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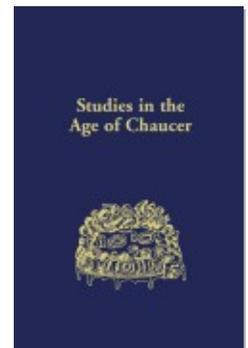
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Critical Edition ed.
by Theodore Silverstein (review)

Thorlac Turville-Petre

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inevitably make an association between “welle” and “specchio di Narcisso” and between “helle” and Dante’s *Inferno*.

The need to control so many strands prompts the author to use dozens of word-plays which attempt to summarize the substance of his arguments while the new formulation adds something more. He himself recognizes it toward the end of the book, but says he does so on purpose: “The Pardoner, in short, has made no effort to translate. Rather he supposes that by exposing his pose he can impose upon the pilgrims a will to repose in him their trust. I recognize that this play of words is too much; I intend it so. It helps me to demonstrate the Pardoner’s excess” (p. 227). Indeed, his book can be summarized in one line: “What for Dante is a problem of the expression of transcendence is for Chaucer a problem of the transcendence of expression” (p. 235). I appreciate Shoaf’s effort at synthesis and am sympathetic toward a brilliant use of words, but he ought to know that inflation makes words, as well as money, mean little.

Having said all this, I must add at once that there is a kernel of intuition in *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word*. It is, I think, appropriate to show how “supreme . . . among Dante’s many gifts is his capacity to let a thing or a person be what it is or who he or she is” (p. 237), and it is illuminating to see Chaucer’s supreme gift, by contrast, in “his capacity to catch human beings in those moments, moments of relations with others, when they most obscure or conceal or mistake who they are” (p. 238). The problematics of economics, sexuality, and semiotics of the Wife of Bath, the Merchant’s parody of creation, and the Pardoner’s “Word of Death” are at times brilliantly explored and illustrated, and the defects which I see throughout the book tend to become less conspicuous here, though they are by no means absent.

This, in other words, is a book to wrestle with and to reject only after a long struggle of irritation and sympathy.

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THEODORE SILVERSTEIN, ed. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Critical Edition*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Pp. x, 268. \$30.00.

There are already several excellent editions of *Gawain*. This latest is much the same length as Tolkien-Gordon-Davis, the glossary is for many entries

identical and, as is proper, there are frequent references to TGD and also to Gollancz in the Commentary. If there is a place for a new edition of the poem, it is for one that distills the best of recent criticism. However Silverstein is not always a surefooted guide through the “mony misy and myre” of critical endeavor of the past decade or so. Speculation on John Massy receives approbation, and the metrical theories of Sapora make some mark, though in general the chief source for metrical and formulaic information seems to be Oakden.

The Commentary sets out especially to illustrate the literary and cultural background of the poem and has many interesting things to say about the details of hunting and armor. Much more attention than is usual is paid to the French Arthurian tradition with which the poet was obviously intimately familiar. All this is excellent as illustration of the general literary milieu, but Silverstein is too keen to draw exact parallels where none exist.

The central thesis of the edition is that the poem is about justice based on “fides,” *trawpe*, the notion of which the poet derives from Cicero and his medieval descendants. This is a view that the editor has put forward elsewhere and one to which he constantly returns in this edition. It is unconvincing, since the attempt to draw close parallels involves both a selectivity of reference from Cicero and a perversion of the meaning of *Gawain*. The most serious distortion to which this argument leads is the proposition that the fifth pentad represents the five parts of justice, and therefore that “clannes” is not “sexual purity” at all, but *innocentia*. That “clannes” in Middle English has a semantic range that can include “innocence” is true enough; to argue that it has this meaning in this context is to miss the point that it is in the reconciliation of those two very specific virtues, “his clannes and his cortaysye,” that Gawain is most crucially tested.

This singleminded pursuit of sources and analogues, however distant, is characteristic of the Commentary. What is the sense in scouring the Latin tradition of *animo manūque*, however interesting in itself, to illustrate an expression so ubiquitous in English of all periods as “heart and hand?” Or riffling through “a bundle of ancient Latin lexical scraps” of the fourth century to explore that truth universally acknowledged that “men ben mery in mynde quen þay han mayn drynk” (which is actually much more interestingly paralleled by the Vernon lyric ending “When men beoþ murgest at heor mele / I rede ʒe þenke on ʒusterday”)? Occasionally such a search turns up information of relevance, such as the Latin word *pentangulus* in two thirteenth-century dictionaries. More often, though, the

discussion leads away from the poem. So the two-page note on *crabayn* (line 1773) is quite useful in bringing together the speculations on the etymology of the word by lexicographers such as Falk and Torp (not “Torg” as he is twice named) and earlier critics such as Skeat (not credited), but the cognates adduced are too distant to support an interpretation of the term here. Of much more significance, but not mentioned, is the sexual connotation of the word in Dunbar’s “Tua Mariit Wemen,” where the old wife describes her marriage to “a craudoune but curage that knyt my cler bewte.” The fear of being regarded a sexual coward drives many a young man to foolishness.

Such lengthy disquisitions leave little space for discussing serious difficulties of syntax and local interpretation. True, an editor is unlikely to have much that is new to say on such matters, but the information needs to be provided all the same. For example, there are no notes to help the reader with the syntax of lines 96–99, 248–49, or 1109 or the sense of lines 113, 199, or 1304. There is a brief note on the notorious crux at lines 1265–67, but I cannot follow what the editor wants the passage to mean, and he himself admits it is not fully satisfactory. The note on line 2225 tells us for some reason that “fyled in a fylor” is not in Oakden, but the editor offers no opinion of the meaning of “Hit watz no lasse bi þat lace” in the following line. The note on Gawain’s journey into the Wirral refers only to a discussion published in 1963, the conclusions of which must be discarded in the light of more recent studies.

The text is quite clearly and attractively printed, but there are quite a number of misprints, some of which render the text unintelligible: line 203, *hawbrgh* for *hawbergh*; lines 466–67, two stanzas run together; line 467, *þer þe* for *þe*; line 804, *whythinne* for *wythinne*; line 817, *þat* for *þay*; line 1311, *Goʒez* for *Boʒez*; line 1701, *kyres* for *kryes*; line 1911, *þey* for *þe*; line 1978, *kynʒt* for *knyʒt*; line 2319, *byrʒt* for *bryʒt*; line 2325, *aʒgayn* for *aʒayn*; line 2399, *kynʒtez* for *knyʒtez*; line 2464, *þy naunt* for *þyn aunt*.

Emendations to the text are generally sensible, though several are not adequately defended (e.g., lines 180, 653, 2274). That in line 1372, “Thenne [sumned] the lorde in þat sale to samen alle þe meny,” is made purely on metrical grounds, but on quite what metrical grounds is unclear, and in any case the emended line makes no sense. Even if a line is missing after line 1022, it is a mistake to supply Gollancz’s unmetrical invention.

Silverstein advances some provocative ideas for the experienced reader but does not provide enough guidance on the syntax of the poem for the

student, who is unlikely to have the patience or ability to profit from the copious quotations in Latin, French, and Italian.

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GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO, *Decameron*. The John Payne Translation Revised and Annotated by Charles S. Singleton, 3 volumes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

It is common knowledge that Charles S. Singleton's reputation rests mainly on his achievements as a Dante scholar. What is probably less known is that Singleton has devoted a substantial portion of his time and intellectual resources to "another world" of the Italian Middle Ages, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but his labors on the *Decameron*, which are as magisterial and rigorous in analysis as his Dante Studies, have not proved to be equally rewarding.

Singleton's involvement with the *Decameron* came to the surface in 1944 when he wrote a piece "On Meaning in the *Decameron*," (*Italica*) in which he polemically argued that the esthetic experience of the *Decameron* ought to be understood as a radical contradiction of the very assumptions of the *Divine Comedy*. Whereas Dante's spirituality subordinates poetry to the claims of theology, Boccaccio's *Decameron* is directed toward the pleasures and comforts of this world. Since then Boccaccio Studies have moved a long way from Singleton's fairly simplified, schematic pattern of literary history, but the bibliographies on the subject rightly continue to list Singleton's article, the outlines of which reappear as a brief preface in the third volume, devoted to notes and commentary, of this revision of John Payne's translation. This revision is the result of Singleton's long love for the *Decameron* and the intriguing, personal story of this scholar with this text, is crisply told by Singleton himself in "A Note on the Holograph" at the end of the same third volume of this elegant set.

In 1933 Michele Barbi, one of the most prestigious names in the Italian philological tradition of textual criticism, examined the holograph copy of the *Decameron* known as Hamilton 90, which was sent to Florence on special loan for the Barbi's inspection from the Berlin's Staatsbibliothek.