Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
- Language - Poetics - Genre -
Language & Paleography
Language & Paleography

- Manuscript likely copied by a scribe – not the author – in late 14th cent. (1375-1400)

- Themes suggest attitudes typical of late 14th cent.; anticipates collapse of feudal, church, and chivalric systems

- Last page contains the motto of the British chivalric Order of the Garter: “Shame on him who thinks ill of it”

*the study of ancient writing systems and the deciphering and dating of historical documents
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**Introduction**

**Caxton's Preface**

### THE TALE OF KING ARTHUR

1. Merlin
2. Balin or the Knight with the Two Swords
3. Torre and Pellinor
4. The War with the Five Kings
5. Arthur and Accolon
6. Gawain, Ywain and Marhalt

### THE TALE OF THE NOBLE KING ARTHUR THAT WAS EMPEROR HIMSELF THROUGH DIGNITY OF HIS HANDS

### A NOBLE TALE OF SIR LAUNCELOT DU LAKE

### THE TALE OF SIR GARETH OF ORKNEY THAT WAS CALLED
The Gawain-Poet

He was a man of serious and devout mind, though not without humor; he had an interest in theology, and some knowledge of it, though an amateur knowledge perhaps, rather than a professional; he had Latin and French and was well enough read in French books, both romantic and instructive; but his home was in the West Midlands of England; so much his language shows, and his meter, and his scenery.

-- J. R. R. Tolkien & E. V. Gordon

First page of Gawain manuscript
Poetics
Quick Facts

- 2,530 lines
- 101 stanzas
- 4 Parts (Fitts)
The poem draws on two literary and linguistic traditions

1. Alliterative verse from Anglo-Saxon tradition (Germanic)

2. Each stanza ends with a rhyming section called a “bob and wheel” (French-Norman)
**Poetics in Action**

Sithen the sege and the assault was sesed at Troye,
The borgh brittened and brent to brondes and askes,
The tulk that the trammes of tresoun ther wroght
Was tryed for his tricherie, the trewest on erthe.
Hit was Ennias the athel and his highe kynde
That sithen depreced provinces, and patrounes become
Welneghe of al the wele in the West Isles:
From riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swythe,
With gret bobbaunce that burghe he biges upon fyrst,
And nevenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat:
Ticius to Tuskan, and teldes bigynnes:
Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes up homes:
And fer over the French flod Felix Brutus
On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settes

with wynne,
Where were and wrake and wonder,
Bi sythes has wont therinne,
And oft bothe blysse and blunder
Ful skete has skyfted synne.

**Alliterative Verse**
- 4 stressed syllables per line
- Meter = \(a\ a/\ a\ x\)
- Anglo-Saxon influence (alliterative verse)

**Bob and Wheel**
- 5 short lines, rhyming \(a\ b\ a\ b\ a\)
- Line 1 ("bob") = one stress
- Lines 2-5 ("wheel") = three stresses / line
- Norman influence (rhyme)
Function of Bob and Wheel

The closing **bob and wheel** of each stanza:

1. provides commentary on what just happened;
2. relates or fulfills moments of suspense; and/or
3. serves as pivot point to the next scene.

Then to the table the two went together,
The King and the constant knight, and keen men served them
Double portions of each dainty with all due dignity.
All manner of meet, and minstrelsy too.
Daylong they delighted till darkness came
To their shores.
Now Gawain give a thought,
Lest peril make you pause
In seeking out the sport
That you have claimed as yours.

(ll. 481-490)
Genre
Genre: Chivalric Romance

- **Romance**: narrative written in prose or verse and concerned with adventure, courtly love, and chivalry

- Popular heroic narrative for French and British aristocrats in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

- **Typical plot**: A chivalric knight on a quest, defeats monsters and giants, and wins favor of a lady

- Catches on ~ 12th cent.
Code of Chivalry

1. Nobility in service
2. Death before dishonor
3. Enterprise in obedience to rule
4. Respect for all worthy people
5. Honor all those above your station
6. Command obedience through respect
7. Scorn those who are ignoble
8. Protect the innocent
9. Punish the guilty
10. Courtesy to all ladies
11. Battle is the test of manhood
12. Combat is glory
13. Defend your charge unto death
14. War is the flowering of chivalry
15. Death to all who oppose the cause
16. Anger blinds, a cool head wins
Knightly Virtues

- **Liberality**: generosity
- **Glory**: great honor, popular praise
- **Courtesy**: formal politeness
- **Honor**: high merit
- **Unselfishness**: caring for others
- **Bravery**: fearlessness; courage
- **Good faith**: trust upon word alone
- **Pride**: a proper feeling of esteem
- **Loyalty**: faithfulness to country, duty
Gawain: Chivalric Hero

“...The function of the **romance hero** is to stand as the champion of the human race, and by submitting to strange and severe tests, to demonstrate human capabilities for good or bad action. [...] **Gawain** shows us what moral conduct is. We shall probably not equal his behavior, but we admire him for pointing out the way.”

~ Alan Markman, a medievalist
And now the Quest...
“It was springtime in Camelot, in the Christmas snow” (l. 54)