

The Western Literary Canon in Context

Parts I–III

Professor John M. Bowers



THE TEACHING COMPANY®

PUBLISHED BY:

THE TEACHING COMPANY
4151 Lafayette Center Drive, Suite 100
Chantilly, Virginia 20151-1232
1-800-TEACH-12
Fax—703-378-3819
www.teach12.com

Copyright © The Teaching Company, 2008

Printed in the United States of America

This book is in copyright. All rights reserved.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above,
no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form, or by any means
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise),
without the prior written permission of
The Teaching Company.

Credits begin on page ii and constitute a continuation of the copyright page.

John M. Bowers, Ph.D.

Professor of English, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

John M. Bowers is a Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he has served as chairman of the Department of English. In 1971 he received his B.A. from Duke University, and he went on to earn an M.A. in 1973 and a Ph.D. in 1978 from the University of Virginia. In 1975 he was awarded a Master of Philosophy degree from The University of Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar with a specialty in medieval English literature.

Professor Bowers has published four books: *The Crisis of Will in "Piers Plowman"*; *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*; *The Politics of "Pearl": Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II*; and *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition*. He is the author of more than 30 articles and essays on authors, including Saint Augustine, Marie de France, and William Shakespeare, as well as seven entries in the 2006 edition of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature* on writers such as William Caxton and works such as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. He has championed scholarship on Chaucer's contemporaries Thomas Usk and Sir John Clanvowe as well as the 15th-century Chaucerian poets Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate. His current book projects concern Chaucer, William Langland, and the *Gawain* Poet.

He has been a visiting research fellow at Merton College, University of Oxford, and a resident scholar at the Rockefeller Foundation's Study Center in Bellagio, Italy. He has lectured widely, with presentations in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Berlin. He has taught at the University of Virginia, Hamilton College (now Kaplan University), California Institute of Technology, and Princeton University. His regular teaching assignments include Chaucer, Shakespeare, literary theory, and world literature.

Professor Bowers has received numerous awards for his scholarship and teaching, including fellowships from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Among his many teaching recognitions, he is the recipient of the Nevada Regents' Teaching Award.

Lecture Fourteen

King Arthur, Politics, and *Sir Gawain*

Scope: Starting in the 12th century, Arthurian literature became a political reflection of a specific time and place. History is written by the winners, and Geoffrey of Monmouth invented King Arthur to replace Alfred the Great in his official Norman French account of Britain's royal past. As the best Arthurian romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written in imitation of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse—in English—because England was at war with France during the second half of the 14th century. The poet revived the enchantment of fairies, giants, and Green Men unique to Britain's folklore. The anonymous genius probed the internal contradictions of chivalry under Richard II, a king whose court was notorious for sophistication verging on decadence. Arthurian stories continue to reflect the political culture in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

Outline

- I. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the best Arthurian romance in the English language. I have to specify the English language, because much of the best Arthurian literature was actually written in French.
 - A. We return to the notion that history, including literary history, is written by the winners—in this case, the French-speaking Normans who conquered the Saxons at the Battle of Hastings.
 - B. As we have seen before, with this translation of power came a translation of culture and the creation of new documents to justify the new regime.
- II. For the Norman French, this document was Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th-century *History of the Kings of Britain*.
 - A. Monmouth, a Welsh scholar, recounted in Latin the tale of British colonization as a continuation of Virgil's *Aeneid*.
 - B. Monmouth was working for the Norman nobility when he wrote, so part of his job was to erase the Anglo-Saxon chapter of British history, including King Alfred the Great.
 - C. In place of Alfred the Great, Monmouth inserted Arthur, a Welshman. In this way, he satisfied his obligation to erase Anglo-Saxon history and he inserted his own personal heritage.
- III. The word "mystery" is a good word to apply to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.
 - A. Its plot is essentially a whodunit, a mystery story.
 - B. It was written by an anonymous author in the 14th century. This is mysterious in itself, because authorial anonymity was not the norm by this point.
 - C. There is only one surviving manuscript of this work, though *The Canterbury Tales* (also written during this period) survives in 82 manuscripts.
 - D. It was largely ignored as a literary work until J. R. R. Tolkien and Eric Gordon produced a standard scholarly edition in 1925.
- IV. The manuscript's date of 1400 gives us some context for the original date of composition.
 - A. It was written during the Hundred Years' War, an extended conflict between England and France.
 - B. One of the results of this war was to inspire a new sense of patriotism in England, including the use of the English language.
- V. This poet was even more patriotic than others, using the original Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter in his work.
 - A. When choosing his hero, he overlooked Sir Lancelot, who was French, in favor of Gawain, a Celt.
 - B. Like Geoffrey of Monmouth, the *Gawain* Poet wanted to connect the story of King Arthur to the Trojan foundation of England.
 - C. The *Gawain* Poet boasts that England is the home of more marvels and supernatural events than any other land. He extends this sense of marvel and wonder to Arthur himself.
- VI. The story starts at Camelot at Christmastime (or "Yuletide"), which is portrayed in this work as a particularly English holiday.
 - A. The Green Knight enters the festivities with a bob of holly, a plant that is associated both with Christmas and with Druidic worship.
 - B. When the Green Knight is beheaded as part of his bargain with Sir Gawain, his head rolls to the floor and is kicked around like a football. The English sport of football was commonly associated with Christmastime, and even today in America, our own version of football is a traditional holiday entertainment.

- VII.** The Green Knight himself is deeply rooted in the folklore of Britain, in the idea of the giants and the wild Green Men of the woods.
- A.** When editing the poem, Tolkien discovered a word for this folkloric figure: the *wodwose*.
 - B.** The idea of the wild man of the woods would continue in the English tradition, appearing in Tolkien's work and even the recent work of J. K. Rowling.
- VIII.** Finally, the mystery of the whodunit is solved.
- A.** Who sent the Green Knight to challenge Arthur's court? It was the old lady in the castle, who, as it turns out, is Morgan Le Fay, King Arthur's half-sister and Sir Gawain's aunt.
 - B.** Aristotle would have approved of this, since he considered it best to keep drama tightly organized within the family.
- IX.** When Sir Gawain returns to Camelot, he is wearing a green sash as a sign of his humiliation. The court jokes about it and makes it into a fashion statement, and this gives us a good idea about who the original audience for this poem was.
- A.** The beardless, high-spirited boys of King Arthur's court were meant to mirror the youthful court of King Richard II, who was the patron of the *Gawain* Poet.
 - B.** The poet was likely a Cheshire clergyman who joined the Cheshire bodyguard in Richard II's household.
- X.** The mystery of the poet's anonymity and the survival of a single manuscript can be explained by the political circumstances following the poem's composition.
- A.** Richard II was deposed by Henry of Lancaster, who would become King Henry IV.
 - B.** Henry IV and his son, Henry V, eradicated all signs of Richard II's court and dismissed the Cheshiremen guard, including (presumably) the *Gawain* Poet.
 - C.** The literary void left by the disappearance of the *Gawain* Poet was promptly filled by a Lancastrian, Geoffrey Chaucer.
- XI.** The King Arthur story would renew itself from generation to generation, and each new era would somehow make it its own.
- A.** At the end of the 15th century, Sir Thomas Malory gathered many of these romances together in his *Le Morte Darthur*. This moved the genre forward by presenting many quests at once in an interlaced plot.
 - B.** In the 19th century, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, would reformulate the story in his *Idylls of the King*, using it to reflect upon the imperial grandeur of the Victorian period.
 - C.** In the 20th century, we had Lerner and Lowe's musical *Camelot* and a 1970s counterculture version of the Arthurian story, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.
- XII.** There is one requirement of canonic works that we have not yet discussed: They have to be well-written, well-constructed, and display universal human values. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* passes this test exceptionally well.
- A.** It is one of the most carefully constructed plots and carefully crafted masterpieces in the English tradition.
 - B.** The tests of character that Sir Gawain endures are tests that reappear in myths and civilizations all over the world.

Suggested Readings:

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*.

Bowers, *The Politics of "Pearl."*

Brewer and Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*.

Questions to Consider:

- 1.** There are writers who tell and writers who show. The *Gawain* Poet is a supreme example of a "writer who shows" by indicating in actions what a character is thinking and feeling. For example, Gawain ties up his horse before his final encounter with the Green Knight. This action indicates that he expects to survive with the help of the green sash. What other actions serve as exterior indicators of a character's true thoughts and motives?
- 2.** Tolkien was drawn to *Sir Gawain* because its author is one of the greatest nature writers in English literature. His landscape descriptions are "painterly," especially in Parts II and IV. Can you find a passage that combines the beauty and threat of the wilderness?