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Su Fang Ng
Kenneth Hodges

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Saint George, Islam, and Regional Audiences in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Su Fang Ng and Kenneth Hodges
University of Oklahoma

BEFORE HIS TALE, which begins with Islamic merchants carrying stories between Syria and Rome, Chaucer's Man of Law offers this apostrophe to merchants: "Ye seken lond and see for yowre wynnynges; / As wise folk ye knowen al th'estaat / Of regnes; ye been fadres of tidynges / And tales . . ." ¹ Thus Chaucer notes that trading networks spread stories as well as merchandise, stories Chaucer himself appropriates and retells. If we take Chaucer's remarks seriously, we need to expand the area of literary exchange beyond Western Europe. **One work that may have been shaped, unexpectedly, by such exchanges is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.** Although European analogues and sources for it exist, there have been hints over the decades of **possible non-European contexts for the poem**. In 1916, George Lyman Kittredge noted that in a number of the analogues the supernatural challenger is black or Turkish.² These analogues thus link the challenger of the beheading plot to racial otherness. In 1974, Alice Lasater, in her work on the influence of Spanish literature (Christian, Islamic, and hybrid) on Middle English literature, noted extensive parallels between a

We would like to thank Michael Bennett for so generously sharing with us his notes on BL Harley MS 3988 and Thomas Burman for sharing his transcription of Theodorus Bibliander's 1550 edition of Robert of Ketton's Latin translation of the Qu'ran. We have benefited from a conversation with Michael Twomey about our paper at Kalamazoo. We would also like to thank Bernadette Andrea and Christina Fitzgerald for reading an early draft of this essay.

¹*Canterbury Tales*, II.127–30, in Larry Benson, gen. ed. *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

²The relevant stories are *La Mule Sanz Fraïn*, *Humbaut*, and *Sir Gawain and the Turk*. See Kittredge, *A Study of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1916), 44, 62.

well-known popular Islamic folk figure, al-Khidr³ (the Green One), and the Green Knight.⁴ Evidence for the *Gawain*-poet's interest in the east has been detected in the other poems as well. The heavenly city of *Pearl*, as Mahmoud Manzalaoui has noted, has close parallels to the description in an Islamic text known to Europeans in Latin translation as the *Liber Scalae* or *Book of the Ladder* (a copy of fourteenth-century English provenance was found at Oxford). It recounts Mohammed's ascent into the heavens (*mi'rāj*), and scholars now largely agree that this text was a source for Dante's *Commedia*.⁵ Further suggesting interest in the east, *Cleanness* draws on Sir John Mandeville's description of the Dead Sea.⁶

Since the poem is elusive in questions of authorship, date, and circumstances of composition, criticism has necessarily proceeded speculatively. Most critics have understandably focused on Northern European (especially Irish and French) sources and analogues. Given recent scholarly interest in medieval romance's engagement with the east and with Islam, however, the Green Knight's non-European analogues and particularly Lasater's intriguing suggestion of al-Khidr need to be reconsidered. While the poem's many unknowns prevent any absolute identification of the Green Knight as al-Khidr, especially since the Green Knight is most probably a composite character with elements taken from several traditions as well as the poet's imagination, the possibility that the *Gawain*-poet may have, in his typically allusive manner, borrowed from an Islamic figure nonetheless leads to a fruitful reexamination of the poem's commitments and affiliations. The seminal works of Dorothee Metlitzki and María Rosa Menocal have demonstrated that

³ Spellings of the name الخضر range widely: Khidr, Khadir, Chadir, and so on. Hizr and Hizir are Turkish variants. Because Khidr was identified with Elijah (Elias), he was also known as Khidr-Elias or Chidrelles.

⁴ Alice Lasater, *Spain to England: A Comparative Study of Arabic, European, and English Literature of the Middle Ages* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1974), esp. 168–96. Several recent articles acknowledge Lasater's work: Joseph Skaria, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Matter of Araby," *South Asian Review* 19.16 (1995): 49–58; Zacharias Thundy, "Classical Analogues—Eastern and Western—of *Sir Gawain*," in "Sir Gawain" and the Classical Tradition, ed. E. L. Ridsen (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006), 135–81. Suggested links between al-Khidr and the devil in Chaucer's *Priar's Tale*, however, seem improbable.

⁵ Mahmoud Manzalaoui, "English Analogues to the *Liber Scalae*," *MÆ* 34 (1965): 21–35; for a translation of the *Liber Scalae*, see *The Prophet of Islam in Old French Romance: "The Romance of Mobammad" (1258) and "The Book of Mobammad's Ladder" (1264)*, trans. Reginald Hyatte (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997).

⁶ Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 154 n. 1025ff.

Islamic literature must be taken seriously as an influence on and source for medieval Christian literature: intellectual engagement with Islam went far beyond the caricatured Muslims of bad romances.⁷ Religious antipathy did not prevent medieval Christians from studying the sacred book of their enemies: Robert of Ketton's twelfth-century translation of the Qu'ran circulated widely and continued to be read into the early modern period. As Thomas Burman shows in his study of Latin translations of the Qu'ran, Robert of Ketton and other translators incorporated Islamic commentary into their translations and their glosses in order to elucidate obscure Qu'ranic passages, and in so doing they strove to understand a difficult, alien text in its own terms: Christian response to the text was not simply polemical—though it certainly was that—it was also deeply philological.⁸ Since medieval engagements with Islam are starting to be understood as doing more than simply recycling old stereotypes or caricaturing Muslims, Lasater's suggestion of al-Khidr as an analogue for the Green Knight must be more thoroughly considered.

As medievalists also turn, increasingly, to questions of postcolonialism, a reconsideration of the literary markers of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* possible engagement with the Islamic world in relation to the likely historical and political contexts of its composition may point us to a new, international reading of the poem. For, while literary study was turning up intriguing evidence of Islamic and international connections, historical scholarship showed that Chester had significant and sustained political and economic ties to the outside world. Though regional, Cheshire was not provincial in the sense of being on the cultural periphery of a national center. Ralph Hanna III suggests that London is best understood not as a central court setting a cultural model for the rest, but as the point of contact where regional court cultures intersected.⁹ In later work, Hanna goes further to decentralize London, suggesting that “before Chaucer, London may truly have been ‘provincial,’ among England's vernacular literary backwaters, just another locality,” as distressing as this may be to “master narratives of national culture

⁷Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).

⁸Thomas E. Burman, *Reading the Qu'ran in Latin Christendom, 1140–1560* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁹Ralph Hanna III, “Sir Thomas Berkeley and His Patronage,” *Speculum* 64.4 (1989): 878–916 (912–13).

[that] require that London reflect a universal metropolitanism.”¹⁰ Cheshire’s relation to the larger world thus need not be defined by its relation to London and the royal court. Michael Bennett’s invaluable study of fourteenth-century Chester shows that not only a number of the lords and military men had significant international experience, including in Muslim lands or the hybrid kingdoms of Spain, but also that Cheshire was firmly connected to the mercantile web that extended through and beyond Britain.¹¹ We suggest that a closer look at a number of the lords proposed as possible patrons for the *Gawain*-poet shows extensive international interests and experience. As Bennett argues, “The links between literary activity [in the northwest Midlands] and increasing mobility are all too evident. . . . Few works of the alliterative revival are provincial in their outlook.”¹²

As postcolonial readings have begun to suggest, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a border poem. **But the borders are not simply between Wales and England: Cheshire was affected by borders between England and Europe, Christendom and Dar al-Islam.** The possible link between al-Khidr and the Green Knight (even if inconclusive, given the elusiveness of the author and his poem) allows the poem to explore these boundaries and show how the chivalry of the young King Arthur and his court is profoundly shaped by an encounter that goes beyond his kingdom and even beyond Christendom. Yet the poet’s playfulness and delicate handling of the theme of the simultaneous allure and threat of the foreign mean that geopolitical allusions are provocative rather than programmatic statements for particular ideologies or interests. In proposing this reading, however, we emphasize an understanding of international encounters that depends upon regional politics. Cheshire’s international ties must be viewed within the context of multiple powerful aristocratic courts with their own foreign engagements. Thus our reading is not singular but several—we look at the courts of three possible patrons of the *Gawain*-poet—as the several courts provide intriguing contexts that give very different meanings to the poem’s international engagements. Nonetheless, one common thread runs through all three courts of the poem’s possible patrons: their surprising cosmopolitanism.

¹⁰ Ralph Hanna, *London Literature, 1300–1380* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2–3, xvii.

¹¹ Bennett, *Community, Class, and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹² Michael Bennett, “The Historical Background,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 79.

The Order of the Garter, Al-Khidr, and Saint George

A fruitful starting point for exploring *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s international engagements is the Order of the Garter. The unique manuscript of the poem ends with a variant of the motto of the Order of the Garter, "Honi soyt qui mal pence," in a medieval hand (perhaps scribal, perhaps added by an early reader).¹³ It urges readers not to think badly of Gawain, and it comments on the creation of a knightly honor out of ambiguous origins. Whether this explicit connection is intrinsic to the work or the result of reader response, it provides a powerful context for the poem, and recent criticism is increasingly persuaded that the poem should be considered as a *Garter poem*.¹⁴ Given the prestige and strong Arthurian associations of the Order of the Garter, and the thematic similarities in the poem, Leo Carruthers is almost certainly correct to conclude that "any English poet writing in the Arthurian mode at this date would necessarily see, and know that an aristocratic audience would see, a parallel between the Round Table and the Order of the Garter."¹⁵ While there is agreement about the importance of the Garter, there is not agreement about specific historical contexts involving the Garter that the poem may refer to, and thus suggested dates vary widely. Michael Bennett's contextualizing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the Ricardian period has been widely accepted, but more recently Francis Ingledew dates it to midcentury, arguing that a poem in which a society of the green girdle is founded out of an erotic test is in fact responding to reports of Edward III's rape of the Countess of Salisbury. In Ingledew's reading of the Order's motto, this alleged rape is also imbricated with the Order's founding as Edward tries to deflect such criticism. This dating would put the poem's composition close to the foundation of the Order of the Garter.

¹³Francis Ingledew, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" and the Order of the Garter (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 224 n. 10.

¹⁴Besides Ingledew, see Leo Carruthers, "The Duke of Clarence and the Earls of March: Garter Knights and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *MÆ* 70.1 (2001): 66–79; W. G. Cooke and D'Arcy J. D. Boulton, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: A Poem for Henry of Grosmont?" *MÆ* 68.1 (1999): 42–54; and Hugh E. L. Collins, *The Order of the Garter, 1348–1461: Chivalry and Politics in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 256–57. Ann R. Meyer notes that Edward and Thomas Despenser were both Knights of the Garter as she makes a case for their possible patronage in "The Despensers and the *Gawain* Poet: A Gloucestershire Link to the Alliterative Master of the Northwest Midlands," *ChauR* 35.4 (2001): 413–29.

¹⁵Carruthers, "Duke of Clarence," 66.

From the beginning, the Order of the Garter was an international Order, with “Stranger Knights” included since its founding in 1348. The Order of the Garter was modeled on the Castilian Order of the Band, whose device was worn as a baldric (like the green sash in the poem) and whose purpose was to restore knights to high chivalry because of the perception that men had fallen away from its ideals.¹⁶ Its founder, Alfonso, was Edward III’s cousin, and it is likely that Edward’s ambassadors Henry, earl of Derby, and William de Montague, earl of Salisbury, who went to Castile in 1343 and assisted Alfonso in the siege of Arab-held Algeciras, reported to Edward on the Order of the Band just before Edward decided to refound the Round Table—an idea that probably evolved into the Order of the Garter.¹⁷ Derby has been suggested as a possible patron of the *Gawain*-poet.¹⁸ If this reconstruction of the origins of the Order of the Garter is correct, the Order’s origin itself is imbricated with the politics of fighting against Muslim others. These politics would transfer as well to a Garter poem written close to the period of the Order’s founding.

However, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* need not be so linked to the Order’s founding to be associated with crusade against Islam. Attempts to pin down a date more precise than the second half of the fourteenth century remain speculative. While it is an intriguing historicization of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the connection Ingledew makes between the poem’s composition and Edward’s sex scandal requires a series of substitutions and even reversals (Gawain is substituted for Arthur so that Gawain can represent Edward, while the Lady’s seduction of Gawain is substituted for Edward’s rape of the Countess) that tend to detract from the historical parallels Ingledew tries to find. Ingledew himself concedes that the poem could well have been written later, and that other sex scandals may have prompted its “thematization of chastity,” including Edward’s later affair with Alice Perrers in the 1360s, Edward’s son John of Gaunt’s sexual promiscuity, or even the immorality of the Ricardian court.¹⁹ Since most critics consider the poem to be late Ricardian, we will propose possible political scenarios in that

¹⁶ D’Arcy J. D. Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown: The Monarchical Orders of Knighthood in Later Medieval Europe, 1325–1520* (Woodbridge: Boydell; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 52–53.

¹⁷ Boulton, *Knights of the Crown*, 109; Collins, *Order of the Garter*, 8.

¹⁸ Cooke and Boulton, “Poem for Henry of Grosmont?”

¹⁹ Ingledew, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” 94.

period; however, since English engagement with the Mediterranean and Islamic world was long-standing, an earlier date would change some specifics but not our overall argument.

It is the Order of the Garter's primary patron saint, George, that provides the connection to al-Khidr and the Green Knight.²⁰ Venerated not only throughout Latin Christendom but also in Orthodox Christian and Islamic lands, Saint George cannot be read as wholly English. In the fourteenth century, his adoption as patron saint of England was still fairly new—it was not until 1416 that Archbishop Chichele officially made Saint George's Day a high feast day to recognize him as patron saint of England and not just of the king and his knights.²¹ The elevation of Saint George was also part of a complex negotiation of England's (and Christendom's) relations to the east, since his origin was in the Levant, in Cappadocia, while the earliest accounts of him were in Greek, Coptic, and Syriac.²² He was known in England in Anglo-Saxon times, but it was the crusades that popularized his cult; several chronicles give stories of George's miraculous aid at Antioch and Jerusalem, and by the Third Crusade George had become the patron of English Crusaders.²³ Edward I made extensive use of Saint George in heraldry and pageantry in Britain, helping to make George a patron of the English beyond the

²⁰ While George was the primary patron of the Order of the Garter, Mary and Edward the Confessor were also patron saints. Gawain's devotion to Mary reinforces the poem's connection to the Garter.

²¹ Jonathan Bengtson, "Saint George and the Formation of English Nationalism," *JMEMS* 27.2 (1997): 317–40 (326).

²² For Saint George as a contested mediator between East and West during the Renaissance, see Jerry Brotton, "St. George Between East and West," in *Re-Orienting the Renaissance: Cultural Exchanges with the East*, ed. Gerald MacLean (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 50–65. For the history of George, see Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed. and trans., *The Martyrdom and Miracles of Saint George of Cappadocia: The Coptic Texts* (London: D. Nutt, 1888); and *St. George of Lydda, The Patron Saint of England: A Study of the Cultus of St. George in Ethiopia* (London: Luzac, 1930); John E. Matzke, "Contributions to the History of the Legend of Saint George, with Special Reference to the Sources of the French, German, and Anglo-Saxon Metrical Versions," Part 1 in *PMLA* 17.4 (1902): 464–535, and Part 2 in *PMLA* 18.1 (1903): 99–171; and "The Legend of Saint George: Its Development into a Roman d'Aventure," *PMLA* 19.3 (1904): 449–78.

²³ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 47; Matzke, "Contributions to the History of the Legend of Saint George," Part II, 150–56. For discussion of how George became England's patron saint, see Samantha Riches, *St George: Hero, Martyr, and Myth* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), 101–39; David Scott Fox, *Saint George: The Saint with Three Faces* (Shooter's Lodge, Berks.: Kensal Press, 1983), 59–96; Cornelia Steketee Hulst, *St. George of Cappadocia in Legend and History* (London: David Nutt, 1909), 40–58, 71–83; and Bengtson, "Saint George and the Formation of English Nationalism."

crusading context. The decision of his grandson Edward III, however, to give Saint George preeminence over native saints as patron of the Garter, including the royal Saint Edward the Confessor, lent a crusading glamour to the new society. Edward III was not alone, however, in turning to George for a patron of knighthood: the Hungarians had already founded a knightly order of Saint George, and early plans for the French Order of the Star had saints George and Mary as patrons (Mary was a secondary patron of the Garter).²⁴

Saint George was, then, always more than English. To understand *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a possible Garter poem, we need to recapture the medieval sense of George as being not quite English but rather a knight of crusade and foreign encounter.

This is especially true given that Saint George transcended Christianity. Muslim and Christian scholars considered Saint George and al-Khidr to be versions of each other. In medieval Anatolia, shrines dedicated to Saint George, to Saint Theodore, and to Elijah were slowly converted into Islamic shrines to al-Khidr after the Byzantine defeat at the hands of the Seljuk Turks at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. In that process of conversion these shrines became shared sacred spaces and, between the mid-thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries, al-Khidr became identified with the Christian saint and the Old Testament prophet.²⁵ In Turkey, al-Khidr's feast day is April 23, celebrated in Western Europe as Saint George's day.²⁶ That al-Khidr was linked to these Christian figures was known in the Middle Ages. In the late fourteenth century, the Byzantine Emperor Cantacuzenus wrote that Saint George was honored among the Muslims as "Χετηρ ἠλιός" [Khidr-Elias], and George of Hungary tells of "Chidrelles" in the early fifteenth century.²⁷ Haghia Sophia had its own "sweating column" associated with al-Khidr.²⁸ Since

²⁴ Boulton, *Knights of the Crown*, 174–77.

²⁵ Ethel Sara Wolper, "Khidr, Elwan Celebi, and the Conversion of Sacred Sanctuaries in Anatolia," *The Muslim World* 90.3/4 (2000): 309–22; Elizabeth Key Fowden, "Sharing Holy Places," *Common Knowledge* 8.1 (2002): 124–46; and Frederick [and Margaret] Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam Under the Sultans*, 2 vols. (New York: Octagon Books, 1932), 1:326–27, 320–36.

²⁶ Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam*, 1:320; Patrick Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären im traditionellen Islam* (Beirut: Orient-Institut der DMG; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000), 85.

²⁷ See Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam*, 1:322; Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr*, 3, 159; Carl Göllner, ed., *Chronica und Beschreibung der Türckey mit eyner Vorrhed D. Martini Lutheri* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1983), 57.

²⁸ Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam*, 1:10–11; Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr*, 266–69.

Constantinople was a major stop on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and lay on the Arm of Saint George, as the Hellespont was called, it is not hard to imagine curious English pilgrims bringing stories of George known in Constantinople back to England. **Something similar certainly happened in 1555, when the ambassador Ghiselin de Busbecq in Anatolia heard stories of al-Khidr, whom he and his Muslim hosts readily identified as Saint George.²⁹ Al-Khidr was also popular in Spain, offering a nearer location where English travelers might hear accounts of him.**

An immortal, being the only man to have drunk the water of life (which in some versions of the story turns him green), **al-Khidr predates Islam, going back as far, perhaps, as Sumeria.³⁰** Islam adopted him as a friend of God, and he became the guide for Alexander the Great in the eastern (Islamic) Alexander romances. In the Qu'ranic commentaries, he is linked to the unnamed figure in Sura 18 of the Qu'ran, to whom God sends Moses for instruction. Although Moses promises not to question al-Khidr but to learn humbly, he fails to keep his word when in a series of adventures al-Khidr acts inexplicably; in each case, unbeknown to Moses, al-Khidr has a benevolent reason. For instance, after they cross the sea with poor fishermen, al-Khidr destroys their boat: as al-Khidr later explains, a king was going to commandeer the fishermen's boat to invade the country. **Moses' rational horror at al-Khidr's actions in each case is shown to be misplaced, and al-Khidr thus demonstrates that God's benevolence exceeds human reason.** After his appearance in the Qu'ran, stories of encounters with al-Khidr spread. He appears in the *Arabian Nights*, stories that probably circulated widely in oral form, and may have been sources for Chaucer.³¹ As the stories spread, some fea-

²⁹ Interestingly, Busbecq did not recognize al-Khidr's association with Elijah (Elias) even though he heard the form Chedreles (Khidr-Elias); he declines the name as Chederle, Chederlis, Chederlem. Saint George, not Elijah, is thus the primary point of contact between the eastern and western traditions, and it is images of George that draw Muslims to "Greek" temples to venerate al-Khidr. See Busbecq, *Aug. Gisleinii Besbequii quae extant omnia; quibus accessit epitome de Moribus Turcarum* (London: R. Danielis, 1660), 52–54.

³⁰ The ninth-century historian al-Tabari surveys the Islamic al-Khidr tradition in *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. William Brinner, 40 vols. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 3:1–18. For modern studies, see Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr*; Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam*, 1:319–336; Israel Friedländer, *Die Chadirlegende und der Alexanderroman; eine sagengeschichtliche und literhistorische Untersuchung* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1913); and Irfan Omar, "Khidr in the Islamic Tradition," *The Muslim World* 83.3–4 (1993): 279–294.

³¹ Metlitzki, *Matter of Araby*, 159; see the headnote to *The Squire's Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 890.

tures became common: he is able to disguise himself (despite his name, he frequently does not appear as green), and he is a patron of travelers, attributes that fit the middle sections of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. An inscrutable figure of wisdom, he teaches people to see God's meaning in seemingly cruel or random events; he appears suddenly and vanishes to who-knows-where, much as the Green Knight is last seen going "Whiderwarde-soeuer he wolde" (2478).³²

Given his widespread popularity, it is unsurprising to find traces of al-Khidr and of Islamic legends of Saint George in Christian medieval literature. The *Gesta Romanorum*, a collection of stories in Latin compiled at the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century, includes a version of the story about al-Khidr and Moses from the Qu'ran, though the characters are Christianized into an angel and a hermit.³³ By 1498, William Caxton, although not mentioning al-Khidr, felt it necessary to expand the description of Saint George when he published his translation of Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*: probably drawing on an earlier fifteenth-century manuscript of the *Gilte Legende*, he adds details about Saint George's tomb as a place where Saracens go to be cured of madness, before noting George's status as protector of England and patron of the Order of the Garter.³⁴ Thus, for Caxton, George was a saint owing associations both to the East and the West, performing miracles for Christians and Muslims. The Islamic version of Saint George had fully entered Western European consciousness by the late seventeenth century at the latest when Barthélemy d'Herbelot compiled his massive *Bibliothèque Orientale* with entries on George, al-Khidr, and Elias or Elijah, noting the conflation of these three figures in the Islamic tradition.³⁵ Thus, in his familiar guise of

³²These traits are described in Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam*, 1:320, and Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr*, 23–35. All quotations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from Andrew and Waldron, eds., *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), and cited parenthetically by line numbers.

³³Tale LXXX, "Of the Cunning of the Devil, and of the Secret Judgments of God," in *Gesta Romanorum*, trans. Charles Swan (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1905), 194–96.

³⁴Manfred Gurläch, "The South English Legendary," "Gilte Legende," and "Golden Legend" (Braunschweig: Technische Universität Carolo-Wilhelmina zu Braunschweig Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1972), 92–93; *Legenda Aurea* (London: William Caxton, 1483), STC (2nd ed.) 24873, leaves clvii–clix.

³⁵D'Herbelot's entry on George reads: "George & en particulier saint-George, Martyr, fort connu dans l'Orient & même par les Mahometans, qui le mettent au nombre des Prophetes & le confondent avec Elie; car ils lui donnent le nom ou surnom de Khedherles & de Khizir Elia, qui est celuy du Prophete Elie." *Bibliothèque Orientale*, ou

militant saint and patron saint of the crusaders, Saint George mediated a military form of East-West contact, while his assimilation into the tradition of al-Khidr involved him in a far more complex set of negotiations between Islamic and western Christian identities.

Saint George's appropriation by Islam might lead the *Gawain*-poet, mindful of the Garter, to the enigmatic figure of al-Khidr. He might explain the Green Knight's greenness, which has not been definitively derived from the British or Celtic traditions. The mature, civilized Bertilak does not make a fully convincing woodwose or wild green man, even if elements of his description may be drawn from them.³⁶ Woodwoses tend to be young, they do not have their own courts, and when Gawain meets woodwoses on his journey (721), there is no evident connection to the Green Knight.³⁷ Nicolas Jacobs concludes that while the beheading game most probably comes from the Celtic tradition, the greenness "is a secondary development in the English poem and designed to make a particular thematic point unconnected with any of the [French or Irish] analogues."³⁸ Al-Khidr—green, immortal, teacher of divine grace through actions that initially seem hostile, master of disguise, unexpected host in the wilderness, and representative of countries ancient and sophisticated in comparison to the relatively young England—seems a better fit than green men. It is thus possible that the Green Knight combines a Celtic tradition with Islamicized legends of Saint George.

Fourteenth-century English interest in Saint George was growing rapidly. After George became patron of the Garter, "England was caught up in a kind of George-mania," in Jonathan Bengtson's words.³⁹ It is possible that this is when Saint George became a fixture in Christmas mummers' plays, in which a character is often killed and brought back to life, which have been discussed in connection with *Sir Gawain*

Dictionnaire Universel Contenant Tout ce qui fait connoître les Peuples de l'Orient (J. Neaulme and N. van Daalen, 1777–79), vol. 2 (1782): 109, sig. O3.

³⁶Derek Brewer, "The Colour Green," in *Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Brewer and Gibson, 181–89; in the same volume, see Helen Cooper, "The Supernatural," 286–87; Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 167–68. For a counterview, see Piotr Sadowski, "The Greenness of the Green Knight: A Study in Medieval Colour Symbolism," *Ethnologia Polona* 15–16 (1991): 61–79.

³⁷See Lasater, *Spain to England*, 185–86.

³⁸Nicolas Jacobs, "Fled Bricrenn and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in "Fled Bricrenn": *Reassessments*, ed. Pádraig Ó Riain (London: Irish Texts Society, 2000), 43.

³⁹Bengtson, "Saint George and the Formation of English Nationalism," 328.

and the *Green Knight*.⁴⁰ In a climate of “George-mania,” Englishmen seeking stories of Saint George would likely also discover stories of al-Khidr, green, wise, and inscrutable. They would also find stories of Saint George’s severed head, which Richard II sought as a relic. The head was in Livadia in central Greece, which was controlled by the Catalan Grand Company, a group of Aragonese and Catalan mercenaries who had come to Asia Minor to fight the Turks.⁴¹ In 1393, it was reported that the alleged owner of the head was interested in selling it to Richard II. This came to nothing, and ultimately the head passed into the possession of the Venetians. (The Order of the Garter finally acquired a relic of Saint George when Emperor Sigismund donated his heart to the English in 1416).⁴² Looking for relics of George in the Levant and the Iberian Peninsula would have meant English and European contact with eastern traditions of Saint George, both Orthodox and Islamic, and with them stories of al-Khidr. While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is much more than a topical poem, it may have coalesced in an environment where tales of Saint George’s head, the Order of the Garter, and al-Khidr, Saint George’s green avatar, were all circulating. Nonetheless, the appearance of al-Khidr in a western English poem is not simply the product of one-time circumstance but is part of the negotiation of important, long-term relationships between England and the older, eastern Mediterranean powers.

The Geography of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

If *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’s original courtly audience recognized the Green Knight as al-Khidr, then the geographic engagements of the poem shift. Medievalists approaching *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from postcolonial perspectives have so far focused on internal colonization, particularly relations between England and Wales. While this has been a productive and illuminating approach, there is also a need to put

⁴⁰E. K. Chambers suggests a link between the Green Knight and sword dances, rather than the closely related mummers’ plays (*The Medieval English Stage* [Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1996], 186 n. 1, 211–27). Sir James Frazier, of course, analyzes the “Green George” as a vegetation spirit, providing, perhaps, a vague mythological link to the Green Knight (*The New Golden Bough*, ed. Theodor Gaster [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1961], 47).

⁴¹Details of the competition for Saint George’s head comes from Kenneth Setton, “Saint George’s Head,” *Speculum* 48.1 (1973): 1–12.

⁴²Collins, *Order of the Garter*, 224–25.

the poem in an international context, one in which England is not a self-evident center of culture. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* opens with the fall of Troy, not only a temporal disjunction from the rest of the poem but one that hints at an eastern perspective:

Sipen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,
 . . .
 Hit watz Ennias þe athel and his highe kynde,
 Ðat sipen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicom
 Welneȝe of al þe wele in þe west iles.

(1, 5–7)

The “west iles” founded by Aeneas and his descendants include not just Britain but also Rome, Tuscany, and Lombardy, western not from the perspective of England but of the Near East.

Medieval England imagined itself not as the center of the world but on the edge of it. Medieval maps of the world centered on Jerusalem or Rome, with England on the margins, as Kathy Lavezzo notes: “We can cite literary examples of this trend as well, from the time of Bede, who describes Britain as ‘an island sundered so far from the rest of mankind’ in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (721), to the time of the Gawain-poet, who locates Britain ‘fer ouer þe French flod’ in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1375–1400). The English were not simply self-conscious of their marginality in the Middle Ages; English writers and cartographers actively participated in the construction of England as a global borderland.”⁴³ When the Green Knight asks scornfully, “What, is þis Arþures house . . . / Ðat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?” (309–10), it may not be a matter of a metropolitan fame reaching the hinterlands, but of a distant kingdom’s fame reaching more central realms. If the Green Knight’s depiction owes something to the multivalent Saint George/al-Khidr, with his roots nearer the center of the medieval map, his curiosity in testing Arthur’s court seems less presumptuous, and his violation of the court’s protocols may have less to do with wildness than with arrogant cultural superiority.

That the poem opens with Arthur’s British court, at the end of a sequence that rehearses the establishment of various successor kingdoms of Troy, suggests the climax of a western *translatio imperii*. On the other

⁴³Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels at the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000–1534* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 7.

hand, its placement at the end of successive displacements also suggests its youthfulness and untested mettle, as the Green Knight's dismissive characterization of Arthur and his court indicates, especially when compared to more ancient civilizations in the East. As Iain Higgins has shown, the East—the location of Eden, Jerusalem, Troy, and Rome—was seen as the place of origin in medieval culture: “The East as it was known to Latin Christendom between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries . . . was the fertile ground of an imagined community's noblest hopes, wildest dreams, and worst fears—at once the distant source of its chivalry, learning, and historical covenant with God, the outlandish source of its most sacred, coveted and finally unattainable sites, and the slowly expanding theater of its most reverent, bewildered, disgraceful and disturbing encounters with Otherness.”⁴⁴ Arthurian literature was one way of mediating between native British pride and the awareness of eastern origins.

Sylvia Federico argues: “Sometimes Arthurianism is viewed as a native tradition, one that supports the notion of a home-grown British hero, whereas Trojanness, by contrast, takes on the flavor of the foreign, exotic, decadent Other. But just as easily, Arthurianism may be glossed as a bit rough—uncivilized and “out-there”—compared to the fashionableness and sophistication of Troy and its European offspring.”⁴⁵ In any case, Arthur's court is one of many, compared both to rival continental European courts as well as to all these courts' ultimate origins in the East.⁴⁶ The result, as Kathy Lavezzo suggests, is that “isolated England requires the validating desire of authorities hailing from world capitals. England cannot authorize itself . . . but requires the legitimizing approval of the center.”⁴⁷ In some works, legitimacy comes from Rome—either imperial desire for English conquest or papal desire for English conversion—or from further east, with the Trojans or Joseph of Arimathea. In medieval romance, often it is Constantinople, the second Rome. As Geraldine Heng argues, Constantinople is the “magical location that precedes, and haunts, medieval Europe, and Europe's capacity to envi-

⁴⁴ Iain MacLeod Higgins, *Writing East: The “Travels” of Sir John Mandeville* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 5.

⁴⁵ Sylvia Federico, *New Troy: Fantasies of Empire in the Late Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 58–59.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xii; cf. Thorlac Turville-Petre, “The Brutus Prologue to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” in *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*, ed. Kathy Lavezzo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 345.

⁴⁷ Lavezzo, *Angels at the Edge of the World*, 87.

sion aureal places, majestic grandeur, and a puissant past under threat” and thus functions “as a point of orientation,” serving, for instance, as the model for Arthur’s Caerleon (later Camelot) in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History*.⁴⁸ Reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with the possibility of Islamic borrowing in mind allows us to see how the poem dramatizes Britain’s relation to the larger world, especially the old and great Mediterranean civilizations.

While the poem’s opening harks back to the mythic origins of Arthur and the British, it also has contemporary geopolitical resonances. If *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is in some ways looking east at the Byzantine Empire, as Heng’s argument for Constantinople’s centrality in medieval romance might suggest, it was looking at a Byzantine Empire whose territory was steadily encroached upon by the Ottomans. Constantinople was besieged long before its fall in 1453, with the Seljuk Turks’ victory at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 being the signal event that started the decline of the Byzantine Empire. Indeed, the victory of Timur the Lame over the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid in 1402, which temporarily halted the Ottoman advance, was welcomed by Europeans who saw the Mongols as God’s scourge on the Turks. In the fourteenth century, ancient Troy was located in lands that were in the hands of the Ottomans. Some European authors and artists trying to discover the origins of these Central Asian peoples associated the Turks with Trojans both geographically and historically. In the seventh century, Pseudo-Jerome traced Turks back to a Trojan named Torquatus.⁴⁹ The association between Turk and Trojan, though contested in historical writing, nonetheless became strong enough that from the late fourteenth century

⁴⁸Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 9.

⁴⁹James Harper, “Turks as Trojans; Trojans as Turks,” in *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages*, ed. Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 151–79. Other scholars also note the medieval idea of Trojan origins of the Turks: A. Eckhardt, “La Légende de l’origine troyenne des Turcs,” *Körösi Csoma Archivum* 2 (1926–32): 422–33; T. Spencer, “Turks and Trojans in the Renaissance,” *MLR* 47 (1952): 330–33; S. Runciman, “Teucris and Turci,” in *Medieval and Middle Eastern Studies in Honor of Aziz Suryal Atiya*, ed. S. A. Hanna (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 344–48. For a contrary opinion, see Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 26–64: Meserve argues that in the Renaissance the idea was not as widespread as believed and largely confined to poetic texts, while in the Middle Ages the idea was contested and had lost its credibility by the start of the fifteenth century in serious historical writing. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not of course historical writing but a narrative poem.

into the fifteenth, artists depicted Trojans dressed as Turks. In one early example, an illustrated manuscript from Castile dated 1350, the Trojans are given *morisco* costumes (we shall have more to say about possible connections between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Castile).⁵⁰ Indeed, the Trojan connection was invoked in a spurious letter to the pope purportedly from a Muslim ruler, “Sultan Morbisanus,” calling for him to call off the crusade because they are both descended from Trojans; revived many times over a century, the earliest version is dated 1345 and addressed to Pope Clement VI (r. 1342–1352), who in 1344 was directing a crusade against Smyrna, capital of the Turkish emirate of Aydin.⁵¹ While this letter is part of an antipapal agenda, the invocation of the Trojan Turks suggests a capacity to consider Muslim foes within a classical framework that links Europeans with Turks. Even if ultimately meant to satirize the pope by claiming his kinship with Muslim foes, the spurious letter presents a different view of Turkish or Muslim enemies, perhaps making possible a double perspective of them as both foreign and kin. Since a number of sources and analogues of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have a black or Turkish challenger, this mix of foreignness and kinship might have suggested to the *Gawain*-poet the intriguing possibilities of delicate allusions to George’s Islamic avatar.

While the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* places Arthur’s court in a large, globalized expanse of place and time, quickly reviewing the cycles of history, the Green Knight’s arrival makes these concerns more specific. When the Green Knight arrives to test the “surqudrye” (311) of the young court, his role as a mature man in contrast to the “berdlez chylder” (280) of the court could be read as a test of the young British civilization in front of the challenging eyes of the older Mediterranean civilizations, a personalizing of the narrative of historical transition of Trojan honor from East to West. His flamboyant entrance is wild, but it may be the wildness of arrogant cultural superiority, not primitiveness. It is suggestive of Farīd ad-Dīn ‘Attār’s story of al-Khidr, who humbles human pride by reminding kings of the cyclic nature of history. In the guise of a camel driver, al-Khidr comes to the court of

⁵⁰ Harper, “Turks as Trojans,” 157–58.

⁵¹ MS Florence, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Ashburnham 1182, fols. 51v–53r, letter from “Morbosiano” to Clement VI; a version printed in *Prose antiche di Dante, Petrarca, Boccaccio et di molti altri nobili et virtuosi ingegni*, ed. A. F. Doni (Florence, 1547), 15–16 (Meserve, *Empires of Islam*, 36, 272 n. 61; part of a later version is also quoted on 35–36).

Ibrāhīm Adham, shocking the servants into speechlessness. He calls the palace an inn, prompting the king's indignant demand for an explanation. When al-Khidr asks about previous owners of the palace, Ibrāhīm recites his lineage, but al-Khidr, unimpressed, repeats that the palace is an inn because it is simply a place where men stay briefly as they come and go out of this life.⁵² In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Green Knight's refusal to respect the court, the knights' stunned silence, and the introduction's emphasis on the quick cycles of previous reigns in British history all resemble this story, although Arthur (perhaps initially more perceptive than Ibrāhīm) identifies himself as "Þe hede of þis ostel" (253).

Geraldine Heng suggests that through romance Europeans understood the sometimes horrifying experiences of the crusades, and managed instances of their own barbarity in contrast to Islamic civility, by repressing fractures of Christian savagery into such *unheimlich* figures as giants.⁵³ Through a crisis of alienation, the Christian European self was represented as a monstrous giant—to the Byzantines and to the Arabs, the Latins seemed an impressive size, and moreover, the cannibalism associated with giants recalls a dearth that led to Christians eating the dead in the First Crusade. While Heng does not treat *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is no surprise that the Green Knight himself seems "Half-etayn" (140) and, like other giants of medieval romance, both strange and familiar.⁵⁴ However, the poet quickly abandons the idea that he is a giant and instead marks the signs of his civility, especially his fine clothing. The fact that the Green Knight is civilized and comes in peace means that he is not simply a figure of crusade but of social

⁵² Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār, *The "Ulābī-nāma" or Book of God of Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār*, trans. John Andrew Boyle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), 235–36. 'Attār also includes a brief story of Saint George (Jirjis) and a story of al-Khidr in which the old sage Khālū confronts a young man who believes himself pure with the crushing awareness of sin; al-Khidr reproves the sage with the suggestive metaphor "do not smite him with that deadly blade" (272). 'Attār was popular in the Muslim east, and although no direct chain of transmission has been established, there has long been speculation about his influence in Middle English verse. Walter Skeat cites his work as providing an analogue of *The Pardoner's Tale*, and perhaps his best-known work, *Manteq at-Tair* [*The Conference of Birds*] is close to *The Parlement of Foules*. See Skeat, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed., 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), 3:444; and Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis's introduction to *The Conference of Birds*, ed. and trans. Darbandi and Davis (New York: Penguin, 1984), 20–21.

⁵³ Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 21–35.

⁵⁴ See also Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Metlitzki, *Matter of Araby*, 192–97.

engagement with the East, just as Saint George as reflected in the Green Knight is not just a crusader but a point of contact between Muslim and Christian legends. These complex religious undertones underlie the poem's narrative arc, in which war is deflected into a game of trading. The Green Knight comes to a court that actively desires him as an outsider, as an embodiment of an "auenturus þyng, an vncoupe tale / Of sum mayn meruayle" (93–94) against which the court can define itself. The paradoxical position of an outsider with a place reserved at court leads to the uncertainty of whether the Green Knight is friend or foe, whether the contest is game or combat. The same tension is implicit in a court that on the one hand measures its wealth by eastern goods—"tars tapites" (77), Gawain's "dublet of a dere tars" (571), and his pentangle, which is a sign of Solomon (625)—but on the other hand represents in its chivalry a militant Christianity that saw crusading as the greatest calling for a knight. Arthur's urge for crusade is plain: he continues to offer battle even after the Green Knight declares that he comes in peace (275–78).

If the Green Knight's intrusion into Arthur's court and the violence of the beheading game shadow the heady fear and exhilaration of crusade, Sir Gawain's stay in Bertilak's court represents the temptations of more peaceful coexistence. This suggests that it may be worth revisiting one of the central questions raised by the poem, how best to read the relation between the two courts, Arthur's and Bertilak's. The regionality of the poem has been read through a postcolonial lens in a number of valuable recent studies analyzing Sir Gawain's travel in the west by the borders of Wales either as an exploration of colonial border hybridization or as a way of addressing the tension between regional lords and the royal court. Critics assume Hautdesert is the provincial court, arising out of the *Gawain*-poet's Cheshire milieu. Within this analytic, Hautdesert is read as a court in the borderlands, on the Welsh fringes, a satellite to the central court. In turn, Camelot as center functions as the arbiter of national or protonational values that are challenged by those of the margins. In her analysis of alliterative revivals, Christine Chism depicts the Green Knight as "provincial outsider to Arthur's court" and argues that the poem plays out a conflict "between a royal court becoming increasingly alienated from traditional seigneurial modes of chivalry and a conservative and insecure provincial gentry, whose status, livelihoods, and careers were increasingly coming to depend on careers at the

royal court.”⁵⁵ This sort of reading has been particularly compelling for recent work applying postcolonial theory to medieval works. Patricia Ingham’s *Sovereign Fantasies* reads medieval Arthurian romances as accounts of how “medieval community is imagined not through homogeneous stories of a singular ‘people,’ but through narratives of sovereignty as a negotiation of differences, of ethnicity, region, language, class, and gender.”⁵⁶ In her reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Ingham locates Bertilak’s court in Wales with the Green Knight as the “exotic other” to Arthur’s “centralized” Camelot, whose “opulence . . . links explicitly to the colonizing impulse of European desires.”⁵⁷

However, the insular context is not the only context. If we see the Green Knight as drawing on Saint George/al-Khidr, a number of postcolonial dynamics are altered or reversed. While England’s relations with Wales were indeed colonial, colonial language simply cannot describe relations with the powerful Islamic east. Instead of the straightforward greed of future colonizers, British desire for eastern goods is the more troubled one of a culturally backward society for the products of richer and more powerful lands. In a genuinely global context, Arthur’s court is not the self-evident cultural center and might in fact be inferior; hence the Green Knight’s challenge becomes far more pressing. Rather than the self-satisfied gesture of colonizers, the court’s adoption of the green girdle is an acknowledgment of weakness in the face of sophisticated foreign courts. Rather than a securely superior Arthur, the poem insists on the Green Knight/Bertilak’s greater civility and refinement. The Green Knight’s rich clothing, lovingly detailed by the poet, rivals the opulence of Arthur’s court, while Bertilak’s castle, although located in “countrayez straunge” (713), is as modern as any, and described as “A castel þe comlokest þat euer knyȝt aȝte” (767). Indeed, the superiority (and maturity) of the Green Knight/Bertilak allows the testing of Arthur’s youthful court. The evidence of Bertilak’s sophistication fits an alternative international reading where Arthur’s court, ambitious but

⁵⁵ Christine Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 66.

⁵⁶ Patricia Clare Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 9. See also Helen Young, “‘Bi contray caryez this knyght’: Journeys of Colonisation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Philament*, 2003 (<http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament>); and Rhonda Knight, “All Dressed Up with Someplace to Go: Regional Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *SAC* 25 (2003): 259–84.

⁵⁷ Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*, 124, 127–28.

young, is considered in relation to the eastern Mediterranean with its richer, older Islamic culture.

The identification of Bertilak with Wales comes from just one stanza in Fitt II with Welsh place-names. While the geography of the journey Gawain takes may be inspired by northern marshes, the space itself is marked by foreignness more than anything else. The Welsh stanza is the middle of three stanzas describing Gawain's arduous journey. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron point out that the "beginning and the end . . . are clouded in a romantic vagueness,"⁵⁸ a vagueness that contrasts sharply with the geographical precision of the Welsh stanza. Ingham asserts that Gawain traces a "journey westward,"⁵⁹ but while Gawain does enter Wales from Logres, the later sequence of place-names indicates that Gawain is on an eastward path back out of Wales: "Alle þe iles of Anglesay on lyft half he [Gawain] haldez / And farez ouer þe fordez by þe forlondez; / Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk / In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrle" (698–701). Andrew and Waldron offer this note: "Gawain's journey takes him to Caernarvon and eastwards along the north coast of Wales. A fourteenth-century map in the Bodleian Library shows the usual route as passing through Bangor, Conway, Abergele, Rhuddlan, and Flint."⁶⁰ Wherever the Green Knight or his Chapel may be, it is not in Wales. In the next stanza, Gawain has passed beyond the named landmarks into "contrayez straunge" (713). There is no compelling reason to insist that the "contrayez straunge" are on the main island of Britain: there are evidently water-crossings, as Gawain is "fer floten fro his frendez" (714) and fights at each "warþe oþer water þer þe wyðe passed" (715).⁶¹ The poet seems no stranger to sea travel; in *Patience*, the speaker uses as a casual example his lord bidding him "Oþer to ryde oþer to renne to Rome" (52) and he takes for granted the unmentioned sea portion of the trip. Thus it is not necessary to restrict critical focus only to the Anglo-Welsh border, especially since

⁵⁸ Andrew and Waldron, eds. *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 234 n. 698ff.

⁵⁹ Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies*, 116.

⁶⁰ Andrew and Waldron, eds. *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 234 n. 698ff. For the Gough map, they cite E. J. S. Parsons, *The Map of Great Britain Circa 1360, Known as The Gough Map: An Introduction to the Facsimile*, with "The Roads of the Gough Map" by Sir Frank Stenton (Oxford: Printed for the Bodleian Library and the Royal Geographical Society by the University Press, 1958).

⁶¹ The *Middle English Dictionary* cites this line as an example of a more metaphorical use of the verb *fleten* (to float), as meaning "to move away from." Given the "water" and the "warþe" [shore] of the next line, the more literal meaning is to be preferred, even at the price of unsettling interpretive habit. See *MED* *fleten*, v.(1) 3.(a) (a).

there are reasons to read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a more cosmopolitan poem than it is usually assumed to be.

The Geographies of *Sir Gawain's* Audiences

The argument for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* cosmopolitanism is bolstered by its geographical origins, for Cheshire men traveled widely domestically and internationally. The poem's international engagements would have resonated with upper-class English audiences, but generalizing beyond that is dangerous. Different regions and different nobles had differing relations to the larger world. The extent of the variation can be suggested by looking at three courts that have been suggested as venues for the *Gawain*-poet's activities: Richard II's, John of Gaunt's, and Sir John Stanley's.

Favoring Cheshiremen and speaking their dialect, Richard II turned in the 1390s to the Midlands and the newly created principality of Chester, making the region a cultural center (as well as a geographic center convenient to Wales and Ireland as well as England) from which to challenge London.⁶² Patricia Ingham's and Christine Chism's arguments about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* colonial subtext are most convincing in the context of Richard's dislocations of traditional structures of power, but Richard's recentering of England can alternatively be viewed from an international perspective. The king's court was not the magnificent center of the kingdom that it would grow to be under the Tudors, although Richard II attempted (largely successfully) to magnify the role of the king's court during his reign, with increasing formality of address, distinction of rank, and use of pageants, as part of a Europe-wide trend that may have started with the Islamic-Christian hybrid court of Frederick II of Sicily.⁶³ While royal courts may have served as regional centers, the borrowing of courtly customs back and forth shows that kings and courtiers were aware of themselves not as occupiers of the cultural center but as part of a web of royal courts competing for cultural primacy. The royal court may be seen as *primus inter pares* with strongly influential baronial courts that constituted rival cultural cen-

⁶²John M. Bowers, *The Politics of "Pearl": Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 73–76; Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 393–94; 444–45.

⁶³Saul, *Richard II*, 328–47.

ters—and, as Richard moved away from London, the city itself would be another rival center.

Using provincial support, Richard fashioned an imperial monarchy, and in doing so he sought election to the Holy Roman Empire and flirted with the idea of a crusade. Michael Bennett argues: “His [Richard II’s] kingship may have been peripatetic and regionally based in the 1390s, but it was universalist in ambition. Drawing inspiration from the ‘matter of Britain’, and from auspicious challenges and opportunities in Christendom, he was willing to be flattered into considering, if not into actively pursuing, a grand crusading vision,” and furthermore, “In 1395 and 1396 the king became a focus for the ambitions and hopes of men who looked to peace and reconciliation of Christendom as a prelude to a counter-assault on the Turks and the ultimate recovery of the Holy Land.”⁶⁴ Aziz Suryal Atiya has shown that crusading continued through the fourteenth century, with conflict with the Muslims exacerbated by the rise of the Ottomans; the English themselves joined forces with the French in 1396 for the key (failed) crusade of Nicopolis against the Turks.⁶⁵ Nicopolis was the culmination of a series of Europe-wide diplomatic endeavors in the later fourteenth century that had its impetus in the fall of Armenia in 1375. The last king of Armenia, Levon VI, was seeking help from England and France to mount a crusade to retake his country—the last part of the Levant to be in Christian hands—from the Muslims. As part of his efforts, he tried to broker peace between England and France, split over the papal schism. Richard II received Levon royally to his court at the end of 1385; the matter of Armenia became of some importance to the English, and allusions to Armenia were woven into the literature of the period, including Chaucer’s.⁶⁶ Levon also had a strong supporter in Philippe de Mézières, adviser to Charles V and tutor to Charles VI, who started a chivalric order, the Order of the Passion, to heal the schism and to campaign for the recovery of the holy lands. Mézières had links to many European courts and his order

⁶⁴Michael J. Bennett, “Richard II and the Wider Realm,” in *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. Anthony Goodman and James Gillespie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 204, 197.

⁶⁵Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (New York: Kraus Reprint, 1938), 435–62; and *The Crusade of Nicopolis* (London: Methuen, 1934), 44–45.

⁶⁶Carolyn P. Collette and Vincent J. DiMarco, “The Matter of Armenia in the Age of Chaucer,” *SAC* 23 (2001): 317–58; Lee Patterson, “‘The Living Witnesses of Our Redemption’: Martyrdom and Imitation in Chaucer’s *Prioress’s Tale*,” *JMEMSt* 31.3 (2001): 507–60 (540).

included Englishmen: the Despenser brothers, the earls of Huntingdon and Rutland, the dukes of York and Gloucester, John of Gaunt, and Chaucer's friend Lewis Clifford.⁶⁷ The famous Wilton Diptych, Maurice Keen argues, may be a crusading icon.⁶⁸ Richard and his court were very much aware of the Turkish threat. Richard was present at the October 1, 1397, reinterment of John Mowbray, killed by Turks outside Constantinople in 1368; sending an embassy to Constantinople in 1397, he received a letter in return from the Byzantine emperor, Manuel II, asking for help against the Turks, and though unable to comply, Richard promised troops the following year.⁶⁹ The crusading fever infected others in England as well. After relinquishing his claims to Castile, John of Gaunt became more sympathetic to peace with France and worked with Richard to effect peace in Christendom as a start toward crusading.⁷⁰

Michael Bennett argues that Richard's "sense of providential mission was nourished by a tradition of prophecy which linked English history with its British and Arthurian past" and that his Irish expedition in 1394–95 in particular seems linked to the prophecy in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie* that the king who conquers Ireland will regain the Holy Land.⁷¹ One prophetic text current in the 1390s, *The Verses of Gildas*, predicts for the king an astonishing career that culminates in a crusade against the Muslims: as Bennett describes it, "After the conquest of Ireland, the king would defeat the Scots and suppress revolt in Gascony. On his return to England, he would honour the lords who sought his grace but exile the malcontents. The king would conquer France, march through Spain and north Africa, subdue Egypt, and

⁶⁷ Collette and DiMarco, "Matter of Armenia," 348; see also Lynn Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 129–37. For Mézières's life and career, see Abdel Hamid Hamdy, "Philippe de Mézières and the New Order of the Passion," *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* (Alexandria University) 18 (1964): 45–54; A. H. Hamdy, ed., *La substance de la chevalerie de la passion de Jhesu Crist*, *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts* (Alexandria University) 18, pts. 1 and 2 (1963): 45–55, 1–104; N. Jorga, *Philippe de Mézières 1327–1405. La croisade au XIVe siècle* (Paris, 1890); G. W. Coopland, ed., *Philippe de Mézières: Le songe du vieil pelerin*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and Coopland, ed. and trans., *Philippe de Mézières: Letter to Richard II* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1975).

⁶⁸ M. Keen, "The Wilton Diptych: The Case for a Crusading Context," in *The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych*, ed. Dillian Gordon, Lisa Monnas, and Caroline Elam (London: Harvey Miller, 1997), 189–96.

⁶⁹ Michael Bennett, *Richard II and the Revolution of 1399* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 110, 124.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 73–74.

advance triumphantly on Babylon. After the recovery of the Holy Land, and after the pope had thrice offered to crown him, he would finally accept coronation as the emperor of the world."⁷² This prophecy influenced the clerk who wrote a French letter-book in the late 1390s that included a letter dated October 13, 1395, from Richard to John of Gaunt asking about the state of Ireland. In further model letters, an exchange between John and his nephew includes news from the nephew about his father, John's brother, "who was 'in the parts of Babylon' with a very fine company. The army had torched the land around Alexandria and won a great victory in an open field near Cairo. Many Saracens had been slain, and the sultan of Babylon had been taken prisoner, 'to the great honour of our lord liege the king' and 'all the chivalry of England.'"⁷³

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight subtly refers to a number of these issues. The detail of rich Armenian carpets surrounding Guinevere in the poem—"of tars tapites innoghe" (77)—is too slight to be an insistent allusion, but with the poet's playfulness it could invoke for some readers the Armenian context.⁷⁴ For those deeply concerned with Armenia and its plight at the hands of the Muslims, the poet's mention of Tars is a reminder of the desirability of eastern goods even as the challenge plot of the poem has a British king confronting a potentially Islamic rival who is ambiguously both hostile and friendly. The representation of Arthur in his youth may be a comment on Richard, who ascended the throne as a minor. If the poem is in part responding to the millenarian aspects of Richard's reign, then the entry of the Green Knight becomes a test of Richard's Roman imperial desires. By testing Arthur's desire for a challenge with a figure of Islamic provenance, the poem asks its audience to consider the worthiness of Richard's call for crusade. In comparing the strength of the Green Knight with Arthur,

⁷²Bennett, "Richard II and the Wider Realm," 202; Bennett cites J. R. S. Philipps, "Edward II and the Prophets," in *England in the Fourteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1985 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. W. M. Ormrod (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1986), 189–201 (194).

⁷³British Library Harley MS 3988, fols. 39–41; cited in Bennett, "Richard II and the Wider Realm," 203. For both Gildas and the French letter-book, see also Bennett, *Richard II and the Revolution of 1399*, 73–74.

⁷⁴Lilian Hornstein shows that "Tars" refers generally in Middle English to Tartary, from the city Tauris, which is modern Tabriz in Iran, or to Tarsus, which is in Lesser or Cilician Armenia, the part of Armenia in Christian hands until 1375. See Lilian Hornstein, "The Historical Background of *The King of Tars*," *Speculum* 15 (1941): 404–14.

and finally finding Arthur's court somewhat wanting, the poem suggests that Richard may be playing at something he does not fully comprehend. Arthur's commitment to participating in the Green Knight's challenge nearly results in the death of a knight. The subtle and witty representation of Gawain's stay at Bertilak's court—where he is both in enemy territory and yet treated as an honored guest—suggests the tension inherent in Cheshiremen's travel abroad, where they might trade with as well as fight in crusades against Muslims. The Islamic east becomes the figure both of fulfillment of ambition and threat to Richard/Arthur. While the international aspects of the encounter between a great, young English king and an ambiguous figure tied to both the crusading Saint George and the powerful al-Khidr of Islam would have resonated with Richard's court, it would be hard to construe it as flattering. Richard II would have wanted the poem to be not about a young marginal king acknowledged by central powers but about a young king recognized as ready to become central.

The reception of the poem in Richard's court would not have been the same as in John of Gaunt's, whose court, since he was Duke of Lancaster and Knight of the Garter, was one likely venue for the *Gawain*-poet.⁷⁵ For John of Gaunt, the Green Knight would be interesting for his hybridity and ties to Spain. John's extensive ties to Iberia date from at least 1367, when he participated in an expedition in support of Pedro the Cruel. Iberia was a border zone, widely thought of as "a liminal area, the border where crusading activity took place; it was also the margin of Europe that separated Christians and Muslims."⁷⁶ Angus MacKay documents thorough cultural diffusion across the Castilian-Granadan frontier in the late Middle Ages.⁷⁷ Not only did Spain have an Islamic tradition of its own, but also it was the maritime link between England and Mediterranean markets such as Sicily, Tunis, and Alexan-

⁷⁵Bennett, "The Historical Background," 82–83; Elizabeth Salter, "Piers Plowman and Alliterative Poetry," in *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art, and Patronage of Medieval England*, ed. Derek Pearsall and Nicolette Zeeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 106–10.

⁷⁶María Bullón-Fernández, "Not All Roads Lead to Rome: Anglo-Iberian Exchanges in the Middle Ages," in *England and Iberia in the Middle Ages, 12th–15th Century: Cultural, Literary, and Political Exchanges*, ed. María Bullón-Fernández (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 1–10 (1).

⁷⁷Angus MacKay, "Religion, Culture, and Ideology on the Late Medieval Castilian-Granadan Frontier," in *Medieval Frontier Societies*, ed. Robert Bartlett and Angus MacKay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 217–243.

dria.⁷⁸ Through marriage, John had a legal claim to be king of Castile, and accordingly he constructed a hybrid court. From 1371 to 1387, his court was that of a usurped king and the focus for legitimate Castilian hopes, and he made several military efforts to claim his throne.⁷⁹

The implications of a Spanish royal court in England are too often overlooked. Forty years ago, Sydney Armitage-Smith warned that John's "strong and persistent craving for continental royalty, the keynote to his character, has been strangely neglected," and this has not changed.⁸⁰ Ignoring John's ambitions yields, in turn, the mistaken assumption that his court was unproblematically English. John married Doña Constanza, the heir of the murdered King Pedro I (lamented in Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*), and by Pedro's will her husband should have been king.⁸¹ Pedro had a significant interest in Andalusian Moorish culture, and P. E. Russell concludes that "he probably felt closer bonds of sympathy with the Spanish Moors and Spanish Jews than with the fashionable chivalric culture of Europe north of the Pyrenees."⁸² How much of his interest and knowledge of Spanish Islamic culture Pedro and his "half-oriental"⁸³ court passed on to his daughter and her court attendants must be a matter of speculation. Furthermore, John himself was descended from Edward I's Castilian bride Eleanor, and he seems to have associated Castile with crusading because of the *Reconquista*.⁸⁴ His struggle to claim the throne had the imprimatur of a different kind of crusade, however, since in the midst of the papal schism Castile supported Clement and John supported Urban.⁸⁵ John established a chancery to manage the affairs of the Spanish kingdom (complete with seals that showed John enthroned), and set up a mint in Gascony to make Castilian coins.⁸⁶ As John prepared to fight for his claim, Richard II began in 1386 to treat

⁷⁸ Olivia Remie Constable, *Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain: The Commercial Realignment of the Iberian Peninsula, 900–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 244.

⁷⁹ P. E. Russell, *The English Intervention in Spain and Portugal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 172; Anthony Goodman, *John of Gaunt: The Exercise of Princely Power in Fourteenth-Century Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 49; Sidney Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), 100–102.

⁸⁰ Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt*, xxi.

⁸¹ Russell, *English Intervention*, 174.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁸⁴ Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, 136–37.

⁸⁵ Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt*, 304–7.

⁸⁶ Russell, *English Intervention*, 176–78; Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt*, 452–53.

him not as an English duke but as fellow king.⁸⁷ John and Constanza kept a number of Castilians on their household staffs; there were Castilian knights and ladies in their courts; and there were, of course, many Castilians of lower rank as well, including merchants, friars, and sailors. Even John's New Year's gifts of jewelry were in the Spanish style.⁸⁸ The effect was, as Russell notes, "to give an appropriately exotic air to the Lancastrian household . . . [and] to keep constantly in the mind of visitors . . . that they were in the vicinity of one whose greatest interests were in the Iberian Peninsula."⁸⁹ Given John's English roots, the Spanish flavor of John's court remained "foreign," as Anthony Goodman concludes, even if Constanza was sufficiently anglicized to be interested in woodwoses and to keep a Welsh jester with the possibly Arthurian name of Yevan (Yvain?).⁹⁰ Thus John's court, an obvious cultural center in England, was neither strictly English nor Spanish; it was a border where French, Spanish, English, and perhaps Welsh culture met and might have hybridized. John's court may well have provided opportunities for a poet to hear stories of al-Khidr and to perform for audiences that would recognize his appropriations of them and appreciate the tension between the familiar and the foreign. In 1388, John renounced his claim to the Castilian throne, but it was not the end of his Iberian involvements. He helped arrange for Philippa, his daughter by his first wife, Blanche, to marry Dom João of Portugal in 1387, creating yet another link by which Iberian stories could reach England: Philippa herself certainly had literary and chivalric interests.⁹¹ In 1389, John became Duke of Aquitaine, bordering Aragon, with its own stories of al-Khidr (including a fifteenth-century Aragonese manuscript in Spanish written in Arabic characters about al-Khidr and Alexander the Great).⁹²

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight would suit the image of an international Spanish court, especially the one that John created around Con-

⁸⁷ Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, 118, 203; Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt*, 302.

⁸⁸ Russell, *English Intervention*, 178–82; 179 n. 3.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 178–79.

⁹⁰ Goodman, *John of Gaunt*, 136–37, 361–62.

⁹¹ Joyce Coleman, "Philippa of Lancaster, Queen of Portugal—and Patron of the Gower Translations?" in *England and Iberia in the Middle Ages*, ed. Bullón-Fernández, 135–65; Jennifer Goodman, *Chivalry and Exploration, 1298–1630* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), 134–48.

⁹² Friedländer, *Die Chahbirlegende*, 173–79. As previously mentioned, in 1393 Don John of Aragon was Richard II's rival in seeking Saint George's head.

stanza. As Pedro's court had been hybrid with substantial Moorish borrowings, Saint George/al-Khidr offered an apt figure to represent this. We do not know if John attempted to do anything with the Castilian Order of the Band, the forerunner of the Order of the Garter, but if he did the poem could be a playful anglicization of that tradition. Unlike in Richard's court, where issues of crusade and empire might shape audience response to the poem, in John's court the poem's representations of foreignness would speak to John's ambitions to rule a hybrid kingdom, Castile, that was also far from the imagined centers of the world, and that celebrated hybridity and cultural contact even while crusading.

If, however, the poem came from the context of a lesser noble's household, like Sir John Stanley's court, it would serve to underline a family claim to cosmopolitan travel—travel was necessary for a polished knight, as several chivalric handbooks made clear⁹³—even if it was a court essentially English in character. From the appropriate region of the country for the poem's dialect, the Stanleys were until 1376 the hereditary master foresters for the Wirral, where Gawain wanders.⁹⁴ They owned literary manuscripts, and the Percy Manuscript, which contains the ballad *The Green Knight*, the one known work clearly derivative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, also has Stanley connections.⁹⁵ Andrew Breeze goes so far as to suggest that Sir John Stanley, rather than being simply the patron, might have been the *Gawain*-poet himself.⁹⁶ Sir John became a Knight of the Garter in 1405; Breeze suggests that the addition of the Garter motto to the manuscript reflects this development.⁹⁷ His service in Aquitaine would have brought him closer to re-

⁹³ Ramon Llull, *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, trans. William Caxton, ed. Alfred Byles (London: Oxford University Press, for the EETS, 1926), 23; for a more qualified endorsement, see Richard Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy, trans. and ed., *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 90–92.

⁹⁴ For a history of the Stanleys, see W. Fergusson Irvine, "The Early Stanleys," *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* 105 (1954 for 1953): 45–68. For connections between Sir John Stanley and the *Gawain*-poet, see Edward Wilson, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Stanley Family of Stanley, Storeton, and Hooton," *RES* 30 (1979): 308–16; Ad Putter, *Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), 34–36; Bennett, *Community, Class, and Careerism*, esp. 215–19, 234; Gervase Mathew, *The Court of Richard II* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 166.

⁹⁵ Wilson, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Stanley Family," 314–15.

⁹⁶ Cf. Meyer, "The Despensers and the *Gawain* Poet," 415; Bennett, *Community, Class, and Careerism*, 234.

⁹⁷ Andrew Breeze, "Sir John Stanley (c.1350–1414) and the *Gawain*-Poet," *Arthuriana* 14.1 (2004): 15–30 (17).

gions where al-Khidr stories might have been in circulation. Furthermore, in his active military career, he could have met many well-traveled men and heard their stories. For instance, in 1399 Sir John Stanley offered sureties for the release of Janico Dartasso, a Navarrese esquire who had entered Richard II's affinity and seen active service across Europe, including in the Tunisian crusade of 1390, and who had been a diplomatic messenger to Italy. Dartasso might have heard al-Khidr stories in any of these places and passed them on to his comrades.

Furthermore, a sixteenth-century biographical poem claims that Sir John sojourned in Turkey. Written by the bishop Thomas Stanley around 1562 about his family history, the poem testifies to the Stanleys' interests in and desire to be associated with the east.⁹⁸ Although it is a romanticized account with many unconfirmed details about Sir John, historian Michael Bennett is unwilling to dismiss its basic outline.⁹⁹ Among other adventures, Sir John spends six months at the Ottoman court. Not quite as considerate of his host as Sir Gawain, Sir John must leave hurriedly when the Ottoman princess warns him (with a remarkable lack of recrimination) that she is pregnant. While details of the romance may be fabulous, Sir John could have spent time with the Ottomans. Chaucer was not being outlandishly inventive when he said that his Knight "hadde been also / Somtyme with the lord of Palatye / Agayn another hethen in Turkye" (*General Prologue*, l.64–66). Whether or not Sir John actually spent six months in the Ottoman court, the fact that the story is carefully recited in the Stanley poem testifies to the importance of the Ottoman connection in the family imagination. (A poem about a later Stanley, Sir William, also has repeated encounters with Muslims.)¹⁰⁰ Sir John's experience abroad educates and polishes him; the attention of the Ottoman court as witness to his worth confirms his glory. As Lavezzo argues, English marginality demands confirmation from the center.

Including the story as part of the Stanley family's self-presentation marks the importance placed on having worldly connections broad enough to extend into the Islamic sphere (though admittedly when the Stanley poem was written, Ottoman-English relations had been changed somewhat by the fall of Constantinople and the possibilities of a Protes-

⁹⁸"The Stanley Poem," in James Orchard Halliwell, ed., *The Palatine Anthology: A Collection of Ancient Poems and Ballads Relating to Lancashire and Chesire* (London: Halliwell, 1850), 211–13.

⁹⁹Bennett, *Community, Class, and Careerism*, 215–16.

¹⁰⁰"Sir W. Stanley's Garland," in Halliwell, ed., *Palatine Anthology*, 272–82.

tant-Islamic alliance against the Catholics). If Sir John was in fact the patron of the *Gawain*-poet, his court would not only have provided a milieu in which the poet could learn of al-Khidr, but it would have provided an audience sophisticated enough to appreciate Sir Gawain's delicate encounter with a foreign court teaching hard wisdom that may or may not be fully Christian. A poem like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in turn lent a cosmopolitan gloss to personal and family identity.

The varied nature of these possible sites of reception of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* demands a shift in geographical perspective. The relationships between provinces such as Cheshire or nobles' courts and the larger world were not necessarily mediated by London and the king, and relationships to the Islamic world depended upon regional as well as national contexts. The network of relations forged by medieval trade and diplomacy were multiple and complex. Cheshire could and did have relations with the outside world independently of London, an independence reinforced when Richard II made it into a palatinate. If *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is to be read in terms of center and periphery, it is probably most fruitful not to consider regional courts in relation to London but to treat England itself as peripheral to the old, powerful, Mediterranean world. As Janet Abu-Lughod argues, there was a global economy with "increased economic integration and cultural efflorescence" in the period 1250–1350 stretching from Europe to China and centered in the Middle East.¹⁰¹ But while the significance of the Asian trade facilitated by the *pax Mongolica* in the late Middle Ages shaped general attitudes in England, the question of understanding how specific audiences relate to the greater world cannot be answered just by thinking about England as an undifferentiated whole but by considering specific courts and regions. In so doing, we get closer to what Ralph Hanna calls "the polyvocal and individuated voices of discrete local/regional literary cultures."¹⁰²

The Otherness of the Green Knight

A. C. Spearing warns that "there are dangers in beginning one's study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by asking 'Who is the Green Knight?' and expecting an answer to that question will somehow 'solve'

¹⁰¹ Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4.

¹⁰² Hanna, *London Literature*, 3.

the poem.”¹⁰³ Given al-Khidr’s inscrutability and fame as a confounder of human reason, there is little danger that recognizing that the Green Knight embodies a representation of a figure of Saint George and al-Khidr will overly domesticate him. In taking seriously a possible Islamic derivation for the Green Knight, our reorienting of the poem yields new questions and new readings obscured by the focus on a Celtic origin for the Green Knight. Reorienting the poem makes better sense of the paradoxes of the Green Knight, his barbaric otherness *and* his civility.

Such paradoxes become particularly important in the revelations at the Green Chapel. The Green Knight forcefully uses the language of Christian penance and absolution:

Pou art confessed so clene, beknowen of þy mysses,
 And hatz þe penaunce apert of þe poynt of myn egge,
 I halde þe polysed of þat plyȝt and pured as clene
 As þou hadez neuer forfeted syþen þou watz fyrst borne.
 (2391–94)

Gawain of course resists this comforting claim of absolution, insisting on his sin. Ever since J. A. Burrow raised the issue of the paired confessions before and after the nick in the neck, and the question of whether Gawain’s flaws are chivalric shortcomings or Christian sins, the significance of the confession has been a matter of debate.¹⁰⁴ To the extent that the Green Knight is recognized as the Christian Saint George, his words are comforting, combining chivalric and Christian forgiveness, and his status as confessor is unproblematic. He teaches Gawain an important lesson about the role of sin, confession, and absolution in chivalry that can be trusted and brought back to a knightly court. But if the poem is also alluding to George’s double, the Islamic part of al-Khidr’s identity unsettles this. Al-Khidr can be Christianized, either by

¹⁰³ A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 180.

¹⁰⁴ See Burrow, *A Reading of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 104–10, 127–33; and W. R. J. Barron, *Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980). For contrasting views on confession and private identity, see Andrew James Johnston, “The Secret of the Sacred: Confession and the Self in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” in *Performances of the Sacred in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Susanne Rupp and Tobias Döring (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 45–63; and David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360–1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), 165–66, 170.

absorbing him completely into a Christian tale, as happens in the *Gesta Romanorum*, or halfway as the double of Saint George, who remains split between the religions, so the confession could still have religious worth. But the confession could also be treated as revealing moral but not strictly religious truth, just as Christian scholars used Muslim philosophy in their theology. The introduction of Aristotle's scientific works through Muslim writers—especially Averroës, who urged scholars to approach religion with the tools of logic and philosophy—had a profound effect on Christian discussion for centuries.¹⁰⁵ The wisdom and learning of the Islamic east (and Spain) could not, therefore, simply be rejected but had to be evaluated very carefully. The end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* similarly challenges the reader, remaining troublingly between philosophy and religion.

The landscape itself witnesses this tension. Just as many chapels in the Near and Middle East were shared holy spaces, in which a single image could be interpreted in quite different ways (as in stained-glass images of Saint George/al-Khidr), the Green Chapel is more (or less) than simply Christian. The final encounter takes place by a ruined chapel, but Gawain darkly fears it is not a holy one:

‘Now iwysse,’ quoth Wowayn, ‘wysty is here;
 Pis oritore is vgly, with erbez ouergrown.
 Wel bisemez þe wyȝe wruxled in grene
 Dele here his deuocioun on þe Deuelez wyse;
 Now I fele hit is þe Fende, in my fyue wyttez,
 Þat hatz stoken me þis steven to strye me here.
 (2189–94)

The devilish appearance of the chapel is a product of Gawain's fears, but whether he misperceives a Christian chapel because of his sin and fear, or whether he accurately perceives that the chapel is not wholly Christian, is unresolved.

This crux is foreshadowed by hints of religious tension throughout the poem. When Gawain rides to meet the Green Knight, he arms himself as a Christian champion, the pentangle proclaiming his faith in Christian resurrection as opposed to his opponent's magical or diabolical way of handling death. What he meets instead of supernatural opposi-

¹⁰⁵Menocal, *Arabic Role*, 36–37. Menocal of course makes an argument for literary influence as well.

tion is a sophisticated and very hospitable court, in some ways greater than Arthur's. Just as Aeneas, invoked at the beginning of the poem, discovered in Dido's court the threat that love can play to nationalist and imperialist ambitions, so Bertilak's court tempts Gawain to abandon his quest. Taking his armor and replacing it with clothes of "tuly and tars" (858), they offer him dishes "sauered with spyces" (892), and he meets the lady who is "wener þen Wenore" (945). The lord presses him to stay past Christmas, and although he defers easily to Gawain's announced intention to pursue his quest, the offer to spend the time until the New Year in bed at Hautdesert leaves Gawain vulnerable. When he leaves for the Green Chapel, his guide urges him to turn away and give up the quest.

The challenge proves to have been a test of Gawain's faith in many senses—his willingness to carry out promises serious (the Green Knight's game) and trivial (Bertilak's game), but also his willingness to meet death as a Christian and his understanding of sin and forgiveness. If the poem gives the Green Knight a dual nature as Saint George and al-Khidr, it allows the poem to raise the threat of Gawain's conversion at Bertilak's attractive court and yet to deflect it into play that results only in a little nick on Gawain's neck, a nick that might, if transferred to another part of the body, suggest circumcision.¹⁰⁶ While the Green Knight's court is literally Christian, with its Christmas services and language of religion, coded into Gawain's adventures at the court are tropes of religious tension, similar to those in other medieval romances. In particular, the bedside conversations between Gawain and the lady recall other scenes in which conversion is figured as seduction. In *Bevis of Hampton*, the King of Armenia initially offers Bevis his lovely daughter Josian's hand in marriage if Bevis will convert, but Bevis refuses him and later refuses Josian herself.¹⁰⁷ It is only when Josian goes to Bevis's chamber (where he pretends to be asleep) and offers to convert herself

¹⁰⁶R. A. Shoaf argues, "The *nirt* is a wound that displaces and resembles the wound of circumcision . . . and given his [the *Gawain*-poet's] audience's undoubted familiarity with the liturgical significance of New Year's Day, the *nirt* in the neck is a brilliant strategy for evoking the numerous associations of the Feast of the Circumcision." *The Poem as Green Girdle: Commerce in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984), 15. We would like to add that by evoking circumcision, the poem also raises the threat of Islam.

¹⁰⁷*Bevis of Hampton*, lines 555–60, 1179–98, in *Four Romances of England*, ed. Ronald Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1999).

that Bevis agrees to the marriage. Whether her conversion is sincere or strategic is put to the test when she is wed to the Muslim King Yvor and endures years of (miraculously celibate) marriage to remain Christian.

The uncertainty in *Bevis* about who will convert whom is a recurring tension in medieval romances featuring Muslim others, where a number of romances and ballads feature Saracen women converting for love of Christian men, often prisoners.¹⁰⁸ Geraldine Heng rightly argues that such women are used to prove both the rightness of Christianity and the justice of Christian invasion because they answer to the desires of the inhabitants: "Part of the fantasy of empire, as colonial and conquest literature in later periods will amply teach us, is that the colonized, in the forms of their women, desire their colonizers."¹⁰⁹ Heng goes on to argue that as the Christians lose lands in the Levant their logic changes, creating reversed versions of the story. In the "Constance" group of stories, of which *The Man of Law's Tale* is the best known, it is a Christian woman who is desired by a Muslim prince, and her faith leads to his conversion, so it is the women who are steadfast and the men who are changeable, and Muslims who could not be conquered are seduced into Christianity.¹¹⁰ If women are steadfast and men convert, then the narratives of Christian men taking Muslim wives brings the threat of Christian conversion to Islam. Sir John Mandeville, for one, claims that the Sultan of Egypt offered him great lordships and a prince's daughter if he would convert, but he refused.¹¹¹ A Stanley poem tells that when Sir William was in danger in Jerusalem, a Muslim woman offered her love in exchange for his conversion.¹¹² In *The King of Tars*, the question of who will convert plays out uneasily: the daughter of the King of Tars pretends to convert and lives as a Muslim until her deformed first son is born and the miracle of his transformation converts her husband to Christianity.

The three days of attempted seduction in *Sir Gawain and the Green*

¹⁰⁸For analysis of these figures in romance, see Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 186–88; Siobhain Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 61–95. For ballads, see Francis James Child's introductory discussion of "Young Beichan," in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 vols. (New York: Dover, 1965; original ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), 1:454–63.

¹⁰⁹Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 187.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 187–99; cf. Metlitzki, *Matter of Araby*, 136–60.

¹¹¹M. C. Seymour, ed., *The Bodley Version of Mandeville's Travels* (London: Oxford University Press for EETS, 1963), 27.

¹¹²"Sir W. Stanley's Garland," in Halliwell, ed., *Palatine Anthology*, 272–82. See also Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 1:463.

Knight depict a struggle over whether Gawain will convert to this new court, whose lady is more beautiful than Guinevere (945), or whether he will win her to his side and thereby somehow escape the coming execution. Throughout, motifs from the stories of Christian knights and their captor/captive Muslim women are playfully deployed. On the first day, the lady invokes the image of a loving captor of a Christian knight when she sneaks up on him and declares, “Now ar ȝe tan astyt! Bot true vus schape, / I schal bynde yow in your bedde (1210–11). Gawain tries to invoke the convention in which loving women release their prisoners, asking her to “deprece your prysoun” (1219), but she refuses. On the second day, she reverses the scenario, teasing him with the thought that she is wholly in his power (1496), although it is clear that her profession of vulnerability is merely a stratagem. Gawain gently rejects this ploy as well, but on the third day comes the crisis. The narrator comments, “Gret perile bitwene hem stod / Nif Maré of hir knyȝt mynne” (1768–69). Mary of course was a major part of Gawain’s Christian identity as represented on his shield, and the question of whether Mary will remember him suggests the question of whether he will remember her: the seductiveness of the court leading to a risk of conversion, a point driven home after the final revelations when the Green Knight offers him the chance to return not to Camelot but to Hautdesert (2467–70).

Bertilak, however, is not Islamic, and if the Green Knight is an avatar of al-Khidr, he is also Saint George. Gawain is being seduced not into apostasy but into a deeper understanding of Christian faith, one based on forgiveness of sin, not perfection, and based on humility in the face of the wider world, not naive and insular English triumphalism. However, although the confession may be a valid absolution in Christian terms, this is not sufficient to make Gawain’s engagement with potentially non-Christian others vanish. Gawain’s blood tie to Morgan the Goddess cannot be confessed away, and he rides back to a court with a green slash interrupting the unending knot of his pentangle. His scar and his appropriation of the green girdle, offered by the woman who tried to lead him astray, are troubling reminders of a moral complexity not acknowledged in the young and joyful court at Camelot. Gawain’s return is like the crusader’s return: he is changed, but it is neither recognized nor understood. Arthur and his court eagerly take up the green girdle of the Green Knight, just as the Order of the Garter took up the cross of Saint George, but whether they understand the subtle and powerful

transformations of encounters with the powers beyond their borders (and the scars those encounters can leave) is not clear.

Conclusion

Like so many other speculations about the Green Knight, the argument that he is tied to al-Khidr cannot be proven, barring the miraculous discovery of both the author's identity and library. Nonetheless, there is a case to be made for a possible Islamic connection. There are not that many green, immortal figures who can appear threatening and hospitable, inscrutable initially and ultimately wise expounders of the mysteries of God. The *Gawain*-poet would probably have had opportunity and certainly have had motive to be interested in stories of al-Khidr, given the English interest in al-Khidr's avatar Saint George. Al-Khidr was one of the most important figures in Islamic mythology, and stories of him would have been ubiquitous, from Constantinople, through the Near East and North Africa, and into Spain. He had certainly passed into the Christian tradition with Latin translations of the Qu'ran, and he appears in changed form in the *Gesta Romanorum*. In addition to motive and opportunity, the poet could easily have had occasion: although the courts of the various proposed patrons would have had very different reasons to be interested in a story of an Arthurian encounter with al-Khidr, the interest in the Islamic world was certainly there. Thus, even though the link between the Green Knight and al-Khidr must remain speculative, it deserves to be part of the discussion of the poem.

The tie with al-Khidr is not simply a matter of source study, since it raises a number of interpretive questions. And it is not simply a matter of applying postcolonialism to the poem: indeed, the poem underscores how postcolonial approaches need to be adjusted to fit medieval contexts. As a recent collection of essays on the postcolonial Middle Ages, *Postcolonial Moves*, warns, "The modernity of postcolonial studies blocks certain routes to the past, and thus maintains certain nationalist and historicist exclusions."¹¹³ In approaching medieval literature, English—even European—dominance cannot be assumed, because the global

¹¹³Patricia Clare Ingham and Michelle R. Warren, eds., *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval Through Modern* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 2.

economy is centered in the Near East, as Janet Abu-Lughod and others have argued.¹¹⁴

In these fascinating new ways of looking at the Middle Ages, we must guard against any unconscious assumption that we know what borderlands look like, and that they necessarily lie at the edges of territories with such familiar Western European centers as London or Paris. In his cogent essay on the filiative connections between postcolonialism and medieval studies, Bruce Holsinger employs this very language of borders, asking, “Can medieval symptoms of colonialism and imperialism—crusading, conversion, linguistic and cultural hybridity in the borderlands of Latin Christendom and the Mongol Empire, indigenous resistance to conquest, colonial ambivalence in the outer British Isles—be responsibly diagnosed through the lens of postcolonial theory?”¹¹⁵ Holsinger’s essay mounts a strong argument for an affirmative answer to the question. We concur, so long as care is taken not to import the assumptions of the modern late imperialism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For even the way Holsinger frames his question suggests that there stubbornly remains an unchallenged assumption that borderlands must lie in the hinterlands or outer reaches of Europe—despite his gesturing at the non-European empire of the Mongols—or, more tellingly, in the “*outer* British Isles” (our emphasis). Borderlands need not lie in the periphery of Christendom; Christendom itself could be the borderlands.

While the basic dichotomy between center and periphery remains important, there are no absolute centers, and so peripheries can negotiate relations with a number of different centers. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, “A postcolonial Middle Ages has no frontiers, only heterogenous borderlands with multiple centers. This reconfigured geography includes Asia, Africa, and the Middle East not as secondary regions to be judged from a European standard, nor as ‘sources’ from which to trace influence, but as full participants in a world simultaneously larger and more fragmented—a world of intersecting, mutating, incommensurable

¹¹⁴For studies extending this Asian-centered system to the early modern and later periods, see Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹¹⁵Bruce W. Holsinger, “Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Genealogies of Critique,” *Speculum* 77 (2002): 1195–1227 (1206).

times and places.”¹¹⁶ This is true not only on a continental scale, but on the scale of the kingdom as well. While London’s cultural weight within England was growing and the monarchy was centralizing, London and Westminster were not the overwhelming center of England. Aristocratic courts, be they Sir John Stanley’s or John of Gaunt’s, had international perspectives that were not exclusively mediated by the capital and the king. These regional differences make any careful historicist work on the poem deeply dependent on speculations about the context of composition, but they drive home the theoretical point that because England’s internal political structure was not that of a modern nation’s, assumptions about its international and cultural relations must be altered as well.

The Green Knight captures the uncertain perspective that results. If he is at once Christian saint and Islamic friend of God, perhaps overlaid with Celtic otherworldly challenger, he can be hospitable and threatening, a teacher of what might be religious wisdom or might not. His belt can become the badge for an order of British knighthood that, save only for the scarred Gawain, has experienced only part of the adventure. For his part, Gawain wins respect for himself and for his king from a great and sophisticated lord, as is important for a knight from the edge of the world, but in doing so he is altered, tempted by the sophistication of foreign courts, confronted with religious issues, and ultimately welcomed by a court he now recognizes as understanding only partially their place in the world. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers a nuanced view of how English chivalry engages not just with a history that stretches back to Troy, but with a world centered well east of England.

¹¹⁶Jeffrey J. Cohen, “Introduction: Midcolonial,” in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Cohen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 1–17 (7).