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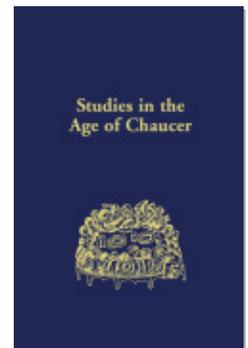
*The Knight on His Quest: Symbolic Patterns of Transition in  
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by Piotr Sadowski (review)

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PIOTR SADOWSKI. *The Knight on His Quest: Symbolic Patterns of Transition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996. Pp. 289. \$37.50.

With its poetic richness and interpretive multivalence, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has happily accommodated modern discussions based on a wide variety of critical approaches. In the first chapter of his book, Piotr Sadowski reviews a number of those discussions, grouping them into five major categories, which he labels the ethnological-genetic, the literary critical, the theological, the psychological, and the literary historical (p. 27). Missing from the list, it will be noticed, are any of the poststructuralist approaches that have been so important in the critical work of the recent past. Sadowski's own analysis, while it does not completely ignore newer contributions, is generally informed by older, more traditional conversations about the poem. Although the choice to position himself away from the most *au courant* criticism does limit what Sadowski can contribute to the study of the poem, it is less troublesome than the ahistoricized context Sadowski produces for the *Gawain*-poet. Among the categories he has identified, Sadowski characterizes his own approach as "closest to historical criticism with elements of literary criticism and source study" (p. 44). Yet rather than localizing the poem within its likely provenance, a provenance that has been fruitfully explored (despite the *Gawain*-poet's anonymity) both by historians and by literary scholars, Sadowski instead sets it within the old monolithic Middle Ages, in which texts from different centuries and different locations across Europe are presumed to "represent an essentially homogenous and unified picture of the world, of the kind spoken of some time ago by C. S. Lewis" (p. 15).

Such presuppositions may put off some prospective readers. Nonetheless, the book is not without interest. Along with its anatomy of traditional approaches to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Sadowski's first chapter also includes a delineation of his own critical framework, that of systems theory. He is perhaps too sanguine about the exactness and objectivity of his approach, about its capacity to offer a "holistic view of literary reality" (p. 49). Yet he is at the same time surely accurate in praising the systemic approach for its versatility and complexity. The approach allows Sadowski to come at the poem from a variety of angles, examining the relations among text, author, and audience as he considers the mythic patterns manifested in the elements of Gawain's quest. In this view, Gawain becomes a kind of Everyman, presented

with a set of tests and transitions that force him to confront the inevitable limitations of the human condition. Following the introductory discussion are chapters entitled "The Temporal Structure of *Sir Gawain*," "The Greenness of the Green Knight," "Sir Gawain's Pentangle," "Gawain's Threefold Temptation," and "The Head and the Loss Thereof."

The systemic approach, with its use of charts and diagrams to quantify observations, serves Sadowski best in the book's fourth chapter, "Sir Gawain's Pentangle: The *Imago Hominis* and the Virtue of Temperance." Drawing on the poem's description of the pentangle as "a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle / In bytoknyng of trawþe" (lines 625–26), Sadowski makes connections with salient biblical passages before moving on to consider the numerological symbolism associated with the number five and the geometrical properties of a pentangle (most notably, the properties of the golden section ratio inherent in its construction), with the ultimate goal of illuminating Gawain's virtues as they are reflected in the sign. Sadowski's observations are evocative rather than definitive, and readers unfamiliar (or uncomfortable) with geometry may not find enough documentation and explanation to follow the argument fully. Moreover, even in this chapter Sadowski shies away from particularity as he considers the intellectual context that might have produced the poem's elaborately explicated sign of the pentangle: "It is not unlikely that the *Gawain*-poet was himself familiar with some Hermetic and Neoplatonic texts," Sadowski writes, "because the intellectual sophistication of the pentangle passage clearly calls for some definite source of this kind as an inspiration" (p. 127). The statement makes an important point, yet surely a more specific and localized examination of its implications would have added to its value. Where might a fourteenth-century poet from the Northwest Midlands have come into contact with such texts? Which "definite source" would be a possible candidate for his reading? Here and throughout his book, Sadowski leaves such questions unconsidered. Yet at the same time, his attention to the geometrical proportions and the symbolism of the pentangle reiterates the *Gawain*-poet's vital investment in this aspect of medieval learning, rightly emphasizing the significance of number in the meaning of the poem.

The chapter on the pentangle, then, provides worthwhile observations, even if they are vitiated by the same limitations that characterize the book from its outset. Another crucial limitation to Sadowski's interpretations of the poem as a whole, though, is the lack of attention to

women, and most importantly, to the role of Morgan. Twice, Sadowski alludes to her centrality to the workings of the plot (pp. 154, 214–15), yet both these mentions are very brief. Sadowski seems aware of the lack, for in an endnote he acknowledges that he has only “cursorily dealt” with “the enigmatic role played by Morgan le Fay” (p. 262, n. 102.) But beyond the neglect of Morgan, Sadowski also fails to mention Gawain’s antifeminist outburst (lines 2414–28). Even without emphasizing feminist approaches, any reading of the poem in its entirety (which Sadowski purports to be giving) will fall short if it fails to account for such prominent and perplexing elements. Here, Sadowski’s commitment to older and more traditional approaches to the poem seems to hamper his ability even to see aspects of the poem that newer discussions have brought into focus.

Sadowski writes that his aim in the book is “not the purity of methodological approach or a validation of a theory, but rather the exciting intellectual adventure of engaging in a mental interaction with the *Gawain*-poet through his text” (p. 49). The particular adventure Sadowski sets for himself is constrained by his omission of some of the poem’s important elements and of its specific historical context. Yet even with its limitations, the book does evoke some of the complex traditions that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* embodies.

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M. C. SEYMOUR, gen. ed. *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages: Vol. 3, Nos. 7-11*. Aldershot, Hants.: Variorum; and Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 1996. Pp. vi, 256. \$67.95.

The present hardback volume comprises five studies of individual named authors that have also been made available by the publishers as separate paperback titles. Accordingly, a double system of pagination is provided; references in the contents pages are to the individual paginations (though references below are to the running pagination). As I have noted in an earlier review of Ralph Hanna’s *William Langland* in this series, the slim format of the individual pamphlet-style versions of these studies makes them ideal for slipping into a pocket or briefcase when one is engaged in library work.