



Discuss the treatment of the Individual and the Community in *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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When one looks at the modern dictionary definitions for ‘individual’ and ‘community’, an immediate juxtaposition is formed. While the individual is defined as ‘single’ and ‘separate’, the community comprises of a ‘group of people living in one place; especially one practising common ownership’.¹ At first glance, the two terms seem irreconcilable; for the existence of the community seemingly dissolves autonomy. David Aers, however, has highlighted their co-dependence, arguing that ‘individual experience cannot be understood apart from the social relations of a specific community’.² The notion of the individual as the product of their surroundings is not unfamiliar, and has endured from the medieval period to the present day. Attitudes toward this fact, however, have radically altered. In post-Enlightenment thought, the nonconformist outsider figure has commonly been prioritised to the extent where background influences become sidelined. In contrast, medieval works celebrate characters that are continually loyal and actively refer to the societies that produced and nurtured them. While today’s culture looks forward to and focuses on the outcome, medieval society looked back to reflect upon and celebrate the glory of history, suggesting that the community was more readily embraced in the medieval definition of the individual. The *Gawain*-poet himself embodies this notion of a ‘communal individual’, for his anonymity has left the scholar no choice but to sculpt his identity from the historical context of fourteenth-century England. When examining the poems of the Pearl Manuscript, the reader finds further evidence of the community’s power over the individual, which, it will be argued, is presented on two levels. On one level, there is the inner community within the narrative, and on another, there is the outer community, comprised of the text’s listeners or readers. While the two are distinct, parallels can be seen between them. Through a close examination of Jonah and Gawain in *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, respectively, it will be demonstrated that, for the *Gawain*-Poet, communal pressures shape individual identity.

In both *Patience* and *Sir Gawain*, the poet appeals to outer community by selecting protagonists familiar to his contemporaries. Jonah is instantly recognisable as the Old Testament prophet, and Gawain’s kinship to Arthur is exemplified in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*. In selecting well-known characters from popular texts, the poet clearly desires the audience to bring pre-formed expectations to his protagonists. In *Patience*, the reader thus anticipates the heroic, Christ-like Jonah of biblical narrative. What they encounter instead, however, is the disobedient, ‘janglande’ Jonah (l. 90)

¹ ‘Individual’: Oxford Reference Online: Premium:

http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SEARCH_RESULTS.html?q=individual&ssid=522987232&time=0.0038476532687568 Date Accessed: 06. 04. 2011;

‘Community’: Oxford Reference Online: Premium:

http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SEARCH_RESULTS.html?searchnumber=1&q=community&timelines=0&category=s7&scope=subject&ssid=678212418&filter_out=long Date Accessed: 06. 04. 2011.

² D. Aers, *Community, Gender and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430*, (London: Routledge, 1988) p. 4.

who sharply contrasts with expectation.³ For A. C. Spearing, the reader is thus constantly reminded of ‘the standard of which Jonah is so miserably falling short’ and this ‘belittle[s] him’.⁴ Such a contrast also makes the tale comic, for a profoundly flawed individual laughably replaces a hero. This tension between expectation and actuality is also explored in *Gawain*, but to different effect. Gawain differs from Jonah, because his characterisation comes closer to expectation, but the challenges he is faced with are unfamiliar. By connecting two familiar themes, the Beheading Game and the Temptation theme, the poet creates an unprecedented outcome. For Alan Markman, tension between hero and plot is commonplace in medieval romance, where ‘the character of the romance hero is known in advance, but his action and behaviour are not’.⁵ The unfamiliar action heightens the reader or listener’s affection for the familiar protagonist because the threat of uncertainty forces them to seek comfort in his stable reputation. This tension felt by the outer community is also reflected onto the inner, fictional community, for Gawain’s reputation dominates the other characters’ perceptions of him. When the Green Knight enters Arthur’s Court, he judges the figures present by their reputation, exclaiming, “What, is þis Arþures hous.../þat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?” (ll. 309-10) In the bedroom scenes, the lady repeatedly attempts to provoke Gawain by reminding him of his reputation, stating, “for I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wowen ȝe are,/þat alle þe worlde worchipeȝ; quereso ȝe ride” (ll. 1226-7). Furthermore, when Gawain meets the Green Knight for the final blow, he says, “þou art not Gawayn...þat is so goud halden...þat neuer arȝed for no here by hylle ne be vale” (ll. 2270-1). These examples illustrate that Gawain is subject to pressures not only from the community of listeners or readers, but also from his fellow characters. It is thus impossible for him to act as an individual in the modern sense, because his very personality is shaped by intertextuality and his knightly reputation.

The narrators of both *Patience* and *Gawain* are also portrayed in relation to a larger community. Although *Patience* is not exactly a sermon, it resembles one, and thus the reader or listener is inclined to view the tale’s narrator as a preacher-figure. Yet, the same narrator is also a member of the congregation, listening ‘on a halyday, at hyȝe masse’ (l. 9). He also demonstrates obedience to his social superiors, asking, ‘Oþer ȝif my lege lorde lyst on lyue me to bidde/Oþer to ryde oþer to renne to Rome in his ernde,/What grayþed me þe grychchyng bot grame more seche?’ (ll. 51-3) Here is narrator who prioritises his obligations to his community. By mentioning the Mass and anticipating a journey to Rome, he invokes the key symbols of Christian unity, the Eucharist and pilgrimage. For Ad Putter, these descriptions allow the narrator to show the relevance of the Bible to his own historical circumstances’, and thus perceive his life as part of a larger continuum of events.⁶ By connecting his own life to biblical themes, the narrator clearly desires for his individual existence to be subsumed into the larger, Christian community. The narrator of *Gawain*, too, seems keen to establish himself as part of a larger historical framework. He informs his listeners that he had ‘herde’ his tale circulated ‘with tonge’ in ‘toun’ (ll. 31-2) and furthers that ‘hit is stad and stoken/In stori stif and stronge’ (l. 34). The fact that this chronicle ‘in londe so hatz ben longe’ (l. 36) suggests that the tale belongs to a long historical tradition, and has thus been historically shared by communities of readers. In creating narrators who view themselves not in isolation, but as part of a historical tradition, the *Gawain*-poet encourages his readers to define these figures through their relations to a larger framework. By establishing this treatment of the individual from the outset, the poet is asking his readers

³ All quotations from the *Gawain*-poet are from M. Andrew and R. Waldron (eds.) *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007).

⁴ A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) p. 87.

⁵ A. M. Markman, ‘The Meaning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’, in *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. by R. J. Blanch, (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1966) pp. 159-175 (p. 168).

⁶ A. Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet*, (London: Longman, 1996) p. 22.

to anticipate the symbiotic relationship that will be formed between the individual and the community in the main body of *Patience* and *Gawain*.

The poet further explores the connection between the individual and the community through his use of space. In *Patience*, Jonah is depicted in three key spaces: the ship, the whale and the woodbine. These spaces literally separate him from the community he is ordained to help, the Ninevites. In the first of these spaces, the ship, Jonah has company, but, as Sarah Stanbury highlights, he is 'isolated from the sailors both by his choice of place and by his acts, namely, sleep'.⁷ Stanbury furthers that 'within the hold of the ship to Tarshish, Jonah becomes a figure of the alienated or despairing self', yet she also argues that the image of a boat with Christ as the helmsman is a popular metaphor for the Christian Church.⁸ By making these two points, Stanbury shows that although Jonah is physically separated from the sailors, he remains theoretically linked to the Old Testament community. The boat itself serves a liminal, transitional space, which removes Jonah from the stability of his natural human habitat: land. Although it is unlikely that Michel Foucault encountered *Patience*, his postmodern notion of heterotopia can be adopted to assist explanation here. A heterotopia is a real site which also acts as a counter-site, and for Foucault, the boat is a perfect example because it is 'a floating piece of space, a place without a place', that can juxtapose 'in a single space, several sites that are in themselves incompatible'.⁹ For Foucault, such liminal spaces are 'reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis'.¹⁰ Jonah, an individual in a state of crisis, is certainly at home in the heterotopic setting. Foucault implies that the heterotopia can only temporarily sustain the individual while they are encountering a transitional phase of development. If one considers that the boat, a temporary setting, is the space in which Jonah's aggressive individualism is explored, then setting serves to undermine character. To explain further, Jonah seeks isolation, but does so in a location characterised by impermanence and instability. His isolated state is rendered unsustainable because he is both literally and metaphorically deprived of a firm grounding. His movement into the whale allows this reasoning to be explored further. When the reader or listener follows Jonah into the whale's stomach, they are confronted with mixed metaphors. Jonah is like a 'mote in a munster dor' (l. 268) and comes to a compartment as 'brod as halle' (l. 272) yet the whale also 'stank as þe deuel' (l. 274) and 'sauoured as helle' (l. 275). Within the whale, contradictory and incompatible spaces co-exist, making it another example of a heterotopia. What such imagery also suggests, however, is that Jonah has begun to understand his isolation in communal terms. For Stanbury, these metaphors place Jonah's 'human drama within a larger Christian cycle of repentance and salvation', and this can be supported by the fact that both the 'munster' and 'helle' are typically depicted as shared spaces in Christian imagery.¹¹ Such language signifies Jonah's readiness to be re-integrated into the community, and thus he is released from the whale onto the ground of Nineveh.

The woodbine is also described in terms of a shared space 'for it was brod at þe boþem, boʒted on lofte/Happed vpon ayþer half, a hous as hit were'. (ll. 449-50) The term 'boʒted' in particular, again evokes imagery of a religious building, and would have undoubtedly reminded the contemporary listener or reader of the ceiling of their parish church. By using distinctly medieval terms to describe Jonah's experience, the poet also shows the applicability of Jonah's tale to the late medieval age, and thus asks his readers to incorporate Jonah's predicament into their own lives. By developing his original source, the

⁷ S. Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1991) p. 74.

⁸ Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet*, p. 75.

⁹ M. Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, Spring, (1986) 22-27 (p.27).

¹⁰ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24.

¹¹ Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet*, p. 81.

poet uses the boat, whale and woodbine to show that Jonah's desire to exist 'entirely within himself for himself' is unsustainable, and an inadequate alternative to the stability offered by the community.¹² Equally, by describing the spaces with metaphors familiar to his contemporary audience, the *Gawain*-poet allows his message to transgress the confines of the text to demonstrate the community's importance not only in fiction, but also in reality.

In *Gawain* the individual is celebrated as part of the courtly community. At the beginning of the tale, Arthur's court are shown publicly feasting in celebration of Christmas, which is significant considering David Aers' belief that 'religious festivals become reaffirmations of the community'.¹³ The poet clearly takes inspiration from Wace in his mention of the Round Table and describes how 'double on þe dece watz þe douth served' (l. 61). It is also described how Iwain 'ette with' Bishop Baldwin and how 'Dayntes dryen þerwyth of ful dere metes,/Foyssoun of þe fresche, and on so fele disches'/þat pine to fynde þe place þe peple biforne,/For to sette þe sylueren þat sere sewes halden/On clothe' (ll. 122-26). Eating is essential for survival, and thus in making the feast a central part of the courtly celebrations, the poet suggests that the community also offers nourishment. The fact that the Green Knight 'hales in at þe halle dor' (l. 136) just as 'þe fyrst cource in þe court [is] kyndely serued' (l. 135) is therefore greatly significant, because he not only threatens the activity of eating, but also the social unity signified by the act. After Gawain beheads the Green Knight, he hangs his axe upon the tapestry, 'þer alle men for meruayl myzt on hit loke' (l. 479). By making the axe a shared spectacle of the courtly community, Gawain is identifying that he beheaded the knight not for his own gain, but for the court's benefit. Gawain's body symbolises social unity, and the reader is reminded of this in his final meeting with the Green Knight. If the knight beheads Gawain, then the tale ends in failure, for as Mervyn James highlights, in medieval thought, 'natural body and social body...reacted on each other with a closeness which comes to near-identity. Thus actions which affected the social body reacted back on the physical body'.¹⁴ The fact that Green Knight merely 'snyrt [Gawain] on þat on syde, þat seuered þe hyde' (l. 2312) is highly symbolic, for it suggests that in taking the girdle, Gawain was almost severed (both literally and metaphorically) from the courtly community. The nick in his neck is a physical reminder of the dangers of selfishness, and thus Gawain's individual body comes to represent communal honesty and trust.

While Gawain is shown as a public figure in Arthur's court, the element of privacy is introduced in Bertilak's castle. After riding 'into a forest ful dep, þat ferly watz wylde,/Hyze hillez on vche a halue and holtwoldez vnder/Of hore okez ful hoge, a hundreth togeder' (ll. 741-43) Gawain welcomes the sight of Bertilak's abode. As Turville-Petre identifies, 'we must suspend our post-Romantic attachment to natural beauty and our distrust of artifice: Gawain experiences wild nature as threatening'.¹⁵ In the castle, Gawain meets a communal feast much like that of Arthur's castle, for 'seggez hym serued semly innoze/Wyth sere sewes and sete, sesounde of þe best,/Doublefelde, as hit fallez, and fele kyn fischez'. (ll. 888-90) Yet, within this residence, the poet develops beyond the public feast to explore the private sphere. After dinner the lord seizes Gawain for 'seme solace by himself stille' (l. 1085) foreshadowing the fact that he will later be tested in another private space: the bedroom. In each bedroom scene Gawain's individual endurance and 'trowthe' is being tested, yet the language he and the lady exchange is saturated with courtly values. On their first meeting, the lady describes how she will 'daly with derely [his] daynte wordes' (l. 1253) and later the

¹² T. Turville-Petre, 'Places of Imagination: The *Gawain*-Poet', in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. by E. Treharne, G. Walker and W. Green, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) pp. 594-608, (p. 598).

¹³ Aers, *Community*, p. 160.

¹⁴ M. James, 'Ritual, Drama and the Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town', *Past & Present*, 98 (Feb, 1983) 3-29 (pp. 6-7).

¹⁵ Turville-Petre, 'Places', p. 600.

poet describes how Gawain ‘cared for his cortaysye’ (l. 1773). Like Jonah, Gawain cannot understand his private experiences without reference to the community, and thus nurture overrides nature. For Spearing, Gawain’s courtly speech creates oppositions within the text, for a ‘key word...[he uses] is *vylanye*, for *vylanye* is the opposite of *cortaysye*; just as *cortaysye* means in one sense the polite behavior appropriate to a courtly person, so *vylanye* means the offensive behavior appropriate to a...peasant’.¹⁶ However, the two terms are not as irreconcilable as Spearing might think. The knight speaks in courtly language because he is loyal to his community, but ‘villein’ is also indicative of human bonds, those between peasant and lord. Therefore, although Gawain uses seemingly juxtaposed terms, the two have one central component in common, they signify communal obligation. After each bedroom ‘test’, the kisses that Gawain receives privately from the lady are always ‘pertly payed’ (l. 1941) to the lord after the hunt. Even the girdle, an undergarment and personal object usually concealed from the public gaze, eventually becomes a symbol of the community. Aers argues that by the end of the poem, ‘the girdle supersedes the Pentangle as Gawain’s emblem’, and this replacement is largely related to the question of identity.¹⁷ The knight’s original emblem, the Pentangle, is pre-established sign already invested with values (and associated with Solomon) before it is impressed upon Gawain’s shield. In this respect, it is a public or communal symbol that has been personalised. The girdle, by contrast, is a private object, which then becomes a symbol of Arthur’s court, for each member of the Round Table decides to wear ‘a bende abelef hym aboute, of a bryzt grene’ (l. 2517). At the start of the narrative, a public symbol is made private, yet by the end of the poem, a private symbol becomes public. This reversal suggests the fluidity of exchange between the individual and the community, and shows that Arthur’s court share in Gawain’s experience despite their physical separation from him. Aers is somewhat sceptical of Gawain’s reintegration into the court, arguing that the poem ‘does not show Gawain being ‘reincorporated’ at its conclusion: it gives...no indication of his responses’.¹⁸ However, the poet’s choice to vocalise the court whilst silencing Gawain surely indicates prioritisation of the community over the individual. As Spearing identifies, ‘when the court determines that henceforward they will all wear the green baldric, they are...reminding [Gawain] that he is not alone in his imperfection...[and] are preventing him from being the outstanding figure he wishes to be’.¹⁹ Structurally, Gawain’s return to court makes the poem cyclical, offering the reader a satisfactory sense of completion. Yet one element has changed: Gawain now gives back to the community that sustained him, for although he took the Pentangle, he now offers the community a new symbol, the green baldric. For the poet, the exchange between the individual and the community is ever-present, and each sustains the other.

Overall, it is clear that for the *Gawain*-poet, the relationship between the individual and the community comprises of a two-way exchange. The poet exploits his message to full effect, emphasising the importance of not only his textual community, but also the community of readers. Jonah and Gawain are connected to both outer and inner communities through their reputations, and find themselves thinking in communal terms even when they are physically isolated from public spaces. By blurring the boundaries of private and public, the poet heralds a concept of the individual as the product of their community, and emphasises the importance of loyalty and companionship in a way that may seem alien to the modern reader surrounded by egocentric desires.

¹⁶ A. C. Spearing, ‘Gawain’s Speeches and the Poetry of “Cortaysye”’, in *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by D. R. Howard and C. Zacher, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) pp. 174-181 (p. 174).

¹⁷ D. Aers, ‘Christianity for Courtly Subjects: Reflections on the *Gawain*-Poet’, in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. by D. Brewer and J. Gibson, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) pp. 91-101 (p. 95).

¹⁸ Aers, *Community*, p. 175.

¹⁹ Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, p. 230.

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