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Gawain in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*

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I

Especially in England, from the earlier Arthurian literature such as the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth to the late Medieval romances, Gawain is described as one of the finest representatives of the Round Table and as one of Arthur's most loyal companions. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which holds a significant place among the Middle English alliterative poems, and which has been supposed as one of the main source books of Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthure*, Gawain is portrayed as the leading figure next to Arthur.¹

Gawain, for example, shows such chivalrous virtues as his bravery, loyalty, and leadership in various battle scenes in the poem. His outstanding achievement as an ideal warrior makes him stand out as the most distinguished knight in Arthur's army. Therefore, when Gawain dies, the poet dedicates to him two of the most impressive and noblest epitaphs in Middle English poetry which are spoken by Mordred and Arthur (Eadie 11). Moreover, unlike other knights, apart from Arthur only Gawain has an individual adventure which seems to act as a kind of interlude or digression in the poem.

Despite Gawain's obviously important role, however, many critics have argued against seeing him in favorable terms.² It is beyond question that Gawain's actions in the poem especially in the battle scenes are sometimes relatively rash, reckless, and thoughtless in the light of modern standards. To take a typical example, in his last battle against Mordred,

Gawain faces an army of 60,000 men with no more than 140 of his own. Although this venture is admired even by one of his enemies, in the end he is killed at the hand of Mordred.

Is Gawain's character, as is claimed by critics, intended by the poet to be perceived as less than admirable? Then, if so, why does the poet give Gawain the most significant role only next to Arthur? The purpose of this essay is to explore the true role of Gawain in the poem by showing how he is described. I will begin with an observation of the poem's nature which is to some extent different from other Arthurian romances of its time. Then I shall attempt to analyze his character from his actions in the poem. In addition, it will be useful to investigate the parallelism between Arthur's character and Gawain's to solve the problem of Gawain's role in the poem.

II

By the end of the twelfth century, as John Finlayson suggests, two main streams of the Arthurian legend had grown simultaneously: the epic tradition in the chronicle style, and the chivalrous romances (*Morte Arture* 4). The former stream derives mainly from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and his successors' works such as Wace's *Roman de Brut* and Laȝamon's *Brut*. The latter is found in the early French romances, especially those of Chretien de Troyes. The streams did not move equally; rather, the genre of romances became more important and dominant in the literary world.

Apart from the popularity of the romances, however, the influence of the Old English poems belonging to the heroic tradition, such as *Beowulf*, has survived in early Middle English literature as seen in Laȝamon's long poem (Oakden 85). Afterwards in the middle of fourteenth-century England, there arose a school of alliterative poetry which was a major lit-

erary phenomenon. It is usually called the Alliterative Revival, and one of the most notable achievements of the alliterative school is the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

It has been generally recognized that the alliterative *Morte Arthure* derives from the former stream of the Arthurian legend, that is, the chronicle, epic tradition of Geoffrey, Wace and Laȝamon. Thus, Arthur is described as the main character in the poem as in Geoffrey's *Historia*. For in the romances, the attention is less often focused on Arthur than on individual knights, and he tends to be reduced to a background figure, making an appearance as a conventionally great ruler only in the opening and closing sections of the story. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, however, Arthur is the main hero who plays a positive role in almost every event in the poem. Along with Arthur, Gawain, whose character had somewhat deteriorated especially in the Old French romances, is also rehabilitated as one of Arthur's earliest and noblest companions (Finlayson, "The Concept" 267).

As is pointed out by John Finlayson, it is also widely agreed that the dominant tone in the poem is that of the *chansons de geste*, typified by the *Chanson de Roland* ("The Concept" 256). The *chansons de geste* is a type of Old French poem which displays heroic deeds in battles. Thus, warfare is always central to heroes. The character of the hero such as Arthur or Gawain in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, as we shall return to later, is closer to the concept of the hero in the *chansons de geste*, rather than to that in the continental romances. For example, the knights' zest for combats in the poem is a part of *chansons de geste* tradition.

Because of its features deriving from the epic tradition and that of the *chansons de geste*, the poem's prime subject is the glories of wars and warriors. In fact, almost every scene is devoted to the description of warfare, including single-handed battles. Even the scenes of feasting are

described just as a prelude to the next war. It can be said that the attraction of the poem lies mostly in the vivid and vigorous descriptions of battle scenes.

Therefore, as in the *chansons de geste*, what is inevitably required for a knight to be seen as a great warrior in a poem of wars are the warlike qualities of prowess in battle and loyalty to his king, rather than the chivalrous virtues of courtesy and love service to women as are found in the romances (Dean 125). In the poem, there is no place for courtly love, or even for women. Their minimal importance here is explicit from the number of words for men and for women. That is to say, the number of the words which represent "man" or "warrior" is three times more than that for "women."³ Moreover, a striking difference from the romances is that there is no description of women's appearance and dress, but minutely detailed description of the arming scenes as the one for Arthur before the battle with the giant of Michael's Mount (901-15).

Such is an outline of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*. It is much more chronicle and epic in form and in quality than the medieval romances. In this warrior's world then, how is Gawain's character described?

III

From the early Arthurian legend such as Geoffrey's *Historia*, Gawain is represented as the best of Arthur's warriors. Then in the Middle English romances, especially in the so-called Gawain-cycle romances, Gawain's character is raised to be the embodiment of all the chivalric virtues as a courteous, ideal knight. Whereas his earlier character in the French prose romances had been modified to the extent that he seemed to be almost a kind of villain who was notorious for his lecherousness.

The figure of Gawain in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, although his martial accomplishment here is extensively stressed, seems to be near to

the one in the early Arthurian legend. He emerges not as a chivalrous knight who is renowned for his courtesy, but as an ideal warrior who is practically invincible in battles. The great admiration for Gawain is shown by epithets which the poet uses to describe him, such as "Sir Wawayne te worthy" (233, 1302), "sir Gawayne the gude" (1368, 2218, 3706, 3724, 3943), "Syr Gaweayne the gracious" (1468), "gud Gawayne, gracious and noble" (2851), or "the gude man of armes" (3858).⁴

On the other hand, however, critics have reproached him because of his somewhat reckless action in the poem. Some critics even ascribe the death of Arthur to Gawain's intemperate rash attack against Mordred (Eadie 11). The poet makes few comments on the characters' actions, so, in order to unify these two different views of Gawain's character, it is useful to survey Gawain's actions and conduct in the poem in detail.

Apart from admiration for Gawain as a martial leader which is spread through the whole poem, there are three episodes in which he is the dominant figure and the main focus of attention: the embassy episode (1263-1483), the Gawain-Priamus episode (2483-3031), and his last battle against Mordred (3724-4024).

The first episode is where Gawain goes to the camp of Lucius as a member of the ambassadors. What has to be noted is that the leader who is initially put in charge by Arthur is not Gawain but Sir Boice (1263), who is, however, merely the nominal leader and has no leading role. It is Gawain who informs and warns Lucius of Arthur's message in front of the Romans. Undoubtedly, as Christopher Dean points out, the hero Gawain shows one of his virtues of strong leadership as a great warrior (117).

Gawain's conduct after his speech to Lucius gives a chance for his critics to condemn his ill-tempered character; when he is taunted by Lucius's uncle, Sir Gayous, Gawain kills him with an outburst of fury.

Than greuyde sir Gawayne at his grett wordes,
 Graythes towarde þe gome with grucchande herte;
 With hys stelyn brande he strykes of hys heuede,
 And sterttes owtte to hys stede and with his stale wendes.
 (1352-55)

According to modern standards, as some critics have pointed out, Gawain's rash behavior here apparently demonstrates his irascibility (e.g., Fichte 108). Nevertheless, no blame is attached to Gawain in the text as in the citation above. Rather, he shows us his invincible accomplishment in the battle field, and rescues Sir Boice, who has been taken as a prisoner (1368-483). Therefore, while it is obvious that the poet describes Gawain's other virtue, prowess, it is uncertain if he criticizes Gawain's problematic rash behavior.

It should be remembered that the poem has a strong connection with the *chansons de geste*. For it has been recognized that the hero's impetuous zest for battle is a kind of topos of the *chansons de geste*, so it is not seen as a fault but a conventional behavior of the heroic knight (Obst 12-13). Furthermore, it is possible to find a key to justifying Gawain's behavior in the text. When Gawain describes himself and his soldiers, he states: "here are galyarde gomes þat of þe gre seruis" (2748). That is, he regards a valiant warrior as a person who has a fervent enthusiasm for battle. In short, Gawain's reckless character does not indicate his inferiority but his valor as a warrior according to the literary tradition of the *chansons de geste*.

The second episode is Gawain's single-handed battle with a heathen knight, Priamus, and the following victorious battles of Gawain and his men against the Duke of Lorraine. Gawain's encounter with Priamus is considered as an interlude in the poem which seems to have little connec-

tion with the main story of Arthur's dynastic wars. On the way to forage, before Arthur's attack on Metz, Gawain parts from the party, wandering off to seek an adventure like a knight errant in the typical romances: "Thane weedes owtt the wardayne sir Wawayne hym selfen, / Alls he þat weysse was and wyghte, wondyrs to seke" (2513-14). There he meets Priamus, fights, defeats him, and comes back to the party with the loser.

It would be possible to criticize Gawain's behavior in this episode, for he seems to forget his task to forage, or rather seems to have no interest in Arthur's war, just thinking of his individual adventure. However, as William Matthews mentions, this episode should be examined apart from the main epic story of Arthur's war (145). It is a kind of deviation, and its spirit is that of the *roman d'aventures* of the chivalric mood.

There is evidence to support the idea of this episode's isolated character. It is apparently separated from the rest of the narrative by being put between two nature-descriptions (2506-12, 2672-77). (Just before the other interlude in the poem, Arthur's battle against the giant of Mont St. Michel (920-32), there is a nature-description in the same way.) The nature-description of the beautiful landscape in Medieval literature is regarded as an example of poetic rhetoric, a topos called "locus amoenus,"⁵ and it is conventionally used for a prologue or division in the poem (Ikegami 3). In order to put another world of romance in the epic world, the poet effectively uses the "locus amoenus" topos, and shows Gawain's heroic virtue of prowess as a splendid warrior. It must be noted that among the knights in Arthur's army, Gawain alone (apart from Arthur himself) is given the privilege of engaging in his own adventure.

The battle of Gawain and his men following the Priamus episode, although they are greatly outnumbered, ends in their great triumph, and Gawain's military accomplishment here is glorious. As is the case in the earlier episode, the person who is put in charge of the foraging expedition

by Arthur is not Gawain but another knight, Sir Florent. While the opinion of Sir Florent is “warpes wilily awaye” (2756) because of their inferiority to the opposing armies in number, Gawain insists on the battle and eventually his armies win an enormous victory. The words of the herald who brings the news of their victory to Arthur are as follows:

All thy forreours are fere that forrayede withowttyn—
 Sir Florent and sir Floridas and allthy ferse knyghtez—
 They hafe forrayede and foghten with full gret nowmbyre,
 And fele of thy foomen has broghte owt of lyffe. (3017-20)

As a “wirchipfull wardayne” (3021), Gawain displays great prowess in the main story which is also shown in the previous interlude, and wins “wirchipe for euere” (3022).

The final episode in which Gawain is described as a dominant figure is his last battle against Mordred. Again there has been criticism of his conduct here. For, in spite of Arthur’s order not to land until the tide goes out, Gawain impetuously rushes into battle against immense odds, and in consequence, he is defeated and killed by Mordred. Regarding the concept of the hero in the poem which I have examined before, however, his rash behavior here can be considered not as the folly of a weak military commander, but as being a typical heroic deed such as one finds in the *chansons de geste*.

Gawain’s permanent glory is strongly emphasized in two outstanding eulogies for him by Arthur and Mordred. Among these two, Arthur’s lamentation could be considered as merely blind praise towards Gawain’s death because of his strong love for his nephew. Yet, as is commented by the poet as “sir Mordred with mouth melis full faire” (3874), the judgment of Mordred, who is Gawain’s enemy and slayer, on Gawain is less

subjective and more useful to confirm how the poet sees Gawain:

He was makles one molde, mane, be my trow[t]he!
 This was sir Gawayne the gude, þe gladdeste of othire
 And the graciouseste gome that vndire God lyffede;
 Mane hardyeste of hande, happyeste in armes,
 And þe hendeste in hawle vndire heuen riche,
 Þe lordelieste of ledyng qwhylls he lyffe myghte,
 Fore he was [a] lyone allossede in londes inewe.
 Had thou knawen hym, sir kynge, in kythe thare he lengede,
 His konyng, his knyghthode, his kindly werkes,
 His doing, his doughtynesse, his dedis of armes,
 Thou wolde hafe dole for his dede þe dayes of thy lyfe!
 (3875-85)

The important point to notice about Gawain's heroic conduct in the poem is that its dynamics seem to be based on his fury against his enemies. When Gawain fights with Priamus, for example, although at first it is an even fight, his rage makes him defeat Priamus: "Thane sir Gawayne was greuede and grychgide full sore; / With Galuthe, his gude swerde, grymlye he strykes, / Clefe þe knyghttes schelde clenliche in sondre" (2557-60). Thus, this procedure, that an outburst of fury leads to splendid deeds, is used as a pattern to show his prowess. In addition, it is not limited only to Gawain, but also to the other knights and even to Arthur (2204-17). Considering that fury reveals the dynamics of the hero's valor which is necessary for him as a great warrior, it is understandable that Gawain's conduct is sometimes not prudent but reckless. It is because impulsive fury is incompatible with prudence. In the heroic, epic world, glory never comes from prudence.

Moreover, in order to justify Gawain's conduct, it is also useful to examine the parallel between Arthur and Gawain.⁶ The similarity in their

characters is readily apparent. For example, Arthur and Gawain both have their own adventures and win single-handed battles, and both show their regard and compassion for the loss of their men. In addition to them, not only Gawain's strong leadership and heroic prowess but also his rashness are found in Arthur's conduct. The king behaves rashly riding without armor and approaching the city wall of Metz, in spite of the attack on him with arrows. Although there still is some argument about Arthur's character in the poem, the main theme of the poem is to describe the glory of Arthur as a praiseworthy conqueror who becomes one of the Nine Worthies.⁷ Viewed in this light, therefore, Gawain, whose conduct mirrors that of Arthur, is also praiseworthy, and is not criticized by the poet.

IV

In this essay, I have tried to examine Gawain's character in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, focusing our attention on his actions. It is concluded that in the poem he is glorified as a great warrior who represents the Round Table. Although his actions often seem not to be reasonable and prudent in the light of modern standards, they can be considered as one of the established patterns of a war poem or a chronicle within the epic and the *chanson de geste* traditions which are main sources of the poem.

The alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which belongs to the Alliterative Revival tradition, inherits the poetic style of the Old and early Middle English literature, in spite of the domination of the French romance tradition in the poet's days. This English identity is also suggested in the major theme of the poem which is presented at the beginning by the poet:

And I sall tell þow a tale þat trewe es and nobyll
Off the ryeall renkys of the Rownde Table,

That chefe ware of cheualrye and cheftans nobyll,

 How they whanne with were wyrchippis many,
 Sloughe Lucyus þe lythyre, that lorde was of Rome,
 And conqueryd that kyngrype thorowe craftys of armes
 (16-24)

That is to say, the poem is the tale of a great king and his brave knights in Britain. As Geoffrey intends in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (Barber 22-23), the poet seems to be concerned with nationalism by giving a pseudo-historical model of their own country.

Although his image was to change later, originally Gawain's role in the early Arthurian literature was that of a military leader. This image which seems to have persisted in England is what is generally found in the Gawain-cycle romances, and is again what is seen in this poem. From what seems to be the poet's nationalist point of view, the hero who is only next to Arthur should not be one of the other knights, such as Lancelot or Tristan, who are popular in the other countries like France, but Gawain, who is the original English hero. Because of the heroic and epic nature of the poem, what is required of Gawain is not the peacetime virtue of courtesy or love service, but prowess or loyalty as "þe sterynneste in stoure that euer stele werryde" (3872).

Notes

- 1 The citations from the alliterative *Morte Arthure* are parenthesized in the text by line numbers.
- 2 For example, Ackerman indicates that Gawain keeps his high reputation in the ME romances, except the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Molory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, and *The Gest of Sir Gawain* (493).
- 3 While there are various words for "man" or "warrior" such as "beryn," "care-

man," "comouns," "freke," "forreours," "frappe," "gome," "hathell," "lede," "pople," "schalk," "sesgge," "wye," "wyhhte," or "yomane," the words for "women" are just "bride," "lady," "wif," "woman," "dame," and "damsels."

- 4 Carl Lindahl points out that in conventional romance a knight is represented with his epithets (74).
- 5 E. R. Cúrtius gives the name of "topos" to poetic conventions, and calls the rhetorical descriptions about "the invocation of nature" and "ideal landscape" as "locus amoenus" (183-202).
- 6 The parallel between them has been indicated by some critics. For example, see Dean 115-25.
- 7 Although it is too involved a subject to discuss Arthur's character here in detail, I agree with John Eadie in thinking that Arthur's fall is not the result of punishment on him of his moral decline, but an inevitable end in the context of the medieval doctrine of Fortune (10-11).

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