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*A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal*

*Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature*



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Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (June 2012), pp. 61-68.

Published by: [www.thisroughmagic.org](http://www.thisroughmagic.org)

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/ambrisco%20article.html>

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## Grappling with *Sir Gowther* in the Middle English Survey

By Alan S. Ambrisco

Blending romance and hagiography, the late medieval poem *Sir Gowther* (c. 1400) is a fascinating text in which the monstrous progeny of a duchess and a demon turns his back upon an early life replete with violent acts—including mass rape, homicide, and arson—and adopts instead the role of the humble Christian penitent before, in one version, becoming a saint. A small number of early studies of the poem focused on its sources and analogs as well as its generic classification. Otherwise, the text has until recently been largely ignored by literary critics, who often balk at the structural and artistic deficiencies of this poorly told popular romance. Joanne A. Charbonneau likely captures something of the response many a new critic once had to the poem when she laments, “How could an author expect us to believe this hopelessly ill-prepared transformation from devil’s son to saint . . .” (21). Since the rise of cultural studies, however, critical interest in the poem has increased, and scholars now are less concerned with its artistic flaws and more concerned with its relationship to penitential discourse, demonology, chivalric identity, and matters of aristocratic succession and legitimacy. I enjoy teaching this poem, which has much to say about the late middle

ages, and I've found my students are fascinated both by the narrative itself and the poem's relationships to more canonical medieval works.

*Sir Gowther* begins by describing Gowther's conception, which resulted from a union between a human duchess and the very same demon who earlier fathered Merlin himself. Gowther's demonic pedigree shows itself early as he literally sucks dry nine nursemaids, all of whom die. When grown, Gowther embarks on a life of violence, raping nuns and setting fire to their convent as well as persecuting married women, widows, friars, and priests. Shortly after discovering the demonic identity of his true father, Gowther begins a life of penitence and humility. A zealous convert, Gowther hastens to Rome where he confesses to and is given penance by none other than the Pope himself. To prove his contrition and carry out his penance, Gowther eats only what has first been in the mouth of a dog and regularly lounges, dog-like, under the table of the Emperor's court before demonstrating his martial abilities in a Holy War against the enemies of Christendom. Fighting in three days of hard battle, he rescues the Emperor himself and kills a pagan Sultan who earlier demanded the hand of the Emperor's mute daughter. Just after this display of knightly prowess, Gowther revives the Emperor's daughter, who seemingly died through a sudden fall. Miraculously, she gains the ability to speak and subsequently delivers Gowther a message from God, stating the erstwhile rapist and murderer is now one of God's own. Excessive both in his early violence and his later devotion, Gowther abdicates his duchy, marries the

princess whose life and voice were miraculously restored, rises to the position of Emperor, and, on his death, becomes a saint.

A hodgepodge of shocking violence and sobering devotion, this narrative poses some interesting questions for the student of Middle English literature. I teach *Sir Gowther* in a survey of Middle English literature offered at my institution in a split-level course geared both for senior undergraduates taking it at the 400-level and first-year graduate students enrolled at the 500-level. The romance exists in two manuscript versions with slight but meaningful variations, British Royal MS 17.B.43 and National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1. Both the Royal and Advocates versions are available in print (Rumble 179-204 and Laskaya and Salisbury, respectively). In my class I use Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury's edition of *Sir Gowther*, which students can access on-line for free as part of the TEAMS Middle English Texts project. While not available in modern English translation, the text (especially since it is fairly short) is approachable for students who have had at least five weeks exposure to Chaucer's Middle English, and these students are generally excited about the pacing of the narrative and the sudden twists in plot. The better students, especially coming from a reading of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* or Chaucer's dream visions, can identify some of the poem's weaknesses in diction and meter, but they nonetheless readily recognize in the poem many features that demand our attention as readers and encourage further research into its cultural context.

In part, the very reason I teach *Sir Gowther* is that students can see a number of themes at work and productively link the poem with a number of other, more canonical medieval texts. For starters, the issue of Gowther's demonic birth and pedigree fascinates them, and the poem's explicit recognition that the demon who impregnated the Duchess is the same who fathered Merlin warrants a comparative reading of texts like the Middle English *Prose Merlin* (the relevant section is available through the TEAMS website under the title *The Birth of Merlin*). Similarly, Gowther's abnormal growth and outrageous behavior (his vampire-like destruction of the nursemaids, his attacks against clergy) encourage some to more specifically consider him as a giant or a monstrous being, and I send them to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's work or medieval texts like *The King of Tars* and Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, which frame monstrous births as a product of interfaith unions (Gilbert).

A more traditional approach to the poem might focus on plot and emphasize Gowther's relinquishing of excessive violence and his adoption of a proper chivalric identity (Blamires, McGregor, Mitchell-Smith). Using such an approach, one might construct a unit comparing *Sir Gowther* to canonical works like Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, or any number of Arthurian texts that contemplate the role of violence in knightly culture and the ways in which chivalric literature identifies licit and illicit forms of violence in the act of constructing proper knightly behavior. This is often the context that makes most sense for students, and there's enough critics writing

on this issue that it can be pursued through new critical, cultural studies, and psychoanalytic approaches.

Critics likewise have focused on the role of penitence in the text, and in the survey course I've used *Sir Gowther* as a kind of transitional piece as we move away from courtly, chivalric literature to religious genres and concerns. Passages in the poem emphasize the role of confession, humility, and repentance in the life of the individual, and I've had students make comparisons to the roles of sin and penitence in *Gawain and the Green Knight* and Mallory's *Morte Darthur*. Following the lead of E.M. Bradstock, one could also see Gowther as a kind of convert to Christianity and compare Gowther's conversion to that of St. Paul in *Acts of the Apostles* (Bradstock, "Penitential Pattern").

Finally, for the student interested in genre-based studies, Gowther poses an interesting case. It uses but transforms the "exile and return" pattern typical of romance, blends the romance form with penitential discourse, and ends (in the Royal version) with Gowther's assumption of the role of saint when he is specifically identified with Saint Guthlac. The tensions in the poem, then, between Gowther's chivalric and saintly identities can be framed as a tension between differing generic expectations and forms, and advanced students might even consider how the two existing versions of the poem (both available in modern editions) differ enough from each other as to invite separate generic classification.

What I most like about using *Sir Gowther* in advanced undergraduate courses and first-year graduate courses is that students feel the body of criticism is manageable, and they often choose this poem for research projects. Too often I see the dazed look on a student's face when he or she begin researching *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, only to find how much has been written on it. Such students tell me their conviction that everything they want to say about the inimitable wife has already been said. In contrast, just enough has been written on *Sir Gowther* to ensure the student is not writing and researching in a vacuum, but there's also a sense among students that there is much more to say about it, that the poem's potential as a research topic has not been exhausted. Even better, comparing *Sir Gowther* to canonical works—*The Canterbury Tales*, *Morte Darthur*, even *The Pearl*—often empowers the student and helps him or her to analyze canonical Middle English texts with a sharp focus capable of generating significant insights about the very texts they earlier dismissed. Grappling with this non-canonical text, then, often brings my students back to the canon with a new appreciation for style and structure as well as enthusiasm for the cultural contexts of medieval English literature. At the very least, they read a rollicking good story about a demonic, sin-stained knight who acts like a dog and transforms into a saint, and this tends to disabuse even the most jaded student of the notion that the middle ages and its literature were predictable or, worse, boring.

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