

**North: The Significance of a Compass Point in “Sir  
Gawain and the Green Knight” and some other  
Medieval English Literature**

by  
**Michael Murphy**

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## **North: The Significance of a Compass Point in Some Medieval English Literature**

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the hero, like many another knight, sets out on a quest. In a couple of interesting ways, however, this quest journey is different from others in medieval romance: we know with some precision in which direction the hero is going — North; and we know the precise time of year — between All Hallows (November 1) and Christmas. We know the direction because we are told the names of places that Gawain passes and in what order, names that remain to this day: North Wales, Anglesey, Holy Head (though this is not the modern Holyhead), and the Wirral. The information that Gawain is going North in the winter is not merely stated and abandoned; the loneliness and discomfort of the journey through a bleak winter countryside are emphasized in two or three stanzas that embody some of the most memorable natural description in medieval English literature (II, st. 911). This is not the never-never season of most medieval romance, in which events, whether they are indoor feasts or outdoor quests and jousts, take place in a sort of perpetual spring-summer. The country through which Gawain rides is, by strong contrast, the bare, gnarled countryside of a northern land in winter.

This unusually precise depiction of time and space leads one to ask whether Gawain's northern journey simply means that he is taking on an unusually difficult quest by going to the coldest part of the country at the coldest time of the year, or whether the emphasized direction has some significance beyond that. I think, perhaps, it does; and that the significance is related to medieval associations with North.

Many years ago Walter Skeat drew attention to a passage in *Piers Plowman* where Langland refers to an ancient association between the rebel archangel Lucifer and the North. Holy Church is recounting the story of the Fall of the Angels:

Lucifer lovelekest tho ac lytel while it dured.  
 He was an archangel of hevene on of Godes knyghtes .  
 He and other with hym that hulde nought with truthe, -  
 Lopen out in lothliche forme for hus false wille;  
 He hadde lust to be lyke hus lord god almyghty.  
*Ponam pedem meum in aqua i/one, et ero similis altissimo.* -  
 Lord! why wolde he tho thulke wrechede Lucifer,  
 Lepen aloft in the north side  
 Than sitten in the sonne side ther the day roweth?  
 Ne were it for northerne men a-non ich wolde telle;  
 “Ac ich wolle lacke no lyf” quath that lady sothly;  
 “Hit is sykerer by southe ther the sonne regneth  
 Than in the north by meny notes no man leve other.  
 For thider as the fiend flegh hus fote for to sette  
 There he failed and ful and hus felawes alle;  
 And helle is ther he ys, and he ther ybounde.  
 Evene contrarie sitteth Criste clerkus knowen the sothe:  
 They care nought thaub **it** he cold knaves, when thei worchen.  
 In wonderwyse holy wryt tellith how thei fullen;  
 Somme in erthe, somme in aier somme in helle dupe,  
 Ac Lucifer lowest lith of hem alle.

(C Text, Passus 11, 106-122)

Skeat’s notes point out that in many works of medieval English literature wherever the fall of Lucifer is mentioned there is often also a mention of his taking up a position in the North.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he notes that this association of Lucifer with the North has a venerable ancestry, dating back to the prophet Isaiah:

“How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer... for thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation in the sides of the North . . . I will be like the Most High.” (XIV, 12-14)

Jewish tradition noted this biblical association between Lucifer and the North, and, as A L Kellogg has pointed out, the early Fathers of Church had commented on it; by medieval times it had become something of a commonplace.<sup>2</sup> As early as the OE *Genesis* for example, there are a couple of references to Satan's connection with the North or North West (275 and 667). The medieval stage plan for the *Castle of Perseverance* shows the castle of Belial on the North side. The devil in Chaucer's *Friar's Tale* comes from "fer in the north countree" (D.1413). This tradition persisted well into the Renaissance: a character in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, pt.I* refers to the prince of devils as "the lordly monarch of the north" (V, iii, 6) and Satan's connection with the North is mentioned at least four times in **Paradise Lost** (V, 688-9, 725-6, 755-60; VI, 79).

All of these citations seem to derive eventually from the passage in Isaiah or to commentaries on it; but Jacob Grimm and Francis Gummere after him note a very similar association between North and Hell which is derived in all probability from Germanic mythology. "Scandinavian belief," says Gummere, "placed its gods in the North, whither the devout Norseman always turned when he prayed.... Since the Christians looked eastward in prayer, the north was regarded as the place of devils.... Hel's kingdom lay in the north; and there dwelt for later and converted Norsemen the devil and his crew. This was a Germanic belief for the A. S *Genesis* affirms the same thought." Gummere was aware of the biblical association of North with devil but chose to prefer his own explanation for the pejorative association. It is certainly true that we do get our word for the infernal regions from the Germanic word. The kingdom of the goddess Hel is both North and down, though it lacks the association with punishment for sin that is essential to the Christian idea of Hell.<sup>3</sup>

One other source not cited by Skeat has considerable interest here. Frederick Klaeber and others have pointed out the possible relevance of a passage in one of the *Blickling Homilies* to the description of Grendel's mere in **Beowulf**.<sup>4</sup> In Morris's translation it goes thus: "As St Paul was looking towards the northern region of the

earth, from whence all waters pass down, he saw above the water a hoary stone; and north of the stone had grown woods very rimy. And there were dark mists; and under the stone was the dwelling place of monsters and execrable creatures.” I find the similarity of this scene to the winter countryside that Gawain traverses on his northern journey and to the scene of his final encounter even more striking than its resemblance to the environs of Grendel’s mere.

A couple of other passages in the same homily, not cited by Klaeber, strengthen this impression of similarity. At one point the preacher is describing the site which was finally hallowed by the building of a church to St Michael: “The knoll was then known as it now is — the hill is large on the outside; and here and there it is overgrown with rimy wood; the other parts are covered with green pasture. ... There was no man, however, who durst ever come into the church at night time”<sup>5</sup> (p.206). The reader will remember the features of scenes in **SGGK** reminiscent of both these passages: the mist-hakel huge, the dreary woods, the rushing water, the monstrous man, the green knoll referred to as a chapel which faces him at journey’s end:

Hit hade a hole on the ende and on ayther  
syde, And ouergrowen with gresse in glodes  
aywhere, And all watz hollow inwith, nobut  
an olde cave, Or a crevisse of an olde cragge,  
He couthe hit noght deme with spelle.  
‘We! Lorde,’ quoth be gentyle knyght,  
‘Whether this be be grene chapelle?  
Here myght aboute mydnyght  
The dele his matynnes telle!

‘Now iwysse,’ quoth, Wowayn, ‘wysty is here;  
This oritore is vgly, with erbez ouergrowen;  
Wel bisemez the wyghe wruxled in grene  
Dele here his deuocioun on the deuelez wyse.  
Now I fele hit is the fende, in my fyue wyttetz,  
That hath stoken this steuen to strye me here.

This a chapel of meschaunce, that chekke hit bytyde!

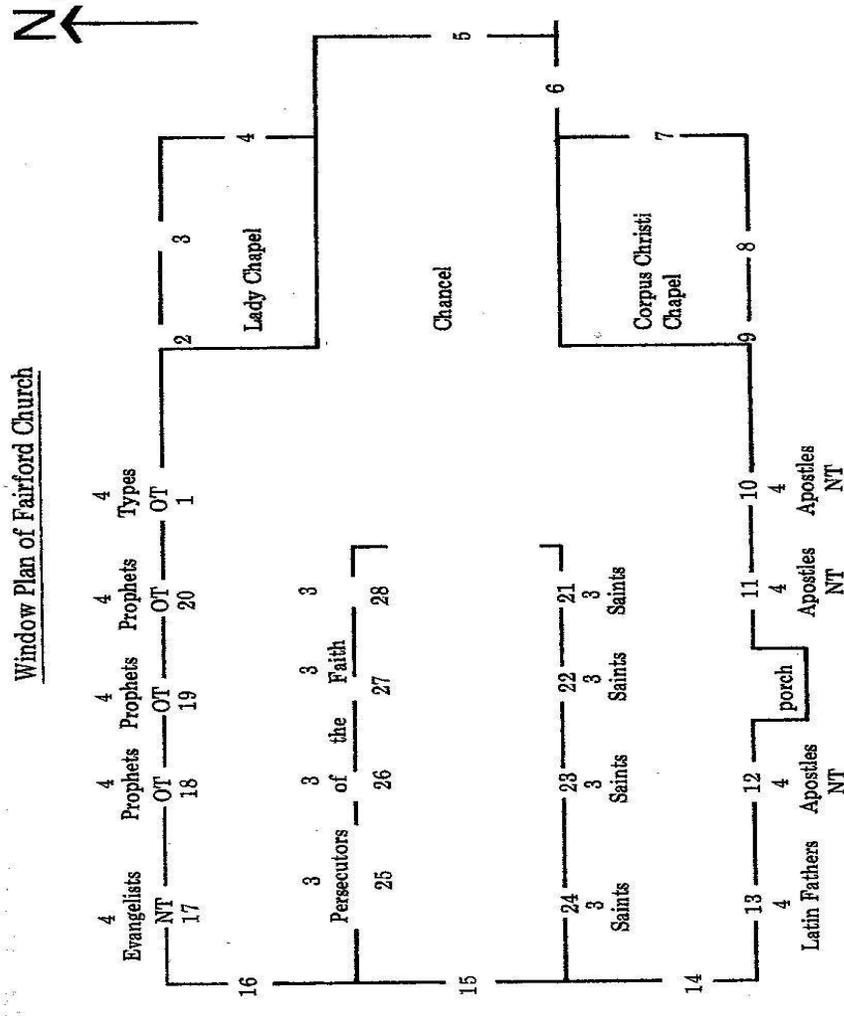
Hit is the corsesdest kyrk that euer I com inne!’<sup>6</sup>

This is not to say or imply, of course, that the author of **SGGK** knew either **Blickling** or **Beowulf** but to suggest that the environs of the medieval Hell had certain features in common with the homes of monsters, and that North was the place for both. <sup>7</sup>

Enough evidence has now been presented, I think, to show that whatever its origin, there is in medieval English literature a well-known association between the northern and the diabolical. But there was another pejorative association with the North in the Middle Ages. Emile Mâle has shown that medieval church architecture often reflects the frequent relationship in the ecclesiastical mind between North and Synagogue on the one hand, and between South and Holy Church on the other. That is, North represents the failure of the Jews to recognize the truth of the Christian religion or it represents the Old Law which prefigured but yielded to the New Law. The figure representing Synagogue is placed on the North side of the church door or on the North side of the church itself. She is sometimes very lovely, but wears a blindfold or carries some symbol of lost power such as a broken staff or a tumbling crown. <sup>8</sup>

This kind of typological representation is not, of course, specifically English. Indeed Mâle draws his examples from French and German churches. I have made no investigation of how far his generalisation holds true for English churches and cathedrals. I can, however, adduce *one* piece of evidence which indicates that North-South opposition was observed when typological scenes appeared in English church windows. In the parish church of Fairford in Gloucestershire there is a famous set of stained-glass windows depicting scenes and personalities from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and post-apostolic times. The simplified plan below indicates how the windows are arranged.<sup>9</sup> Those in the Lady chapel, the chancel and the Corpus Christi chapel deal with incidents in the lives of Jesus and his Mother. On the west side the three windows deal with Judgement. What concerns us here principally, however, are the windows in the north and

south aisles, and the north and south sides of the nave. It will be readily seen that these are placed in a planned and ordered way.



The outside windows in the walls of the northern aisle (with one exception) deal with OT figures (17-20 and 1); their opposite numbers in the south aisle with NT or early Christian figures (10-13). Similarly, the four windows on the north side of the nave depict various persecutors of the faith in NT and later times (25-28); the southside windows show their opposites, the Christian saints (21-24).

There is one flaw in the neatness of the arrangement — the presence of the four Evangelists in a window of the north wall. As NT figures they clearly belong with the groups of

Apostles on the south wall. Someone, it seems, miscalculated, probably forgetting that the porch on the south took up the space of at least one window, so that there are five windows on the north side and four on the south. Thus there is one NT window too many or one OT window too few; even if the Evangelists window were moved to where the porch is, there is no OT window to take its place. Nevertheless, the general pattern is clear. The North represents prefiguration or rejection of the faith; the South its fulfillment.

Further evidence for the significance of North in connection with churches has been cited by Gottfried Storms, who points out that medieval churches were rather consistently built on the north side of villages in both England and the Continent. He speculates that “the church had to serve as a protection against evil spirits and devils coming out of the northern hell.” Moreover, on the northern sides of churches the suicides and the unbaptized were buried.<sup>10</sup>

There is still a third association with North in the Middle Ages, this time specifically English. For Englishmen of the period there was a real distinction between the North and the South of their country both as to people and to place. Many southerners then (as now to some degree) regarded the North with combined distaste and amusement. The place was cold and wild, and its inhabitants outlandish, uncivilised yokels who muttered a ridiculous version of English. One of the bestknown expressions of this attitude is a passage in John Trevisa’s translation of the

*Polychronicon* of Ranulph Higden:

*Al the longage of the Northumbres, and specialych at York ys so scharp, slyttying and frotyng, and unschape, that we Southeron men may that longage unnethe [scarcely] undurstonde. Y trowe [I think] that that ys bycause that a buth nygh [they are near] to strange men and aliens that speketh strangelych, and also bycause that the kyneges of Engelond woneth [live] alwey fer fram that contray: For a buth[they are] more y-turnd to the south contray; and yef a goth [if they go] to the north contray, a goth with gret help and strengthe.<sup>11</sup>*

Now, there are a number of interesting things about this passage, very familiar to many from anthologies of medieval verse and prose. First, it is a late fourteenth century translation into English by John Trevisa of Cornwall from an earlier thirteenth century Latin Chronicle by Ranulph Higden of Chester, which is itself a direct borrowing from an early twelfth century history also in Latin, written by William of Malmesbury in 1125.<sup>12</sup> So the linguistic sentiment expressed in the quoted passage was already two and a half centuries old when Trevisa put it into English in 1385 around the time when Chaucer was writing his *Tales*, Langland *Piers Plowman*, and the *Gawain* poet his masterpiece. I say “sentiment” advisedly because feeling is much more in evidence than objective description. To say of northern speech, as William does, that “we southerners can understand none of it” (ut nichil nos australes intelligere possimus) may express something close to the truth in both the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. To account for the difficulty by claiming that the language of the Northumbrians was “gratingly uncouth” (inconditum stridet) is to express nothing more than the prejudice of a man who accepts as civilised only the accents of his own dialect.<sup>13</sup> It is evident that Malmesbury’s testimony is for the historian and the sociologist, and not for the descriptive linguist though nobody should have any doubt that there was indeed, as there still is, a very noticeable difference between the speech of southerners and that of northerners.

Moreover, one historian has amply demonstrated that the nonlinguistic differences were longstanding and deep. A. B. Emden gives a very circumstantial account of the North-South polarity as it existed at the University of Oxford from the beginning, where the whole administration was coloured by a keen awareness of the dichotomy and an open provision for it. One of the two proctors, for example, had to be a northerner, and “there were as many as 34 University offices that were subject to this territorial basis of appointment.”<sup>14</sup> The outbreaks of dissension “inter australes et boreales” [between southerners and northerners] were frequent, often violent, and sometimes murderous; and they involved not merely rowdy undergraduates, but sometimes Fellows of Colleges or heads of Halls. The statutes of some colleges warned their Fellows to avoid slurs about “australes, aquilonares seu boreales.” There were secessions and rebellions in the conflict, and in one of these John Trevisa was prominently involved.

Queen’s College, where Trevisa was a Fellow in the 1370s, had been founded principally for

men from the counties of Cumberland and Westmorland, both in Northumbria. In Trevisa's time, however, the college had accepted quite a number of Fellows from the South West. In 1376 the Fellows elected a new Provost who was a northerner. Trevisa and his southern colleagues refused to accept him, and elected an "anti-Provost." It was several years before they were compelled to submit under severe pressure from the Archbishop of York and the king's chancellor.<sup>15</sup>

So it was perhaps with some glee that Trevisa wrote that the language of the Northumbrians was "scharp, slitting and frotting and unschape", a fairly enthusiastic rendering of "stridet incondita". Caxton reproduced the derogatory adjectives unchanged in his edition of 1482. The commentators tell us that the *Polychronicon* in English or Latin had a long period of popularity extending well into the sixteenth century, so that Malmesbury's disparaging comments about northern speech had a long life both in his own book and in one or other version of Higden's.

But why does Higden, apparently a northerner, reproduce the aspersions of Malmesbury? (He merely reduces "nichil . . . intelligere possimus": we cannot understand them *at all* to "vix intelligere possimus": we can *scarcely* understand them.) Higden was a monk of St Werburg's in Chester, a city very close to the Wirral mentioned in *SGGK*, and not far from the probable dialect area of the *Gawain* poet. A monk of Chester might of course be a native of the south of England, but what evidence there is suggests that Higden was a native of Cheshire. So by both modern and medieval standards he was a northerner. Why then does he reproduce even the phrase "nos australes" (we southerners)? One answer might be that Higden is simply a slavish user of his sources. Another, of course, is that even if Cheshire was northern by both our standards and Chaucer's, it was certainly not Northumbrian. York is well north of Chester, and many people lived far north of Higden in England, let alone in Scotland. It is quite possible, therefore, that he could think of himself as a southerner, regarding the North as uncouth, except that in his case North would mean "north of us" or "in Northumbria". It was perhaps easier to consider oneself among the "australes" when one was writing Latin. By contrast, the *Gawain* poet had to be very aware—and presumably proud—of the northernness of his vernacular writing. Further evidence of the attitude of southerners to northerners in England is found in a vigorous passage in *The Owl and the*

*Nightingale*, a distinctly southern production of the thirteenth century, where the Nightingale is unambiguously and even eloquently abusive about the North. The Owl asks why her opponent does not sing in foreign lands such as Ireland, Scotland, Norway and Galloway (907 ff). The Nightingale's response is a torrential shower of abuse of everything connected with the North (995 ff). To be sure Ireland is included in the general assault, and Ireland is not North of England. But it has always been a convenient target for a round of abuse by Englishmen, and pedantic geographic objections are not allowed to get in the way. Those unspeakable northern places are barbaric because they are northern; Ireland, I suppose, is barbaric because she cannot help it. Here is what the Nightingale says about these awful lands:

995 3ut thu aisheist wi ich ne fare

into other londe & singe thare?

No! wat sholde ich among hom do,

thar neuer blisse no com to?

that lond nis god, ne hit nis este,

1000 ac wildernisse hit is & weste:

knarres & cludes houen[e]-tinge,

snou & hagel hom is genge.

That lond is grislich & unuele,

The men both wilde & unisele,

1005 hi nabbeth nother grith ne sibbe:

hi ne reccheth hu hi libbe.

Hi eteth fish an flehs unsode,

suich wulues hit hadde tobrode:

hi drinketh milc & wei tharto,

1010 hi nute elles Jat hi do:

hi nabbeth nother win ne bor,

ac libbeth al so wilde dor:

hi goth bitight id roughe uelle,  
 right suich hi comen ut of helle.  
 1015 Thegh eni god man to hom come,  
 so wile dude sum from Rome,  
 for hom to lere gode thewes,  
 an for to leten hore unthewes,  
 he mighte bet sitte stille,  
 1020 vor al his wile he sholde spille:  
 he mighte bet teche ane bore  
 to we3e boje sheld & spere,  
 Than me that wilde folc ibringe  
 That hi[me] wolde ihere singe.  
 1025 Wat sol[d]ich thar mid mine songe?  
 ne sunge ich hom neuer so longe,  
 mi song were ispild ech del. <sup>16</sup>

Chaucer, the Londoner, clearly inherited this tradition of mild contempt for the North. The only characters in the *Canterbury Tales* who are given dialects are the northern students in the *Reeve's Tale*. <sup>17</sup>The Wife comes from Bath in the West Country, and the Reeve himself from Norfolk, and Chaucer could easily have characterised them through accent also, but chose not to. His amused condescension towards the North is further shown when he has the Parson, of all people, insist (proudly?) that he is a "southren man" and that he will have no truck with the literary "rum-ram-ruff" (alliteration) so typical of the northern verse of his day. And, as we have said, he has the devil in the *Friar's Tale* come from "fer in the north coundree".

There are at least a couple of small signs that the northerners knew about the superior attitude of their southern fellowcountrymen, and were sensitive about it. One is in the passage I have quoted above from *Piers Plowman*, where the poet refrains from answering his own question as to why Lucifer seized the North:

*Ne were it not for northerne men anon ich wolde telle.*

The other is the suggestion of one of the shepherds in the *Second Shepherds' Play* to Mak to "take out that southern tooth," apparently his "superior" southern accent, though it is hard for the modern reader to see much southern tooth in Mak's speech as written.<sup>18</sup>

All of the foregoing should add up to the strong probability, if not actual proof that for a sophisticated fourteenth century southern audience the North of England, when it was not being treated as a joke, was a dreadful place. If kings went there only "with grete help and strength", any knight who returned from a one-man "military" mission there was truly a hero.

But there are a couple of obvious objections to accepting what I have said, at least as far as *SGGK* is concerned. First, it may be pointed out that *many* of the English Gawain stories are set in the North, around Carlisle and Inglewood, where the court is often held. In these stories, the northern milieu, far from representing the Unknown, is thoroughly familiar to Arthur and his court; and though it provides its share of ferlies, it is not treated as sinister or diabolical. The authors of these tales clearly either do not know or do not care about southern attitudes to the North; and Gawain is, if anything, a northern knight.

True; yet *SGGK* is different. The court in this tale is being held at Camelot, which is clearly in the South. The hero's journey from Camelot, described in the unprecedented geographical detail I have mentioned, is to a North beyond the Wirral, which just as clearly represents the Unknown to *this* Gawain and *this* court. Gawain is here a southern knight, and the green man is something from the North.

It may be further objected that the Gawain poet is himself clearly an inhabitant of the bleak and diabolical North I have been speaking about. We know this not because we know his name or his home town, but because he writes in the dialect and verse form so despised by southerners like Chaucer. His northernness is evident in every page he writes.<sup>19</sup> Surely it is unlikely that a man who is so vigorously and unashamedly northern in his art would share the preconceptions and biases of his southern contemporaries. (Higden, northerner or not, by contrast writes in Latin.) What then are we to make of all the "evidence" that has been presented about the unflattering connotations of North?

A tentative answer is that our poet is well aware of bad associations with North and is, among other things, making a highly civilised response to them. He gives his audience (mostly northerners themselves, presumably) a northern monster of southern preconceptions who lives in a cold wintry countryside. But the Jolly Green Giant is, in fact, a northern gentleman whose hospitality is as warm as the country is cold, and who revels in the manly and sometimes dangerous winter sports it offers, while his southern guest lolls in bed. The “giant” and the “barbarous” North he represents put to the test the best man that southern chivalry can offer, and they show him to be wanting. All in good fun, of course, and delicately done. Chaucer has his fun with northern clerks, and even lets them go with their coarse kind of triumph. They are only yokel clerks fit for a fabliau; heroic knights they will never be. Gawain, too, gets away with nothing more than a nick in the neck and a quirk in his southern sensibility; he has had a taste of the dangerous sports northerners like to play. A northern knight may live in a devilishly nasty country, but he can make a southern paragon look as if a point in his pentangle were bent.

## Endnotes

1. *Piers Plowman* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), II, 24-25. Both here and in an article for *N & Q*, 3rd ser., xii, 110 he gives ample references to support his position. Most of the references below are from Skeat.

2. Louis Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Soc. of America, 1968), I, 12; III, 160. A L Kellogg, “The Identity of the Green Chapel in *SGGK*” and “Satan, Langland and the North” in *Chaucer, Langland, Arthur: Essays in ME Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U.P., 1972), pp.6-10, 29-31. Kellogg also reminds us of the occasional medieval association between the colour green and the devil. Thomas Hill points out a common enough variation in the North-South direction in some medieval texts where Lucifer, Hell and Sinners are associated with the North West; and God, Heaven and the Saints with the South East. This is actually the case in the two references from the OE *Genesis*. See “Some Remarks on the Site of Lucifer’s Throne”, *Anglia* 87 (1969), 303-311.

- 3 . J Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology* tr. J S Stallybrass (New York: Dover, 1966), pp.34,493,802, 1001; Francis Gummere, *Haverford College Studies* 1(1889), 118ff :
- 4 . F Klaeber, *Beowulf* (Boston: D C Heath, 1950), note to 1. 1357. Further references in G Anderson, *The Literature of the Anglo-Saxons* (1949; rep. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), pp.355-356, n.11.
- 5 . R Morris, *The Blickling Homilies*, E.E.T.S. orig. ser. nos. 58, 63, 73 (Oxford: O.U.P.1874-80; rpt. one vol. 1967), pp.206, 208.
- 6 . *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ed. J R R Tolkien and E V Gordon, 2nd edn., revised by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), II, 2180-2196.
- 7 . See also H Tristram, “Stock Descriptions of Heaven and Hell in OF Prose and Poetry”, *NM* 79 (1978), 102-113.
- 8 . E Male, *The Gothic image* (1913; rpt. N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1958), p.5 ff; W S Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church in the Middle Ages* (N.Y.: Ungar, 1970).
- 9 . O. Farmer, *Fairford Church and its Stained Glass Windows* (Bath, 1933); J G Joyce, *The Fairford Windows* (London: Arundel Soc., 1872). My sketch is based on that in Farmer.
- 10 . Gotfrid Storms, *Compounded Names of Peoples in Beowulf* (Utrecht-Nijmegen: Dekker and Van de Vegt, 1957), pp.16-17.
- 11 . See F. Mosse, *Handbook of Middle English* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1957), p.289, which prints Higden’s Latin and Caxton’s 1482 version also.
- 12 . . Malmesbury’s Latin is in *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, Rolls Series 52 (London, 1870), p.209. *Polychronicon*, Rolls Series 41, Pt 2 (London 1869), pp.162-163 has Higden’s Latin, Trevisa’s version and the English version of an anonymous fifteenth century translator.

13 . On the other hand, the anonymous fifteenth century translator did not translate at all Higden's "stridet incondita" ("inconditum stridet" in Malmesbury).

14 . Northerners and Southerners in the Organization of the University to 1509", in *Oxford Studies Presented to Daniel Callus*, ed. R W Southern. Oxford Hist. Soc., n.s. vol 16 (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press for the Ox. Hist. Soc.), 1964 (for 1959-60), p.4.

15 . About Trevisa's problems at Oxford see D C Fowler, "John Trevisa and the English Bible", *MP* 58 (1960), 81-98.

16 . *The Owl and the Nightingale*, ed. J W H Atkins (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1922), 11.995-1027. *Dare one suggest still another theme present in the poem: North v South?*

17 . Professor N F Blake claims, unconvincingly I think, that the notion that the clerks in the *Reeves Tale* are being satirized through their speech is merely "a modern explanation", because "in the fourteenth century a standard language had not developed, and the patronising attitude to speakers of non-standard varieties developed even later than the standard itself" See his article "The Northernisms in the *Reeve's Tale*" in *Lore and Language* 3, 1 (1979), p. 7 .

18 . See, however, A C Cawley, "Mak's Imitation of Southern English" in *The Wakefield Pageants* (Manchester U.P., 1958), p.131 where the small evidence is assembled..

19 . For "the distinctively northern topographical terms . . . used strikingly in *Gawain* to evoke the harsh and hostile character of the northern countryside into which Gawain ventures" see T Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), p. 76 .

Like most medieval literature, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* participates in several important literary traditions that its original audience would have instantly recognized. Medieval poets were expected to re-use established source materials in their own works. Modern readers sometimes mistakenly take this as evidence of how lacking in creativity and originality the Middle Ages were. In reality, much of the interest of medieval literature comes from recognizing how one work of literature pulls against those that came before it, makes subtle changes from its sources, and invests old material