WONDER AND ITS VOCABULARY IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Francisco Javier Minaya Gómez
Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha
Ciudad Real, España

Abstract

What role does the semantic field of WONDER, with its multiple components, play in shaping the emotional dimension and narrative design of the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? To address this question, this paper examines how wonder operates both within and beyond the text. Drawing on recent emotion research, theories of emotional communities in the Middle Ages, and a set of lexical tools on Old English, Middle English, and Anglo-Norman French, the study highlights the Gawain-poet's lexical choices, revealing a minimal survival of Old English roots alongside several foreign loanwords that acquire semantic dimensions akin to the native vocabulary. Building on these findings and tracing the attestations of this semantic field in the poem, the paper then investigates how the affective response of wonder structures the narrative framework, with particular attention to class and gender dynamics. The lexical and contextual analysis suggests that WONDER stands at the core of the poem's affective dimension, and that describing, suggesting, and potentially eliciting wonder through linguistic choices and textual motifs is among the poet's chief priorities.

Keywords: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* wonder, Middle English, emotions.

EL ASOMBRO Y SU VOCABULARIO EN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Resumen

¿Qué papel desempeña el campo semántico del ASOMBRO, con sus múltiples componentes, en la configuración de la dimensión emocional y el diseño narrativo del poema en inglés medio *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? Para responder a esta pregunta, este trabajo examina cómo opera el asombro tanto dentro como fuera del texto. Basándose en investigaciones recientes sobre emociones, teorías de comunidades emocionales en la Edad Media y diversas herramientas lexicográficas de inglés antiguo, inglés medio y francés normando, el estudio pone de relieve las elecciones léxicas del poeta de Gawain, revelando la supervivencia mínima de raíces del inglés antiguo junto a varios préstamos foráneos que adquieren dimensiones semánticas comparables a las del vocabulario nativo. A partir de estos hallazgos y del rastreo de las atestaciones de este campo semántico en el poema, se investiga también cómo la respuesta afectiva del asombro estructura el marco narrativo, con especial atención a las dinámicas de clase y género. El análisis léxico y contextual sugiere que el ASOMBRO se ubica en el núcleo de la dimensión afectiva del poema y que describir, evocar y potencialmente generar asombro mediante elecciones lingüísticas y motivos textuales es una de las prioridades fundamentales de su autor.

Palabras clave: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* asombro, inglés medio, emociones.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.25145/j.refiull.2025.51.15
Revista de Filología, 51; diciembre 2025, pp. 359-383; ISSN: e-2530-8548

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

The potential of literary texts to depict and trigger emotional experience is increasingly becoming a topic of scholarly interest. Over the last decades, both literary scholars and cognitive scientists have come up with different models and methodologies to look into the emotional dynamics of literary texts with the aim of trying to establish not only how particular authors and their communities understood and related to emotional experience but also how authors intend to trigger specific responses on the part of their audience. However, until recently, scarce attention had been paid to medieval English literature in this respect. Exceptions to this are the work by Harbus (2012 and 2016), who approaches, respectively, Old English literature and the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (henceforth, SGGK) from a cognitive perspective; or the work by Lockett (2011) on Old English and Latin traditions and their depiction of folk psychology. Parallel to this, and similarly relevant to this study, other scholars have focused on particular emotional responses and have begun to explore the role of wonder in medieval culture and literature, highlighting the importance of this emotional response in particular genres.

Given this context, while the emotional landscape of SGGK has been analysed from a more general perspective, and despite its central place in the narrative, the role of wonder in this poem (and, by extension, its vocabulary) remains largely unexplored. The purpose of this paper is to draw on recent theories of emotion and emotional communities in the Middle Ages to investigate several related questions: What is the role of the semantic field of WONDER, with its multiple components, in shaping the emotional dimension and narrative design of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? How does the Gawain-poet's choice of vocabulary, encompassing surviving Old English roots and foreign loanwords, reflect or construct wonder, and what does this reveal about potential similarities or differences in their etymological development? How do the poem's lexical and figurative expressions of wonder illuminate its social and cultural dynamics, particularly in relation to class and gender? And, finally, how does SGGK stage and evoke wonder as an affective response for its audience, and what broader insights about medieval emotional communities does this yield? Using the *Thesaurus of Old English*, the *Historical Thesaurus of English*, the *Middle English Dictionary*, the *Anglo-Norman-Dictionary* and the *Gersum Database*, this paper analyses the semantic field of WONDER in this Middle English poem, paying attention to the surviving Old English roots and foreign loanwords in it with the aim of identifying potential similarities or differences in their etymological development. Based on this analysis, and on the subsequent identification of this vocabulary in the text, this paper closely examines how this terminology is used by the *Gawain*-poet

[1] This research has been financially supported by the MICIU and the AEI, under grant number PID2022-138508NB-I00 (Modelos culturales de las emociones positivas en las lenguas germánicas medievales). The author would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on this manuscript.

and for what purpose. Combining these lexical tools, studies on figurative language, and literary studies on the nature of wonder and the emotional dimension of this and other medieval romances, this paper highlights the intimate link between linguistic expression, emotional experience, characterisation, and reception.

2. THE EMOTIONAL DIMENSION OF SGGK

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is one of the best-known Middle English (ME) texts, and, as such, one of the most frequently studied texts from the period. This text, as well as the other compositions by the same author, have been tackled from different angles. In terms of emotion research, this author has been studied, for instance, from the perspective of vocabulary. An example of this is the work by Pons-Sanz (2022), who analyses the semantic field of EMOTION, and particularly the lexical domain of FEAR. Indeed, fear in SGGK has also been analysed from the perspective of gender and from the theoretical angle of emotional communities (Rosenwein, 2006) in the study by Yeo (2016). Other than fear, researchers like Harbus (2016) have focused on the emotional dynamics of this text, and other studies analyse the role of the fantastic in this poem (Kline 1995; McDonald 2018), in its connection with the emotions that it prototypically triggers. This section presents an overview of the available scholarship on the emotional dimension of SGGK and the role of wonder in medieval literature in general in order to highlight key ideas that could be applicable to the present textual analysis.

In line with her earlier work on Old English (OE) verse and its affective potential, Harbus (2016, p. 595) outlines the main research avenues on the relationship between cognitive sciences and literary analysis, highlighting how the cognitive study of texts can reveal important information about how earlier authors (and, by implication, their emotional communities) conceptualised particular emotions. In her view, this line of enquiry is particularly interesting in its bidirectionality: not only does it reveal how medieval authors related to specific emotions, but it can also provide insights as to the emotional dynamics of the text under scrutiny, and how it is intended to affect its audience or readership. Based on earlier work on the emotional dimension of literary texts, she explains the relationship between linguistic form, emotional experience, and literary expression: "Literary texts routinely both represent and evoke these cognitive activities [...]. The text can be analysed for conceptual and semantic cues for these responses on the planes of both content and language" (Harbus 2016, p. 595). The driving hypothesis here is that through a cognitive semantics analysis of a given text's emotion vocabulary important information can be abstracted as regards the role of this emotion inside its narrative framework but also in terms of how it would have been intended to elicit specific responses.

In this sense, Harbus (2016, p. 594) points out the "general scholarly lack of interest in *Gawain's* emotional landscape" and directly challenges Anderson's (2005) view that there are "no emotional qualities to the poem's main character." Anderson's stance derives from his reading of the pentangle passage, where he finds

"no mention of more inward, moral, emotional, and spiritual qualities," and his observation that Gawain displays no clear "emotional bond with his king or with his fellow knights" (Anderson 2005, p. 227). Harbus, by contrast, argues that the text is deeply invested in charting Gawain's shifting experiential world and that the "capacity to arouse an emotional reaction in the reader is a central component of the text's narrative and aesthetic design" (Harbus 2016, p. 595). She also discusses the work by Andrew and Waldron (2013), in whose translation of the poem they claim that the emotional effectiveness of the poem is rooted in the narrator's point of view. In fact, she adds to this claim that "beyond a single technique, this capacity to arouse an emotional reaction in the reader is a central component of the text's narrative and aesthetic design, and results from a sustained focus on the representation of emotional response" (Harbus 2016, p. 595). In her paper, she succeeds in demonstrating how Gawain is indeed surrounded by important emotional situations, and she claims that his "emotional journey is comprehensive: it covers all seven of the key emotions recognised by psychologists: fear, anger, disgust, sadness, joy, shame and guilt" (Harbus 2016, p. 598). However, Harbus does not acknowledge wonder to be a central emotion in the main character's emotional journey nor the poem's emotional depth, when, in fact, lexical studies like that by Pons-Sanz (2022, p. 366) illustrate a lower rate of attestation of the terms in the lexical domain of fear as compared to that of wonder, as section 4 will highlight.

In order to properly analyse the role of wonder in this poem, Walker's (1997) seminal paper on this emotion in medieval literature provides a solid theoretical basis for this analysis because of the strong focus on wonder as a medieval emotion and its literary typology. She claims that wonder is "a recognition of the singularity of the thing encountered" and highlights that "only that which is different from the knower can trigger wonder" (Walker 1997, p. 7). For her, wonder in medieval literature is often not an organic reaction: "reactions such as wonder, delight, or terror do not simply occur; they are evoked, sometimes even staged" (Walker, 1997, p. 15). Walker (1997, p. 6) proposes several areas where the wonderful is found in medieval writings, one of which is "a literature of entertainment, within which [she includes] travel accounts, history writings, and the collection of odd stories." This category is defined as a "collection of oddities (including monsters or hybrids, distant races, marvellous lands)" and "antique notions of portents or omens –that is, unusual events that foreshadow the (usually catastrophic) future and were accompanied by a vague sense of dread" (Walker 1997, p. 12).

The work by Brewer (2016, p. 5) is similarly interesting for a study of wonder, from a cultural but also from a psychological perspective. He defines this emotion as "a form of positive affect" and he explains that wonder has "'negative affect' cousins in fear, dread and horror, as well as awe and reverence, suggesting that it defies strict categorisation as a positive feeling." Generally speaking, Brewer (2016, p. 5) identifies five distinguishing traits that differentiate phenomena that elicit wonder: "(1) they are novel; (2) they cause excitement; (3) they are unexplained; (4) they create a desire to understand; and (5) their propensity to induce wonder is dulled with experience." Brewer (2016) then goes on to enumerate the common physiological effects that these stimuli cause on the subject:

> A wondrous phenomenon can invoke bodily feelings of muscular tension, tingling, short-term paralysis (arresting the responder), feeling dazed, a sensation of warmth in the heart or abdomen, and an increase in heart rate and respiration through the central and autonomic nervous systems. (Brewer 2016, p. 30)

In a similar vein, Onians (1997, pp. 11-12) classifies the responses to wonder into different components: "(1) a striking experience, usually visual but sometimes aural; (2) a consequent physical paralysis; (3) a mental reaction resulting in learning; and sometimes (4) a new action." These physiological effects might be potentially useful to the present study in two respects: in identifying patterns of metonymic etymological development of OE, Old Norse (ON) and Anglo-Norman French (AN) into Middle English, whereby the emotion term would have developed from terms referring to these bodily symptoms, and, as well, in episodes where these symptoms accompany ambiguous lexical emotion markers.

Wonder is, furthermore, a response that is typically associated with the marvellous and the fantastic, particularly in medieval romance:

> Marvels and the marvellous are synonymous with medieval romance; and not just a form of festive entertainment. They are at once constitutive of the genre –wonder informs the structure and dynamic of romance, its subject matter, even its verbal complexion– and, for both medieval and modern readers, emblematic of it. (McDonald, 2018, p. 14)

However, several authors like Finlayson (1999), Prendergast (2013), or McDonald (2018) point out the scarcity and trivial character of wonders in Middle English romances, with the exception of one romance, SGGK. This idea is, in fact, developed by Prendergast (2013), who claims that the notion of wonder is what separates SGGK from other Middle English romances, an idea that is similarly supported by Kline (1995, p. 108). This is what makes SGGK canonical, the fact that wonders are not "trivial" or "mostly unsensational" (Finlayson 1999, p. 387). On the contrary, "[w]onder, in this text, is not something that is a means, or something to be destroyed, but something to dwell upon" (Prendergast 2013, p. 247). And, more often than not, there is an expectation that this dwelling upon the marvel, this inspection of the miraculous, is done externally rather than by the characters in the poem, who have a more indifferent attitude towards these wonders, who, other than the main character, seem not to derive knowledge from their experience.

The role of wonder in this narrative is certainly complex, and Kline (1995) analyses it from the angle of the fantastic. One of the main ideas in her study is that "the author of *Gawain* creates a tension between perceptions of what is real and what is magical, underscoring its ambiguity in his portrayal of magic" (Kline 1995, p. 111). Indeed, this tension between what is real and what is fantastic is apparent throughout the poem. Supernatural and verisimilar characters, objects and circumstances coexist in the poem's narrative framework without further explanation, and the characters seem to marvel at both the natural (e.g., Gawain's appraisal of the forest through which he travels) and the supernatural (e.g., the Green Knight) with equal frequency, which suggests that there is no particular intention on the part of the

poet to make these two ontologically separate categories. It is only through an analysis of these instances of wonder that the role of this emotion in this ME poem can be further defined. Certainly, through an analysis of the semantic field of wonder and its usage in this poem, certain patterns and tendencies can be observed, and these observations yield important information as to the role of wonder in this text and the poet's intention behind it.

3. THE SEMANTIC FIELD OF WONDER IN OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH

In order to move onto the analysis of this semantic field, a brief comparison between the OE and ME lexical domains for this emotion is required in order to identify potential differences in their semantic dimensions. The *Thesaurus of Old English* (TOE) categorises the Old English terms for wonder under the heading of "Amazement, astonishment, wonder, admiration" (TOE, s.v. *Unexpected*, 06.01.08.05.01), and it lists a series of terms that describe these four responses, which can broadly be categorised as amazement. More in-depth studies on this Old English lexical domain further explain how these terms are used in the context of the complete Old English corpus and they point out the fundamental constituents of this semantic field that might serve to trace patterns of semantic and diachronic evolution from Old English times until the 14th century. In this regard, Minaya (2023) presents a survey of this semantic field and looks into its usage of individual terms across poetry, prose, and glosses and glossaries.

Minaya (2023) breaks down this semantic field into two main groups: literal and figurative denominators of wonder (see Table 1). He discusses how the bulk of the attestations of this lexical domain are represented by the literal denominators for this emotion, mainly by the root OE *wund-*, of unknown etymology. These terms describe what is miraculous, astonishing, supernatural, exciting, or perceived as being of an extraordinary quality, which is consistent with how this response is described in aesthetic emotion literature (e.g., Fingerhut and Prinz 2020; Brewer 2016). Minaya (2023) also explains that other terms like OE *wafian* describe a similar aesthetic perspective to OE *wundrian*, stressing an active aesthetic contemplation that results in the experience of this emotion. However, he also stresses the fact that other terms like OE *wræclīc* 'strange, wonderful' but also 'wretched, miserable' might not so clearly belong to this lexical domain, as they are only attested in one text, the *Paris Psalter*, which is known for its defective translation practices.

Perhaps more interestingly, Minaya (2023) discusses two more groups where figurative language plays an important part. The first of this is a series of fear-related terms that, through their semantic proximity, describe instances of positive wonder in certain parts of the OE corpus, particularly OE *amasian*, the linguistic antecessor of Present-Day English (PDE) *amaze*, and OE *ablycgan*, which is mainly used by the Old English author Ælfric to denote instances of positive amazement. Minaya (2023) also goes over three different Old English verbs that denote EFFECT FOR CAUSE metonymies in which the effect (attention, silence, or paralysis) is used to

allude to the emotion that cause it, as well as a rare calque from Latin *adtonito*, OE *toþuniendan,* which relies on the feeling of seeing and hearing thunder to describe the emotion under scrutiny here.

TABLE 1. THE OLD ENGLISH SEMANTIC FIELD FOR WONDER, BASED ON MINAYA (2023)

Category	Term	Translation
Literal	*wundor*	'wonder, miracle, portent'
	wundrung	'marvelling'
	wundrian	'to marvel'
	wundorlic	'wonderful, miraculous'
	wundorlice	'wonderfully, miraculously'
	wræclīc	'strange, wonderful'
	wafian	'to marvel, experience wonder'
Fear-related terminology	*āforhtian*	'to frighten, cause wonder'
	āgælwan	'experience intense wonder, fear'
	brēgan	'to be afraid, experience wonder'
	amasian	'to be amazed, astonished'
	ablycgan	'to be in awe, experience wonder'
Action tendencies	*hlosnian*	'pay attention while astonished'
	toþuniendan	'astonished'
	swigian	'become silent from astonishment'
	styltan	'become paralysed from astonishment'

The Historical Thesaurus of English (HT) also lists the above Old English terms, and it includes the attested ME lexemes for this emotional response in different semantic and grammatical categories. There are two categories in the HT that are relevant in coming up with a preliminary list of ME terms for WONDER: "Feeling of wonder, astonishment" (HT, s.v. *Expectation*, 02.01.14.08) and the subcategory "Quality of inspiring wonder" (HT, s.v. *Feeling of wonder, astonishment*, 02.01.14.08.01). Both these categories describe two very different attitudes towards this emotional experience: the former describes a more subjective experience, while the latter contains terms that typically describe that which is generally and more objectively categorised as a portent, a miracle, or a wonder. Table 2 contains a summary of the terms in these two categories that could be found in the 14th-century text under analysis here, in this case, separated by grammatical category.

TABLE 2. THE MIDDLE ENGLISH SEMANTIC FIELD FOR WONDER BASED ON HT (02.01.14.08.01)

Category	Terms
n. Feeling wonder, astonishment	*wonder, ferly, marvel, stonying, astoning, ecstasy, mazedness, wonderfulness, excess*

Continúa

TABLE 2. THE MIDDLE ENGLISH SEMANTIC FIELD FOR WONDER BASED ON HT (02.01.14.08.01)	
Category	Terms
n. Quality of inspiring wonder	*wonder, wondering, selly, sellcouth, ferly, wonderness, adventure, marvel, wonder-work, miracle*
adj. Astonished, wondering	*awonder, forwondered, marvelling, wonderful, astoned, mazed, astonied, akimed,*
adj. Causing wonder, astonishing	*wonderly, wundorlic, wonderful, wundorful, wonder, marvellous, marvel, selly, sellcouth, uncouth, sully, ferliful*
adv. Wonderfully, astonishingly	*wonder, marvelly, marvellous, marvellously, wonders, ferly, selcouth, ferlily, disguisily, sellyly*
vb. Feel wonder, astonishment (at), be amazed, be a matter of wonder	*awonder, muse, ferly, marvel, astone, gaure, stare, gape (on), stony, stound, maze, stun, awhape, stony, astony*

Despite the fact that there are no lexical studies that look into how these terms are in Middle English or in specific genres or historical periods,[2] this list of lexemes is useful, at a methodological level, to move on to the next part of the analysis. With this list in mind, and taking the glossaries in Andrew and Waldron's (2007) and Putter and Stoke's (2014) editions of the poems in the *Pearl* manuscript, I will identify which of these lexical items occur in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in order to further inspect their semantic dimension from a cognitive and semasiological perspective. Similarly, I will try to ascertain whether there are any possible differences between native English terminology and French and Norse loanwords as far as their meanings are concerned, but also in terms of whether they might be used in describing or referring to particular objects and circumstances, or might be uttered by certain characters. The principles of inclusion for the lexical items above are based on whether the term describes the emotional response under scrutiny here or not. For instance, Putter and Stokes (2014, p. 555) point out that the term ME *aunter* 'remarkable incident, a marvel' as well as 'dramatic events, chivalric adventures' occurs 9 times in *SGGK,* but only 5 of these attestations are included in my database because they demonstrably and unequivocally refer to affective experience. In order to best answer these research questions, the next section will examine this lexical domain first, analysing the relevant terms in the OE lexical domain of wonder and their survival into this ME text, and then the French and Old Norse loanwords. The last section of this paper then analyses these wonder-occurrences with the aim of further clarifying the role that this emotion plays in the poem.

[2] With the exception of McDonald (2018, pp. 16-17), who makes a very brief overview of some of the terms that are often used by Middle English romancers to describe the wonderful.

4. WONDER, MARVELS, AND ADVENTURES: THE LEXICAL DOMAIN OF WONDER IN SGGK

There are 49 different occurrences of the terms in the lexical domain of WONDER in the poem under scrutiny. Given that the poem has an approximate length of 21,000 words, the semantic field accounts for roughly 0.23% of the poem's word count, or, in other words, approximately 1 in every 430 words in the poem belongs to this lexical domain. This figure is more or less consistent with earlier research on the Gawain-poet's usage of other emotion-related lexical domains. For example, and despite the marked differences in textual scope, the study carried out by Pons-Sanz (2022, p. 366) details that there are 62 different attestations of the terms in the lexical domain of pleasure across all of the texts in the Pearl Manuscript, 23 for love, 35 for anger, or 30 for fear. Table 3 indicates the number of occurrences of each of the terms identified in this poem in contexts where it describes wonder-experiences on the part of the characters of the poem or the narrator's appraisal of a circumstance as intended or expected to trigger this emotion.

TABLE 3. NUMBER OF OCCURRENCES

TERM	OCCURRENCES
wonder (n)	10
merveille (n)	6
aventure (n)	5
selli (adj)	4
ferli (n)	3
selli (n)	3
stonen (v)	2
ferli (adv)	2
ferlili (adv)	2
sellili (adv)	2
aueli (adj)	1
aventurous (adj)	1
wilsom (adj)	1
ferli (adj)	1
wonderli (adv)	1
wonderli (adj)	1
merveille (adj)	1
wondren (v)	1
forwondred (v)	1
wonder (adj)	1
Total	49

However, this table does not give a very accurate reading of the rate of attestation of this lexis in terms of expressions, etymology, or origin. In Table 4, this vocabulary is distributed differently, according to root expressions and language of origin.

TABLE 4. ETYMOLOGICAL GROUPING

Term	Occurrences
Native terminology	
wonder-	15
selli-	9
ferli-	8
Norse loanwords	
aueli	1
wilsom	1
French loanwords	
merveille	7
aventur-	6
(a)stonen	2

Despite the longer list of lexical units in Table 3, Table 4 illustrates how the vocabulary employed by the Gawain poet is fairly limited and that this poet relies on only eight different lexical roots to describe this emotional experience.

As far as the native terminology that is inherited from OE is concerned, a comparison between the first group in Table 4 and Table 1 illustrates striking differences between the OE and ME lexical domains of WONDER. Only one root from OE can be said to be present in the Gawain-poet's lexical choices, OE *wund-*. Of unknown etymology, this root survives into Middle and Present-Day English, and, indeed, it is used in this poem on 15 occasions to describe a wide array of phenomena, objects, and circumstances: from natural sounds, surprising circumstances or Bertilak's impressive catch, to more complex experiences of wonder, like the appraisal of the Green Knight, all of which will be analysed in more detail in the next section. In this sense, the semantic dimension and the context of usage of this ME root are consistent with how its OE antecessor is employed.

A similar scenario can be identified in the semantic dimension of ME *selli* and its derivatives, which descend from OE *sellic*. Despite the fact that OE lexical tools categorise this term as a descriptor of what is "strange, extraordinary, wonderful" (BWT, s.v. *seld-*, adj., I.), they also define it as a marker of what has "unusual good qualities, excellent, admirable" (BWT, s.v. *seld-*, adj., II.). The study carried out by

Minaya (2021) highlights how this term is commonly found as a poetic marker of beauty and excellence. According to the MED, both these senses continue into ME: "strange, surprising, unusual" and "exceptional, excellent" (MED, s.v. *selli,* adj., 1 and 2). In this poem, this root is used to describe length of time (in the sense of 'extraordinarily long') and frequency, impressive animals, or warm welcomes, but also to describe more generally the tale told by the narrator, Gawain's story; interestingly, there are also instances where its valence is not entirely positive, as is the case with Morgan le Fay's description.

Though less frequently attested, the other root in this group is perhaps more interesting because of the pattern of semantic variation that it illustrates. ME *ferli-* descends from OE *fǣrlic,* an adjective that is not very frequent in the OE corpus, with only 80 occurrences. It generally describes what is "sudden, unexpected" (DOE, s.v. *fǣrlic,* adj.). Minaya (2022, p. 204) explains that this term is frequently found in co-occurrence with terms for amazement or wonder, "denoting the sudden character of this event, which amplifies the intensity with which the emotion is felt." The conceptual connection between suddenness and surprise seems to have caused a semantic shift in ME, where the noun and adjective ME *ferli* and the adverbs *ferli and ferlili* prototypically refer to emotional experience and, in a second sense, to what is unexpected or sudden, for example: "1. (a) Terrifying, terrible; (b) strange; marvelous, miraculous; wonderful," "2. (a). Unexpected, sudden," "3. Exceedingly great or numerous" (MED, s.v. *ferli*, adj., 1, 2 and 3). In the poem, it describes a great variety of circumstances: from the fearsome forest that Gawain crosses, the fields described in the poem, or the Green Knight's great satisfaction, to the wonders and marvels that take place in Britain.

Finally, Table 4 stresses that the number of Norse loanwords and their frequency of attestation is relatively small in this text. The table also shows the inclusion of the term ME *aueli,* which is justified on the basis of just one attestation. According to the Gersum Database (Dance, Pons-Sanz, and Schorn, 2019), the root of the adjective is a borrowing from ON *agi,* which is defined as "dread, awe" (Dance et al., 2019, s.v. *aghlich*). Pons-Sanz (2022, p. 373) explains that this term describes the emotional reaction of those who see the Green Knight at Camelot when he first walks in, and she highlights how "he causes both fear and awe." Similarly, the MED defines this term as "inspiring awe or respect" (MED, s.v. *aueli*, adj., 1.a.). The inclusion of the emotions of awe and respect further clarify that this instance of emotional experience might not necessarily be negative and, as a result, it is included here as a potential marker of wonder or, more generally, amazement, an umbrella term that describes both awe and wonder, but also the experience of the sublime (Fingerhut and Prinz, 2020).

The inclusion of the other Old Norse borrowing is similarly problematic. Contextually, the term ME *wilsom* occurs in the wheel of a stanza that describes the roads that Gawain travels on his own. The term here seems to be used in the sense of 'bewildered' (see MED, s.v. *wilsom*, adj., 1), and it indicates the narrator's evaluation of the landscape that is spanned by Gawain, but further inspection of this instance of emotional experience is required. Etymologically speaking, ME *wilsom* is loaned from ON *willr* "wild; bewildered, erring, astray" (Dance et al., 2019, s.v.

wylsum, adj.), and, interestingly, it exhibits a similar diachronic evolution to OE *wafian* 'to marvel at', which, according to Minaya (2023), descends from a Proto-Germanic root describing the act of roaming or wondering but came to describe emotional experience. In this case, the term ME *wilsom* could be read as describing Gawain's wonder at the landscape, drawing on the conceptually contiguous idea of wandering through the forest.

This poem also contains three French loanwords that describe wonder-related phenomena. ME *merveille* seems to be the closest French equivalent to the native ME *wonder*, as it is defined both as "a thing, act, or event that causes astonishment or surprise" and as "wonderment, astonishment, surprise" (MED, s.v. *merveille*, n., 1 and 3). In this sense, ME *merveille* describes both the emotion of wonder and also what triggers it, as is the case of ME *wonder* (cf. MED, s.v. *wonder,* n., 6). Surprisingly, AN *merveille* is not used as a descriptor of the emotion of wonder. It is defined in the Anglo-Norman Dictionary (AND) as "marvel, wonder, something to be marvelled at" (AND, s.v. *merveille*, n., 1). Through its borrowing into ME, the Anglo-Norman term acquires an additional sense as an emotion word, following the diachronic and semantic development of the native vocabulary. Indeed, this is the way in which it is used in the poem, describing wonders in a more general manner (for instance, when Arthur refuses to eat until he beholds a marvel), but it is also used to describe the Green Knight's appearance, as well as the mountainous landscape that is featured in the poem.

Conversely, the term ME *aventure*, which has a similar number of occurrences in the text, showcases a different pathway of semantic evolution. In the AND, it is defined as an "event," and as "destiny, fortune;" within this last sense, the AND includes the sense of "marvel, wonder) (AND, s.v. *aventure*, n., 1 and 2). The ME term shows a similar semantic structure, while the first senses refer to events that are taking place or dangerous situations, the last two senses allude to the idea of wonder: "A marvelous thing (action, occurrence, a wonder, a miracle" and "A tale of adventures, an account of marvelous things" (MED, s.v. *aventure,* n., 5 and 6). What this clarifies is that, while ME *merveille* can be used to describe affective experience, ME *aventure* is only used in contexts where it refers to the phenomena that trigger it. Certainly, it is also used as a general marker of phenomena that are outside the general course of nature.

The last term in this group is perhaps more interesting in the figurative dimension of its diachronic evolution. ME *astonen,* which is used in the text meaning 'astonish', derives from AN *estoner*, which is defined in its main sense as "to stun, daze" and, in an additional sense, as "to surprise, astound" (AND, s.v. *estoner*, vb., 1 and 2). This sense distribution implies that, in Anglo-Norman, the emotional dimension of this term originates from a conceptualisation of emotion as forces, a widely studied mapping in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (see Kövecses 2000, p. 61). In this case, the Anglo-Norman term showcases the development of a secondary emotion sense via metonymy, where the effect of an emotional experience (feeling as if struck by a blow) is used to refer to the emotion (wonder). In Old English, emotions are also conceptualised as forces, as, for example, Díaz-Vera (2011, p. 95) or Minaya (2022, p. 204) show in the case of fear and its usage in hagiography, respectively. This Anglo-

Norman term is connected with three different ME terms: ME *astonen, astoned* and *stonen,* and the distribution of their senses is more or less similar. For instance, ME *stonen* is first defined as "to be astonished or amazed," and, in a second sense, "to be stunned or staggered by a blow" (MED, s.v. *stonen*, vb., 2). This suggests that, in ME, and eventually in Present-Day English,[3] this root evolves from an action verb towards emotional experience to the point that the former becomes a secondary sense. After the analysis of the etymology and semantics of this lexical domain offered in this section, in what follows, I will look into the specific instances of wonder that this vocabulary describes, grouping them thematically.

Finally, it is important to underscore the polysemous character of wonder and its vocabulary in SGGK. The data in Tables 3 and 4 show that, although the Gawain-poet relies on relatively few lexical roots, these terms exhibit multiple overlapping senses, often blurring boundaries between astonishment, admiration, and dread. Such breadth reflects the layered history of Middle English, where Old English roots (*wund-*, *sellic*, *fǣrlic*), Norse-derived terms (*aueli*, *wilsom*), and Anglo-Norman French vocabulary (*merveille*, *aventure*, *astonen*) converge. These diverse etyma frequently carry nuances of both positive and negative affect: *wonder* or *merveille* can denote genuine admiration, *ferli* can highlight suddenness or surprise, and *aueli* signals awe that shades into fear (Pons-Sanz 2022; Fingerhut and Prinz 2020). In addition, several of these terms function as intensifiers (e.g., *wonderly long, ferly fayn, selly longe*) that amplify magnitude or significance in ways not strictly limited to WONDER. The poet thus exploits this semantic layering to evoke a wide variety of affective responses, whether he is alluding to the Green Knight's supernatural marvel, Gawain's inner turmoil, or the collective reaction at Camelot. Recognizing wonder's polysemous complexity helps explain how it can overshadow other emotions in raw attestation counts: it is multifunctional, at once describing external marvels, internal states of surprise or dread, and broader experiential intensifications that reinforce SGGK's rich affective dimension.

5. EXPERIENCES OF WONDER IN SGGK

The previous section has provided an analysis and overview of the lexical domain of wonder as it appears in this ME poem. This section moves from lexicology into textual analysis, and it looks more closely at the usage of this lexical domain in the poem, with the aim of establishing the role of this emotion in the narrative and how it might connect with the idea of narrative empathy discussed by Harbus (2016). As discussed in the previous section, there are recurring patterns in the usage

[3] See, for example, the Oxford English Dictionary entry for PDE *astonish*, where the three first senses related to the idea of 'force' or 'shock' are categorised as obsolete, and the only contemporary sense is no. 4: "To give a shock of wonder by the presentation of something unlooked for or unaccountable; to amaze, surprise greatly" (OED, s.v. *astonish,* vb., 4).

of this vocabulary. To begin with, most of these terms are indistinctly used to describe wonders and marvels more generally, without alluding to what these are specifically, but they are also used to describe something that is not unusual or extraordinary, by means of negation. This lexical domain is also applied to what is exceedingly big or long, in the sense of 'extremely' rather than 'wonderfully'. In the sense of aesthetic contemplation, this vocabulary is also employed in describing the natural world, animals, or landscape, as well as interactions that take place within the poem's social sphere. Finally, the roots analysed above are found in specific emotion episodes that involve the experience of supernatural occurrences like the appearance of the Green Knight, his game or his chapel, or the sight of Morgan le Fay. In what remains, I will analyse these episodes and areas separately.

These terms oftentimes describe the wonder in very general terms, and, in fact, it is how the poem opens up, depicting Britain as a place where many wonders occur:

> *And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus*
> *On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez wyth wynne,*
> *Where werre and wrake and wonder*
> *Bi sypez hatz wont þerinne* (13-17)[4] [5]

This idea is repeated another time and with different vocabulary in the lines that follow the excerpt above: more *ferlyes* (23) are said to take place in Britain than in any other place. Thereafter, the narrator alludes to these marvels to clarify that the tale that is being told relates to one of these wonderful occurrences. They claim that they mean to recount one of such stories, a wonderful adventure that took place in the time of King Arthur. In this case, *aventure, selly, wonder* and *mervaille* are employed to describe the tale of the Green Knight, and what is particularly interesting in all of the six occurrences mentioned in this stanza is that the wonder-term in question is found in an alliteration context, so that lexical choice seems to be motivated by the alliterative pattern. Nevertheless, by collocating ME *were* 'war' with *wrake* 'vengeance, revenge' and also 'distress', the poet shapes the valence of this emotional episode, generating a response that transcends the boundaries of the exclusively positive.[6]

The more general sense of the lexical domain of wonder also closes the poem. The Green Knight confesses that Morgan le Fay is responsible for his appearance and the plot to deceive Gawain: *Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue* (2459).[7]

---

[4] These line numbers correspond to Andrew and Waldron's (2007) edition of the poem.

[5] "Felix Brutus founds Britain with joy on many broad slopes, where war and vengeance and marvel have continued there from time to time, and often both joy and strife have quickly alternated ever since" (Andrew and Waldron, 2013, p. 85)

[6] The usage of ME *wonder* in negative contexts is not uncommon: see, for example, sense 7.a. in the MED: "a terrible or shameful deed; a crime; a sin; also, evil" (MED, s.v. *wonder,* n., 7.a.).

[7] "She sent this marvel to deprive you of your senses" (Andrew and Waldron, 2013, p. 139).

And, later on, the narrator encapsulates the essence of the tale by pointing out how Gawain goes on to tell his story, and the marvels that he has encountered (*ferlyly he tells,* 2494). Furthermore, the idea of wonder is reinforced twice in the poem's closing stanza, one of them in an alliteration context, where *aventure* is paired with *Arthurus,* and another one in the wheel of the stanza, where this tale is framed in the longer list of wonders and marvels that have taken place in Britain since Felix Brutus arrived.

The poet also employs these terms to describe what should not be regarded as something extraordinary or unusual. We are told that Gawain was happy (ME *glad*) when the feast at Camelot began, but that it is no wonder (ME *wonder*, not alliterative) if by the time the Green Knight leaves, he feels a different way. His negative emotional state here is conveyed through a figurative usage of the adjective ME *hevi*, which prototypically refers to physical heaviness, but, in this context, it describes negative emotional experience: "of a person, the heart, thought, etc.: burdened with sorrow or woe" (MED, s.v. *hevi*, adj., 4), thereby conceptualising sadness or sorrow as heaviness, following the conceptual metaphors studied by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) BAD IS DOWN and SAD IS DOWN, or, alternatively, EMOTIONS ARE FORCES. Other examples of circumstances that are presented by the poet as fairly ordinary are Gawain's dislike of the Green Knight's movements as he prepares to strike his blow, or Gawain's observation that it is no wonder that men are misled or tricked by women, as he goes through a list of men who have, apparently, been wronged by women (i.e., Adam, Solomon, Samson and David, lines 2416-2419).[8] In both these contexts, *mervaille* and *ferly* are found in alliterative contexts.

There are eight different instances in which this vocabulary is used to describe something that is exceedingly intense, large, long, loud, or impressive from a visual perspective. These include: the Green Knight being pleased that Gawain has accepted his dare (*ferly fayn,* 388), the castle's long finials (*ferlyly long*, with alliteration, 796), Lady Bertilak waiting a long time for Gawain to wake up (*selly longe*, no alliteration, 1194), Bertilak's impressive catch (*were wonder,* 1322), Gawain feeling pleasure when exchanging glances with Lady Bertilak (*forwondered*, with alliteration, 1660), Gawain's comment that Lady Bertilak has consistently earned a beautiful jewel from him (*sellyly ofte*, no alliteration, 1803), Bertilak's and his warm welcome to Gawain (*selly soiorne,* 1962), and the sound that the Green Knight seems to be making with his sword on the stone prior to his appearance at the Green Chapel (*wonder breme noyse*, no alliteration, 2200). In this category, one could also include the description of the feast held in Bertilak's castle (*wonderly pay woke,* 1025).

The social and the natural world are also routinely described with wonder terms in this poem. The interaction between Gawain and Lady Bertilak is systematically placed in a context where the experience of wonder plays an important role, for example, when Lady Bertilak greets Gawain in the morning. Consider the following passage:

[8] For an analysis of this passage, see Prendergast (2013, p. 247).

Þenne ho gef hym god day, and wyth a glent laȝed
And as ho stod, ho stonyed hym wyth ful stor wordez (1291-1292)[9]

The poet then continues to narrate the contents of Lady Bertilak's speech, and we are given an explanation as to why Gawain is shocked by their conversation:

> 'Now may He who prospers every speech reward you for this pleasure, only it is hard to believe that you are Gawain!' 'Why?' said the man, and he asks eagerly, afraid that he had fallen short in the manner of his speeches. But the lady exclaimed 'God bless you' and said: 'For this reason: anyone as good as Gawain is rightly considered to be, and in whom courtesy is so completely embodied, could not easily have stayed so long with a lady without asking for a kiss through his courtesy, by some trifling hint at the end of a speech. (Andrew and Waldron, 2013: 113)

A similar circumstance can be found several lines after this episode. The lady is visiting Gawain in his room, and she is described as peeping through the curtains *with a luflych lok* (1480) 'with a look of love'.[10] Then she utters the following words, which go in line with these previous interaction:

'Sir, ȝif ȝe be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez,
Wyȝe þat is so wel wrast alway to god,
And connez not of compaynye þe costez vndertake,
And if mon kennes yow hom to knowe, ȝe kest hom of your mynde;
Þou hatz forȝeten ȝederly þat ȝisterday I taȝtte
Bi alder-truest token of talk þat I cowþe.' (1481-1487)[11]

In the first instance, it is Gawain who is genuinely surprised at Lady Bertilak's advances and flirtatious attitude, and this emotional experience is conveyed through a term that suggests a conceptualisation of this emotion episode as being struck by the force of an emotion. Lady Bertilak is doubting Gawain's courtesy, because he does not seem to correspond her advances, and, indeed, in the next episode, which refers back to the first passage described here, now she expresses her wonder at Gawain's attitude. In this case, wonder does not result from an inability to cope with a circumstance, as in the first passage, but is best understood in terms of intense surprise.

As discussed in the previous section, the poet also places the experience of wonder in contexts where it is associated with the contemplation of the natural world.

---

[9] "Then she wished him good day, and laughed with a twinkle, and as she stood she astounded him with her severe words" (Andrew and Waldron, 2013, p. 113).

[10] Similar remarks can be found several lines before this passage, when in Lady Bertilak's visit, he is said to "[open] his eyelids and behaved as though he was surprised" (Andrew and Waldron 2013, p. 111), *vnlouked his ȝe-lyddez, and let as hym* ***wondered*** (1201).

[11] "Sir, if you are Gawain, it seems to me a wonder, a man who is always so well disposed to good things, and you cannot understand the manners of society, and if someone teaches you to know them, you cast them from your mind: you have quickly forgotten what I taught you yesterday in the very truest teaching I could put into words" (Andrew and Waldron 2013, p. 117).

Gawain's journey through the woods is described as a *wylsum way* (689), and, indeed, the poet further clarifies why these paths in the forest should be a matter of wonder:

> *At vche warþe oþer water þer þe wy3e passed*
> *He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,*
> *And þat so foule and so felle þat fe3t hym byhode.*
> *So mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez,*
> *Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole.*
> *Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolues als,*
> *Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarrez,*
> *Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,*
> *And etaynez, þat hym anelede of þe he3e felle* (715-723)[12]

This passage enumerates a series of creatures and animals that Gawain finds in his journey, and this occurrence of OE *ferly* seems to be aimed at emphasising the numerous beings that Gawain fights, an idea that is repeated through the inexpressibility topos (*Unsagbarkeitsopos*) a rhetorical focusing on the character's "inability to cope with the subject" (Curtius, 1953: 159). But despite the fact that the poet here acknowledges their inability to make a comprehensive list of these creatures, they attempt to mention some of the most impressive ones, so that the wonder that they intend to trigger is fully justified: these creatures are fierce and violent (ME *fel*), and unpleasant to look at (ME *foul*), and yet they are classified as marvels (ME *merveille*), not because they are particularly pleasing from an aesthetic perspective, but because some of them are out of the course of the ordinary, not the wolves, the bulls, the boars or the bears, but the giants and the dragons, which belong to the realm of the supernatural. This landscape is, further on, described as a *forest ful dep, þat ferly watz wylde* (741) "a deep forest that was exceedingly wild" (Andrew and Waldron 2013: 100), and later on the water that surrounds Bertilak's castle is said to be *wonderly depe* (786) 'wondrously deep'. In these cases, the poet is drawing on the experience of wonder, on the one hand, to entertain and fascinate the audience, but, on the other hand, this wonder also reinforces Gawain's bravery.

Nevertheless, wonder is not only reserved for the contexts and elements mentioned above. The fact that Morgan le Fay is described in negative terms has been mentioned in the preceding pages, but this does not cancel out the wonder that the sorceress is supposed to trigger. Lines 941 to 970 contain a contrasting description of Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak; while the latter is presented as extremely beautiful, richly dressed and attractive, the former is described as being extremely unappealing: "the other was sallow," "rough wrinkled cheeks sagged on

[12] "At every ford or stream where the knight passed it was a wonder if he did not find a foe in front of him, and that so ugly and so fierce that he was obliged to fight. The man finds so many marvels there among the hills, it would be too difficult to tell the tenth part of them. Sometimes he fights with dragons and also with wolves, sometimes with men of the woods that lived in the crags, with both bulls and bears, and boars at other times, and giants that pursued him from the high fell" (Andrew and Waldron, 2013, p. 100).

the other," "the other was attired over the neck with a neckerchief, muffled up over her swarthy chin" (Andrew and Waldron, 2013: 105). Finally, the narrator focuses on her eyebrows and face:

> *Þat no3t watz bare of þat burde bot þe blake bro3es,*
> *Þe tweyne y3en and þe nase, þe naked lyppez,*
> *And þose were soure to se and sellyly blered;* (961-963)[13]

Morgan is presented as an ugly old woman, and the poet still stresses the fascination and the wonder that is supposed to be felt at her disfiguration, the horrible aspect of her face. While other usages of ME *selly* are positive in valence, in this case they point towards a negative aesthetic appraisal, despite the fact that wonder is, overall, a positive emotion.

Similar remarks apply to the aesthetic evaluation of the Green Knight throughout the poem. When he first appears in Camelot, his appearance elicits a very precise emotional response:

> *Þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster,*
> *On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe;*
> *Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware and so þik,*
> *And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete,*
> *Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were,*
> *Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene,*
> *And þat þe myriest in his muckel þat my3t ride;*
> *For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne,*
> *Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale,*
> *And alle his fetures fol3ande, in forme þat he hade, ful clene;*
> *For wonder of his hwe men hade,*
> *Set in his semblaunt sene;*
> *He ferde as freke were fade,*
> *And oueral enker-grene.* (136-156)[14]

There are two lexical items in this passage that further detail the profile of this emotional experience, as well as several nouns and adjectives that clarify what it is that makes this creature special or wondrous. It is portrayed as a large man, tall and bulky, to the point that the poet considers him a half-giant, and yet still elegant

[13] "[N]othing of that lady was bare but the black brows, the two eyes and the nose, the naked lips, and those were disagreeable and exceedingly bleared" (Andrew and Waldron 2013, p. 105).

[14] "there rushes in at the hall door a fearsome lord, the very biggest man on earth in height; from the neck to the middle so squarely built and so thick-set, and his loins and his limbs so long and so big, I think he was half-giant on earth, but at any rate I declare him to be the biggest man, and moreover the most elegant for his size who could ride a horse; for although his body was massive in back and in chest, both his belly and his waist were becomingly slim, and every part of him matching completely. For people were amazed at his colour, ingrained in his outward appearance; he behaved like a bold warrior, and bright green all over" (Andrew and Waldron 2013, p. 88).

in appearance, with attractive proportions. In him coexist both monstrosity and an eery appeal, and this ambiguity is reflected in the lexical choices of the poet. He is first described as *aghlich*, a term that, as seen in the preceding section, describes objects, people and circumstances that trigger either fear or awe. In this case, and following the conceptual model proposed by Keltner and Haidt (2003), this instance of ME *aghlich* can be read as an instance of awe that is triggered by a perception of vastness (that is, something larger or radically different than the self) and a conceptual need for adaptation of the subject's mental structures that is rooted in their inability to process the creature in front of them. Once the Green Knight is inspected in detail, awe leads to wonder, because the adaptation of the beholder's mental structures is successful. Moreover, while the first instance seems to be an appreciation on the part of the poet, the second term describes people's reaction at the creature, an idea that recurs several lines after this passage: *Ther watz lokyng on lenþe þe lude to beholde / vch mon had meruayle quat hit mene myȝt / Þat a haþel and a horse myȝt such a hwe lach* (232-234) "There was gazing for a long time to behold the knight, for everyone wondered what it might signify that a knight and a horse could take such a colour" (Andrew and Waldron 2013: 90).

The preceding passage highlights the idea of looking intently to try to figure out the knight's nature, and this idea is reinforced again in another passage; this action tendency is furthermore consistent with how this emotion is described in aesthetic emotion literature (Fingerhut and Prinz, 2020). Another passage further details the somatic profiles and action tendencies of this emotional experience:

> *Al studied þat þer stod, and stalked hym nerre*
> *Wyth al þe wonder of þe worlde what he worch schulde.*
> *For fele sellyez had þay sen, bot such neuer are;*
> *Forþi for fantoum and fayryȝe þe folk þere hit demed.*
> *Þerfore to answare watz arȝe mony aþel freke,*
> *And al stouned at his steuen and stonstil seten*
> *In a swoghe sylence þurȝ þe sale riche;*
> *As al were slypped vpon slepe so slaked hor lotez in hyȝe--*
> *I deme hit not al for doute,*
> *Bot sum for cortaysye--*
> *Bot let hym þat al schulde loute*
> *Cast vnto þat wyȝe* (237-248)[15]

[15] "Everyone who was standing there stared and cautiously approached him, with all the wonder on earth as to what he would do. For they had seen many marvels but never such a one before; and so the people there considered it illusion and magic. Therefore many a noble knight was afraid to answer, and all were astounded by his voice and sat stone-still in a deathly silence throughout the fine hall. Their voices died away as if they had all fallen asleep suddenly – I judge it not wholly for fear but partly for courtesy – but allowed him to whom all were duty bound to defer to address the man" (Andrew and Waldron 2013, p. 90).

Here, the poet describes the effects of this emotion episode drawing on a series of lexical items that describe the emotion at a literal level, like ME *wonder, sellyez* or *stouned*, but this lexis co-occurs alongside lexis for fear, like ME *arȝe* "frightened, afraid" (MED, s.v. *argh*, adj., 1), and ME *doute,* which describes "uncertainty, doubt or perplexity" (MED, s.v. *doute*, n., 1) and in the context of the passage is not exclusively presented as the sole cause for the emotion. What is more, the poet also draws on some common action tendencies and somatic profiles for this emotion to emphasise the intensity of this episode: approach tendencies (*stalked hym nerre*), feelings of bodily paralysis (*stonstil seten*), and an inability to speak (*sylence*). This emotional response contrasts with that of Arthur, who beholds this *aventure* from his dais, and addresses the Green Knight fearlessly (*rad was he neuer,* from ME *rad* 'afraid, frightened').

Later on, when the Green Knight explains the dynamics of the game that he proposes, the emotional reaction of those who are at Camelot grows in intensity, and this intensity is expressed through the somatic profile of this response: *If he hem stowned vpon fyrst, stiller were panne* (301) "If he stunned them at first, more motionless then were all the retainers" (Andrew and Waldron, 2013: 91). Later on, when Gawain succeeds in beheading the Green Knight, the poet makes it a point to acknowledge that the scene is gruesome to behold: *He brayde his bulk aboute, Þat vgly bodi þat bledde; Moni on of hym had doute, Bi þat his resounz were redde* (439-442) "He twisted his trunk around, that ugly body that bled. Many a one was frightened of him by the time he had finished speaking" (Andrew and Waldron 2013: 94).[16] The emotional reaction here shifts from wonder to fear, awe or aesthetic horror as the following two terms attest: ME *doute*, discussed above, and ME *ugli* "terrifying, horrifying, dreadful; also, threatening, unsettling" but also "loathsome, ugly, repulsive" (MED, s.v. *ugli*, adj., 1a and 1b). Indeed, as the MED acknowledges in this last entry, it is "sometimes difficult to distinguish" between these two senses. Here, the reaction of those who are at Camelot contrasts strongly (at least in terms of valence) with that of Arthur:

> *Þaȝ Arþer þe hende kyng at hert hade wonder,*
> *He let no semblaunt be sene, bot sayde ful hyȝe*
> *To þe comlych quene wyth cortays speche [...]*
> *Neuer þe lece to my mete I may me wel dres,*
> *For I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake* (467-475)[17]

[16] As Andrew and Walderon (2013, p. 94) point out, this phrase describes the emotional response of the characters in the scene, but the poetic effect showcases "a good instance of the poet's use of the *Wheel* for surprise and suspense."

[17] "If Arthur the noble king was amazed at heart, he let no sign be seen but said aloud with gracious speech to the fair queen: Nevertheless I may well proceed to my meal, for I have seen a wonder, I cannot deny" (Andrew and Waldron, 2013, p. 95).

Arthur's response differs from that of the onlooking court in two notable respects: first, he registers no fear, marveling at the supernatural occurrence he has witnessed; and second, he refuses to externalize any sense of amazement, whether through gestures or words. In accordance with Yeo's (2016: 254) argument, this refusal to show fear or astonishment maintains a construct of hegemonic masculinity for the Knights of the Round Table –one that strategically displaces the court's anxiety onto female figures rather than the men themselves. Moreover, Arthur's ironic final comment –eating precisely after he has seen something "wonderful," in direct contrast to his earlier insistence that he cannot dine until such an event occurs– softens the dark and foreboding overtones of the Green Knight's appearance. This ironic stance is heightened a few lines later when Arthur humorously tells Gawain to "hang up his axe," suggesting that it has done its work well enough. As Brett (1919: 7) explains, this proverbial saying, heng up thyn ax, also occurs in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, a text composed nearly two centuries earlier. By deploying this familiar idiom, Arthur recontextualizes what might otherwise be an atrocious or uncanny moment into something more jovial, effectively reestablishing camaraderie and levity among the knights. In so doing, he trivializes the supernatural horror the Green Knight presents, reframing it as a manageable, if striking, occurrence. Thus, Arthur's quip not only underscores his own composure and leadership style, tempered more by wit than fear, but also reveals how humour can serve as a narrative strategy to counteract the ominous tension, restore social harmony, and maintain the masculine ideal of courage under extraordinary circumstances, where he is able to make a joke, telling Gawain to hang up his axe, for it has hewn enough.[18]

6. CONCLUSION

All things considered, the preceding sections have highlighted the complex character of wonder in this text, both in textual and lexical terms. The vocabulary associated with this emotion appears with relatively high frequency compared to other responses, yet closer scrutiny reveals that SGGK draws on a limited set of roots inherited from Old English, supplemented by loanwords from Old Norse and Anglo-Norman French. Likewise, the poem contains fewer wonder-related terms than those available to fourteenth-century Middle English speakers, according to the *Historical Thesaurus*. This analysis shows that alliterative references to wonder tend to function as broad, sometimes abstract markers, potentially filling metrical gaps while contributing to the poem's ominous tone at the beginning and the end. Other terms not traditionally listed as denominators of wonder, such as *wylsum*, emerge as meaningful descriptors of this emotional experience upon closer examination. Yet, in some cases, the usage of these terms can appear ambiguous, as the poet occasionally

[18] *Now sir, heng vp þin ax, þat hatz innogh hewen* (477). This phrase can be taken literally and figuratively, thereby underscoring the ironic nature of Arthur's offhand remark.

conflates wonder, awe, and fear. This ambiguity, which is rooted in the polysemy of most of the terms in this semantic field, underscores the importance of point of view in constructing the poem's emotive atmosphere. Furthermore, the poet employs figurative denominators, particularly Anglo-Norman borrowings conceptualizing wonder as a force, and integrates action tendencies and somatic profiles consistent with the scholarship discussed in earlier sections.

On the one hand, wonder in SGGK serves multiple poetic functions. It establishes the overall tone, reappears to lend circularity to the narrative, and permeates Britain's depiction with an aura of strangeness. Beyond mere spectacle, however, wonder shapes the social fabric of the poem, where courtesy interlaces with marvels both natural and supernatural. Lady Bertilak and Gawain's relationship, for example, is tinged with an unusual interaction that ultimately underscores Gawain's virtue. Meanwhile, Gawain's courage gains further emphasis through his encounters with violent and dangerous phenomena –a combination of realistic perils and fantasy elements.

On the other hand, the poet also deploys wonder to guide audience reactions, using it as a tool for entertaining spectacle. Through hyperbolic descriptions (intensifying size or strangeness), the poet encourages a heightened emotional response in medieval audiences. What might otherwise be perceived as grotesque becomes fascinating through the distancing effect of narration. Such examples underscore the poem's intentional staging of wonder, which is most conspicuous in Camelot's collective response to the Green Knight. A focus on curiosity or fear arises from the Green Knight's unsettling arrival, yet it also exposes the social hierarchy of emotional expression: those at court are constrained from revealing their true reactions by the demands of courtesy and masculine ideals.

Nevertheless, there is a series of attestations of this lexical domain where the potential of this emotion in this literary context is fully realised and where the staged character of these emotional experiences is more apparent. This is most evident in the reaction of the people at Camelot when they behold the Green Knight's arrival and in how the poet presents these episodes. While the poet paints an impressive and potentially monstrous portrayal of the creature that is meant to trigger wonder and fascination in those who envision it, they also acknowledge a series of reactions that stem from its appraisal: from a wonder that is rooted in curiosity to awe/fear-experiences that are triggered by a perception of threat or an inability to cope with the sight of the Green Knight. Not only is this element meant to entertain and fascinate, it also structures the social sphere of the poem. Courtesy prevents those who are at court and see him from showing their true emotions, and Gawain's and Arthur's manliness prevent them from fully expressing the depth of their emotional reaction, while, at the same time, fear is ascribed to the female character. Furthermore, Arthur's dismissal of this episode as a *mere selly* underscores the tension between the poem's unsettling elements and its potential for humour. The term *selly*, which can convey both the marvellous and the uncanny, can also operate playfully; these senses overlap without being wholly identical. By invoking a proverbial phrase, Arthur literalises the saying in a comical manner, trivializing the uncanny dimensions of the Green Knight's intrusion and showing how an ostensibly disturbing or awe-inspiring

moment can be reframed to relieve communal tension. Ultimately, these examples demonstrate how a multidisciplinary reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (one attentive to linguistic form, social norms for emotional display, and narrative strategies) reveals that wonder stands at the core of the poem's affective design. The Gawain-poet repeatedly uses lexical choices and textual motifs to trigger wonder in characters and audience alike, suggesting that sustaining and manipulating this response remains one of the text's chief artistic priorities. This study opens the door for future explorations of aesthetic experience and its vocabulary in both Middle English language and literature.

Recibido: 13.2.2024; aceptado: 13.2.2025.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AND = De Wilde, Geert, Pagan, Heather, & Demelas, Delphine (Eds.). (2023). *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* (AND2, recurso en línea). Aberystwyth University. https://anglo-norman.net/.

Anderson, John J. (2005). *Language and imagination in the Gawain-poems*. Manchester University Press.

Andrew, Malcolm, & Waldron, Ronald (Eds.). (2007). *The poems of the Pearl manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (5th ed.). University of Exeter Press.

Andrew, Malcolm, & Waldron, Ronald (2013). *The poems of the Pearl manuscript: In modern English prose translation*. Liverpool University Press.

Brett, Cyril (1919). Notes on passages of Old and Middle English. *The Modern Language Review, 14* (1), 1-9.

Brewer, Keagan (2016). *Wonder and skepticism in the Middle Ages*. Routledge.

Curtius, Ernst Robert (1953). *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (W. R. Trask, Trans.). Pantheon Books.

Dance, Richard, Pons-Sanz, Sara M., & Schorn, Brittany (Eds.). (2019). *The Gersum Project: The Scandinavian influence on English vocabulary* (recurso en línea). https://www.gersum.org/.

Díaz-Vera, Javier E. (2011). Reconstructing the Old English cultural model for fear. *Atlantis, 33* (1), 85-103.

Fingerhut, Joerg, & Prinz, Jesse J. (2020). Aesthetic emotions reconsidered. *The Monist, 103* (2), 223-239.

Finlayson, John. (1999). The marvellous in Middle English romance. *The Chaucer Review, 33* (4), 363-408.

Harbus, Antonina (2016). Emotion and narrative empathy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *English Studies, 97* (6), 594-607.

HT = Kay, Christian, Alexander, Marc, Dallachy, Fraser, Roberts, Jane, Samuels, Michael, & Wotherspoon, Irené (Eds.). (2025). *The Historical Thesaurus of English* (2nd ed., v5.0, recurso en línea). University of Glasgow. https://ht.ac.uk/.

Keltner, Dacher, & Haidt, Jonathan (2003). Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion. *Cognition & Emotion, 17* (2), 297-314.

Kline, Barbara (1995). Duality, reality, and magic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In Joe L. Sanders (Ed.), *Functions of the fantastic: Selected essays from the Thirteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts* (pp. 11-30). Greenwood Press.

Kövecses, Zoltán (2000). *Metaphor and emotion: Language, culture, and body in human feeling*. Cambridge University Press.

McDonald, Nicola (2018). The wonder of Middle English romance. In Katherine C. Little & Nicola McDonald (Eds.), *Thinking Medieval romance* (pp. 13-35). Oxford University Press.

MED = Lewis, Robert E. (Ed.). (2001). *Middle English Dictionary* (recurso en línea). University of Michigan Press. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/.

Minaya Gómez, Francisco J. (2021). *The lexical domain of beauty and its metaphors in the Anglo-Saxon formulaic style*. Peter Lang.

Minaya Gómez, Francisco J. (2022). *Emotions of amazement in Old English hagiography: Ælfric's approach to wonder, awe and the sublime*. Peter Lang.

Minaya Gómez, Francisco J. (2023). Words of wonder: The cognitive and semantic dimension of the literal and figurative denominators for wonder in Old English sources. *Cognitive Semantics, 9*, 418-441.

Minaya Gómez, Francisco J. (2025). Wonder and the supernatural in Old English verse: An assessment of WONDER as a potentially mixed emotional response. In Edel Porter & Javier E. Díaz-Vera (Eds.), *Cultural models for emotions in the North Atlantic vernaculars, 700-1400*. Brepols.

Onians, John (1994). I wonder: A short story of amazement. In John Onians (Ed.), *Sight and insight: Essays in art and culture in honour of E.H. Gombrich at 85* (pp. 11-33). Phaidon.

OED = Oxford University Press (n.d.). *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (recurso en línea). Recuperado el 2 de octubre de 2025, de https://www.oed.com/.

Prendergast, Thomas A. (2013). Canon formation. In Marion Turner (Ed.), *A handbook of Middle English studies* (pp. 239-252). Wiley-Blackwell.

Pons-Sanz, Sara M. (2022). Medieval multilingualism and the expression of EMOTION: FEAR in the Gawain-poet's texts. *English Language and Linguistics, 26* (2), 361-398.

Putter, Ad, & Stokes, Myra (Eds.). (2014). *The works of the Gawain poet: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Penguin Classics.

Rosenwein, Barbara H. (2007). *Emotional communities in the early Middle Ages*. Cornell University Press.

TOE = Roberts, Jane, Kay, Christian, & Grundy, Lynne (2017). *A Thesaurus of Old English* (recurso en línea). University of Glasgow. http://oldenglishthesaurus.arts.gla.ac.uk/.

Walker Bynum, Caroline (1997). Wonder. *The American Historical Review, 102* (1), 1-17.

Yeo, Jayme M. (2016). "Dere dame, to-day demay yow neuer": Gendering fear in the emotional community of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *Exemplaria, 28* (3), 248-263.