its paralyzing effect on the Court.[10] To King Arthur the chess-set is obviously connected with his succession, as appears in his promise of his crown and lands to whomever shall capture this chess-set:

> Die up wille sitten sonder sparen
> Dit scaecspel halen ende achter varen
> Ende leverent mi in mine hant
> Ic wille hem gheven al mijn lant
> Ende mine crone na minen live
> Willic dat zijn eghin blive (ll. 71-76)
> ['To whomsoever will mount without delay and pursue and capture that chess-set and deliver it into my hands, I will give all my land; and my crown after I depart this life by my will he for himself shall hold.'][11]

This game of the Death of the King (Persian shah-mat/checkmate: the king is dead) is a token to him. If one accepts any truth at all in, for instance, John Darrah's theories about rituals of Sacred Kingship and year-kings or 7-year kings in the Celtic world underlying Arthurian stories, this is more readily obvious.[12] It is interesting to notice that in the Mabinogion story of *Peredur Son of Efrawg* the hero also finds a chessboard in a castle called, in Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones' translation, the Castle of Wonders.[13]

There, also, a succession-ritual could be assumed. But even without that the point is still borne out by the text. Lines 103-111 suggest a succession-test again, with the possibility of no one taking up the challenge:

[10] But see Karina H. van Dalen-Oskam, 'The Flying Chess-set in the *Roman van Walewein*', elsewhere in this book.

[11] I am quoting from the edition and translation of the *Roman van Walewein* by D.F. Johnson (1992). An extensive summary of the *Roman van Walewein* is given on p. 188-193 of this volume.

[12] Darrah 1981.

[13] Jones and Jones 1989, 224.

Ic salre jou mede doen die ere
Ic soude met rechte zijn jou here
Nu salic zijn jouwer alre knecht
Deer Walewein die nu ende echt
In dogheden es ghetrect voort
Hi scaemde hem als hi dit hoort
Datter niemen was soghedaen
Die dat belof durste anevaen
Van sinen here den coninc (ll. 103-111)
['I will honor you as follows: I would by rights be your lord — now I shall be to you all a servant' [says Artur]. Sir Walewein, who is now (and always has been) at the fore in knightly deeds of virtue, was ashamed when he heard that there was no one so disposed that he dared accept that promise from his lord the king.]

The lines following these might reflect a year-king challenge-ritual (in a subdued form, of course), so a cyclic theme again!

Alse die here Walewein dit hort
So dede hi zine wapene ghereiden
Ende wapende hem al sonder beiden
Ende seide vindict in enich lant
Ic saelt u leveren in uwe hant
So helpe mi God die u gheboot
Of ic blive in den wille doot
Dies sijt seker ende ghewes (ll. 128-135)
[When Sir Walewein heard this he had his armor prepared, and armed himself without delay. Then he spoke, 'Wherever I find the chess-set I shall hand it over to you so help me God your creator, or may I perish in the attempt! Of this you may be certain.']

The envious reaction of the others when Walewein accepts the challenge receives a different angle in this light, as does their opinion that it is dangerous to come too near the chess-set. All this, up to line 226, and the stress on the horse as all that Walewein will need in his test-quest, makes more sense if an awareness of a succession-issue is assumed. In this way it also becomes clearer why Walewein's returning without the set would constitute a loss of honor.

The mountain that Walewein encounters at the outset of his quest and the serpents that wait within also stress the death-aspect of the chess-board. The cyclicity (death and rebirth) that I mentioned earlier as typical of Walewein/Gawain is apparent from passages such as this:

Des nacht doghedi groot verdriet
Van navons dat die sonne liet
Haer scinen tes soe weder up ghinc

> Deer Walewein die jonghelinc
> Hi viel in knieghebede terre waerf
> Ende seide God die dor ons staerf
> Ende om ons coret die bitter doot
> Nu helpt mi here uut deser noot (ll. 287-294)
> [That night he suffered great anguish, from the moment when the sun ceased to shine, until she rose again. Sir Walewein, the youthful knight, then fell to his knees in prayer and said, 'Oh Lord, you who died for us and for our sake tasted that bitter death, help me now out of this predicament!']

Here his youth is also stressed, another quality typical of the successor (l. 290).

The numerous references to days ending and new days beginning throughout the *Roman van Walewein* are a further indication of the essentially cyclic movement of this adventure. Admittedly, any symbolic suggestions of a succession-plot are subdued: the idea of succession never materializes on the story-level, until Vostaert's half-hearted admission at the very end:

> Sulke willen segghen hier
> Dat Walewein die ridder fier
> Trouwede Ysabele die scone
> Ende hi selve coninescrone
> Spien na des coincs Arturs doot
> Maer in gheloefs clene no groot
> In wilre nodan niet jegen lesen
> Want het mochte wel waer wesen (ll. 11.103-11.110)
> [There are those who would claim that Walewein, the brave knight, then married the fair damsel Ysabele; and that he himself wore the crown after King Arthur's death. But I don't believe it in the least; nevertheless I won't deny it, for it could well be true.]

Nevertheless, it suggests as good a cause as any for Walewein's particular adventures in this romance, and one that would fit in with the cyclic pattern. The fact that his quest takes the form of obtaining a number of successive attributes seems perfectly appropriate to such a reading. If the plot of the *Roman van Walewein* has indeed been modelled on a folktale of the Aarne-Thompson 550 type,[14] which is particularly about the selection of which one of three brothers is the best man, and therefore, I assume, most fit to succeed the king their father, then the very choice of such a folktale-pattern suggests an underlying theme of the kind I am suggesting. On the narrative level the *Roman van Walewein* is obviously

[14] As described in the introduction to Johnson's edition (1992, xxii).

not about growing up, but, apparently, a theme of the achievement of complete manhood is the deeper motivation of this plotline, for which the winning of a sword and a lady successively is the proper object, not only as symbols of manhood, but also especially of kingship.

And this pattern does not necessarily stop at the mountain-passage as *rite-de-passage*. The whole business with the serpents contains details which could be seen as continuing the succession-symbolism: the killing of the young dragons *before* the old one is faced, and also the fact that Walewein is caught in the dragon's *tail* may be suggestive of this. Likewise the breaking of Walewein's lance and the loss of his sword, so that only his little dagger remains to rescue himself with, I would not hesitate to present as Freudian images of the same symbolism.

The 'all-or-nothing' jump down from the mountain-ledge concludes the episode of the chess-set quite aptly, I think, both on the symbolical and on the psychological levels. On the symbolical level Walewein has staked his claim conclusively by removing the dragons from his path, and now he finds himself in an elevated but totally solitary position, like a king. Continuing on the chosen path involves an 'all-or-nothing' decision, of which his rationalizing about whether to take the jump or not is a telling reflection on the psychological level (ll. 656-709).

Two more aspects emerge from the comparison between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Roman van Walewein*, which the scope of this article does not permit to work out in detail here, but which I would like to suggest anyway, for future attention. One is a parallel, the other a marked contrast.

First the parallel: both romances show originality not only in composition, but also, in contrast to other romances, in generic deviations. Both include Christian-religious doctrinal considerations in markedly peculiar ways. I consider them peculiar because the rewards do not justify themselves as a Christian end, however Christian the deeds themselves may have been. This is true of the Pentangle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and in the *Roman van Walewein* of the Red Knight's confession and communion (ll. 3906-4103), his rescue of Walewein as a ghost (ll. 8335-8465), and of the sword bridge and purgatorial river round King Assentijn's castle (ll. 4944-5087 and 5818-5855). Both romances make excursions into allegory; both include telling animals, and use landscapes in an uncommonly symbolic, near-allegorical way. Both reach back to folktale plots — rather than French-courtly discussions — in order to infuse the conventional aristocratic and heroic

ideals with new significance. This is a generic shift similar to that made by the French Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal* after the earlier Grail stories, a shift in which the Cistercian monks are suspected to have had a hand. A typical clerical shift, it seems to me, both popularizing and allegorizing. Perhaps a closer look at the background and training of the clerks working at the courts described at the beginning might be revealing. From the point of view of literary history this point certainly deserves more attention, because these revitalizations are, historically speaking, dead ends, in the sense that this development has not created any following. They are, in every sense, reactionary texts.

And finally, the marked contrast. Felicity Riddy already pointed out (see note 3) that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Roman van Walewein* differ from one another in that the *Roman van Walewein* shows an optimistic view of time as change, whereas *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* shows a much more pessimistic view of time as decay and ruin, as inexorable pressure.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is characteristically younger (late fourteenth century), later than the *Roman van Walewein*, with respect to its tragic recognition of man's shortcomings in view of the ideals. It stresses the fact that the flaw in the character (of Gawain) is inherent in the human instinct, and that is what makes us human. In the Middle Dutch thirteenth-century *Roman van Walewein* one of the conspicuous characteristics is that roaming squires continually give information — a technique also used markedly in the *Queste del Saint Graal*. This suggests that knowledge in these texts is largely 'revealed' knowledge. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not need this, or rather: it provides the explanations in retrospect, as a result of which the inborn or instinctive nature of the motivation in this text is emphasized. The new realism of landscape and seasons creates a tragic sense of alienation. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* harks back to the greatest moments of old epic heroism — the loneliness of the hero — and forward to Renaissance tragedy. Humility is its final perspective, as much more than a particular Christian virtue.

From the other works of the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*-poet, notably *Pearl*, we know (as René Wellek has conclusively demonstrated) that this poet held the Jovinian views of *sola gratia*; not Works but only God's Grace determines our salvation.[15] That may explain the difference: his insistence on the Pentangle-virtues and 'treuthe' rather

[15] Wellek 1966.

than on action, in contrast to the *Roman van Walewein*-poets' obvious insistence on Works on top of God's Grace.

A Pelagian belief in the importance of Works as part of the scheme of achieving perfection — and not God's Grace alone — might explain the ever active role that Walewein is given by the *Roman van Walewein*-poets. The exponential development of complications, each revealing more and more complex virtues shown in action, were already attributed by Norris Lacy (see note 6) to intrusive author-manipulations. He did not, however, specify the character of the manipulations; it is, therefore, interesting that the only analytical remark about these manipulations he offered states that the intrusive author 'promotes a hero whose success is both deserved and destined.'[16] The noticeable amount of action in the *Roman van Walewein* and the suggested impression that it is in deeds that Walewein's virtues reveal themselves as deserving the desired end may reflect a different position in the earlier stage of the late-medieval renewal of the Pelagian-Jovinian debate of Works vs. Grace Alone, in which the Dutch poets come down on the then orthodox ecclesiastical (rather than evangelical) side that grace is indeed bestowed by baptism, yet full grace is earned by merit.

The large amount of action in the *Roman van Walewein* compared to the relative lack of activity on Sir Gawain's part in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* could, therefore, also be considered as resulting from religious positions, like the parallel concerning generic shifts I suggested earlier.

So it seems to me that a comparative approach to the *Roman van Walewein*, in this case through the British *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, does indeed elicit questions that open up perspectives for future study of this unique Middle Dutch text.

[16] Lacy 1995, 311.

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