



How far do you consider that the literary qualities and characteristics of *Pearl* and *Patience* support the view that they were written by the same poet as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?

Oliver Small

The question of common authorship is one that has dogged the critical debate surrounding MS Cotton Nero AX for decades, exasperating commentators and literary researchers alike in their various attempts to win the argument, or else put the query to bed altogether by discounting its necessity. This essay will not point towards any grand theory of solution but discuss the form, style, symbolism and meaning of the poems (particularly *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain* and to a lesser extent, *Patience*) in light of the question, and with regard to some of the critical responses to it. The aim is to clarify the textual evidence in a literary-critical way and to demonstrate how much of that that evidence indeed supports the hypothesis of a single poet.

Each poem in the manuscript has a distinctive shape, with internal patterns of varying rigidity and intricacy; although undoubtedly individual in this way, in certain respects the poems contain echoes of each other in their construction. *Pearl* is perhaps the most formally complex of the poems, its 101 stanzas of 12 lines each amassing 1212 lines altogether; the numbers in their symmetry and suggestiveness of allusion are clearly anything but arbitrary. The number twelve has numerous Biblical representations and significances, not least there being twelve Apostles, twelve legions of angels (Matt 26:53), and twelve tribes of Israel (Exodus). Even the age at which Jesus first publicly appeared was twelve, according to Luke (2:42). The number twelve, unsurprisingly, is most prominent in the book of the Bible which serves to be the poet's main source of theological interest: the Book of Revelations (or Apocalypse), in which out of its 187 Biblical mentions, 22 are numbered. In Revelations the measurement of the New Jerusalem will be 12,000 furlongs square (a number which the *Pearl*-poet revises to 12 furlongs in l. 1030), while its four walls will be 144 (12 x 12) cubits long, twelve gates set in three of those walls. The poet's own reflection of this description serves as a kind of climax of the poem's numerical-structural thesis (l. 1023-32).

As Otis Chapman has pointed out, the number twelve does not just show up in the number of lines, its factors proliferate the structure of the poem and its most basic level: the twelve lines of each stanza are governed by three rhymes (paye, pere, yot (stanza 1)), each line containing four stresses with most of the lines alliterating on three words or four.¹ So the perfection of the number twelve may never be elucidated by speech in the poem, but the significance the poet gives to it is manifest in the poem's formal features.

The poet's carefully sustained form in reflection of this numerical symbol is reflective of a similar interest in the number five as a sign of perfection and circularity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The pentangle on Gawain's shield represents, we are told, the five virtues of chivalry, the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of the Virgin, as well as

¹ C. Otis Chapman, *An Index of Names in the Pearl-poet's works* (California: Cornell Press, 1952), p. 65

Gawain's five full senses and 'fingers'. But its deeper symbolic significance is in the emphasis the poet places on the shape and formation of the pentangle, as 'þe endeles knot' (l. 630). The varying lengths of stanza in *Gawain* are always concluded by the five-line 'bob and wheel', which in its 'endeles' patterning, gives repeated emphasis to the unity of the five. Furthermore, R.G. Arthur points out that the number five signaled circularity in medieval numerical theory, since it 'reproduces itself in its last digit when raised to its powers'.² This notion of circularity points to the clearest parallel in terms of numerical structure between *Pearl* and *Gawain*, in their number of stanzas: both 101. Brian Stone notes that the number one hundred and one is significant in that it is a prime number which contains the number of unity (and so God), the number one, in it twice.³ However, in light of the fact that the two poems' dominant symbols are of roundedness and eternity, a more thematically based interpretation of this choice is possible too. In its reaching and exceeding of a 'round number', the number 101 undoubtedly suggests the completion of a cycle and a new beginning, capturing the 'roundness' of the pearl, the never-ending quality of the pentagon and the circularity of the narrative of both poems which can be found in the 'concatenation' technique.

Although *Pearl*'s system of concatenation is more dense and intricate, *Gawain* also has a way of 'linking back', namely in that its last line (l. 2525, before the final bob and wheel) is closely reflective of its first. In both *Pearl* and *Gawain*, the protagonist, having been through a trial (for the dreamer of faith, for *Gawain* of courage and courtesy) reaches a new stage. The dreamer 'returns' to Earth from his heavenly vision just as *Gawain* returns to Camelot, but as the lines at the end are altered from the beginning, so are the protagonists. *Gawain* feels he has, by his own standards, failed to enact the courtesy appropriate to a knight of the round table. He has learned about the difficulty in compromising between chivalric codes of behaviour. The dreamer now knows more about divine grace and salvation but at the cost of acceptance that he must live out his life without his pearl and without the former self-pity of his mourning.

This linking back technique and moreover the matching number of stanzas in both poems stand as composite evidence for the existence of a singular poet. Not only does it reflect a literary predilection for numerical symbolism that is manifest in a structural fastidiousness, a consistency and relish for detail but it throws into light the similarities of the essential nature of the symbolic elements of the pearl and the pentangle. Their everlasting natures and purity in form are shown to be not only thematic but structural elements of the poetry, and this act of dual representation on such a scale as illustrated must, in my view, be peculiar to an individual creative mind.

D.S. Brewer has also argued for the theory of common authorship from the vantage point of the integer between structure and theme, positing the argument that each of the four poems has the 'same general pattern' in that 'passionate, selfish desire is met and controlled'.⁴ I find Brewer's assessment of the transition the protagonists go through to be problematic when we consider *Pearl* and *Gawain* independently of *Patience*, the latter poem being one that more readily matches Brewer's description. The dreamer in *Pearl* has had his judgment and reason clouded by grief, so much so that he borders on being reproachful when he discovers his pearl to be a Queen of Heaven, but this is not to say his persistent mourning and lack of understanding of religious doctrine is 'selfish'. With regard to *Gawain*, I refer to W.A. Davenport, who points out that in the fierce critical debate around the question of common author, it is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* which has suffered the worst

² R. G. Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Michigan: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 34

³ B. Stone, *Chaucer* (N.Y.: Penguin, 1987), p. 219

⁴ D. S. Brewer, 'The Gawain Poet; A General Appreciation of Four Poems', *Essays in Criticism*, No. 17 (1967), pp. 130-142 (p. 131)

manipulation in order to be ‘shown’ to be a similar poem to the others. Repeatedly distorted to fit the same thematic template as the religious poems in the manuscript, it has ‘been characterised as an exemplary narrative [...] a moral case-history, a punishment of pride and moral taint’.⁵ Gawain is not a revelatory religious parable, it is a secular romance and its hero has little to no correlation with the figure Brewer describes as common to all four poems in the manuscript. It is Gawain’s *un*-selfishness in taking on the Green Knight’s beheading game for Arthur that catapults him into the challenges he later faces. And rather than having to repress ‘passionate desire’ in the bedroom scenes, Gawain’s primary concern is juggling the apparently contradictory obligations of chivalric courtesy to which he is loyal: chasteness, and absolute politeness to a lady.

A.C. Spearing similarly attempts a characterisation of the central common experience that unites the poems under the same hypothetical author’s banner. In his words: the poems show ‘man confronted and baffled by a non-human power’.⁶ Whilst this is true in that neither of the protagonists’ crises is directly attributable to a non-divine/magical personage, Spearing’s summation seems to be too applicable to medieval literature in general and more importantly, lacking in the identification of specific and subtle traits that might be indicative of authorship, rather than signs of imitation.

One of these traits is the seclusion, even enclosure in which the poet portrays his heroes residing at various points. Jonah finds himself alone and shut out from life in the dank underworld of the whale’s belly; the dreamer starts his narrative in the heady mutably natural environ of the burial garden and Gawain’s crucial moment of seclusion and enclosure is his experience on consecutive nights in the bedroom, where he must face the challenge of dealing courteously with the lady of the castle. In each case, the protagonist would rather remain alone in the privacy of their isolation: Jonah does not want to face the Ninevites, the dreamer would rather not have to accept his pearl is beyond mortal grasp and certainly Gawain would not choose to be put under the pressure of having to manage such counter currents of responsibility and feeling. But each time their seclusion is disrupted, for Gawain it is disrupted three times! The poet’s tendency is to foreground comfortable or escapist solitude, and to bend the narrative to impinge upon it in order to test the mettle of the hero.

Stylistically, the poems all display what Brewer calls a ‘zest for technical details of all kinds’;⁷ these are most clear in the hunting and breaking of the deer scenes in *Gawain* and the sea-faring descriptions of *Patience*, which show an uncommon resemblance in their observational and technological exactitude:

‘Gederen to þe gyde-ropes, þe grete cloþ falles’ (*Patience*, l. 105)
 ‘þen brek þay þe balé, þe bowelez out token’ (*Gawain*, l. 1332)

In *Pearl*, the ‘poetry of technology’ is not so evident but physical detail is reserved for the architectural and decorative descriptions, reflecting scripture, of the New Jerusalem, especially in terms of the adornment appropriately noticed by the ‘jeuler’:

‘þe topasye twynne-hew þe nente endent;
 þe cryspase þe tenþe is tyzt;’ (*Pearl*, l. 1012-13)

As Brewer argues, each instance of this poetry of rich detail and technicality is carefully specific to its subject matter, building on the complex system of the poem’s symbolic fabric: Gawain’s position is reflected in the figures of hunter and hunted; the preciousness of gems is

⁵ W. A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain-Poet* (London: Athlone, 1978), p. 5

⁶ A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain Poet A Critical Study* (Cambridge: CUP, 1970), p. 32

⁷ Brewer, p. 134

transposed from the garden of mortality into the Kingdom of Heaven, where the jewels glitteringly exhibit the glory of salvation.

A further underlying echo throughout these poems can be seen in the spiritual experiences of the protagonists, manifest in their physical and emotional tribulations; Brewer notices an enthusiasm for the description of the ‘roughness of experience’.⁸ The harshness of the winter in Gawain’s journey across the Wirral is conducted with same zesty descriptive spirit as the tempestuousness of Jonah’s storm; both make full use of the phono-aesthetics allowed for by alliterative long line to evoke the battering of the elements:

‘þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadde’ (*Gawain*, l. 727)
 ‘wawes ful wode waltered so hiȝe’ (*Patience*, l. 142)

Even the swooning grief of the ‘jeuler’ is climactic in its sense of drama: ‘I slode vpon a slepyng-slaȝte’ (*Pearl*, l. 59). But the real connection between these experiences is not the relishing maltreatment of his heroes by the poet, but his philosophy behind how to deal with the blows life deals out. The pearl maiden tells the dreamer: ‘þou moste abyde þat He schal deme’ (*Pearl*, l. 348), an acceptance of fate: both good and ill, lends a life-affirming facet to this interest in harshness. Jonah asks reluctantly: ‘What grayped me þe grychyng bot grame more seche?’ (*Patience*, l. 53), his tale is an exemplum of the need to take on life’s tough challenges without complaint, and much of Gawain’s virtuousness is rooted in his hardiness, a spiritually derived capacity for endurance against grave odds: ‘Nade he ben duȝty and dryȝe and Drȝtyn and serued/ Doubteles he hade ben ded’ (*Gawain*, l. 724-5). What unites the poet’s interest in these instances is the need to take ‘the rough with the smooth’,⁹ to accept life’s challenges stoically and to move on from them spiritually enhanced.

I find one of the most convincing arguments for common authorship to lead on from this noting of the blending of harshness with positivity by the poet. It is the sometimes unexpected and testy humour the poet exerts in contrast with the turbulent experiences of the characters. Jonah shows amusing petulance in his conversations with God; in *Pearl* there is the poking of fun at fatherly obtuseness in the dreamer’s disbelief that the pearl maiden could be a Queen of Heaven (a countess maybe!); Gawain’s innocent affectation of sleep to avoid disappointing the lady is humorous for its role reversal and the sheer awkwardness felt by the reader/listener for *Gawain*. As Brewer notes, the humour in all three of these poems ‘is rarely sarcastic and never satirical’;¹⁰ it gently exposes naiveté rather than caustically showing up ignorance and pride. It enjoys in the fallibility of its participants rather than criticises the victims of social satire. This unity in sense of humour may simply be distinctive in its separation from the metropolitan cutting irony of London’s poetry, such as that of Chaucer. However if we take into account the roots of this humour as pertaining to my previous argument about the life-affirming nature of the poems’ message, it seems more likely to be part of an individual poet’s didactic aims rather than merely a mode of humour which is geographically locatable.

My final point of argument for the theory of common authorship draws upon the complexity and indefinability of symbols in *Pearl* and *Gawain*. Symbolism in these poems is not straightforward, not easy to decode and classify, rather the symbolic natures of the pearl, the pentangle and the colour green especially show themselves to be relatable to different instances and significant in ways that do not necessarily match up neatly but nevertheless attest to their potency in the way they give shape and power to the verse. One instance in

⁸ Brewer, p. 134

⁹ Ibid., p. 137

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 133

particular shows the transposable nature of the symbol of the pearl, when it is used by Bertilak to commend the chivalry and grace of Gawain. Perhaps this connotes a similar virtuousness of Gawain to the pearl maiden; I think it more likely however that the echo of this symbol says something more about the unity of form in the chivalric code to the perfect roundness of the pearl in its eponymous poem. The ‘gentyl’ courtesy Gawain has shown is being balanced to the same weight as the divine grace and courtesy of the saved in *Pearl*’s New Jerusalem.

Like many of literature’s great symbols: Conrad’s heart of darkness, Lawrence’s arc of the rainbow and Murdoch’s drowned bell, the pearl and the colour green cannot be defined in terms of any specific abstraction¹¹ but their power and significance is none the less for that. The pearl stands above all for something of unquantifiable value and purity and the greenness of the knight hints at otherworldliness and temptation. Perhaps above everything else, it is the symbolism in these poems that convinces me of the *singular* fineness of this poet; the complex and inscrutable mingling with the unmistakably affecting.

Stylistic data analysis has also been offered as evidence for common authorship, the periphrases for God across the different poems being a dominant piece of evidence put forward. Synonyms, which have a humanising effect on the figure of God, have been seen as peculiar to the Gawain poet. Similarly, Cooper and Pearsall have made headway in the argument by demonstrating the similarity in distribution of function words throughout the works.¹² While this sort of linguistic data analysis points towards useful areas for observation, I would hold that statistical analysis may be just as open to fault as critical interpretive evidence, if not more so. Literature is after all not data to be downloaded, calculated and condensed into a concluding ‘answer’, a feel for the writer(s)’ work is to be achieved by the discerning human reader, who is able to pick up on subtle correlations of style, meaning and literary preference as only a fellow psychological being can do. I hope this essay has gone some way in achieving that end.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and *Pearl* are separate and distinct poems. Where the former is a secular exploration of manners and society, set against a backdrop of chivalric quest, the latter is an ornamental and theological debate on the differences between earthly and heavenly value. The differences should not be neglected for the sake of convenience to the argument; in fact it would be illogical to do so, because they make us as readers look for the unconscious relationships between the poems, which would give us clues to common authorship rather than simply highlight correlates, which could no more than evidences of imitation. Those unconscious traits, this essay has attempted to demonstrate, are indeed there.

¹¹ Spearing, p. 34

¹² Pearsall & Cooper, ‘The Gawain Poems: A Statistical Approach to the Question of Common Authorship’, *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 39, No. 155 (Aug., 1988), pp. 365-385

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