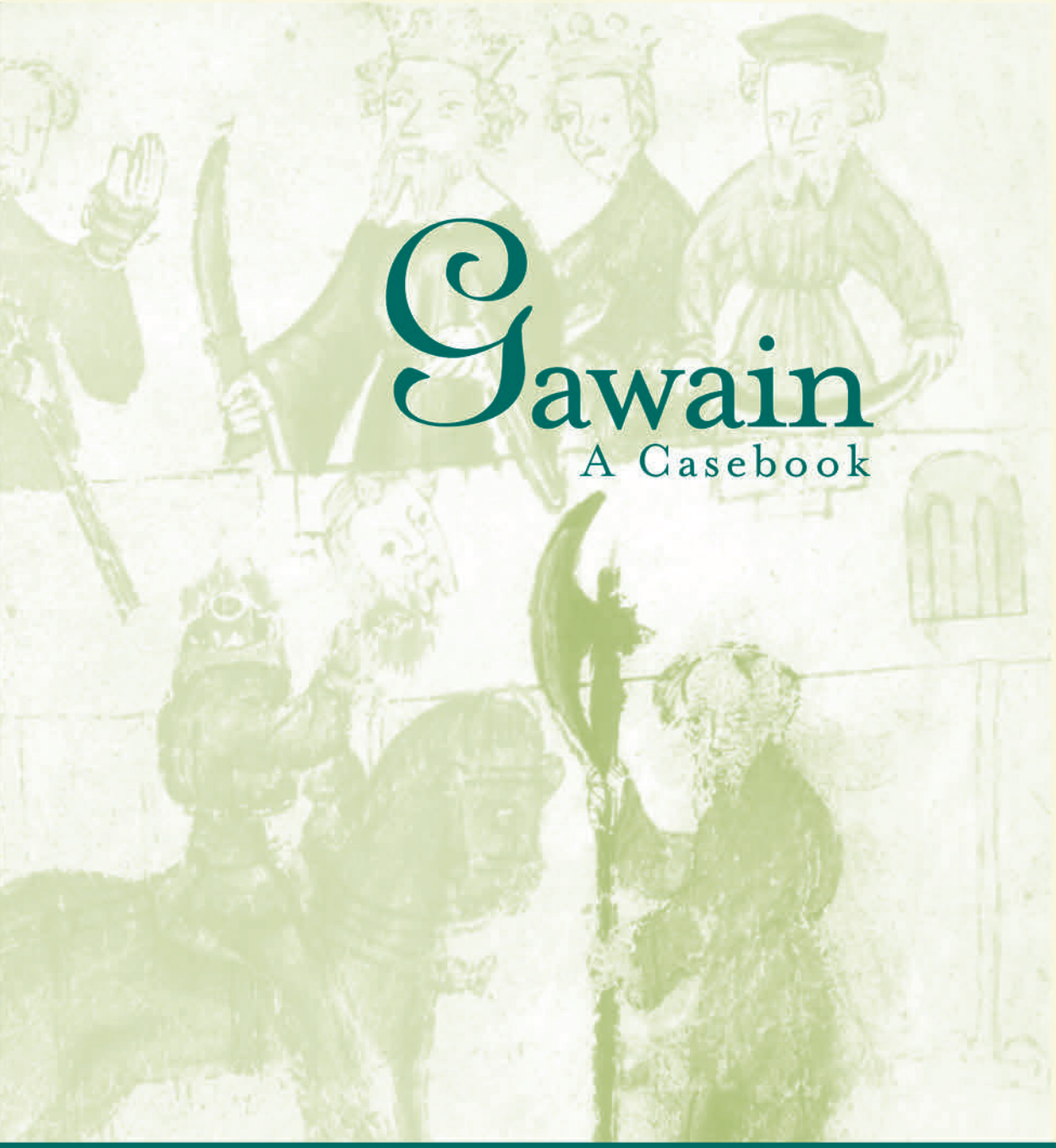

Gawain

A Casebook

Edited By

RAYMOND H. THOMPSON &

KEITH BUSBY

Gawain

Arthurian Characters and Themes

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Series Editor's Preface

Gawain is Volume VIII of the Routledge casebook series "Arthurian Characters and Themes." The series includes volumes devoted to the best-known characters from Arthurian legend: Tristan and Isolde, Arthur, Lancelot and Guenevere, Merlin, and Perceval. One is devoted to Arthurian women in general, and a single volume treats an Arthurian theme—the Grail—rather than characters.

Each volume offers an extended introductory survey and a bibliography and presents some twenty major essays on its subject. Several of the essays in each volume are newly commissioned for the series; the others are reprinted from their original sources. The previously published contributions date for the most part from the past two decades, although a few older, "classic" essays are included in several of the volumes—the criterion being the continuing importance of the study.

Heaviest emphasis remains on the development of the legend and its characters and themes during the Middle Ages, but each volume gives appropriate attention also to modern, even very recent, treatments. Similarly, the central focus is on literature, but without excluding important discussions of visual, musical, and cinematic arts. Thus, a number of the volumes are intently interdisciplinary in focus.

The proliferation of scholarly studies of Arthurian material continues at a daunting rate. When the *Bibliographical Bulletin of the International Arthurian Society* began publishing annual bibliographies, the first volume (1949) included 226 items (books, articles, and reviews), and some sections of that compilation represented national bibliographies over a full decade. The number of entries has increased regularly and dramatically, to the point that the most recent numbers of the *Bulletin* list well over one thousand items. Furthermore, the major contributions to Arthurian scholarship are often dispersed widely through North America, Europe, and elsewhere, and in books and articles that are in some instances very difficult to locate.

As a result, it is extraordinarily difficult even for the professional medievalist to keep abreast of Arthurian scholarship, and it would be very nearly impossible for the non-scholar with serious Arthurian interests to identify and locate a score of the major scholarly contributions devoted to a particular character or theme. These difficulties surely dramatize the value of the *Arthurian Characters and Themes* series, but they also remain an insistent reminder that even the most informed selection of major essays requires us to omit

many dozens, perhaps hundreds, of studies that merit serious attention. Editors have attempted to remedy this situation insofar as possible by providing introductions that discuss numerous other authors and texts and by compiling bibliographies that document a good many important studies that could find no room in these volumes. In addition, many of the contributions that are included here will themselves provide discussions of, or references to, other treatments that will be of interest to readers.

This volume, co-edited by Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby, includes a detailed introduction examining the development and character of Gawain. The volume offers nineteen essays, in addition to the introduction and bibliography. Three of these (chapters 11, 13, and 17) are previously unpublished; the remainder are major contributions selected from journals and scholarly volumes. As a service to readers, the editors have provided English translations of quotations from other languages.

Because permissions from copyright holders sometimes prohibited us from modifying the texts in any way, there are instances in which notes or documentary form will differ from essay to essay. In addition, style, usage, and even spelling (British vs. American) may vary as well. In a few instances, the editors have been permitted to modify the form in which the essay appears, and in those cases modifications have often gone well beyond the correction of minor and obvious errors. Offsetting the remaining inconsistencies is the advantage of having available, in a single volume, a substantial selection of the finest available studies, new as well as previously published, of the figure of Gawain.

Such a volume could not be produced without the generosity of museum officials and editors of presses and journals who kindly gave permission for us to reproduce illustrations and articles. We are pleased to express our gratitude to all of them. Appropriate credits accompany the essays.

—Norris J. Lacy

Introduction

RAYMOND H. THOMPSON AND KEITH BUSBY

More than that of any other knight of the Round Table, the reputation of Gawain, King Arthur's favorite nephew, has fluctuated through the extremes of heroism and villainy. The earliest accounts in the chronicles portray him as a mighty warrior who serves his uncle valiantly in battle. When he first appears in French romance during the twelfth century, most notably the poems of Chrétien de Troyes, Gawain is distinguished by his courtesy and *sens* (discretion) as well as valor, but his reputation suffers from two developments. In the verse romances, he becomes the object of generally affectionate humor and irony as the poets take advantage of his idealism to place him in embarrassing situations. Much more damaging, however, is his decline in the prose romances, where his shortcomings (particularly vengefulness) are contrasted, with increasing severity, to the virtues of newer heroes like Lancelot and Tristan, Galahad and Perceval. He reaches his nadir in the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal* and the Prose *Tristan*. As the Arthurian legend spread throughout Europe, French romance provided models for fresh creative endeavor. Where verse was most influential, as in Dutch and German, Gawain remains an admirable figure; but where the prose romances proved more popular, as in Spanish and Portuguese, his reputation suffers (though Italian seems to be an exception). In English, he is treated favorably for the most part, and he is the attractive (if imperfect) hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, one of the greatest works of Arthurian literature.

Unfortunately for Gawain, Sir Thomas Malory chose the prose romances as the basis of his *Morte Darthur*, which was to prove the most influential version of Arthurian legend for later English authors, including Alfred Lord Tennyson and T. H. White. Greater awareness of other sources has, however, yielded more positive portrayals. Thus in an Author's Note, Gerald Morris observes, "Gawain was still around in the French stories, but he was portrayed as a rude and blustering fellow with few morals and even fewer manners. This is all nonsense, of course. To those of us who have met the courageous, courteous,

and humble hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain will always be the perfect knight."[1] This is a tribute to the power, not only of a great work of literature, but of the virtues that have, through the ages, attached themselves to this hero. They provide a welcome balance to the ignominy heaped upon him in the prose tradition.

Chronicle

The chronicles are impressive for fidelity to their ultimate source, the *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain, 1136) by Geoffrey of Monmouth, which was widely accepted as factual despite some reservations. Since details added by later chroniclers are few and unimportant, Geoffrey's outline of Gawain's career remains unchanged, although the attitude towards these events may vary.[2]

The first mention of Gawain in the chronicles does, however, predate Geoffrey. In his *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (Deeds of the Kings of the English, ca. 1125), William of Malmesbury describes the discovery of Gawain's tomb:

> Tunc in provincia Walarum, quae Ros vocatur, inventum est sepulchrum Walwen, qui fuit haud degener Arturis ex sorore nepos. Regnavit in ea parte Britanniae quae adhuc Walweitha vocatur: miles virtute nominatissimus, sed a fratre et nepote Hengestii, de quibus in primo libro dixi, regno expulsus, prius multo eorum detrimento exilium compensans suum; communicans merito laudi avunculi, quod ruentes patriae casum in plures annos distulerint. Sed Arturis sepulchrum nusquam visitur, unde antiquitatis naeniarum adhuc eum venturum fabulatur. Ceterum, alterius bustum, ut praemisi, tempore Willelmi regis repertum est supra oram maris, quatuordecim pedes longum; ubi a quibusdam asseritur ab hostibus vulneratus, et naufragio eiectus; a quibusdam dicitur a civibus in publico epulo interfectus. Veritatis ergo notitia labat in dubio, licet neuter eorum defuerit famae suae patrocinio.
>
> At this time was found in the province of Wales called R(h)os the tomb of Walwen, who was the not degenerate nephew of Arthur by his sister. He reigned in that part of Britain which is still called Walweitha. A warrior most renowned for his valour, he was expelled from his kingdom by the brother and nephew of Hengist, of whom I spoke in the first book, but not until he had compensated for his exile by much damage wrought upon them, worthily sharing in the praise of his uncle, in that they deferred for many years the ruin of their falling country. But the tomb of Arthur is nowhere to be beheld, whence ancient ditties fable that he is yet to come. The tomb of the other, however, as I have said, was found in the time of king William upon the sea-shore, fourteen feet in length; and here some say that he was wounded by his foes and cast out in a shipwreck, but according to others he was killed by his

> fellow-citizens at a public banquet. Knowledge of the truth therefore remains doubtful, although neither story would be inconsistent with the defence of his fame.[3]

Walweitha has been identified as Galloway in Scotland, and on the basis of this entry and other evidence, Rachel Bromwich argues that the figure of Gawain "belonged originally to north Britain."[4]

Gawain's reputation for valor is given greater substance by Geoffrey, who provides the first extended account of Arthur's reign. Gawain and Mordred are the children of Loth and Anna, Arthur's sister.[5] Arthur restores Loth to the dukedom of Lothian and later raises him to the throne of Norway. Raised as a youth in the pope's household, Gawain distinguishes himself in the war against the Romans during both the embassy to the Roman camp and the main battle, and Geoffrey proclaims that he and Hoel are the two finest knights, unsurpassed in later ages. The Britons win the day and are advancing on Rome when they learn that Mordred has usurped the throne and is living adulterously with the queen. They return to Britain, but when they land, they suffer heavy losses, among them Gawain. Arthur pursues Mordred into Cornwall where he slays him, but he receives his own death wound and is borne to the Isle of Avalon to be healed.

Later chronicles add only minor details to this account of Gawain's career. In Pierre de Langtoft's *Chronicle*, written in Anglo-Norman around 1300, Gawain assists his father to the throne of Norway, whereas in earlier accounts he is a twelve-year-old youth in Rome at this time. Langtoft also notes that the Roman emperor's death is attributed to Gawain and that Arthur sends his nephew's body to Wales, possibly influenced by William of Malmesbury's mention of his grave there. In his English verse chronicle *The Story of England* (1338), Robert Mannyng of Brunne follows Langtoft in these last two instances; but in the Prose *Brut*, an anonymous thirteenth-century chronicle in Anglo-Norman and in English translation, and in the early fifteenth-century verse *Arthur*, the body is sent to Scotland. To complicate the issue still further, in the fourteenth-century *Myreur des Histors* (Mirror of History), Jean de Preis claims that Gawain accompanies Arthur to Avalon.

In *Le Roman de Brut* (1135), Wace introduces a more courtly tone that accounts for Gawain's appreciation of the social graces during his speech in praise of peace:

> "Molt sont bones les gaberies
> E bones sont les drueries.
> Por amistiez por amies
> Font chevalier chevaleries." (vv. 2221–24)[6]
>
> "Delightful are pleasant conversation and the love of ladies. For love and for their ladies do knights perform deeds of chivalry."

Wace praises Gawain's humility (v. 1318) and courtesy (v. 4203), but when he adds scenes that show him in action, like his defeat of Marcel's cousin, it is valor that they demonstrate. He also strengthens the bond between Gawain and Arthur: not only does he note in one manuscript how the former strives to serve his uncle,[7] but in all versions he comments upon the latter's grief over his nephew's death, "Car il n'amoit nul home tant" (for he loved no man so much; v. 4536).

Wace's chronicle was adapted into English alliterative verse in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century by Layamon, who abandons the courtly tone of his source. Thus while he retains Gawain's speech in praise of peace, Layamon eliminates all reference to love in favor of the more general "gode workes." He too commends the hero's virtues, especially valor and liberality, and he places still greater emphasis upon the love between Arthur and his sister's son. Indeed, so enraged is Gawain at Mordred's betrayal of his uncle that he vows to hang his brother and use horses to draw the queen in pieces (vv. 28, 207–17), a threat in keeping with the savagery displayed by Arthur and his warriors throughout the chronicle.[8]

Thus, while they refer to virtues like humility, courtesy, and liberality, neither Wace nor Layamon offer Gawain any more opportunity to demonstrate them than do the other chroniclers. Instead it is his valor that we witness in the course of Arthur's wars against his enemies; and if his actions seem savage and cruel by modern standards, they are no different in that respect from those of Arthur and his other followers, all of whom view the king's nephew with admiration and love.[9] Even the Scottish chronicles exempt Gawain from the criticism that they level at Arthur in their warning against English imperialist ambitions.[10] Indeed, Gawain is treated with unfailing respect in all the chronicles save one. Among the manuscripts collected in the *Chroniques d'Anjou* is the *Liber de Compositione Castri Ambaziae* (ca. 1140), and here his *impetus et stultitia* (impulsiveness and folly) are held responsible for Arthur's losses in battle against the Romans.[11] This one exception, however, serves to make all the more impressive the otherwise universal chorus of approval for his conduct in the chronicles.

French[12]

Tales concerning Arthur and Gawain were apparently circulating in France before the first appearance of the latter in Geoffrey of Monmouth and Wace. Evidence from allusions in the poetry of the Occitan (Provençal) troubadours and from onomastics suggests that the Gawain of French romance may have been constructed from a character of oral tradition, whose features and associated tales were gradually melded with the figure of the chronicle tradition.[13] How these tales of undoubted Celtic origin actually circulated on the Continent is unclear, although at least one multilingual storyteller from Wales is thought to have visited William IX, Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Poitiers,

the earliest known troubadour, in the eleventh century.[14] The tales might have spread thence south to greater Occitania and north to the domain of the *langue d'oïl*. It is unlikely that this case is isolated or that this was the only means of transmission, for one can hardly discount the role played by the Normans and their descendants. They were, after all, the only people whose language was common to the entire area: from Ireland in the west, through much of Wales and England, to most of France as far east as Lorraine.

When Gawain appears as Gauvain (or Gavain and variants) in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, he is hardly recognizable as the same character from Geoffrey and Wace. Wace's addition of Gawain's comments on the relationship between love and chivalry (noted above) is surely significant and was probably inspired by knowledge of the oral tradition, to which he famously alludes when he speaks of the events of the Breton fables which took place during the *pax Arthuriana*.[15] Chrétien (as in so many areas of romance) set the tone for the subsequent evolution of the character of Gawain in Old French. Gawain is Arthur's closest advisor and, in the absence of a son, his apparent heir and successor. The relationship between nephew and uncle is one of mutual dependence: Gawain advises Arthur, even upbraids him when he believes the king has made an error of judgment, while Arthur for his part exhibits concern for his nephew and protects and supports him where necessary.

Structurally, in Chrétien's romances, Gawain functions as a foil for the heroes (Erec, Cligés, Yvain, Lancelot, and Perceval), whose achievements are measured against his own and who are ultimately destined to surpass him. The comparisons, however, are rarely odious before *Perceval*. Certainly, his judgments are questioned; but the point of having a hero equal and then surpass him would be rather senseless if he were openly and continually mocked. Chrétien never accords Gawain the status of hero proper, even in *Lancelot* or *Perceval*, where the number of lines allotted to him is considerable. This is undoubtedly part of Chrétien's questioning of the courtly-chivalric ideal, for what better way to do so than by critically examining its foremost representative, Gawain? What Chrétien appears to be saying by his presentation of Gawain is that a code of behavior, as ideally implemented and well-intentioned as it might be, is inadequate in the final instance unless it is applied with thought, forethought, and genuine humanity.

In his first four romances, Chrétien seems to present Gawain in an ironic but generally positive light, which suggests a fondness for the character on the part of both himself and his intended audiences. In *Erec et Enide*, Chrétien tells us that "Devant toz les buens chevaliers / Doit estre Gauvains li premiers" (before all good knights, Gawain must rank first; vv. 1691-92),[16] and in *Cligés*, the hero is Gawain's blood relative. Close readings of these two romances may already offer hints of criticism on Chrétien's part, but it is with *Yvain* and *Lancelot* (written more or less contemporaneously, it appears) that we begin to notice real signs of questioning the Arthurian ideal as embodied in Gawain.

Gawain's advice to Yvain on love and marriage turns out to have disastrous consequences; and he appears to champion an unjust cause, which leads him into a single combat against the hero, interrupted only by a ruse of Arthur's.[17] In *Lancelot*, Gawain's quest for the abducted Guenevere fails where Lancelot's succeeds (for obvious narrative reasons). The implication here and in *Yvain* is that Gawain cannot be a hero because his understanding of the mutual relationship between knighthood and love (which he appears to appreciate in Wace's *Brut*) is deficient.[18] Perhaps more significant (for Chrétien's final romance and for the post-Chrétien romances, verse and prose, Grail and non-Grail) is the related matter of Gawain's not having a single, true love to provide him with the inspiration required of a true hero. There is no Enide to his Erec, no Fenice to his Cligés, no Laudine to his Yvain, no Guenevere to his Lancelot, and no Blanchefleur to his Perceval. Behind this good man stands no good woman.

The introduction into Arthurian romance of the Grail theme by Chrétien in *Perceval*, his last unfinished romance, had considerable ramifications for his presentation of Gawain. Whereas in the four early romances, the yardsticks had been by and large worldly, the final test in *Perceval* appears to be spiritual. The parallel quest structure seen in germ in *Lancelot* is made the very basis of the bifurcated adventures of the Grail romance. The development of Perceval—from country lad, through knight and lover, to a person in possession of all the necessary qualities and knowledge to succeed in a second visit to the Grail Castle—stands in direct and bleak contrast to the circular movement of Gawain. Courteous as ever, Gawain is in *Perceval* subject to accusations of murder and treason (possibly founded), mocked as a horse dealer and coward, sent off on impossible quests, and involved in several amorous liaisons of a doubtful nature. The Gawain of *Perceval* and the values he represents are seen as sterile and incapable of dealing with the more spiritual side of human existence. It should be pointed out here that *Perceval* has been subject to the most extraordinary variety of interpretations and that the character of Gawain has been adjudged variously. Whether it was Chrétien's intent to condemn as totally inadequate Arthurian knighthood and courtesy is a moot question, but there seems little doubt that his presentation of Gawain leans towards the negative rather than the positive.[19]

Despite many shared characteristics, the evident differences between Chrétien's first four romances and his last one were clearly perceived by medieval authors and audiences; and they resulted in a dual romance track as it were, further enabled by the unfinished nature of *Perceval*. Failures at the Grail Castle, lascivious encounters, fantastic adventures, and a sustained contrast with Perceval—by means of constant linking back to Chrétien's founding romance and switching of heroes—consolidates the judgment of Gawain as second-best. Yet authors of the four Continuations of *Perceval* (the anonymous *Continuation-Gauvain* and *Continuation-Perceval*, and those by Gerbert

de Montreuil and Manessier) remained fascinated by the narrative potential of a figure whose traits are both fixed (brave knight, womanizer, nephew of Arthur, symbol and representative of the court, and so on) and capable of generating almost infinite stories. It should be noted that Gawain is never killed off in romance before *La mort le roi Artu*; to have done so would have been to deprive authors of a valued source of material. The religious nature of this complex set of continuations, which contain some of the most imaginative storytelling in the whole corpus of Arthurian romance, becomes more pronounced by the third decade of the thirteenth century, when Gerbert de Montreuil and Manessier write independently of one another but probably both with a knowledge of some of the early prose romances. The negative view of Gawain gradually becomes more pronounced.[20]

The other romance track in the early post-Chrétien period is that of emulation (but not slavish imitation) of the master's early romances by authors now generally known as the Chrétien epigones. In point of fact, the first two decades after Chrétien's death (assuming Gerbert de Montreuil is telling the truth) produced no episodic non-Grail verse romances, perhaps because authors were hesitant to expose themselves to comparison with the master. The earliest of the epigonal romances is probably *Le bel inconnu* by Renaut de Beaujeu (Bâgé), which dates from before the end of the twelfth century. This text is significant for our purposes not only because Gawain features in it, but because its hero, Guinglain, is the son of Gawain and Blanchemal the Fée. Here is another means of exploiting the popularity of a romance character: relating the achievements of his offspring (other possibilities are to relate boyhood deeds [there is a fragmentary *Enfances Gauvain*] or the history of parents). The general tenor of the epigonal romances (of which there are some twenty) is ironic and parodic, and the character of Gawain is treated accordingly, though generally without malice. In some, however, he is involved in adventures that lead to scenes of broad comedy verging on the obscenity of the *fabliaux*. Notable among these romances (the study of which was revived beginning in the 1980s) are the short *Le chevalier à l'épée* and *La mule sans frein* (the latter by "Paien de Maisières," punning on Chrétien de Troyes?); the full-length *L'atre périlleux*, *La vengeance Raguidel*, and *Meraugis de Portlesguez* (the last by Raoul de Houdenc), in which Gawain plays a major role; and others, such as *Fergus* (by Guillaume le Clerc), *Yder,* and *Hunbaut*, where his role is less important albeit still significant. There is one romance in Occitan (with Catalan features), *Jaufre* (ca. 1210?), which clearly responds parodically to Chrétien's *œuvre* and demonstrates that the meridional author understood the northern Gawain in the same spirit as the northern epigones. Some of the last French verse romances, such as *Le chevalier aux deux épées* (*Meriadeuc*), *Les merveilles de Rigomer*, *Escanor* (by Girard d'Amiens), and *Claris et Laris*, are quite prolix, much longer than the average (some twelve thousand, seventeen thousand, twenty-six thousand and thirty thousand lines, respectively,

compared with the usual six thousand to seven thousand). It seems clear that these later romances (all post-1240) are written with knowledge of, and influenced by, the great prose cycles; their structure and their presentation of Gawain owe much to them.[21]

The long and extraordinary prose romance of *Perlesvaus* (early thirteenth century) draws for its presentation of Gawain mainly on the verse tradition, underlining his great valor (sometimes put to doubtful use) and reputation as a womanizer. Ultimately, his chivalry, courtesy, and amorous proclivities add up to a kind of impotence that humiliates him and bars him from the Grail Castle. The *Perlesvaus* and the *Didot-Perceval* (ca. 1200) in many ways anticipate the great *Lancelot-Graal* (Vulgate) cycle's (ca. 1225–30) presentation of Gawain. Analysis of the Gawain of the *Lancelot-Graal* is made particularly complicated by its multiple authorship and spirit. The prose *Lancelot* is still largely secular in nature, and its Gawain is still the great but flawed knight destined never to achieve the distinction of Lancelot. The Cistercian-inspired *Queste del saint Graal*, by contrast, roundly condemns Gawain's knightly and courtly activities as sinful. *La mort le roi Artu* returns to a degree to the secular inspiration of the *Lancelot*, but the tragic end of Arthur's kingdom is seen as resulting from irresolvable conflicts generated by the kind of values Gawain represents.[22]

Chronologically, the next major prose romance is the Prose *Tristan* and its derivatives (*Meliadus de Loenois*, *Guiron le courtois*, *Palamède*, etc.), dating from the 1230s onward. If the Vulgate *Queste* condemns Gawain for his vices when compared to the saintly virtues of Galahad, Perceval, and Bors, the *Tristan* degrades his character even further, showing him as the intemperate and spiteful leader of a clan set up in opposition to the Grail lineage. Here Gawain openly commits rape and murder, and his deeds are roundly condemned by the other characters (including his own brothers) and by the narrator. For the first time, we encounter a Gawain presented in an entirely unsympathetic light.[23] The degradation is complete, and it makes even more remarkable his restoration in medieval English and Dutch literatures. The so-called Post-Vulgate cycle, combining elements and texts from the Vulgate cycle and Tristan romances, generally speaking presents a negative image of Gawain.

Chrétien created a Gawain with features that were to become fixed in later romance, some of which were to be developed in directions he may never have envisaged. The advantage (and sometimes disadvantage) for authors was that they did not have to create a new character: Gawain came with a whole corpus of adventures and resulting reputation attached. Within these limits, an author could use Gawain and tweak his features to whatever end he had in view. The major limitation, however, was that, despite a few efforts to the contrary, the character of Gawain could not be made into the kind of hero who underwent a crisis, resolved it, and emerged a wiser and better man. For

this reason, he was doomed to remain in French romance a major part of the Arthurian backdrop, indispensable, useful, and largely predictable.

Italian and Iberian

In Italy, the history of Arthurian romance and consequently of the figure of Gawain, is one of reception of the French prose tradition. Many manuscripts of the *Lancelot-Graal* and Prose *Tristan* (and derivatives) were actually copied in Italy in the fourteenth century, and their Gawain is identical, of course, to the French Gawain of the prose tradition. The same result is evident in Italian texts derived directly from the French prose romances, such as the *Tristano Riccardiano* and the *Tristano Panciatichiano*, although Marie-José Heijkant argues in her contribution to this casebook that pro-Gawain tendencies emerge, albeit for different reasons, in Italy just as they do in England and the Lowlands.

In the Iberian peninsula, as in Italy, there is little penetration of the Chrétien and post-Chrétien verse tradition. Translations and adaptations of French prose romances of the Vulgate, Post-Vulgate, and Tristan cycles are the major witnesses in Castilian, Catalan, and Portuguese. If *Jaufre* is to be associated with Catalonia as well as regions north of the Pyrenees, then its Gawain must also be part of the Iberian tradition; there are wall paintings depicting it in Saragossa, and a late adaptation, the *Tablante de Ricamonte*, was known to Cervantes. This would be a unique testimony to the reach of Chrétien de Troyes in the peninsula. Indeed, despite some evident exceptions, medieval Spain and Portugal seem to have been perhaps the least receptive of all regions in Europe to French literature. It is in any case clear that geographical proximity is not a guarantor of influence but rather that cultural conditions make particular situations receptive in varying degrees to the irradiation of French romance.

If Gawain was known to readers of the two peninsulae largely through French prose romance, the evidence from the Modena Archivolt (1120–40) and from proper names suggests the circulation of oral tales concerning Gawain and others before Geoffrey of Monmouth in Italy and a little later in Iberia. A Galvam in Portugal from 1208 (presumably born at least two decades earlier) could possibly have been named after Chrétien's character, but this seems unlikely, and it is in any case too early to argue for the influence of the prose romances.[24]

Germanic (German, Dutch, and Scandinavian)

The presentation of Gawain in Middle High German literature, as in other literatures, takes its cue from Chrétien de Troyes. The adaptations of *Erec et Enide* and *Yvain* as *Erec* and *Iwein* by Hartmann von Aue and of *Perceval* in *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach constitute a major part of the corpus of classical medieval German romance. As such they set the tone for the further development of the figure in Middle High German. The first appearance

of Gawain in Middle High German, however, may have been in Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's *Lanzelet* (between 1194 and 1205), since its author claims that it is based upon a book brought to Germany by Hugh de Morville. This romance contains an episode in which an interrupted combat between Gawain and the hero may recall an episode in Chrétien's *Yvain*, and which in any case reflects Gawain's role as a foil to the hero.[25] Despite his many modifications to Chrétien's romances, Hartmann von Aue radically changes neither the character nor the narrative function of Gawain in *Erec* and *Iwein* (ca. 1200–5). Wolfram von Eschenbach, on the other hand, effects a much more substantial transformation (and completion) of Chrétien's *Perceval* in *Parzival* (ca. 1205), as Albrecht Classen shows in his essay in this casebook. Wolfram's critical stance towards Chrétien in general is reflected in his reworking of the Gawain character. Not only does Gawain free the queens and damsels in Schastel Marveile (Chrétien's romance breaks off before this adventure is resolved), but the transposition of Perceval to a transcendent Grail realm does not entail a concomitant mocking and downgrading of Gawain. Gawain remains the best knight, but in the Arthurian world only.

A number of "post-classical" Arthurian verse romances in Middle High German treat the adventures of Gawain at some length, in particular Wirnt von Grafenberg's *Wigalois* (1210–15) and Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Diu Crône* (ca. 1230). Although full of standard adventures told at fast pace, *Wigalois* treats Gawain with respect. As in *Le bel inconnu*, Gawain has a son, here the eponymous hero, but this time by a legitimate marriage to Florie. Father and son team up together and both excel in socially beneficial adventures, often against supernatural odds. The absence of a spiritual or Grail dimension essentially requires Wirnt to present an excellent Gawain with an equally excellent and virtuous offspring, though the former still does not achieve the status of central hero. *Wigalois* (about 11,700 lines) seems to have been enormously popular in medieval Germany, for nearly forty manuscripts survive in complete or fragmentary form. Of all the later German romances, however, the most interesting and significant in this context is Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Diu Crône* (more than 30,000 lines), in which Gawain is, exceptionally, the main hero. Heinrich's sources are many and varied, both French and German (Chrétien, the Continuations, Ulrich von Zatzikhoven, Hartmann, and Wolfram); but his critical assessment of Parzival's failure, which may be directed at Chrétien and Wolfram, is largely expressed by the elevation of Gawain, achiever of a kind of secularized Grail, to the rank of best knight in the world. Yet in *Diu Crône*, as in the other romances that portray him favorably, Gawain undergoes neither evolution nor crisis like Erec, Yvain, Lancelot, or Perceval. Rather than conclude that he is not a hero, we may rather suggest that he is a different kind, one with a preformed character.[26]

Perhaps the most extraordinary and widespread rehabilitation of Gawain in the Germanic domain is found in Middle Dutch literature, especially in those

romances not directly derived from existing French works. In those that are derived from French works, certain adjustments are nevertheless made to the character of Gawain, such as making him more of a courtly lover in *Die Wrake van Ragisel* (an adaptation of *La vengeance Raguidel*) or making him a general idealization in the various versions of the Vulgate Cycle. It is in the "original" Dutch romances, nevertheless, that we encounter the most accomplished Gawain of all. In a number of Dutch romances, Gawain (Walewein) is referred to as "der avonturen vader" (father of adventures), and this epithet endows him with a fundamental role in the creation of the Arthurian world even while it elevates him and his adventures to the status of a classic paradigm of the romance hero. Romances such as *Walewein ende Keye* (before 1320), inserted into the so-called *Lancelot-Compilatie*, and the independent *Roman van Walewein* by Penninc and Pieter Vostaert (second half of the thirteenth century) remove all traces of the ironic French treatment of Gawain in their presentation of an excellent knight capable of achieving the most demanding adventures. Most traces of the scurrilous skirt chaser are also excised in the Dutch tradition, in which Gawain is transformed into a faithful lover (to one Ysabele, for example, in the *Roman van Walewein*). Since it is clear that the Dutch authors and audiences were familiar with the details of the French romance tradition (in part by virtue of French-Dutch bilingualism in certain courts of the Lowlands), it seems equally clear that we are dealing with a conscious response to French romance, a kind of dialogue between the two, as it were.[27]

This dialogue essentially defines the relationship between the seminal French Arthurian romances and the cultures that received and transformed them, and thus the corpus of romances in each language (Italian, Spanish, Catalan, Occitan, German, Dutch, the Scandinavian languages, Welsh, and English) presents a distinct variant or variants of the figure of Gawain. Once more proving that geographical proximity is not necessarily a factor in the receptivity towards French literature, a considerable number of Arthurian romances survive in Old Norse-Old Icelandic, and one version of the Yvain story survives in Swedish (*Ivan Lejonriddaren*, 1303). This is not the place for a survey of the Scandinavian Arthurian romances. For the present purposes, it will suffice to note the existence of adaptations of *Erec et Enide*, *Yvain* and, more significantly, *Perceval* (all dating from the mid-thirteenth century, probably from the reign of King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway [r. 1217–63]). Generally speaking, the increased power accorded the female characters has repercussions on the male figures, including Gawain. Particularly significant is the adaptation of *Perceval* as two separate romances, *Parcevals saga* and *Valvens Þáttr*. The latter begins as Chrétien's narrative returns to Gawain and his encounter with the Male Pucelle, just after the Good Friday episode, and it ends, as does Chrétien, with Gawain sending for Arthur to come to the Castle of Marvels. Gawain's status is enhanced by the bisection of Chrétien's romance

and the consequent dissociation from the Grail theme, where he is compared so disadvantageously to Perceval.[28]

Welsh

As Gwalchmai son of Gwyar, Gawain figures in the tale of *Culhwch and Olwen*, several of the Welsh Triads, and three romances that tell stories found in the poems of Chrétien de Troyes. Roger Sherman Loomis has argued that Gawain's Welsh prototype is not Gwalchmai but Gwri Gwallteuryn (Gwri Golden Hair), more commonly referred to as Pryderi, the son of Pwyll, in the pre-Arthurian Four Branches of the Mabinogi. His hypothesis, however, has not won wide acceptance.[29] Gwalchmai's name means "hawk of the plain(s)" or perhaps "hawk of May,"[30] and in *Culhwch and Olwen* we are told that "he never came home without the quest he had gone seeking. He was the best on foot and the best on horseback. He was Arthur's nephew, his sister's son, and his first cousin."[31] Despite this promising introduction, however, he plays no independent role in the tale, which suggests that the passage may be a later interpolation.

The triads were used "as a means of putting the materials of heroic story into catalogue form," but dating is problematic because the manuscripts in which the texts are preserved were all copied after the twelfth century.[32] This makes it difficult to distinguish earlier native tradition from the contamination of later continental influence. Gwalchmai appears in the oldest collection that mentions Arthur, the Peniarth MS 16, which lists "Gwalchmai son of Gwyar" among the "Three Well-Endowed Men of the Island of Britain" (Bromwich, *Triads*, p. 8).[33] He is also found in three later triads: "Slender-Hard [*Meingalet*], horse of Gwalchmai" is one of the "Three Bestowed Horses of the Island of Britain" (p. 120); "Gwalchmai son of Gwyar" is one of the "Three Men of the Island of Britain who were most courteous to Guests and Strangers" (p.195); and Gwalchmai is one of the "Three Fearless Men of the Island of Britain" (p. 219). Among the "Three Golden-Tongued Knights" in Arthur's court is "Gwalchmai son of Llew son of Cynfarch . . . .and there was neither king nor lord to whom those came who did not listen to them; and whatever quest they sought, they wished for and obtained it, either willingly or unwillingly" (p. 252).[34] Gwalchmai effectively demonstrates this eloquence by helping Arthur make peace between Trystan and March in the late medieval *Ystorya Trystan*.

The three Welsh romances provide versions of stories told by Chrétien de Troyes: *Geraint Son of Erbin-Erec et Enide*, *Owain (The Lady of the Fountain)-Yvain*, and *Peredur Son of Efrawg-Perceval*.[35] Despite variation in detail, all three follow the narrative outline found in the French poems, and Gwalchmai plays a similar role in each. Yet while he remains the most courteous knight in Arthur's court, he is much readier to fight than in the French versions. In *Geraint*, he jousts with the wounded protagonist before recognizing him and artfully luring him to Arthur's pavilion; in *Owain*, he engages in combat

with the protagonist for three days, before mutual recognition leads to a contest in politeness as each proclaims the other victor. Gwalchmai is given more opportunity to demonstrate his courtesy in *Peredur*, however, for not only does he persuade the hero to accompany him to Arthur's court after Kay and his companions have been unhorsed for their rudeness, but in two of the manuscripts it is he rather than Owain who takes on the role of friend and helper. This increased emphasis upon Gwalchmai's prowess is in keeping with the marked preference for action over words in the Welsh romances.

Some of the differences in the Welsh romances also eliminate hints of criticism found in Chrétien's versions. Gwalchmai does not fight Owain to support a damsel's dubious claim to a larger share of her inheritance, and it is not he but Arthur who persuades the protagonist to leave his wife for a year; and the reduction of Gwalchmai's adventures in *Peredur* removes any hint of an unfavorable contrast with the protagonist who is, in any case, involved with far more women than is he. Thus, in Welsh tradition, Gwalchmai emerges as an admirable figure, noted both for his eloquence and for his skill as a warrior.

English (Medieval)

As a consequence of the cultural and linguistic upheaval caused by the Norman Invasion, romances in English are later in date and fewer in number than their French counterparts. Many are based upon French sources, and even those for which none has been found are indebted for familiar motifs, such as the contrast between the courtesy of Gawain and the surliness of Kay.[36] As a result, the presentation of Gawain is strongly influenced by the choice of source, since French verse romance is usually more favorable to the hero than prose. Nonetheless, the English romances were clearly aimed at an audience with different tastes from their models, and this is reflected by their choice not only of source but of what material within it to include and what to leave out. This process of selection most often benefits Gawain's reputation, prompting one scholar to speak of "the hagiology of Gawain."[37]

Among the English romances that are based upon French verse romances are a number, all dating from the earlier part of the fourteenth century, in which Gawain plays a minor role as the true friend to the young hero: *Sir Percyvell of Gales*, which is based upon Chrétien's *Perceval*, and Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* and the other adaptations into English of Marie de France's *Lanval*. In *Lybeaus Desconus*, which corresponds to the first part of *Le Bel Inconnu* by Renaud de Beaujeu, Gawain is the hero's father. He plays a larger role in *Ywain and Gawain*, which is based upon Chrétien's *Yvain*: here too he is a close friend and valiant knight, though his advice proves less helpful than intended.[38] These poems praise him as the foremost knight at Arthur's court, and his friendship/paternity is valued as a mark of distinction.

In the remaining romances that draw upon French verse for their story or motifs, Gawain is the central hero.[39] Foremost among them is *Sir Gawain and*

the Green Knight, which is dated in the late fourteenth century. It combines the motifs of the Beheading Game and Chastity Test so that the outcome of the former is made dependent upon the latter. The poem has attracted more admiration and scholarly attention than any other English Arthurian work. Yet this attention, paradoxically, has had a mixed impact upon Gawain's reputation, for although the hero performs remarkably well under severely trying circumstances, in the final analysis he is found wanting. In explaining his failure, scholars have found fault with virtually every aspect of his conduct: from undertaking the Green Knight's challenge to play the Beheading Game without fully considering the consequences, to lying idly in bed while his host engages in the rigors of the hunt; from failing to mention in the confessional that he intends to keep the Green Girdle in violation of his promise, to relying upon it rather than the Virgin Mary to preserve his life; from overreacting when he confesses his fault, to demonstrating absurd petulance in his outburst against the wiles of women. As if the damage were not enough, some even evoke his sins in French romance to detect a sinister sensuality in his response to the hostess.[40]

By retaining the girdle, Gawain has clearly "lakked a lyttel" (lacked a little; v. 2366),[41] but only when judged by "a humanly unattainable standard of perfection" (Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet* p. 228). Perfection may be expected of the hero of romance, who conventionally commits an error after initial success and then wins forgiveness by a series of good deeds, as in the poems of Chrétien. By taking us inside Gawain's mind, however, sharing his thoughts and fears as the poem progresses, the Gawain-Poet shifts from what Northrop Frye terms the romance mode to the low mimetic mode: no longer "superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment," the hero becomes "one of us: we respond to a sense of his common humanity." [42] Gawain affirms his humanity and wins our sympathy as we watch him struggle against the many trials set in his path. It is not, after all, his choice to rest in bed while his host goes hunting, nor does a young man facing imminent death need to be "a notorious philanderer" (Barron, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," p. 170) to be aroused by the determined efforts of his beautiful hostess to seduce him. Unlike the Green Knight, Gawain is not superhuman—as he wryly observes, if his head is cut off, he "con not hit restore" (cannot restore it; v. 2283) —and by human standards, as the Green Knight acknowledges, he has proved himself

> "On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede;
> As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,
> So is Gawayn, in god faith, bi oþer gay knyȝtez."
> (vv. 2363–65)
>
> "The most faultless man who ever lived; as pearl beside white peas is of greater value, so is Gawain, in good faith, beside other gallant knights."

That he takes failure so hard is because he has tried so hard to maintain his chivalric ideals. It is this idealism that enables him to achieve so much against almost impossible odds. The poem reminds us not only that perfection is beyond our grasp, but also that we can achieve so much more if we nonetheless strive to attain it.

Though few attain Gawain's insight into the "faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed, / How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylþe" (faultiness and the frailty of the perverse flesh, how liable it is to catch the stains of sin; vv. 2435–36), this reminder of human fallibility is a persistent theme throughout the remaining English romances,[43] which are dated in or around the fifteenth century. Three of the poems offer a criticism of pride of conquest, and although it is aimed primarily at Arthur, it also encompasses Gawain as his surrogate.

Although the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* (1399–1402) is based upon the chronicles rather than verse romance, it is convenient to consider it in this group because of its concern with conquest. Pride is a quality that marks all epic heroes and drives them to great achievements, yet it exacts a cost in human lives, as Arthur comes to realize. Gawain is the foremost exemplar of the fierce warriors whose valor wins victory after victory for their king. During the embassy to the Roman camp, the encounter with Priamus, and the landing in Britain, he displays the valor, generosity, and loyalty to Arthur that win the love and admiration of all, even his foes. Unfortunately, the vengeful fury he feels against his brother Mordred for betraying his beloved uncle drives him to a last desperate assault against hopeless odds, and he and his men are overwhelmed. His passing leads to three eulogies: by the poet himself, who sadly observes, "thus sir Gawayne es gonn, the gude man of armes, / Withowttyn reschewe of renke, and rewthe is þe more" (thus sir Gawain is gone, the good man-at-arms, without rescue of man, and more is the pity; vv. 3858–59);[44] by the remorseful Mordred, who extols him as "the graciouseste gome that vndire God lyffede" (the most honorable man who ever lived; v. 3877); and, loudest of all, by Arthur, who laments, "Þou was worthy to be kynge, þofe I corown bare" (You were worthy to be king, though I bore the crown; v. 3962). Gawain is guilty of misjudgment when he leads his men in the final assault, but he fails as an impetuous leader, not an overly reckless warrior. As such it serves as a comment upon Arthur's own failure in leadership, as the king himself states: "He es sakles, supprysede for syn of myn one" (He is guiltless, overcome because of my own sin; v. 3986).[45]

In *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, the ghost of Guinevere's mother offers a dire warning against pride: of her daughter, who is too fond of luxury, and of her son-in-law, who is "to couetous" for conquest (v. 265).[46] Although Gawain's motives in accompanying Guinevere to the secluded spot where the ghost appears have aroused the suspicion of some scholars[47] and although his response to Galeron's challenge strikes a fiercely aggressive note, his valor, loyalty to Arthur, and generosity to his defeated opponent confirm his

heroic stature. He demonstrates the same qualities in *Golagros and Gawane*, another poem that criticizes Arthur's craving for conquest. Written in Lowland Scots, the poem is based upon Gawain's encounter with the Riche Soudoier in the First Continuation (*Continuation-Gauvain*) of Chrétien's *Perceval*; but whereas the Riche Soudoier refuses to surrender lest the shock kills his mistress, Golagros believes that his responsibilities as a ruler do not leave him free to accept Arthur's overlordship without consulting the will of his people. Gawain magnanimously agrees to pretend that he has been defeated in combat so that these problems may be resolved without the death of a valiant foe.

Gawain emerges with less distinction, however, from *The Jeaste of Syr Gawayne*, which is also based upon an episode in the same Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval*. Both tell how Gawain seduces a maiden he finds in a tent and then fights her father and brothers. Events culminate in an inglorious conclusion as the combatants painfully hobble homewards on foot, while the damsel is soundly beaten by her brother. The best that can be said for Gawain is that he behaves better than the other figures.[48]

The remaining romances in which Gawain is the central hero belong to a category that Gillian Rogers calls folk romance, and many are collected as ballads in Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript:[49] *The Grene Knight*, *The Turke and Gowin*, two versions of the Carl of Carlisle story, two versions of Gawain's wedding to Dame Ragnell, *The Avowynge of King Arthur*, and *King Arthur and the King of Cornwall* (though his role here is minor). In all, Gawain is spared the criticism that is frequently aimed at Arthur and his court. He demonstrates a level of valor, loyalty, and courtesy that breaks magical spells of transformation and wins the admiration of all, particularly in the story of his wedding when he agrees to marry a repulsive hag to save Arthur's life.

As one might expect, Gawain fares less well in works based upon French prose romance, though the selection of material often proves to his benefit. *Arthour and Merlin* (1350–1400), Henry Lovelich's *Merlin*, and the Prose *Merlin* (both ca. 1450) are all translations of the Vulgate *Merlin*; *Lancelot of the Laik*, a Scottish poem from the second half of the fifteenth century, is closely based upon the account of Arthur's war against Galehaut in the Vulgate *Lancelot*. They preserve the picture of Gawain found in their sources: a valiant warrior who serves his uncle loyally in the wars against his enemies, though in the Scottish poem his efforts are overshadowed by those of Lancelot.

The Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* (fourteenth century) offers a condensed version of the events leading up to the death of Arthur as told in the Vulgate *Mort Artu*. Sometimes the omissions favor Gawain: he does not, for example, try to woo the Maid of Astolat as he does in the French romance. At other times they are less helpful: whereas in the Vulgate he reveals what he believes to be Lancelot's relationship with the Maid only to defend his friend against the charge of treason with the Queen, in the poem he lets the misinformation slip

for a less pressing reason, though it does bring comfort to the King. Nevertheless, the poet avoids taking sides in the feud between Lancelot and Gawain. If Gawain is implacable in his desire to avenge the killing of his unarmed brothers, Lancelot for his part has ignored warnings of danger in order to fulfill his desire to be with Guinevere.[50] As a result, Gawain is depicted in positive terms for the most part, his faults balanced by virtues. When he makes his last appearance, to his uncle in a dream, he is accompanied by a large company of lords and ladies on whose behalf he had fought, convincing evidence of the good deeds that he has performed.

This even-handedness, unfortunately for him, is abandoned by Sir Thomas Malory, who makes Lancelot the hero of *Le Morte Darthur* (1469–70). Where earlier English writers had drawn their material from those parts of the Vulgate Cycle that viewed Gawain favorably, Malory included among his sources not only the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal* but also the Prose *Tristan* and the Post-Vulgate Cycle, all of which portray him in very negative terms.[51] Malory, moreover, modifies his sources so that Gawain appears to even greater disadvantage. Where these sources are generally favorable to Gawain, like the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which is the basis of the section on Arthur's wars with the Romans, and the lost younger-brother story, which is the basis of the tale of Gareth, Malory reduces Gawain's role, assigning many of his deeds to Lancelot. Where the sources are already unfavorable, he often presents Gawain in an even harsher light, notably in his betrayal of Pelleas, his murder of Pellinor and Lamorak, and his insistence upon revenge against Lancelot for the death of Gareth.[52] Although some of these changes are intended to enhance the status of Lancelot, they go far beyond what is needed, and they were to bequeath to succeeding generations of writers a far less attractive figure than is found everywhere else in Middle English literature.

English (Renaissance to Nineteenth Century)

With the passing of the Middle Ages, interest in Arthurian legend waned dramatically. Prior to the nineteenth century, Gawain appears only three times. In *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1587) by Thomas Hughes and in William Hilton's *Arthur, Monarch of the Britons: a Tragedy* (1759), two plays based upon Geoffrey of Monmouth, he emerges as a heroic figure, particularly in the latter. In the burlesque opera "The Marriage of Sir Gawaine" (1782), John Seally emphasizes his comic predicament. The nineteenth century, however, witnessed the Arthurian Revival, and with it increased attention to Gawain.[53]

During the first half of the nineteenth century, he continues to win praise for his courage and courtesy, particularly in Reginald Heber's "Fragments of The Masque of Gwendolen" (1816), which retells the story of Gawain's wedding with Dame Ragnell (here called Gwendolen), and in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's epic poem *King Arthur* (1848). Despite his comic misadventures in the latter, he remains a witty and attractive figure.

Gawain's luck runs out in the second half of the century, however, for Tennyson chose to blacken his reputation even more than did Malory, the prime source for *Idylls of the King* (1857–85).[54] His conduct is most reprehensible in "Pelleas and Ettarre" (1869), where he betrays the trust of Pelleas by wooing Ettarre for himself, and Tennyson leaves him no redeeming features at all. In "The Passing of Arthur" (1833-34, 1842, 1869), even the warning of his ghost is scornfully dismissed by Bedivere: "Light was Gawain in life, and light in death / Is Gawain for the ghost is as the man" (vv. 56–57).[55] Nor was Tennyson alone in his hostility to Gawain, for William Morris turned this staunch defender of the Queen's innocence in medieval accounts into her accuser in "The Defence of Guenevere" (1858).[56] During the last decade of the century, Gawain fell foul of no fewer than three playwrights: in "The Marriage of Guenevere: A Tragedy" (1892), Richard Hovey demonstrates his lustful nature, even at the age of sixteen, when he accompanies his mother to Arthur's court; in *Mordred* (1893), Wilfred Campbell blames the fall of the Round Table upon his vengefulness; and in *Mordred: A Tragedy* (1895), Henry Newbolt turns this most loyal of knights into a supporter of Mordred's rebellion against Arthur. The century thus closed for Gawain on a very low note indeed.

English (Twentieth Century)

The twentieth century witnessed major shifts in the forms in which Arthurian legend is presented. Plays dwindled in prominence if not in number, to be replaced by films and television presentations; longer poems became rarer, though short verse and sequences continued to appear in the pages of the many magazines that published poetry; prose fiction in the form of novels and short stories, meanwhile, proliferated to achieve a position of dominance. In the process, the legend developed in a variety of genres, the most important of which were fantasy and historical fiction.[57] Fiction aimed primarily at younger readers and comics grew in popularity and, like role-playing games and film, exercised an ever-growing influence over new generations of readers.

Gawain figures in a number of plays and musical dramas. He is at his worst in Edwin Royle's *Launcelot and Elaine* (1920, 1929), a dramatization of Tennyson's idyll that turns him into a willing puppet of Mordred, and in Rutland Boughton's *Avalon* (1945), an unperformed opera in which he betrays Arthur and joins Mordred at the last battle. Malory is the source for Stark Young's *Guenevere* (1906), Laurence Binyon's *Arthur: A Tragedy* (1923), Georgene Davis's *The Round Table: A History Drawn from Unreliable Chronicles* (1930), and David Freeman's dramatization of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (1990). In these, Gawain wins some sympathy, but his vengefulness is blamed for the fall of Arthur's kingdom in all but the first play. Clemence Dane draws upon the chronicles for *The Hope of Britain*, the second of seven plays collected as *The Saviours* (1942), in which Gawain plays a minor role as Arthur's loyal nephew during his wars.

When dramatists turned to verse romance for their material, however, Gawain emerges with greater credit, not only in the many plays and operas for children that adapt the stories of his encounter with the Green Knight and Dame Ragnell (by John Chambers, Tim Porter, Richard Blackford, and others),[58] but also in the verse drama *Gawain* (1991) by David Harsent. Based upon *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this last was developed into a successful opera, with music by Harrison Birtwhistle.

Poems that are influenced by Gawain's role in the chronicles and verse romances usually portray him positively also, though when they draw upon *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, they may note his failings. In two long poems that conclude with the destruction of Arthur's kingdom, E. H. Tax's *The Wraith of Gawain* (1948) and John Heath-Stubbs's *Artorius* (1973), Gawain acts with courtesy and valor. In fact, when the former turns from verse and Celtic tale to Malory for the source of plot, it makes changes that show him in a favorable light, even in his conflicts with Pellinore and Lancelot.

Such sympathy is rare, however, for most poems that make use of Malory's account adopt his approach to Gawain, and while they may acknowledge the basic nobility of his character, they focus upon his flaws in the events that unfold. Thus he is condemned for promiscuity in Francis B. Money Coutts's "Ettard's Troth" (1912) and for the vengefulness that breaks the Round Table in Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Merlin* (1917) and *Lancelot: A Poem* (1920). An exception to this pattern is "The Breaking of the Links" by John Masefield, one of the poems collected in *Midsummer Night* (1928), where the high-minded Gawain departs the court, outraged at the accusations of treason against the Queen.

It is in prose fiction, however, that Arthurian legend has received fullest attention, and that Gawain's character is explored most closely. He is found regularly among Arthur's followers in the historical novels that are based upon the chronicles, but usually in the minor role of a valiant and loyal captain. Only Rosemary Sutcliff provides a fuller picture of the hero, by turning him into a healer in *Sword at Sunset* (1963). Though no relation to Arthur, Gwalchmai, as he is called here, is as devoted to his leader as he is to the wounded, serving both tirelessly. His self-sacrificing concern for others mirrors that of Arthur, so that this fine novel offers one of the most admirable portraits of both men.

Fiction that draws its plots from verse romance and heroic tale, in English and other languages, presents a mixed, albeit generally favorable, image of Gawain. Some novels that include the story of Gawain's encounter with the Green Knight emphasize his achievements, while others focus instead upon the chastening lesson learned by a flawed hero. Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex* (1978), which at the end judges him to be "one of the very greatest knights who ever lived and the finest man of the company of the Round Table (for he had all the virtues and of the vices the most natural),"[59] manages to balance

achievement with a lesson that serves as an important stage in his development. By contrast, Vera Chapman, who follows Malory's depiction of a Gawain prone to savage rages, replaces him with a nephew of the same name when she adapts the story in *The Green Knight* (1975).

The account of his wedding to Dame Ragnell allows Gawain to demonstrate his courtesy in several novels, including Berger's *Arthur Rex* and Gerald Morris's *The Squire's Tale* (1998). When the novels draw from Welsh tradition, as do Nigel Tranter's *Druid Sacrifice* (1993) and Sarah Thomson's *The Dragon's Son* (2001), they too usually emphasize his honorable behavior. Richard Monaco's Grail trilogy (1977–80), which is based upon Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* rather than the Vulgate *Queste*, presents him as an attractive character despite his many flaws; and Gillian Bradshaw makes Gwalchmai, as she calls him, the admirable central hero of *Hawk of May* (1980) and *Kingdom of Summer* (1981), the first two books in her Arthurian trilogy. Her two novels make use of accounts of Gawain's birth[60] and of his encounter with the maiden in the First Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval* respectively, as they portray his valiant struggle against the forces of darkness within, as well as outside, himself.

In Winter's Shadow (1982), which concludes the trilogy, uses not verse but prose romance as the primary source of the story, and in this Bradshaw aligns herself with the majority of modern authors. Although her choice is appropriate to her darkening vision of the destruction of the Arthurian dream, it does cast Gwalchmai again in the role given him by Malory: that of the champion whose pride, anger, and vengefulness prevent any hope of reconciliation between Arthur and Lancelot. Gawain manages to escape blame in works that do not involve him in the feud with Lancelot; in *Firelord* (1980), for instance, Parke Godwin achieves this by severing his uncle-nephew relationship with Arthur. Such changes are rare, however, and even novels that do not deal with the fall of Arthur's realm may prepare us for Gawain's later role by showing us early signs of his dangerous impulses.

Thus while in some accounts of his childhood, like that by Bradshaw, he struggles to escape his mother's malign influence, more often Gawain shows the rashness and anger that were eventually to prove so fatal, most notably in T. H. White's *Witch in the Wood* (1939, later retitled *The Queen of Air and Darkness* in *The Once and Future King*, 1958). In *The Squire's Tale* (1998), Gerald Morris completely exonerates him of any blame in the episode of Pelleas and Ettarde, whereas John Steinbeck censures him severely in *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976). In *The Savage Damsel and the Dwarf* (2000), Morris again shows him to advantage in the story of Gareth, but E. M. R. Ditmas gives him a violent temper in *Gareth of Orkney* (1956). In *Arthur Rex*, Berger defends Gawain's conduct in his feud with Pellinore, but most novelists are highly critical, especially Nancy Springer in *I Am Mordred* (1998). In novels based upon *Perlesvaus*, like Dorothy James Roberts's *Kinsmen of the Grail* (1963), Gawain acquits himself creditably on the Grail Quest;

but in the more numerous novels which, like White's *Once and Future King*, follow Malory, he reveals himself as badly unsuited for so spiritual a challenge.

Since it leads to the downfall of Arthur's kingdom, Gawain's feud with Lancelot is the deed that condemns him in the eyes of many authors, though even here views do differ. Some, like Berger and Sharan Newman in *Guinevere Evermore* (1985), emphasize his nobility and reluctance to perform his duty to avenge his brothers against his good friend. Most who treat the love between Lancelot and Guinevere sympathetically, however, though they may acknowledge Gawain's positive qualities, blame his pride, as does Nancy McKenzie in *The Child Queen* (1994) and *The High Queen* (1995, both revised and issued in 2002 as one novel, *Queen of Camelot*). The harshest condemnation of his conduct is found in *The Wicked Day* (1983) by Mary Stewart, who allows him no redeeming features whatsoever. In her efforts to exonerate Mordred of responsibility for the final disaster, she shifts blame onto the rest of the wild, uncontrollable Orkney clan, Gawain included.

Gawain's treatment in the twentieth century thus reflects the influence of the conflicting traditions that authors inherited as well as their own creative needs. Historical novelists who draw upon the chronicles usually portray him as a valiant and loyal follower of Arthur; writers who adapt material from the verse romances, especially *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the story of his wedding to Dame Ragnell, usually praise his courtesy and loyalty; those who follow Malory and the prose romances are usually more critical of his failings, particularly anger and vengefulness. The mingling of traditions, however, can lead to radical reinterpretations of Gawain's conduct in familiar stories, and this often works to his benefit.[61]

Non-English Literature (Post-Medieval)

After the Middle Ages, interest in Arthurian legend dwindled in all languages of Europe, and when it did revive at the end of the eighteenth century, it never attained the popularity it found in English. Those works that did treat it, moreover, paid more attention to other figures, notably Tristan and Isolde, Lancelot and Guenevere, Parzival and Galahad, Merlin and Arthur himself. Gawain was more likely to appear, therefore, in translations from English of popular novels like White's *Once and Future King* (translated into German in 1976 as *Der König auf Camelot*) and to be treated accordingly. Where authors did draw upon their own indigenous medieval versions, they were inclined to reduce or even eliminate Gawain's role.

Modern French Arthurian literature largely ignores Gauvain, as he is called in French literature, preferring other figures. He is reduced typically to a minor character in works like *Le Chevalier de neige* (The Snow Knight, 1953), a play by Boris Vian (later developed into an opera) that presents the story of Lancelot and Guenevere as found in the Vulgate Cycle. The exception to this pattern is *Gauvain et le Chevalier Vert* (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight), one

of a series of plays under the title *Graal Théâtre* (1977) by Florence Delay and Jacques Roubaud. This condenses material from not only the English poem, but also Chrétien's *Yvain* and *Perceval* and the First (*Gauvain-*) Continuation. The play is enlivened by ironic commentary and some nice touches of humor, notably Kay's incredulity when he hears that most of the army's supplies have been sent to the very people it is besieging because Gauvain, Yvain, and Arthur gallantly took pity on two hungry damsels, and Flore de Lis's insouciance when she tells her father and brother that she has just lost her maidenhood to Gauvain. Yet despite the humor at his expense, Gawain remains, as in the verse romances, an attractive and entertaining figure whose fondness for a fair damsel does not prevent him from rejecting the amorous advances of Bercilak's lady, nor from achieving partial success at the Grail Castle.

When interest in medieval culture revived in German-speaking countries after the Romantic Movement, it focused upon their own mythical past in works like the *Niebelungenlied* rather than upon the Matter of Britain. Whenever it did turn to the Arthurian legend, moreover, it was to Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* or Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Whereas the former excludes Gawan, as he is called in German literature, the latter gives him a major role. Unfortunately, his adventures were the very ones most likely to be cut in later adaptations of the story, especially those for children, with the result that Arthur's nephew often became a marginal figure, just one more knight of the Round Table. Richard Wagner completely eliminated him from his last opera, *Parsifal* (1882), which exercised a powerful influence over subsequent reworkings of the story. Only when writers sought more widely for sources did Gawan command attention. He is the central character in *Gawan* (1901), one of eight Arthurian plays by Eduard Stucken collected under the title *Der Gral: Ein dramatisches Epos* (The Grail: A Dramatic Epic, 1924); he finds a place in Käthe Recheis's *König Arthur und die Ritter der Tafelrunde* (King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table), a novel for younger readers influenced by Malory; and he figures prominently in two of the most important plays in modern Germany, *Merlin oder das Wüste Land* (Merlin or the Wasteland,1981) by Tankred Dorst and Ursula Ehler, and *Die Ritter der Tafelrunde* (The Knights of the Round Table, 1989) by Christoph Hein. Gawan also benefited from the appetite for translations of English novels by authors like T. H. White, Mary Stewart, Gillian Bradshaw, and Marion Zimmer Bradley, whose *Mists of Avalon* was a German bestseller in 1983.

During the Middle Ages, the Dutch viewed Walewein, as Gawain was called, favorably, and Penninc and Pieter Vostaert made him the central hero of the *Roman van Walewein*.[62] After the publication of its text in 1848, the poem was adapted in M. C. H. Betz's verse novel *Walewein* (1890); and Louis Couperus devised an ironic continuation of the story in *Het zwevende schaakbord* (The Floating Chessboard, which appeared first in installments, 1917–18, then in a single volume, 1922), though this time the hero achieves less success.

Jaap ter Haar, the best-known modern Dutch writer to deal with the legend, separates Walewein into two characters in *Koning Arthur* (1967, translated into English in 1973 as *King Arthur*): Welwyn, who is King Lot's son, is noble and idealistic, whereas Gawain is "a great man, blinded by hatred."[63]

Unlike the other post-medieval literatures, Gaelic literature survived in oral tradition. As a result, some of the songs and tales that have been collected may have been handed down from the Middle Ages, often with considerable variations.[64] Gawain, whose name appears in various forms, figures in several. In the Irish *Eachtra an Mhadra Mhaoil* (Adventures of the Crop-eared Dog), Sir Bhalbhuaidh (Gawain) helps the son of the King of India, who has been transformed into a dog, regain his human form. By contrast, in the Irish *Eachtra an Amadáin Mhóir* (The Adventures of the Great Fool), which has similarities with the story of Perceval, he takes on Kay's role by mocking the ignorant hero, slapping Arthur's daughter when she laughs, then being punished severely for his unkindness. In the Scottish *Sir Uallabh O'Corn*, Sir Uallabh (Gawain) undergoes a series of fantastic adventures before marrying the daughter of the King of India and becoming King of Ireland. In one Scottish variant of the tale of Carados and the serpent found in the First Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval*, Sheen Billy (Gawain) takes on the role of protagonist. Finally, the Scottish *Am Bròn Binn* (The Sweet Sorrow) recounts Gawain's quest for a girl who has visited Arthur, usually in a dream. This exists in three versions, and although Gawain rescues the girl from a giant in one, in another she lulls him to sleep and beheads him.

Elsewhere, Gawain has been portrayed mainly in translations from English. The Spanish, for example, have been particularly interested in Tennyson's Arthurian poems and modern Arthurian fiction.[65] When Spanish authors create original works, they focus on other characters, particularly Merlin and Vivien. Gawain makes a rare appearance in Darío Xohán Cabana's novel *Galván en Saor* (1989), which shifts between the present and medieval times: Galván (Gawain) travels to Saor (Galicia), where he meets Merlin, now a bus driver. Cabana thus follows a common trend among Galician authors of transporting Arthurian characters and motifs to their home region.

In these post-medieval literatures, thus, relatively little attention is paid to Arthurian legend, and when it is, it is to characters other than Gawain. The exceptions to this pattern occur in translations from popular English works and in Gaelic oral tradition.

Visual Media 1: Art

Arthurian art in a variety of media flourished in two main periods, the later Middle Ages and the Arthurian Revival in Victorian England. Gawain makes a promising start. On the Modena archivolt in northern Italy, the earliest representation of an Arthurian theme in monumental sculpture,[66] the name Galvaginus (Gawain) is inscribed above one of the knights who ride to rescue

Winlogee (Guenevere) from the castle where she is imprisoned by Mardoc, and this has led some scholars to argue that Gawain and not Lancelot was the original rescuer of the abducted queen. Attention, however, soon shifted to figures like Tristan and Isolde, Lancelot and Guenevere, Arthur and Galahad.

The most popular subject featuring Gawain in medieval art, especially on ivories, was his adventure in the Perilous Bed, originating in the *Perceval* of Chrétien de Troyes. He does appear, however, in other scenes from the poet's works, such as his combat with the hero in *Yvain*, and, in *Perceval*, his warding off assailants with a chessboard and his encounter with a lion at the Castle of Marvels. He also appears in pursuit of the Floating Chessboard in a miniature at the beginning of the Dutch *Roman van Walewein*. In illuminations of the highly popular Vulgate Cycle, Gawain figures along with other knights as they ride through forests, approach castles, dine at feasts, and fight in battle or single combat. Such figures are not individualized other than by their coats-of-arms: in earlier manuscripts, Gawain sometimes bore a silver shield with a red quarter in the upper left corner, but in the fifteenth century, this shield became purple with a double-headed gold eagle.[67] This was his shield for war. In peace he bore a shield with his personal device, most famously the gold pentangle on a red background in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The four crude illustrations in the manuscript of this poem are a striking contrast to its literary merits, and they confirm "the limitations of English secular illumination ca. 1400" (Whitaker, *The Legends of King Arthur in Art*, p. 77) in comparison with the work on the Continent. Nor were the earliest Arthurian woodcuts much of an improvement, for when Wynkyn de Worde reissued Caxton's text of Malory's *Morte Darthur* in 1498 with twenty-one illustrations, they were clumsily executed. Gawain does appear with Ector in one, wearing armor in the latest fashion, and it is of interest to observe in Arthurian illustrations how clothing fashions change as well as artistic styles.

When English artists returned to the legend during the Arthurian Revival, they exhibited more talent; but the Pre-Raphaelites largely ignored Gawain in favor of an ecstatic Galahad and Elaine of Astolat (or her avatar the Lady of Shalott), whose brightly illuminated dead body floating down the dark river to Camelot appealed to the Victorian taste for morbid and sentimental scenes. Given Gawain's unflattering portrayal by Tennyson and Morris, it was perhaps just as well he was passed over. William Dyce was commissioned by Prince Albert to paint a series of seven frescoes for the Queen's Robing Room in the new Palace of Westminster (1848–64), and his earliest design, *Piety: The Knights of the Round Table departing on the Quest for the Holy Grail* (1849), included an impatient Gawain on his rearing horse. That design was rejected, but Dyce did portray him in a later fresco, *Mercy: Sir Gawain swearing to be merciful and never again be against Ladies* (1854).[68] Most often, however, Gawain appears as a failed Grail knight, as in Edward Burne-Jones's "How

Gawaine sought the Sangreal and might not see it because his eyes were blinded by thoughts of the deeds of Kings," one of four stained-glass panels in *The Story of the Quest for the Holy Grail* (1886), and "The Failure of Sir Gawaine and Sir Ewain," one of seven tapestries in *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (1891–94), woven by Morris & Co.[69]

Since most book illustrations are found in retellings of Malory for children, Gawain appears but rarely, though to judge from Howard Pyle's depiction of the unsavory seducer in two illustrations for the Pelleas and Ettarde episode in his *Story of King Arthur and His Knights* (1903), this was perhaps just as well.[70] Elsewhere he figures in one of the illustrations by Dan Beard of Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and in an illustration by Jessie King for Sebastian Evans's translation of *The High History of the Holy Grail* (1903). In the twentieth century, however Gawain is most likely to appear in the illustrations of retellings for children of his encounter with the Green Knight and of his wedding with Dame Ragnell, the Loathly Lady. For example, the former story was retold by Gwyn Jones with illustrations by Dorothea Braby (1952) and by Michael Morpurgo with illustrations by Michael Foreman (2004); and both were retold by Selina Hastings with award-winning illustrations by Juan Wijngaard, the former in 1981, the latter in 1985.[71] Charles Keeping provided powerful black-and-white illustrations for *The Tale of Sir Gawain* (1987) by Neil Philip, in which the gravely wounded knight recalls a number of adventures, but none picture Gawain himself, interestingly enough.

Visual Media 2: Films, Comics, Games

To a populace increasingly oriented toward visual media, films, comics, and games have exercised a powerful influence, serving for many as a "gateway" to the Arthurian legend. Thus while they may strike some medievalists as pale imitations, or even trivializations, of a rich heritage, they do have a wider impact on society in general than their artistic merits might recommend. If an author as popular and influential as Marion Zimmer Bradley can speak of the comic strip *Prince Valiant* as "an early inspiration,"[72] clearly we need to take such works into account.

Films on Arthurian subjects have proven almost as disappointing as plays, despite some worthy attempts. Only in adaptations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has Gawain attracted much attention.[73] Elsewhere, his role has been cut or drastically reduced to focus on the central characters, usually the love triangle of Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. The audience would need to be alert to spot him in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981), and *First Knight* (1995). Gawain plays a minor role in *Knights of the Round Table* (1953) as a loyal retainer of Lancelot, in the confusing *Lancelot: Guardian of Time* (1999) as Lancelot's valiant foe/companion, and in *King Arthur* (2004) as one of the Sarmatian knights who help the

Britons defeat the Saxons. He is a good-hearted foil to the hero in two adaptations of Hal Foster's comic strip *Prince Valiant* (the first in 1954, the second in 1997) as well as in *The Legend of Prince Valiant* (1992), an animated series by Sei Young Animation Company for the Family Channel. He is ennobled by his love for Dame Ragnell in the 1985 CBS television film *Arthur the King*. We see more of Gawain in two impressive French films, Robert Bresson's *Lancelot du Lac* (1974) and Eric Rohmer's *Perceval le Gallois* (1978), but even they reduce his role from that which he plays in their sources, the Vulgate *Mort Artu* and Chrétien's *Perceval*, in order to focus upon their central hero.

His encounter with the Green Knight is included in *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* (1981), an animated series, and it is the central plot in three films: *Gawain and the Green Knight* (1973) and *Sword of the Valiant* (1983), both directed by Stephen Weeks, and Thames Television's *Gawain and the Green Knight* (1991). The first two were not successful, but the third has won praise for its thoughtful approach to the material.

The dominant Arthurian figures in the comics and graphic novels have been Merlin, Morgan le Fay, Arthur, and Mordred, joined by a wide variety of newcomers like the Shining Knight, the Black Knight, and the demon Etrigan (Merlin's half-brother). This reflects the popularity in the medium of figures with supernatural powers (Arthur wields his magical sword Excalibur, while Mordred is taught by Morgan), sharply divided into good and evil. Knights of the Round Table like Gawain often become little more than features to establish the Arthurian setting.

Gawain does achieve some prominence in the best-known Arthurian comic strip, *Prince Valiant*, begun in 1937 by Harold R. Foster and continued first by John Cullen Murphy, then Murphy's son Cullen. The hero, Val, starts as squire to, and then, after achieving knighthood, becomes the good friend of, Gawain, who is portrayed as a heroic but merry character. Foster emphasized the historical context of fifth-century Britain, but since most comic strip creators prefer superheroes, they usually pay little attention to Gawain. Two exceptions are Mike W. Barr in *Camelot 3000* (issued in twelve installments, 1982–85; reprinted in one volume, 1988) and James Calafiore in *Camelot Eternal* (1990–91). In the former, Gawain is reincarnated as a black South African, closely bound to his family; in the latter, which offers an alternative conclusion to Malory's story, he still refuses to forgive Launcelot for the death of his brothers and eventually kills him. He does occasionally appear in the comics in other languages: in Dutch, for example, Frank Herzen and Gerrit Stapel created a cartoon strip *Gawain en de Groene Ridder* (Gawain and the Green Knight, 1980). Gawain's rare appearances in the comics thus preserve his status as a valiant warrior.

In games, Gawain is even less visible. He is not one of the five characters that one can play as in Konami's video game version of the 2004 film *King Arthur*, and this is typical of his fate: to be excluded in order to focus upon other

figures. Occasionally, however, the game player takes on the role of Gawain: in *Brimstone* (1985), an early computer game developed by Synapse Software and published by Brøderbund, Gawain encounters both the Green Knight and Morgan le Fay during his adventures in the underworld; and he is the newly created knight who is sent to defeat Morgana in *Chronicles of the Sword* (1996), an adventure video game from Psygnosis. He is one of the Famous People available to the game master in Greg Stafford's role-playing game *King Arthur Pendragon* (1985, 4th edition 1993), which notes that he is gracious and generous, but also lustful and vengeful where his family is concerned. Gawain is similarly characterized in *La Table Ronde* (n.d.), a French role-playing game designed by Anne Vétillard for Jeux Descartes. In 1989, Stafford also designed a story-telling game based on Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*, in which Gawain is described as "a lusty, freedom-loving knight whose only fear is marriage."[74] Because his abilities are so far above those of ordinary characters, he is normally reserved for the game master in role-playing games. He is one of the ancient characters in *Duel of the Ages*, a card game, and one of the ButtonLords in *Pendragon ButtonLords* (2000), a board game from Green Knight.

Gawain's portrayal in visual media thus demonstrates a lack of attention. He figures most frequently in illuminations of medieval manuscripts, but less often than knights like Lancelot and Tristan. The English verse romances in which he is the hero were rarely illuminated, and the influence of Malory and Tennyson dampened enthusiasm for him among artists in the nineteenth century and book illustrators in the twentieth. In films, comics, and games his appearances are rare and often fleeting. Only when these media turn to the stories of his encounter with the Green Knight and Dame Ragnell is he given the opportunity to display the courtesy and loyalty for which he was famed in medieval romance.

Conclusion

The wide fluctuations in the treatment of Gawain offer us a figure that appears full of contradictions. The chronicles praise him as Arthur's mightiest warrior, unsurpassed in future generations. In French romance, however, this supremacy is increasingly challenged by younger heroes who are attracted to Arthur's court, and Gawain's defeats at the hands of Lancelot, Tristan, and others, steadily accumulate until challengers begin to wonder how he ever gained a reputation for prowess in the first place. The earlier French verse romances present Gawain as the standard of courtesy and discretion against whom all others are measured (and almost invariably found wanting), and this image is largely preserved in English, German, and Dutch verse. In later French verse, his idealism often leads to embarrassing situations that create humor at his expense, whereas in the prose tradition his conduct becomes totally reprehensible. The modesty and compassion that serve the hero so well in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and accounts of his wedding to Dame Ragnell are

replaced by the pride that takes affront at the achievements of others in the Prose *Tristan* and by vengefulness in accounts of the Death of Arthur by Malory and others.

That Gawain's reputation has recovered from such calumny does suggest that he possesses certain traits that continue to appeal to us down through the ages. First of all, Gawain is unswervingly loyal to Arthur, a trait that commends itself to readers in whom the king's struggle to build a better world strikes a sympathetic chord. Secondly, once the fashion for courtly love had passed and the clerical exaltation of chastity grown less persuasive, Gawain's involvement with unattached damsels (always less frequent than often assumed) may seem less offensive than an adulterous relationship that destroys a kingdom or a religious fervor that abandons other responsibilities to seek personal salvation. Indeed, the excesses of religious fanaticism are often condemned as a serious threat to Arthur's rule.[75] Finally, the courtesy for which Gawain is so famed goes beyond polite manners to embrace generosity to the poor (in Chrétien's *Perceval*), kindness to the aged (in *Claris et Laris*), and aid to ladies who need someone to protect their rights. The gratitude for his service wins for his ghost the opportunity to warn Arthur in his dream on the eve of the Battle of Camlann. He is even fond of animals, as is demonstrated by his attachment to his horse Gringalet and his anger at the killing of his dogs on his first quest in Malory and elsewhere.[76]

Gawain will always find detractors, for authors, like the rest of us, seek a convenient figure upon whom to fasten blame and so excuse the faults of their own hero, whether it be Tristan in the Prose *Tristan*, Lancelot in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, or Mordred in Mary Stewart's *The Wicked Day*. Ironically, however, the very contradictions in his conduct that have emerged in different works have also created interesting possibilities for the figure of Gawain. In shedding the perfection that precluded character development and discouraged his adoption as central hero, he has sprung to prominence in some of the finest works of Arthurian literature: Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* in the twelfth century; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the fourteenth; and, in the twentieth, Rosemary Sutcliff's *Sword at Sunset*, Gillian Bradshaw's Arthurian trilogy, and Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex*. Gawain's heroic struggle against the enemy, both without and (more importantly) within, here and elsewhere, will always win the admiration and touch the hearts of those lured by the Arthurian dream of a better world.

Contents of This Volume

Of the nineteen essays in this volume, three are new compositions, four are excerpts from books and long articles, and twelve are reprinted articles. Translations of quotations have been provided by the authors or the editors where warranted. The essays trace the evolution of Gawain's character, from

earliest mention in the chronicles to most recent appearance in literature and film.

B. J. Whiting's "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," is the classic wide-ranging survey of the treatment of the hero in French and English literature, from Wace to T. H. White. In this substantial excerpt, Whiting attributes the decline in Gawain's reputation to the "epic degeneration" that affects all popular heroes, and to his being supplanted in medieval literature by newer champions who follow the dictates of courtly love on one hand and the increasingly ascetic demands of the Grail quest on the other (p. 29). To these impersonal forces Whiting adds deliberate vilification at the hands of two writers in particular: the author of the Prose *Tristan* and Tennyson. Courtesy emerges as Gawain's most outstanding characteristic in the Middle Ages.

Rachel Bromwich's "Gwalchmei m. Gwyar" is excerpted from the Notes to Personal Names in the second edition of *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads*. She scrutinizes the appearance of Gwalchmei in William of Malmesbury's chronicle and in Welsh tradition, the variations in his name and parentage, and the courtesy and valor he displays in the three Welsh romances. She speculates that Gwalchmei's origins, like that of many figures in early Welsh tradition, are probably northern.

The next two essays deal with Chrétien de Troyes. In "The Character of Gauvain in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes," William A. Nitze examines Gauvain's role in the chronicles before turning to Chrétien's romances. He concludes that it is to the latter we owe our conception of Gauvain as "an exemplar of perspicacity and judgment, a model of courtesy and understanding, to whom the entire court—ladies as well as knights—is beholden, and never lacking in a sense of reality and humor" (p. 69). While acknowledging Gauvain's virtues, Douglas Kelly argues in "Gauvain and *Fin' Amors* in the Poems of Chrétien de Troyes" that not only is Gauvain an unreliable counselor in matters of courtly love, but that courtly love is superior to "mere chivalry" in Chrétien's Arthurian world, and this sets the stage for his decline in later romances (p. 78).

The next three essays survey French verse romance after Chrétien. In "Arthurian Adventure or Quixotic 'Struggle for Life'? A Reading of Some Gauvain Romances in the First Half of the Thirteenth Century," Friedrich Wolfzettel judges that in the works studied Gauvain illustrates not just the comic frustration of his good intentions but also "the tragic inadequacy of the fictional Arthurian world under the real conditions of life" (p. 86). "Diverging Traditions of Gauvain in Some of the Later Old French Verse Romances" by Keith Busby examines *Hunbaut*, *Le Chevalier aux deux Epées*, *L'Atre Périlleux*, and *Les Merveilles de Rigomer*. Busby concludes that "the overwhelming impression left by these late romances is of the esteem and affection in which Gauvain is held by other characters in the romances, by authors, and,