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"Teaching *The Turke and Sir Gawain* in the Undergraduate British Literature Survey Course"

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## "Teaching *The Turke and Sir Gawain* in the Undergraduate British Literature Survey Course"

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Composed around 1500 and preserved in the Percy Folio manuscript (British Library Additional MS 27879), the late Middle English romance *The Turke and Sir Gawain* is often seen, when considered at all, as a defective poem due to its many textual gaps and artistic flaws. Little sustained criticism on the poem exists, but given its central figure is Sir Gawain and that it involves a beheading scene, editors have occasionally and loosely linked it to the well-known fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Hales and Furnivall 88).[1] I find that teaching *TG* in my undergraduate early British survey course offers an instructive comparison to *SGGK* while helping to fill in a frequently-neglected gap in such surveys that all too often move from Chaucer's fourteenth century to the Elizabethan era with breakneck speed. In what follows I offer some suggestions for incorporating this non-canonical romance into a survey of British literature alongside the kinds of canonical texts offered in the standard anthologies. Teaching this little-read poem at an early stage in the course, moreover, helps me to foreground for my students questions about the function of literature by discussing the social work it accomplishes.

*TG* is a short poem (only 337 lines) available as part of a volume of Middle English Gawain romances edited by Thomas Hahn for the TEAMS series (Hahn 337-58). Available in print and in a free online format, Hahn's edition is in the original Middle English, but as it is intended for a general readership it is so heavily glossed that the language poses few if any problems for my students. The poem details the arrival at Arthur's court of a "Turke" who offers to exchange blows with any so hardy to accept his challenge. After rude treatment by Sir Kay, the Turke receives a blow from Gawain but, instead of receiving an immediate return blow, Gawain journeys with him for a time. The two enter a cleft in the earth and encounter a mysterious castle, where the Turke once again refuses to give Gawain his promised buffet. Instead they travel to the Isle of Man and encounter a heathen sultan whose court is filled with giants. No longer an adversary, the Turke becomes Gawain's "boy" and the two survive the sultan's challenges. Specifically, they win a tennis match played with a gigantic brass ball, after which the Turke lifts a huge "chimney" above his head and later defeats a giant by drowning him in a cauldron of boiling lead. By now allied with Gawain and deferential toward him,<sup>[2]</sup> the Turke refuses to strike Gawain the promised blow and instead asks Gawain to strike off his head. When Gawain complies the Turke stands up as a Christian knight and the two mysteriously discover a group of seventeen Christian female captives whom they restore to their husbands and country. The poem ends with

Gawain refusing from Arthur the lordship of the Isle of Man and granting it to the Turke, now a Christian knight named Sir Gromer.

In my early British survey, I teach *TG* after *SGGK*, and a comparison of the two poems helps to frame some of the salient features of *SGGK* that often escape the notice of students new to medieval romance. At first, students typically note features common to both texts and Arthurian romance more generally: magical elements; outside, foreign threats; threats against courteous behavior; a challenge in the form of an exchange of blows; and the testing of Gawain's mettle as the preeminent example of Arthurian chivalry. At some point we note, however, that *TG* ends up testing the Turke more than Gawain, who easily lives up to the flawless reputation he enjoys in most Middle English popular romances (Hahn 6). Seeing Gawain's untarnished excellence in *TG* encourages my students to pause over *SGGK*'s atypical presentation of a flawed knight arguably isolated from the Arthurian court and its pretensions to idealized behavior, best seen in the symbolism of the pentangle Gawain bears on his shield. They see *SGGK* as a departure from the standard script of romance, especially because *TG* results not just in a return to Arthur's court, but in its enlargement through Sir Gromer's conversion. In *TG* the reintegration of Arthur's courtly Christian society is further emphasized by the return of the Christian ladies to their lords, proof as well of the chivalric accomplishments of Gawain and his now-Christian ally. The result is *TG* offers a conservative vision of chivalric accomplishment and aristocratic virtue,

features in marked contrast to *SGGK*. Once my class perceives *SGGK*'s ending as a departure from the typical Gawain romance, they are eager to discuss *SGGK*'s examination of the ethical compromises Gawain makes and Arthur's court accepts. Some students, following Bertilak's lead, see Gawain's flaws as understandable in light of humanity's innate sinfulness. Gawain is not uniquely flawed, then, but rather "a sinner like everyone else," and the poem then gently criticizes his pretensions to the contrary (Burrow 171). Others read *SGGK* far less sympathetically as a pointed criticism of what Pearsall calls "the delicate fabric of chivalric idealism," a fabric which unravels in *SGGK* in ways it never does in *TG* (Pearsall 351). [3]

Beyond its utility as a contrast to *SGGK*, I've found *TG* useful for addressing another recurring topic in my survey: gender. Women are wholly absent from the poem (even in the poet's address to his audience) until the Christian female captives magically appear following Sir Gromer's beheading, and their rescue then marks the successful return to and restoration of Arthurian community. *TG* depicts power, even threats to that power, as vested in men. This is, of course, in stark contrast to Marie De France's *Lanval*, Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and most especially *SGGK*, which, as Geraldine Heng has shown, has a "feminine narrative folding into and between the masculine" (Heng 501). The near absence of female characters in *TG* is not, I would argue, merely myopia on the part of a text ostensibly treating other concerns. It is a

starkly conservative denial of the limits of and threats to masculine power and privilege that are becoming apparent in the literature of the late Middle Ages.

Somewhere in our discussion, one or more students usually claim *TG* resists gendered readings or that Gawain's easy idealization suggests this poem is mere entertainment, a simple text not intended to examine or change the world. In response, I tell my students that literature performs other kinds of social work beyond the social critique evident in *SGGK* or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (which they read next). Replicating, and hence reinforcing, existing social relations is a key element of the kind of ideological work literature can, and often does, accomplish. Larry D. Benson, for example, has noted the "inverse relation between the weakening of feudal ties and the rise of romance chivalry," so that late medieval romances emphasize "an ideal of noble conduct that defined that class" at precisely the point where a rising merchant class and increased urbanization meant "power shifted away from the old agrarian aristocracy" (143). In this respect, *TG* offers a very conservative, even nostalgic, view of the aristocracy during a time (the late fifteenth century) when the prevailing social order was changing, the power and privilege of English aristocracy eroding and even being actively contested.

The challenges to Arthurian order, courtesy, manhood, and chivalric pretension in *TG*, however, are not merely framed as challenges stemming from within English society but rather from a figure with a precise relationship to fifteenth-century politics

beyond England. Gawain's ally in the poem is not, like the Isle of Man's sultan, an unspecified figure for Islam in general but rather a figure for the Ottoman Empire whose incursions into Europe were causing a great deal of anxiety in the fifteenth century. The decisive Turkish victory at the 1396 Battle of Nicopolis proved disastrous for central and eastern European forces allied against the Ottoman Turks, who became the rising extra-European threat to eastern Christendom. Throughout the fifteenth century, numerous papal calls for crusade and/or financial support for crusade bear testimony to concern about Ottoman Turks, which was especially strong in England (Norako 172-75). Unlike the actual Ottoman threat to Europe in the fifteenth century, however, the Turk in *TG* capitulates willingly to Gawain's superiority and turns out not to be much of a threat at all. His willing decapitation, moreover, signals his submission to Arthur's chivalric and political ascendancy, especially when he arises (head intact) as the now-Christian and Arthurian knight Sir Gromer.

This outside threat, moreover, is contained by the mechanism of religious conversion, another staple of medieval romance. If time and student interest allow, we discuss what the romance says about conversion more fully in the survey course, but the text's treatment of this issue has enough complexity for *TG* to work well in a graduate-level course on Arthurian literature or romance more generally. *TG* projects a fantasy in which western chivalric norms are valued and validated, and far from toppling Arthur's court, the Turke sees this value and willingly joins both the Round

Table and the Christian community. The Turke's conversion to Sir Gromer is effected when Gawain uses the sword on the Turke, filling a basin with his blood in a violent version of a baptismal ceremony. Here the poem collapses distinctions between two types of religious conversion—voluntary conversion and forced conversion through violence—perhaps in an effort to belie fears about the efficacy of forced conversions. Far from a fearful military threat to Christianity or an outsider staunchly opposed to Christianity on theological grounds, the Turke willingly abandons his previous identity. His voluntary conversion, moreover, projects a Christian fantasy about the ease of conquering and/or converting the non-Christian world, a dream of conquest that had long since been demonstrated as just that—a fantasy (Ambrisco 213-16). When the Turke's actions enable the larger consolidation of the Christian community at the poem's end, we see another fantasy, not one about the efficacy of conversion as a geopolitical tactic, but one about conversion's ability to effect genuine religious change in individuals. Often viewed with suspicion in medieval Europe, converts to Christianity were repeatedly accused of adopting only the external practices of Christianity, and many claimed that conversion could never be complete—that traces of the pre-Christian self always remained. Assuaging European fears about the Ottoman Empire, the figure of the Turke here projects an image of power, not for a contemporary non-European state, but for Christian Europe and the conversionary power of its faith.



Presented early in the survey of British literature, *TG* helps me to discuss the range of social work literature so often accomplishes, and I encourage my students to write an essay that compares and contrasts *TG* to any of the texts we've read that separates an individual from his or her community in order to gauge its values and ideals. By this point we've already compared *TG* and *SGGK* in class as a model, so *Beowulf*, Marie de France's *Lanval*, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, or portions of Malory's *Morte Darthuroften* make the most sense for comparison, but such a paper could be assigned later in the course to include texts from later centuries. Many students, charmed by its giant-bashing and ludicrous tennis match, are eager to think and write about *TG*, and quite a few critical eyes are opened once we acknowledge that the quiet certainties of its Arthurian court may only seem to foreclose probing questions about social structure and the societal status quo. For many students, the fact that so very little has been written and said about *TG* is quite empowering, as it gives them the chance to do work that they perceive means more because it hasn't already been done for them. Teaching *TG*, then, helps my students expand their view of the work literature does, and it also expands their sense of the meaningful work they too can accomplish.

## Endnotes

[1] For the remainder of the essay I use *TG* to refer to *The Turke and Sir Gawain* and *SGGK* to refer to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

[2] This reading differs from that of Jean E. Jost, who claims, "A sinister hint of danger accompanies each of the Turke's helpful gestures" (53).

[3] For further assessments of Gawain's chivalric misconduct in *SGGK*, see studies by Anderson, Wetherbee, and Larrington.

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