It is increasingly widely recognised nowadays that the study of medieval poetics should be firmly rooted in the context of the *trivium* – not only of rhetoric, but also of grammar and logic. Taken together, the disciplines of the *trivium* constitute a repository of a specifically medieval textual poetics. In the ‘Introduction’ to his recent book on medieval poetics – *From Topic to Tale: Logic and Narrativity in the Middle Ages*¹ – Eugene Vance gives a valuable survey of a variety of approaches to medieval textuality. He regards textuality as a pivotal factor that influenced medieval poetics from the twelfth century onwards and had an epistemic impact upon the whole of medieval culture. Under that impact, he claims, new and specifically textual models for understanding and expressing the reality developed. Romance is a genre the created world of which is modelled by such new, textual determinants, and Vance analyses Chrétien de Troyes’s romances from the viewpoint of their relations to medieval logic.²

In the present chapter I wish to demonstrate that a sharp awareness of textuality underlies the ‘Gawain’-poet’s concept of romance as revealed in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and constitutes a strong impulse of his poetics as manifest in his other works as well.

In the second stanza of *Sir Gawain* the narrator describes his story in a series of metaliterary designations, crowned with a compact description of the poem in the wheel. I believe that from this wheel much can be learnt about the poet’s concept of romance and of the literary work in general:

\[
\text{I schal telle hit astit, as I in toun herde,} \\
\quad \text{With tonge.} \\
\text{As hit is stad and stoken} \\
\text{In stori stif and stronge,}
\]

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The speaker alludes here to his supposedly aural reception of the story – 'herde' – and creates an oral context for its transmission – 'telle', 'with tonge'. Yet these implications of the oral convention, reminiscent of minstrelsy, are inconsistent with the second half of the description, in which a visual image of the text is evoked.

The narrator perceives his story as 'with lëll letteres loken'. The noun 'letteres', specifically, connects the concept of the poem revealed here with the discipline of grammatica, which was defined by John of Salisbury as a science of letters: grama means littera, that is, 'letter' or 'line'. Letters are figures (figure) which serve as visual indicators, first, of spoken words, and second, of things. Thus, the use of the word 'letteres' in the description of the romance evokes a visual picture of it as a written text and establishes its relationship to the art of grammatica.

The epithet 'lell' suggests a relationship of fidelity between the text of the poem and an order of material things which the poem imitates. John of Salisbury claims that grammatica 'imitates' nature, and poets, likewise, should faithfully represent nature as they write. The narrative 'I' of Sir Gawain seems to be fully aware of this basic requirement and assures us that it will be fulfilled in his story.

However, he may also be referring here, at the simplest level, to the mise en escrit of his text, that is, to the linking of the letters of which it is composed. This conjecture is based upon the use of the verb 'loken', which may be translated as 'linked'. The phrase 'with lëll letteres loken' would therefore depict a visual image of the written text as consisting of figures joined together. The word 'loken' is essential to the concept of the text revealed in these lines. In this concept the motif of ligature appears to be quite important. It brings to mind the literal sense of ligature as used in writing and printing as well as the notational device of ligature developed in medieval music. The idea of the text as a configuration of lines and strokes is supported by the description of the text written on the wall of Belshazzar's palace in Cleanness as 'Pe tyxte of Pe tede lettres' (1634), that is, 'the text of the letters joined together'.

The text, conceived of as a ligature of letters, constitutes a basis upon which the 'Gawain'-poet builds his poetics of ligature. The literal ligature of the written text becomes a model for a number of