

SYMBOLIC NUMBERS AND THEIR FUNCTION IN  
*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT* (I)

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RESUMEN

Se analizan en este artículo los números y la función que éstos desempeñan en *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Más específicamente centraremos nuestra atención en los números dos y tres. Al leer el poema, el lector percibe que hay una serie de números que el poeta utiliza con frecuencia y podemos inferir que su uso se debe a alguna razón en particular. De hecho, no se escogen al azar, sino que sus apariciones parecen haber sido seleccionadas con sumo cuidado. Algunos estudiosos creen que el autor lo hizo conscientemente, de manera que el principal motivo podría ser que estos números no son simples cifras, sino que se pensaba que algunos de ellos eran, según la tradición medieval, simbólicos y, por lo tanto, jugarían un papel muy importante en el poema puesto que proporcionan cohesión a la estructura del mismo.

ABSTRACT

This paper is aimed at analyzing the symbolic numbers occurring in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well as their function. More specifically, we will focus on numbers two and three. When reading this poem, we, readers, become aware of the fact that there are some numbers which are often used by the poet and we may infer that they are exploited for a particular reason. In fact, they are not chosen at random but their occurrences seem to have been carefully studied. Some scholars think that the author did so on purpose, thoughtfully, and the main reason for this feature could be that these numbers are not simple ones; some of them are, according to medieval tradition, considered to be symbolic, therefore playing a very important role in the poem, i.e., that of giving cohesion to its structure.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*<sup>1</sup> is a fourteenth-century poem which is defined as the jewel of Arthurian romance<sup>2</sup>. In fact, Tolkien and Gordon point out that “*Gawain* [*SGGK*] stands first among medieval English romances, and high among romances at large, in the strength of its plot” (xiv)<sup>3</sup>.

As for its historical context, it should be stated that fourteenth-century English people lived “in a world of struggle and extremes, never far from famine, surrounded by death, where feast and fast, enemy and friend, death and laughter are closely bound together” (Brewer, “Introduction” 3)<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. Numerology

Since this essay is concerned with numbers, we will have to deal with numerology, i.e. the study of numbers. The interest in this area started to develop ages ago<sup>5</sup>. Thus, numerology is a key aspect when investigating medieval works, as can be seen not only in *SGGK*, but also in the other poems supposedly written by the *Gawain*-poet<sup>6</sup>.

In fact, numerology in *SGGK* is a sort of mixture for, as Brewer states, “[...] he [the *Gawain*-poet] unifies originally oral delivery, the twos and threes of folktale, with a highly literate style –for numerology despite its roots, is the quintessence of literacy, counting lines written on a page” (“Introduction” 20)<sup>7</sup>. Despite this distinction, both are used in order to give cohesion to the structure of *SGGK*. This has been pointed out by authors such as Tolkien and Gordon, who refer to “The intricacy with which each element is linked to the other [...]” (xiv).

As far as the structure of *SGGK* is concerned, the most important numbers are, according to Martin, two and three:

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is structured by repetitions, parallels and contrasts (...). In this story we have two Christmases and New Years at the two courts of Camelot and Hautdesert, two great lords in King Arthur and Bertilak, two beautiful hostesses who are specifically compared (ll. 943-45), two brave champions in

Gawain and the Green Knight, three journeys from Camelot to Hautdesert, from Hautdesert to the Green Chapel, from the Green Chapel to Camelot. There are 'games' at both courts, the blow and the return blow, the three hunting scenes and the three seduction scenes, three exchanges of the winnings in each. (325)

As for the analysis, we will precisely focus on numbers two and three, leaving aside those numerical parallelisms based on the traditional fourfold division of the poem corresponding to the four largest illuminated initial capitals in the part of the manuscript devoted to *SGGK*<sup>8</sup>.

## 2.2. Number two

It has already been mentioned that English people lived at that time in a world full of contradictions, extremes, and dichotomies. Some of these are fundamental in the development of the plot, the most important one being that of the pentangle and the girdle<sup>9</sup>. Several scholars have focused on the oppositeness of both symbols. On the one hand, the pentangle is the endless knot, it is indivisible, it presents a "[...] monosemous, unambiguous character [...]" (Plummer 206). On the other hand, "Gawain's new sign [the girdle], in contrast, is polysemous, complex, an acknowledgement of his new sense of himself" (Plummer 206)<sup>10</sup>.

Another contrast can be seen between 'nature' (wilderness) and 'culture' (civilization): "At the beginning of the poem Nature and Culture seem clearly distinguishable as the Green Knight –representing the mysterious forces of nature– bursts in on the cultured and artificed setting of Arthur's court" (Ashley 214).

However, we should not be shocked by this abundance of oppositions for this is a matter not only of society and life, but also of religion<sup>11</sup>. For example, throughout the poem, we find Gawain living in the luxury and warmth of the court, but also undergoing the hardness and extreme cold of wilderness.

A different dichotomy is represented by the two games occurring in the poem. According to Prior, "[...] the two games that organize the plot apparently fit the courtly/uncouth classification. The Beheading game [...] frames the story in grotesque danger [...] The second game, which organizes the events in between, is played at a court, and involves the

noble pursuits of hunting and `luftalkyng´ [...]” (106-07)<sup>12</sup>. Finally, another element we find twice in *SGGK* is verdicts: there are two of them at the end of the poem<sup>13</sup>.

### 2.3. Number three

This number is by far the most exploited number in the poem. As Brewer points out, “The folkloric `three´ is particularly effective in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (“Introduction” 18). Even from the structural point of view, the plot is made up of three different themes which are perfectly mingled: the Beheading Game, the Sexual Temptation, and the Exchange of Winnings.

As mentioned in the last quote of section 2.1. (“Numerology”), Martin (325) also underlines the importance of number three<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, Blanch, Miller and Wasserman refer to this number and its religious connotations:

Thus, in the course of her study Johnson [1984] perceives the Jonah of *Patience* as a type of Everyman and Christ; identifies the threefold pattern of *Cleanness*, the three scriptural episodes, with the three temptations noted by John (1 John 2.16); (...) and examines three potential time patterns in *Gawain* –cyclic, degenerative, and regenerative (a time scheme grounded in the liturgical calendar). (xv)

Due to this abundance of `threes´, this section will be divided into different subsections.

#### 2.3.1. Three elements in gawain’s armour

Davis calls our attention to the fact that the author focuses on three main elements in the passage dealing with Gawain’s armouring:

Three components of the army –all loops of various kinds, representing bonds of human correctness and obligation– are singled out for our attention as the passage progresses [...]. They are in presented sequence the `vrysoun´ (608; cf. modern `horizon´), a silk band which attaches the rear of Gawain’s helmet to the backplate of his armour; embroidered by female hand with turtle doves, love knots and the

like, this is significant of courteous and erotically inflected relations between the sexes. Next mentioned is the ‘cercle’, a flat metal crown studded with brown (= ‘male’) diamonds projecting the bonding of chivalric brotherhood and of a society of (male) equals (cf. the form of the Round Table, mentioned several times in the poem) [...] Last comes Gawain’s pentangle emblem, which receives its own passage of complex exposition. It is generally agreed that this passage places courteous and chivalric commitment [...]. (345)

### 2.3.2. Three prayers

Curiously enough, when Gawain is completely desperate, he asks God and Mary for a place in which he could attend mass. Then he says his prayers which happen to be three: a pater, an ave, and a creed. Thus, in the original we can read:

And þe fore sykyng he sayde, ‘I beseche þe, lorde,  
 And Mary, þat is myldest moder so dere,  
 Of sum herber þer he3ly I my3t here masse,  
 Ande þy matynez to-morne, mekely I ask,  
 And þerto prestly I pray my pater and aue  
 and crede’. (753-58)

Olivares refers to this passage as follows: “El poeta de *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, como vemos, elogia a la Virgen María siempre a la luz de su relación con Jesucristo, esto es como Madre de Dios; así lo confirman también las oraciones que reza: su Avemaría va como engarzada entre dos oraciones a su hijo, el Padrenuestro y el Credo” (325).

### 2.3.3. Three hunting scenes

They are closely connected with both the ‘temptation scenes’ and the exchange of winnings scenes. They take place “during daylight on the 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, December” (Brewer, “Feasts” 137) and most scholars have focused on a supposed parallel of pursuit (Bertilak hunts animals while his wife hunts Gawain). In fact, there is a clear relation between Gawain and the hunted animals. As Rooney puts it,

An early, indeed pioneering, proponent of a symbolic link between the hunts and the bedroom scenes was H. L. Savage, who found characteristics of the animals hunted paralleled in Gawain's behaviour. Thus on the first day he is timid like the deer, on the second day bold like the boar and on the final day wily like the fox (Savage, 1956). (159)

However, our impression is that, as the hunting and temptations scenes go on, the similarity between the knight and the animals is more and more remarkable. Thus, on the third day we clearly see that Gawain behaves as the fox does:

The fox in the field swerves aside to try to avoid its fate. We may see Gawain deviating from his path of denial to take the girdle in the hope that it will save him from his anticipated fate. The symbolism cannot be taken very far. The poem does not condemn Gawain whole-heartedly for his fault and he is hardly reduced in our eyes to the status of the wily and ignoble fox. (Rooney 160)

This parallelism has been traditionally focused on; according to Stone, “there is value in the suggestion of D. W. Robertson, Jr. that the three victims, deer, boar and fox, may carry their traditional religious symbolism and may therefore represent respectively the Flesh, the Devil and the World” (16)<sup>15</sup>.

Moreover, it has been even pointed out that, on the one hand, the deer and the boar are signs of Bertilak's hunting prowess, but they are also food. On the other, the fox, since it cannot be eaten, has no value except as a sign (Plummer 204). When Tolkien and Gordon deal with this aspect, they highlight that when the fox is caught there is no ceremony: the fox is quickly skinned (ll. 1920-21: ‘And syþen þay tan Reynarde, / And tyruen of his cote’) and the party makes for home because night is approaching (120).

#### 2.3.4. Three temptation scenes<sup>16</sup>

First of all, we should note that, as Prior puts it, the three days spent in the castle with the Lady “constitute the real test of Gawain's integrity and honor” since there is a clash between two codes: the moral one and

that of *cortaysye* (120). On the third day, Gawain has to choose between one of these and eventually the moral criterion defeats the social one.

These passages remind us of those concerned with hunting because, as it was the case in those, here we also find an evolution: tension grows as we read. Thus, the first day Lady Bertilak visits Gawain's bedroom and tells him that she wants to talk to him; here we find a "not-too-subtle invitation to lovemaking" (Prior 116):

And now 3e ar here, iwysse, and we bot oure one;  
 My lorde and his ledez ar on lenþe faren,  
 Oþer burnez in her bedde, and my burdez als,  
 Þe dor drawen and dit with a derf haspe;  
 And syþen I haue in þis hous hym þat al lykez,  
 I schal ware my whyle wel, quyl hit lastez,  
 with tale.  
 3e ar welcum to my cors,  
 Yowre awen won to wale,  
 Me behouez of fyne force  
 Your seruauant be, and schale. (1230-40)

Therefore, the first temptation is the less subtle and the most direct. However, the second one is more subtle: she does not offer herself openly and she will be happy with partial victories. The third one presents an innovation on the part of the author because he, for the first time, shares with his audience the knight's thoughts:

In dre3 droupyng of dreme draueled þat noble,  
 As mon þat watz in mornyng of mony þro þo3tes,  
 How þat destiné schulde þat day dele hym his wyrde  
 At þe grene chapel, when he þe gome metes,  
 And bihoues his buffet abide withoute debate more. (1750-54)

This last temptation day is the most important of all. It "includes moments of humor, irony, and almost farce" (Prior 121). Nevertheless, this is also the moment of "most moral tension, when Gawain makes his most important and most seriously wrong move: when he accepts the Lady's 'luflice'" (Prior 121-22).

As in the hunting scenes, the third day at Hautdesert is very different and the poet intervenes to say that Gawain and the lady are in great peril and will need Mary's help (ll. 1768-69: `Gret perile bitwene hem stod, / Nif Maré of hir kny3t mynne'). The reason for this peril is that, as can be seen in ll. 1760-62 ('He se3 hir so glorious and gayly atyred, / So faultes of hir fetures and of so fyne hewes, / Wi3t wallande joye warmed his hert'), "desire comes near to overwhelming his [Gawain's] resistance" (Gilbert 64). Thus, we find that Gawain's attachment to the Virgin Mary is his "last bastion of defence", his "protection against adultery" (Gilbert 64).

Another feature that proves to be highly relevant is the fact that, as Blanch points out, "The three temptations at Bertilak's castle, first of all, spring from the conception of the world as explained in 1 John 2.16: `For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world'" ("Religion" 98)<sup>17</sup>. This reference allows us, once again, to see the above mentioned close connection between number three and Christian religion.

### 2.3.5. Hunting and temptation scenes<sup>18</sup>

Although some scholars have claimed the existence of a parallelism between the hunting scenes and the temptation passages, others do not agree. Such is the case of Tolkien and Gordon, who (dealing with ll. 1158 and ff.) stated that "The noise, confusion and slaughter of this scene, and the terror of the mass of hunted animals, make unacceptable any suggestion of a symbolic parallel between it and the simultaneous quiet pursuit in the castle bedroom" (107). On the other hand, we find scholars such as Hieatt who defended that "the same structure is repeated in three successive days" (351)<sup>19</sup>

### 2.3.6. Three exchanges of winnings

In *SGGK*, we find Bertilak urging an arrangement by which he himself will go hunting while Gawain remains at ease in the castle, and on the return from the hunt there is to be an exchange, the host giving whatever he has gained and Gawain providing whatever feat he achieves.

Moreover, this ‘game’ takes place on three successive days. Thus, Bertilak being away, his wife visits Gawain’s bedroom for intimate conversation, and gives the knight a kiss on the first day, two on the second, and three on the third<sup>20</sup>; these kisses enable him to fulfil the arrangement made with his host because he will give the kisses to him on his return to the castle each evening. However, on the third day Gawain keeps her present of the girdle secret. This failure, according to Gilbert, “can be read as an adulterous act” (67)<sup>21</sup>.

As in the case of the temptation scenes, the exchanges of winnings are also traditionally used in other literary works<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, these passages of exchanges of feats are closely connected with the Beheading game, too. We can clearly see a linking between what happens in the castle and the Beheading match in the following terms: “what happens at the return blow will turn out to depend on Gawain’s performance on the three successive days” (Luttrell 106-07). However, Gawain is not aware of this: he fails to give Bertilak the green girdle because he “is distracted by the visible threat to his life” (Luttrell 107).

### 2.3.7. The cock crows thrice

In the poem we find two references to cocks crowing in ll. 1412 (“Bi þat þe coke hade crowen and cakled bot þryse”) and 2008 (“Bi vch kok þat crue he knwe wel þe steuen”). In the first case, we find a cock crowing thrice. We cannot avoid remembering a famous biblical passage in which, at a very important moment, a cock crows thrice. On the one hand, by considering this line from a surface-level perspective, Stone notes that “Cocks were thought to crow exactly on the hour during the night, and especially at midnight, 3 a.m., and an hour before the dawn” (181). On the other hand, Blanch makes a deep analysis of this line and its possible religious connotations, thus relating it to Saint Peter’s legend (“Religion” 96)<sup>23</sup>.

### 2.3.8. Three moral sins

In this poem Gawain does not achieve perfection because of three sinful qualities. Thus, in ll. 2379-84, Gawain “analyses his single fault into

three moral constituents, cowardice, covetousness, and untruth” (Burrow 116-17). The above mentioned passage reads:

For care of þy knokke cowardyse me ta3t  
 To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake,  
 Pat is larges and lewté þat longez to kny3tez.  
 Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer  
 Of trecherye and vntrawþe: boþe bityde sor3e  
 and care! (2379-84)

Gilbert also refers to these sins: “Precisely these qualities –untruthfulness, fear of death, and the greed to live longer than the amount of time which has been ordained– are the key elements in Augustine’s analysis of *avaritia vite* in his *Sermon 107*” (271)<sup>24</sup>.

### 2.3.9. Three strokes

Gawain is guided to the Green Chapel where the Green Knight gives him three feinted blows, just nicking his neck with the third stroke. The first stroke is a feint: the Green Knight was going to hit Gawain the first blow, ‘Bot Gawayn on þat giserne glyfte hym bysyde’ (l. 2265). The second blow is also feinted, but the final blow nicks Gawain in the neck.

Then the Green Knight reveals three things: first of all, that he is Gawain’s host; secondly, that the first two feinted blows stand for the two occasions on which Gawain faithfully gave him his gains (Lady Bertilak’s kisses), and, thirdly, that the nick was a reproof for Gawain’s failure to reveal the gift of the girdle. This is the passage in which the Green Knight explains why he was successful just in the third and last blow:

Fyrst I mansed þe muryly with a mynt one,  
 And roue þe wyth no rof-sore, with ry3t I þe profered  
 For þe forwarde þat we fest in þe fyrst ny3t,  
 And þou trystly þe trawþe and trwly me haldez,  
 Al þe gayne þow me gef, as god mon schulde.  
 Pat oþer munt for þe morne, mon, I þe profered,  
 Pou kyssedes my clere wyf — þe cossez me ra3tez.  
 For boþe two here I þe bede bot two bare myntes

boute scape.  
 Trwe mon trwe restore,  
 Penne þar mon drede no waþe.  
 At þe þrid þou fayled þore,  
 And þerfor þat tappe ta þe. (2345-57)<sup>25</sup>

### 2.3.10. Three confessions

As for the sacrament of penance, Gawain makes three separate confessions in *SGGK*. Aers describes the first scene of confession (ll. 1876-84) as “an emphatically orthodox one” between Gawain and the priest (95). Indeed, it culminates in the knight’s absolution<sup>26</sup>. However, the second confession is not very strict; Aers defines it as a “‘pretend secular confession’ which, theologically speaking, cannot remedy ‘the inadequacies of a sacramental one’” (97)<sup>27</sup>. Finally, some scholars think that the third confession takes place when Gawain arrives at Camelot. It is successful because there are no problems for the court: “Joyfully it assimilates its courageous and chaste representative together with his story and new emblem” (Aers 99).

### 2.3.11. Three enemies

The hero has to cope with three main enemies in *SGGK*, i.e. the Green Knight<sup>28</sup>, his French *alter ego*<sup>29</sup>, and, finally, Lady Bertilak.<sup>30</sup> According to Olivares, what actually helps Gawain defeat his enemies is his *cortaysye*, which is not only appearance, but also essence (*trawþe*) (333).

### 2.3.12. Other ‘threes’

Although we have dealt with the most relevant occurrences of number three, there are many more references to this number. The first one occurs in line 763: ‘Nade he ben du3ty and dry3e, and Dry3tyn had serued’ (‘No sooner had Sir Gawain signed himself thrice’). Another example occurs in line 1066: ‘Naf I now to busy bot bare þre dayez’ (‘To be about the business I have but three days’). In line 1141 we read ‘Blwe bygly in buglez þre bare mote’ (‘Blew upon their bugles bold blasts three’). The example

in line 1439 is ‘On þe sellokest swyn swenged out þere’ (‘For three at the first thrust he threw to the earth’). The last but one instance, in line 1713, reads ‘Þer þre þro at a þrich þrat hym at ones’ (‘Where three athwart his path threatened him at once’). The last example is found in lines 1868-9: ‘Bi þat on þrynne syþe Ho hatz kyst þe kny3t so to3t’ (‘Three times, before they part, / She has kissed the stalwart knight’).

Furthermore, we will also deal with a ‘number three’ which is not present, but missing (it is said that the presence of an element is as important as its absence). Therefore, it is relevant to highlight that there is no third feast after Gawain’s return to Camelot. As Brewer puts it,

Furthermore, there is no feast to mark the end of Gawain’s adventure. It would have been as otiose as that account of Gawain’s adventures on the way home which the poet declines to relate [...] A feast often marks the end of an Arthurian adventure [...] but the poet avoids so firm and simple a closure here, leaving us with an ambiguity well reflected in the variety of critics’ judgements on how well Gawain has done. (“Feasts” 139)

Finally, it will be pointed out that number three also plays an important part in hagiography<sup>31</sup>.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The study carried out has hopefully allowed us to become aware of some of the great amount of numerical values we can find throughout *SGGK*. Despite the fact that they make its structure more complex, they also give cohesion to it by means of the symbolic meanings they convey. This complexity has been approached to by many scholars and, as a result, the *Gawain*-poet is praised for this.

Thus *SGGK* is full of structures carefully built up with the help of numbers. The most outstanding example is the pentangle, whose fives are qualified by Burrow as “an ingenious piece of number symbolism” (103)<sup>32</sup>.

No matter how hard we try to guess the meaning hidden under elements such as numbers, we will always find new interpretations for the occurrence of a particular element in a given situation. At the same time, some of the features intended by medieval authors to convey particular meanings in a

more subtle way will always remain unknown for us. Heatt draws this conclusion near the end of his article: “The extent to which numerical structure and numerology are to become factors in the study of Old and Middle English literature remains a matter of guesswork” (358).

It is our intention to develop the second part of this essay in the near future, the focus being on other symbolic numbers which, even though they were either just mentioned in this paper or paid no attention, perform a highly relevant role in *SGGK*, too. They not only provide the structure of the poem under study with cohesion, but also imply a wide range of religious references and symbolic connotations.

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#### NOTAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS

- 1 From now onwards, *JGGK* will stand for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, except for its occurrences in quotes and bibliographical references. In order to carry out this study, we used both the translation into Modern English of *JGGK* made by Marie Borroff (1967), and taken from Abrams (1993: 202-54), and the Middle English version provided by the Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia Library <<http://etext.virginia.edu/mideng/browse.html>> ("The Middle English collection").
- 2 McArthur defines *Romance* as "Originally a book or narrative, usually in a Romance language, and especially one in which adventure, love, and chivalry are prominent, often with an accompaniment of magic and wonder" (872).
- 3 Stone also praises *JGGK*: "The result is a Romance both magical and human, powerful in dramatic incident, and full of descriptive and philosophic beauty; in which wit, irony and occasional *pathos* provide constant enrichment, so that when the dénouement with its profound moral comes, it is not felt merely as didactic, but as the climax of a work which has for subjects the celebration of abounding civilized life, with all its ambiguities and special preserves of fine feeling" (11).
- 4 Furthermore, these traditional societies are said to be "soaked in religion [...] Atheism is inconceivable, God is near: Gawain rides with 'no man but God' [Ne

- no gome bot god] (l. 696)” (Brewer, “Introduction” 4). In fact, at that time, in that form of Christianity, according to Aers, “the five wounds of Christ and the figure of the Virgin Mary sacralize the values of the secular nobility in the poet’s own culture. The wounds of Christ and the image of Mary are placed on the very symbol of class power, privilege and violence –the warrior’s shield. Indeed, Gawain is said to draw his knightly fierceness and courage in battle from the image of the Virgin Mary (ll. 644-50)” (95). These brief notes prove enough to show that the author of *JGGK* wrote it under the influence of the religious background that surrounded the society he belonged to.
- 5 One of the most important mathematicians dealing with numbers and with their qualities is Pythagoras: “Es válido atribuir a Pitágoras la afirmación [...] según la cual todas las cosas son números. Partiendo, posiblemente, de consideraciones relativas a los acordes musicales, que pueden ser reducidos a proporciones matemáticas, Pitágoras dedujo que ‘los números son, por así decirlo, el principio, la fuente y la raíz de todas las cosas’. A partir de aquí se desarrolló toda una aritmología mística que asignaba a los números unas propiedades cualitativas. De este modo, la *tétraktis*, o suma de los cuatro primeros números, que se representan por el triángulo decádico y envuelve en ella las naturalezas de lo par y lo impar, se considera el fundamento de todas las cosas” (*Gran Larousse Universal*, vol. 16, 10015).
  - 6 Martin highlights this idea: “The poet draws on other symbolic schemes to structure and convey meaning. One is numerology, a scheme which feels ‘natural’, God-given, because it is ancient, arithmetical, classical and Scriptural. Some numbers are sacred: three suggests the Trinity (*Cleanness*) or the three days from Crucifixion to Resurrection (*Patience*). Five suggests perfection and occurs in natural and spiritual taxonomies, such as the five fingers, the five senses, the five wounds of Christ, the five joys of Mary (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*). Five is a ‘circular’ number. The *Gawain*-poet is fascinated by beginnings and endings, sequences, circles and symmetry” (319). It should be made clear what is meant by the Trinity: “(in the Christian religion) the union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one God” (Crowther, 1995: 1277).
  - 7 Therefore, there seems to be a distinction between two concepts that are related to each other: ‘folkloric numbers’ (as a matter of tradition), and ‘elaborate numerology’. These two kinds of numbers are found in the poem: “[...] undoubtedly operative, at a subconscious level, are folkloric numbers, which no doubt are at the root of the more conscious and elaborate numerology of learned clerks” (Brewer, “Introduction” 18).
  - 8 For further information about this topic, see Hieatt 347-59.
  - 9 Hieatt first states that “[...] the relationship of these two objects is that of a balanced, two-part symbolic structure [...]” (340). Then, he adds that “[...] the conceptually fixed, symmetrical, apparently calculated symbolic opposition (endlessness-incompleteness; knotlessness-knottedness; rigidity-pliability; protected area-trap) between

- these two most important symbols in the romance suggests that what they stand for –troth and untroth– are what *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is about” (344).
- 10 Another critic, Prior, also refers to this contrast: “The pentangle is, as the narrator tells us, the ‘be endeles knot’ (l. 630), without beginning or end to its self-sufficient continuity. The girdle, on the other hand, has no such fixity; it can be knotted and unknotted and passed around from wearer to wearer as easily as its meanings can be shifted” (122-23). It should also be mentioned that Martin writes about another feature highlighting the contrast between both symbols (‘natural vs imposed signs’): “The pentangle, logically and geometrically, has a claim to be eternally true; the girdle, sartorially, morally and epistemologically, can be arranged in various ways. There was contemporary interest in the theory of signification. A standard distinction was between natural and imposed signs. At first the pentangle seems to be a natural sign ‘bi tytyle’ (l. 626) because of its mathematical basis. The girdle, in contrast, is arbitrary [...]” (327).
  - 11 “Historical Christianity is founded on paradox, starting with the incarnation. The whole Bible is fertile, to its advantage, in inconsistency, self-contradiction and paradox. [...] At least they are in part well-suited to our poet, who is always conscious of tensions, of being pulled in two different directions” (Brewer, “Introduction” 8).
  - 12 Hieatt also points out that there are “two arithmetical series (...) the two sequences of the Beheading Test and the three sequences of the Temptation” (353). Furthermore, Tolkien and Gordon comment on that “the two rounds of the Beheading Game frame or bracket the three rounds of the Exchange of Winnings Game” (346).
  - 13 As Olivares explains, one of the verdicts is recorded by the Green Knight and the other by Gawain himself: “En el primero, el Caballero Verde recuerda al protagonista que faltó levemente a su fidelidad (v. 2366), al esconder de él el lazo; por ello Gawain ha recibido una pequeña herida en el cuello. En ningún momento le censura el Caballero Verde falta alguna en su *cortaysye* [...]. Gawain, herido en su orgullo, se muestra más estricto en su autoevaluación. El caballero reconoce su falta y se define a sí mismo como ‘fawty and falce’ (v. 2382), tras haberse acusado de un largo elenco de defectos [...]. Ante esto, el caballero Verde le reitera su perdón y su alabanza [...] El Caballero Verde entiende que Gawain ha conservado intactas todas las virtudes de su pentalfa, y entre ellas sin duda su *cortaysye* [...]” (311).
  - 14 This number is present not only in *JGGK* but also in the other poems attributed to the *Gawain*-poet.
  - 15 Since Stone does not provide readers with Robertson’s reference in his work, two possible options have included in section 4.2. (“Secondary sources”).
  - 16 It should be underlined that some literary traditions are connected with this kind of scenes. Thus, Rooney tells us that “It is, after all, well-established in chivalric romance that knights who stay in bed, like Erec and Yvain, and spend their time inside in the company of ladies are asking for trouble (Barnes, 1993: 132)” (157).

Moreover, Wrigley states that “Between the Gawain ‘temptation’ story and the Blancheflor episode of Chretien’s *Perceval* there is a close similarity of patterns[...]. In both stories, three scenes of dalliance within the castle are counterpointed by three passages of manly action outside it” (125). Then he adds that “On each of the days when Gawain is snugly in bed being tempted by his hostess Sir Bertilak is out hunting in the wintry hills (In the Grail romance it is Percival himself who sallies forth between flirtations, and his campaign is not against beasts but against human adversaries)” (125).

- 17 Blanch also adds that “According to medieval Christian tradition, then, the temptations outlined by John –the flesh (gluttony), the eyes (avarice), and pride (vain-glory)– are identified with the devil’s three temptations of Adam in Eden (Gen. 3.1-7) and of Christ in the wilderness (Matt. 4.1-11, Luke 4.1-13). Gawain may thus be compared to Adam (Howard, 1966: 43-56, 215-54), for he indulges a craving for rich food both at Camelot and at Hautdesert, covets a worldly object (the green girdle), and falls prey to ‘pride of life’. In a similar vein, Gawain is identified with Adam through the use of the *felix culpa* motif (Haines, *Allusions*; Sims; and Haines, *Fall* 74-177), the theme that depicts Adam’s sin as a ‘fortunate fall’ because his expulsion from Eden for disobedience creates the need for a redemptive second Adam (Christ). Gawain’s fall, however, is especially significant, for once he shamefully acknowledges his faults –disloyalty, covetousness, cowardice, and pride– he is spiritually renewed. Finally, Gawain’s and Camelot’s inordinate preoccupation with decorative bindings of the earth (plaits, loops, nets, links, ribbons, cords, knots, and snares) is emblematic of pride and worldly values (Blanch, *Imagery*)” (“Religion” 98).
- 18 Attention should be paid not only to content, but also to form, that is, the way in which these passages are presented and combined with each other. The author does so by means of “the medieval narrative technique of ‘interlace’, moving from hunt to bed and back again in order to keep parallel processes in focus together” (Stone 16-17).
- 19 Later Hieatt (351) presents the above mentioned structure in the following diagram:
- “I- First stages of hunt.
  - II- The happenings in Gawain’s bed chamber to departure of lady.
  - III- Gawain’s rising, religious observance, recreation with the two ladies of the castle.
  - IV- Conclusion of hunt; dressing or skinning of deer, boar, fox; return to castle.
  - V- Events of the evening: exchange of what has been gained during the day, entertainment; in 11th stanza of each series: mention of (1) retirement of company for night; (2) early activities of next morning; (3) pledge(s)”.

According to Prior, “The poet has constructed this part of the story as a particularly elaborate set of parallels, with three days of hunting and flirtation which the narrator moves between with far more adroitness than usually found in the ‘meanwhile back at the castle’ kinds of plot structure common in many romances with more than one story line. And yet the careful structure is belied by the increasing conflation of the two motifs: Bertilak’s hunts become gradually less rule-bound, and the Lady’s seduction grows less genteel and more threatening. On the third day the hunt for the fox has many hints of moral language and virtually no suggestion of manly dangers or skills, while the Lady’s flirtation with Gawain has become morally dangerous, and very like a hunt in its pursuit of the prey” (107).

- 20 On the second day, having tried Gawain twice and found him faithful, Bertilak says “Now `þrid tyme þrowe best` þenk on þe morne” (l. 1680). Wright translates it into Modern English as “the third time’s the charm” (86), and Tolkien and Gordon as “Now `third time turn out best` remember in the morning” (118).
- 21 In fact, Gilbert adds that “On this last day, the kisses become a blind, intended to distract Bertilak from seeking for any further gifts [...] When he conceals the girdle, Gawain conspires in the betrayal of the lord; when he kisses him, he himself deceives him” (68). Moreover, it is unavoidable to comment on that Gawain’s attitude in this passage reminds us of Judas’ behaviour.
- 22 Luttrell concludes that “The stay at the castle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is related to an international popular tale that is widely distributed, particularly in Europe and Asia, and so ancient that it was adapted in the story of Jason and Medea. The earliest proper records of it are in literary collections, first in eleventh century Sanskrit and then in the Italian Renaissance. Tales of this type tell the following: *The Tasks*: the hero is at the castle of an evil being (...) who on each of three successive days imposes on him an impossible task on pain of death” (92). Then he adds that “The pattern of *The Tasks* typically has the evil being leaving at dawn (sunrise), with the day’s impossible task having to be achieved before the master’s return at nightfall (sundown)” (93). Finally, he comments on that the three days on which Bertilak and Gawain exchange their winnings “correspond to those which the hero survives with success in the folk-tales” (106-07). Moreover, Gawain’s success on the first two days and implicit failure on the last occasion coincides with the rhythm “of the game-introduction to *The Tasks*, with its pattern of the hero winning twice but losing the third game”.
- 23 “Peter’s traditional identification in the Bible with the cock (Mark 14.30, and John 13.38), a symbol both of Peter’s triple denial of Jesus and of his subsequent remorse and pardon for his faithless conduct [...]. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, on the other hand, the Peter tradition is elicited by the porter’s invocation (813-4) once the knight arrives at Hautdesert, the stage for Gawain’s ‘binding’ and judgement. Further evidence emphasizing the tie between the Saint Peter

- oath and Gawain may be found in a series of cock images. For example, a reference to the three cock crows (1412 and 1415) on Gawain's second day of temptation is reminiscent of the rooster crowing during Peter's triple repudiation of Christ. Somewhat later (New Year's Day), however, Gawain's sleep is disturbed, for he warily acknowledges the judgement of fate, his engagement with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. Hearing three cock crows (2006-09), then, Gawain carefully prepares himself for the impending doomsday. Inasmuch as the cock is associated with Peter through various symbolic motifs—spiritual watchfulness (Mark 14.32-42), especially because of the approach of the Last Judgement; penance (confession), and the promise of spiritual renewal—a clear connection between the Saint Peter legend and Gawain's behaviour at the Green Chapel is established [...]” (Blanch, “Religion” 96).
- 24 “This sermon, then, is the ultimate source for the poet's conception of Gawain's greed [...] though the poet has not, of course, built this into a sermon, but made it part of Gawain's somewhat overwrought reaction to his lack of perfection” (Newhauser 271).
- 25 It should be mentioned that there are also hagiographic precedents for the three strokes from the Green Knight's axe to which Gawain must submit (cf. Tkacz, 1992).
- 26 “Gawain's ambiguous confession to the priest (ll. 1876-84), however, raises some vexing questions, especially since the confession scene follows his ‘faithful’ concealment of the lady's green girdle (ll. 1874-75) [...] in order to make a valid confession, signaled by the priest's absolution (forgiveness of sin), penitents must acknowledge their sins, feel genuine sorrow (contrition), make proper restitution, and resolve to sin no more [...] In Gawain, however, the duties of confession are not fulfilled, for Gawain seemingly intends both to be pardoned for his sins and to violate the third bargain with Bertilak by retaining the lady's girdle, a clear failure to make restitution [...] he [Gawain] is alienated from God and thus needs the spiritual salve of a valid confession” (Blanch, “Religion” 98-99).
- 27 “In the second confession scene (ll. 2374-88), on the other hand, Gawain shamefully recounts his sins to the Green Knight as lay confessor and flings the girdle at him—Gawain's demonstration of restitution. Once the Green Knight offers both ‘absolution’ (ll. 2390-94) and the green girdle to Gawain, Arthur's chastened knight vows to sin no more, for he will wear the luf-lace as a penitential reminder of his faults and the weakness of the flesh” (Blanch, “Religion” 99).
- 28 Olivares refers to him as “un personaje que configura bajo el color de su piel y su atuendo el recuerdo de la barbarie y el primitivismo pagano (celta, anglo, sajón, juta, ...) presente en los albores de Inglaterra” (334).
- 29 Olivares states that “Gawain se enfrenta también a su enemigo invisible, su *alter ego* francés. Gawain castigado a ser el eterno amante fiel, desconsiderado y olvi-

- dadizo, proporcionará el argumento sobre el que la Tentadora basará su estrategia. Ante él su homónimo inglés desplegará la *cortaysye* del doncel enamorado” (334).
- 30 “Ella amenazará la estabilidad de su pentalfa y, en último término, también su vida. Gawain resistirá sus tres asaltos con su cortesía verbal, con sus modales y aferrándose a ese lema que el poeta explicitara en los versos iniciales: ‘His clans and his cortaysye croked were neuer’” (Olivares 334).
- 31 Hagiography is defined as “(a piece of) biographical writing about a person’s life that is too full of praise for its subject” (Crowther 534). Blanch writes about this connection in the poem: “The traditions evoked by the remaining saints’ oaths (Giles and John the Evangelist) reflect, likewise, the themes of sin, penance, and redemption in *Gawain*. Giles (ll. 1644-45), for instance, is portrayed in medieval legend and art as a humble recluse who, during his three-year life in a cave, is nourished by the milk of a hind. While Flavius, the king of the Goths, and his hunters track the hand for three consecutive days, the animal seeks refuge in Giles’s cave. At the conclusion of the third day, however, Giles is wounded by an arrow shot by one of the king’s archers. Such an incident parallels the situations in *Gawain*, for the three-day chase in the Giles legend is symbolically analogous to the three hunts-temptations at Hautdesert. Furthermore, the wound suffered by Giles foreshadows Gawain’s injury (ll. 2313-15) at the Green Chapel [...]” (“Religion” 96).
- 32 Duggan writes about this interest in number symbolism: “[...] scholars have attempted to determine whether the *Gawain*-poet shared Dante’s (indeed, the common medieval) interest in number symbolism and whether the obvious structural symmetries of the plot of *Gawain* were reinforced by subtle and complicated numerological schemata. The preponderance of evidence suggests that the poet carefully plotted his works so that part of their meaning is carried by the order and position of elements within the larger structures” (238). However, as Brewer puts it: “More objective quantifiable, though not always obvious, are numerological structures in literature. There can be no doubt that these exist, and were consciously intended in some texts, although awareness of numerology is remote from most modern literary response” (“Introduction” 18).
- 33 Whereas under this heading are included the works and articles which have been actually used, those which have been either consulted or mentioned in the essay occur in section 4.2.