

BREAKING THE ROMANCE: IDENTIFYING SIN, EARNING  
REDEMPTION, AND THE GIFT OF MERCY IN  
*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Mickey Sweeney

Although it is difficult to define romance, genre critics agree at least that romances are formulaic. Discussions of noble courts, magic, quests, and love spring from a long list of key elements that would not surprise a romance audience. Therefore, when an author changes the expected, it should be noted, and the *Gawain*-poet makes exactly such a change when he introduces, for example, the “misogynistic outburst” at the tail end of his romance. Gawain has just discovered that he has been tricked and blames his failure on the untrustworthiness of women. Greater men than himself have fallen prey to the wiles of women; therefore, he proceeds to include himself in a list of religious heroes, such as Adam, Sampson, and Solomon. By placing this intense focus on Gawain’s burst of emotion, the poet forces us to re-evaluate the power of emotion in the text and how it might affect a proper examination of conscience. Gawain claims guilt for an array of sins, but it is his emotions, rather than some form of demonic temptation, that has caused his failure. Indeed it is the most human and perhaps most powerful emotion—fear of death—that has caused him to accept the green girdle. His human nature, as it were, is made evident in his emotional outbursts; the poet painstakingly establishes the “real” Gawain, who is distinguished consistently by the fact that first, he suffers from an array of emotions, and second, he fails to respond as his romance counterparts expect. Through a steady questioning of the differences between the man in front of them and the man they know by reputation, the Green Knight and the temptress create for the reader two different Gawains—one of romantic reputation, the *luf*-talker, and one who suffers from very human insecurities and flaws. The display of such awkward emotions is one of the ways that the audience becomes aware of the breaking of romance conventions; evidence for such a claim can be seen when on returning to Arthur’s court, Gawain is greeted with laughter. Gawain’s return, and his generous welcome, would suggest the familiar topos of a happy ending, which is expected, but his claim for the power of sin, then followed by his silence, is not. The court seeks to re-embrace Gawain, but to do so it must silence the

man that he has become and try to reconfigure him once again into a hero that feels as romance norms dictate. There is however a potentially different reading of this episode as well, one more in keeping with the religious vein that the author has begun in the final fitts of the poem, which is that Arthur's court, in full knowledge of Gawain's failures, is offering him a merciful reception. Perhaps the poet has constructed an ending that works on the levels both of a happy ending and of a redemptive one.

If we work backwards from this ending point and try to map the important moments in the text that lead to these possible conclusions, we must return to the confession scenes, and, I would argue, to Gawain's first emotional/human moment, which is when he prays to Mary, Jesus, and Saint Julian, and Hautdesert appears.

I have always found it a curious beginning to his journey that Gawain suffers from despair while roaming the woods of Wirral, but of course, he is at the end of his year-long journey; the poet just chooses to minimize those events. Gawain's solution to his anxiety is to pray to the Lord and gentle mother Mary that he might find some lodging so that he can hear mass and matins. Furthermore, after bewailing his misdeeds, praying, and then, with hardly an extra moment to cross himself three times, he catches sight of the most splendid castle "As hit schemered and schon thurgh the schyre okez" (772). I would love to read that as magical, but James Winny suggests instead, that in medieval romance "shinning" buildings are characteristic of the otherworld, and he furthermore directs us to see *Sir Orfeo* for comparisons (145).<sup>1</sup> Gawain also thanks Jesus and Saint Julian, the patron saint of hospitality for listening. Winny suggests that Hautdesert is an ironic answer to Gawain's prayers, but I would argue for a more nuanced reading of this situation, which is that Mary and Saint Julian have indeed been listening to Gawain, far more closely that we would expect from such a formulaic request as a prayer for shelter, and that after hearing his despair and bewailed misdeeds have provided Gawain with an opportunity to examine his conscience, perform his penance, and become a better Christian.

The background of Saint Julian's story, it has been argued is that of a romance hero, made saintly penitent. Katherine I. Rabenstein argues that his is a pious fiction, stating that

the feast day of January 29 in the *Acta Sanctorum* appears to be arbitrary. Of the many churches, hospitals, and other

charitable institutions in western Europe which bore or bear the name of Saint Julian, most commemorate this hero of a romance, a pious fiction that was very popular in the Middle Ages. There is no evidence to suggest any historicity whatsoever. According to Voragine's *Golden Legend*, Julian the Hospitaller accidentally committed one of the worst crimes possible: He killed his parents. A hart tells him while he is hunting that he will kill his parents. To prevent that from happening he leaves for faraway lands; his knightly skills are such however that he is given a rich widow by his new king and lives contentedly. While he is away his parents come to visit (this is explained in various ways) and his wife honors them with the best bed in the house. On his return, Julian thinks his wife is betraying him and slays the couple in his bed. He runs from the scene of horror only to meet his wife returning from mass, which is when she explains who it was that occupied the bed. He wails in despair and becomes determined to live a life of penance. As part of his penance, he opens a series of hospitals and places of refuge, which is why he also becomes associated with hospitality.<sup>2</sup>

The potential parallels are not exact to Gawain's experiences, but it is interesting that we begin with a romance hero—a noble knight of virtue—who becomes a somewhat saintly penitent whose work is that of spreading penance and mercy. We could speculate that Gawain's mistreatment at the hands of Bertilak's hospitality (temptations as such seem more than what is acceptable for holiday games), and equally, Gawain's lack of respect for his host, for the rules of hospitality, and for the fact that he has been given refuge could be the poet's attempt to alert the audience to the importance of these themes. Julian created safe places for the needy as an act of penance; perhaps part of Gawain's penance is to learn to respect and appreciate such safe spaces and traditions. Gawain is given this refuge as a source of his penance, a reading of the order of events, which would find sympathy with Dante's construction of canto 9 of *Purgatorio*. In this text our sinner finds himself directed by a lady from heaven to the gate and then to steps that lead to purgatory. In John D. Sinclair's reading of these moments, in his edition of *Purgatorio*, "According to the Church's teaching, the sacrament of Penance has three parts,—contrition of the heart, confession by the lips, and satisfaction by works,—and these

areas are symbolized by the three steps to the gate.” The first step reflects his “sincerity of *Contrition*,” the second the “anguish of his Confession,” the third “his ardour to give *Satisfaction*, to amend for his sin by the “exercises of love.... Penitence,” says Sinclair, “is not finished, only begun, at the gate” (128-29). It is worth noting that canto 9 begins with the purgation of pride, which leads us directly back to Gawain’s “need,” we might argue, to experience Hautdesert and why it might be initiated by his prayers to Mary and Julian.<sup>3</sup>

When faced with questions of sin and penance we are of course led into thinking of the “sin” and confession scenes and why they are staged as they are in the poem. Critics have argued for generations over the nature of Gawain’s sin and whether it is mortal or venial in nature.<sup>4</sup> Many have written on the efficacy of Gawain’s confession at Hautdesert. We are told that Gawain confessed himself completely and that the priest “asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene / As domeȝ day shulde haf been diȝt on þe morn” ‘He absolved him of his sins as safe and as clean / As if the dread Day of Judgment should dawn on the morrow’ (1883-84). The passage is troubling in many ways. It is clear that Gawain thinks he has done what needs be done to be clear in conscience. He makes merry: “And syþen he mace hym as mery among þi fre ladyes, / With comlych caroles and alle-kynnes joye” ‘And then he makes himself so merry amid the noble ladies / With agreeable carols and all kinds of mirth’ (1885-86). A first-time reader might assume that Gawain has prepared himself to return the girdle that night at the exchange of winnings ceremony. This would of course be breaking his word to the lady of the house, an action that an audience might have judged as putting right his seeming *faux pas* in hospitality and chivalric terms. But when that is not the case, the audience, both modern and medieval I suspect, is left to ponder whether it is we who do not understand fourteenth-century rules for confession, or if it is Gawain who has failed fully to confess himself.<sup>5</sup>

But how would the poet’s audience have understood Gawain’s emotion-driven actions? As Andrea Hopkins points out,

Medieval readers would have been familiar with the discourses in many vernacular penitential handbooks on how the penitent should prepare himself for confession by examining the ways in which he has sinned. Typically he would begin by asking himself if he had committed any of the seven deadly sins...[and then] he should discover whether he

has sinned in any of his five senses.... Gawain we are already informed, does not sin in any of these ways. (212)

Well, we were told that when he put on his armor, but is that still the case by the time he reaches Hautdesert and has had some experiences of life? Hopkins further explains:

[T]he sacramental essence of penance is the relationship between sinner and his God....And that the root of that relationship on the sinner's part is contrition: "a sorrow of the soul and a detestation of the sin committed, with a proposing not to sin in the future." All sin is an offence against God.... The gravity of the sin depends upon the degree upon which it alienates the sinner from his God. (32; see also 64)<sup>6</sup>

It would seem that even if we cannot judge Gawain's state of contrition at the point of his confession to the priest, we could assume that he intends to retain the girdle and therefore has not met the last requirement of not sinning in the future. Is retaining the "luf token" a sin? Perhaps not, but Gawain certainly seems to think in those terms when he is discovered to have done so. The evidence we have for judging the gravity of Gawain's actions is the force of his emotional reaction to discovering them, or perhaps it would be better to say, to having them discovered by others. We might argue then that he is not consciously sinning and therefore not consciously refusing to confess, but that would work against the very nature of what confession is meant to be, a vigorous process which brings the sinner to realization of his sins. Gawain, we are told, knows how to do this; indeed he wails his misdeeds to the heavens, before he is ever exposed to Hautdesert.<sup>7</sup>

But this situation is a far cry from that first confession in the forest; first, we do not even know if the association with the mistress of the keep, described as the goddess Morgan, taints the chapel at Hautdesert. It may not only be that Gawain is compromised in his confession, it may be that the chapel itself is tainted. Could this have been what the audience was expecting with the introduction of such a mysterious castle? Could this priest be telling Gawain what he wants to hear, as a test of his desire to confess the girdle truly? It is difficult to know how to interpret Gawain's request to the priest to "lern hym better / How his sawle schulde be saved," particularly when it is followed by the poet's direct assertion that Gawain "schrol hym schyrly and schewed his

mysdedez" 'And shamefaced at shrift he showed his misdeeds' (1878-80). This is a trickier passage than it seems, as many might read misdeeds as an assertion of Gawain's having committed only a venial sin, but "mysdedez" as defined by the *Middle English Dictionary* can be interpreted along the broadest continuum from simple misdemeanor to the wickedest sin.<sup>8</sup> If Gawain does not confess the girdle, could the lesson be, not that the girdle was unimportant, as many critics suggest, but that Gawain has not yet learned to recognize sin?

We are forced to ask, given that this second "confession" is of course far more traditional in Christian terms, why are we left with the conundrum of how this priest— indeed any priest, not just one who is an integral member of the Bertilak-Morgan keep— could offer Gawain what seems to be absolution if he has told him about the taking of the girdle? Is this a false priest? There are some suggestions of context for this thinking: the French Grail sources that provide the backdrop of Malory's Grail quest, for example, in which Bors meets a false priest who tries to lead him to despair by misinterpreting the vision of the black/white birds.<sup>9</sup> This episode presumably comes from the French Grail romances, and thus would also be a precedent for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. And perhaps we should consider the characters of Fals Semblant and his sidekick, Hypocrisy, in the *Roman de la Rose* (chapters 52-58) when they discuss, along with their interactions with the church, the nature of their service for the God of Love. But, if this is a false "romance priest," why does the narrator lie to us? Could it be to lull Gawain and audience alike into a false sense of comfort with the situation, a sense of "if not caught, then not wrong"? We are in the world of romance, after all, and that world includes false-seeming priests and chapels and it is of course human nature to want to delude ourselves about our own "bad behavior." Does the poet know and depict human nature in a way that makes sense to us all?

But perhaps the answer is simpler; Gawain is only engaging in a "perfunctory" confession. We do not hear of any great emotional or in-depth discussions, just a request to learn better how to save his soul. That request Mary and Saint Julian have certainly fulfilled in leading Gawain to Hautdesert, and Morgan and this priest are also certainly doing by enabling him to wear the girdle to the Green Chapel. This results in Gawain's receiving the full impact of Morgan's trick, which will result in his humbling and better understanding of sin. In allowing this flawed confession, one that does not reflect "a sorrow of the soul and a detestation of the sin committed, and clearly no promise to not

sin in the future,” the priest in the end is helping Mary, Morgan, and Saint Julian to do a good Christian act—to humble Gawain’s sinful pride and teach him better to know his conscience and perhaps to understand the nature of sin far better than he once had; such a reading would add resonance to his final lines regarding how impossible it is to hide a sin once it is committed, even from one’s self, it might be inferred. As this poem is conceived of in a series of parallel depictions, we might think of the chapel and priest at Hautdesert as the mirror images of the Green Knight and the Green Chapel. Ironically, considering the mediums, both are means to test Gawain and serve to make him a better Christian.

It is suggestive indeed, that the priest at Hautdesert “sette him [Gawain] so clene” (1883) as if doomsday should be the next day, and the Green Knight “absolves” him as if he had never sinned since he was first born (2394); it is as if figuratively Gawain has died and been reborn, or baptized, as the Green Knight’s “fautlest freke” (2363). It is also, of course, suggestive that the Green Knight uses the language of penance and redemption, but as tempting as such absolution is—and we must note that for the first time Gawain is certainly displaying “a sorrow of the soul and a detestation of the sin committed”—he is still not redeemed, as it is clear that he is willing to blame the ladies for his having been deceived by their feminine wiles.

Much critical discussion has been generated by the nature of Gawain’s “sins”; he accuses himself of “cowarddyse” and “couetyse”(2374), becoming “fawty” and “falce,” despite having always feared “trecherye” and “vntrawpe” (2383-84).<sup>10</sup> This may well be another point in the text where the poet deliberately creates ambiguity to force an audience to deliberate over the actual meaning and interpretation of sin. Tony Hunt provides an overview of the debate by suggesting that in examining the “moral issue from a clerical standpoint... Gawain analyzes his behaviors in terms of Christian theology.... And by the standards which he sets himself we can see how he has been untrue to God and thus declares himself to be *fawty* and *falce*” (15).<sup>11</sup> It is clear, however, that Gawain defines his sin as one of pride (2433-38). Gawain is not impressed by Morgan; instead, perhaps because of injured pride, he adduces the list of wicked women who have betrayed great biblical heroes through their wiles to be “excused” (2428) for having been beguiled, though not excused for his excess of pride.<sup>12</sup> Could it be that the poet provides another example for his

audience of how difficult it is to interpret sin and know one's own conscience?

One of the final passages of the poem, Gawain's last confession scene, is also clearly designed to provoke reflection. After Gawain heads for Camelot we are told, wearing that lace "tokenyng" of being trapped in the transgression of sin (2438), he arrives and, suffused by shame, offer these final words:

"Of couardise and couetyse pat I haf caȝt þare.  
þis is þe token of vntrawþe pat I am tan inne,  
And I mot nedeȝ hit were wyle I may last,  
For non may hyden his harme; bot vnhap ne may hit,  
For þer hit oneȝ is tachched, twynne wil hit neuer" (2508-12)  
"For the cowardice and coveting that I came to there;  
This is the badge of false faith that I was found in there,  
And I bear it on my body till I breathe my last.  
For one may keep a deed dark, but undo it no whit,  
For where fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore."

Why would the poet, who has clearly depicted Gawain as the master of words, as the delicate bedroom scenes demonstrate, have Gawain utter something so out of tune with the mood of court? Could it be to demonstrate how different Gawain has become, a man no longer in harmony with the thinking of the court, but a man of emotion, plain speaking, who is therefore no longer able to "talk the false, generic romance talk" as it were? One possible reading of this moment is that it indicates that the romantic style of feeling (or not feeling) and thinking no longer suits Gawain. When the court laughs at his homecoming they are clearly of the Green Knight's mindset, which according to the goddess's criterion, affirms that Gawain has successfully passed his test.<sup>13</sup> If this is so, then in their eyes he should be hero, and just as the Green Knight predicted would happen (388). The girdle is also given another layer of meaning when Arthur suggests they wear it to honor Gawain. Could this be why the author returns to the story of Troy, to indicate that in this world nothing has changed? Is it the confines of the genre that require this coming of full circle? This story is after all from the "best boke of romaunce" (2521).

Gawain's world is now one where thoughts and actions matter; he is ashamed that he was tempted, and ashamed that he was weak in the face of Morgan's test. The court's making merry in the face of

emotional dilemmas may be the key link between the priest at Hautdesert, the "absolution" he offers, and the romance/fairy/magical thinking that takes place at Arthur's court. Or it may be something quite different, the court's laughter, or warm and clear embrace of the flawed knight's return, might be something akin to mercy. He has learned humility; he has discovered the nature of sin and repented. This would make Gawain a prime candidate for the benefits of mercy and forgiveness. Such a reading would call to mind Chrétien's text, in which Perceval's mother gives him instructions on how to behave, as does Gornemant of Gohort, both of whom suggest that when mercy is called for, it should be given, which applies even in this situation, which is post-combat (Staines 360; 1593-1672). We could argue that Gawain asks to be redeemed with the act of his final confession in the poem, but that is not something that Arthur can grant; mercy however, as it is understood in the chivalric sense, is.

For the *Gawain*-poet's audience there may have also been a tremendous interest in what the lay community could do in terms of contributing to its own salvation, hence the wellspring of information and cultural artifacts regarding the corporal works of mercy and this potential ending. As E. L. Ridsen explains it: "Mercy is a gift from God; we do penance (such as Gawain's travels and tests) to gain a sense of deserving it. This sense is, of course, illusory, since mercy is not about 'deserving' anything. Our ability to treat one another mercifully is a gift from God, a reward, in a sense, for understanding something greater than ourselves (the power of mercy) and for the desire to limit our own sinfulness."<sup>14</sup> Such thinking becomes more evident in the explosion of stained glass windows, baptismal fonts, and poems, to name but a few types of artifacts that we still have, which now provide a ready source for our understanding of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century engagement with the idea of mercy and everyman. An example can be found in Trotton, England:

On Christ's right is a gigantic naked figure, from whose body dragons emerge: in their gaping jaws small human figures enact the seven deadly sins. The painting would have provided the fifteenth-century parishioners of Trotton with a pictorial rendering of a standard examination of conscience (Anderson 145-46). Paintings of this sort were extremely common in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. As windows became larger and wall-space smaller, such

representations shifted into painted glass. The works of mercy in particular were increasingly represented. (Duffy 63-64)

An interest in such themes was also reflected in well-to-do households in commonplace books for “collections of material which might include both entertainment and uplift, romances of Sir Isumbras or Bevis of Hampton alongside saints’ lives and sermons”(Duffy 69). For an example of poetry, Eamon Duffy argues that lines like “For a man with-owt marcy, of marcy shall misse; / And he shall have marcy, that marcyfyll is” (Dyboski 141, qtd. In Duffy 358) demonstrate that “the emphasis here is on motivation—mercy—and that is representative of late medieval religious teaching in general” (358).

This cultural attention to mercy might argue for the *Gawain*-poet’s interest in combining such materials in his romance: a reading that would make even clearer the association of Saint Julian to Gawain, and the idea of refuge, works of mercy that he engaged in, and refuge as a key construct in the symbolic repertoires of romance, Christianity, and the medieval world. Hautdesert was a refuge of sorts; one could easily argue that King Arthur’s court is its mirror image. Camelot was after all one of the last places of refuge for all that was noble, romantic, chivalric, sinful, and adventurous in the imaginations of fourteenth-century writers. Camelot’s infinite adaptability and applicability, are only two of the reasons that even today our interest is still captured by its main characters and story lines. It is only logical that one of its greatest tellers of Camelot’s story, in addition to capturing the intrigues and marvels at the heart of the Arthurian tradition, would want to adapt its usefulness to the thriving interests of his day, the examination of conscience and of the various manifestations of mercy.

*Dominican University*

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Citations for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from Winney; translations are from Borroff. For the *Sir Orfeo* reference see Winny, who lists Ashmole 61, 361: "Gan schyne as doth the crystallle."

<sup>2</sup>Rabenstein prepared this summary in 1998, which is reproduced on [www.saintpatrickdc.org](http://www.saintpatrickdc.org) with her permission. The content has not been updated since 1998 and represents Roeder's 1955 research as cited on the website.

<sup>3</sup>It might also be a hint at a suggested reading of Gawain's situation: if he, too, handles his penance correctly, perhaps this knight might also be considered a saint for his subsequent actions, but of course there is no way of reliably asserting such readings, as seductive as they might be.

<sup>4</sup>Information regarding mortal and venial sins, as well as the seven virtues, ten commandments, et cetera, can be found in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, which offers simple but nuanced definitions for very complex subjects.

<sup>5</sup>Burrow has argued that Gawain commits a mortal sin by deliberately making a false confession (106, 104-11, 127-59). Many others have followed in the train of his argument; for examples see Barron (433-35). Field set the stage for opposing arguments (255-69). See also Horgan (310-16) and Dunning (58-60). Morgan suggests that "The *Gawain*-poet leads us to understand that Gawain makes a sincere confession. He does what is possible for one who is ignorant of the particular knowledge that defines his sin.... Passion does not excuse from sin altogether, unless it rules out entirely the voluntariness of the act, as in those who become mad through love or fear" (135). Morgan, like the Green Knight (2367-68), argues that fear is a mediating factor for Gawain's confession (136). See Putter for a discussion of the history of the scholarship.

<sup>6</sup>See also Barron (91-93). Internal to the quotation is Aquinas, *Summa*: 3a.84, 1 and *Summa*: 1a2ae.72, 5.

<sup>7</sup>There is also the problem of why Gawain accepts the girdle; he does not see it as a *luf*-token, he does not think of it as simply a gift born of chivalric customs as he has already refused several of those, but rather as something that will help in his quest. The girdle's attraction is that it will prevent an unnatural death "'þer is no hæpel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat miȝt, / For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erþe"' 'There is no hand under heaven that could hew him down, / For he

could not be killed by any craft on earth' 1853-55). Gawain thinks of it as a "juel" (1856) for the event he is facing at the Green Chapel. If he could escape alive, then the "sleȝt were noble" (1858). Although "slyȝt" means stratagem, it is also a term for magic (*MED*). Gawain, then, is consciously committing to take something that has potentially subversive properties. See the most recent works of K. S. Whetter for a discussion of tools of the romance genre that have a potentially subversive impact on the portrayal of Christianity in the texts. This use of magic would certainly qualify as one of those tools.

<sup>8</sup>"mysdedez": a) An offense, a transgression, misdeed; sin, crime; (b) wrongdoing, misconduct, wicked or sinful conduct; wickedness, sinfulness; -- esp. early: sins; (c) ill-usage, maltreatment; damage, harm; also, an injury, a hurt. 2. Sexual impotence (*MED*).

<sup>9</sup>Another romance example of a false priest can be found in book 6 of the *Morte D'Arthur: The Tale of the Holy Grail* (see Malory). Bors meets Launcelot and accepts his advice to eat only bread and water and to wear no proud knightly clothes but only a plain shirt under his armor. Riding on his way, Bors sees a bird that kills itself for its young. He comes to a castle where a lady asks him to fight as her champion; he agrees to do so, then goes to bed and dreams. Bors sees a white bird that offers him riches, then a black bird that asks him to serve her tomorrow, for her blackness can do far more for him than the other's whiteness. In a second dream he sees a chapel with a chair in it, on the left of the chair a worm-eater tree, on the right two lilies; the tree desires to take the life from the lilies but is prevented; then from these flowers come many more. A wise man says, "Guard yourself lest any such adventure befall you." The next day Bors fights for the lady and wins without killing his enemy. As Bors rides on, he finds his brother Sir Lionel naked and bound, being beaten with thorns. The same instant he sees a maiden who is about to be raped. Not knowing which to save, he prays that Christ defend Lionel, then goes to help the lady. He meets a seeming priest who falsely interprets Bors's visions and guides him to a lady who slays herself because he will not lie with her. In that instant the lady, her attendants, her tower, and the false priest all vanish in howling smoke. A true priest explains that Lionel, a knight who has needlessly killed, is the rotten tree of Bors's vision, while the rapist and threatened maiden are the lilies: in choosing them, Bors has chosen correctly, for they were still sinless, unlike Lionel. The battle he fought as a lady's champion was a battle for the New Law, Holy Church (represented also by the humble black bird of his dream), against the

Old Law and the Devil, represented by the outwardly white bird. Bors leaves and soon meets Lionel, free now and armed. Lionel tries to kill him for his choice of the lady rather than himself, and when a holy man throws himself over Sir Bors to save him, Lionel kills the holy man. He then kills another knight who tries to save Bors, and Bors prepares to kill Lionel. A fiery cloud parts them and Bors is ordered to flee to where Percival awaits him.

<sup>10</sup>Vantuono offers this translation: “Accursed be cowardice and covetousness also; / In you are villany and vice that virtue destroy.... Because of concern for your clout, cowardice taught me / To reconcile myself with covetousness, to go against my nature.... / Now I am faulty and false, and have foolishly followed / Treachery and untruth” (2375-83).

<sup>11</sup>See Barron for a gentle and very determined interpretation of *trawthe* and treason, in which he analyzes the validity of Gawain’s second confession (122-25).

<sup>12</sup>Friedman concludes that Morgan as instigator is not well integrated into the narrative structure of the poem.

<sup>13</sup>Thanks to Edward Ridsen for his reading of it as comic catharsis, and his further suggestion of this motif’s importance to the history and tradition of English literature. He also points out the crucial function of it in this poem: “In Old English poems laughter suggests frivolity and a forthcoming fall, just as Troy parallels the coming fall of Camelot.”

<sup>14</sup>Thanks again to Edward Ridsen for his suggestions and reading of the essay.

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