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SIR GAWAIN'S DEEDS OF ARMS:
THE MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE
AS MARTIAL INSTRUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Deeds of arms is a rather broad term that denotes martial activities that a knight or man-at-arms would undertake in their career. Formal deeds of arms is therefore a modern attempt at creating a subcategory of those martial exploits that would be undertaken outside of the immediate context of war (*Formal Combat* 3), the most recognisable of which would be the judicial duel, an activity extensively covered in historical fencing treatises, popularly known as fight books. Although no English sources of this type survive, it can be argued that it does not necessarily prevent one from gaining any insight into English chivalry's knowledge and use of contemporaneous martial systems. According to Matthew Bennett, the songs and tales written and performed in chivalric circles "represent a coherent body of literature designed to improve military techniques, effectively having the same didactic impact as more conventional manuals" (273–74). As the latter are sadly missing from the extant assortment of the Middle English literature, it seems sensible to draw upon the records of the former. Notably, the character who seems to be most recurrently engaged in formal deeds of arms in the Middle English chivalric romances is Sir Gawain. In fact, participating in such exploits seems to have been Gawain's forte, as he does so in a number of Middle English romances, either in direct combat, as in *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, *The Avowyng of Arthur*, and *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, or in

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more fantastical challenges, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or *The Turke and Sir Gawain*. After all, if Gawain was considered to be the perfect knight, “*chevalier exemplaire*, the paragon against which manhood is measured” (“Gawain and Popular Chivalric Romance in Britain” 220), it seems sensible that he would have been expected to perform feats of martial brilliance, preferably in a form recognisable as genuine martial arts of the day. It should also be noted that, as Thomas Hahn puts it, there is evidence for “Gawain’s profound familiarity among audiences in medieval Britain”, a view which seems to be supported by the fact that Gawain romances, which most likely circulated from the thirteenth century on, are found in copies that date from fifteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries, many of which “show signs of modest origins and constant use” (222), which in turn points to an enduring appeal and popularity of said tales, and the fact that they were continuously replicated, and distributed to a broader audience. Documents such as John Paston’s late-fifteenth century “Inventory off Englisshe bokis” (225), which features in the pride of place “the Greene Knyght”, probably one of the popular retellings of the Gawain Poet’s masterpiece, or Robert Laneham late-sixteenth century *A Letter* describing “the entertainment” for Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth Castle, which included a performance of stories of the Table Round, led by one Captain Cox, described by Laneham as “hardy as Gawin” (227), stand as a testament to the long-lasting popularity of Gawain romances in writing and oral performance alike. It is therefore likely that, being the favourite of the English, and especially the English men-at-arms, he was purposely written into scenarios that would add a sense of physical realism and familiarity through descriptions informed by examples of public martial displays. To support such an assertion, this study analyses the depictions of Gawain’s deeds of arms against the contents of assorted fight books and documents regulating or recording judicial duels, in order to verify whether there is correspondence between literary description and the records of actual formal combat. Hopefully, such an approach reveals traces of cross-pollination between different types of late-medieval martial literature, and helps support the view that particular Middle English romances were not merely works of fiction, but also a literary record of the performative aspect of the late-medieval English martial tradition.

1. THE MEDIEVAL FIGHT BOOKS

The available fight books document mainly German and Italian schools of martial arts, but precious little is known of other traditions. The single oldest record of a complete armoured fighting system is Fiore dei Liberi's *Fior di Battaglia* (*The Flower of Battle*), which was composed in the first decade of the fifteenth century, by which time its author had been studying "the art of fighting with spear, pollaxe, sword, dagger, and unarmed grappling, on foot and on horseback, armoured and unarmoured" for over forty years, by his own admission (Liberi lv). In the preface to his work, dei Liberi informs the reader that he had devoted his youth to learning from "many German and Italian masters", which represents a general tendency in the late-medieval martial tradition. Geoffroi de Charny, a French knight who frequently fought against the English in the Hundred Years War, devoted a separate section of his *Livre de chevalerie* to the subject of studying the art of war:

[O]ne should observe those who are best and learn by listening to them and by asking about what one does not know, for they ought rightly to know better how to explain, teach, and advise than others, for they have seen and known, taken part in, experienced, and proved themselves in all forms of armed combat in which good men have learned and learn how to excel. (Charny 58)

If Charny's perspective was representative of the general beliefs held by his contemporaries, which is highly likely given his status as the keeper of the Oriflamme, the honour given only to "the most worthy and the most adept warrior" (Kaeuper 12), it would seem that a pursuit of learning, especially from recognised fencing masters of the day, was an intrinsic tenet of the late-medieval chivalry. It is worth noting that during dei Liberi's life, Italy would see a considerable number of English men-at-arms, such as Sir John Hawkwood, who found employment as mercenaries, or *condottieri*. Fiore himself was a *condittiere*, as were most of his students, thus, if one believes the English were similar in their approach to gaining martial knowledge to their continental counterparts, as there is little basis to think otherwise, one cannot discount the possibility that at least a few of the English men-at-arms learnt from Italian masters, and possibly brought that knowledge back home.

Given dei Liberi's open admission of German influences on his art, the present study shall also consider *Gladiatoria*, the earliest German fight book devoted solely to armoured duels, and one of the most influential treatises on

the topic throughout the period and well into the sixteenth century. Such longevity surely stands as a testament to the effectiveness and wide appeal of the techniques recorded therein.

2. JUDICIAL DUELS: THE EQUALITY OF ARMS AND ARMOUR

“The Gloucester Ordinance” of 1397 states that the parties involved in trial by combat are to fight with equal arms and weapons assigned by the court (*Murder, Rape, and Treason* 45). Johan Hyll’s 1434 *Treatise of the Point of Worship in Arms* specifies that the appellant is allowed to have a spear, a long sword, a short sword¹ and a dagger (*Murder, Rape, and Treason* 55), same as the defendant. Similarly, many chivalric romances, even Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale”, underline equal equipment of warriors engaged in formal combat as “in the bilateral ordeal of judicial duel, fairness was expressed in the literal insistence of ‘equality of arms’” (Ho 296). But not only weapons were considered to be an important factor in a formal challenge. In the decision of the Count of Hainaut concerning the combat between Jehan de Moustiers and Jehan de Thians, the combatants were instructed not only to carry lances of the same length, use equal swords, and “bear no other arms save those stated [in the decision]”, but also that neither is allowed to “have on them powerful spells, secret spells, nor sorcery, nor anything else that might be considered deceitful” (Moffat 88–89). The last point seems evocative of a detail from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but if one finds themselves doubting the relation between the beheading game and the deeds of arms, it suffices to recall an event described by Froissart, wherein a French squire, Gauvain Micaille, approached English positions “in the midst of the skirmishing” in order to ask if there was “any gentleman who wishes to perform any feat of arms for the love of his lady”, in the form of an exchange of three lance strikes, followed by the same number of axe blows, sword blows, and dagger blows (Moffat 176–77). Same as in the poem, the challenge comprises a set number of hits with a weapon, as it happens also three. There is, of course, no basis to presume the occurrence had any connection with the plot of the poem, but one should consider the possibility that in the cultural context of the fourteenth century, the Green

¹ A long sword was a popular knightly sidearm with a grip long enough to accommodate wielding it in two hands. Short sword would most likely refer to an arming sword, that is, a single-handed, shorter variety of the weapon.

Knight's game could have been seen as a reference to just such real-life contests. If we accept that the challenge is, at least partially, representative of the specific deeds of arms in the form of an exchange of a previously agreed upon number of blows, it becomes clear that Gawain's transgression of keeping the magical token that made sure "he myzt not be slayn" (*Green Knight* 51) put him in direct violation of the real-life regulations governing formal deeds of arms. The poem is quite clearly concerned with conceptual exploration of the notion of chivalry, but there is also a visible preoccupation with its more immediate, physical aspect, as represented by the two extensive scenes of Gawain's arming. If one considers how the medieval regulations of formal deeds of arms tended to devote a considerable attention to the matter of proper equipment, the poem's arming scenes could be seen as a form of a legal record, allowing the audience to scrutinise whether the preparations followed accepted standards. The Gawain Poet seems to have understood that knightly arms and armour served as outward symbols of one's station, often regulated in form by his rank, function, and intent. In that regard, when the poet informs us that "Ȝet laft he not þe lace, þe ladies gifte, þat forgat not Gawayn for gode of hymself" (*Green Knight* 56), he points to the very moment of Gawain committing the transgression. The action is so striking that in the same stanza it is further underlined that Gawain does not seek to simply adorn his armour but dons the gift "for to sauen himself" (56), a shameful recognition of the fact that Gawain sought an unfair advantage by way of magic.

As Gawain was hailed in the English tradition as the paragon of chivalry, this treachery had to come as a shock to the audience of the poem. He himself recognises his shortcomings and decides to carry the girdle "[i]n tokenyng he watz tane in tech of a faute" (68), and then, as he recounts his adventure he "grouned for gref and grame; Þe blod in his face con melle, When he hit schulde schewe, for schame" (69). If we read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* through the perspective of formal deeds of arms, the vivid picture of Gawain blushing and groaning out of shame becomes quite understandable. After all, deeds of arms were meant to be the definitive show of prowess and martial excellence. One could argue that the shameful episode Gawain had to endure stemmed exactly from his popularity as the embodiment of the performative mode of chivalry, often celebrated through deeds of arms. With the added detail of the story being concluded with the motto of the Order of the Garter, a society created for the promotion of chivalric values, it could signify that the plot was intended as a form of a lesson for its noble audi-

ence, or at least was read as such by the author of the final inscription. Indeed, a number of English chivalric romances use Gawain, in one way or another, to transfer teachings concerning correct conduct in formal combat.

3. GAWAIN THE TEACHER

Although Sir Thomas Malory followed French preference for Lancelot, his work still features singular glimpses of the more English perception of Gawain. One such moment appears during a formal deed of arms between Gawain and Morholt. The former is unhorsed and prepares for fighting on foot, but as his opponent “began to com ... on horseback,” Gawain reacts with a scold, instructing the knight to “alight on foote”, if he does not wish his horse slain (97). Morholt thanks Gawain for his gentlemanly correction, and states: “Ye teche me curtesy, for hit is nat commendable one knight to be on horseback and the other on foote” (97). Thus, again, a story of Gawain presents an insight into the matters of proper behaviour in a deed of arms.

Another example of an educational direction, albeit with Gawain as the recipient, comes in *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawaine*. In a prelude to the story’s pivotal fight, a conversation between King Arthur, Sir Spynagros, and Sir Gawain stresses the dangers and challenges of an armoured duel, and underlines the importance of preparation and skill. The scene brings to mind the introduction to *The Flower of Battle*, where the author writes how he taught many noblemen who were obliged to fight in a duel (Liberi 1r). In similar vein, Sir Spynagros gives to Gawain his “counsale”, that “sall right gret avale” (260) in the form of a surprisingly thorough martial advice, starting with the suggestion to attack the opponent straight away to overwhelm and stun him with a lance strike. If the opponent should open with a furious onslaught, one should “lat the riche man rage/ And fecht in his curage” to let him tire, and then “dele ye your dynt” (260). Intriguingly, Sir Spynagros’ speech is reminiscent of typical fight book instructions, where one is presented with both the initial “play”, as techniques were often referred to, and the optimal counter. The poem, to which Thomas Hahn refers as “the single richest and most impressive romance of arms and battle that survives from late medieval Britain” (*Eleven Romances* 227), offers a veritable wealth of descriptions of armoured combat, one of the most impressive being the pivotal duel between the titular knights.

The fight between Gawain and Gologras starts with a typical joust, but its description does not follow the generic repetitiveness known from Malory's fight scenes. As the knights dismount and commence fighting on foot, Sir Gawain attacks his enemy with the point, "[p]ertly put with his pith at his pesane"² (*Gologras and Gawaine* 263). The thrust is so powerful that it destroys more than fifty links and stuns the enemy (263). This scene illustrates the poem's adherence to the rules of the knightly art, as a thrust to the face or throat is the absolute staple of medieval armoured fencing. Four out of sixteen plays in *The Flower of Battle*'s armoured fighting section, including the three opening ones, are devoted to delivering or defending against thrusts to that area (dei Liberi 33r–34v). Similarly, in *Gladiatoria* the three initial plays depict a thrust to the face/throat and a defence against it (Hagedorn 61–65). It is therefore rather significant that the poem which preceded the duel with a lesson evocative of fight book instructions, replicates their most common introductions to dismounted armoured duel in an opening description of foot combat. In addition, as we are told that Gawain "skilfully aimed his strength" striking at his opponent's mail standard, it suggests that the author wanted the audience to know that the attack was purposeful and proficient, something that would surely stand out to the warriors in the audience as a show of no mean prowess, especially being "an fell fair" (263), a lethal thrust, which emphasises Gawain's skill at arms.

Gawain withstands the opponent's counter offensive and hews "to the hede" shearing the fastenings of Gologras' helmet (265).³ Finally, Sir Gawain manages to "[g]rippit to ... Gologras on the grund grene", and having "dagar ... drawne" bids him to submit (266). Just as the beginning of the duel served as a representation of the recurrent fight book opening, the finale perfectly illustrates one of the most common conclusions. *Gladiatoria* ends with five different ways of throwing the opponent to the ground and assailing him with a dagger (Hagedorn 202–11). As Hagedorn observes in his introduction to the dagger techniques:

The dagger was often used as a last resort in armoured combat; once the opponent was taken to the ground ... one should attempt to thrust into the openings of the armour ... to completely persuade the opponent to surrender or even kill him. (34)

² The *pesane* is a mail standard, a form of a flexible collar worn directly around one's neck.

³ Notably, the cutting of helmet straps is believed to be what opened King Richard III's to his death-blow in the Battle of Bosworth (Appleby 254).

The duel is built up, and narrated in a way that accentuates the challenge Sir Gawain has to face. Arguably, the fact that the fight reaches the stage of employing the weapon of “last resort” suggests the author used his audience’s knowledge of the armoured combat to heighten the dramaticism of the scene. If the audience of the romance was acquainted with the particularities of martial arts teaching, the story’s noticeably instructional tone prior to the fight, and the realistic depiction of the knights’ conduct would surely strongly resonate with them.

Finally, as the events of the duel perfectly align themselves with the proper armoured combat progression seen in the fight books, they clearly signify Gawain’s mastery of versatile fighting techniques. When compared to the fencing treatises, it seems clear that the sheer number of specific points the poem shares with them could hardly be completely coincidental, particularly in a work characterised with a remarkable degree of focus on the art of war and its physical accoutrements.

4. GAWAIN THE MARTIAL MASTER

Another romance of note, *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, starts in a rather unassuming manner, with Arthur and his companions going off to a hunt. In the end, however, it emerges as a work similar in its martial content to *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawaine*, while in the attention it gives to knightly armour it can be easily compared with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, particularly in the introduction of Sir Galaron, detailing the craftsmanship and embellishments of his harness from “his basenet burnished ful bene” (189) to “his shene schynbaudes” (190).

The main focus of this analysis is the poem’s description of the duel between Galaron and Gawain. It starts with a joust, wherein the latter suffers a strike to the neck, but quickly repays in kind with a thrust “[t]horgh blazon and brené” (194), which remains in accordance to the fight books as it is aimed at a gap protected with mail rather than plate. The success of the attack is represented by the statement that Gawain’s “bronde was bloody” (195), which is to mean that it penetrated the defences and drew blood. When the duel continues on foot, Gawain proves his skill by thrusting at his enemy “under the brode shelde/[t]horgh the waast of the body” (196), which is evocative of the attack from the fourth play of the sword in *Gladiatoria*. It is noteworthy that the earliest surviving manuscript of *The Awntyrs off*

Arthur dates back to around 1430 (Shepherd 219), which is exactly the dating of the earliest manuscripts of *Gladiatoria* (Hagedorn 20), therefore the techniques depicted in the treatise would have been created to overcome the armour that existed during the romance's creation. Judging by the description, Galeron likely wears a single-piece globose breastplate. Such defence extended down to about the wearer's navel, and was worn on top of a mail shirt. Although the depiction of the fourth play of the sword in *Gladiatoria* shows both combatants wearing outer garments, the one in the thirty-first play depicts a sword thrust to the waist against a warrior who clearly wears only a mail shirt under his breastplate (Hagedorn 105). Gawain's attack seems therefore to be a direct representation of a technique depicted in a particular fight book from the period, and one expertly aimed to exploit the openings in his opponent's armour, which was surely recognised as a feat of great skill by those adept in armoured combat.

As the duel continues, Sir Galeron, though hurt and stunned, answers with another strike to Gawain's throat, that pierces "ventaile⁴ and pesayn" (196), a typical fight book attack, so deadly that Gawain escapes death only by "the brede of an hare" (196), by the poet's own admission. As the fight reaches its high point, Gawain attacks Galeron with a powerful sword strike to his side. As the hit is said to "carf downe clene, / [t]horgh the riche mailes that ronke were and rounde" (196), one may presume that the attack was aimed at the exact same spot as the previous one. Galeron, now grievously wounded, falls to the ground but soon recovers and follows up with a desperate counter attack.

At this point it is sensible to comment on the different transcriptions of the poem, as Hahn in his notes states he chose the version of Douce MS in writing that Galeron "followed fast on his [Gawain's] tras/ [w]ith a swerde kene" (197), but he acknowledges Amour's, Gates', and Hanna's editions represent the line as "followed fast on his face/faas", wherefore "[a]ll three editors seem to take this literally as specifying the place where Galeron attacks Gawain" (221). The latter approach appears to be the more accurate reading in light of the poem's evident preoccupation with martial arts, its detailing of the exchanged attacks, their precise targets, and the damage they cause. If we consider that in the scene Galeron is gravely wounded, and thus probably desperate to end the duel while he still can, the direct attack to the face clearly stands out as a shrewd decision, specifically if Gawain's face

⁴ The *ventaile* stands for "aventail", a cone shaped neck defence attached to the lower edge of a basinet-type helmet.

was the only open target. In fact, a similar scene is to be found in *Chronicon Galfridi le Baker de Swynebroke*'s description of a duel between Thomas da La Marche and Giovanni Visconti, fought at the Palace of Westminster on 6 October 1350. The account states that Thomas defeated his adversary, but "did not kill him ... because he could not sufficiently penetrate his armour anywhere ... save his face which was left bare" (Moffat 108). The same document suggests that Thomas' face was also exposed during the duel, a choice not entirely uncommon in formal deeds of arms, as evidenced by the reply from Sir John Cornwall and Janico Dartasso to a challenge from Household of Louis, Duke of Orléans, where the noblemen repeat specifications that mounted combat is to be carried out in "basinet without visor or bevor", and inquire whether for combat on foot "the basinet [should] have visor or not" (Moffat 213). Moreover, the second play of the sword in *Gladiatoria* presents a defence from high guard against an opponent who "tries to thrust towards your face with strength" (62), the exact scenario that Gawain finds himself in. Curiously, the poet states Gawain "kevered on hight" (*The Awntyrs off Arthur* 197), thus seemingly replicating the technique in question. As to the ending of the duel, where Sir Gawain "bi the coler keppes the knight" (197), there are several wrestling techniques in *Gladiatoria* based on grabbing the opponent by the neck, or around the mail collar, such as the fourteenth (86–87), the twenty-third (134–35), and the thirty-fifth (150–51) techniques of the sword among others.

In conclusion, the combat descriptions in *The Awntyrs off Arthur* present a remarkable adherence to the martial arts techniques codified in the best known contemporary armoured fighting treatise, with the details of the armour, the areas targeted by the combatants' strikes, and the particular forms of attack that can be traced back to *Gladiatoria*, and directly compared with its contents.

5. THE FINAL RULING

Unfortunately, no definite statements can be made in the matter, and the romance alone cannot be seen as a conclusive proof of the English chivalry's acquaintance with any specific treatise, but given the status of fight books in continental Europe, it seems unreasonable to think that late-medieval England would regularly come into contact with warriors from other nations, import considerable quantities of armour manufactured in Germany and Ita-

ly, and at the same time somehow remain insulated from the then current developments in martial culture. Considering Gawain's popularity as an embodiment of martial prowess and chivalry, it is reasonable to see him in particular as the literary vehicle through whom teachings on chivalric conduct would be transferred onto the English audience. What survives in the Gawain-centric Middle English romances indicates conscious attempts at codifying the key points of a rich chivalric martial tradition in a form that would be educational for a broader spectrum of initiates of the martial profession, and could serve as an added layer of meaningful detail, meant to cater to the tastes and the expertise of the seasoned combatants. Whereas many combat descriptions in medieval chivalric romance follow the same general pattern of unspecific hyperbole, the nuisance and detail of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, and *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawaine* serve as a sophisticated literary portrayal of the lived experience of men-at-arms, possibly to heighten the dramaticism and significance of given scenes by grounding them in realistic representations of the martial excellence associated with formal deeds of arms. The impact of the martial tradition on medieval European culture cannot be overstated, and thus one would do well to approach different representation of this rich heritage not separately, but as strands interwoven into an intricate tapestry, where historic documents and accounts, martial treatises, and works of fiction all share common points of interest and should be seen collectively. It is particularly true in the case of medieval England, much of the chivalric tradition of which survives only as vestiges encoded in fiction. There is still much to uncover about the English martial culture and reading the period's fiction alongside its martial instructions may help us uncover that much more.

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THE MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE AS MARTIAL INSTRUCTION

Summary

Recent decades have witnessed a growing interest in medieval European martial arts, resulting in scholars, and martial arts practitioners studying historical fencing treatises in hopes of recreating combat systems of the period. Unfortunately, none such treatises of English origin survive. However, a well-documented history of cultural and material exchange between the Continent and England, suggests that a careful examination of selected Middle English romances may unveil a literary record of a possible transmission of those martial systems to England. As one analyses the depictions of formal combat in assorted Middle English romances devoted to the exploits of Sir Gawain it becomes evident that some of them bear an uncanny resemblance to the contents of certain continental fight books. Such comparison may reveal a particular role Sir Gawain may have had in the English chivalric tradition, that of a purveyor of martial teachings and an instructive model of the performative mode of chivalry.

Keywords: deeds of arms; chivalric romance; Gawain

CZYNY ZBROJNE SIR GAWAINA:
ROMANS ŚREDNIOANGIELSKI JAKO INSTRUKCJA SZTUKI WOJENNEJ

Streszczenie

Mimo rosnącego zainteresowania sztukami walki średniowiecznej Europy, niewiele wiadomo na temat metod walki zbrojnej stosowanych w średniowiecznej Anglii. Zachowały się jednak z tego okresu liczne romanse rycerskie poświęcone właśnie potyczkom i czynom zbrojnym. Biorąc pod uwagę dobrze udokumentowaną historię wymiany kultury i dóbr między średniowieczną Anglią a kontynentalną Europą, można zakładać, iż ówczesna literatura rycerska zawiera wskazówki dotyczące potencjalnego przenikania i wzajemnej inspiracji także w zakresie stosowanych technik bojowych. Postacią kluczową dla takich poszukiwań jest Sir Gawain, postać niezwykle popularna w średnioangielskich romansach rycerskich, a zarazem ówczesny wzór rycerskich cnót, szczególnie w kontekście militarnym. Wyjątkowy status Sir Gawaina sprawia, iż fabuły poświęconych mu romansów skupiają się często na czynach zbrojnych i sztuce wojennej, co czyni je idealnym źródłem porównań z ówczesnymi traktatami wojennymi z kontynentu. Porównując średnioangielskie romanse o Gawainie ze współczesnymi im traktatami szermierzymi i innymi dokumentami poświęconymi instrukcjom militarnym oraz ordynacjami regulującymi formalne czyny zbrojne, artykuł wskazuje, iż rzeczony romanse mogły pierwotnie służyć nie tylko rozrywce, ale również kodyfikacji nauk sztuki wojennej i rozpowszechnianiu wiedzy o jej technikach wśród angielskich zbrojnych.

Słowa kluczowe: romans rycerski; Sir Gawain; czyny zbrojne