

SHAPE, MOTIFS, AND IMAGERY IN THE FIRST 490 LINES OF “SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT”

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ABSTRACT

“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” is an anonymous Middle English poem often attributed to the moniker, the Pearl poet. The poem is famous for its structure. The poems, or lays, from this time period were likely committed to memory and read aloud rather than being read silently from the copied manuscript in which they were found. It is an important point though to ponder, whether the shapes that written words make could hold meaning for the writer. In this paper, the first part (21 subsections) of the translated and reshaped version of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” has been analyzed for shape, motifs, and imagery. It was found that the textual shape of each subsection reinforces the poem’s musicality and impact, while the translated text reveals surprising forms that parallel the shocking ‘beheading game’ that the poem is most famous for.

KEYWORDS

Pearl Poet, Middle English, Literature, Poetic Structure, Form, & Style

1. INTRODUCTION

When we think of poetry having an unusual shape, we think of modern versions. We don’t think of poems that are hundreds of years old. “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” is a Middle English poem that is famous for its structure. While reading the poem I was struck by the shapes of the subsections. Each consists of a strophe, a bob, and a wheel. The poem I have analyzed here has been translated and reshaped from the original manuscript, Cotton Nero A.x (“Cotton”). In this paper, I describe the structure and themes of the first part of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, lines 1 to 490, in Casey Finch’s translation of *The Pearl* poet (Andrew et al). I discuss some of the motifs and imagery that the 21 subsections suggest. And I describe how the shape of each subsection not only helps reinforce the poem’s musicality and impact, but also elucidates the theme visually. I believe that the reading aloud of both the original poem and the translated version is made more dramatic because of the poem’s structure. But what is emphasized most in the original poem is encompassed by the bob. Here, I discuss the importance of the strophe in the translated version and what it means thematically when considering the translated poem’s unique shape.

2. SHAPE, MOTIFS, & IMAGERY IN “SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT”

There are 2,530 lines in the poem, but only the first 490 are analyzed here. The poem tells the story of the ‘beheading game’, a year-by-year exchange of axe blows, proposed by the

strange and mysterious Green Knight upon a visit to King Arthur's court. It is Gawain who accepts the challenge of the Green Knight to protect Arthur. Gawain goes first in the 'game' and beheads the Green Knight. Magically, the fallen stranger stands up, grabs hold of his head, and informs the challenger of the rules which call for another meeting a year to the day, when it will be the Green Knight's turn to take a swing.

2.1. The Cotton Nero A.X Manuscript

An interesting visual has been created by the translators or transcribers in their decision to move the bob after each strophe of the 101 subsections of the poem. In the original Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, the bob is set apart from the last sentence of the strophe (Figure 1):

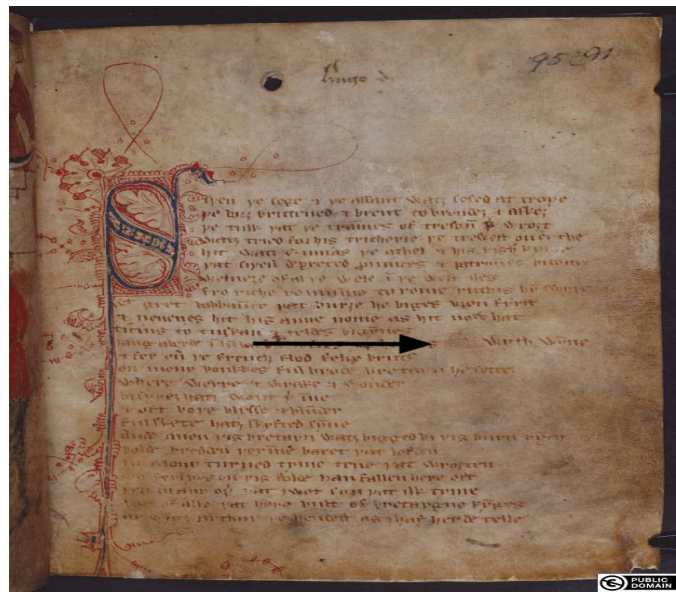


Figure 1. The bob (to the right of the arrow) set apart in the first subsection of the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript ("Cotton").

This break clearly delineates the text, but also creates a thematic shift. And when reading the poem we would naturally insert a lengthy pause with a staccato effect:

On many bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez Wyth wyne,
Where werre and wrake and wonder
Bi sypez hatz wont þerinne
And oft bope blysse and blunder
Ful skete hatz skyfted synne. ("Cotton")

The bob, "Wyth wyne," floats in space in the original document. Pausing there is halting and almost dreamlike. You could say that it looks detached, separated, cut off. Next, we see that when it is carried down to occupy the next line in the Casey Finch's translation (Andrew et al), it creates a dramatically different shape:

To the broad slopes of Britain to build there his realm
So dear.
As well as wonders, woe
Has wavered year to year.
And there, tossed to and fro,
Have been both bane and cheer. (14-19)

One wonders why the bob was moved. While reading, we almost want to pause on the bob, “So dear,” and lower our voice. This removes the dreamlike qualities of the original, creating a darker and more sinister tone. Thus, we read the bob with less dramatic effect.

2.2. A Closer Look at Casey Finch’s Translation

Each of the 101 bobs in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” were examined, but none of them appeared to do anything of literary significance to set them apart, so to speak, from the rest of the subsection. It is not the purpose of this essay to discuss why the bob was set apart in the original manuscript. What is interesting, though, in Casey Finch’s translation is that the bob is moved to the next line, below the strophe. I believe that the strophe then takes on added significance thematically.

Each of the 101 strophes can be read as separate pieces with individual themes. The bob is less conspicuous when it occupies its own line—as one can see it is shortened significantly compared to the last line of the strophe above and the first line of the wheel below. This contributes to a pause in the reading, but visually, it cuts off the strophe from the wheel. It is believed the wheel then gains further momentum in an oral reading. What is most dramatic is how the overall shape is depicted. In figure 3, it is shown how the movement of the bob creates the shape of a head (the strophe), a neck (the bob), and an upper torso (the wheel):

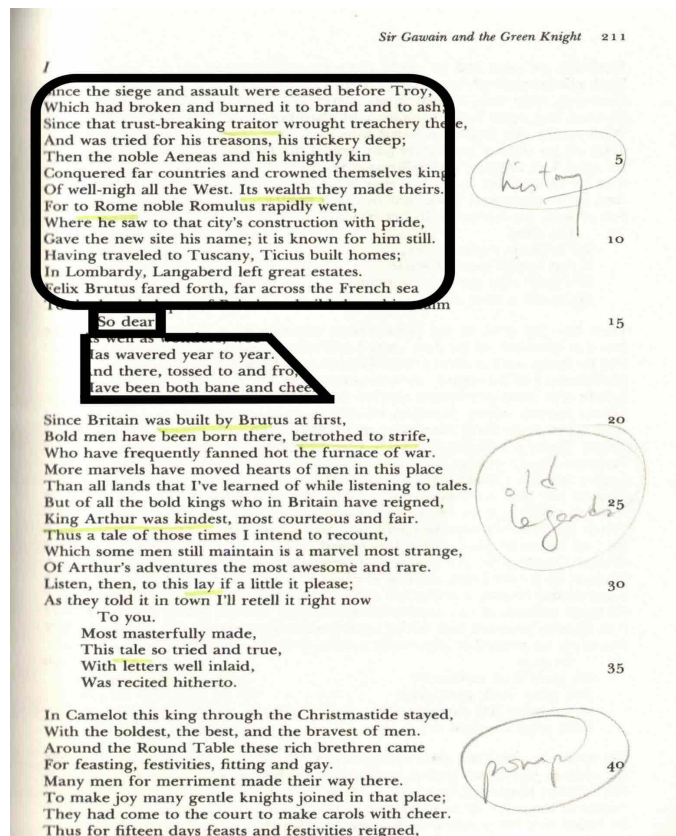


Figure 3. This paper’s author notes, with the ‘head, neck, and torso’ outlined in lines 1-19 (Andrew et al, p. 211).

If the bob is not moved to the next line, such a shape is not possible. This essay does not explore research into the historical configurations of the strophe, bob, and wheel. Nor is it

within the scope of this paper to determine why the bob is located where it is, and why it was moved, or if the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript is an outlier in its placement of the bob. The effect, though, on the Finch translation of the text is profound. The beheading game, which first shocks and then propels the narrative forward, underlies the entire poem. And here in Figure 4, we see a head, a neck, and a torso:

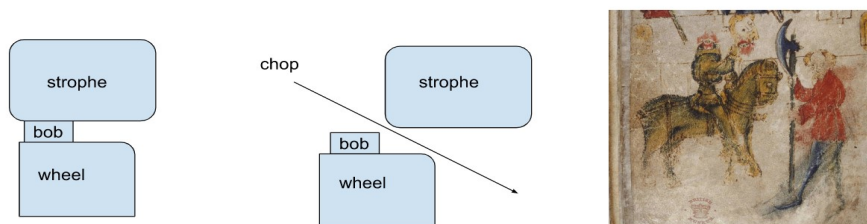


Figure 4. Author's depiction of how the thematic elements of the strophe can be symbolically excised; set alongside a drawing from the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript (far right) for comparison. ("Cotton")

2.3. Themes in the Subheadings

One of the underlying narrative elements of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" is the beheading game, which has been introduced here as being oddly represented within the text itself. Thus, the 101 subsections can have their strophes cut off, allowing *The Pearl* poet to use structure to communicate a hidden message. Or perhaps the bob was intentionally set aside the last line of the strophe to avoid such a connection. This is the problem with the original Cotton Nero A.x manuscript as it does not produce the same effect visually. However, it produces an effect nonetheless. It is isolated from the text. And the effect is produced musically, one imagines, if read aloud. And pausing at the end of the strophe and before the bob, cuts off the narrative, thereby chopping off whatever came before.

In the strophe of subsection one (1-19), it has been interpreted that the theme is related to "history" (shown later in Table 1). And with the strophe removed, history is excised. "[T]he noble Aeneas and his knightly kin" (5), "noble Romulus" (8), to "Tuscany, [where] Ticius built homes" (11), these are all gone. The bob states "So dear" (15). Goodbye. Yes, oh dear.

Chopping off the strophe of the second subsection (20-36) removes more recent history. It can be called "Old legends." Although King Arthur is a character in this poem, in the second strophe he is described reflectively as one of "the bold kings who in Britain have reigned" (25). This can be interpreted as more recent, and local history is removed, or chopped off if we wish to visualize the text in such a way.

How does this chopping effect contribute to the overarching thematic elements of the poem? The strict control used on the lines of the poem, the tight structure, supports the recurring motif of control, and we see it enforced in subsection five (85-106). It was his "custom when keeping his court" (100) to have some adventures. The strophe is cut off by the bob, "The hall" (102). The wheel then states

Full proud does he appear;
He stands both strong and tall.
And young as the New Year,
He makes much mirth with all. (103-106)

This is Arthur's tale, "of nobility, boldness, betrothal" (95), and it is exactly what transpires in subsection 7 (130-150). It appears that Arthur is in complete control of his

court. But here, the Green Knight suddenly appears and takes control of it. He does so with what can be called “stature.” By chopping off what occurs in each strophe, the effect is to not only heighten the narrative, but to also propel the action forward. The short sentences and phrases in the bob take on an added weight. However, in looking at the 101 bobs of the translated version, recurring motifs that contribute to the dramatic effects outlined here are not noticeable.

In Table 1, an outline and comment on corresponding themes for each of the 21 strophes in the first section of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” is provided.

Table 1. Understanding the first 21 subsections, or stanzas, of the poem.

Sub-section	Strophe motifs	Possible thematic elements
1	<i>history</i>	Distant cities and people of the past are described (1-19).
2	<i>old legends</i>	The language that describes the adventures makes the tales seem like old legends rather than concurrent events to the timelines of the narrative (20-36).
3	<i>pomp</i>	The festival and attendees are described, including a whopping 15 days of “feasts” (37-59).
4	<i>Xmas tradition</i>	A more detailed look at the New Year; having the narrative start and finish on day one of the year cuts time, removing the regular scenes of life from the poem (60-84).
5	<i>adventure</i>	The king describes his custom during the New Year of telling adventure stories or having “jousting” games with “mighty opponent[s]” (85-106).
6	<i>nobles</i>	The names of the nobles are given here, including the banners, the sounds of drums and pipes (107-129).
7	<i>stature</i>	The Green Knight’s appearance is highlighted by his “haughty, bold” nature, “His body, boldly bright” (130-150).
8	<i>coverings</i>	We see the outer fashionings of the Green Knight, “the bright, golden gems/Which were richly ... arranged” (151-178).
9	<i>gold</i>	“Gold strand[s] of hair” that is “glowing green;” the green descriptions in this strophe take on a goldish tint (179-202).
10	<i>contradictions</i>	The Green Knight comes in peace but armed to fight, and without chainmail (203-231).
11	<i>confusion</i>	His audience is left “stunned” and think “it a thing supernatural” (232-249).
12	<i>honor</i>	The king states that they “would honor [his] will;” the honor and “courage, [of] this castle’s true knights” are questioned (250-278).

13	<i>exchange</i>	“It is Yule,” and there is an exchange of presents, an exchange of blows (279-300).
14	<i>proclamations</i>	The Green Knight questions if “this [is] the court for its courage renowned,” thereby proclaiming that they all lack courage (301-322).
15	<i>king’s courage</i>	Arthur volunteers, brashly, for the game (323-342).
16	<i>belief</i>	Sir Gawain’s belief in the honor code, and “if the queen acquiesces” then it proves her belief in him, to uphold the King’s honor (343-365).
17	<i>deals</i>	There is a contract drawn up for a “deal in turn” (366-389).
18	<i>sharpens</i>	The “pledge” is sharpened, “by God high above,” and Gawain “promise[s] and pledge[s] with the purest of hearts.” His will and intent is clear (390-416).
19	<i>the fall</i>	The head falls, the “blade bites into the ground.” The hitting of the earth is symbolic for the fall about to come (417-443).
20	<i>vision</i>	The eyes of the detached head stare at the Green Knight’s audience; Gawain and Arthur “both laugh and grin” at the “marvel among all men.” They have a vision for the future (444-466).
21	<i>veil lifted</i>	There is a “darkness [come] on/The land;” the veil symbolized by the festivities of the New Year is now lifted (467-490).

The last subsection, number 21 (467-490), ends with “The good king and Gawain” (482) finishing their “marvelous meats” (485). The strophe has been labeled here as “veil lifted.” The imagery in this last subsection is powerful. Arthur speaks to his queen to ignore the “cunning” (471), and to all to “admit this [is] a marvel” (475). We see again the motif of control, and it is visually depicted as Gawain “Hangs that ax high” (477). But as “darkness comes on/The land” (485-486) we know that the veil of deceit described here is being lifted, and that what should be a game is no laughing matter. This and everything else in the text is chopped off. The dramatic effect propels us into the second part of the poem. And we shan’t look back.

3. CONCLUSIONS

It has been outlined here how the shape of the text can influence how the theme is heightened in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” The power of the strophe being visually excised helps move the poem forward. And each excised strophe is a statement of revision for the author. A new world is being invented, one strophe at a time. And this visual effect influences how the text can be read. Was it done with intent? Either way, the shape of the poem is impactful. A future analysis of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” could look at other sections and analyze the role of the wheel. Was the translated text intentionally formed to make a ‘chopping effect’? There is no way of knowing for certain. But such an unusual stylistic feature of both the translated text and the corresponding ‘cut

off' bob of the original, functions to loudly proclaim *The Pearl* poet's foothold in the history of English literature through form, and the effect is profound if not shocking.

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