

Did Sir John Stanley write *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?

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The *Gawain* Poet was the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a fourteenth-century Arthurian romance, and perhaps the greatest poem ever written in Northern England. Its anonymous creator ranks with Marvell, Wordsworth, and the Brontës as amongst the North's supreme literary artists. The question naturally arises as to who he was. In 2004 the present writer gave an answer, publishing (in the US journal *Arthuriana*) an analysis of the poem and its associated works *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*. He there proposed that the unknown poet was Sir John Stanley (c. 1350-1414), the evidence including dialect, topography, and verbal parallels between the four texts and Stanley's correspondence. What follows offers a revised survey of publications before and after 2004, examining whether they strengthen the case for Stanley as the *Gawain* Poet, weaken it, or demolish it completely.

Keywords: The *Gawain* Poet; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; *Pearl*; Sir John Stanley (d. 1414); Robert de Vere (1362-92), Earl of Oxford

Questions of authorship aside, John Stanley is well known. The son of a minor landowner, he rose in a spectacular way through his own skills and marriage to an heiress. He became a provincial magnate, a courtier to Richard II, and the founder of the Stanley dynasty, with the present Earls of Derby as his descendants. He ended his days as Knight of the Garter, Lieutenant of Ireland, and King of the Isle of Man. He was also an expert hunter, responsible for the royal forests of Macclesfield, de la Mere, and Wirral. If, in addition, this remarkable man wrote some of the finest poems in the English language, it will draw further attention to

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him and to the Lancashire and Cheshire of his time, where his estates were located and (it appears) his poems of love, adventure, chivalry, and religion were composed. It will be proof of the sophisticated literary, courtly, and religious civilization which Northern England possessed in the later Middle Ages.

It is true that, despite its far-reaching implications, the *Arthuriana* paper has not been much noticed. Hence this paper, with its material in two sections. In the first we survey comments on who the *Gawain* Poet was; in the second, we look at what is known of Sir John Stanley, particularly as regards his language. We start with some facts on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and its related poems. It appears solely in London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.x, in a hand of about 1400. The manuscript, with some inferior illustrations, is undistinguished. But the four poems in it are the very opposite. The most important of them tells this story.

It begins at the court of Arthur, where a New Year's feast is interrupted by a green horseman with an axe, who challenges the guests to a beheading contest. Gawain accepts the offer and decapitates the stranger. What follows is unexpected. The trunk runs forward and snatches up its head, which opens its eyes and commands Gawain to meet him in a year's time for a return blow at the "Green Chapel". Head in hand, the body gets back in the saddle: horse and rider hasten off through the door. The months pass. Gawain begins his journey and, after various adventures (including bedroom ones, where he politely evades an attractive chatelaine's attempts to seduce him), arrives at the Green Chapel for a second encounter with the Green Knight (and the axe). He survives with no more than a nick on his neck, and to his amazement and chagrin discovers that the challenger is none other than his host, whose young wife tested his chastity. (Had he succumbed to her, he would surely have lost his head.) Gawain returns mortally discomfited to Camelot, where the other knights regard his trials as a huge joke. In the same dialect and manuscript as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness*. The first is an allegory wherein the speaker tells of losing a precious pearl (interpreted as a deceased infant daughter); he thereafter falls asleep to find himself in a garden of exotic beauty, there meeting a mysterious girl in white, who from beyond an uncrossable river speaks to him words of religious consolation. *Pearl* is accompanied by the Scriptural poems *Patience*

and *Cleanness*, setting out respectively the stories of Jonah and those of Noah's Flood, the Destruction of Sodom, and Belshazzar's Feast. These texts were effectively unknown until modern times, with an edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in 1839 and of all four poems in 1864 (Wells 1916: 54-57, 578-85, 770).

In commentary since then one hears diverse opinions. Some show sense on what they say of the poet; others, less so; but critical fashion and personal impulse are frequent. Kenneth Sisam observed on the romance of *Gawain* that the "descriptions of nature, of armour and dresses, the hunting scenes, and the love-making, are all excellently done", while the author has "a quiet humour that recalls Chaucer". *Pearl*, on the other hand, is "almost overwrought", with a richness and luxuriance that at first "seem scarcely English", and alliteration and rhyme of such intricacy that one wonders how the author sustained "his marvellous technique without completely sacrificing poetry to metrical gymnastics" (Sisam 1921: 45, 58-59). Another writer maintained that the castle where Gawain stayed was based on Clitheroe Castle, belonging to John of Gaunt (Oakden 1930: 257-61). But no-one accepts that. Better was his later praise of the author, whose "remarkable attitude to nature" reveals "rare gifts" for literary creation, as do his powers of description, whether of the arming of a knight, the pinnacles of a fortress, the hunting of hart, boar, or fox, or "the cutting up of a beast" (Oakden 1935: 47). He rightly stressed the poet's pride in hunting and butchery (routinely ignored by critics), which does not flinch from details of a slaughtered deer's windpipe and guts (line 1336). Yet Oakden was modestly silent on the fur coat (trimmed "ful fyne with felles" or pelts) worn next to the skin of Gawain's chatelaine, who (her throat "all naked" and "brest bare before") enters the knight's bedroom (closing the door behind her) early in the morning, while her husband is away hunting on the moors (lines 1733-49). Whether presenting an animal's innards or the blandishments of a *femme fatale*, the poet demonstrates remarkable powers of observation, as well as easy familiarity with the life of lords and ladies.

Sir Israel Gollancz (1863-1930) made unconvincing proposals on the *Gawain* poem as written for an audience in North Wales, and a better one for the Green Chapel as in the rugged country of north-west Staffordshire (Gollancz 1940: xviii-xx). This area of the Peak District was in the Forest of Macclesfield. We shall use this as a clue to authorship.

Gervase Mathew (1905-76) had careful remarks on the manuscript. It belonged to Henry Bank (1568-1617) of Bank, near Halifax in West Yorkshire, indicating a northern provenance; two annotations in fifteenth-century hands suggest that its previous ownership was secular, not monastic. On authorship, Mathew took similarities between the four poems as pointing to "a single author or a single redactor, perhaps a clerk or esquire in some household" (later critics would reject "redactor", with its implications of multiple authorship). The manuscript itself is a professional but clumsy effort, the dialect forms perhaps indicating a scribe from Chester (later dialectologists would modify this to "south-east Cheshire or north-west Staffordshire"), whose copy-text had de luxe illustrations and was probably "commissioned by a magnate of wealth not much before 1390", with his household possibly at "the Earl of Arundel's castle of Holt" near Wrexham, Wales. Mathew also provided analysis of the knightly virtues implicit in the text, the supreme ones being "prowess and loyalty" (Mathew 1948: 354-62). There are two points here. Mathew's study of the poet's chivalric values is now little read, but deserves attention. Mathew was a Dominican friar, and so knew much about the religious life. He did not think that *Gawain* was the work of a cleric, his preference being for a layman in a great household.

Despite concentrating on poem rather than poet, George Kane referred to the latter's eye for "gold and silver and the filigree of both, and precious stones, against backgrounds of rich Eastern stuffs"; they contrast with "the driving sleet on Gawain's journey, the fatigue of his charger, the misery of sleeping out in armour, the brightness of blood on snow"; with the last being at Gawain's ordeal by axe (Kane 1951: 76). The writer had a genius for detail. E. V. Gordon had comments of a different kind. The author was "a man of education", yet made less parade of learning than did Chaucer, Gower, or Langland. He had "less interest in philosophy" than they did, and more in "the arts and the aristocratic activities of his day". He may "have had a monastic education" but was hardly "himself a monk". He might have been "a chaplain in an aristocratic household". (Given his tenderness for a lost daughter, zest for killing animals, and awareness of sexual attraction in near-adultery, "chaplain" here makes little sense.) Gordon yet admitted that the poet's interest in theology might be that of a "pious layman" (Gordon 1953: xlii).

Dorothy Everett (1894-1953) had interesting observations. The four poems, which she put in "the last quarter of the fourteenth century", have "obvious links" with each other in vocabulary, phrasing, and (*Pearl* excepted) metre, as well as less obvious ones in "the doctrine of the Beatific Vision" and "the pearl as a symbol of perfection", which point to a single author for all, because two or more writers would hardly possess "this rare and, one would think, inimitable quality". The poet read widely: in French, the *Roman de la Rose* and some Arthurian romances; in English, alliterative poetry; in Italian (most unusually), Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Boccaccio's *Olympia*; in Latin, the Bible with its commentaries and interpretations, perhaps indicating "an ecclesiastical education. If so, his independence of mind is the more remarkable." She quoted Menner's 1920 edition of *Cleanness* on his unfettered attitude to "theological doctrine and conventional interpretation", while "in *Pearl* he employs both in a manner still more individual." He was yet "sufficiently at home in courtly, or at least aristocratic, society to be able to depict with fidelity its manners, pastimes, and setting", including details of dress, armour, architecture, and sport (Everett 1955: 69). For the poet, religion and the worldly met in unusual combination.

Her remarks are more thoughtful and helpful than those of John Speirs (d. 1979), observing that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* "is of course a Christian poem. But it is Christian rather as some of the medieval Christmas carols are, as Christmas itself is; Christian in harmony with pre-Christian nature belief and ritual" (Speirs 1957: 221-22). This 1950s venture into lay anthropology says much about Speirs, little about the poet. Preferable are comments of Laura Loomis. "Was he a monk, a minstrel, a learned clerk, an official in some lordly household, or himself a man of rank and wealth? In any case he wrote as one familiar with courtly life, its pleasures, luxuries, arts, and ways" (Loomis 1959: 528-40). Reflection on the poems will rule out most of these. It is the "man of rank and wealth" whose face we perceive in these texts: a religious man, but with the confidence and independence that status and income supply. Laura Loomis deserves full credit as the first to regard *Gawain* as the work of a provincial magnate.

What she said tallies with perceptions of John H. Fisher on the social views of Ricardian writers. The *Gawain* poet "wrote about and for the aristocracy", with none of the "overt questioning of the social changes

that troubled Langland and Gower"; despite supposed criticism of kingship in his calling Arthur *sumwhat child-gered* (line 86) or "boyish, merry", this "does not mean that the author questioned the aristocratic system"; his "choice of garden paradise or castle put his pieces in the context of the agrarian aristocracy" (unlike Langland's London settings, at a far lower social level). The garden of *Pearl* is not that of Eden, with "no lords or ladies" (and so a "nascent primitivism" producing "Wyclif's communism"), but that of love, where "everyone is a lord or lady". Hence the "courtly maiden" and "humbly suppliant lover". As for the parable of the vineyard, it contains "the notion of arbitrary authority in the familiar context of lord and laborer"; while the maiden's "explanation of her state in paradise evidently recognizes grades in the hierarchy of heaven", together with a "heavenly state of equality impossible of attainment in mortal society" owing to man's sinful nature (Fisher 1961: 139-57). In short, the poet's attitude to aristocracy is unquestioning and profoundly conservative, even reactionary. Fisher's insights are of the first importance. They deserve notice, despite his strange view of the author as a "writer with predominantly theological interests", glossing over what he says on feasts, jewels, furs, armour, horses, hunts, and illicit love.

C. S. Lewis dealt firmly with the observations of Speirs on supposed pre-Christian elements in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Lewis 1962: 219-30). Not much has been heard of them since. They led nowhere, unlike the enquiries of John Dodgson, place-name scholar. He cited R. W. V. Elliott on the landscape of the Castle and Chapel as like that "around Swythamley in north-east Staffordshire, near the Cheshire border and in the south-western hills of the Peak district", the poet perhaps actually living at Swythamley, "a grange of Dielacres Abbey, near Leak, Staffordshire". (Yet Elliott's belief that the poet was perhaps a monk on a monastic estate must be rejected. There is nothing monastic in the four poems attributed to him.) Together with Dodgson's words on the wild country of the Peak are comments on the "Holy Hede" from which Gawain, having travelled through North Wales, crosses into the "wyldrenesse of Wyrle" (lines 700-1), where the first can be linked with Holywell, Flintshire, and where allusion to the Wirral Peninsula of Cheshire indicates a region known to the poet and his audience (Dodgson 1963: 19-25). He made clear the poet's knowledge of north-east Wales, Cheshire, and the Peak.

A different approach to the poem was made by the Polish-American Marxist, Margaret Schlauch. The text is a "society romance", showing "an exceptional talent for descriptions of nature" and for dialogue between the characters. Readers know no more about Gawain's situation or "the true relationship among the characters" than Gawain does himself, a technique anticipating the "unity of point of view" employed by Henry James and others. The text nevertheless had no influence on later English fiction. For historians of the modern novel, its interest is "largely antiquarian" (Schlauch 1963: 23-28). Her somewhat perfunctory comments keep the poet at a distance. Fisher had had compelling remarks on him as a social arch-conservative, wedded to the cause of aristocracy. If Schlauch had developed Fisher's ideas on classic Marxist lines, she would have provided a study with real insights.

Dodgson's views on topography were treated positively by John Burrow. He observed how "the original audience of *Sir Gawain*, in Cheshire perhaps, or Lancashire", would know Holywell as the shrine of St Gwenfrewi or Winifred, whose legend tells how a local tyrant had her decapitated, her head being miraculously restored (Burrow 1965: 193). Topographical allusions show the poem as a Cheshire one. Derek Brewer (1923-2008) offered reflections on the poet and courtesy, which he interpreted as a religious entity relating to personal integrity, beauty, politeness, honour, self-control, courage, and cleanliness. It did not include asceticism, *fin amour*, or (for example) almsgiving (Brewer 1966: 54-85). Brewer again removed the quartet of poems from a monastic milieu. Like the analyses of Mathew and Fisher, his essay is now little read.

There are acid lessons on how not to read *Gawain* in a paper on Heinrich Zimmer (1851-1910) of Berlin. Zimmer was a respected Celticist, advancing sound arguments on the British hero Arthur (d. 537) as a historical figure. But he was also a Jungian, believing in the "mythological archetypes" of the collective unconscious. He thus saw Gawain as going through a valley of death to "the aloof and lonely sanctuary of life renewed" where he is duly reborn, having encountered the Green Knight, who is Death, and his wife, who is Life, "traditionally Death's bride". Even Zimmer, recognizing that the poem does not really bear out this interpretation, concluded that its author was unaware of "the meaning that inevitably emerges" (Moorman 1966: 209-35). But some may hold that, when what we find does not fit the theory, the

latter has to go. Zimmer was neither the first nor the last to write absurdities on *Gawain*.

Patricia Kean was here as cautious as Zimmer was not. Although her study of *Pearl* has much of interest (as on the poet's apparent knowledge of Dante), she describes the "old controversy" on whether the text is "biographical or allegorical" as hardly "relevant to the real purpose of the poem". Her conclusion is that the author was "essentially, a Christian" (Kean 1967: 241-42). This does not help us much. The standard Oxford edition of *Gawain* has more perceptive comments, on the poet's consistent "theological concern" and "moral seriousness" (despite this poem's "surface lightheartedness"). He knew much of "the life and etiquette of noble households"; possessed "a detailed, even technical, knowledge of hunting, of castle architecture, and of the armour and gear of a knight. In *Patience* he uses with an air of assurance the right terms for the parts of a ship." He was deeply read in the Vulgate Bible; *Pearl* implies some knowledge of patristic theology. He had read widely in French romance. His language, though "strongly provincial", is yet sophisticated, courtly, and elegant. He had interest in neither "astrology and its associated sciences" nor the "Boethian problems of foreknowledge and free will", unlike Chaucer. On date and provenance, the editors are cautious; more so than Dorothy Everett, whom they quote. The text "cannot be dated precisely", but must be earlier than the manuscript, itself hardly later than 1400. Emphasis on display may "imply a date towards the end of the century", while dialect and allusions to North Wales and the Wirral suggest that the poet "was writing not far" from them (Tolkien and Gordon 1967: xxiv-xxvii). So the poet was familiar with courts, hunting, horses, castles, arms and armour, ships, French romance, the Bible, and theology. He had no interest in philosophy, science, astrology, or astronomy. He did not read the Latin classics, unlike Chaucer. He did, however, know French and perhaps even Italian literature of his time. He was not university-trained and lacked Chaucer's wide intellectual interests, but had practical experience of foreign travel and military life. His confidence on such matters (as also, we recall from Fisher, the administration of justice) points less to Laura Loomis's "official in some lordly household" than to her "man of rank and wealth"; a devout man, at ease in the court, on the bench, and on campaign, but not an urban intellectual.

With this, contrast views offered by Larry Benson. He regarded *Sir Gawain* as proof of "the scrutiny that older values were undergoing as the Middle Ages came to an end". It was a century when "crusades" had "nothing but the name in common" with previous ones; when the "examples of chivalric conduct" admired by Froissart are "glaring exceptions in his chronicles of a cruel and greedy era"; when "peasants were asserting themselves in a way that showed clearly that the old feudal order was dying"; when "the Great Schism and the rise of heresy showed that even the Church was not as secure" as supposed; and when "plague and famine threatened the existence even of society itself" (Benson 1968: 23-34). True, of course. The *Gawain* poet certainly knew about atrocities, peasant revolts, schism, and epidemics, especially the last, one of which perhaps killed his daughter (as argued below). Yet *Gawain* is no polemic on obsolete institutions and beliefs. While Benson saw the poet as a doubter, Fisher and Brewer regarded him as subscribing to the values of medieval chivalry and Christianity, even to the point of reaction. The point is fundamental.

In a studious account, Ian Bishop (1927-90) of Bristol favoured an autobiographical approach to *Pearl* (while dismissing the extravagances of some critics), quoting Norman Davis on the line "In Crystes dere blessing and myne" near its close as "an epistolary formula" then "used almost exclusively by parents addressing their children" (Bishop 1968: 8, 131). The phrase expresses tender love. With it, a father might bid everlasting farewell to an infant daughter. A mere allegorist would feel no such emotion, one imagines. In the same year Gervase Mathew published a book which abounds in insights on the English nobility at the time when *Sir Gawain* was written. He thus mentioned Henry of Grosmont (1299?-1361), whose daughter married John of Gaunt. Henry, Duke of Lancaster, was an unexpected combination of soldier, magnate, and author; his *Livre de Seyntz Medecines* of 1354 is a volume of frank confessions. From this and other sources we find in him a man of piety, chivalry, courage, and sexual frailty, who craved honour but also had an "itch to possess more lands". He was not alone as a devout warrior-nobleman who valued books. Thomas of Woodstock (1355-97), Duke of Gloucester, showed "rash courage in the French wars", but also founded a college of priests at Pleshy (his seat in Essex) and possessed a magnificent library (with an English Bible still extant). Mathew showed how military courage,

wealth, religious fervour, and a love of books might at this date co-exist in one man. He made a further comment of far-reaching importance. It is this. "I have a theory that Sir John Stanley was the patron of the *Gawain* poet. The poem ends 'Hony Soyt qui mal pence', and this suggests that it was written for a knight of the Garter; the dialect suggests that it was written in south-west Lancashire, and at this period Sir John Stanley was the only knight of the Garter in south-west Lancashire. It is also possibly relevant that he was hereditary forester of Wirral and had links with the North" (Mathew 1968: 109-10, 166). Another aspect of the poet was investigated by James Oakden, tracing the influence of the liturgy on *Pearl* (Oakden 1968: 337-53).

There is an insight (its context unexpected) from Rosemary Woolf. She distinguished between "naturally anonymous and accidentally anonymous" texts. Most medieval English lyrics, romances, and mystery plays have a "self-effacing style". Even if we knew who wrote them, it would be "unimportant", arousing neither "curiosity or excitement". But *Pearl* and *Gawain* gain from being read in conjunction, "so that here knowledge of authorship would be very valuable". She cites an instance in lines 345-6 of the former, where the maiden tells the narrator how, even if he should writhe like a doe (*daunce as any do*), or struggle and bray (*braundysch and bray*) out his agonies, he is trapped and must endure what happens. The image is of a deer at bay, exhausted and at the mercy of hounds (Woolf 1968: 5, 262). It is not the only hunting metaphor in *Pearl*. When the narrator first encounters the Maiden, he takes her (line 185) as a spiritual *porpose*, which has been understood as "quarry, object of a pursuit". An exquisite sensibility notwithstanding, the poet referred naturally to the ungentle business of tearing animals to bits. He rejoiced in hunting.

In his edition of *Patience*, John Anderson noted the "sixteen lines of narrative" where the poet described "in generous detail" the preparation of a ship for sea. He gave its date as perhaps after 1357 and before 1390, and possibly before the completion in about 1379 of the B-text of Langland's *Piers Plowman*, which apparently alludes to *Patience*. On provenance he cited a famous 1963 paper by Angus McIntosh of Edinburgh, which allocated the dialect of the MS Cotton Nero A.x scribe (not that of the poet) to "south-east Cheshire or north-east Staffordshire" (Anderson 1969: 11, 20-23). If there are references

to hunting in Cheshire forests or on Staffordshire moor, others point to experience of shipping on the Dee or Mersey.

Although Basil Cottle (1917-94) is another scholar now little read, he had illuminating remarks on the poet. He gave a picture of a "well-off provincial society, with its classes happily dovetailed and bestowing service and patronage", which possessed "a noble court of great luxury and taste", where "due order was observed but nobody groused". The ritual arming of a knight engaged his attention; so, too, did heraldry (in nearly fifty lines). He said much on courtesy, and not merely of "refined and privileged equals": the porter is polite to Gawain and is "thanked for his services"; grooms are "thanked for stabling Gawain's horse"; the boorish intruder at Camelot is addressed as if he had been invited; Gawain and his host dispute whose presence grants more honour; there are no hard words from the temptress, "even when the seduction fails"; and Cottle then analyses at length the poet's scrupulous use of familiar "thee" and formal "you" in the dialogues (Cottle 1969: 279-80). So the poet was an expert observer, who saw society from above and not from below. He could be affable, but in no way questioned established order. The point on heraldry is underlined by the Scrope-Grosvenor case of 1386, routinely cited in biographies of Chaucer. Scrope and Grosvenor took to law their quarrel about a certain coat of arms. Chaucer, despite giving testimony in court, in his verse gave no space to blazon. The subject did not interest him (just as it interests hardly any modern critic). But it very much interested the *Gawain* poet. It is yet more evidence for him as a provincial grandee.

Tony Spearing in 1970 provided a book-length study of the poet, following Gordon in dating him to 1360-95, and Angus McIntosh on the dialect of MS Cotton Nero A.x as that of a scribe from south-east Cheshire or north-east Staffordshire, differing little from the poet's own dialect. Yet Spearing, despite copious remarks on the author's attitude to feasting, hunting, court life, the Bible, French and Latin poetry, and the mystical theology of his day, shied away from defining his identity or social status (Spearing 1970: 2-18). Despite its title, his book says almost nothing about the poet. His face or image is left blurred or indistinct. In the same year D. J. Williams published an able (if conservative) account. Stating that there is "no proof that these four poems were written by one man" (which he yet thought probable), he offered no proposals on what kind of person he was. All the same, he

had interesting remarks on *Gawain* and Chaucer's tale of the Knight, especially their contrasts. Both narratives are serious and sophisticated, but are "informed by a different spirit". The former is closer to the twelfth-century romances of Chrétien de Troyes and is "a more highly developed work". It was "written to entertain an aristocratic circle"; it embodies "courtly ideals" similar to Chrétien's, but "under a closer critical scrutiny", although they are not "under fire". The ambivalence here is paralleled by that of Jonah's "escapade in the whale" in *Patience* (Williams 1970: 107-58).

John Burrow pointed out the accidents of time. If Chester and not London had been England's capital, the *Gawain* poet would "immediately have been acknowledged a national classic, and a north-western Caxton would have rushed his work into print". Instead, he was forgotten for three centuries. His work influenced later alliterative writers (including the author of *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, composed in 1425 or so at Carlisle or thereabouts) and was still read in the Cheshire-Lancashire region into the sixteenth century. After that, oblivion, until Thomas Warton (1728-90) showed interest in the texts, to be followed by Madden in 1839 and Richard Morris in 1864. Burrow deals more with the poems than the poet, but quotes a 1966 essay by Spearing on how all four of them set out "a confrontation between a human being and some more than human power", the protagonist in each case emerging "humbled by the confrontation" (Burrow 1971: 4-5, 102-3). The texts all possessed the hand and voice of one author. It is good to be certain of this when reading interpretations of *Pearl*, with the pearl identified as a eucharistic symbol, a believer's soul, the Blessed Virgin, and so on (Gradon 1971: 192-211).

Such plurality is welcomingly absent from a paper with thorough and decisive views on authorship. While the poet's "analogous phrases, paraphrases for God, methods of introducing a story, stating that something is difficult to describe, and endings that echo beginnings" are elements found in other medieval poems, their frequency in these four poems makes the statistical case for common authorship "overwhelming". Still more important than these five categories are imagery and diction. Identical words, often "in special senses that are uniquely the same", are used to describe the same scenes. Above all is the thematic unity of the poems. *Patience*, humility, and purity are the subject of the two homiletic texts: they dominate the two others. "The

pearl-maiden, a symbol of purity, teaches the dreamer the lesson of resignation. Gawain, the 'perle of prys', is not perfect" and returns to Arthur's court a humbler knight, having failed the test of loyalty (Vantuono 1971).

Awareness of the above puts into context comments by Charles Muscatine on the author as "a surprisingly uncomplicated moralist, and a conservative one as well"; although he surely noticed the troubles of his time, his response is "oblique", any crisis being "completely absorbed in his art", itself perhaps "a defense against crisis" (Muscatine 1972: 37, 69).

Spearing likewise comments on the poet's belief in breeding and *cortaysye*, the values of an aristocratic elite (Spearing 1972: 28-50). They are yet supplemented by other remarks on how in *Gawain* the courtly world of France or "heraldry and books of romance" or pinnacled castles is combined with that "of a countryman from the borders of Staffordshire and Cheshire, speaking a rough dialect and accustomed to listening to heroic stories" (Medcalf 1973: 643-96). The word "countryman" is too hard. Nor was the dialect "rough" to those who spoke it. Better to say that the poet was "widely read in the most sophisticated literature of the age", whether religious, secular, English, French, Latin, or even Italian. He was a provincial with "an intimate knowledge of aristocratic life, architecture, etiquette, hunting, feasting, dress and armour, and the terms of courtly conversation" (as also heraldry). He may have been a "secretary or chaplain" in one of John of Gaunt's castles in Lancashire, Staffordshire, or Derbyshire. He was in any case most certainly "a writer of genius" (Barron 1974: 3, 4).

Here correct observations have an illogical conclusion. A chaplain would not know much about flirting or the chase. The poet's familiarity with all the above, including expensive literature in modern languages, indicates an aristocrat with the appropriate income. Compare again remarks on the poet as "a man of learning, a superb craftsman with a delight in the world of the senses, and a man with a keen and subtle sense of humour" (A. C. and J. E. Spearing 1974: 81). All of this is true, but still (to labour the point) neglects his social conservatism, adherence to chivalric values, profound Christian faith, and zeal for hunting.

Gawain was surely known (despite the doubts of some) to the author of *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, perhaps by a Carlisle cleric writing in 1425

or 1426 (Hanna 1974: 38). At the other end of England was Chaucer, whose *Prologue to The Legend of Good Women* implies (in Tony Spearing's opinion) that he had read *Pearl*, and the opening to *The Squire's Tale* that he had read *Gawain* (Spearing 1976: 111). This is half right. *Pearl* is surely influenced by Chaucer, not vice versa. Evidence in any case that its author possessed exalted rank and social connections in London. Yet Anderson would not go beyond the view that the MS Cotton Nero A.x texts were probably by the same man, who presumably lived in the north-west and read *Mandeville's Travels*, written about 1357. Anderson thought that any attempt to narrow the dating within the limits of 1357 to 1400 "must be speculative" (Anderson 1977: 1). Derek Pearsall, making no reference to Vantuomo's paper of 1971, similarly asserted that we know nothing of the four poems' authorship, "though it has become habitual to attribute them to the same poet" (Pearsall 1977: 186). Elsewhere is the comment that the audience for alliterative poetry tended to include gentry, knights, franklins, and the clergy rather than "members of the higher nobility" (Turville-Petre 1977: 35, 47). The critic has not realized that we hear more of the latter (such as the fifteenth-century Yorkshire squire Robert Thornton, who owned a copy of *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and other romances) because they outnumbered the nobles, especially in the North. Yet the MS Cotton Nero A.x's illustrations reproduce those of a de luxe original entirely beyond the means of any local landowner or country parson.

Although the editors of a standard edition comment on the "subjective element" in "judgements of similarity of thought and attitude", they come down all the same for common authorship, seeing the poet's art as combining "orthodox medieval Christianity" with the "chivalric social morality of the High Middle Ages" (Andrew and Waldron 1978: 16). That is surely right. Even in Davenport's study it is not, however, stressed as it should be. Despite admission of how the Gawain poet's works possess "a range and quality comparable to those of Chaucer", when Davenport comments on the northern writer as not "particularly intellectual", but having "a liking for 'university wit'" in word-play and metrical numerology, he diminishes his subject (Davenport 1978: 2, 216). The poet was no mere wordsmith; and "university" is here irrelevant. His education was not scholastic.

New attitudes to *Gawain* were noted and mocked by Derek Brewer. He ridiculed the view that the poet treated Christmas at Camelot with "ironically sarcastic criticism of its childishness and irresponsibility", and how Arthur should instead "be at his desk getting on governing the country" (Brewer 1980: 73). In his opinion, the author says what he means. His realism was genuine, and his social and religious values were conservative ones (like those of Derek Brewer himself).

Now for a digression on clothes. A rare analysis of the Green Knight's attire, down to his "mantle lined with ermine", provides the conclusion that his tight tunic was all the rage in 1365, going out by 1370, and *passé* by 1380 (Newton 1980: 64). The implications for dating are novel. Taken as they stand, they torpedo the case presented here. John Stanley was born, it seems, in about 1350. A date of composition in the 1360s would create insuperable obstacles. Yet there is a way round them. Because nothing else puts *Gawain* before the late 1380s, it may be that the author deliberately provided the Green Knight with attire that was good but outmoded. The parallel would be with the time lords or Transylvanian counts of modern entertainment. They dress well, but not in today's fashions, thereby acquiring a curious authority. If there is an equivalent for this in *Gawain*, we have a further glimpse of the writer's skill.

Brewer's attitude to the poem would have been contested by Ray Barron. He found in it "a complex of interrelating ambiguities which challenge the reader's judgement of meaning and theme and provide a seedbed for ironies which expose chivalric values to his critical scrutiny", as in the Exchange of Winnings, wherein Gawain fails to surrender the girdle won from the lady (Barron 1981: 89-105). Many see the author as conservative. Barron took him as a radical. The latter may be doubted. Comparison with the genuine article brings this out. The real literature of complaint brims with anti-clericalism, pacificism, attacks on government advisers, condemnation of a corrupt knighthood, and criticism of the wealthy, as is demonstrated by one left-wing historian. But nothing of that in *Gawain*, "written for a local magnate with a family and manor in south-west Lancashire". We agree, noting her further comment on a 1978 paper by George Kane, with "an amusing summary of the variety of interpretations" of *Gawain* (Coleman 1981: 44, 309). Conservative and Marxian critics hence agree on *Gawain's* ambience as a lay one in England's north-west.

Derek Brewer gave the poet's home as "the hills and moors of Derbyshire in the North Midlands" (Brewer 1983: 155). "Derbyshire" is a slip for "Staffordshire". No dialectal or topographical evidence links the writer with Derbyshire. Nor would he have lived among those hills and moors, though he certainly hunted on them (see Turville-Petre's 2008 paper on the Green Chapel and Ludchurch, in Staffordshire's northern tip). His residence will have been a great hall in the lowlands of the north-west, as indicated by Janet Coleman. As for his values, anachronistic attitudes to them are identified by John Burrow in an essay on honour and shame. He observes that, while *Gawain* is not actually about these qualities, it takes them for granted. It displays "an ingrained familiarity with principles which are, at best, strange to the modern reader, and at worst thoroughly objectionable", making it hard for such readers to appreciate how Gawain's moral self-scrutiny slept until it was woken by a fellow knight's reproaches (Burrow 1984: 130). Further misunderstanding comes in a comment on the unknown "craftsman who produced these four remarkable texts" (Fowler 1984: 171). Yet the poet was more than craftsman. He was a supreme artist. As for where he lived, Silverstein cited R. W. V. Elliott on the relation of "the Green Chapel to the valley of the River Dane" in north-west Staffordshire (Silverstein 1984: 17).

In a chapter on the MS Cotton Nero poems which abounds with insights, Jack Bennett (1911-81) echoed Stephen Medcalf on the contrast between "rich feasts, a castle built in the latest style", ornamented armour, fashionable furnishings, polite and elegant conversation, elaborate laws and customs of the chase, as also the international French "terms of art that were current at the court of Richard II and in the households of his nobility" and, on the other hand, "wild and rugged country, winter and rough weather, boisterous humour with some grim touches" and "plain-spoken comment". A singular combination. Vantuomo's paper notwithstanding, Bennett yet opined that common authorship of the four poems could not "be conclusively proved" (Bennett 1986: 202). There are implications here. The familiarity with a king's household indicates a context for the poems altogether grander than a Cheshire or Lancashire manor-house; on the other hand, no evidence has ever been produced to show that the four poems are not by one man.

Paul Strohm, expert on medieval literary sociology, offers more doubts. He followed Spearing (at a distance) on the opening of Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* as perhaps showing knowledge of Gawain. If so, it suggests a writer with metropolitan contacts. As for his audience, Strohm attempts to trash critics who locate it "with equal plausibility in baronial courts, among the country gentry, amongst Cheshire servants of Richard II, and in the monastic houses of the south-west Midlands" (Strohm 1986: 1-18). Yet some of these views are more equal than others, even if Strohm fails to notice. Hunting and attempted seduction are strange fare for the cloister; and the writer evidently walked not with mere gentry, but with magnates and kings. So "Cheshire servants of Richard II" may be rather near the mark. Despite their interest, further chapters by Tony Spearing on *Gawain* and *Cleanness* shed no light on their author (Spearing 1987: 173-215).

Felicity Riddy repeats the unlikely suggestion that the poet was a "probably a cleric" and perhaps in the employ of a "secular household" (Alexander and Riddy 1989: 268. This despite the goings-on in *Gawain*, the expressions in *Pearl* of a father's tender love for a child, and (most startling) the enthusiastic praise in *Cleanness* (lines 703-4) of sex:

Bitwene a male and his make [mate] suche mirthe should come,
Wel neghe pure Paradise myght preve no better.

The writer does not sound like a priest. He sounds like a layman, happily married and with children. As for where he wrote, Lee Patterson (with a nod to Fisher's paper of 1961) has a penetrating aside. *Gawain* "is structured by the relationship between a royal and provincial courts. It may even be that the representation of the 'child-gered' [having a child's ways] Arthur", presiding "over an elegantly gamesome court, is meant to reflect Richard" (Patterson 1992: 7-41). Patterson's remark is casual but arresting. Because Richard II was born in 1367 and died in 1400, this would put the poem between 1382 (when Richard married and attained his majority) and 1400, and no doubt early in that period, when Richard was still youthful. Patterson's suggestion tends to locate *Gawain* in the late 1380s. It really will be "Ricardian Poetry".

Derek Pearsall remarks acutely on hunting as a barrier between us and our ancestors even greater than rhetoric (as C. S. Lewis thought). When the *Gawain* Poet chose to "parade its language of technical

expertise", hardly any reader today can respond (Pearsall 1992: 57). This is well said. Because canon law barred clerics from blood sports, the poet's obsession with hunting indicates a lay author. His knowledge of it was authoritative, as shown by his delight in its rituals and protocol. As for what he wrote, scholars who believe in common authorship of the MS Cotton Nero poems are cited against splitters who believe in multiple authorship (Blanch and Wasserman 1995: 150). Wrangles continue on the integrity of his work, quite unnecessarily.

In a paper which repays careful reading, John Bowyers follows Michael Bennett on political links between Cheshire and the court of Richard II. Despite being "agnostic" on whether the MS Cotton Nero texts are by one poet or not, he feels some certainty on the date of *Pearl*. He locates it within the mid-1390s, some ten years after *Gawain*. Composition about 1395 would come after Richard II's "seven quiet years" (in Harold Hutchison's phrase) of 1389-96, when English politics were relatively stable (Bowyers 1995). We shall see how a paper of 2014, written independently of Bowyers, suggests a date in the early 1390s on quite different grounds.

As for who the poet was, this brings us to Ad Putter, who combines wise remarks with ones more contentious. He says this. The poet has long been related to "a small baronial household, hostile to King Richard II's absolutist tendencies and his francophile court". Against this we might say that the original de luxe copy of the poems does not indicate a "small" household; nor are francophobia or hostility to absolutism at all obvious in *Gawain*. Putter is, nevertheless, correct in dismissing the negative aspects of "provincial" as applied to the writer. Next is his reference to Michael Bennett's speculation on how, lacking a patron in the north-west, the poet went south in hope of "prospects of patronage by the king" or a Cheshire magnate at his court. The lost luxury manuscript is certainly evidence for a "wealthy patron". Against that is the argument that, if the poet were himself a magnate, as shown by his effortless allusions to the ostentation and ceremonies of court life, he needed no patron. He could pay for his own manuscripts. Next is the dubious case, after Jill Mann, for *Gawain* as appealing to "an audience of sophisticated and wealthy merchants and knights' most easily found in London". Against that are its allusions to North Wales, the Wirral, and Green Chapel, of faint interest to those on Cheapside or in Whitehall. The poem's Cheshire associations stare one in the face.

Also feeble are the suggestions that the poet's knowledge of Italian literature indicates a London base; that "the Greene Knight" in an inventory of the younger Sir John Paston was *Gawain*, so that the poet probably worked in London; and that, because Richard II understood his Cheshire archers, therefore he would have understood and relished the language of *Gawain*. (Against that, a critic cited below observed that Richard had no known interest in alliterative poetry.) Further unconvincing statements come in the propositions that, while the sources of the poems "suggest a clerical background" (even if their author "does not address his audience as a cleric"), his "ethics of conscientious worldliness" indicates links with merchants. Representing the interests of clerics, knights, and merchants, *Gawain* may thus be related to London, "where people from different backgrounds" made up "a textual community" with "the broad social appeal" to be found in *Gawain* (Putter 1995: 191-96). One fears that this is not compelling. While the poet surely knew London's sophistication and luxuries, his heart belonged to Cheshire and its borders. He placed there the main action of *Gawain*. As for his social views, we observe again how Fisher (whose 1961 paper is not mentioned by Putter) typified them as aristocratic to the point of reaction. Nothing to attract, one might think, the London merchant class.

One finds contrasts to the poet's politics in *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, perhaps written in about 1425 by a Carlisle cleric, and associated with the Neville dynasty. Its author probably knew *Gawain*, but offered a picture of "the instability of power and wealth" which suits a preacher (Allen 1996: 129-42). The later work underlines the point that, while *Gawain's* London connections are weak, its northern ones are strong, like those of its surviving manuscript. They are further developed by Michael Bennett, taking up Gervase Mathew's 1968 proposal of a link between *Gawain* and Sir John Stanley (c. 1350-1414). His family in the 1370s built the hall at Storeton in the Wirral, a region mentioned in the poem; he himself, "a successful career-soldier", built a stronghold (demolished in 1819) by the quay at Liverpool. In 1389-91 he was Justiciar of Ireland, acting regularly thereafter as negotiator and raiser of troops for Richard II. So he knew the court well, and Bennett cites Mathew and Edward Wilson for him as perhaps the patron of the poet. Stanley survived political transition to become a Knight of the Garter in

1405, the only one in Cheshire or south Lancashire (M. J. Bennett 1997: 71-101). He died in 1414 as King of the Isle of Man.

Ray Barron, observing that the "enigma of author and audience remains unresolved", had comments on the latter. It is hard "to believe that such a sophisticated text" as *Gawain* "could have been produced for provincial gentry", despite the rather scanty evidence for them and "the rising bourgeoisie" as an "audience for romance in English". The poet was obviously a prodigy. He had an intimate knowledge of literary French, law, theology, dialectic, armour, fortification, architecture, fashion, textiles, and "the refined etiquette of court and hunting field" (Barron 1999: 164-83). Who could this provincial phenomenon be? One might take his references to royal luxury to show him as (in Lady Bracknell's phrase) evidently a man of some wealth. His social background was utterly unlike that of any other English romance writer.

On the grounds of his sophistication and range of allusion, Sheila Fisher of Connecticut associates the *Gawain* poet "with one of the country courts of Edward III or John of Gaunt" in the north-west Midlands, a speculation traceable to 1930 and J. P. Oakden, who is not here mentioned (S. Fisher 2000: 150-64). Citing Pearsall and Hanna on the Scriptural poems *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, David Lawton notes that, although "most recent suggestions have focused on the monasteries" for their social context, *Patience's* story of Jonah "was a favourite of lay and extra-regular readers well into the Reformation" (Lawton 2000: 454-87). In contrast is James Simpson, uttering 1990s critical fashions, who states that there is no reason why *Gawain* "should not have London or Westminster connections", even though the poem refers to neither place. He adds that the "Stanley family in particular at that time constituted the dominant power in Lancashire and had close contacts with court", without saying what this might mean for the MS Cotton Nero texts (Simpson 2000: 114-32). Readers must find bewildering these contrasting backgrounds of court and cloister. One of them must be dropped. In a lucid survey of *Gawain's* ambiguities, Derek Pearsall avoids saying whether our quartet of poems are by one man, but rightly declares him "one of the greatest poets of the English language" whose sole provinciality was his dialect, and assuredly not his "understanding of courtly culture or the conventions of romance" (Pearsall 2003: 75).

In 2004 the present writer published a paper taking up the links with Sir John Stanley indicated by Mathew in 1968. He suggested that the *Gawain* Poet was not some clerk or chaplain employed by Stanley, but Stanley himself. Hence the confident familiarity with court life and luxury or the rituals of hunting and love, as also the interest in heraldry, armour, military architecture, French romance; the layman's point of view in matters of religion, the love of children (Stanley had many), the praise of married love; the practical understanding of shipping; the lack of interest in science, philosophy, or scholasticism; and the reactionary politics. Documents by Stanley survive, including a letter in French of 1405 to Henry IV, using words characteristic of MS Cotton Nero poems, including *honor, comfort, haste, gracious, joie, access, and fortune* (Breeze 2004).

Naturally, papers of this kind take a while to be noticed. In the meantime, John Anderson dealt with Noah's Flood and the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in *Cleanness*. He disagreed with Muscatine's opinion of 1972 on the writer as "completely absorbed in his art" and indifferent to events in the wider world. *Cleanness*, like *Patience*, is about suffering, and in fourteenth-century England there was plenty of that. (It included plague in 1390-93.) Yet Anderson did not think this the end of the story. The three shorter poems indicate how "God's love is present" in the world, even if the writer "shows no confidence that people can grasp it" (Anderson 2005: 238). On another matter we find Tony Spearing denying proof of Italian influence, stating that "evidence is lacking" for the poet's knowledge of Dante (Spearing 2005: 172).

An important paper on the dialect of the MS Cotton Nero texts casts doubt on the famous conclusion in Angus Macintosh's paper of 1963 that the scribe came from "a very small area either in south-east Cheshire or just over the border in north-east Staffordshire"; its authors, for precise linguistic and metrical reasons, would put both scribe and poet "somewhat north of Staffordshire" (Putter and Stokes 2007). They thereby reinforce the Cheshire connections to be inferred from place-names in *Gawain*.

Helen Cooper is cautious and negative. Noting how Sir John Stanley has "increasingly been canvassed" as *Gawain's* patron, she yet finds objections. Events which might link Stanley with these texts, including "the foresterships in 1403" and "incorporation into the Order of the Garter in 1405", occurred "after the composition of the poems" (Cooper

2008: ix-xvii). Professor Cooper has not reflected that Stanley, brought up in the Forest of Wirral (and son of a man who in 1346 claimed its Forestership), knew about forests long before 1403. Nor would he have been granted authority over forests if he had never felled a tree or killed a stag. Nor has she noticed Gollancz's view that the Garter motto seems to be a later addition to MS Cotton Nero A.x. Her objections may be put aside.

A different argument for the poet as a man of Cheshire comes from nautical terms. One writer refers to "the extraordinarily meticulous description of the ship's parts" (as also a storm) in *Patience*, here citing Robin M. Ward's 1991 Keele MA thesis on maritime passages in alliterative poetry, where it is taken as showing first-hand experience of navigation (Sobecki 2008: 124). The poet had gone to sea and knew much about it. He knew the gear and tackle and trim of ports and sailors. He did not spend his life in an inland county.

After mariners, hunters. Thorlac Turville-Petre, after noting *Patience's* factual and specific description of a whale's innards (animal guts figure as well in *Gawain*), discusses Ludchurch, a Peak District ravine east of the Staffordshire-Cheshire border, and identified by R. W. V. Elliott as the poem's "Green Chapel" (Turville-Petre 2008: 320-29). The chasm is remote. Yet it lay in the royal forest of the Peak, bordering the royal forest of Macclesfield. Those who hunted there would know it.

As for Sir John Stanley, he continues to gain notice. A study of early Cheshire writing has a chapter on him and his family, together with another on *Gawain*, although at no point suggesting any connection between the two (Barrett 2009: 133-206). Another volume, on the landscape and politics of *Gawain*, refers to him as perhaps the work's patron (Hill 2009: 168 n. 53). Laura Ashe regards the author of *Gawain* as one who exploited romance in order to "betray it"; he "deconstructs the ideology of chivalry from within" so as "to expose the absurdity of its inherited ideals" (Ashe 2010: 159-72). Her reading of the work is in flat opposition to that of John Fisher (whom she does not mention) in 1961. Fisher thought the poet a reactionary, Laura Ashe a subversive. They cannot both be right. Nor does she suggest what magnate would finance a work which must (on her reading) have mocked his most cherished beliefs, before paying a scribe to copy it into a sumptuous illuminated manuscript. Preferable, in returning us to reality, is Lee

Patterson's perception (in a revised version of his 1992 article) of *Gawain* as juxtaposing "monarch and nobleman, metropolis and hinterland", with Sir Bertilak's court depicted as superior to Arthur's, whether in love, honour, courtesy, or hunting. Bertilak "understands the meaning of court practices more profoundly than the royal court that thinks itself to be the center of fashion". Patterson considers that such loyalty to the provincial, with scepticism on urban values, together fit well with "origins in the Cheshire-Shropshire region" (where "Shropshire" must be a slip), Cheshire being a county palatine that had "very close relations" with Richard II from 1385 onwards. Patterson, who cites with approval Fisher's paper of 1961, goes on to reject (on the grounds of the poem's "social meaning and lack of royal interest in alliterative poetry") Michael Bennett's proposal of one of Richard II's "household clerks" as author (Patterson 2010: 71-72, 282). Everything in the poem points to a Cheshire patriot as its author. Despite knowing about life at court, he regarded Cheshire as in no way inferior to London, especially on courtly values. With that, the case for an audience of London merchants and the like presented by Jill Mann and Ad Putter must collapse.

In the same year, Thorlac Turville-Petre republished his conclusions on the Green Chapel's whereabouts (Turville-Petre 2010: 594-608). Thereafter came further notice of the Stanley family's literary interests, and even how "Andrew Breeze goes so far as to suggest that Sir John Stanley, rather than being simply the patron, might have been the *Gawain* Poet himself" (Su Fang Ng and Hodges 2013). The present writer thereafter developed ideas of Jean-Paul Friedl (d. 2002) as set out by his research supervisor, Ian Kirby of Lausanne, in an IAUPE conference lecture of 2013 at Beijing, China. Friedl, noticing the curious repeated use in *Pearl* of the word *spot* "blemish", offered a reason for it: that the maiden died of plague. We can go further. In fourteenth-century England there were five great outbreaks of plague, the last two being in the late 1370s and between 1390 and 1393. We can also say that, if the maiden died (aged under two) of plague, it would have been the bubonic kind, which leaves marks on the skin, and not the more deadly pneumonic variety, which does not. Friedl's suggestion hence allows us to place *Pearl* in the early 1390s: the monument of a grieving father to a lost infant child, perhaps called Margaret or "pearl" (Breeze 2014).

In 2014 the “sensational claim” of the *Arthuriana* paper of 2004 was noticed again, this time by Michael Johnston of Purdue University. He admitted its possible truth, but did not consider the subject worth further attention, despite attention to a law suit involving Sir John Stanley (Johnston 2014: 33-34, 216-20). Johnston shines, however, in comparison with Kristina Pérez, who thinks that the “homosexual kisses between Gawain and the lord are pitted against the heterosexual adultery of Gawain and the Lady of Hautdesert”; this even though the destruction of Sodom in *Cleanness* shows the poet's views on homosexuality; and Gawain and the lady do not commit adultery (Pérez 2014: 121). Johnston is also in advance of Putter and Myres. In a major edition, for all the poet's unclerical interest in armour, attempted seduction, fashion, fatherhood, heraldry, hunting, jewellery, married love, military architecture, and seafaring, they still think him perhaps “a cleric who could not progress beyond minor orders” (Putter and Stokes 2014: xv).

A century after we began with John Wells of Beloit, Wisconsin, we end with Walter Wadiak of Lafayette College, Pennsylvania. In a study citing David Aers, Georges Bataille, Pierre Bourdieu, Helen Cooper, Andrew Cowell, Jacques Derrida, Frederic Jameson, Stephen Knight, Jacques Lacan, Jill Mann, Karl Marx, Marcel Mauss, James Simpson, and A. C. Spearing, he agrees with Muscatine in regarding *Gawain* as “a response to chivalric decline”. But he does not follow Fisher (who is never mentioned) in styling the poet's social attitudes as reactionary. Wadiak instead offers, after P. B. Taylor, the “Marxist view that what the poem is really about is commerce”, as “refined by Jill Mann, who saw the poem's focus on the value of *trewthe* [troth, pledged word] as directed towards a mercantile audience concerned with that virtue's role in underwriting financial transactions”, the girdle given by the Lady to Gawain being “a sign of the relativity and arbitrariness that attaches to any kind of value in a commercial world”, like money itself (Wadiak 2017: 90). Such opinions do Marxism no good. They ignore Fisher's conclusion, demonstrated by detailed citation of the texts, that the poet's politics were the outdated ones of a landed ruling class; they ignore as well Lee Patterson's view that *Gawain* has nothing to do with a London audience, courtly or bourgeois, and that its loving representation of life at Hautdesert exalts provincial values against London ones. The poet had the robust right-wing religious and social

beliefs of a provincial magnate. For that and other reasons, the recent case for links with the merchant class of London (or anywhere else) cannot be taken seriously. Subsequent to this is David Coley, who on the matter of authorship quotes Derek Pearsall's somewhat disobliging remark that they "are based on such naive and improbable assumptions concerning what constitutes evidence as to bring the study of attribution into disrepute" (Coley 2019: 16).

With that, we bring to a close the first part of this paper. Commentary over a hundred years demonstrates how some opinions fade, such as the author's being a monk; others replace them, such as his writing for the mercantile class; others again obstinately refusing to go, such as his being a clerk or cleric. There is not a shred of evidence for the last. The poet will instead have been a man of wealth and power with superlative social contacts, as proposed by Laura Loomis back in 1959. One observes a further and general aspect of the above: how time has eroded the influence of careful studies by (for example) Mathew, Fisher, Brewer, or Bennett. One remembers John Burrow's comment on how the questions of honour or religious belief analysed therein now bewilder younger readers. If changes in mentality poison our comprehension of the past, scholarship will decay. One may see this already happening in much writing of the last twenty years.

Laura Loomis, as noted, thought the poet perhaps a man of wealth and power. Her comment in mind, we move to our last part, looking at the life and times of Sir John Stanley in the light of the above. Because they have been set out in the *Arthuriana* paper, using Barry Coward's study of the Stanley family and other sources, we need not go into detail. But we shall add references to three books not at hand in 2004. Stanley was born, it seems, in about 1350 (not 1340). He was brought up at Storeton in the Wirral; his father, William de Stanleigh (1311-60), had in 1346 claimed Forestership of the Wirral. He was a younger son with miserable prospects, as Coward makes clear. He inherited from his father nothing but a farm at Newton, a hamlet now swallowed up in Macclesfield. (It was, however, only eight miles from the gorge of Ludchurch, the supposed Green Chapel.) As with Malory, John Stanley's early life included crime. In 1369 he was convicted of having attacked Thurstaston Hall, Cheshire; in 1378 he was found guilty of murdering his second cousin, obtaining a pardon only on condition of joining the king's army in Aquitaine. In 1385 his fortunes improved dramatically on

his marriage to Isabel Lathom, heiress to Lancashire estates at Knowsley and Lathom. He thereby acquired power and wealth. The next year he was deputy in Ireland for Robert de Vere, the beginning of a long association with Irish wars, politics, and financial crisis. Amongst the sweeteners coming from his new status was a collar of precious metal given to him in 1387-88 by the future Henry IV. It perhaps resembled another collar decorated "with scrolls and a swan in the tirt" for which Henry paid over 23 pounds sterling in 1391-92 (Fletcher 1997: 191-204). John Stanley was now clearly accustomed to the favour of the mighty and the good things which they could grant. He became controller of the wardrobe and a trusted member of Richard II's Cheshire affinity, there perhaps being in (or addressing?) "the primary audience" of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Michael Bennett 1999: 113). In 1405, after receiving many offices, he became King of the Isle of Man. In January 1414 he died in Ireland; his body was brought back for burial at Burscough Priory, near Lathom. Storeton Hall, where he was brought up, is now a farmhouse, having come down in the world (Harding 2002: 184). But the Stanleys, Earls of Derby and still in possession of lands acquired by him as their ancestor, have most certainly come up in it.

Sir John Stanley thus figures in the documents as a housebreaker, murderer, soldier, colonial administrator, politician, master forester, justice (in 1395, of Chester), courtier, builder, magnate, ancestor, and king. It is an astonishing story, even if one easily recalls others in history who have risen from obscurity to the heights. To his varied qualities can we therefore add that of *littérateur* and poet of genius? Proof of this is, of course, not possible in our present state of knowledge. But a strong case can be made for it. Since it is already rehearsed in the *Arthuriana* paper, we need present a summary only of the factors, some of them linguistic or topographical, some (the more important) involving the point of view which the four poems display:

1. The dialect found in the Cotton Nero manuscript can be accepted as that of Cheshire, that of the scribe differing little from that the author.
2. Gawain alludes to places in North Wales, Wirral, and (as regards Ludchurch) Staffordshire. The viewpoint is a Cheshire one.

3. More subtly, Hautdesert is presented to its advantage against the court of Arthur in south Britain. A provincial author felt in no way inferior in matters of personal integrity or status to those in the metropolis. Their social customs are indirectly criticized in the person of Gawain.
4. The author had an expert confidence on matters of castle architecture, etiquette, hunting, luxury items, riding, seafaring, sophisticated flirtation, and war.
5. His politics were resolutely conservative; he was neither a subversive nor anticlerical.
6. MS Cotton Nero A.x is a copy of an original prepared at considerable expense.
7. It bears the motto of the Garter, of which John Stanley (from 1405) was the sole north-western member at this date.
8. The author complains (*Patience*, lines 34, 46, 528) of poverty. Stanley was a younger son, due to inherit little or nothing; a circumstance which must date *Patience* to before 1385.
9. There are strong parallels between the vocabulary of the poems and that of Stanley's letter of 30 July 1405 to Henry IV.
10. The poet knew French and French romance well. Stanley in the 1380s did military service in Aquitaine, with opportunities to learn French first-hand.
11. *Pearl* is most simply read as a father's elegy for a daughter who died before her second birthday. References therein to *spottes* "rashes, blemishes" may indicate the cause as bubonic plague, of which there was an epidemic from 1390 to 1393, as the cause. Marrying in 1385, the Stanleys might be expected to have had a daughter by then.
12. The allusion to a daughter counts against identification of the poet as a cleric. So, too, do references (*Pearl* 1210, *Patience* 9) to himself not as celebrating mass, but as in the congregation.
13. Approving remarks from the mouth of God on the delights of married love (*Cleanness*, lines 697-704) are secular in tone, not clerical. The same is true for the attempted seductions in *Gawain*.
14. There is no evidence for the poems as the work of a professional clerk or scribe.

The upshot of the above will be to make the author out as a Cheshire and Lancashire grandee, with important positions at court and in local administration, who had done military service in France; a religious man, happily married and with children. It also places the poems within a relatively short time-span. *Gawain* could not predate 1385; if its Arthur represents Richard II (1367-1400), it may be of the later 1380s. *Pearl* on this basis would be of the very early 1390s. (Since this paper was written, however, evidence has come to light in Ann Astell's argument for *ver* "spring" in line 866 of *Gawain* as alluding to the flamboyant Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford. Her case, put forward in 1999, deserves further notice. It means that the poem must predate his disgrace and exile in December 1387; while the reference in line 678 to Gawain's being made a *duk* "duke" would put it after 13 October 1386, when Oxford was made Duke of Ireland. It was an unprecedented honour. All previous dukes in England were of royal blood. It suggests that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written sometime in the period October 1386 to December 1387, when duke-making was a topical subject, but before the new Duke of Ireland fled into political exile. The poem may date from 1387, perhaps being intended as an entertainment for the Christmas of that year.)

If, of course, *Sir Gawain* or *Pearl* could be shown as of before 1386, they could not be by Stanley. If critics could prove that they were, the above case would, naturally, collapse. There are other ways in which they could do this, besides that of dating. If Stanley could be proved as having anti-clerical or Wycliffite opinions, as with the "Lollard Knights" of the Oxford historian Bruce McFarlane (1903-66), this could not be reconciled with the full-blown sacramental Catholicism of *Pearl*. Again, if a document by him in English could be found, proving his dialect as unlike that of the poet, we must also rule him out. If family records indicate that he never had a daughter (called Margaret?) who died in infancy, it would likewise be conclusive.

If, however, there is cogency in the above, we may look on Sir John Stanley as a newcomer to England's literary pantheon. He will join the Earl of Rochester and Lord Byron in the (small) band of English aristocratic poets. As the King of Man, he could even be included in a still smaller one of those who wore crowns, like James I (1394-1437) of Scotland and *The Kingis Quair*. If, on the other hand, critics can prove

the case set out here to be ill-judged, baseless, or false, it will offer a permanent lesson on the perils of literary and historical interpretation.

POSTSCRIPT: After this paper was accepted for publication, there came to hand Ann W. Astell, *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999), as a gift to the writer from Dr Ros Field. This book has effectively been ignored by other scholars. Yet it contains (Astell 1999: 124-6) two observations of epoch-making importance, unfortunately not fully understood by Professor Astell herself. She there relates line 678 of *Gawain*, on its protagonist as being made a *duk* or duke, to various dukes, including Robert de Vere (1362-92), ninth Earl of Oxford, created Duke of Ireland on 13 October 1386. She adds that *ver* or spring, used in line 866 of beautiful clothing given to Gawain, is a dig or quiet joke at the expense of de Vere, favourite of Richard II and notorious for flamboyant dress. Allusions to de Vere notwithstanding, she declares (Astell 1999: 137) that the romance "must have been written between 1397 and 1400", despite noting de Vere's ruin at the Battle of Radcot Bridge, 20 December 1387 (when he fled into exile). On the contrary, the two lines will date the composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to between 13 October 1386, when de Vere (as England's first non-royal duke) made dukedoms a topical subject, and 20 December 1387, when disaster at Radcot Bridge made his luxurious tastes a thing of the past. One may say too that the judicial murders of the Merciless Parliament (February to May 1388) would thereafter make the theme of *Sir Gawain* (decapitation) a risky one. The poem can be dated with some confidence to 1387 (perhaps as entertainment for Christmas that year). The evidence also reinforces its links with John Stanley, who was de Vere's deputy in Ireland and must have known him well; the result being gentle mockery of him in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

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