

**Gawan's Token of Loyalty:
The Bene - Gawan Relationship in Wolfram's *Parzival***

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Resumo

Neste artigo o autor tenta determinar os motivos que impedem uma relação amorosa entre Bene e Gawan. Conclui que Gawan não se interessa por Bene dada a importância da relação já estabelecida com a sua futura rainha Orgeluse.

Abstract

In this article the author attempts to determine the reasons why Bene and Gawan do not enter into an amorous relationship. He concludes that Gawan does not interest himself in Bene because of the importance of the relationship he has already established with his future queen Orgeluse.

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Six of the sixteen books of Wolfram's *Parzival* are devoted exclusively to the adventures of Gawan, the 'parallel' hero of the romance. Although counterpart to the Grail hero, Parzival, it is clear that Gawan and the future Grail King encounter different types of adventure: *aventure* in Parzival's world has a stronger spiritual dimension, since it is motivated either by his love for Condwiramurs or his search for the Grail. His is not the fantastic world of secular adventure characteristic of Gawan. The importance of Gawan in *Parzival* is evident, not only because Wolfram devotes so much of the narrative to him, but also because he has the same family bond (*swester sun*) to King Artus as Parzival does to the Grail King, Anfortas, and because in battle Gawan is one of the most proficient knights of the Round Table. Above all, Gawan's prominence in this work is due to his great success with the ladies: Gawan serves, wins and happily marries the lady of his choice to have the perfect *minne* relationship. Secular *minne* is to be the dominant force in Gawan's life (cf. Greenfield 1984: 38 - 65).

Gawan is a *Minneritter*, descended from the fairy Terdelaschoye (cf. 585,11ff.) and, while Parzival's career leads him forward from wise, grey-haired man, to wise, grey-haired man (characters which are instrumental in Parzival's process of maturity), Gawan's career leads him from beautiful lady to beautiful lady. It would not, however, be legitimate to speak of Gawan's *development* as a *minne* knight, with him becoming more proficient in love from

affair to affair. Gawan has inherited an instinctive capacity for *minne* from his parents, and this magical predestination gives him a greater understanding of the workings of love. From the outset, he shows an awareness and an inner security in this area, matched by none; thus in the *Blutstropfenepisode* he alone from the Round Table can show a sensitive understanding of what is afflicting Parzival (cf. 301,7ff.). Although Gawan's *minne* encounters may not demonstrate a development, they *do* serve as stepping stones for him to reach the final and satisfying relationship he is to achieve with Orgeluse. It is not the intention of this paper to look at Gawan's relationship with his partners in love (Obilot, Antikonie and Orgeluse), all of whom have received much attention from *Wolfram-Forschung* (cf., among others, Mohr 1957; Ertzdorff 1962; Poag 1966; Gibbs 1972: 152 - 158; 184 - 212; Zimmermann 1972; Wynn 1976; Francke 1983; Duckworth 1987; Tax 1989; Zutt 1989), but to examine in detail his encounter with the ferryman Plippalinot's daughter, Bene.

In this meeting we are shown a lady who is only too willing to give the *Minneritter* Gawan her love, and yet no *minne* relationship ensues. In the romance as a whole, Bene plays two rôles: in Books X and XI, that of a lady serving Gawan, and, in Books XII, XIII and XIV, that of messenger between the lovers Itonje and Gramoflanz. *minne* is clearly an important factor in Bene's life in this poem. The meeting of Bene and Gawan thus represents one in which two characters, for whom love is clearly a dominant force, are to be given the opportunity to engage in *minne*: and yet, nothing happens. This article therefore proposes to discuss Bene's rôle as Gawan's potential love partner, analysing the reasons why no relationship develops and the function which this female figure has here.

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The figure of Bene is Wolfram's invention. In the source, Chrétien's *Perceval*, the equivalent scene where Bene appears in *Parzival*, knows no such character. There, after Gauvain, who is already paying service to the *demoisele estolte*, has defeated his opponent (7349 - 7359) and the ferryman has arrived to take his due reward (7380), Gauvain spends the night at the ferryman's house. There is, however, no young lady there to entertain him, indeed no mention is made of the ferryman's family; on the next morning Gauvain asks the ferryman to tell him who the ruler of the land is (7510) - a question which the *notoniers* is unable to answer. The ferryman then goes on to explain the history of the magic castle, before accompanying Gauvain in his assault on it.

In Wolfram's version, before beginning his attack on Schastel Marveil, and after having defeated Lischoys Gwelljus, Gawan is presented with an opportunity for *minne* in his meeting with the ferryman's daughter, Bene. However, this only occurs after the ferryman has arrived to take his lawful fief (i.e the horse of the vanquished knight), after the victor has explained how he needs to

keep his horse, and after the ferryman has agreed to take the defeated knight in lieu of this prize. Then Plippalinot invites Gawain to his home to spend the night. Here, Wolfram's description differs from that offered by Chrétien, not only because Gawain now meets Plippalinot's family, most importantly his beautiful young daughter, but also because the ferryman's house is not described in the same way as in the French version. In *Perceval*, the ferryman's house is presented simply as a most worthy residence:

*Pres de l'eve fu li hosteus
Al notonier, et si fu tex
Que descendre i peüst uns quens;
Cil fu molt aaisiez laiens. (7473ff.)*

Thus, it is magnificent enough for a count to stay there; however, in Wolfram's version the narrator notes that Plippalinot's home is such that Artus would never have built a better one in Nantes (548,24f.); how is this reference to be understood? It seems that there is a note of irony in this statement, particularly when we take into account the later references to the furnishings in Plippalinot's home. Although the narrator speaks of the presence of fresh-cut rushes and flowers (549,13), and that a carpet, comfortable cushions and bolsters were set on the floor for Gawain to sit on (549,23ff.), the reference to Gawain's bed does seem to indicate that Plippalinot's home is not in fact up to high courtly standards. The narrator notes:

*einez waz ein pflûmît,
des zieche ein grüener samît;
des niht von der hôhen art:
ez was ein samît pastart. (552,9ff.)*

Thus, not the best green samite was used, but only an imitation one. Equally, the quilt which covers his bed was made of brocade, but *without* gold thread brought from the East (552,15ff.). It would appear that the ferryman's home, although aspiring to be that of an aristocrat, is evidently *not* up to the standard of Artus' castle in Nantes...

Similarly, although the narrator goes out of his way to emphasize Plippalinot's high social standing (he notes: *er was geborn von rîters art, / mit guoten zûhten wol bewart* - 544,17f.), he is nonetheless a ferryman who, despite this high knightly descent lives presumably from his trade and from the tilth which he earns from the defeat of knights at the hands of other knights; in courtly terms this does not seem very noble. In general, medieval literature portrays the ferryman as a positive character (as an exception we see the ferrymen in Pleier's *Meleranz* and in the *Nibelungenlied*, or the Rhône ferryman in the Anno mira-

cles), who by taking the hero across a stretch of water, sets him on the course of a new adventure. This is doubtless also the case here, since Plippalinot aids Gawan in his quest, and it is therefore probable that Wolfram has upgraded this character socially, from Chrétien's simple ferryman to one of noble descent, thereby emphasizing his worthiness. However, although of *rîters art*, Plippalinot is *not* a knight.

It is possible to imagine that Gawan and Bene do not have a *minne* relationship because of the apparent social gap which separates them. The three other women in Gawan's life in this poem are all eminently noble: Orgeluse is a queen, Antikonie a king's sister and Obilot the daughter of a duke. Bene, although of noble descent, is merely a ferryman's daughter. However, all of Gawan's amorous adventures in *Parzival* are characterized by some or other element which makes them unusual. Obilot is clearly much too young to be a *Minnedame*, yet Gawan pays her *minne* service: with Obilot there can be no question of a physical reward. Antikonie, on the other hand, is much too free with the *lôn* she wishes to give Gawan. Theirs is a relationship devalued because no *diens* is supplied, and the reward is offered prematurely. Thus, both Obilot and Antikonie have a *minne* relationship with Gawan, although in neither case is it successful because the courtly rules of the *diens-lôn* convention are not fully upheld. With Orgeluse this is not the case; yet here too, although the rules are followed, the service required by Orgeluse is too extreme, indeed so extreme that she is later criticised by Gawan for having demanded so much (cf. 612,5ff.).

Thus, although the social gap between Bene and Gawan might, according to courtly convention, disqualify them from love, it is clear that for Gawan the fact that the rules are not all followed does not imply that he will refuse to be a partner in love, even if he knows that this affair might not lead to a successful conclusion (as in the cases of Obilot and Antikonie). Indeed, Bene would appear to stand a better chance of having a *minne* relationship with a knight of high standing than would the almost destitute Enite in Hartmann's *Erec*. And yet, she does not.

When Gawan spends the night at Plippalinot's house, he dines with Bene at his host's request. He pays her no *minne* service, indeed he tells her: '*iwes diens wil ich enbern*' (554,15). Bene explicitly states that she requires no reward of him. Wolfram leaves the audience in no doubt that there is no physical reward:

*Gâwân al eine, ist mir gesagt,
beleip aldâ, mit im diu magt.
het er iht hin zir gegert,
ich wœn si hetes in gewert.
er sol ouch slâfen, ob er mac. (552,25ff.)*

Since then neither service nor reward are given, this cannot be regarded as a *minne* encounter; yet, what is described here is the ideal situation for lovers. Bene, at Gawan's bidding, serves as a lady would serve her suitor, and twice offers him all he might desire with her father's approval, indeed at her father's request. On their arrival, Plippalinot tells her: *nu diene im unverdrozzen* (549,5). And she takes her father at his word, leading Gawan to his room, helping him off with his armour, and telling him: *'ich diene iu mêre / hêr, nâch iweren hulden / dan von andern schulden'* (549,20ff.). Gawan then requests that Bene have dinner with him, at which Bene blushes *von scheme* (550,23). In the early morning hours Bene, who has been sleeping at the foot of her mother's bed, returns to Gawan *durch gesellekeit* (553,26), and sits on the carpet before his bed, waiting for him to wake up. When he does arouse from his slumber, she makes him an offer: *'hêrre, gebietet über mich: / swaz ir gebiet, daz leist ich'* (554,17f.). Yet, instead of doing whatever he wills with Bene, he asks her about Schastel Marveil (cf. 554,23ff.)...

The question might reasonably be asked: why does nothing happen in this perfect opportunity for *minne*, with the perfect *minne* knight present? There is no indication (as with Obilot) that Bene is too young: her father would hardly agree if she were. And the Antikonie affair illustrates that it is not difficult to arouse Gawan's interest in beautiful women, indeed the line *er sol ouch slâfen, ob er mac* (552,29) indicates that Bene does arouse some instinctive sexual response in Gawan.

Bumke (1997, 79) notes: "Daß da nichts passiert, wird auf Gawans Müdigkeit nach den Anstrengungen des Tages zurückgeführt". This does not, however, explain why nothing happens on the next morning, when Bene makes her offer again. It is true that, as Bumke has remarked, Gawan is tired after his exertion during the day (cf. 553,1), but in other circumstances it is improbable that such weariness would have stopped this *Minneritter* from taking advantage of the situation. However, the reason Gawan gives for his exhaustion does explain *why* Gawan will not take up Bene's offer.

Before reaching Plippalinot's home, Gawan tells his host:

*'mich hât grôz müede überstriten,
daz mir ruowens wære nôt.
diu mir diz ungemach gebôt,
diu kan wol süeze siuren* (547,12ff.).

The exhaustion which afflicts him is due not only to the fighting as such that he has been engaged in, but also - and perhaps primarily - to the motive for that fighting, i.e. his *Minnedienst* for Orgeluse. It is because of Orgeluse that Gawan is so tired; when talking to Plippalinot he complains that Orgeluse has

given him no fair reward (547,16); by thus withholding her *lôn* she has made Gawan sad. Gawan asks who will give him solace in love:

*'wâ sol ich nu træsten holn,
muoz ich âne helfe doln
nâch minne alsohe riuwe?
pfligt si wîplicher triuwe,
si sol mir freude mêren,
diu mich kan sus versêren.'* (547,25ff.)

Thus can it not only be seen that Gawan's exhaustion is due to his *Minnedienst* for Orgeluse, but also that Orgeluse has now become his primary preoccupation. Although he seeks solace in love, he refuses it from Bene because of Orgeluse. The major difference between Gawan's earlier contacts with ladies (his - unsuccessful - *minne* relationships with Obilot and Antikonie) and his acquaintance with Bene is that he now knows Orgeluse. And as, after he has met Orgeluse he will forget Antikonie and the promise made to her to devote his knightly deeds to her (431,6ff.), so too will he not accept Bene's offer, although he is attracted to her.

minne with Bene is, for Gawan, an impossibility. Wolfram knows that and it is probable that the poet has attempted to prepare his audience for this impossibility by including elements in his description of Bene's household which would not appear in socially more acceptable surroundings. Although the narrator nowhere explicitly states that Gawan does not engage in *minne* with Bene because of Orgeluse, it is clear that Wolfram has introduced this character here with the intention of showing the importance of Gawan's attachment to his future wife. Bene is the temptation that Gawan can refuse: it is as if Bene were Gawan's token of loyalty to Orgeluse, and as such she might be compared to Orgeluse herself, who is the temptation which tests and proves Parzival's loyalty to Condwiramurs.

In her book on the women figures in Wolfram's work, Gibbs (1972) devotes two pages to Bene and she states that "to see in Bene anything more than a minor character would be to overestimate her" (217). This is perhaps a little unfair to a character who does play a not insignificant structural rôle in the Gawan adventures. The Bene episode does not, as has already been noted, appear as part of Chrétien's *Perceval* or anywhere else in the entire Arthurian tradition. Wolfram has obviously put it here with some motive in mind: by resisting Bene Gawan shows that he is able, once promised to Orgeluse, to resist the *minne* temptation. Gawan, although in every way a *Minneritter*, cannot be lured away from his chosen love by some other lady. For Wolfram, if the male-female relationship is to be successful, there can be no place for *minne*

outside a valid relationship, once it has been entered into.

However unkind fate might seem to Bene (indeed, to nearly all woman characters in medieval romance), Wolfram does allow her to play an important rôle here. Ladies in Arthurian romance are often significant not as characters in themselves, but in the rôle they play vis-a-vis the men of the poems. This is also the case with Bene, who in providing the temptation Gawan can refuse, in showing that a Gawan - Bene love is impossible, demonstrates the extent to which Wolfram wishes to commit a *Minneritter* like Gawan to a lasting and serious relationship with one lady. It is, however, a characteristic of Wolfram that a figure such as Bene should be portrayed not as a mere sterotype, but as a young woman who, although she would gladly give herself to the man of her choice, is, as her later rôle as go-between in the Itonje-Gramoflanz affair demonstrates, devoted to *minne*: as such, in many respects, Bene is not only simply another lady whom Gawan is to encounter during his career as *Minneritter*, but is herself to become an active player in helping to establish minne within Arthurian society.

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