

Breeze, Andrew. 2023. *The Historical Arthur and the “Gawain” Poet: Studies on Arthurian and Other Traditions*. London: Lexington Books. Pp. x + 153. ISBN 978166692956.

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Professor Breeze's book, so he claims up front, “is sensational,” in that it “contains proof for ‘King’ Arthur as a real person, a North British champion killed in 537 at *Camlan* (the fort of Castlesteads on Hadrian's Wall). As if this was not enough, its second part offers proof for the Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as written in 1387 by Sir John Stanley (d. 1414), Cheshire magnate, who (it seems) intended it for Christmas festivities at Chester Castle” (ix). The next sentence passes over the other poems dealt with in part two (*Pearl*, *Saint Erkenwald*, and *The Awntyrs off Arthure*), before returning to the triumphalist mode: “if the above is correct, we settle for all time the question of ‘King’ Arthur's historicity; and introduce John Stanley to the pantheon of England's poets. He there ranks with Chaucer himself, whom he knew, and who in his ‘Squire's Tale’ imitated *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (ix).

All depends on the qualifier *if*, and elsewhere in the book, remarks about “proof” notwithstanding, Breeze is open about the possibility that other interpretations or new evidence might prompt abandonment of his claims. While I consider it possible that either or both claims are accurate, he does not prove his cases, but rather selects certain modes of evidence and presents them in a way that makes them seem undeniable. But perhaps we all do so to a certain degree, and it is part of the process to point out and assess the particular manner in which this occurs, some of which I will do here.

Chapter 1, “The Historical Arthur,” argues that Arthur fought battles in southern Scotland or northern England, but not at Mount “Badon,” which was rather Mount “Bradon,” “a hill above Braydon Forest, northwest of Swindon” (6). This latter took place in 493, the remainder in 536 and 537, this commander being slain at Camlan. Chapter two, “Arthur *Dux Bellorum* and Welsh *Penteulu* ‘Chief of the Royal Warband,’” announces the imperative to “chuck out fables on him as a Roman-style leader fighting the English,” arguing that this *dux bellorum* was “a *penteulu*, a ‘captain of the royal host’: not a king, but the trusted commander of Strathclyde forces attacking other Northern British peoples to seize their herds and flocks” (35).

A worrying feature of this is the treatment of an essay by David Woods which Breeze identifies as “crucial.” Woods, we read, “dated the Battle of Mount Badon to 493” in “rather elegant” arguments which “proved” from allusions to a volcanic cloud that covered Britain in 536–37 that Gildas wrote in early 536, “before the effects of the volcanic winter were evident” (4). From Gildas's claim that he wrote 43 years after the Battle of Mount Badon, it must have taken place in 493. Yet in fact Woods does not mention the Battle of Mount Badon or its dating at all. Second, Woods himself makes no claim to have “proved” anything about dating Gildas: “Firm proof is impossible”; “It is impossible to prove this beyond doubt” (Woods 2010, 232, 234).

And third, I would say that even the evidentiary claims Woods does make are questionable, which certainly is what accounts for his caution. Which contemporary priests, Gildas asks, can follow Jesus' injunction to let their light shine in the presence of men? "Rather does a dense cloud and black night of their sin so loom over the whole island that it diverts almost all men from the straight way and makes them stray along the trackless and entangled paths of crime" (Woods 2010, 228). Now, if it were already accepted that Gildas was writing in 536, then it would be reasonable to find here a muted allusion to the actual cloud cover. But it will not do to reverse things. As Woods acknowledges, Gildas's text "contains many images of light and dark" along these lines (228). This instance works perfectly well on its own terms, without bringing the weather into the picture. The phrase "over the whole island" he finds striking, but it is simply a way of saying just that, that priests are sinful from sea to shining sea. Langland, too, bemoaned the bad shepherds who, rather than tending their flocks, "hop about in England" (see the original in Kane and Donaldson 1975, B.15.529). So I worry about both the argument itself and Breeze's presentation. So much in these first two chapters relies on the notion that Gildas was "writing in 536, as proved in 2010 by David Woods" (14; also 33) that readers ought to decide for themselves whether Woods's claims can bear this weight. I am not so sure.

The arguments regarding John Stanley as author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* encounter similar difficulties. Breeze had prosecuted the case in an earlier article in the journal *Arthuriana* (Breeze 2004); here he summarizes it, bringing what he presents as new evidence to bear on the matter, and castigating those who have not embraced it, or who are cagey about matters of authorship and dating (he places its composition firmly in 1387). Let me say up front that, so far as these things go, I consider Stanley as viable as anyone else. Maybe he was even the author. I certainly do not consider the case proved for all time, however. On pages 62–63, Breeze offers a summary of the factors that lead him to identify the author "as a Cheshire and Lancashire magnifico, with important positions at court and in local administration, who had done military service in France; a religious man, happily married and with children." Happily married? "Approving remarks from the mouth of God on the delights of married love (*Cleanness*, lines 697–704)," which "are secular in tone, not clerical," as are the seduction scenes in *Gawain*. Priests did not hunt. The dialect "can be accepted as that of Cheshire"; the manuscript, as "a copy of an original prepared at considerable expense." And so forth.

Put thus, Stanley stands to reason. And yet by the assumptions at work here, Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare (wasn't a lawyer, didn't travel to Italy, etc.). In reading Breeze's account, I realized I had always taken for granted that the knowledge of seafaring, seduction, hunting and the like could all have come from books or conversation. This certainly doesn't make him a priest, but it doesn't rule it out, either. As with the cloud over the whole land, yes, if Stanley was the poet, then they could have come from lived experience, but to reverse things would be to beg the question. There are some dubious claims here, particularly the notion that the sole extant manuscript derives from a deluxe manuscript, for which there is no actual evidence. Likewise, while Breeze allows that "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" (63), this takes for granted Angus McIntosh's narrowing of that dialect down to "a very small area either in SE Cheshire or just over the border in NE Staffordshire," which fits with Stanley's birthplace in Stanley,

Staffordshire. Yet Ad Putter and Myra Stokes have submitted corrections which indicate a region that is “plausibly Cheshire, but less plausibly Staffordshire” (2007, 487–88).

Breeze’s engaging preface remarks upon his pleasure in finding “emphatic confirmation” of his argument in 2022, when Rosalind Field gave him a copy of Ann Astell’s book (1999). “Remarks by Ann Astell on lines 678 and 866 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as mischievous allusions to Robert de Vere (d. 1392), Duke of Ireland, are crucial for dating the poem to 1387, when de Vere spent a flamboyant summer at Chester Castle with John Stanley, his deputy for the government of Ireland” (ix–x; also, 72 “two brilliant ideas”; 91 “a bombshell”). “Yonder ‘dere’ is worthy ‘a *duk* to have worped,” say the courtiers, writes Astell: “A lowande leder of ledez in londe hym wel semez” (678–79), while later, when Gawain gets dressed, “*Pe ver* by his uisage *verayly* hit semed” (866), the former alluding to de Vere’s recent elevation to a dukedom, the latter “dramatizing his own auditors’ shock of recognition of the ‘truth’ (*verayly*) of his allegory, boldly likening Gawain’s appearance to that of De Vere / Pe ver, playing at the start of a line on both the homonym *ver* and on the paleographic resemblance of a capital thorn to a capital *D*” (124, 126). To Breeze, if not Astell, the evidence is “conclusive:” “The romance cannot predate October 13, 1386, when Richard II made de Vere a duke on the Feast of the Confessor; it will not postdate December 20, 1387, when de Vere lost all at Radcot Bridge” (91).

Something very unfortunate has occurred here, of which Breeze is not the culpable party, even if a search on Google or especially JSTOR for the terms “Stanley Gawain” might have alerted him. The ideas that lines 678 and 866 allude to de Vere are not Astell’s at all, her “I would suggest” and absence of any real indication to the contrary notwithstanding. Both originated with William McColly: “This investiture” of de Vere with the dukedom of Ireland “may lie behind the comment of Arthur’s courtiers” in 678, while his “surname, I believe, is encoded explicitly in the poem,” “the ver” being “a pun on ‘de Vere’” (1988, 80–81). Astell cites McColly on one or two other matters, while one note, on Richard’s conference of the title “Duke of Ireland” on the earl, has a “cf. McColly” after its main reference to a historian who does not mention *Sir Gawain* (189 fn.51). I would imagine that she would be embarrassed to find her “revolutionary insights” so insistently trumpeted as the game-changer of *Gawain* studies (here, Breeze 81). It would not be difficult for readers of *The Historical Arthur and the “Gawain” Poet* to substitute McColly’s name for hers on the latter’s many appearances, even if the narrative of 1999 as a fulcrum of “a before and after unnoticed by other scholars (including this one until now)” must be abandoned (72). Given Breeze’s insistence that critics wear the effects of their claims, I am sure he would agree that McColly, not Astell, is the one who deserves the praise and acclamation.

More important: was this discovery of de Vere in the words of the poem new evidence for his argument? Breeze occasionally points out that Astell, who identified 1397 to 1400 as the poem’s window, “did not see the implications for dating” (91). As for the vocabulary, her reading is that “the pun on the name ‘Vere’ exposes its association with springtime verdure” (125–26). For my part, I have argued that the term *ver* means not “spring” or “fur,” the two choices up for debate, but “green” (Warner 2021, 141–43). But most telling is McColly’s finding here, in opposition to Astell, of “the fur by his face (or de Ver? by his appearance) (‘the ver by his visage’) . . .” (81). Breeze seems happy to go along with Astell on the matter, which to him is subordinate to the *fact* of the supposed allusion to de Vere.

More to the point is that McColly identifies de Vere as the model for Gawain, citing eight pieces of evidence, including the two lines we have been discussing, and, as the model for the Green Knight / Bertilak (whose portrait he considers flattering), Sir Hugh Calveley (d. 1394), to whom attaches a list of characteristics to rival that Breeze assigns Stanley as author: a native Cestrian, reputed for his size and strength, noted as a military leader, a lord of considerable wealth, closely associated with France, with references to him that may be encoded in the text. Most relevant for us are McColly's remarks about dating. "This speculation about Gawain and de Vere implies that the poet composed *Sir Gawain* after de Vere's conviction of treason (13 February 1388), when he was already in exile on the Continent." (89). And what audience would have been implied by this? None other than . . . "the Stanley family of the Wirral," both Sir William, master forester (d. 1398), whom Breeze identifies as the author of *St. Erkenwald* (109–15), and his younger brother John, Breeze's *Gawain* poet, whose relationship with de Vere "was significantly explicit, for in 1386 he became de Vere's lieutenant in Ireland" (89).

McColly and Breeze are working with near-identical frames of mind and of reference. And yet for the one, Calveley looms large where for the other he is absent; the one takes this body of evidence to locate John Stanley as the poem's *audience, after 1387*, the other, to locate him as *the poet, in 1387*. On their own terms, both are compelling—but those terms are not enough. Such discrepancies are built into the quest for this author. W. G. Cooke and D'A. J. D. Boulton find it "difficult to imagine any other explanation" for the evidence they cite than that the poem was composed in the mid-fourteenth century (Cooke and Boulton 1999, 50) while, to move things forward a half-century, J. Eadie believes there to be "little doubt" that the poet "knew something of Christine de Pisan's *Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*" of ca. 1403 (Eadie 1986, 576). Breeze asserts that his argument "will fail in its objectives if it does not vaporize almost everything said by Professor [Jill] Mann on the *Gawain* poet and Richard II's court" (107); any of these other authors could take the same tack in a book targeting Breeze's words about the poet and John Stanley.

That would be most unfortunate, and not just because vaporizing one's colleague's claims is not a particularly productive ambition. More so because, first, Breeze's suggestions, while admittedly put forward with no little hyperbole, are worth taking seriously, as suggested by their congruence with McColly's wholly independent proposals, and second, his insistence that critics *do* engage, and not just lazily repeat whatever they assume to be the authoritative take on the matter, is absolutely right. Few others than Professor Andrew Breeze have been willing to push that admirable commitment to the field and its intellectual foundations so far.

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