



# Gawain: Transformations Of An Archetype

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## Abstract

The origin of the Grail legend, as first suggested by Jessie Weston and confirmed by the majority of anthropologists, is probably one of the numerous mystery cults coexisting with early Christianity, but condemned as heresies and driven underground when the Christian myth was established as a state religion. The complete version of this cult is lost to us but its fragments, scattered in various European and Oriental tales, point to a common source in the Bronze Age mythic complex involving the immortal Goddess and her consort, the ever-dying, ever-reborn god of vegetation. It is this ancient vegetative deity, concealed beneath a thin disguise of a Christian knight, that is incarnated in Gawain, the oldest, most primitive figure in the Arthurian romances, whose reputation as a ladies' man is a survival of his original role of the Champion of the Goddess. His numerous transformations - from the lover of the Goddess of the archaic fertility rituals, through the maidens' knight or alternately the Maiden's knight of medieval romance - include also the archetypal woman destroyer of Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" and thus anticipate Shakespeare's tragic heroes. Shakespeare's centrality to the western canon, it might be argued then, resides not in the thematic originality, but in a new, and still unsurpassed way, in which his plays re-articulate and transmit to us the forgotten wisdom of the earliest pagan myths

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