

Ekphrasis and Chivalry in Middle English Literature

Medieval English literature often places great emphasis on the detailed depiction of characters' equipment, clothing, and other crafted material objects. For much of history, material culture has been a primary focus of art-historical study, with written records serving as a complementary source.

Definitions

Ekphrasis: MWD, "ekphrasis, n. (1)" a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art.

Chivalry: OED, "chivalry, n. (3)" In early use, esp. Bravery or prowess in war; warlike distinction or glory.

Phrase, to do chivalry. Obsolete.

OR:

Chivalry: OED, "chivalry, n. (1)" collective. Knights or horsemen equipped for battle.

Objects of Study

The exemplary crafted objects at the centre of this study were Chaucer's Knight's **coarse gypon** and **rust-stained armour** as depicted in *The Canterbury Tales*, and Gawain's **helm** and **shield** from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Gawain's Accoutrements

Gawain's accoutrements was broken down into two elements: his ornate shield, and his monumental helm. His shield is crimson, with the pentangle painted in pure gold upon its outward face, untouched by mark or scuff.

The inverse of the shield is ornamented with the face of the Virgin Mary. His shield works on three levels artistically: through colour, the design of the pentangle, and the Virgin Mary.

His helm is described just as intimately: Gawain's helm is very similar to a houndskull bascinet. A good contemporary example would be the helm of Charles VI, from when he was the Dauphin.¹ The bascinet was the most popular helmet amongst the knightly class in the fourteenth century, and the houndstooth visor was an equally common addition to that style of helm. A bascinet of this era and style also has, as the Gawain-poet says, an "aventayle."² The aventail is a short cape of mail that would hang down over the neck from the helm, suspended by a leather (or in Gawain's case, silk) band. Covering the aventail is a *bourson*, which is a coat of silk;³ Gawain's *bourson* is embroidered with preening turtle doves and parrots, and studded with perfect diamonds.

Ekphrasis in Gawain's Kit

For "men, exotic species of birds were prestige animals through which to display wealth and power," which means Gawain's helmet is not merely an elite object because it is decorated: it is an elite object because of how it is decorated.⁴

Furthermore, the style of helm was synonymous with knights and warfare.⁵ As for Gawain's shield, colour is straightforward: the shield is painted red with a golden star.⁶ Red is significant in that most depictions of the Virgin Mary show her wearing red, and commonly with a golden aura; it also relates to the pseudo-Dionysian 'theology of colour,' which claims red as the equal space between good and evil.⁷

The Virgin's face on the inside of Gawain's shield would lend weight to an interpretation of the red mass of the front face of the shield representing her body, interceding on Gawain's behalf to protect him while she watches over him. The Virgin Mary was considered a primary intercessor on behalf of humanity to the divine, and her aura was considered a barrier against evil.⁸ Artistic representations of her were empowered and took on her traits of being "unshakeable" and "immovable."⁹

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Figure 1: Gawain Arming (ca. 1370)

Gawain's pentangle is an object of intense literary and art-historical discourse. It is generally accepted that the pentangle is representative of the seal of Solomon.¹⁰ These are demonstrated through *moulets*, which the University of Victoria retains examples of in their MS.Brown.Eng.2 armorial. These *moulets* were continental representations of the Star of David and the Seal of Solomon.¹¹



Figure 2: Helm of Charles VI (ca. 1380-1410)

We all know the image of the **KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOUR**, but how true to medieval literature and to history is this image?

Figure 3: MS.Brown.Eng.2 Armorial (ca. 1580)



For Bibliography Scan Here:

Figure 4: Rusted Haubergeon (late 14th c. CE)



Chaucer's Knight

When considering the Knight, his accoutrements must be compared against existing records of historical dress. Identifying the cultural code that the Knight is aligned with should be obvious: he is a knight, a crusader, and should embody chivalry.¹² However, the question remains whether he represents historical chivalry or the romanticised ideal, which was propagated within the romances of the Middle Ages and later exaggerated and made rote in the eighteenth century as the "knight in shining armour."

The Knight's Accoutrements

The Knight's ornament can be ultimately broken down into two objects: "Of fustian he wored a gipoun, / All bismotered with his habergeoun."¹³ The gipoun (or otherwise called a gypon) was commonly worn by both knights and foot soldiers. It was a type of gambeson, though unpadded, normally worn with a warrior's armour.

It would commonly be ornamented with an escutcheon, displaying the knight's family crest or a personal heraldic device (such as Gawain's *moulet*). It would typically be used as a covering for the armour beneath. A haubergeon (Figure 4) is a sleeveless or short-sleeved shirt of mail armour, which would be oiled and greased to prevent rusting. It was typically a part of what constitutes a full suit of armour: plate and mail.

It is evident that the Knight does not strike the image of the "knight in shining armour" in his "bismotered gypon" made from fustian, covered with a travel stain in place of the escutcheon and crest, his shield battered and dashed with swords and maces, and his haubergeon tarnished and rusted over. But that should not mislead readers! The Knight was wealthy,¹⁴ and his gear is a conscious choice that references the archetypal Active Knight,¹⁵ which adhered to the chivalric ethos codified in Geoffrey De Charny's *A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry*.¹⁶

Chivalry and Armour in the Middle Ages

The Active Knight is a knight who, according to De Charny's medieval guide, fought in good wars. De Charny provided a hierarchical structure of knights, defining the good knights as the ones who engaged in legitimate battles.¹⁷ The best knights were the ones who fought for God, went on pilgrimage, and defended the weak. Chaucer's Knight and Sir Gawain exemplify these ideals. The Active Knight exemplified the common ground between the "knight in shining armour" and the "murderous noble thug" archetypes.

Both Gawain and the Knight serve as reflections of how chivalric ideals were not mere abstractions but were represented visually through the ornament of a knight engaging in chivalric action. These representations illustrate a code of conduct that was as much about survival and honour on the battlefield as it was about courtly manners and virtuous behaviour. Their deliberate ornament, both decorous and plain, illustrate this code of conduct visually to a lived audience in fourteenth-century England, and beyond.

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