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JONES, Shirley Jean, 1936-  
SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT:  
ITS MAGIC, MYTH, AND RITUAL.

The University of Oklahoma, Ph.D., 1966  
Language and Literature, general

University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan

THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA  
GRADUATE COLLEGE

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT:  
ITS MAGIC, MYTH, AND RITUAL

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY  
SHIRLEY JEAN JONES  
Norman, Oklahoma  
1965

**SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT:**

**ITS MAGIC, MYTH, AND RITUAL**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To Professor Rudolph C. Bambas for his guidance and his  
patience;

To my Committee for the time and advice graciously ex-  
tended me;

To the English faculty, whose encouragement and instruc-  
tion have served to see me through my study at  
the University of Oklahoma;

To Oklahoma Baptist University and my friends there, who  
have shown me every courtesy;

And of course to my family, who have given much and  
received little,

I can only echo Gawain:

Graunt mercy,  
þer Kryst hit yow forȝelde.

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SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT:

ITS MAGIC, MYTH, AND RITUAL

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

There is magic in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, magic of the kind that a witch and a warlock, a Morgan le Fay and a Merlin, could conjure up with spells and incantations, and an older magic, too: a magic that had to do with a primitive dependence on the land that was not tempered with any bit of sophisticated knowledge of the workings of nature, and so man had to depend on ritual and myth to make up for the knowledge he lacked. The other kind of magic is a sort that the modern reader can succumb to, for it is nothing short of miraculous that a work by an unknown poet of the fourteenth-century, written in a difficult provincial dialect, should survive and be read, studied, and argued over by twentieth-century students. There have been various studies, often unrelated, of the ways in which the poet uses the magic that belongs to the various streams which have flowed into the legends to maintain unity of structure and diversity of characterization. Because there are several distinct "problems" connected with this romance, some of the studies have been rebuttals of other critics' findings; many

have turned their efforts to tracing analogues and other parallels existing in the related literatures. Many of the controversies will, it is more than likely, never be resolved, because we are dealing with a work of art which has already proved itself enduring, and much of that endurance is a result of several levels of interpretation. The artistic wealth that is the end of the Gawain-poet's labors can either dazzle the reader who comes on it, as Gawain did the Castle Hautdesert in the midst of a dark wood, or disappoint him when he discovers that someone else has seen it from a different direction. But several different views are available to the curious reader, and it will be this paper's purpose to explore some of these avenues.

A major problem involves the whole element of magic which exists in the romance as it is a part of the structure, as the Gawain-poet has woven into it the character of Gawain, the Christian knight-errant, father of courtesy and chaste behavior. One must ask oneself at the onset what the poet was attempting: obviously he set out to tell a story which would delight, which indeed must have enthralled his audience. But true to the instincts of the medieval mind, he meant also to instruct his receptive readers. Christian thinking was too much a part of the life of the Middle Ages for the pagan (or magic) and Christian elements not to mix more easily than they do in Beowulf, for example. Yet there is division enough to allow little cracks to appear in the cement of this

romance, cracks which have widened ominously by the time Gawain and Bercilak meet in the valley of the Green Chapel.

The nature of the protagonist, Gawain the brave, the courteous, the modest young knight, is not always so simple as it seems. His modesty and good manners, as he asks leave of his uncle to answer the challenge of the Green Knight, are normal, indeed conventional aspects of the superior knight. On the other hand, Gawain's convictions as to the extent of his obligation not only to his host but to himself in fending off the importunate lady are very odd in the light of the Camelotian sexual adventures which were becoming more spectacular and more a part of every knightly quest, even though Kittredge has shown that chastity and obedience were an important aspect of the beheading game of earlier stories.

Another problem is, of course, Bercilak himself. Is he merely the pawn of Morgan? Did the Gawain-poet really intend us to see the entire intricate plot as one of the many schemes Morgan had in mind to bring about the Round Table's undoing? Or is our first picture of the green half-giant as he strikes terror in the banquet hall in Arthur's castle the real one: a powerful wizard whose role from the beginning is that of a tester, a ruler-judge whose ideas of justice are tempered with mercy? Bercilak is, on the face of things, a superior being both as the gigantic axeman who challenges Arthur and his knights and as the Host who, as huntsman, is first in bravery and in craft. He represents



the "evil" or anti-Gawain forces only as he admits himself the tool of Morgan le Fay: he credits her with his inhospitable behavior in throwing Gawain in the way of terrible temptation from his wife and, presumably, from his servant who urges Gawain to turn and flee from the fate that awaits him at the Green Chapel. The duality of characterization, necessary from the standpoint of plot alone, is most interesting and most revealing of the abilities of the poet when Gawain and Bercilak are seen not only as antagonistic forces but also as contrasting types of the same basic creature: the chivalrous knight.

A third problem is the "loathly lady," Morgan le Fay's characterization. This problem is only too clear to anybody who has ever taught the poem in an introductory literature course, for the confusion which inevitably accompanies an undergraduate's reading of this romance is heightened when he struggles with an identification of Bercilak's lady as temptress and Morgan le Fay as instigator. More often than not, footnotes notwithstanding, the student's firm conviction is that the Host's wife is Morgan, and the logic of this mistake is unfortunately all too clear. There are ramifications to the loathly lady idea here, and the correlation between pagan goddess and Christian demon is undeniable, as is that duality which exists in the host's nature. The continuing controversy involves Morgan le Fay's artistic credibility. Is she merely an appurtenance to aid the poet when he ties the last strings of his plot together, a left-

over from the old Celtic tales of Walwain? Does she stand as the connection between the beheading game and the temptation, an ex machina convenience only? An examination of both sides of the arguments can contribute something to the understanding of the mechanics of the poem as well as to the nature of the three main characters.

Still another problem which interests the modern reader has to do with the environment, or climate, in which the courtly protagonist and antagonist operate. It is apparent from the first that the Gawain-poet is working in the English tradition as seen in the lyrical passages which describe the field and forest of Gawain's grueling quest and the Host's hunts. Indeed, one customarily cites as an example of the poet's unusual writing excellence his ability to deal summarily with the temptation to digress and talk about the knight's adventures before he reaches Bercilak's castle. But there is more than meets the eye as Gawain wanders here and there, coming inevitably to those walls behind which his fate will be decided. The very situation of the castle in relation not only to the cold and drear wood but to the forbidding valley and the terms which the poet calls on to describe the aspects of the story have a kind of conscious ambiguity which we cannot ignore as we trace the strands of magic which intertwine and sometimes overcome the modern or Christian theme. Some of the parallels and contrasts have to do with the very twistings and turnings of the story itself; others seem included simply for embellishment and for

the evocation of the correct mood which the poet wishes in his audience before he moves into further incident.

These are the problems, at least readily seen ones, and all of them have in common a mysterious duality in which magic or myth of the most primitive kind goes hand in hand with the conventional Christian anti-magical outlook which one might expect from a fourteenth-century poet whose education must have been outstanding and whose viewpoint was sophisticated. The magic, as it rises out of the mythic backgrounds which make up the romance, is obviously antithetical to much of medieval thought about chivalrous behavior and to most of the popular notions about the Round Table. Indeed, it is so antithetical that Gawain becomes almost an anti-hero from the lady's standpoint except by reason of his wit, which allows him to repel her advances without mortally offending her. We need to follow these strands of magic, myth, and the rituals of both pagan and Christian thought and see where they lead and how successful the poet has been in their combination. First, however, it might be well to look briefly at the critical background of the romance and to summarize briefly some of the work which has been done in an effort to get at significant points in the poem.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has been variously read as a poem of pagan rituals with pre-Christian heroes, as a form of the anti-romance in which Gawain defeats the

forces of evil by the very virtue of his chastity, and even, sometimes, as a medieval romance with its origins in the French treatments of Celtic themes and which, in turn, was drawn on for other treatments in the later, debased popular romances. Perhaps the calmest voice from out of the multitude is Morton Bloomfield, who has summed up much of the important scholarship on the poem, particularly that dealing with the various problems posed by the romance, since it is in this area that most of the work of the past two decades has been done.<sup>1</sup> The philological approaches have been to establish a text, identify the dialect, and determine the meaning of words in the MS., and this area will be covered even further with the publication of the MED. The literary historical problems, as Bloomfield sees them, have not yet been satisfactorily answered: the author of the poem is still in doubt, even though one book has been written to prove him a member of the court of John of Gaunt in Lancashire.<sup>2</sup> The date of the poem can be fixed only generally; the relation of the poem to the times and to the geography of England depends not only on the date but also on our speculations as to who the poet was and what his aim was. Finally, the poet's sources must concern us, not only because the student ought

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<sup>1</sup>Morton W. Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," PMLA, LXXVI (1961), pp. 7-19.

<sup>2</sup>Henry L. Savage, The Gawain-Poet, Studies in His Personality and Background (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), pp. 1 ff.

to take a scholarly interest in the origins of a work but also because a proper evaluation of the accomplishment that is the poem depends on our knowing, at least approximately, what the poet had to work with as well as what he did with what he had.

An attempt to find historical allusions is an unrewarding work, and in the past many otherwise levelheaded men have been trapped by their enthusiasm for this work into some unfortunate publications; Savage is perhaps the best example as he has hunted for the exact time, place, and man. But questions that can be partly answered, at least, and which can be considered apropos of the historical reality of the work have been raised, though not always answered, by Bloomfield as he has drawn on the body of critical literature written on SGGK. The first, and rather deceptively simple question is on the meaning of the so-called "alliterative revival" in England. There is also the question of the significance of the later flowering of Arthurian romance in England as compared with the popularity of the Matter of Britain on the Continent. Stylistically, we can ask whether SGGK is a poem written in high style. If we can determine the level of style, perhaps we can also decide on the relative importance the concept of chivalry had for the aristocracy of fourteenth-century England, and perhaps the important question of audience can be solved. Was SGGK written to give medieval noblemen a

thrill? And an important political question concerns the evidence of a baronial opposition to London during this time. But perhaps this latter question is closely related to the first and second. As we deal with the sources, many of these questions answer themselves; others find at least partial solution in the consideration of the specific problems with which the next part of the paper is concerned.<sup>3</sup>

G. L. Kittredge's definitive work on the sources and versions of SGGK is considered almost the last word in any foundation-laying which has been done on the basic themes of the Challenge and the Temptation. For example, he tells us that the Irish tale of The Champion's Bargain must have gone into French at an early date, since it was used for four romances: Perlesvaus, La Mule sanz Frain, Le Livre de Caradoc, and a shadowy lost French SGGK.<sup>4</sup> Each of these romances, of course, embodies the story in a different combination, though their descent from the Irish story is evident, for each contains the Beheading Game. Kittredge speculates that it was in the lost French SGGK that the second theme, that of the Temptation episode, was joined with the Beheading Game, for this combination does not appear elsewhere. In Caradoc there is the cycle of the Faithless

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<sup>3</sup>Bloomfield, loc. cit. The value of this article lies not only in its summary of work completed but also in an expansion of the questions given in the above paragraph.

<sup>4</sup>George L. Kittredge, A Study of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1916), pp. 25 ff.

Mother; in Perlesvaus, the episode of the Knight Errant, and in La Mule, the hero is summoned by messenger to effect the disenchantment of a waste city. Although Kittredge believes that the English SGGK is descended from the French version, he does not deny the influence of these others on the English poem, an influence which is due in part to certain mythic characteristics of the Universal Hero, which Gawain certainly is.

Interestingly enough, Perlesvaus, the hero of which is Lancelot, is as sophisticated in its use of magic as SGGK. The challenger, for instance, cannot resume his head, even though the city can be disenchanted only when a knight will kill and then return to be killed. In the action of the story proper, only two brothers are left, and one of them is slain by Lancelot so that in the end only one remains. The author does not make clear the precise manner in which the city is disenchanted or even how the enchantment came to be laid on in the first place because he does not wish to go into enchantment, apparently. The level of sophistication can be seen when in the jeu parti both Lancelot and Gawain reply in effect that only a fool would hesitate in choosing to behead rather than be beheaded. Obviously the practical considerations of the hard-headed adult must enter here.

Other treatments of the sources argue the similarity between various French romances, the German Diû Krône, and

the Irish Fled Bricrend (Bricriu's Feast).<sup>5</sup> Billings says that the real difference between the romances derived from the Irish tale and the others is that the central incident of the Challenge (or the Beheading Game, as Kittredge terms it) is only incidental to the French poem, Chrétien's Perceval, the Prose Perceval, La Mule, and Gawain et Humbart. Jessie Weston, interestingly enough, rejects the Conte du Graal as an original source and says the Irish tale is the oldest of all.<sup>6</sup> Both she and Roger Loomis are primarily concerned with the mythic-religio implications of the quest as it is part of Gawain's journey to find the Green Chapel. In fact, Loomis is interested in the connection between SGGK and Bricriu's Feast only as it shows Gawain as a sun-god. He has done work on the antiquity of the names of Gawain and believes, unlike most Gawain students, that the earlier name Gwalchmai descended from the French Galvain.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. Alice Buchanan has correlated an entire group of stories with both the framework and the minor features of SGGK. All these stories are of direct Irish origin and include The Champion's Bargain, Yellow and Terror, Curoi's

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Hunt Billings, A Guide to Middle English Metrical Romances Dealing with English and Germanic Legends (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1901), p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> Jessie Weston, From Ritual to Romance (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1957), pp. 190 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Roger S. Loomis, "Gawain, Guri, and Cuchulainn," PMLA, VLIII (1928), pp. 384-396.



Castle, and Death of Curoi.<sup>8</sup> Kittredge also treated many of the aspects of these stories, and he is inclined to see Yellow and Terror as the most archaic of the lot, although modern scholarship is disinclined to follow him here, perhaps because the story is copied from an eleventh-century MS. and refers to "other books" and because it differs from The Champion's Bargain on many points, on five of which it coincides with SGGK. As in this latter, the challenger offers to submit to a blow on the condition that he later be allowed to return the blow. In The Champion's Bargain, the exchange is proposed in reverse order and changed only after protest. As in SGGK, the completion of the bargain is carried out in a wild region: a loch in Y & T and a turbulent burn in SGGK; in Bargain, the conclusion occurs in the royal palace. The hero is led to the spot by a guide furnished by the host in both SGGK and Y & T. In Bargain no guide is necessary, and there is but one stroke dealt the hero, whereas in SGGK, of course, the challenger lets the ax come down on the hero's neck three times. The hero of both SGGK and Y & T comes to the abode of a friendly person who sends him on with a guide into the wild region where he must submit to a test. These correspondences can surely be no accident, and Buchanan represents the school which believes SGGK the result of a combination of the two versions of the Beheading

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<sup>8</sup>Alice Buchanan, "The Irish Framework of Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, XLVII (1932), pp. 315-338.

Game, The Champion's Bargain and Yellow and Terror, with other aspects of the Curoi stories thrown in.<sup>9</sup> The one other important correspondence is in the name of the tester in Bargain where he is referred to as a bachlach, or herdsman. In SGGK, the tester is ultimately revealed as Sir Bercilak de Hautdesert. Hulbert, who discovered the correct MS. reading of this name, showed that the same name was assigned to the huge knight in the False Guinevere story; and in Fueterer's Lancelot, he is Barzelak; in the English Prose Merlin, Bertelake, while the French Vulgate Merline, source of both these English and German romances, gives Bercilai and Bertolais; there is also the possibility that the original French form was Barcilak.<sup>10</sup> I believe that this conjecture is probably correct, particularly in view of the sporting propensities of the Host: Berseillier is a verb of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which means first, tirer de l'arc and secondly, chasser.<sup>11</sup> Each of these meanings is, of course, appropriate to the Green Knight when he is the Host, and the phonology would have been apparent to an aristocratic audience accustomed to the hunt.

Another group of students of the sources follow the idea that the central theme of the Temptation is in various stories built around a visit to a perilous castle where the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 317.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>11</sup> R. Grandsaignes d'Hauterive, Dictionnaire D'Ancien Francais, Moyen Age et Renaissance (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1947), p. 61.

testing devolves on the hero. Loomis says this tradition is ultimately derived from the visit to Curoi's castle, and part of his case rests on the notion that the name Bercilak goes back to the Irish noun bachlach (see above). Also, the ambiguity of the Welsh word glas is an important factor here, for it may mean either green or gray, and in The Champion's Bargain, Curoi is the man in the gray mantle.<sup>12</sup>

Larry Benson reopens the case for Caradoc's being the main source for SGGK, and unlike Kittredge, he says there are three versions. He gives the parallel details from the long version, but ignores the short and redacted ones. An interesting point which he makes is that "in each poem the beheading episode becomes a kind of initiation into life by which the hero learns a disturbing fact about himself, his close relationship with evil."<sup>13</sup>

The second area of sources concerns the second main theme, the Temptation. Kittredge has established a point here that seems beyond argument: the Temptation is not ethical ultimately but rather connected with folk-lore in which a central incident is a test or proof to which supernatural beings subject mortals who intrude into their domain. There are many kinds of tests inspired by many motives, as any glance through a fairy tale book will show us. Sometimes the

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<sup>12</sup>Roger S. Loomis, "The Visit to the Perilous Castle: A Study of the Arthurian Modifications of an Irish Theme," PMLA, XLVIII (1933), p. 1030.

<sup>13</sup>Larry Benson, "Sources of the Beheading Episode in Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Philology, LIX (1961), p.9.

test is motivated by the desire to destroy the intruder or else expel him from the Other-world; to deter or exclude the unworthy man and insure the selection of the matchless hero (sometimes for marriage purposes); to set up terms to be met if the hero is to enter the life of the Other-World or to enjoy the love of a fée or goddess.<sup>14</sup> And not infrequently the result of the enchanter's spell and its fulfillment is to break a charm or else to set up a reversal of the charm. However, Kittredge is suspicious of the very mythic ingredients he has enumerated, and so he says that the Temptation in the English poem is designed to try Gawain's fidelity to the Host and his loyalty to the chivalric ideal of "truth." In showing how the Temptation theme descended from the test of folk-lore to the chivalric-Christian test in SGGK, Kittredge investigates the intermediate step in the hypothetical French versions:

The Frenchman was a first-rate raconteur who combined two independent stories into a single plot with a high degree of constructive ability, and he was master of a flowing and limpid style exquisitely adapted to straightforward story telling. The Englishman was an idealist and a true poet, who saw, in the capital story which his French predecessor had told so acceptably, the possibility of illustrating the finest traits of the mediaeval gentleman, who controlled an elaborate and difficult poetical technique in such a way as to make it a natural vehicle not merely for the description in which he delighted but for dramatic action as well. . . ."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Kittredge, pp. 76 ff.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

Although this is a purely speculative passage, it is speculation done by an expert and is perfectly credible as an account of what the English poet could have done, and indeed did do, with the materials he must have had at hand.

In the Temptation story, fulfillment usually brings good to the adventurer, and the enchanter may have one of two things happen to him. First, the fulfillment of the test may put an end to him forever, especially if he is a malevolent power. This idea is of course a primitive one, but still widely current in children's stories. The enchanter or operator of the test may not be an evil being but himself under a spell so that when the hero fulfills the steps of the Temptation, good comes to both the temptor, or temptress, and the hero. In this version, obviously, the enchanter-temptor may not be unfriendly, for with success comes his own success. One is reminded of the lady in the ballad of Kemp Owyne as almost an archetype of the ugly monster released from a wicked enchantment through the efforts of the hero in response to tempting bribes. The temptation theme seems much older than the beheading game, although each obviously has its roots in exceedingly basic observances, and each, to some extent, is interwoven with the other. The temptation at the last of SGGK for Gawain to flee from the valley and so return unharmed to the court is an excellent example of the conjunction of the two themes. The Temptation, as it involves Gawain and the wife of the Host, must ultimately result in the winning or the losing

of life. It is one of the chief instances of the Gawain-poet's skill that he has combined the two parts in such a way that the seam is not readily apparent.

Final note should be made of one of the derivatives of SGGK to be found in the Percy MS. and entitled The Green Knight.<sup>16</sup> This is a corrupt and disordered version of SGGK. The Green Knight, Sir Bredbeddle of the west country, has a wife who has fallen in love with Gawain from afar, and her mother, a witch named Agostes, schemes to help her realize her love. She teaches Sir Bredbeddle to change his shape and then sends him off to Arthur's court in search of adventure, though he specifically wishes to test Gawain's "three points," valor, courtesy, and truth. The entire story is very abbreviated: Gawain stays at Bredbeddle's castle only one day, but he receives the three kisses and the girdle during this time and shares the kisses with his host, who brings home an enormous amount of game. In the end the Green Knight (who wears green armor only and is not the "hue" of green) accompanies Gawain back to Arthur's court and becomes the King's vassal. This account is important if only because of its corruption of the SGGK story so that we can see the points of main interest to its contemporary audience. The role of Agostes is of the utmost importance here, and, though she is not exactly conspicuous in her evil, she is by no means a virtuous witch. The aggressive behavior of

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

Bredbeddle's wife is undoubtedly the outcome of the dalliance between Gawain and the Host's wife in SGGK. The artistic building up to a climactic third day in the earlier poem and the wonderful descriptions of the hunt as well as the courteous exchanges between the Host's wife and Gawain are left out in order to get on with the plot. And the return of both the Green Knight and Gawain to the court of Arthur provides an ending in the usual manner of the Arthurian stories in which the conquered knights must travel back to Arthur to swear fealty to him. That the English SGGK had a didactic purpose as far as its audience was concerned is evident from the "three points" which Bredbeddle is so eager to test Gawain on, but neither Kittredge or any of those who have written on the sources of the Temptation theme are prepared to say where this aspect of the story came in. Agostes, the witch/mother-in-law, is another important point of study in SGGK; to the medieval audience, all twentieth-century arguments to the contrary, the figure of the *fée*, Morgan, is basic in the story from a motivational standpoint. However, her role will be discussed later.

A dissenting voice in the study of the sources, at least insofar as such a study is regarded as essential to an understanding of the poem and its origins, comes from John Speirs, who sees no reason for our worrying with establishing "derivatives" or sources.<sup>17</sup> In fact he is most

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<sup>17</sup>John Speirs, Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), pp. 219-20.

cavalier in his disregard for such study, considering the use he makes of mythic sources in his work on medieval English poetry. He believes it is obvious that the poet did know the French romances, the Celtic tales, and so on, but this knowledge is no more an explanation of SGGK than Holinshed is of Shakespeare, for he contends that SGGK is not simply a court romance. It is a totally different thing from the French romances, and so there is no reason to dwell on relating SGGK to the French tradition, much less to discuss hypothetical romances as if they and not the poem had a real existence.<sup>18</sup> Speirs' important sources are the body of myth and ritual, tales and ceremonies that were, and are, still an actual part of community life. Further, he believes the whole poem is modified by medieval Christianity, its theology, morality, symbolism. Hence Speirs sees the Gawain-poet as an individual artist, a re-creator of a great deal of material into a complete masterpiece, in a tradition established not long before his time, in which inherited material was shaped and re-shaped for oral recital. Undoubtedly this view of Speirs' shapes his whole conception of the roles of Gawain and the Host, as we shall see in a consideration of structure. However, Loomis makes light of the attempts which have been given above on the grounds that a sophisticated court poet would be unlikely to connect the

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 216.



Green Man of May Day celebrations with the Gawain cycle and that the allegorical claims for SGGK are of doubtful authenticity.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps we should look first at the mechanics of the poem and then consider such evidence as may lie within the movement of the story itself.

Just as there are various notions as to what sources exercised strong influence on the English SGGK, so to a lesser degree rages debate as to the exact nature of its structure. Part of the argument has been occasioned by the editors of the poem, particularly Madden, who, in 1839, divided the work into four main parts as indicated by the so-called large capitals with which the MS. is decorated. However, as his critics have been quick to point out, he ignored five of the initial letters, and in 1864 Morris followed Madden's precedent and in his turn was followed by Tolkien and Gordon, although Gollancz in his revision of Morris' edition puts the smaller capitals into larger point. Laurita Lyttleton Hill, in an article on the significance of the capitals, points out that they occur at places in the story that are important to its progress; for instance the three days' hunting and the dalliance at the castle are divided into three sections in the MS. by the capitals rather than lumped together in Fit III. Parts I and IX

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<sup>19</sup>Roger S. Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance (Harper Torchbook edition; New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 163-164.

both have to do with the Beheading Test and hence wrap the story up neatly.<sup>20</sup>

Bloomfield believes that the poet has used suspense as the organizing principle, and so the nine-fold division corresponds to the points of new suspense.<sup>21</sup> His idea is similar to that of Mrs. Hill's except concerning part III, which is devoted to the working out of the pentangle symbolism and Gawain's prayer. Even here, though, the idea of suspense as the poles on which the poem is strung is defensible, for Gawain's arming follows the prophetic warning with which parts I and II end.

No less attractive is the idea that the poet based his structure on the use of parallels and contrasts. Speirs, among others, finds this idea extremely feasible as the use of contrasts bears out the theme of interplay between "nature" (represented by the Green Knight) and civilized behavior or "courtesy" (represented by Arthur's Round Table and particularly Gawain).<sup>22</sup> And structurally as well as thematically, the three testing episodes at the castle are interwoven with the three hunts in slow-motion, almost, with the perilous bedroom scenes contrasted to and paralleled with the activity and energy of the forest scenes. Sylvan Barnet

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<sup>20</sup>Laurita Lyttleton Hill, "Madden's Division of Sir Gawain and the 'Large Initial Capitals' of Cotton Nero AX.," Speculum, XXI (1946), pp. 67-71.

<sup>21</sup>Bloomfield, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup>Speirs, pp. 239-240.

believes in an interlocked structure, a three-tiered building of challenge, temptation, and conclusion of challenge, and the tripartite quality is repeated in the knight's triple prayer, the three hunts, the three temptations, the three kisses. The structure is made even more intricate, this critic says, by the hunts' being frames for the temptations, as the poet describes the beginning of the hunt, moves back to the temptation in the castle, and then returns to the conclusion of the hunt. Thus the exploits in arms make a frame for each game of love even as the central story with its sexual theme is framed by the battle-overtone of the Challenge.<sup>23</sup>

Somewhat in keeping with the frame idea is a scheme in which there is seen a circular structure. Dale J. Randall shows in a diagram the way in which the frame, consisting of "sithen the sege and the assaut. . . ," the Brutus allusion, and Arthur's court, is repeated at the end of the story to encircle completely the action of the challenge, quest, temptation, challenge fulfilled on New Year's day, and the return.<sup>24</sup>

All these views, unlike those on other aspects of the poem, are in essential agreement when taken very general-

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<sup>23</sup>Sylvan Barnet, "A Note on the Structure of 'Sir Gawain,'" Modern Language Notes, LXXI (1956), p. 319.

<sup>24</sup>Dale B. J. Randall, "A Note on Structure in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" Modern Language Notes, LXXII (1957), pp. 161-163.

ly. Suspense is used often and with telling effect. The use of parallels and contrasts not only contributes to the feeling of suspense but also serves to bind together the two main themes of the challenge and the temptation. The poet's sense of time, both within and without the story, often underlines the sense of contrast: for example, readers note the leisurely movement within the castle, the almost languid interchanges between Gawain and the Lady, and the violent rush of the hunt. The lyrical descriptions of the land as Gawain rides on his way or even that of the swiftly passing seasons between the two New Year's Days provide evidence of the poet's never-failing artistic ability to put in enough of the setting to influence the mood but not so much that the action is ever seriously hampered. There is a curious feeling that Gawain in his adventure cuts through the cycle of nature, just as the life of the individual quester makes its path through the circling seasons.

There is also no consistent use of tense; often within the same sentence both past and present will be used: e.g., "And he . . . kneled down bifore the kyng, and cachey that weppen."<sup>25</sup> This use of several tenses is reflected also in the poet's particular use of the frame, for he employs the standard medieval practice of setting a tale within an

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<sup>25</sup> Sir Gawain and the Greyn Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1925), vv. 367-368. All line references will be to this text throughout the paper.

historical reality, here the brief reminder of the founding of Britain by Brutus, in a convention designed for speedy suspension of the audience's disbelief. Familiar costumes, customs, holidays and the like imposed on far-off figures historically also served to heighten the sense of reality. Too much cannot, of course, be made of this latter idea, for it is commonly met with in the medieval period as well as in other places and other times where the level of sophistication was not very high and the narrowness of the artist's life prevented his depicting any habit other than that which he saw around him.

It is also an integral part of a quest story that a resolution be made by the end so that the hero may make a return, successful or not, to his place, or world. A closer inspection of the action reveals that at the end as well as the beginning, the poet wasted no time in getting into his story. The Green Knight enters the castle after only five stanzas, two of which contain the relation of the historical past, one of which gives the time of year, and two of which describe the festivities into which the Green Knight is to make such a startling entrance. Eight stanzas are necessary, after the Green Knight nicks Gawain's neck and is then bidden to "Blyne, burne, of thy bur, bede me no mo!"<sup>26</sup> Six stanzas serve for the explanation to Gawain and the audience of the full extent of the dangerous game he has played; one returns

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<sup>26</sup>v. 2322.

Gawain to the court, and the final stanza is Gawain's confession to his lord and peers and a return to the historical past. Thus we can see that the poet wasted little time in opening or closing his story; the dénouement is concise, almost too much so for the modern reader, who would like to know more about Morgan's motives, Bercilak's relationship with her and with the Round Table, and so on. Even the very internal action moves quickly, never flagging, as is evidenced by one stanza's being devoted to Gawain's adventures over a month's time. It is undeniable that much of the poem's popular appeal must have been based, as it is now, on the story's swift, clean movement from challenge to challenge as well as on the poet's ability to give the sort of details which would make his tale vividly real to a fourteenth-century court, details like the breaking of a deer's carcass and the games and jests indulged in after dinner.

This, then, is the background of the study which has been done on SGGK. The quickening of interest today in medieval study will no doubt result in a great deal of attention being paid to the poem's texture, its structure, and naturally its language. But I should like to examine the main characters, the climate, and the symbols to see what conscious and unconscious ambiguity exists and perhaps arrive at a definition of the elusive strands of magic and myth as they affect the reading of this romance.

## CHAPTER II. GAWAIN

One of the most interesting and yet the most controversial of all the SGGK interpretations involves its mythic aspects, particularly those which deal with Gawain as a type of Sun-God, or life-giver, and the Green Knight as a vegetation-god, or fertility figure. The most serious consideration in such works as Miss Weston's From Ritual to Romance, Sir James G. Frazer's Golden Bough, and more recently Speirs' treatment of the Green Man has brought forth strongly-worded protests from many writers who argue that a great deal too much is being made of such normal aspects in the romance tradition as a gigantic knight, a loathly lady, a brilliant young hero, and other similar appurtenances of the romance. However, as Kittredge has shown us, the English SGGK is descended from an earlier Irish story, The Champion's Bargain, and it is only logical to suppose that this tradition has its roots in still another stratum of that mysterious realm that emanates from the primeval consciousness. Therefore it seems that part of the richness of the fourteenth-century story lies in those elements which do call forth certain subconscious universalities. One area which has not been mined and one scholar who has been overlooked here is Joseph Campbell and his work with the monomyth.

Campbell gives a composite adventure of the hero which involves three main steps, or episodes: the Separation or Departure; the trials and victories of Initiation; the Return and reintegration with society.<sup>1</sup> Obviously this so-called adventure of the hero-figure is what students of medieval literature are accustomed to call the quest. However, Campbell has called upon many religions and many traditions to render clearer the individual steps in each part. The first, the Separation or Departure, involves five steps. They are first, the call to adventure, or signs of the vocation of the hero; next, the refusal of the call, or the folly of flight from the god; third, the supernatural aid, the unsuspected assistance coming to one who has taken up his proper adventure; fourth, the crossing of the first threshold, and finally the whimsically entitled "Belly of the Whale" or passage into the realm of night. The second part, the trials and victories of initiation, includes the road of trials on which are revealed those dangerous faces of the gods; the meeting with the goddess or Magna Mater (bliss of infancy regained); woman as the Temptress, or realization and agony of Oedipus; atonement with the father; apotheosis and the Boon. The third step, the Return and reintegration with society, is called by Campbell indispensable to the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world,

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing Co., 1956), pp. 30-37.



and it is here that the three separate types of heroes enter into our consideration: that one who has won through and submitted to all rites; the hero who has darted to his goal by violence, quick device, or luck, and plucked his boon, but always with disastrous results to himself, such as Prometheus, and the hero who makes a safe, willing return only to meet with blank misunderstanding and disregard. The various Returns and Reintegrations may include areas in which all these heroes may find themselves: the refusal of the return, or the world denied; the magic flight, or the escape of Prometheus; the rescue from without; the crossing of the return threshold; the master of the two worlds; and finally freedom to live, the nature and function of the ultimate boon.<sup>2</sup>

Although it is certainly to our advantage to look on both Gawain and the Green Knight as they have been influenced by the rituals of sun and nature worship, it is also necessary to look at SGGK in terms of the basic action or the motives; to separate the actors and the action is to miss out on some vital connections in the romance. And of course SGGK fits many of the categories that have been outlined by Campbell, and a recognition of these archetypes serves to clarify somewhat Gawain's and Bercilak's roles as well as the plot movement.

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<sup>2</sup>Campbell, pp. 3-46.

First we see that the Separation or Departure involves both a call and a refusal. The challenge which the Green Knight issues to the court is at first a common type of Christmas Game, in this case expertly designed to insult and frustrate the society gathered at table. The awesome aspects of the giant figure and his huge steed astonish and intimidate the entire company, and finally Arthur must move or be recreant. That Gawain waits for his lord to speak first is, however, but the first sign of his courtesy; the second is his mannered request for leave to take up the challenge. The important thing about the opening incident is that the challenge becomes the means for taking Gawain out of the court, his own world, and onto a journey or quest at the end of which he enters another. As Kittredge pointed out in his treatment of the romantic analogues to this treatment, earlier and parallel challenge themes involve a return on the part of the challenger and not the challenged. But the Gawain-poet is working on another main theme, that of the Temptation, and beyond that, he is proving Gawain in the oldest and most terrible test the imagination can devise: he is sending Gawain out, alone, to face and overcome not simply were-wolves, giants, trolls, and the like; he is forcing his hero to make the march to his certain death and play out the drama far from the only consolation prize available to a condemned warrior--knowledge that his final moments of bravery will be seen and recorded in memory as a kind of

immortality among his race. The testing which Gawain undergoes, therefore, is more akin to the primitive custom of initiation or "proving oneself" than it is a bold display of honor before an assembled court of peers.

Gawain's (and the rest of the knights') failure to act immediately on the challenge issued by the intruder is an acknowledgement of the weakness which resides to a lesser or greater degree in all men, the universal desire for security and comfort (in this case in a castle among one's own society) in contrast to the insecurity and discomfort which taking up challenges and going on quests involve. Likewise included in the tacit refusal is the knowledge that the Other-world which has intruded itself into the warmth and gaiety of the court has certain grim aspects, the beholding of which represents either a symbolic or literal death. The shame which Arthur evinces in his angry acceptance and the gloom which accompanies Gawain's setting out on his mission are the positive denials of this weakness or baseness which the knight/hero must overcome.

The aid which is given Gawain, as to all questors at one time or another, is closely identified with his religious behavior. As he rides through the wintry landscape, having crossed many fords and fought many battles, his prayer is not for an end to his journey but for a suitable place to celebrate Christmas. And although the help granted Gawain is in answer to his pious wish that he might have a place to celebrate Mass, the miraculous appearance of the Castle

Hautdesert as it looms into view out of the cold, forbidding forest is unexpected assistance given Gawain because he has taken up his proper quest and shown his strength and his worth in doing so; this is, of course, in the great mythic tradition.

The magnificent castle which he comes upon almost immediately after his prayer to the Virgin Mary has supernatural elements which have been revealed by the language which the poet uses to describe it, particularly as it appears to be made out of paper. This castle with the hospitality it will offer Gawain has a strangely catalytic quality; indeed, when Gawain (and his audience) is made aware of its proximity to the Green Chapel, not only do the relationships among the characters shift and become more definite, but also the second theme, the Temptation, begins, and there is an easy transition as Gawain steps out of his particular "passage into the realm of night" or the wild forests of the Wirral into the trials of initiation which will culminate with the grimly ambiguous meeting in the valley of the Green Chapel.

The trials, as listed above, included not only the road of trials, or those dangerous aspects of the gods, but also the meeting with the goddess, or Magna Mater, and encountering woman as the Temptress. One of the major problems met with when dealing with this romance is the fascinating duality of the young and beautiful lady of the castle, Bercilak's wife, and her companion, the old and very ugly lady

who turns out to be Morgan le Fay, Gawain's aunt. Just as the contrast is immediately apparent between the young knight, Gawain, and the powerful castellan, Bercilak, so is the contrast driven home by the poet as Gawain meets the two ladies at chapel. We notice he pays great homage to the old woman, who is, of course, a manifestation of not only the loathly lady of Celtic lore but also the queen-mother. However, he pays court to the beautiful young woman, and it is she who engages him in increasingly more dangerous dalliance during the three days of his temptation. The sexual temptation involved here is in the dramatic tradition of the traveler repaying his host's hospitality with fidelity to his wishes (compare the analogues given by Kittredge), but it is impossible for the reader not to detect another undercurrent here: the relationship between the two women is too tenuous, and the pairing off of Gawain and the young woman, Bercilak and the old woman suggests a family feeling which is brought nearer the consciousness rather than dispelled by the dénouement in which Gawain learns of his kinship with the old woman.

It is in the great mythic tradition that the goddess, or Magna Mater as Campbell calls her, is the perpetrator of the trials which the hero undergoes, but she rarely is an active temptress. It is thus in SGGK, since the Host's wife is only acting on orders given her by her husband who, in turn, is motivated by the aged Morgan le Fay. There are many instances in the world's literatures of the goddess pre-

paring trials for a hero either to test his worth or to persecute him out of enmity (for example, the duel between Juno and "pious Aeneas"), and Gawain's quest and temptation are certainly in this very pattern.

Also it is in the explanation by the Green Knight that the point in the quest for atonement with the father is reached by Gawain. Bercilak and Gawain have both played the game to its end and are no longer antagonists; Bercilak appears as an overt father-figure offering his castle now for what it appeared as earlier, a place of protection rather than the place of peril which it was in reality. The boon which he extends to Gawain is reconciliation with those forces that he was partly responsible for unleashing on him, and though critics have expressed surprise that Gawain politely and somewhat regretfully refuses Bercilak's offer, this turning away is the logical outcome of the traditional movement by the son away from parental confines and also is the return to and reintegration with society. The so-called boon comes ultimately in a kind of rebirth; the hero is, after all, not called on to give his life, and in Gawain's case he comes away from the encounter with only token punishment, for he has suffered all the temptations, even the final one of refuge in flight. He has indeed won through, submitting, even though unconsciously at times, to all the rules: of courtesy, of loyalty, of chastity, of humility; and he is vouchsafed a return to his world and accepted gladly therein.

Whether Gawain is a mythic hero, or at least in this pattern, is a source of much speculation and some argument, though a rewarding topic for all that. A point also worth some inspection is that he has elements of the young warrior-knight concept as a result of the presence of some didacticism in the romance. When we consider SGGK as it is simply a romance written in the great tradition that originated in France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Gawain is a hero who typifies the chivalric ideals of a particular era. These ideals, whatever name one gives them, were points in what amounted to almost a lay-religion, rather like that pseudo-religion of courtly love which culminated in (or degenerated into, depending on the point of view,) Maryolatry. Whether the Gawain-poet was writing in a deliberately didactic vein to improve the chivalric "morals" which he thought had loosened somewhat or whether he was celebrating those manners which surrounded him in some great noble's court, Gawain's tenure as the ideal knight, the "father of courtesy," was meant to illustrate all that could be good in the tradition.

Both the Challenge and the Temptation themes can be seen as frames within which this best of all knights, Gawain, shows to good advantage. Although it is true that Gawain fails slightly and so is chagrined in the final test, such a failure simply shows what most men know: perfection is beyond mortal grasp. Indeed, Gawain's great virtue of humility

is shown to be an integral part of him and is made more credible as a result of his slight flaw.

What specific virtues, either Christian or knightly, is Gawain meant to represent? Curiously enough, there is some variance among the critics. Gollancz, for instance, sees Gawain as a knight of chastity and the romance itself as illustrative of his triumphs over all the temptations to break his vows of chastity.<sup>3</sup> Mabel Day, who has developed and expounded Gollancz's ideas, says that each of the parts, the challenge and the temptation, must bear its share of the load: in the first, Gawain is tested in his courage and faithfulness to the plighted word; in the second, in chastity and faithfulness of promise. The temptation of chastity as it involves sexual abstinence is not overtly expressed in the first and last fits, and some critics have rejected Gollancz's and Day's interpretations as too narrow and confining. However, there is little cause to do so when we remember first, that chastity had wider implications than it does in the modern, restricted meaning of preservation of virginity, and second, that contact with women has been thought to be a source of debilitation for the warrior-hunter from the most primitive times. Chastity, in medieval thinking, involved a purity of mind and purpose which went beyond simple virginity or sexual abstinence, though this

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<sup>3</sup>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. R. Morris; rev. Sir I. Gollancz (London: Early English Text Society, 1912), pp. xxi ff.



latter was an important part of medieval cultural and religious codes. Married people could be chaste provided they observed their marriage vows and treated marriage as a symbol of the sacramental union of Christ and his Church.

Sir James G. Frazer has traced many of the beliefs concerning sexual conduct in primitive tribes throughout the world, both eastern and western, and it is certain that in the primitive mind, in some mysterious way, the belief is strong that sexual intercourse weakens and even demolishes the masculine vigor which the warrior needs to be successful in battle or which the hunter-fisherman uses in procuring food.<sup>4</sup> This belief is directly traceable up through time to the legends which grew up around the quest for the Sangreal, as witness the pronouncement in Perceval that no woman or maid can speak of the Holy Thing nor can any man who has wedded a wife know its secrets.<sup>5</sup> Gawain's chastity, then, is an absolute necessity if he is not to break the bonds of hospitality and if he is to have any hope of success in his encounter with the Green Knight. It is surely fitting that, had he yielded to the Lady's importunings, he would have been vulnerable to the Green Knight's ax, for his "armor" of chastity, which had its origin in his absti-

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<sup>4</sup>Sir James G. Frazer, The Golden Bough (Abridged Edition; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), pp. 244-259.

<sup>5</sup>Weston, pp. 137-138.

nence, would have been removed. It is true that there are analogues which test the hero by putting him to bed with the host's wife or daughter and then ordering him to refrain from lovemaking on pain of death. Not only are the circumstances a good deal removed from this open testing in SGGK, but also the testing or tempting is too closely tied in with the challenge and concealing the true identity of the Host to fit in with the old "perilous bed" tale. And besides, these latter tales are nothing more than fidelity tests, since the hero, once he successfully passes them, is usually granted his will with the woman in question.

Some have seen the poet's insistence on Gawain's chastity as a way he found of capitalizing on a tradition for didactic purposes, even regarding it as perhaps directed against the courtly love tradition. In the secular romances, by the fourteenth century, the Arthurian court had become known for its looseness of morals: regard the Morgan tradition. Hence the poet found a perfect way to shore up the crumbling ideals by featuring the knight who succeeded because he did resist temptation and woman's wiles and live up to his knightly vows.<sup>6</sup>

There is, of course, the problem of Gawain's lapse, but it is not one involving chastity. Rather it is "lewté" or fidelity, as the Green Knight terms it, wherein he failed,

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<sup>6</sup> Denver E. Baughan, "The Role of Morgan le Fay in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" Journal of English Literary History, XVII (1950), p. 250.

And Gawain himself calls his fault by several names: cowardyse and couetyse,<sup>7</sup> trecherye and untrawþe,<sup>8</sup> and again he says he has forsaken larges and lewté that befit all knights.<sup>9</sup> An interesting idea here is that the poet may well have been exemplifying in the person of Gawain the fate of the entire Round Table; those ominous signs of youthful pride which are inherent in Arthur and all his knights will eventually become larger and darker until it is evident that the Court will never reach the ideals to which it has aspired but will instead sink gradually down into the twilight of dishonor, and the Round Table will be no more.<sup>10</sup>

The noble virtues of the secular estate in the Middle Ages were first, valor and fidelity in the service of one's temporal lord; second, justice in dealing with both the strong and the weak; sobriety and courtesy in the conduct of one's personal life, and last, piety in the service of God. These virtues were derived from the medieval doctrines of Christian perfection, and the chivalric ideal may be expressed as the imitation of Christ, but of Christ as seen through knightly eyes.<sup>11</sup> If this list of virtues does characterize Gawain, and on the whole it would

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<sup>7</sup>v. 2374.

<sup>8</sup>v. 2382.

<sup>9</sup>v. 2381.

<sup>10</sup>Richard H. Grene, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," Journal of English Literary History, XXIX (1962), pp. 128 ff.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

seem so, then SGGK can be seen as "a highly stylized projection of the image of that class," a marvelous world where the virtuous hero represents the noble ideal and his antagonists the forces which threaten its ascendancy.<sup>12</sup> That is, Gawain as a hero represents the ultimate, the supreme achievement of the warrior class of the Middle Ages, and his antagonistic forces are all that would bring about the overthrow of these virtues inherent in such an achievement, forces which the clear-sighted Gawain-poet might see as burrowing from within as well as without. Ironically enough, such an interpretation does much to justify Morgan's place within the poem as well as support the claim that the poem is primarily didactic in nature. Also, this theory's acceptance must mean that we are to characterize the poem as a piece of nostalgia, much like Malory's Morte d'Arthur a hundred or so years later. And somehow the poem is much too vigorous and too young to fit into the category of nostalgic remembrance just as Gawain is too fresh and too honorably fair for our admitting him to be touched with the tarbrush of lightness and lewd infidelity as he is in the later chroniclers such as Malory.

The subject of the lateness of the flowering of the legends needs to be treated, though not in any great detail. Clearly the Arthurian legends had become debased in France and Germany by the time of SGGK. It may be that the legend

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

sprang to life in England because of the situation of the language, for it was not until the fourteenth century that Anglo-Norman was entirely banished. Also, the rise of English nationalism under Edward III may be an important factor. This king tried to rehabilitate chivalry and knight-hood, and the Arthurian legend provided the English with a ready-made aristocratic myth if they conveniently ignored its Celtic origins.<sup>13</sup> The feeling of separateness which was intensified by the Hundred Years' War would find expression in the stories of the English knights, and the love of tradition, of "background" could be satisfied by the knowledge, even as it is expressed in SGCK, that Britain had her roots in burning Troy. The hunger for fame might well be made even greater by hearing of an historic, yet contemporary knight whose reliance on the chivalric and Christian virtues enabled him to achieve an almost flawless triumph and an immortality through his fame handed down over the centuries.

There is still another aspect of Gawain which is quite apart from the stylized hero of chivalry as he is seen in some instances, and that is the young hero moving from a state of innocent ignorance to one of self-knowledge in which his virtues of humility, courtesy, and the like become more firmly based as a result of their having been

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<sup>13</sup>G. M. Trevelyan, A Shortened History of England (Abridged edition; Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1959) pp. 182 ff.

tested. The idea of self-knowledge fits in with the most basic conception of Gawain as an archetypal hero; that is, he moves in the standard path of adventure, the formula of which has been expressed by Campbell as separation--initiation--return.<sup>14</sup> To attain his self-knowledge, Gawain must undergo some testing which amounts to enduring certain rites as a requisite for attaining warrior status or manhood in some societies. Gawain must discover within himself the courage necessary to ride forth to meet his challenger, as well as the strength needed to resist the allurements of the Lady with the courtesy to make such resistance acceptable after the manners of his time; or he will be utterly disgraced as a recreant knight. Because of his success in moving through the world outside, or at least apart from, his own, he is able to return bearing the knowledge he has gained to his fellows and thereby benefiting them in true heroic fashion by allowing them to participate vicariously in his own initiation. The bestowing of the knowledge is represented by the Order of the Green Girdle; that is, the wearing of the girdle by Arthur's knights shows that each of them has participated in Gawain's adventure, shared in his "schame" but also reaped the benefit, self-knowledge, accruing as a result of the temptation. Just as Gawain's knowledge of himself and the world outside his has widened, so has that of his own society as a result of the return.

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<sup>14</sup>Campbell, p. 30.

The Green Girdle is meant as a symbol of achievement at the end as well as of virtue in the beginning, but it is likewise a sign of the penance which Gawain has assigned himself. He says to the Green Knight before he leaves him:

'Bot your gordel' quoy Gawayn 'God yow forȝelde!  
Ȝat wyl I welde wyth good wylle, not for ȝe wyne golde,  
Ne ȝe saynt, ne ȝe sylk, ne ȝe syde pendaundes,  
For wele ne for worchyp, ne for ȝe wlonk werkkeȝ,  
Bot in sygne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte,  
When I ride in renoun, remorde to myseluen  
Ȝe faut and ȝe fayntyse of ȝe flesche crabbed,  
How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylpe . . . .<sup>15</sup>

It is significant, however, that the theme of penance has intruded itself long before the meeting at the Green Chapel. Gawain, for instance, arrives at the Castle Hautdesert on a fast day and is given clothes

Whyssynes vpon queldepoyntes Ȝat koynt wer boȝe;  
And ȝenne a mere mantyle watz on Ȝat mon cast  
Of a broun bleeaunt, enbrauded ful ryche  
And fayre furred wythinne with felleȝ of ȝe best,<sup>16</sup>  
Alle of ermyrn inurnde, his hode of ȝe same . . . .

Though it is the color usually associated with the monk or hermit as dull and drab befitting one who has forsworn the world, his brown mantle is rich and gayly decorated with costly fur. Just as paradoxical is the meal which the newcomer is given; though it is a fast day with meat and fowl prohibited, Gawain feasts right royally on various broths and fishes:

Summe baken in bred, summe brad on ȝe gledeȝ,  
Summe soȝen, summe in sewe sauered with spyces,

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<sup>15</sup>v. 877-881.

<sup>16</sup>v. 891-893.

And ay sawes so sleze þat þe segge lyked.<sup>17</sup>

It is a fast only in letter, not in spirit, and Gawain is exhorted to eat in tones of mock modesty: "Þis penaunce now 3e take,/ And eft his schal amende."<sup>18</sup> This early penance, then, is only a token one; the castle's chapel, which figures in both the third and fourth fits as a place from which the celebrants of the mass emerge to begin their holiday games and feasting, is the scene of Gawain's final spiritual preparation on the eve before his meeting the Green Knight:

Sypen cheuely to þe chapel choses he þe waye,  
Preuely aproched to a prest, and prayed hym þere  
þat he wolde lyfte his lyf and lern hym better  
How his sawle schulde be saued when he schuld seye heþen.  
þere he schrof hym schyrly and schewed his mysdedez,  
Of þe more and þe mynne, and merci besecheþ,  
And of absolucion he on þe segge calles;  
And he asoyled hym surely, and sette hym so clene  
As domeþday schulde haf ben diþt on þe morn.<sup>19</sup>

However, the note of careless, merely formal penance deepens and becomes ominous here. Gawain, before he goes to confession,

Lays vp þe luf-lace þe lady hym raþt,  
Hid hit ful holdely, þer he hit eft fonde.<sup>20</sup>

Then, and only then, does he hie himself off to the chapel to prepare for the ordeal facing him on the morrow. As Burrows in his interesting article has pointed out, Gawain does not attain a "right shrift" as a result of his accepting and concealing the girdle.<sup>21</sup> The feeling of guilt

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<sup>17</sup>Vv. 891-893.    <sup>18</sup>Vv. 897-898.    <sup>19</sup>Vv. 1876-1884

<sup>20</sup>Vv. 1874-1875

<sup>21</sup>John Burrows, "The Two Confession Scenes in 'Sir Gawain,' " Modern Philology, LVII (1959), pp. 73-79.



as a result of his falsehood becomes plainly evident as he joins the company, who notice that "þus myry he wat; neuer are,/ Syn he com hider, er þis."<sup>22</sup> The feeling grows when Gawain acts even more unusual at the return of the Host, for he goes out to meet the returning hunt and moves first in the daily exchange, though on the two previous days it has been the lord who has taken the lead. There is also a reversal from the preceding days when the Host has declared his goods to have been cheaply bought by Gawain, who can drive a hard bargain; on the third day, the Host declares his goods, a foul fox skin, poor return indeed for such valuable things as three kisses. If we admit the possibility of irony in an age where this characteristic often seems markedly absent, a backward look would indicate that the Host is actually cheyving Gawain, who has failed to exchange his "felle," or the costly and beautiful green girdle, for the "foule fox felle" which the Host won partly by chance from the craftiest of the forest animals. Gawain's--and the audience's--ignorance of the scheme does preclude the possibility, perhaps, of such conscious irony, and yet it is asking too much of the modern critic to ignore such a beautiful parallel and exercise in structural irony.

The guilty conscience which Gawain apparently bears as a result of his not attaining a right shrift turns, in

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<sup>22</sup>v. 1891-1892.

the fourth fit, on the suggestion that Gawain's absolution has no power to save him though, by extension, a true act of penance, such as giving up the green girdle, would have. Perhaps the truest--and most painful--penance is that done at the end when Gawain must make another confession, this time before the entire court. Burrows maintains that Gawain's confession is extravagant when he declares that he has committed three faults: cowardice, covetousness, and treachery; Bercilak rules out the sin of covetousness when he speaks of penance on the point of his axe, penance for the lack of lewté.<sup>23</sup> And further he admits that Gawain is indeed as faultless a man as ever walked. However, it is necessary, perhaps, that Gawain exaggerate his crime in order that his shame and humility be exhibited, for the emphasis throughout is on Gawain as a perfect knight, and so any flaw must be the more remarkable, particularly as one of Gawain's virtues is modesty.

There is also the great mythic tradition in which the hero makes some error of action or judgment:

It is always some little fault, some slight yet critical symptom of human frailty, that makes impossible the open interrelationship between the worlds; so that one is tempted to believe, almost, that if the small, marring accident could be avoided, all would be well. In the Polynesian versions of the romance, however, where the fleeing couple usually escape, and in the Greek satyr-play of Alcestis, where we also have a happy return, the effect is not reassuring, but

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<sup>23</sup>Burrows, p. 78.

only superhuman. The myths of failure touch us with the tragedy of life, but those of success only with their own incredibility.<sup>24</sup>

From the human standpoint, success through perfection seems somehow possible but is never probable. Gawain might well have given up the green girdle to the Host and so have been spared the necessity for the light blow and the confession at court, but such forbearance when his life was in such dire straits and he was offered a magic as strong as that of his foe would have been superhuman, far above the likes of any mortal knights who might be expected to follow Gawain's example. To read SGGK as a quest poem in which the hero makes the trip outward, undergoes most successfully the initiatory rites de passage, but learns the true meaning of penance and gains true humility as a result of his error, and then returns to give his own world the benefit of his knowledge is certainly to do justice to one important level of the poem and to see that side of Gawain as a hero meant partly, at least, for the purposes of instruction.

SGGK as a kind of "babees boke" or manual of manners has been lightly touched upon by first one commentator and then another who has recognized the obvious: Gawain is almost a paragon of manners throughout much of the romance. This side of the young knight is first revealed by his courteous request in the opening fit that his king and lady give him

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<sup>24</sup>Campbell, p. 206.

leave to rise from the board and take up the challenge. His modest denial of his worth (I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest<sup>25</sup>) and his courtly flattery of his uncle are as polished as anything one might expect in a high king's court. It is a result of Gawain's being the mannered knight that other facets which he has--those of the hero, the initiate, the penitent--often become somewhat obscure.

Besides the castle courtesy displayed among his peers, Gawain is celebrated at Bercilak's court: each man says to his companion when Gawain first arrives,

Now schal we semlych se sleȝteȝ of þeweȝ  
And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble  
Wich spede is in speche vnsþurd may we lerne,  
Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture.<sup>26</sup>

Gawain's right to be the "father of good breeding" is tested most severely, of course, when the lady visits him in his bedchamber. As she becomes increasingly more importunate and more difficult to put off, Gawain must use every subtlety and courteous speech at his disposal in order not to offend her in any way, for to do so would be a serious breach of courtly behavior. In fact, the necessity for courteous speech makes his situation during the temptation much more difficult, since the lady must be repulsed and yet not realize it. He is tested in other ways as well. His refusal to the guide who offers to let him ride away from the Green Chapel is couched in language proper to a superior

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<sup>25</sup>v. 354.

<sup>26</sup>vv. 916-919.

speaking to an inferior: he recognizes the apparently benevolent motives of the man and thanks him for them, but he utters a rebuke in calm, though stringent language. If it is true that this final temptation is an effort on the part of the plotters to uncover cowardice in one of Arthur's knights, not only does the effort fail, but the knight continues in the same faultless courtesy, even under stress, that he evinces throughout his career. Indeed, the loyalty and good will that are his as he leaves both castles bound on his apparently hopeless journey appear to stem from his unflinchingly chivalrous behavior.

It is worthwhile to note that only at secondhand does Gawain ever really fight and wage war on monsters and the like, secondhand in the sense that we are always told about his exploits but actually shown only those involving his courtesy and wit. His bravery is unquestioned at the Green Chapel, although he instinctively flinches at the first feint after the long tradition of the analogues which Kittredge lists, notably Perlesvaus, in which Lancelot dodges the ax also.<sup>27</sup> When Gawain has received the third blow, he leaps to his feet and is prepared to fight, though he does not have to do so. Also, in the brief perspective of the journey through the Wirral, as well as during the three days of hunting, Gawain is a passive figure. Although the former situation is the happy result of the

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<sup>27</sup>Kittredge, p. 53.

artistic sense of the poet, who refused to digress, and the second, the demands of the temptation theme, it is significant that the focus is constantly on Gawain the witty and charming courtier. The opportunity for contrast appears particularly great during the three days of the bed-chamber scenes and the hunting: Gawain as a polished knight at home in a strange land is an extension of the knight who must display sobriety and courtesy in the conduct of his personal life, whereas Bercilak is a larger-than-life depiction of the knight as a vigorous man of action who is not only master of hounds but of horses and men and beasts of the field in hunting as well as in battle. This romance represents the best form of civilization which the poet knew, and so both aspects of the knight are presented in an admiring tone. Gawain is a good horseman and a good knight who has "many adventures in the vales, and vanquished often." Bercilak is a genial hospitable lord who offers his guest every courtesy, though it must be admitted that testing one's guest with a view to penalizing him severely if he fails to withstand temptation does transcend the rules somewhat. Each of the two major knights has his dominant humor or virtue, after the medieval belief, but also the others play an important part in his behavior, and without them he cannot be a true knight, worthy of emulation or salvation.

The various faces of Gawain the hero prove what the modern reader already knows: there is no little variety in

interpreting him or his role. Perhaps one which has caused the most acrimonious debate within the ranks of readers has been that which involves nothing more nor less than Gawain as he is in the tradition of the magician. A distinction must be made between a magician in the most primitive sense and a warlock in the Merlin school, a rather sophisticated being, assisting kings like Arthur to fulfill the ancient prophecies and at other times wreaking great mischief on folk from what must appear to the modern reader as sheer joie de vivre. The most readable account of Gawain as a magic being is found in Speirs' Medieval English Poetry, and it is this sort of treatment which has caused such a great division in Gawain-scholarship with the detractors of "cloud-cuckooland" (as Kittredge called it) on one side and the staunch defenders of the Green Man's land on the other.

As Frazer points out in the early chapters of The Golden Bough, kings developed from priests who in turn developed from simple magicians, magicians who often took the form of rainmakers or other manipulators of nature for the national or tribal good. It is apparently a result of Frazer's scholarship that students believe Gawain originally to have been a young sun-god who is depicted in sharp contrast to the Green Knight, a vegetation god after the ubiquitous "green man" of the English countryside, or even a mysterious tree god like the many that are found throughout

the various Indo-European countries.<sup>28</sup> The color contrast is used to support this theory: Gawain's red-and-gold against Bercilak's green-and-gold is merely representative of the struggle in nature with the sun calling forth the growing green, and Gawain's yielding to the green of the girdle, representing a way other than his, results in his shame.<sup>29</sup> Also, the struggle between the two appears in one light as a kind of power-struggle which Kittredge points out usually resulted, in the literary analogies, with the challenger's demise or disenchantment, depending on his nature.

Other magic features which Speirs searched out in his study are the arming of Gawain (corresponding to the Green Knight's description at the first and so setting up the pair as equal combatants), which goes beyond simple decoration and appears in a ceremonial rather than a practical light. Also there is the carol dancing which has its precedent, Speirs believes, in the dancing youths accompanying various gods and winding up with the Sword Dancers and Morris Dancers of more recent folk festivals.<sup>30</sup> The one obvious magic element, even to those who ordinarily scoff at the presence of magic in the poem, is the pentangle, which is

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<sup>28</sup> Frazer, pp. 10-12.

<sup>29</sup> William Goldhurst, "The Green and the Gold: The Major Theme of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" College English, XX (June, 1958-September, 1959), pp. 61-65.

<sup>30</sup> Speirs, pp. 229-230.



dwelt on long and lovingly by the poet. Speirs sees this as representative of Gawain's origin as a sun-god because the pentangle is an ancient life symbol on the Tarot packs which utilize both Christian and pre-Christian significances.

The pentangle is utilized as an overtly Christian symbol in SGGK, and its use certainly implies an audience sophisticated and learned enough to accept the explanation. The "endless knot" has a long history, much of which has been dealt with by students of folk-lore. It is believed, for example, that there is a strong connection with the gesture of the sword dancers when, having "beheaded" the old man or done other deeds according to the dance pattern, they intertwine their swords in the geometric figure and holding it aloft cry triumphantly, "A nut! A nut!" As Miss Weston has pointed out in her study of this symbol, the word nut equals knot (as in the game of 'Nuts,' i.e., breast-knots, nosegays, in May).<sup>31</sup> The symbol of the pentangle, or knot, is one of the four symbols associated with various fertility dances beginning with the Maruts, early Aryan dancers who were attendants of the god Indra. These symbols, which were the sword, lance, cup, and dish (the last the pentangle), filtered down through the worship of gods, most of them concerned with fertility rituals, and ended up in a somewhat corrupted version on the Tarot cards of the gypsies and presented in the folk dances of

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<sup>31</sup>Weston, p. 98.

England, their primitive significance almost wholly lost. Neither Miss Weston nor later students have been able to trace the exact significance of these symbols as a group, though the two most prominent, the cup and lance, are, of course, sex symbols in the fertility rites and figure most prominently in the history of the Grail quest. But the curious history of the pentangle and the care which the poet takes to give it Christian importance and attach it firmly to Gawain must give us ample reason to believe that Gawain is in the long tradition of important magic-workers whose primary aim was to control certain forces of nature in order to benefit their people, even to the point of self-sacrifice if such an extreme measure were necessary to appease angry gods who were withholding rain or sending too much down so that the people suffered. In this case, the Christian symbolism heavily overlies the pagan, but from the folk-lore which was current in England during the medieval period, folk-lore which we can conjecture from practices as late as the nineteenth century, it is more than likely that an audience would be aware of the double implications of Gawain's heraldry, though they would expect, of course, to place the greatest emphasis, just as the poet does, on the Christian significances which are listed, particularly since Gawain in this poem is Mary's knight. Awareness of the duality would, however, have transformed Gawain into a more complex character than.

There are other details which have to do with fairly common magical practices. Water plays an important role in Gawain's travels. He "fareȝ ouer ȝe fordeȝ by ȝe forlondeȝ,"<sup>32</sup> and "At vche warȝe oȝer water ȝer ȝe wyȝe passed/ He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,/ And ȝat so foule and so felle ȝat feȝt hym byhode."<sup>33</sup> The country through which Gawain must pass to reach the Castle Hautdesert is grim indeed, and he must fight natural foes, such as wolves, boars, and the like, as well as supernatural enemies like trolls and giants. The implication of the ford of a stream's being guarded by some evil creature is in the folk tradition that witches and fiends cannot cross open water any more than they can abide naked steel. Hence we have the Burns' poem "Tam O'Shanter," in which the hero intrudes on a devils' meeting and only escapes by crossing a stream; this same tradition is found throughout European fairy stories and devil tales, and several crossed the ocean after all to end up in "The Headless Horseman." If the fiend cannot cross water, he can set up camp by a body of water, and so the Green Chapel is beside a raging brook in a forbidding valley: "Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt/ ȝe dele his matynnes tele!"<sup>34</sup> Of course, the Green Knight must cross the burn, but he does so by vaulting over on his ax, and though he is magical by reason of his being a shape-shifter, there is no question that he is temporarily, at

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<sup>32</sup>v. 699.

<sup>33</sup>v. 715-717.

<sup>34</sup>v. 2187-2188.

least, a type of fiend. His customs and his habitat certainly seem to prove it.

The location of the Green Chapel is in small like that of the nearby castle; that is, they both are surrounded by dark and perilous woods which are dangerous if not depressing to the traveler. The parallel ends with the location, however; the castle is a magnificent dwelling-fortress where the only odd thing is its resemblance, in its perfection, to the paper centerpieces, or subtleties, of the time (pat pared out of papure purely hit semed<sup>35</sup>). The odd thing about the chapel, from Gawain's viewpoint, is that it isn't a "chapel" at all, at least not the kind he has expected. "Nobot an olde cave!"<sup>36</sup>

Here again, in these two locations where Gawain is sorely tried, we find echoes of an earlier magic tradition. Mother Angela Carson, who has explored this aspect of the poem from the standpoint of the meaning and function of the Green Chapel, says the trysting-place is not a chapel as Gawain expects, but instead a burial mound.<sup>37</sup> She explains the deception which is played on Gawain--and on the audience--by showing that linguistically, chapel is an archaic word derived from an old military term for a place where two or three knights meet in combat. By the twelfth

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<sup>35</sup>v. 802.

<sup>36</sup>v. 2182.

<sup>37</sup>Mother Angela Carson, "The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and Function," Studies in Philology, LX (1963), pp. 598-605.

century, she says, chapel had the meaning of heavy blows and carnage (a synonym was abattoir) as well as an essentially private place of worship. As Mother Angela points out, Gawain is amazed when he arrives at a meeting place and must immediately reverse the expected image he has had throughout the year and replace it with what is obviously a burial mound. And because of its sinister connotations, the place becomes even more horrible and assumes a kind of "intermediary step which makes the gradual revelation artistically and psychologically convincing."<sup>38</sup>

What this critic ignores, however, are the implications below the "brilliant thread of irony" which she says is a result of the ambiguity which depends on the contrast between what Gawain expects and what he encounters. Caves are places that to primitive people appeared to be gateways to the netherworld. Aeneas' journey to the underworld to consult Anchises or Orpheus' quest to seek his dead wife, Eurydice, are examples of the cave as a gateway to the Other-world. Also, as Speirs has pointed out with good effect, caves were often appropriated by seers and other prophets, and so, taken together, they were not so much devourers of life as they were a source, an entrance through which life might return to earth--or else wisdom be gained.<sup>39</sup> However, as was the case with fertility rites, harvest festivals, and other like pagan beliefs, the medieval Church

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 606.

<sup>39</sup> Speirs, p. 246.

adopted an equivocal attitude to the areas of nature superstitions and attempted to outlaw caves, groves, and other places by regarding them as sources of black magic or places of devil worship. Gawain pays lip-service to this Christian belief that the old magic was of the devil; no one believes that Gawain is really surprised to meet the Green Knight at such a place with obvious magical overtones. His eagerness in seizing on the Green Girdle as a magic aid to help him against an obviously supernatural foe shows that Gawain is a believer in magic. That men like the Green Knight exist to go riding around the countryside with their unusual hue, carrying their heads by the green hair, is also a factor which reveals that in this story, at least, as well as in a long English Tradition, people are not surprised, though very often sorry, when magic comes in their way. Medieval Englishmen knew of "fairy mounds," which were really haunted barrows that abounded in many parts of England and which were left over from the occupancy of the Celtic tribes who must have been Druids. As Kittredge says, the vividness of the description of the valley of the Green Chapel leads the reader to believe the poet had actually seen such a place just as he knew the Wirral well enough to describe it with chilling effect.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Gawain ushers in the Green Knight with an appropriate speech suited to the built-up suspense that is one of the accomplishments of the poet:

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<sup>40</sup>Kittredge, p. 142.

'Now iwysse,' quof Wowayn, 'systy is here;  
þis oritore is vgly, with erbez ouergrowen;  
Wel bisemeþ þe wyþe wruhled in grene  
Dele here his deuocioun on þe deueleþ wyse.  
Now I fele hit is þe fende, in my fyue wytteþ,  
þat hatþ stoken þis steuen to strye me here.  
þis is a chapel of meschaunce, þat chekke hit bytyde!  
Hit is þe corsesdest kyrk þat euer I com inne!'<sup>41</sup>

Gawain is surely conscious of the tradition which hangs over a place of this sort, for he (and more important the poet) has been born and bred in a particularly wild and haunted corner of England. On another level, however, it is necessary in sustaining the tone of the story and keeping it in a "right" pattern that the young hero, who is about to undergo his final testing and endure judgment of a kind, must do so in a place which is set apart by reason of its position and its history and the fact that it is haunted by the spirits of other men who have come there and, if we would believe the guide, been slaughtered because they did not have the stout temper of Gawain and so could not withstand the terrible ferocity of the Green Knight by reason of their invalidity as questors.

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<sup>41</sup>v. 2189-2196.

### CHAPTER III. BERCILAK

Sometimes there is found in a reading of the romance some slight confusion as to the purpose or direction of the main characters, a confusion which is primarily the result of a very obvious ambiguity of nature. This ambiguity is noticeable in the central figures of Gawain, of Bercilak, and of Morgan le Fay. It has been noted that SGGK is a romance which often deals in contrasts: the richness and comfort of the court which Gawain leaves to enter into the bare and severe hardships of the Wirral on his quest; the contrast of the old, withered lady and the young, fresh wife at the castle of Hautdesert; even the contrasts, heraldic in their implications, of the green-and-gold of the Green Knight and the red-and-gold of Gawain, a contrast which is sometimes used to explain the theme. The ambiguity of characterization does not blend so comfortably, however, with what we usually think of as the purpose of the device of contrast.

For example, the description of the Green Knight at the time of his dramatic entrance into the banquet hall, prepares us for his role as a grim and terrible warrior, a merciless foe:



On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe;  
Fro þy 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.<sup>1</sup>

And the poet continues his description, after acquainting his audience with the astonishing fact of the big man's hue, by describing his armor and that of his charger, only to end with the remark that this fearsome knight comes all unarmed to make his challenge but for a branch of holly and a huge, monstrous ax. Throughout his speech we are not for one minute convinced that here is one who wishes the lords and ladies of Arthur's court any good or who is merely indulging in a taste for a rather extreme Christmas game. His speech is traditionally that of the challenger whose motives proceed from feelings of scorn and contempt. After the actual deed of the beheading has occurred, his actions are still in keeping with his role: the gruesome aspect of the headless trunk holding the talking head with its rolling eyes simply confirms what the poet expected the audience to know from the description. He is "half etayn" not only in form but in behavior, for he is partly if not wholly elvish in his relationship to the mortals he is playing with, and it is at this point of his tale that the poet depends on our interest in Gawain to move the story into the next frame: the preparation of the questor which becomes a rite of arming and of prayer.

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<sup>1</sup>v. 137-140.

We do not meet the Green Knight again until the fourth fit, when Gawain comes to the valley of the Green Chapel, with its rushing burn and a wonderfully fierce noise. The green man has changed in no way from Gawain's first meeting with him: he is large, fierce, and scornful. It is important that we remember that no hint has been given his audience by the poet about the double nature of the Green Knight, and the second meeting is as cruel as the first:

And we ar in þis valay verayly oure one;  
Here ar no renkes vs to rydde, rele as vus likeþ.  
Haf þy helme of þy hede, and haf here þy pay.<sup>2</sup>

There are no courtly compliments exchanged, and indeed the Green Knight takes the opportunity to mock Gawain's shrinking as he earlier made a scathing comment on the unwillingness of any knight in the banqueting hall to take up his challenge. He is larger than life in his contemptuous dismissal of the apparent cowardice that he finds in lesser men.

We must, however, compare the two sides of the Green Knight, for two personalities as well as two shapes he does have, as Gawain finds to his shame and dismay after he has endured the stroke of the Knight's ax. The Host, or Bercilak de Hautdesert, is the other side, one more normal and one more readily recognized by the audience and by Gawain himself. Although there is no clue that the Host is also the Challenger, part of the intricacy of plot depends on

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<sup>2</sup>Vv. 2245-2247.

Gawain's being challenged a second time, unaware though he may be, by a being who wishes him little good. The character of the Host is, in many instances, different from the outward form of the Green Knight. As Speirs has pointed out, Bercilak has an association with fire:

Brode, brycht, was his berde, and all beuer-hued  
Sturne, stif on þe strypppe on stalworth schonkeþ,  
Felle face as þe fyre, . . .<sup>3</sup>

We can see this association not only in the description of the Host as a large, mature man with a reddish-brown beard, but also in the mention of firelight and torch-light as they appear characteristic of the castle.<sup>4</sup> That the castle affords warmth and light to Gawain just as the Host offers the warmth of his hospitality is, of course, an unmistakable attempt on the poet's part to dissociate the Host from his other ego, the Green Knight, and to lull his audience into some degree of comfortable security in the knowledge that Gawain is, for a time, out of the threat of danger when in reality the peril is far more menacing in the warm castle than it was in the cold, drear wood.

Apart from his physical description, the Host is unlike the Green Knight in his unaffected gaiety: he is fond of feasting and games, and rather than experiencing a twinge of jealousy over the accomplished courtier whom he has welcomed into his midst, he is delighted that yet another guest has come to increase the sport. He is above

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<sup>3</sup>v. 844-846.

<sup>4</sup>Speirs, p. 234.

all a hunter. As can be seen from these qualities, just as the Green Knight is conventionally the warlock-antagonist, the Host is a typical English lord, powerful, possessed of a large meynie, an estate which provides him every necessity, including sport, and a beautiful, obedient wife. Not only is he chivalrous himself, he admires chivalry and courtesy in others. His admiration for Gawain's behavior is hardly marred by the light punishment that he deals him:

' . . . sothly me þynkkeþ  
On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede;  
As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,  
So Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝteþ.  
Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wonted;  
Bot þat watþ for no wylde werke, ne wowyng nauþer,  
Bot for ye lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame.'<sup>5</sup>

This speech is a remarkably gentle and courteous one and indicative of the true personality under the fearful shape of the Green Knight. In fact, this entire passage indicates to the audience, when the Knight has acquainted Gawain with the truth of what he has been through, that the Host is the main character while the Green Knight is a kind of overlay, possessing qualities which can be put on at need but which aspect can be rendered both harmless and appreciative when the correct action is taken.

The romance ends with no little respect and admiration on both sides, the kind of admiration which equals can and ought to bestow on each other according to the code of

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<sup>5</sup>Vv. 2362-2368.

chivalry. If we accept the duality or ambiguity which comprises the Green Knight/Host, we do not need to worry over the ending as many critics have done. Gawain, who has been tested without knowing it, would be churlish indeed to take offense at past actions and to ignore the Host's courteous and admiring explanation (which amounts to something like an apology). What Gawain cannot do, it seems, is to return to the scene of his testing, but the Host, for he now is genuinely hospitable, must offer Gawain the run of his castle once more:

þerfore I eye þe, hapel, to com to þy naunt,  
Make myry in my hous; my menie þe louies,  
And I wol þe as wel, wyze, bi my faythe,  
As any gome vnder God for þy grete traue.<sup>6</sup>

The poet, then, intended his audience to be sharply aware of the two sides of the Green Knight's character by revealing a sharp division between the two which is only fully revealed at the end when the Green Knight makes known the deception which has occurred at his castle and tells Gawain his true name. These sides of his character are at first in clear contrast as can be seen in the physical descriptions of the half-giant Green Knight and the large Host with his "beaver-hued" beard and affinity for jokes and games. The problem which follows is the proper motivation for a melding of the two aspects of this important antagonist, a melding which occurs at the end when the Green

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<sup>6</sup>v. 2467-2470.

Knight and Bercilak merge perceptibly. Of course the motivation is, as Bercilak himself explains, Morgan le Fay,

Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle  
For to assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were  
þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;  
Ho wayned me þis wonder your wytte3 to reue,  
For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dy3e  
With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked  
With his hede in his honde bifore þe hy3e table.<sup>7</sup>

Some have felt this to be a somewhat unsatisfactory explanation of motive for the Green Knight, deciding that the patness seems to make it no more than a "plant" which gives only a deus ex machina respectability to the Green Knight's revelation. Indeed, Albert Friedman contends that the Gawain-poet, in falling back on such a device, has betrayed the difficulty inherent in piecing together the several themes that make up the story as a whole, and his implication is that the poet did not succeed in bringing these various plots together into harmonious and artistic unity.<sup>8</sup> If we leave out the motivation which the poet gives the Green Knight, however, as these critics have done, then we are faced with an even greater problem, for the Green Knight has no other reason to ride to Camelot.

Kittredge has pointed out that the analogues to both the Beheading Game and the Temptation themes are disenchantment stories; i.e., the Hero meets either a cruel

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<sup>7</sup>v. 2456-2462.

<sup>8</sup>Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum, XXXV (1960), pp. 269 ff.

monster or a helpful animal, usually, and through certain tasks or tests, a beheading takes place, either from dire necessity, if it is a threatening monster, or else by request, if a helpful animal, and disenchantment results as the monster/animal is transformed into a handsome youth or beautiful woman.<sup>9</sup> But it is clear from the poet's special problem in dealing with the antagonist that the Green Knight cannot be under an enchantment against his will; such a scheme would not enable him to carry on the temptation game in between the challenge in such a case. However, it can be replied in rebuttal that the Green Knight sought out Arthur's court and a knight who could prove himself worthy not only to set out on the fearful task of courage in the initial stage but also to undergo the stringent temptations of the dalliance with the Host's wife in order to effect a different kind of disenchantment. It is true that there are some analogues of this kind. For instance, in The Carl of Carlisle and other stories of this same type, personal contact such as kissing, admitting the bespelled person to one's bed, or even guessing a riddle results in disenchantment.<sup>10</sup>

It is also to the point, as we consider Bercilak's nature, if we remember that a warlock in Christian times automatically became a demoniacal figure who was purely evil, just as sun gods, vegetation gods, and the like were con-

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<sup>9</sup>Kittredge, p. 200.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 269.

sidered devils in England after its Christianizing. In cases such as these, ambiguity is bound to result. In folk stories and in mythic tales, the obvious solution to the problem for a Christian story-teller is to turn the fée into a mortal woman who is under a spell laid upon her by a wicked step-mother or shift a demi-god into a mortal man. The transformed being, in this instance Bercilak, will have a character to fit his purpose and his outward guise so that two entirely different personalities are possible with one put on and off at need.

In the short Green Knight of the Percy MS., as Kittredge presents it in his study, the Green Knight, whose name is Sir Bredbeddle, wishes to test Gawain's "three points," or valor, courtesy, and truth, and he does so with the help of his mother-in-law, a witch who can help him learn the secrets of shape-shifting and does so to procure a lover for her daughter.<sup>11</sup> As this version is greatly telescoped as well as extremely corrupt, it serves as a good key for what a contemporary audience might have known and remembered of the longer, more polished work. Sir Bredbeddle is motivated by an "old witch" just as Bercilak is, and he assumes enchantment willingly in order to attain his and the witch's ends. In none of the analogues, indeed in no one of the heroic and romantic traditions which run into these analogues, does one find a self-motivated antago-

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<sup>11</sup>Kittredge, pp. 125 ff.



nist. It is, then, actually a primary ingredient of the story that Bercilak, as he plays the Green Knight's role of Challenger, be instigated by a figure behind the scenes. Because Morgan le Fay is an original member of the Arthur-Gawain cycle of stories, it is natural enough that the poet use her not only as an explanation for the challenge but also as the reason for the dual nature of the Green Knight/Bercilak, since the latter is not under an unwilling enchantment-spell. His two roles have been decreed by Morgan, but it is plain that the role of the hearty, hospitable Host is his real one, and it is the Host who speaks to Gawain at the end, still in his "half-etain" shape, but no longer under the necessity of maintaining his grim and gruff guise; the battle of wits as well as of axes is over and done with.

Another problem, and perhaps one of the most fascinating for modern readers, which has to do with the Green Knight is, of course, his color. The man and horse are in green harness and are themselves green. This touch may be original with the Gawain-poet or it may have been taken from a French source. The fashion did not catch on, however, for in the Percy MS., Sir Bredbeddle is not green himself, though he does have green armor, a green weapon, and a green horse. It is evident that the Gawain-poet used the color green because in Celtic folk-lore it is a fairy color and crops up in most of the tales derived from these sources. An interesting contemporary use is Chaucer's "yeoman dressed

in green" of the Friar's Tale. Kittredge, however, has traced the use of color in the analogues of the story, and it is somewhat disappointing to find that in the first stage, The Champion's Bargain, the challenger is a gigantic carl who is dressed in a black garment and wears a hide over his shoulders. In the next two stages, as the story reaches France, he remains huge and uncouth, but is clad in green, as we can see from both Caradoc and our English SGGK, but no one has been able to trace a tradition in which the actual flesh tint of both horse and rider become green.<sup>12</sup> It is not uncommon in history as well as story lore to find knights designated by the color of their armor: in Malory, for example, there is a Green Knight who has two brothers, the Black Knight and the Blue Knight, and Gareth does battle with the Red Knight of the Red Launds. Historically, there is the famous Black Prince, Edward. In many of the French romances, the trappings of the horses as well as the armor and heraldry of the knights are brilliant in color and often described in some detail as in the romances of Marie de France. If Kittredge is correct, and his explanation is most logical of all the attempts when he says that the innovation of the greenness of the knight and steed are due either to the author of the theoretical French Gawain or to the English romancer, "who always exercised the freedom of a man of genius,"<sup>13</sup> then it is

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<sup>12</sup>Kittredge, p. 98.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

apparent that he made his knight green to heighten his supernatural aspect and probably to identify him with half-remembered stories of demons who were nothing more than tree spirits or some vegetation gods that remained only as grotesque elements in local celebrations and dances. Green is a Celtic fairy color, very likely because it is the basic nature color, and therefore this joint significance was likely to lead into areas of ambiguity. That is, the Green Man was a well-known figure in England of the fourteenth century and so the use of his color for Bercilak would advance the association of the supernatural demon who has powers for good and bad as nature itself does; on the other hand, the prototypes of the Green Knight, notably Curoi, as the eminent Celticist Roger Loomis has pointed out, were clad in gray, though the Irish adjective glas is itself ambiguous and may mean gray as well as green.<sup>14</sup> Not much has been settled, nor is likely to be, about the use of color unless all the other evidence in the poem is examined, and some of this has been ignored by those who question the mythic elements in Bercilak.

Other instances which served to show the audience that this was no ordinary opponent were his appearance at New Year's during the Christmas feast, his holding the holly bough in his hand as though it were a wand, his adhering to the traditional formula in setting up the meeting

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<sup>14</sup>Loomis, The Development . . . , p. 163.

date, a year and a day from his challenge. Regardless of whether these characteristics of the Green Knight are additions by the French or the English writers, they heighten Bercilak's dual nature, the contrasting aspect of which justifies the combination of the Challenge and Temptation themes and the use of Morgan le Fay as a behind-the-scenes instigator. Although Bercilak, in the guise of the Green Knight, begins the tale as an anti-heroic figure, and although his confession of his actions at the end keep him at least nominally in this role, he is but another facet of the chivalric world of SGGK. His coming unarmed to the court and his supernatural characteristics are basic to his chivalric role not only because they make him a much fuller character and help explain much of what his role consists of but also because such a dual concept is necessary to the story as it was to its antecedents. Bercilak's behavior as Host and at the last shows us an energetic, conscientious lord who occupies a vital role in his society. If Gawain represents the perfect courtly knight, so does Bercilak stand for the provincial lord who is worthy of and receives respect from his retainers and peers. That Bercilak at the same time must carry the burden of the antagonist to Gawain's position as "father of courtesy" and as a supernatural being results in the ambiguity which has concerned many of the critics of the poem. Besides the chivalric duality of character which manifests itself in Bercilak, there are also his

mythic aspects which do a great deal to show us the tradition, consciously or unconsciously followed by the Gawain-poet, which resulted in the final meeting at the Green Chapel.

Much has been made in the last few years of the Green Knight's vegetation aspects--it is immediately noted, of course, that the green beard is like a bush; the knight carries a holly branch in one hand and an ax or "thunder weapon" in the other, and his great steed strikes fire from the stones as he rides out of the hall. Speirs believes the reader "instinctively" feels him an intruder from a pre-Christian, pre-courtly world. He carries no knightly arms but a primitive, savage weapon. He behaves "discourteously." He is other than human.<sup>15</sup> Certainly Speirs and others are justified in seeing a vegetation-fertility concept behind the huge green man, and much of his evidence is striking and unarguable. For instance, the holly is an evergreen and once was associated with tree worship as well as popularly connected with the male sex just as the evergreen ivy was feminine. The idea of the evergreen plant figured prominently in fertility rites through Europe from the earliest times.<sup>16</sup>

Also, the Green Knight is Sir Bercilak de Hautdesert of a castle which is a prominent feature of two sections of the poem. After terrible deprivations--hunger, cold, fatigue-

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<sup>15</sup>Speirs, p. 225.

<sup>16</sup>Frazer, pp. 756 ff.

Gawain happens suddenly on a wonderfully-made castle in the wilderness which affords him food, warmth, rest.

Whether we accept the Latin and Welsh meaning of desert as hermitage or the Old French waste land, wilderness, the fact remains that the castle is a place of plenty and its lord a dispenser of hospitality to the weary traveler.<sup>17</sup> Besides that, the Host is a huntsman, a provider of meat apart from the Exchange of Winnings, and he is moreover a good husbandman of his game, for he observes closed seasons and hunts the fox, a predator. But though the primitive nature of the Green Knight/Bercilak is not to be denied, he hardly behaves "discourteously." His behavior, instead, may be termed exuberant, genial, even boisterous while he is Bercilak, and while the Green Knight, he is an overpowering and mysteriously frightening figure. His outspokenness is in the tradition of the challenge and cannot really be termed discourtesy, for he is in the first place not bound by ordinary rules, and in the second, he issues a challenge but never in directly insulting language. Who, then, is his mythic predecessor, if we would be more definite and go beyond the vague "Green Man" who decorates a great many tavern signs in England today?

There is little to make of the fact that he is a fire god. He does give a savage yell when he departs the hall, and his horse does strike fire from its hooves. How-

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<sup>17</sup>Tolkien and Gordon, Sir Gawain . . . , p. 115.

ever, Gawain, whose gold and gules seem more properly designed for a fire god, also departs with some sparkle:

He sperred þe sted with þe spureȝ and sprong on his way,  
So stif þat þe ston-fyr stroke out þerafter.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, as noted above, Bercilak's castle is an oasis of warmth and splendor in a cold forest that is wintry and unfriendly to Gawain, and the man himself, with his beaver-hued beard and his predilection for firelight and games, seems warm and remote from all coldness, all barrenness and dreariness. But these aspects seem only incidental to Bercilak who, as lord of the castle and its domains, wields no little power with his enormous meinie and the multitude of guests under his roof for the holiday period. Also, his very powerfulness and forcefulness are combined with his ability as a shapeshifter and his survival after the beheading when his vigor remains unabated. These do not seem to be primarily characteristics one would associate with a fire or thundergod. But it involves no stretch of the imagination to see that he is no ordinary monster but is much more sophisticated, although at the same time, paradoxically enough, he seems to have origin in a very old and primitive body of belief.

He is, I think, in the great tradition of the priest-king, and perhaps consciously placed in opposition not only to Gawain (as a result of the Challenge and Temptation in which he is necessarily the antagonist) but also to Arthur.

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<sup>18</sup>v. 670-671

And this idea is in keeping not only with what most folklorists believe about such figures, but also with the historical critics, who believe there is a great deal of the didactic in SGGK.

Sir James G. Frazer spends several chapters in his work exploring the concept of the ancient belief of a tie between a country's well-being and the state of health and vigor of its king. In brief, he shows that a primitive man, or a savage, believes that the king's person maintains the land. If he is a strong, virile king, the land will be productive, free from drouth, flood, and famine, and the people will not suffer from want or disease. From this belief in "homeopathic magic" or the law of similarity, as Frazer calls it, arose such a custom as summarily disposing of a king who was growing old or else impotent, usually by killing him and placing another in his place. Sometimes a people would get so caught up in this mortality fear that a king would be appointed for a certain length of time, perhaps seven years, at the end of which he was publicly sacrificed and another candidate put in his place.

In the same custom is the grim story told by Frazer of the high-priest of the sacred grove of Diana Nemorensis. He guarded a certain tree day and night, both a priest and a murderer. The man whom he guarded the tree from would be his successor, for a candidate to the priesthood might succeed to the job only when he had slain the current priest,



and he would take over the functions and privileges of priesthood until he in turn was slain by a stronger or a craftier.<sup>19</sup> There is a long list of peoples who followed the custom of sacrificing their enfeebled kings. Frazer cites an interesting instance: "The mystic kings of Fire and Water in Cambodia are not allowed to die a natural death. Hence, when one of them is seriously ill and the elders think that he cannot recover, they stab him to death."<sup>20</sup> Partly this is an effort to keep the divine soul which resides in such sacred persons as kings from leaving the land and thus exposing it to evil forces. But primarily this practice is based on a belief that the king is a personification of his nation, and to kill him and then appoint a successor is simply to observe a resurrection and renewal, since the divine soul is transferred from its old habitation to a new.

In the same pattern there is a somewhat modified custom of the sacrifice of a temporary king. At times it happened that a king resisted the idea of the transferring or losing custody of the divine soul through death and so thought of a happy substitute--for him. He would temporarily abdicate and appoint a king in his place, one who would reign only for a few days. Then this temporary ruler would be killed, though later a mock execution appeared to suffice. By historical times in Europe, at least, several

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<sup>19</sup>Frazer, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

traditions along this line appear to have come together to make up a major cultural observance. Usually at some point during Whitsuntide, sometimes during or just before Lent, ceremonies are observed in which a "wild Man" or king is chosen by the villagers, and after due ceremony (which is sometimes a parade, sometimes a wild, licentious celebration), is slain in a mock ritual which often appears quite realistic.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes the execution follows a carnival in which all kinds of licentious behavior and merrymaking have been allowed; the execution of the "king" consists, in many parts of Europe, of burying the carnival by burning a straw effigy or using some other means to put the carnival spirit to death symbolically. In one Italian festival of this sort, the huge effigy is pulled through the town while the celebrants escort it, each carrying in his hand a radicus, in this instance a huge leaf of the aloe.<sup>22</sup> And in some countries, Death, an effigy of straw, is carried out and burned or flung into the water, after which girls go into the wood to cut down a young tree, decorate it in some manner, and bring it into the village with great rejoicing. This enactment is called "Bringing Summer Back."<sup>23</sup> There are many analogous rites which Frazer has found in all parts of the world, throughout many centuries. The general explanation is, of course, that these practices,

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 344 ff.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 352.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 357-367.

going back to the sacrifice of the aged king, were magical rites intended to insure either the revival of nature in the spring after its "death" during the winter or to maintain the vigor of the land. The mourning at the sacrifice followed by a general rejoicing when a new king or image representing a renewal is lifted up signifying rebirth is a universal acting out of the revival of hope. In this same line of thought can be seen emerging the ancient religious theories based on the magical rites summarized above, theories which produced the myths of Adonis, of Mithra and Dionysus, and so on.

How do these rites and customs contribute to an identification of Bercilak de Hautdesert? In this way. Bercilak, as king quite literally of his own demesne, represents the strong, vigorous priest-king whose person is reflected in the well-being of his land and his castle, hence the connection between the warmth and hospitality of the king and that of his men and his dwelling, and the vigorous energy displayed on the field and at the fireside in hunting and in games. Also, his relationship not only with his young and sensual wife but also with the grim and foreboding figure of the old woman recalls the religious worship of a union of the sexes in the figures of Adonis and Ishtar, or their various counterparts, because such a sexual union furthers not only the multiplication of men but through the law of similarity in magic, a plentitude

of fruits and animals in a widespread fertilizing of the land and all therein. Death, however, comes to gods as to men, and the death of a god is echoed in the temporary death of nature, or winter, just as fall, when the harvest is home, is significant of the aging man--or god. But with spring comes a rebirth of nature, and so the god has risen again, the king has returned to bring back life. The other self of Bercilak, the half-giant Green Knight, is a kind of caricature of the genial Host-figure; he is closely associated with the natural world because of his very color, and he bears the symbol of eternally enduring nature, the evergreen holly, but paradoxically he carries an instrument of execution, the ax. He endures a beheading, which is death, but he rises again with his life and energy renewed. Vigor, which is a primary virtue of the Host, is thus exemplified not only in his exploits in the field but also in the ability of his other self to resume his life after it has been taken from him. Of course, this mystical ability accompanies magical creatures in the long line of stories behind SGGK: in the Irish versions of The Champion's Bargain, Fled Bricrend, and in the French La Mule sanz Frain and Le Livre de Caradoc, the challenger is beheaded but either puts his head back on or takes it and rides off. There are many more stories, notably Celtic, in which creatures have the ability to take back their heads, and often it requires no little effort on the part of the hero to

countereffect this ability. It must be noted that the Gawain-poet invests his Green Knight with significant variations which could only serve to remind his audience of fertility rituals and allied celebrations of which they were all surely aware and which were still being celebrated in the English countryside, even in a Christian atmosphere which had almost succeeded in turning the old religion into demonology.

In this same train of thought in which the Christian veneer sometimes allows pagan observances to show through, we can also note to some purpose that Gawain has occasion to visit three different chapels during the romance. The first is in Arthur's castle and is duly visited by the pious Gawain before he sets out:

So harnayst as he wat, he herkne, his masse,  
Offred and honoured at þe heze auter.<sup>24</sup>

Then when he has reached, unawares, the end of his quest, he prays to Mary for "some harbor, where devoutly I may hear mass and your matins tomorrow"<sup>25</sup> and of course he is granted his wish, for the castle appears in the midst of the forest with its chapel which Gawain attends every day he is there, receiving absolution on the day before he meets the Green Knight. But the last chapel, and the one most central to the story, is the Green Chapel of the Green Knight. As noted above, the Green Chapel is not

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<sup>24</sup>v. 592-593.

<sup>25</sup>v. 755-756.

only pictured vividly enough to encourage the reader's belief that the poet was calling on actual knowledge of such a place but also described in such terms as to indicate the extent of the way in which the poet had, in his own thinking, mingled orthodox Christian belief with deep-seated pagan superstition, and this mixture is the make-up of the Green Knight and of his "seat" as well. He is indeed a kind of malevolent fiend who has some alliance with the devil, but he is also a god-like being with powers of renewal as well as the ability to instill life and energy into the world which he dominates. In some manner he is the guardian of the forest, and it is in the heart of this forest that the valley lies which Gawain must enter and where he must stand judgment and out of which he emerges a different and a better knight than before.

Bercilak has his origin not only in the Celtic tales of Caradoc and Cuchulainn but also in the folk rituals whose origins were shrouded in mystery but for all that were still strongly alive in the English countryside. The vitality of the Green Knight figure is almost entirely owing to the artistic union of a folk-tale monster, a pre-Christian god-king, and a Christian chivalrous knight-concept.

#### CHAPTER IV. MORGAN LE FAY

Few characters, at least in medieval literature, have received more attention than Morgan le Fay in the Arthurian legend. Attempts to trace this mysterious and usually wicked enchantress have led back, logically enough, to the earliest Celtic literatures where she seems originally to have been a goddess of healing, but also the Irish goddess Morrighu or Morrighain is identified with Bodb or Boab, the goddess of battle and discord.<sup>1</sup>

It is apparent from the earlier Arthurian tradition that she was to be one of the agents to bear Arthur to Avilon, thus the connection with a healing goddess. We see how corrupt this tradition became in later times, even before the Malory reworking, by the story of Lancelot and the six ladies, the foremost of whom is Morgan. They come upon him while he is asleep, bear him to a castle, and when he awakens, demand that he choose one of them for his mistress. In this "promiscuous" tradition in which Morgan cuts an increasingly worse figure, she is thrown out of court because of a discovered affair with a knight, and so is explained her hatred of Guinevere. Bercilak makes

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<sup>1</sup>Tolkien and Gordon, Sir Gawain . . . , p. 115.

mention also of the famous tradition which says she learned her magical art from having "love dealings" with Merlin.

In SGGK, Morgan has figured as chief witness in the cases of both detractors and defenders of the Gawain-poet. One camp claims that we must not only take the poet at his word when he says that Morgan's anger and jealousy lie behind the entire plot, but a chief speaker, Denver Baughman, claims that her double plan of frightening Guinevere and humiliating Arthur actually succeeds, for he interprets the lines "þat stryke wyth hit . . . þozt mayn dintez"<sup>2</sup> as literal blows which did no harm, in the face of statements to the contrary by Tolkien and Gordon, Hulbert, and Kittredge.<sup>3</sup> When his nephew, Gawain, succeeds where he has failed, Arthur is justifiably enough chagrined, and his worth both as king and as knight is lessened. Although Baughman does not use this fact to further his argument, it is certainly true that throughout the long list of adventures in which Arthur participates, he is often overthrown or in some way made to look less able than more highly-rated knights like Lancelot or Gawain, even though the king is praised at the same time for daring to throw himself into situations where kings are not expected to venture. Baughman repudiates the majority view that the theme is a testing of both loyalty and chastity, the burden of which is borne by the Challenge and Temptation episodes.

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<sup>2</sup>Vv. 330-339.

<sup>3</sup>Baughman, p. 246.



This view rests on the assumption that there is enmity between aunt and nephew, and it ignores the fact that Morgan's plan rests on the beheading of Bercilak.<sup>4</sup>

The opposing camp, which sometimes appears to contain nearly everybody who has written on the subject including the leading editors, is led by Friedman, who published a rebuttal to Baughman's argument that Morgan le fay is not only essential and integral to the plot but also successful in her plan, and that through no fault of the Gawain-poet, Morgan's role, traditionally, has been completely misunderstood.<sup>5</sup> Friedman denies vigorously that Morgan's plan succeeds even partially or that she is anything more than a deus ex machina device that the poet uses in the final effort at getting his two threads together. Friedman believes that while Baughman is correct in saying that Morgan is not, initially, a "cheap enchantress" but rather a goddess doing the holy work of healing in the Vita Merlini, and other works, she later does become a schemer against Merlin and Arthur's entire court. That the poet sees her in this latter light is shown when he speaks of her envy of the court and her hatred of Guinevere and also in his description of her as an exceptionally ugly hag in a tradition of "the more evil, the uglier." This argument also includes a rejection of the disenchantment motive from which Kittredge worked, and this point is im-

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>5</sup>Friedman, p. 260.

portant in an examination of Morgan le Fay only as Friedman sees Bercilak as a shape-shifter rather than as an enchanted knight. Bercilak, by this reckoning, would be something of a free agent, particularly since he tells Gawain, "And þe wowyng of my wyf: I wroȝt hit myseluen."<sup>6</sup> Morgan, playing the role of the goddess of discord, would be traceable back to the legends in which mortals are enticed to undergo tests by immortals, sometimes in order to become the lovers of fairy mistresses. Although Kittredge has shown that such a genealogy is not directly in the background of SGGK, it is quite possible that the poet was aware of these stories when he was forced to work two widely-varying traditions into the single fabric of his story.<sup>7</sup>

Kittredge believes, and gives good evidence, though of a highly speculative nature in parts, that Morgan represents another substitution in the story, perhaps by the English poet, since in the French Gawain, the moving cause of the plot was Bercilak's desire to be disenchanting, a motive left over from the Temptation story.<sup>8</sup> The English poet shows a distinct desire to attach the Gawain story to the existing Arthurian saga by referring to the "Brutus books" as a written source, and so he decided to reinforce this attachment by putting in Morgan as the instigator; hence the object of Bercilak's visit to the court is no longer his disenchantment. However, the English poet may

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<sup>6</sup>v. 2361.    <sup>7</sup>Friedman, p. 271.    <sup>8</sup>Kittredge, p. 133.

have had a precedent in using Morgan by finding in his French original an ancient lady, perhaps Bercilak's mother-in-law, and Kittredge cites the instance in Chrétien's Perceval of Gawain's adventure of the Perilous Bed and his meeting three queens under spells, one, an old lady who is Arthur's mother. And of course, looking forward to the Percy Green Knight, we find Morgan as the "close contriver of all harms," having lost both nomen and numen; she is called by the name Agostes and has the character of a witch and procuress who can transform men and has taught Sir Bredbeddle the art of shape-shifting. There can be no doubt that she is here the motive-power of the whole transaction, and if it is true of the corrupt MS., how much more so in the SGGK romance, as it is in the long literary Arthurian tradition.

The essential literary problem, then, is whether Morgan le Fay is a strong moving force behind Bercilak and the entire chain of events or whether she is a faint, mysterious remnant of the "loathly lady" tradition who weakens the whole romance by becoming a simple and inartistic "dea ex machina." The problem can hardly be solved to all the contenders' satisfaction, but perhaps more light can be shed on it by following Kittredge's lead to see whether there is additional background for such an antagonist as Morgan appears to be in SGGK and also to examine perhaps more closely the exact extent of her appearances in SGGK.

Jessie Weston, in From Ritual to Romance, aided workers in the field of the Arthurian legend as well as students of comparative religion by charting the various roads which she believed led from pagan Mystery to Christian Ceremonial. Though she discounted the role folk-lore played in the problem, many of her discoveries, based as they are on mythic oriental and occidental legends, are helpful in tracing the effects that early traditions had on both intermediate and late literature. The Morgan problem, as it exists in SGGK, arises out of the reasons for her close association with Bercilak. Weston, using Von Schroeder's translation of the poems in the Rig-Veda, tells the story of a kingdom on which drought and famine have fallen. The king of this country discovers that, so long as a young Brahmin lives a chaste life, the drought will endure. In order to save his country, the king encourages an old woman, who has a daughter of a somewhat irregular life, to undertake the seduction of the hero, Rishyacringa, who has never even seen a woman. The girl visits the boy in his hermitage and causes him to forget his religious duties. A second time, she returns during the father's absence and persuades the boy to accompany her to a ship which carries him to the drought-stricken land. The king gives to Rishyacringa his daughter as wife, and as soon as the marriage is consummated, the spell is broken, and rain falls. Von Schroeder believes that there is little doubt

that the king's daughter played the role of temptress in earlier versions of this tale.<sup>9</sup> One is apt to be struck more by the similarities with the Percy Green Knight than with SGGK, but the significance of this and like passages is obvious: the old woman, ugly and past her prime, but still a figure of authority, accompanies in a natural course of events the young and beautiful temptress who must rely on the aged woman's wisdom and experience. It requires the pair of them to succeed in their assigned mission.

In some other interesting occurrences of the old woman as a necessary element in certain ritualistic observances, there is a story of the Latin feast of Anna Perenna, an old woman in whom Mars once confided his love for a maiden and who, as a result, disguised herself as a young woman and went through a marriage ceremony with the god. Scholars of this set of tales believe that Anna Perenna is the female counterpart of the Vegetation Spirit, who has grown old and must ultimately yield place to the young god and his correspondingly youthful bride; the old must weaken and die before the new appears, just as winter precedes spring or the fruit-bearing plant dies and is harvested before planting for another year.<sup>10</sup>

The curious role that the woman plays in the heroic quest is also touched on by Miss Weston in regards to the

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<sup>9</sup>Weston, pp. 30-31.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

Sangreal quest. She mentions, for example, that Gawain, in the Diû Crône, is given eternal youth by his fairy mistress; that Gawain discovers the Grail to be so secret a thing that no woman, whether wife or maid, can speak of it, and there is even some sort of tabu on men with wives talking of it; that Perceval is told by the maiden of the White Mule that she is unable to give him any information about what the Grail may be:

It is too secret to be told.  
No lady, girl or maid may say it  
Nor may any man betray it  
Who is wedded to a wife.<sup>11</sup>

From these three instances, it can be seen that in the Grail quest women play a paradoxically important role; they are present but yet are hindrances to the hero; they are at once benevolent and malevolent beings on the borderline and yet excluded from the secrets.

Another body of evidence that Miss Weston presents and which has some bearing on a study of Morgan has to do with the Nature Cults as they are found to have influenced various aspects of the Grail quest. As Frazer has pointed out, the story differs little in essential details from country to country: a young and beautiful hero-god, Tammuz, Attis, or Adonis, is always the beloved of a great and powerful goddess; always he suffers a terrible and untimely death which brings great bitterness to the goddess and hence

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 137-138.

to the world, but the death and period of mourning are followed by his resurrection.<sup>12</sup> As we move into the romance (and the influence of certain Celtic elements), the theme becomes more closely allied with the hero who ventures out into a world for which he is most lamentably unprepared, with such resulting themes as the sinister figure of the Red Knight with his Witch Mother, love trances, the chivalric rescues of distressed maidens, and the like.<sup>13</sup>

And finally there are the mysteries of Mithra, an important Persian god who in late pre-Christian times merged with many vegetation gods and whose worship spread to the farthest boundaries of the Roman Empire, for Mithraic remains have been found at such garrison centers as London, Caerleon-on-Usk, York, and Chester. Miss Weston speculates that it is perhaps the contamination of Mithra worship (in which women were absolutely excluded from the cult but allowed to participate in certain Attic mysteries) that resulted in Gawain's being informed that no woman may speak of the Grail, and yet it is invariably a maiden who directs the questor to the Grail or who reproaches him for his failure.<sup>14</sup>

If we look on this body of evidence, though it seems somewhat disjointed at first, we come up with one important and unmistakably basic fact concerning Morgan le Fay: as a

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 143-144.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 169-170.

feminine antagonist force against which Gawain must struggle in his journey from Arthur's court to the Green Chapel and back again, she is in a long ritualistic tradition as a companion to the masculine forces represented by Bercilak, at once sympathetic and antagonistic to the quest; she is likewise in the old traditions when she stands behind the young and beautiful temptress, Bercilak's lady, signifying, as it were, both the ominous deception behind the smiling mask which the temptress turns toward Gawain and the terrible dual nature of woman giving life but bringing death.

One of the episodes in the journey of the Hero as Campbell has listed them in The Hero with a Thousand Faces is the "meeting with the goddess," and he recognizes more fully than most of the SGGK critics of Morgan seem able to the duality of woman, who is "the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthly and unearthly quest," who is "mother, sister, mistress, bride."<sup>15</sup> She is the comforter, the nourisher, the good mother. But the image is not always benign, for there is the "bad" mother--absent or unattainable; hampering, forbidding, punishing; she who would hold back the growing child trying to push away, and the desired but forbidden mother. The mythological figure of the Earth Mother, or Universal Mother, is seen in many religious traditions; the Indian Cosmic Mother, shown in a temple image in Calcutta, displayed her divinity's two aspects simul-

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<sup>15</sup>Campbell, pp. 110-111.



taneously: the two left hands brandished a bloody saber and gripped by the hair a human head; the right hands were lifted in the "fear not" gesture and extended in the bestowal of favors. This goddess, whose name is Kali, has as her title "The Ferry across the Ocean of Existence."<sup>16</sup> This realization of an archetypal ambiguity of woman is found in many traditions. For instance, in the Celtic story of the five sons of the Irish king Eochaid, a hideous hag, a veritable loathly lady, guards a well, and when the first four sons come to drink, she will not permit them water without their bestowing a kiss on her, a price they are not prepared to pay. But the fifth, Niall, both kisses and embraces her, and she changes into a beautiful woman whose name is Royal Rule and who bestows on him and his heirs the kingship of Tara forever. Her explanation of her dual nature is that without battle and fierce conflict, royal rule cannot be won; but in the end, it is gracious and beautiful.<sup>17</sup> Loomis, who also makes use of this story, says there is evidence that the loathly hag, who is an allegorical figure personifying the rulership of Ireland, at an earlier stage was Eriu, a goddess personifying Ireland, and the story of her metamorphosis from a hideous woman to a beautiful young girl was originally a Nature myth explaining the transforming of the world at springtime.<sup>18</sup> In the loathly lady

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>18</sup> Loomis, The Development . . . , pp. 142-143.



In this short diatribe Gawain uses some of the most famous temptresses of history to justify, or at least to show some precedent for his own beguilement, and his speech is typical of the misogynistic comment of the medieval period. Indeed, one is reminded of Jankin in the Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale, for such a brief sermon as this would have pleased the young clerk as he read from his ill-fated book about wicked women. Women as promiscuous, low-minded, but wily opponents in a perpetual battle of the wits with their often stupid husbands are a common occurrence in the literature of the time. Undoubtedly this view is orientally descended rather than Celtic in origin, for the tales of the gods and goddesses as well as those romances and fairy tales based on oriental themes depict women in a debased way. One example, besides those given by Gawain above, might include the Potiphar's Wife theme which not only figures prominently in the story of Joseph but is in several versions which came eventually to the shores of Europe, notably in the wonderful collection of tales, The Seven Sages. The Celtic fée is remarkably constant; she demands a great deal of loyalty, but she returns it in kind. In the borrowed Sir Lanval, for instance, taken from Marie de France's Sir Launfal, the fairy mistress takes Sir Lanval for a lover on the condition that he not mention her name or position. When he is back at court and betrays her, she still appears, saves his life, and carries him off, away

from the corrupt court which has such a bad effect on him. She is generous and forgiving, and it is rare indeed to meet with these qualities in tales from the east. It is perhaps true that a blending of the different themes, both eastern and western, produced the pitifully debased, often loathsome figure of Morgan, and perhaps this blending is also responsible for the strangely ambivalent feelings which Gawain seems to have for her in the end when he refuses to take umbrage at the Host's revelation.

From a larger view, it is evident from the instances cited above that in the most primitive and inner depths of his being, man the hero and poet is never accustomed to thinking of either his weal or his woe without likewise thinking of the suspicious and darkling female being who is all too closely linked with his fortunes. That such a figure is basic to the events of the heroic journey is unarguable; SGGK offers but one further piece of evidence, a great deal of the weight of which depends on the whole body of Arthurian legends to which the Gawain-poet meant his work to be appended.

In the popular literature of both medieval France and England, Morgan was considered not merely a fée but a goddess; she was called dea by Giraldus Cambrensis, and in a Paris MS., of the Vulgate Lancelot, she is Morgain la deesse, Morgan the goddess.<sup>20</sup> She becomes increasingly more powerful

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<sup>20</sup>Tolkien and Gordon, Sir Gawain, p. 115.

and more evil until finally by Malory's time she is the very epitome of the sexually insatiable witch whose every thought is of the unwitting victim she can entrap. A later descendant of this incredibly corrupt creature is Spenser's Duessa, whose body, when she is disrobed in a symbolic disenchanting, is horribly loathsome and evil-looking. Although a wicked witch may take on a beautiful shape temporarily, in the end her evil is revealed by her ugliness.

Because of the well-established tradition in which Morgan does possess great gifts of magic, no medieval audience would be likely to cavil at her ability to give a man the power not only to change his shape but also to live without his head, especially since talking, prophesying heads are not uncommon in folk-lore. Also, because by the thirteenth century the French tradition had already permeated the Arthurian body enough to have Morgan established as a wicked woman who had been banished by Guinevere, her sister-in-law who, as a courtly French lady, was the very antithesis of the dark Celtic witch, no audience could doubt that Morgan might well be behind any plot to discredit or harm outright the Round Table and its ideals. From this point of view, therefore, Morgan is no "dea ex machina" but the very part and parcel of that tapestry which was made up of the lives of Arthur Pendragon, Guinevere, and the Court.

But does the Gawain-poet justify further his use of Morgan by admitting her freely to move in the story or does

he depend simply on the tradition with which he is so familiar to carry the burden of artistic justification? The ugly old woman appears frequently throughout the second and third fits, obviously respected and catered to by the lord and lady of the castle as well as their guest, and so Bercilak's explanation, in the fourth fit, of who she really is can hold little more surprise for Gawain and the audience than the revealing of the Green Knight himself. She is not a character dragged suddenly into the narrative at the unraveling but instead one fitted into the pattern of "things are not what they seem."

The "other lady" first appears in verse 947:

An oþer lady hir lad bi þe lyft honde,  
þat watȝ alder þen ho, an auncian hit semed,  
And heȝly honowred with hapeleȝ aboute,  
Bot vnlyke on to loke þo ladyes were,  
For if þe ȝonge watȝ ȝep, ȝolȝe watȝ þat oþer;<sup>21</sup>

And the poet goes on to describe in some detail the great contrast which exists between the two ladies. Gawain's behavior towards the two is impeccable; he salutes the older first, and then he kisses the "lovelier" graciously. He is taken between the two, and the conversation, we can infer, does honor to all three. Only one stanza down, the feast is described, and

þe olde auncian wyf heȝest ho sytteȝ,  
þe lorde lufly her by lent, as I trowe;  
Gawan and þe gay burde togeder þay seten . . . .<sup>22</sup>

At the earlier feast at Camelot, the poet described carefully

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<sup>21</sup>Vv. 947-951.

<sup>22</sup>Vv. 1001-1003.

the seating arrangement on the dais where Guinevere sits beside her lord, highest of all, with Arthur's two "sister's sons" and other worthy persons honored by their placement at the high table. It is surely noteworthy that the ancient lady has precedence over the younger woman, though the latter is the true mistress of the castle since she is married to its lord, and this feature of etiquette could not be ignored by a medieval audience.

One other point which has sometimes gone unnoticed in the controversy regarding Morgan the motivator is the exact extent of her plan as it is revealed by Bercilak to Gawain at the end of the fourth fit. Bercilak says that she sent him to "assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were/ þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;"<sup>23</sup> also,

Ho wayned me þis wonder your wytte, to reue,  
For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dy3e  
With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked  
With his hede in his honde bifore þe hy3e table.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously Guinevere is not so "dismayed" that she dies. Friedman, in his argument that Morgan le Fay is simply an intrusion by the poet, cites the failure of the Green Knight to make Guinevere even to swoon, though in several episodes, notably the Vulgate Lancelot, she does so at the false announcement of Lancelot's death.<sup>25</sup> However, from the description of the Green Knight and the stillness with which the company greets his entrance and speech, it is fairly

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<sup>23</sup>v. 2456-2457.

<sup>24</sup>v. 2459-2462.

<sup>25</sup>Friedman, p. 261.

certain that some sort of fear is being experienced; in the climactic lines in which the huge man is beheaded, the head rolls forward, but is kicked away by the banqueters in what surely must be an action of revulsion and fright, for "moni on of hym had doute,/ Bi þat his resoun} were redde."<sup>26</sup>

The language used in this passage, runyschly, þat vgly bodi þat bledde, was intended to convey something of the horror and fright which rendered the lesser knights and ladies speechless. It is therefore true that Guinevere is not literally frightened to death, but in the ordinary and figurative sense of the phrase which speakers use exaggeratedly in order to communicate the depth of their feelings, perhaps she and the other ladies both in the romance and in the poet's audience were indeed frightened by the gruesome details which accompany the first part of the Challenge. Just so is Arthur humiliated and "greued;/ þe blod schot for scham into his schyre face/ and lere"<sup>27</sup> at the scornful speech of the Green Knight. In both ways, as well as the ultimate outcome in which Morgan's nephew effectively vindicates the surquidré of his uncle's court, she never really fails of her purposes as her follower lists them at the end, though, if we remember her great enmity, it is probable that she is disappointed with the outcome. It seems then somewhat churlish to accuse the poet of an "ex machina" offense when an overview of the poem and its ante-

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<sup>26</sup>Vv. 442-443.

<sup>27</sup>Vv. 316-318.



cedents and mythic traditions reveals him to have acted as fairly in his use of a feminine instigator as in his joining the two themes of the Challenge and the Temptation game.

Since the Gawain-poet is obviously learned in the Arthurian legend, several strands from these stories probably influenced him: that group of tales in which Morgan harasses the women of the court by sending various articles to test the love-faithful, such as a chapel in a valley from which no one who entered might escape who had been faithless in love, a cloak which would not fit a faithless woman, a ring indicating a cuckold, a drinking horn, and others. Also there is the tradition of the battle-goddess Morrigan, or Bodb, who appears in the Cuchulainn stories as a true discord goddess, on the order of Ate, but less subtle than her Grecian counterpart.<sup>28</sup> There is further the loathly lady tradition, particularly in the theme as it appears several times culminating with the Wife of Bath's Tale and mentioned above, wherein Gawain, or some other knight, must marry an ugly hag because of a promise made her by his liege lord in payment for some prophecy or other gift of wisdom or even, in the Wife's Tale, for a kind of punishment. Gawain's link with the loathly lady is due mainly to there being an entire cycle of early stories revolving around him; his gentleness and courtesy are wonderfully illustrated by his treatment of the hag.

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<sup>28</sup>Campbell, p. 360.

Morgan le Fay as the mythical "universal mother," possessing the wisdom of age, the honor that experience confers, is a figure whose dual nature is illustrated by the contrast afforded between her and the young, lovely temptress. It is fit, however, that the true temptress, or testor, is Morgan herself, and her young counterpart is no more than a pawn who cleverly but docilely plays her part. Her relationship to Bercilak is, for appearance's sake, that of an honored tutelary figure, a kind of household seer. But on the mythic level, she is the aged partner in an alliance formed to test the upcoming, youthful hero who is destined to supplant her and her lord, himself a symbol of the land's season, eternal resurrection and renewal.

## CHAPTER V. THE CLIMATE

Isolated passages in SGGK which have come in for much admiration but comparatively little study have been those which concern themselves with the passing of the seasons and the descriptions of the landscape through which Gawain rides in his quest for the Green Chapel. Commonly these passages, particularly those at the beginning of the second fit, are used to illustrate the structural excellencies of this poem, for the poet refrains from digressing as a lesser artist might have done, choosing rather to condense the passing of time into a very short but nevertheless vivid connection between the main poles on which the plot is strung. From a lyrical standpoint, there are no finer stanzas in English literature than those which depict the passing of summer into autumn:

After, þe sesoun of somer wyth þe soft wyndeþ,  
Quen Zeferus syfleþ hymself on sedeþ and erbeþ;  
Wela wyne is þe wort þat waxes þeroute,  
When þe donkande dewe dropeþ of þe leueþ,  
To bide a blysfyl blusch of þe bryzt sunne.  
Bot þen hyþes heruest, and hardenes hym sone,  
Warneþ hymeþ hym for þe wynter to wax ful rype;  
He dryues wyth drozt þe dust for to ryse,  
Fro þe face of þe folde to flyþe ful hyþe;  
Wroþe wynde of þe welkyn wrasteleþ with þe sunne,  
þe leueþ lancen fro þe lynde and lyzten on þe grounde,  
And al grayes þe gres þat grene watþ ere;

Þenne al rypeþ and roteþ þat ros vpon fyrst,  
And þus zirneþ þe zere in zisterdayeþ mony,  
And wynter wyndeþ azayn, as þe worlde askeþ,  
no fage,  
Til Mezelmas mone  
Watþ comen wyth wynter wage;  
Þen þenkkeþ Gawan ful sone  
Of his anious uyage.<sup>1</sup>

This stanza, in the great English lyric tradition, is a lovely rejoinder to "Sumer is icumen in" with the grim inevitability of winter's coming heightening the melodic beauty of the wind-driven harvest-time.

Besides the esthetic pleasure to be derived from these various passages, however, there is also another and rather more serious consideration underlying the various stanzas which deal with the natural world which surrounds and sometimes almost overwhelms Gawain. This consideration not only involves the mythic tradition of the Waste Land and its successor, the Wood of Error, but also concerns the structural implications of SGGK as a story based on the rites de passage or initiation ritual.

Like most of the writers who have dealt with that part of the Arthurian legend which concerns the quest of the Sangreal, Bleheris has Gawain setting out on a journey with no notion of what lies ahead, and his ignorance results in his failure to restore the Waste Land to fruitfulness, for he does not inquire about the nature of the Grail when he should; however, Miss Weston notes that he

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<sup>1</sup>v. 516-535.

does so of the Lance, another of the four fertility symbols involved, and as a result "the waters flowed again thro' their channel, and all the woods were turned to verdure."<sup>2</sup> Also, in the Diû Crône version, when the questor is prepared and so knows what to do and ask, the spell is broken, and the Waste Land is restored to fruitfulness.<sup>3</sup> The so-called "freeing of the waters" is of the utmost importance in restoring the waste or desert lands to their former state of fertility. As Miss Weston points out, though she deals only with the Grail quest, there are two divisions in the group of stories containing the questor and a waste land, and these antecedents are applicable to SGGK. There is a partial or complete failure of the hero to rescue or revive the land which he finds laid waste in the first group: Gawain, Diû Crône, the prose Perceval, and Chrétien's Perceval. In the second, notably in the Perlesvaus, the failure of the hero to carry out his office results in the illness of the king and the misfortunes of the land.<sup>4</sup>

The division here is one of cause and effect, then, for the guilt of the hero and the heavy burden of his failure is much more reprehensible in the second than in the first group. In almost every instance he is a predestined hero who is nonetheless ignorant of the true circumstances of the castle and its situation. Likewise, in every story

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<sup>2</sup>Weston, pp. 12-13.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid.    <sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 15-17.

he must make his way through terribly grim landscapes to a place which usually offers hospitality but which also holds great danger either for the hero or for the resident king. A discussion of the hero in a preceding section dealt with the strong belief of primitive man in the direct tie between the welfare and productivity of the land and its people and the health and vigor of the king. The sick and dying Fisher King who is dependent on the young hero, his waste and barren land which is rarely restored are all part and parcel of the most basic mythic beliefs in human psychical history.

There can be little doubt that the Waste Land of folk-lore extends backward into that body of beliefs which is concerned with the king's role in the welfare of the nation. Just as SGGK reflects a nearly ideal situation in the flourishing folk and their lord of the Castle Haut-desert, so does Gawain's role of questor require him to pass through a wild and barren land. The poet emphasizes again and again the grim nature of the area through which Gawain rides. He goes through the realm of Logres, the poet relates, moving into North Wales with the Isles of Anglesey on his left, "And fareȝ ouer ȝe fordeȝ by ȝe forlondeȝ,/ Ouer at ȝe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk/ In ȝe wyldrenesse of Wyrle . . . ." <sup>5</sup> The movement here is essentially swift, though the poet is aware, as he knows his

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<sup>5</sup>v. 691-701.

audience is, that the distance covered is not only very great but very difficult as well. He closes the stanza with a comment on the hardships which such a journey entails:

þe knyzt tok gates straunge  
In mony a bonk vnbene,  
His cher ful oft con chaunge  
þat chapel er he myzt sene.<sup>6</sup>

After the geographical description, which some students of the poem have been at great pains to try to pinpoint exactly in a maze of speculation, the poet hints at the supernatural landscape, an element introduced at the very beginning of the poem and one which he has already explored with the unusual antagonist and his charger. The continuing supernatural aspects include the foes "so foul and fell" which he finds at each ford and crossroads. But the order of climax reveals that the most terrible foe of all, the one most greatly to be feared, is the season which has laid a heavy and unrelenting hand on the countryside:

For werre wrathed hym not so much, þat wynter was wors,  
When þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadde,  
And fres er hit falle myzt to þe fale erþe;  
Ner slayn wyth þe slete he sleped in his yrnes  
Mo nyzteþ þen innoghe in naked rokkeþ,  
þer as claterande fro þe crest þe colde borne renneþ,  
And hengeð heþe ouer his hede in hard lisse-ikkles.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, at the beginning of Fit II, the movement is from the actual geography, familiar to the poet and his audience, to supernatural enemies, expected since the advent

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<sup>6</sup>v. 709-712.

<sup>7</sup>v. 726-732.

of the Green Knight into Arthur's hall, to the "peryl and payne and plytes ful harde" of nature's wrath, a season's wrath, to be sure, but nevertheless a season which is in keeping with the general emotional tone of the work as Gawain sets out with the lament of the courtiers that so fine a knight must meet with such inevitable disaster as the result of a foolish Christmas game.

The very depth of Gawain's troubles with his environment occurs at that point in a fearsome forest when he is aware of his physical discomfort, but it is noteworthy that his spiritual discomfort is much greater. Thus the poet uses the one to point up the other, and the nature of Gawain's plaint that he has no place where he can say Mass as well as his physical bravery and hardihood serve to underscore his piety and show us Gawain as a nearly ideal knight possessing most of the desirable qualities of chivalry. The poet also uses the scene of complaint which follows immediately on the graphic description of the hardships Gawain has endured to make a dramatic entry into the next scene:

Nade he sayned hymself, segge, bot þrye,  
Er he watȝ war in þe wod of a won in a mote . . . .<sup>8</sup>

The swiftness with which the poet effects the startling change from a forlorn, miserable wood with its "bryddeȝ vn-blype" to a wonderful castle rising out of a meadow, its

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<sup>8</sup>Vv. 763-764.



turrets and towers gleaming with chalk-white chimneys, is designed to cause the audience to focus on this new and seemingly innocent episode in Gawain's quest. It is in the tradition of the Grail questor particularly, that the hero come safely, though not without some pain and hardship, through the first part of his journey, and following this long line, the castle looms up before Gawain as he stands in the dark wood, an oasis of physical and spiritual comfort on the one hand and relief from the terrors of the field and forest surrounding it, but on the other a place of testing, of deceptive peril.

It should also be noted that the comely dwelling has as its direct antecedent the familiar grail castle, but the parallel in SGGK is not complete, for there is never any question that the king of the land or its inhabitants will suffer as a result of Gawain's ignorance as to the true significance of the castle or its contents. However, the dark wood through which Gawain passes safely, though fraught with peril like that which the Grail questors meet, is incidental to the central testing incidents, whereas in the Grail quest, the dangers which the knights meet are often designed to prepare them for the final revelation in which the vision of the Grail figures most prominently. Like the Grail questors, Gawain's ignorance of the true state of things causes him harm, and his quest is thereby only partly successful. But because of this partial

success, Gawain's spiritual well-being is more endangered than his physical security, and the very fact of the castle's location, lying as it does in the midst of a dense wood which Gawain braves both coming in and leaving, serves paradoxically to emphasize the similarity and yet the differences between Bercilak's castle and the castles of the Grail which lie in the midst of a Waste Land and which echo to the cries of a stricken, leaderless people.

The castle's very name indicates that it is in the tradition of the perilous castle of the Grail quest. Hautdesert is thought by some to refer to the Green Chapel itself, as Tolkien and Gordon believe. But the very ambiguity of the name according to the two languages appropriate here, French and Celtic, is not necessarily a conflict in meaning. If in Celtic Hautdesert means "high hermitage" and refers to the supernatural aspects of the Green Knight and his barrow in the isolated valley, the French "high wilderness" is equally suitable both to the castle and to the "fairy mound" where the Green Knight and Gawain meet for the last time. The tradition of the anchorite would, in English at least, be of a somewhat fabulous cast, for a medieval audience was brought up on stories of saints like Anthony and Paul the Hermit.

However, to take the Hautdesert as descriptive of the geographical location of the castle and the other parts of the Green Knight's demesne is in the long tradition of

taking one's name from one's location, and this surname is descriptive of the locale. The Gawain-poet has spent several stanzas impressing on his audience the wildness and ruggedness of the terrain, and undoubtedly he could easily have hit on this name to fit in with his relation of Gawain's journey through the Wirral up to the castle and then the short trip through the forest to the valley of the Green Chapel. The Wasteland tradition which glimmers here and there throughout the romance supports this interpretation of the name, just as the name, in one of its meanings, must have been meant to remind the audience of other stories in the Arthurian legend.

The poet's use of parallel structure has been a source of great delight to many critics, for it is obvious, plentiful, and always skillful. He has also managed, however, to work in contrasts within the parallels which intensify the audience's awareness of the environment in which the story's two themes work themselves out. Gawain's hardships as he wanders through the Waste Land to the castle have been noted. His journey through the wood to the valley, though it takes only a small amount of time, is equally hazardous, and he has been emotionally set up for the harrowing experience he will undergo by the use of contrast in the introductory stanza of Fit IV, a contrast between the interior of the castle and the outside world and its weathers, an ironic contrast, it happens

after the encounter in the valley:

Nou nezeþ þe Nw þere, and þe nyzt passeþ,  
þe day dryueþ to þe derk, and dryþten biddeþ;  
Bot wylde wedereþ of þe world wakned þeroute,  
Cloudeþ keþten kenly þe colde to þe erþe,  
Wyth nyþe innoghe of þe norþe, þe naked to tene;  
þe snawe snitered ful snart, þat snayped þe wylde;  
þe werbelande wynde wapped fro þe hyþe,  
And drof vche dale ful of dryftes ful grete.<sup>9</sup>

And as the winter storm rages outside, the poet adds a very human touch to the portrait of his hero:

þe leude lystened ful wel þat leþ in his bedde,<sup>10</sup>  
þaþ he lowkeþ his liddeþ, ful lyttel he slepes;

That is, the season, by dint of the storm, has intruded into the bedchamber where Gawain has lain in comfort four nights and where he has spent some anxious morning hours in dalliance with the lady; the use of the storm to presage the coming trial is a brief parallel with the swift-moving description of the seasons at the beginning of Fit II which culminates with the onslaught of the autumnal winds and the ominous darkening of the land through which Gawain's journey lies.

It appears most likely from the use the poet makes of the weather and the landscape as a psychological base from which he can work on his audience that he means the actual physical world of the poem to serve as a vivid and realistic background against which the characters move and also to function in a mythic way as another of the links which connect this poem with the Arthurian group.

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<sup>9</sup>v. 1998-2005.

<sup>10</sup>v. 2006-2007.

But certainly there is a strong connection between the action of the story and the elements, a connection which in the beginning and the end serves as a foreboding of the dangers, but which in the middle seems designed to lull Gawain and the audience into a false sense of security. The warm, inviting castle where food and servants are plentiful affords sharp contrast to the forest out of which Gawain rides after crossing himself following his prayer. That the forest holds dangers even in the immediate vicinity of the castle, and hence civilization, is evident during the hunting scenes, but these descriptions are stylized, almost as though the poet wishes them to be mere background subservient to the exciting rush of the hunt, and the only time he allows his audience to view the scenery is during the boar hunt and at the death of wily Reynard.

The basic structure of SGGK has been analyzed in some detail by critics over the years, all of whom have paid close attention to the use the poet makes in his first and last lines of references to the historical antecedents, the truth of which lies, for a medieval audience, at least, in the books and stories as they are "in toun herde." The circular, or even spiral, nature of the structure is evident in the return to the Brutus books at the end, and although Gawain, and the court vicariously, has undergone an experience of purification which is chastening in part, the

ending of the romance like the beginning is static, as though a curtain has been twitched aside momentarily and then let fall again. This effect is heightened by the emphasis the poet places on the history of Britain, and the tumultuous, almost breathless recapping of the post-Troy incidents is followed by the unmistakable implication that the "Brutus land" is set apart by reason of the wondrous happenings that have occurred:

Mo ferlyes on yis folde han fallen here oft  
þen in any oþer þat I wot, syn þat ilk tyme.<sup>11</sup>

Here, then, is a land of magic, the very atmosphere of which is conducive to marvelous happenings. Perhaps to underscore this idea, the poet in this second stanza goes to great pains to place this adventure in the Arthurian canon: "And an outrage awenture of Arthure, wondere." <sup>12</sup>

Both these ideas, the first that the Brutus land is one where strange things can and often do happen and the second that this particular story is in the time of the great King Arthur, are happily joined together to make an important, underlying point of the whole story, at least as far as the marvels of this tale and its theme are concerned. For the poet says in the third stanza as he concludes his introductory material and moves into the immediate background of his poem:

With alle þe wele of þe worlde þay woned þer samen,  
þe most kyd knyȝteȝ vnder Krystes seluen,

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<sup>11</sup>v. 23-24.

<sup>12</sup>v. 29.

And þe louelokkest ladies þat euer lif haden,  
And he þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes;  
For al watȝ þis fayre folk in her first age,  
on sille, . . .<sup>13</sup>

This subtle and clever passage is full of thematic implication when taken together with the information which the poet has given his audience in the preceding two stanzas. These wonders, and especially those involving the Round Table, occurred in an earlier, fresher age, and so a curious ambiguity of sorts is present: the time at one level is the dawn of chivalry when men of heroic stature like Gawain and Bercilak were able to perform brave feats in an ordinary day's adventuring, but also it is a contemporary fourteenth-century landscape dotted with modern castles and familiar hunt scenes and men dressed in the latest fashion feasting with their ladies.

SGGK is a bi-level performance when examined closely, and its very nature serves to dispel the skepticism of all but the most hide-bound of literal readers. The poet devotes the greater part of three stanzas to the task of preparing his audience for what is to come, to set them up, as it were, so they will believe that such a time and such men existed in the morning of their nation and yet, clothed in the audience's own clothes and speaking the audience's own language, they exemplify a possible code of conduct in the afternoon of that same age. The didactic

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<sup>13</sup>v. 50-55.

possibilities of this technique are great. And almost without fear of argument can the contention be made that the poet's loving detail concerning landscape or geography serves this technique also. The mythic aspects of a Waste Land or a Wood of Error simply undergird the many-faceted major and minor themes which the poet has woven into his romance.

The emphasis on newness is gained not only by allusion to the first age but also by the very season and atmosphere in which the tale begins and ends. The celebration and feast are in honor of Christmas and the New Year: "Wyle Nw 3er wat3 so 3ep 3at hit wat3 nwe cummen, . . ." <sup>14</sup> And the king who presides over the company is also in his first bloom:

He wat3 so joly of his joyfness, and sumquat childgered:  
His lif liked hym ly3t, he louied 3e lasse  
Auper to longe lye or to longe sitte,  
So bisied him his 3onge blod and his brayn wylde. <sup>15</sup>

The dominant impression is, then, that here is a young people in a new age, and this idea, of course, becomes even clearer as Gawain's quest unfolds and grows far more complex than in the beginning. That is to say, the possibilities of a knight's being tested are more readily apparent during a period when the entire court is young and relatively untried, and the probability of a hostile force's attempting the challenge is also more likely. This youth-

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<sup>14</sup>v. 60.

<sup>15</sup>v. 86-89.



fulness of both the king and his knights is one other of the things which lends the tale its credibility. The organization of the Round Table is still in progress; its reputation is still in the making, and the fame of some of its outstanding members is not yet so great that all foes tremble before their lances. The season, then, serves to emphasize the untested quality of the knights and the society.

It might also be noted that some critics have brought up the very interesting point that underlying the gaiety and freshness of the new order are some ominous signs of youthful pride inherent in Arthur and his court as well as other flaws which are indicative of their having fallen somewhat short, even before the challenge and temptation themes are introduced, of the ideals to which they have aspired.<sup>16</sup> Because we can see plainly that the Gawain-poet was conversant with many aspects of the Arthurian legend, we can only deduce that he, as Malory did after him, saw even in the morning of their greatness the clouds gathering which would eventually overwhelm the ideals for which a chivalric age stood. He surely knew of the innate flaws in such a society as this which would cause the fellowship to split asunder, and it may be that the portrait of the company in a holiday mood is touched by the somberness of what is to come. Gawain's fault, which the court

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<sup>16</sup>Greene, see above, p. 38.

assumes as its own by donning the green girdle, is but the first crack in what is to be an ever-widening chasm of imperfection.

There is yet another tradition which owes a great deal to the Waste Land myth; indeed, it probably grew out of the latter and arises to its full height in Milton's Comus: that is, the Dark Wood, the Wood of Error. This Wood represents the area of alienation on one level, and it can be said to represent that stage in the hero's initiation from whence he cannot turn back, one step past the midway point as it were. It becomes the Wood of Error when the hero or the initiate is either unprepared to go forward through its entirety to attain the goal at the end or else is unable to do so even if he wishes. In this second sense, one might even term the wasteland through which the Grail Seekers struggle a Wood of Error, for their failure results in the complete overthrow of their mission and the people they are meant to rescue. On the other hand, at the sword of the destined hero, the monster of Error in the Wood may be easily overcome, as in the instance of the Red Cross Knight's overthrow of Error in the first of his and Una's adventures in The Faerie Queene. Gawain's wood, in the long tradition, is full of hardship, typified by the piteous birds, particularly since he must travel through it in the winter season. We see no trace, however, of the peculiarly threatening mishaps which may either stop the hero's journey outright or lead the unwary

traveler astray in the Dark Wood until Gawain sets out on the last lap of the journey accompanied by a guide.

The description of this section of the forest, the final one in the work, is given in the fourth stanza of Fit IV, and it is justly celebrated both because of the parallels with Beowulf which place it directly in the English descriptive tradition and because in excellence it can stand on its own merit. The poet paints an astonishingly realistic word-picture of the English countryside in winter as he once again uses a subtle off-side approach to reach an important point in the story:

ƿay boȝen bi bonkkeȝ ƿer boȝeȝ ar bare,  
ƿay clomben bi clyffeȝ ƿer clengeȝ ƿe colde.  
ƿe heuen watȝ vp halt, bot vgly ƿer-under;  
Mist mugged on ƿe mor, malt on ƿe mouteȝ,  
Vch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.  
Brokeȝ byled and breke bi bonkkeȝ aboute,  
Schyre schaterande on schoreȝ, ƿer ƿay doun schowued.  
Wela wylle watȝ ƿe way ƿer ƿay bi wod schulden,  
Til hit watȝ sone sesoun ƿat ƿe sunne ryses

ƿat tyde.  
ƿay were on a hille ful hyȝe,  
ƿe quyte snaw lay bisyde;  
ƿe burne ƿat rod hym by<sup>18</sup>  
Bede his mayster abide.

In this scene is little dramatic urgency: the way is wandering, and it is dark so that the riders, who have time to look about them, notice the queer appearance of the landscape and the fanciful shapes created by the mist and the snow on mountain and moor. It is, then, with something of a start that the interruption of a human voice breaks this

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<sup>18</sup>v. 2077-2090.

quiet landscape at dawn, and with the speech of the guide, Gawain is thrown into his last and most deceptively simple test. For Gawain has arrived at the end of his quest; though he wears the green girdle, he does not wholly trust in it. He is alone except for his guide, a stranger, who urges him to flee from the certain death that awaits him in the valley. The cold winter's day, the forlorn aspect of the wilderness in which he finds himself and which recalls the other forest of Christmas Eve, all these are factors which make more poignant the temptation to become a recreant knight and certainly more courageous his decision to put such a cowardly thought away from him and ride into the valley where not the comfort and security of a marvelous castle but rather the terror and death of the Green Chapel are awaiting him. Immediately on his courteous reprimand of the guide, the landscape becomes even more menacing:

And þenne he wayted hym aboute, and wylde hit hym þoȝt,  
And seȝe no syngne of resette bisydeȝ nowhere,  
Bot hyȝe bonkkeȝ and brent vpon boȝe halue,  
And ruȝe knokled knarreȝ with knorned stoneȝ;  
þe skweȝ of þe scowtes skayned hym þoȝt.<sup>19</sup>

It is more rugged, though it retains the lowering aspect of the early morning, and this stanza ends with yet another important climactic point, the discovery of the chapel and Gawain's astonishment that it is "nobot an olde caue" rather than the conventional chapel that he expected.

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<sup>19</sup>v. 2163-2167

Undoubtedly the poet intended his description of the seasonal landscape to point up the terror and suspense of the situation in which Gawain finds himself and also to follow that tradition of the Wood of Error where the devil or his fiends lurk to turn the feet of the innocent or virtuous traveler out of the correct path. The false guide here is rebuked, but still the error persists when Gawain finds himself confronted by the cave about which he has had a misconception all along. The evil which Gawain senses centers on, and indeed may emanate from the fairy mound out of which the Green Knight appears, but it is in keeping with other similar incidents throughout the poem that the atmosphere is effected in part by an almost lyrical passage describing a wintry forest scene and culminating in a treacherous suggestion by a guide who, ironically enough, is a fit inhabitant of the wood he appears to fear. He fulfills his duties up to a point, after which he becomes an agent of temptation.

The personification of nature is also continued in this passage from the stanza quoted above. This device, which the poet uses sparingly, serves on the one hand to make more telling descriptions possible, and on another, to enhance the overwhelmingly hostile climate as Gawain nears the Green Chapel. Such personification is in keeping with the primitive tradition that objects of nature--trees, clouds, rainbows, and the like--are indeed alive as they

are inhabited by supernatural creatures who serve as "souls" and who can be angered and then propitiated in the same way as gods. Such a conception is clearly appropriate in a country where "ferlyes" happen as a matter of course.

In keeping with the hero's initiation, Gawain has a difficult passage through the wilderness and forests up to that point where he undergoes the climactic test of courage and is rewarded and punished for his behavior at the castle. Even though the poet eclipses many of the hardships of the journey for purposes of artistic unity, he nevertheless spends some effort on communicating the harshness and dreariness of the land and its inhabitants. As is customary in the hero's journey, however, Gawain comes to the end relatively unscathed, mostly because he is a destined hero and his character the strong key which opens many of the serious situations in which he finds himself. In fact, from the time Gawain actually sets out on Gringolet from Arthur's castle until he finally meets the Green Knight at the barrow, the poet uses a total of nine stanzas plus a number of lines in others to describe the landscape, the castle looming suddenly out of the forest, and the valley of the Green Chapel. But when Gawain has finished the game and the challenge is over, the poet spares no more attention to detail, for it is no longer needed:

Wylde wayeȝ in ȝe worlde Wouen now rydeȝ  
On Gryngolet, ȝat ȝe grace hade geten of his lyue;  
Ofte he herbered in house and ofte al ȝeroute,

And mony aventure in vale, and venquyst ofte,  
pat I ne ty3t at þis tyme in tale to remene.<sup>20</sup>

From the view point of the narrative, the poet must get Gawain home as quickly as possible, for the true ending has to occur in the same place as the beginning; the court must be apprised of the entire affair and Gawain accepted once more into their midst. And as can be easily seen in the second fit, the poet is much too wily to be lured off his track into the swamps of digression. But the tradition behind this rather brusque treatment is that of the rites de passage in which the hero, having undergone various treatments and situations, is elevated or refined to a state where he can transcend, if he chooses and if he is so fated, the horrors and grimness of a difficult return. Joseph Campbell cites the example of Buddha entering into Nirvana,<sup>21</sup> that of the Irish hero Oisín,<sup>22</sup> and others who make the Return and become a master of two worlds, the one from whence they came and the one they entered. Gawain, because he has successfully completed the challenge game and more or less come unscathed through the temptations, need no longer face a hostile universe, and so the poet whisks him home in a final tying together of the threads of the plot.

That part of his world which involves Gawain only indirectly is the forest of the hunt, and as noted earlier,

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<sup>20</sup>Vv. 2479-2483.

<sup>21</sup>Campbell, p. 364.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 221.

the description of the woods in which the three days' hunts take place is never so detailed as are those of the passing of seasons at the beginning of Fit II or of the wilderness through which Gawain makes his way to find the castle and then the valley. The reasons for the sketchiness of these surroundings may be two-fold. Perhaps the poet felt little need to establish an emotional atmosphere based primarily on natural description during the hunts when their intrinsic excitement could be assumed to evoke a response in an aristocratic, and hence knowledgeable, audience. Also, he obviously wished to establish an unmistakable connection between the two settings of forest and castle, a connection that would consist at once of comparison and contrast. To do this, he dealt not with sight but with movement, not with the supernatural or magical but with the familiar, almost the commonplace. Because there is a great deal of action and much rapid movement during the hunt scenes, the poet cannot pause to launch out on a lyrical description of the glade in which the deer are killed, for instance. In fact, only the necessity for describing the boar's flight and his eventually being brought to bay calls forth any detail at all:

þen al in a semble sweyed togeder,  
Bitwene a flosche in þat fryth and a foo cragge;  
In a knot bi a clyffe, at þe kerre syde,  
þer as þe rogh rocher vnrydely watȝ fallen,  
þay ferden to þe fyndyng, and frekez hem after;  
þay vmbekesten þe knarre and þe knot boþe . . . .  
. . . . .  
Bot in þe hast þat he myȝt he to a hole wynnez



Of a rasse bi a rokk per rennez þe boerne.  
He gete þe bonk at his bak, . . .<sup>23</sup>

It can be seen from the treatment of the commingled scenes involving all the principals that the poet's grasp of his design is absolute and unfaltering. The above passage, like the preceding ones describing the onset of winter or the snow in the wood, is in no way merely a stop-gap, an opportunity to let the poet or the audience catch a breath; these stanzas are rather firmly woven into the narrative to carry it along, to establish an important emotional climate, varying as the need arises, and consciously or not to place this account of Gawain and the court's coming of age in a long mythic tradition, the importance of which depends on an ambiguity of climate as well as a knowledge that the Waste Land and the Dark Wood are integral parts of the heroic journey. Certainly it must be plain to the reader that the Gawain-poet is not simply indulging in a taste for purple passages when he incorporates the lyrical pieces in the fabric of his poem, for he uses these to arouse emotion, to establish motive in some cases, and always to advance the journey.

As the critic of structure usually notes, the poet makes use of a rising and falling of suspense for purposes of effective narration. Nowhere is this action more clearly and more skillfully used than in the descriptive pas-

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<sup>23</sup>v. 1429-1434; 1569-1571.

sages of the journey through the Wirral. As we have already seen above, Gawain's first view of the Castle Hautdesert follows immediately on his prayer to Mary and her Son that he be granted a place where he can pray his "pater and aue and crede."<sup>24</sup> He crosses himself three times, and lo, there is the magnificent castle placed, fairylike, in the midst of a dark, cold wood.

The rising action and increasing tension in Fit II are primarily attained by the use of certain steps of suspense. That is, it opens with the passage of seasons and a warning by the poet that

A 3ere 3ernes ful 3erne, and 3elde3 neuer lyke,  
þe forme to þe fynisment folde3 ful seldom.<sup>25</sup>

This passage of two stanzas precedes the sorrowful leave-taking of uncle and court by Gawain, and yet another richly descriptive section unfolds, that of the arming of Gawain which ends in the allegorical pentangle stanzas. Gawain's departure is as dramatic as that of the Green Knight in the first fit, and the drama is continued as the poet dwells at some length on the wild and savage lands through which Gawain passes and the terrible supernatural and grisly foes he meets. This passage ends with the pious prayer that Gawain offers up, and again the suspense is heightened when the castle is described. The strange, other-worldly atmosphere is brought to a close at the end of the two

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<sup>24</sup>v. 757-758.

<sup>25</sup>v. 298-299.

castle stanzas, for normalcy appears to take over with the appearance of a courteous porter.

It is apparent, then, that the poet's descriptive passages in the opening sections of the fit serve the useful purpose of building up to the several plateaus on which occur the actions that move the story forward. But when the poet has reached a suitable point at which it no longer serves him to continue the suspense, as when Gawain reaches what appears on the surface to be an ordinary castle with a hospitable lord and lady, he drops the descriptive technique and takes up a rapidly-paced narrative which continues until the interesting, and somewhat unusual, use of the interspersed scenes of the three days' hunt with the bedroom dialogue of Gawain and the lady.

The poet resumes his descriptive-passage technique once more at the beginning of Fit IV, when the first stanzas establish the tone of the whole and set Gawain on his way. The tempting speech of the guide, coming as it does at the end of a stanza which is a cold, bleak continuation of the first one, makes a distinct pause in the action as well as a last test the hero undergoes before entering the final part of the challenge. The sense of dawning danger is increased by the menacing, brooding aspect of the wintry landscape as well as the speech of the guide, and this sense of peril rises to a climax during the investigation of the valley of the Green Chapel as Gawain rides

through it, walking up to the old cave and growing aware as he does of the whirring noise which comes from the bank across the burn.

This pattern is like that seen not only in the beginning as the description of the Christmas feast is concluded by the startling entrance of the Green Knight but also in the shifting of the scene from the challenge to the temptation in Fit II as Gawain advances through the countryside to the castle in the wood. We do not find the suspense technique used, of course, after Gawain's meeting with the Green Knight; again the poet falls back on a straightforward narrative to close his story. In fact, an astonishing sense of the ordinary permeates the final stanzas, an anticlimactic falling of the emotional tension which has characterized most of the fourth part but which is present to some degree in the third as the poet lulls Gawain and the audience into a false sense of security.

From an artistic standpoint, the use of passages of detailed and sometimes ornate description as steps between ever higher plateaus of suspense is not only justifiable but also necessary from the poet's thematic standpoint; that is, he is taking into account the delight an audience must always feel in having its sensibilities titillated but also never overestimating the length of time the excitement can be sustained. And always we must remember that the Gawain-poet succeeded where many lesser poets

have failed in weaving into the complex thematic structure of his plot such brilliant descriptive passages and making them serve a dual purpose.

## CHAPTER VI. THE SYMBOLS

A study of symbols used in any work can become a kind of perilous marsh in which the critic is surrounded and then engulfed by the frightening monsters of his own imagination, for symbols are all too often, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder and not out of the mind of the artist. However, students of SGGK are on rather more solid ground when they approach its symbolic elements, first because one of the classical medieval passages of symbolic significance is found here and also because the Middle Ages were notoriously fond of works with allegorical, and hence symbolical, overtones. The example which lies nearest to hand here is, of course, the Gawain-poet's well-known Pearl, but there are the even more famous Roman de la Rose, much of Chaucer's work, like the lovely little jeu d'esprit, Parlement of Foules, and the powerful, though rambling, Piers the Plowman, with its kaleidoscopic hero changing with every passus, its torn pardon, its field full of folk. Therefore it might be reasonably argued that the searcher after symbols is less apt to go astray in a work of the fourteenth-century than, say, a student of the nineteenth-century.

As we have already observed above, the most famous symbol in SGGK is that one which appears chased in gold on a field of bright gules, the pentangle. Its mythic significance has been widely discussed, though nowhere more clearly than in Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance, and the Gawain-poet utilizes the familiar meaning of the pentangle in folk-lore by allowing it to underlie the religious symbolism which he explains in twenty-two lines, the whole of which adds up to a chivalric moral in the hero of perfection. The magical aura of the pentangle is plain to the audience immediately; that it is a very ancient and powerful sign is also made clear:

Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle  
In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat hit habbeþ,  
For hit is a figure þat haldeþ fyue poynteþ,  
And vche lyne vmbelappeþ, and loukeþ in oþer,  
And ayquere hit is endeles; and Englych hit callen  
Oueral, as I here, þe endeles knot.<sup>1</sup>

Its appropriateness as Gawain's device is ironically underscored in the concluding stanzas when Gawain's bitter speech against the well-known treachery of women includes Solomon's "fele sere," or his many and various women who led him away from righteousness. Something of the sexual significance of the pentangle has been discussed already in a preceding chapter; certainly its ritualistic importance is sexual in nature, and its close connection with the lance in the Grail stories makes this importance

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<sup>1</sup>Vv. 625-630.

very clear indeed. The religious explanation which the poet gives, however, is the one of primary importance, for it emphasizes that aspect of Gawain's character which is an integral part of the over-all chivalric ideal, principles stemming from both pagan and Christian ideas of honor and justice. As most commentators point out, the pentangle as a sign of perfection is ancient and was likely well-known by the medieval scholastics. That it stands for truth is simply another way of saying that it stands for the ideal in chivalry, for the virtue of truth would be the capstone of the lesser virtues, and Gawain's strength lies in his allegiance to this truth. It is this quality which enables him to reach the valley without overt hindrance, for he rejects the guide's suggestion that he ride away, no man being the wiser, and so fulfills his vow.

Gawain's most bitter lamentation is that he has forsaken "pat is larges and lewté pat longeȝ to knyȝteȝ."<sup>2</sup> Or as he also puts it, he is guilty of "trecherye and vn-trawȝe." His scutcheon has been tarnished and his reputation lessened, for he has failed to be entirely worthy of the sign of perfection which he bore away proudly from Arthur's hall. The depths of his feeling are understandable, and his lament is not an exaggerated one; the care with which the poet depicted and explained the pentangle shows the audience that the responsibility of the virtue

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<sup>2</sup>v. 2381.



of perfection is no small one, a realization which is all too clearly emphasized by the theme. Perfection is not attainable by mortal man any more than other ideals. It is true, however, that as far as it is possible for a mortal, Gawain does approach something very near to perfection; hence the poet's emphasis on Gawain's being given the pentangle device:

Forþy hit acordeþ to þis knyȝt and to his cler armeþ,  
For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue syþeþ  
Gawan watþ for gode knawen, and as golde þured,  
Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertueþ ennoured . . . .<sup>3</sup>

Of all the knights he is the most highly regarded, the worthiest; he is a true "hero of destiny" and therefore the one who must venture out to have his mettle and his truth tested.

It should be remarked that this device is newly granted Gawain:

Forþy þe pentangle nwe  
He ber in schelde and cote,  
As tulk of tale most trwe  
And gentylest knyȝt of lote.<sup>4</sup>

The symbolism of the pentangle is heightened by this passage which seems almost an afterthought on the poet's part. The significance of a new pentangle is that Gawain enters on his expedition in much the same way that a maiden knight set forth on his first adventure or tourney, as the case might be. He was cleansed physically and spiritually before his arming in the morning, keeping an all-night vigil in the

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<sup>3</sup>v. 631-634.

<sup>4</sup>v. 636-639.

castle's chapel. In some instances, the new knight was given a blank shield, for he had to earn the right to bear arms, but as chivalry entered into its afternoon, he was given his shield with its device at the same time as his golden spurs and his sword. Gawain's situation, as he is armed and readied for his journey, is similar to the setting out of the maiden knight. There is a feast in his honor, and early on All Souls' Day he is carefully dressed in his armor, and his horse is caparisoned and readied also. The culmination is the description of the pentangle which adorns his shield and his coat-armor, for this is the highlight of the ceremony, coming after the fastening of the gold spurs and the sword belt and after he has heard Mass.

By these means are emphasized not only Gawain's status as a young knight entering into an adventure of temptation but also that of the court and its king as an untried, untested society which has claimed perfection, indeed has been accorded that virtue by rumor, but practically speaking has not yet earned the truth of the claim. Seen in this light, the symbol is an important one not only for its very old mythic associations but also for its religio-historic connections and its integrating role of delineating the basic theme of SGGK, a theme which grows out of the Challenge and Temptation motives and resolves itself into a perilous trying-out of an entire society in the person of its representative. As symbol, the pentangle

is interesting artistically, for it is worked into the fabric of the romance through the skillful heraldry of the poet as well as through his obvious learning and the delight he takes in weaving a very complex and ingenious explanation which has its end only in the moment when Gawain learns to his great dismay that he has allowed another important symbol and device, the green girdle, to eclipse his own arms and hence tarnish the perfection for which they stood. The pentangle is allowed to fall quietly into oblivion, for it is after all the green girdle which the company agrees to adopt as token of the brotherhood of the Round Table for the sake of honoring its most distinguished and best-loved member.

It should perhaps be noted here that one of the best-known of Gawain students, Henry L. Savage, devotes an appendix in his book on the Gawain-poet to the pentangle in an effort to prove his contention that the poet had a specific man in mind for the role of Gawain, Enguerand, the Sire de Coucy. In support of his candidate, he submits that the pentangle stands for the French Ordre de l'Étoile, a rival to the English Garter which had as its symbol a golden five-pointed star on a red ground.<sup>5</sup> However, Savage admits that it is probably unlikely that the facts of the French order and Gawain's pentangle can ever be brought together historically.

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<sup>5</sup>Savage, pp. 160 ff.

For the purposes of the pentangle's significance, it is interesting and instructive to note that the pentangle as used by this order was the star of the Magi, and the motto was Monstrant regibus astra viam, certainly an appropriate one when we consider how important a part the Christmas celebrations have in SGGK.<sup>6</sup> And if the order were well known in England, the device as a symbol of nobility and perfection would be an even richer symbol for the poet's use. But this theory, however fascinating, must be discarded on the grounds that it is the girdle which the Round Table adopts and not the five-pointed star, and small honor can be said to have been paid by the use of a device which is stained and unsuccessful and which drops from sight during the second half of the story. Regardless of the poet's reasons for using this symbol, and they seem relatively clear without pushing them to the point of an exact identification, its meaning is unmistakably to represent Gawain as a type of the perfect knight, and its appearance and eclipse in the story serve necessary thematic purposes.

The green girdle is, after the pentangle, the most transparent symbol used in connection with the theme and with the conclusion of the story, and it has certain qualities which render it important in a magically ambiguous way. It first appears in Fit III during the third day's

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 163.

dalliance when the lady, having failed to persuade Gawain to accept a "riche rynk of red golde werkez,"<sup>7</sup> offers him her girdle:

"I schal gif yow my girdel, þat gaynes yow lasse."  
Ho laȝt a lace lyȝtly þat leke vmbe hir sydeȝ,  
Knit vpon hir kyrtel vnder þe clere mantyle,  
Gered hit watȝ with grene sylke and with golde schaped,  
Noȝt bot arounde brayden, beten with fyngreȝ . . . .<sup>8</sup>

At first Gawain refuses even to touch the gift on the grounds that he must accomplish his undertaking before binding himself to anyone through accepting any treasure. Earlier he refused the ring by claiming that he had nothing to give in return. But the lady, who is as crafty as the fox her husband hunts in the forest, explains the girdle's magic:

For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,  
While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,  
þer is no hapel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myȝt,  
For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erȝe.<sup>9</sup>

And when she presses it on Gawain and urges him to keep it secret from her lord, Gawain weakens, accepts it, and so tacitly agrees to her conditions.

The two things which seem most important about the girdle in the beginning are first, its magic in protecting from harm the knight wearing it, and second, its possession by the wife of the Host. Its description is lightly touched upon, and that it is made of green silk embroidered and tasseled with gold seems of small moment--at the time when Gawain first sees it. There are many objects of protection

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<sup>7</sup>v. 1817.    <sup>8</sup>v. 1829-1833.    <sup>9</sup>v. 1851-1854.

in folk-lore: magic rings, swords, garments of various sorts are commonplace devices designed to make the hero even more invincible than he already is by reason of his outstanding physical characteristics. The girdle is clearly meant by the poet to appear in this tradition until Gawain and the audience are made aware of the surprising fact that the Host and the Green Knight are the same person, and so the girdle, like the lady, is a possession of the Green Knight and a hindrance rather than an aid to Gawain on his venture.

A recent article explores the possibility that Gawain never puts the trust in the girdle that he might be expected to on the strength of the Lady's word, and so it is in effect a broken reed which Gawain, although disbelieving, grasps because it is the only hope left him.<sup>10</sup> This interpretation is based on the meaning of verse 2226: "Hit wat, no lasse bi þat lace þat lemed ful bryzt . . . ." That is, the four foot long ax with which the Green Knight leaps over the burn does not look any less dreadful by reason of the presumed power of the girdle, and so Gawain, wearing the lace in full view over his armor, is nevertheless not inclined to put his trust in it. The usual interpretation has been that the ax's length is so great as to

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<sup>10</sup> Stoddard Malarkey, and J. Barre Toelken, "Gawain and the Green Girdle," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LXIII (1964), pp. 14-20.

be measurable by the long, rich girdle, another way of showing the Green Knight's strength, which exceeds that of mortal men.

The girdle is primarily the instrument which reveals Gawain's flaw, and yet its true meaning in the romance is that which it has at the end. It is the girdle rather than the pentangle which is the appropriate badge of the lords and ladies of the Round Table because the girdle represents not the golden perfection of the pentangle but rather the beautiful but flawed nature of weak mortality. The girdle is as surely a symbol of imperfection as found in the sins of treachery and untruth as the pentangle is of truth, the high virtue, for the deception which is played on Gawain by the inhabitants of the Castle Hautdesert emanates from the "luf lace" and its ownership by Bercilak, and Gawain accepts it as part of his due penance.

The greenness of the girdle is, on the first level, designed to connect it with the Green Knight and so act as another means of uniting the two parts of the story, the Challenge and the Temptation, just as the identification of the ugly old woman as Morgan le Fay explains the motive behind both parts. But it is more than likely that the green and gold of the girdle as well as its magical power and its wearing by the lovely temptress is intended to emphasize the presence of "mo ferlyes on þis folde" which

the poet talks about in the second stanza of the introduction. It is a fairy object, and in keeping with the generally cautious attitude which the Gawain-poet evinces towards all characters and things of a Celtic and hence green tint, it is partly good and partly evil. It brings shame on Gawain and stains his otherwise faultless character, but it also is symbolic of his great achievement and his coming of age as well as that of his society. Like the castle, the lady, Morgan le Fay, and Bercilak, its nature is ambiguous and seems more often than not like the barrow, or Green Chapel, mysterious and inhabited by fiends. But this ambiguity is innate in any story which deals with the hero's passage through time to attain maturity, for good and evil seem inseparable elements of such a journey.

Besides the girdle, the other outstanding possession (except the castle) of Bercilak is his weapon, an ax. When the Green Knight appears in Arthur's hall, he carries "a holyn bobbe" in one hand and an ax in the other:

And an ax in his oper, a hoge and vnmete,  
A spetos sparpe to expoun in spelle quoso myzt.  
þe hede of an eln erde þe large lenkþe hade,  
þe grayn al of grene stele and of golde hewen,  
þe bit burnyst bryzt, wyth a brode egge  
As wel schapen to schere as scharp rasores.  
þe stele of a stif staf þe sturne hit bi grypte,  
þat watz wounded wyth yrn to þe wandez ende  
And al bigrauen with grene in gracios werkes;  
A lace lapped aboute, þat louked at þe hede, . . .<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>v. 208-217.



This is an unusual weapon for an unusual knight. That it is meant to symbolize the nature of its owner is very clear from the beginning.

It is not, at least for a late fourteenth-century knight, a particularly chivalric weapon. The Green Knight is aware that the men in the hall may look askance at his dress and his weapon, for he says to Arthur:

3e may be seker bi pis braunch pat I bere here  
pat I passe as in pes, and no plyzt seche;  
For had I founded in fere in feztynge wyse,  
I have a hauberghe at home and a helme boye,  
A schelde and a scharp spere, schinande bryzt,  
Ande ower weppenes to welde, I wene wel, als;  
Bot for I wolde no were, my wedez ar softer.<sup>12</sup>

He is making sure that his intentions are not misunderstood, and he does not wish to be mistaken for an uncouth, churlish fellow who has wandered ignorantly into the company of his betters. He says, in effect, that he comes not in war but in peace and so he is dressed--and armed--accordingly. If the holly cluster is a sign of the Yule celebrations as well as a symbol of everlasting greenness (and the power of faery), the ax is a weapon that a man might choose for a Christmas game but one which he would not think of using in a tourney. It is therefore exceptional in an ordinary way, and this ax is exceptional also because in its great size and ornate workmanship it characterizes the huge, supernatural man who wields it. Indeed, the ability to pick up the giant weapon and swing it as first Arthur does and then

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<sup>12</sup>v. 265-271.

Gawain is a test of strength in itself and one likely to be appreciated by men conversant with the manner of arms.

The ax symbolizes a conflict which is different from the usual meeting of courtesy and chivalry. Instead of the "scharp spere, schinande bryzt" which requires great skill born of long practice in the using, the ax requires mostly brute strength. This one is burnished and decorated with thong and tassels, but it is a menacing instrument of death nevertheless, even as the Green Knight, in spite of his beautiful and colorful array, is a grim and perilous figure whose coming throws the shadow of fear over the company he is to test. The use of the ax, the unconventional aspect of the challenge, is prophetic of the entire series of temptations to which Gawain will be subjected; the game is not played according to the rules but in a decidedly unchivalric manner so that Gawain is tested when he is most vulnerable and completely unaware of the state of affairs.

The second ax which the Green Knight uses is different from the first. It is

. . . a felle weppen,  
A denez ax nwe dyzt, þe dynt with to zelde,  
With a borelych bytte bende by þe halme,  
Fyled in a fylor, fowre fote large--<sup>13</sup>

This ax is considerably less ornate, if one is to judge by the length of description, and appears even more frighten-

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<sup>13</sup>v. 2222-2225.

ing, if only because of the urgency of the hero's situation. The enormity of the weapon is somewhat belied by the ease with which the Green Knight handles it, and still it is reminiscent of the feeling which he achieved in the hall, the barely-repressed contempt in which he holds the knights, who are admittedly lesser men physically.

Both axes are significant as symbols of the reality of the challenge-temptation themes in contrast to what Gawain and his society see in the person of the Green Knight/ Bercilak and the meaning of the two Christmas games these two figures each suggests. In no way are the beheading and exchange of winning games meant to become a chivalric duel between brave knights. Rather, the innate qualities of both vices and virtues are tested in a manner which transcends the chivalric rules. The two Irish antecedents of SGGK, The Champion's Bargain and Fled Bricrend, have a huge axman as antagonist, though later, a swordsman proposes the game, and so retaining this weapon served a need of the poet. The antiquity of the ax as compared to the more modern sword, the green color which connects it to the Green Knight and the background of Celtic lore (and to the bachlach or carl of the Irish versions) are all significant aspects of an important symbol which serves to clarify the theme and the roles of both Gawain the hero and Bercilak the tester as they contribute to all facets of the story and its interpretations. The weapons, like

the armor and heraldic devices, are symbols which characterize the men who bear them.

Perhaps the most obvious use of symbol other than that of the pentangle is in the area of the hunt and the animals which dominate each of the three days. It is quite clear that the poet intends his audience to make something of the heraldic use of the pentangle, since he goes into a long explanation of the significance of the device and because the very theme of the story, that of a hero's testing, is based on the conflict between the ideal of perfection and the reality of the outcome. One must proceed cautiously, however, when he comes to the third fit and the hunts, for the technique which the poet uses is much different from that employed in the pentangle passage, and the temptation is strong to find parallels and contrasts where the evidence is tenuous. Much work has been done on the detailed treatment of those scenes concerned with breaking the deer and unlacing the boar, the ritual of rewarding the hounds, apportioning the kill, and so on. Savage has made particularly thorough studies in this area along with others who have interested themselves in checking the authenticity of these scenes against contemporary hunting treatises like Twici's Le Art de Venerie, Edward, Duke of York's The Master of Game, Dame Juliana Berners' The Boke of Saint Albans, all of which are listed in the bibliography of the Tolkien and Gordon edition and which are available for study in translation.

The three animals which are hunted are the female deer, both does and hinds, the wild boar, and the fox. The hunting days are described in great detail from the setting out of the lord and his company to the preparing of the slain animals for meat and trophy, and conclude with the return of the Host to his castle and the exchange of winnings as he and his guest agreed on Christmas Day. Each one of the three species hunted offers a different set of problems both in the chase and after the kill: the herd of barren does and hinds requires a group of beaters and large, swift deerhounds to turn them and pull them down with the help of hunters' arrows, whereas the boar is hunted with large bloodhounds and mastiffs and harried from place to place as he attempts to stand at bay. As is obvious even to the armchair observer, the three days' hunting represents a good cross-section of the game and sport available to the lord of the manor, and hunting the deer and the wild boar was a serious business, for by this means was meat provided the castle, while the fox was regarded as vermin that afforded a threat not only to the poultry of the manor but also to the wild fowl besides having a wicked and treacherous nature in general (compare Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale). Perhaps the sport involved in this latter chase was a major consideration even then, for the fox hunt in SGGK provides a blood-chilling test of the worth of man, horse, and hound.

The structure of Fit III which the poet builds enables him to contrast the swift and furious pace of the hunt with the leisurely, courteously smooth action which takes place in Gawain's bed chamber. That the poet meant the two scenes to afford a thematically important contrast is evident from the way he has interwoven them. For example, the first day's hunt begins in the first stanza of the fit, continues through the second, and then with only one line as transition, the scene moves to Gawain's room where he lies abed. The exchange between Gawain and the lady occupies five stanzas, at the end of which the poet turns once again to the forest and the breaking of the many deer that have been killed. It is clear, then, that the poet is deliberately using the two scenes for the contrasts he can achieve, and it may well be likely that he uses the forest hunts to point up the allegory of the hunt going on inside the castle walls.

Only two of the three beasts hunted are honorable and hence chivalric beasts employed by heraldry. The deer represents swiftness and alertness among other qualities, and the boar, power and boldness; both are represented on many coats of arms.<sup>14</sup> The fox, however, is a renegade, a symbol of sly, stealthy craftiness, and is not discovered along with his brother beasts like the lion, the leopard, the unicorn, and the others as they bedecked countless

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<sup>14</sup>Savage, pp. 38-41.

shields and banners in the Middle Ages. He is to be found on a few isolated scutcheons,<sup>15</sup> but in England Reynard was not held in high regard:

Here he watȝ halawed, when hapeleȝ hym metten.  
Loude he watȝ ȝayned with ȝarande speche;  
ȝer he watȝ ȝreted and ofte ȝef called . . . .<sup>16</sup>

The importance of the beasts lies in the records, both of the huntsman and herald, and of the modern critics of the poem, no one has been more active than Henry Savage in attempting research which would not only reveal the full range of the animals' hunting and heraldic significance but also deal with the allegorical intent. The understanding of a medieval audience as to a poet's intent on such matters as anthropomorphic qualities of brutes would be the result of long acquaintance with bestiaries and other works of an allegorical nature, and this understanding is almost entirely lost to the modern audience. Heraldry was a very practical science in the Middle Ages, not having deteriorated to the quackery of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the qualities of a stag or a boar were common knowledge, mainly because these and other animals were blazoned abroad on arms, banners, and the like in place of other identification. With any excuse at all, a writer, if he wished, could draw on the body of common knowledge of animal behavior for the purpose of depicting with a broad brush outstanding charac-

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., note, p. 46.

<sup>16</sup>Vv. 1723-1725.

teristics, allegorical or not, in comparison or contrast, or even, as the Gawain-poet has done, to unify the actions taking place in the two settings of forest and castle, using the one to comment indirectly on the other.

The first day's hunt is strenuous but not dangerous, for the females alone are hunted, and they are wild with fright, fleeing the beaters and the dogs. Gawain's actions during the first day are comparable to those of the timid deer, for he is cornered unaware and attempts to evade the unwelcome visitor by pretending sleep. But the lady waits him out, and he decides that it is more seemly to discover what she wants than to lie in bed while she watches him. The conversation between the two on this day is light and playful. She declares that he is taken prisoner, and he follows her lead, jesting with her and yet keeping well within the bounds of propriety. The kiss which she directs him to ask of her is readily given and easily exchanged at nightfall when the hunter returns. The light conversation is easily comparable to the swift, beautiful flight of the deer, and the danger underlying the dalliance is concealed-- at least from Gawain and the audience. Also, Gawain's ploy of lying still and pretending sleep can be compared to the deer's trick of lying in covert until broken out by hounds.<sup>17</sup>

The second day's hunt is a dangerous undertaking for men and hounds, and some suffer greatly from the on-

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<sup>17</sup>Savage, p. 42.



slaughts of the fierce boar as he is followed through the forest. The courtesy of Gawain is tried more severely on the second day than the first, but just as the lady presses her suit more strongly, so does he meet her demands more openly and with more courtesy than on the first day. Thus the increased excitement because of the furious danger involved in hunting down the boar reflects to some extent the increasing tension of the two people at the castle and Gawain's effort to deny the lady courteously but unambiguously. The two kisses which she receives on this day are also significant of the greater effort spent in the field by the hunting party, and the bold risk which the lord takes when he kills the boar single-handedly is paralleled by the boldness of the lady even at the banquet table that night when "Such semblaunt to þat segge semly ho made/ Wyth stille stollen countenance, þat stalworth to plese . . ." <sup>18</sup>

Although both Gawain's and the lady's tactics are different on the second day of the dangerous game they are playing, it seems a case of the tail's wagging the dog to account for this change entirely by the physical and mental differences existing between the two beasts of venery, the hart and the wild boar. <sup>19</sup> Assuredly the parallel is likely and the symbolism apt, but these cannot be made to carry more than their share of the weight, and the increased

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<sup>18</sup>v. 1668-1669.

<sup>19</sup>In brief, this is Savage's case, pp. 44-45.

tension is due in part, at least, to the growing familiarity between the Host and his lady and their guest.

The third day is the climactic one at the castle, and the symbolism of the parallel hunt appears fairly obvious. It is Reynard the fox who is pursued by horsemen and hounds, and the wily creature employs all the tricks of his kind to escape. He almost succeeds, but he is ambushed by the lord, who turns him from his way into the jaws of the pack. So does Gawain, pressed harder by the lady on this day, cleverly reject all her importunities, including her rich red ring, until at the last he is defeated by her offer of the green girdle with the magical qualities to save him from death. Then he accepts and conceals the lace as she wishes, and she has her prey as surely as the lord has the fox, whose body he has snatched from the hounds. The symbolism here is heightened by what is perhaps an ironic, though veiled, reference to the girdle by Bercilak when he says:

For I haf hunted al þis day, and noȝt haf I geten  
Bot þis foule fox felle--þe fende haf þe godeȝ!<sup>20</sup>

Gawain's girdle is a kind of "felle," one which he will later look on with much more disgust when the deception is discovered than the host does on his fox skin.

A question arising from the use the poet makes of the three days' hunts is whether he has not ignored a logi-

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<sup>20</sup>v. 1943-1944.

cal order of precedence in making the fox hunt the climactic one, although the fox is by every regard the most ignoble of the three animals hunted and also the most worthless as far as the exchange of winnings is concerned. The deer hunt is more spirited and more valuable for the great supply of meat which the castle gains, and the boar hunt is more dangerous and more exhilarating, but the fox hunt requires great endeavor on the part of men and hounds and almost ends in failure. Seen in this light, the ascending order of importance in the hunts is not the usual one of a castle-holder's point of view but rather that which fits in with the poet's need for establishing a subtly increasing tension in the action at the castle without revealing the true nature of the temptation to which Gawain is being exposed. And the audience will not forget later on that the base fox was brought low on the same day which saw Gawain lose his claim to the bright new pentangle in an act of untruth.

The poet's need for a certain amount of symbolism was pressing, if only to establish a relationship which would seem well-knit on the disclosure of the plot to Gawain when he faced the Green Knight at the Chapel. It is obvious that the Host had to be got out of the way while the lady tempted Gawain, and the logical action was hunting, especially in view of Bercilak's character. The careful details, especially those anatomical ones involving the

breaking of the deer and so on, are clearly not part of the over-all plan involving the symbolic use of the animals heraldic and base but rather explainable, perhaps, by the deceptively simple hypothesis which C. S. Lewis formulated in his study of the medieval literary model: the medieval audience welcomed knowledge, even that perfectly familiar to it, because it was presented in rhetorical devices, the performance of which pleased them, and because it was the sort of detail necessary for sustaining the identity of the characters just as the opening of the poem with its account of the fall of Troy is placing the Arthurian reign in the right context of the annals of Britain.<sup>21</sup> The use of ornate symbolism in no way detracts from what must have been the keen interest of the medieval audience in following the realism of the hunts. It is but one more measure of the poet's greatness that he can--and does--work easily on several levels at once and attain from the many the singular impression which is the end result of the poem.

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<sup>21</sup>C. S. Lewis, The Discarded Image (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 198-200.

## CHAPTER VII. CONCLUSION

As the reader surveys the medieval panorama which is the romance of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, he sees the curious blend of far-off and near-by worked into the landscape so that the amount one actually sees is deceptively great. The naiveté of the painter sometimes caused him to paint things in different perspective and proportions from his modern counterpart's custom, but the accompanying simplicity of manner enabled him to achieve a broader scope and a greater vision than is found in the later Arthurian canvas. The Gawain-poet essays a blending of historical past and present with some important mythic nuances to color his blend. It was, however, his peculiar genius which enabled him to succeed in combining two motifs in a successfully unified piece, the two motifs themselves a collection of ritual and magic which was the legacy of countless generations of slowly changing thought and practice, social and religious custom. To recognize this legacy as the oldest, most primitive antecedent of a work like SGGK is not to go hunting in Cloud Cuckoo-land; it is to place genius in the ever-moving stream of human experience rather than to isolate it and refuse acknowledgement to the precursors, documented or not.

SGGK is not only the great achievement of English romance, however. It is the color and glory and mystery which men saw in chivalry at the sunset of its age. It is atypical of the romance and the age because of its moral-mythic precepts as seen in the persons of both the hero and his antagonist, but it could not have come about had it not been for the peculiar set of circumstances which sent the Celtic lore to France to be gallicized and polished almost beyond recognition before returning to the native shore to pick up once more the mysteriously dual strain of pagan and Christian beliefs. If the reader will acknowledge the ambiguity which must arise from the mixture of these strains, he will have gone far towards understanding the poem itself.

At the beginning I wrote of problems which the serious reader discovers for himself either from his own investigation of the work or from coming across the various discussions of these problems in critical articles which have appeared regularly throughout the twentieth century as a result of the revival of interest in the poem. The problems are not, however, of a kind likely to hinder this increased interest by reason of obscuring the poem itself. Rather they are almost retiring in nature, and the student must work at making their acquaintance. The exception which tests this rule is, of course, that involving Morgan le Fay, her character, her motivation and role. But even here, misunderstanding Morgan's raison

d'être or confusing her with the lady does not impede the progress of the poem. Those critics who frown on this practice and who would admit no ambiguity here or elsewhere may find the medieval field alien corn indeed.

But what of the less obvious ambiguities which earlier chapters have taken up and attempted at least to define where the ambiguities are and what they consist of? The character of Gawain rises first to mind. The significance of Gawain as the earlier perfect knight and "father of courtesy" is, of course, used didactically by the poet; that this is true is proved by the reversal of the traditional courtly love situation so that Gawain is pursued by the lady, who nevertheless cannot be insulted by his open rejection of her aggressiveness. The three days of temptation are of central importance in delineating Gawain's moral character; however, the symbolic significance of Gawain as representative of his society in an initiation ceremony underlies and enhances his moral role as a true, perfect knight. These two levels are not and cannot be sharply differentiated. The first level concerns the immediate and conscious intention of the poet; the second comprises the material which he found at hand around him throughout the countryside he had known all his life and the body of stories passed down to him by his countrymen.

The two levels also determine the outcome of the plot, and for this reason alone they are an influence which

cannot be denied by any student of the poem. The outcome is, of course, that Gawain mostly succeeds in his quest but partly fails. He carries the pentangle on his shield as he rides away from Arthur's castle; he wears the green girdle when he returns. He has proved what everybody finds out sooner or later in his own life: perfection is an admirable goal but unattainable. Thus, Gawain as a figure in a complex morality drama is on the face of it a failure. But his failure turns out to be a piece in the pattern of the hero moving through the initiation ritual; therefore the flaw is not the cause for despair so much as it is the key movement in the hero's revelation of his manhood. That Gawain's fellow courtiers "laxen loude-per-at" is partly caused by their acceptance of Gawain as the best-loved among their company and also by their acknowledgement, symbolized by their adopting the girdle as outward sign of their company, that Gawain's initiation, or testing, has served vicariously for all of them as well as for their society as a whole. That is, the laughter arises partly out of love and partly out of relief, and it is this ending which shows Gawain as a true comic hero in the Dantean sense inasmuch as he has traveled out away from the light and comfort of the court through the dark, bleak wood into perilous temptation and then out and up again to the ultimate return once more to warmth and joy and laughter. Gawain is not so much an ambiguous figure as a complex one who is made to serve several ends through his single role.



Gawain's antagonist, Bercilak, is by the very fact of his shape-shifting a different matter altogether. The antecedents of the two threads of plots are enough to show us that the Gawain-poet could hardly help the ambiguity of characterization which is the Green Knight/Bercilak and still maintain the high level of realism which contributes greatly to this romance's relatively sophisticated treatment of the magic and motivational elements, at least as compared to contemporary treatment, both French and English. This is to say that the poet avoids what could have been a complex investigation of the causes of Bercilak's two roles (and a digression in the interests of satisfying his audience's curiosity about magic) simply by showing Bercilak first to have sufficient motive for shifting his shape and next to be able to do so because he houses Morgan le Fay. The poet did not believe any other explanation necessary, and so he did not give one. That Bercilak, like Gawain, owes part of his character to older mythic antecedents as well as the more immediate story ancestors results in the basic tension between dissimilar and yet complementary forces. That he is on another level a depiction of certain chivalric ideals results in the successful hoodwinking of Gawain during his stay at Bercilak's castle, for the Host is as accurate a depiction of the knightly lord of the castle and folk as Gawain is the knightly questioner and idealized courtier.

Bercilak has easily recognized characteristics of the Green Man of folk-lore as well as the testing carl. But he is primitive only so far as the poet allows the audience to see him as a descendant of the supernatural dancers in pagan rites which in the contemporary fourteenth century scene have degenerated to familiar fiends which are explained away by the Church as begotten by the Devil after his Fall. The very nature of the Green Knight's Chapel, a barrow situated in a grim valley, when taken together with his hue and his contempt for mortal men, is enough to enable the poet to overlay skilfully Bercilak's vegetation god identity with a "yeoman dressed in green" concept of orthodox Christian belief: in a reversal of the salvation process, the devil and his fiends can assume human shape to test and perhaps to damn good men. And of course this testing of good men was one of the ways the old gods of faery excluded unfit mortals from their realms. It is perhaps clear, then, that the essential character of Bercilak stood ready to the Gawain-poet's pen; it is his genius, however, which resulted in so complex a characterization and so satisfactory a one as we find in SGGK. Bercilak is easily acceptable as a proper antagonist for Gawain, and yet there are aspects of his character which suggest strongly that he is on the same side as Gawain: i.e., he is knightly and honorable in his dealings with Gawain and appears as yet one more facet of the chivalric ideal which the poet insists on subtly but effectively.

The poet has been criticized more vigorously for the figure of Morgan le Fay than for any other aspect of the story, for it is felt in some quarters that there is not enough justification for Morgan's being the instigator of the action. To some she appears as an after-thought, an artificial means of joining this story to the Arthurian canon as well as a dea ex machina figure. I think it plain, however, that the poet chose to divide his third main character up into the two women of greatly contrasted appearance because in the first place he was striving for realism, or at least its appearance. Had the plot depended on two shape-shifters, Morgan as well as Bercilak, rather than the one it has, there would have been a great deal more magic involved and a lengthier explanation at the end.

And we must not ignore tradition when looking at this treatment. Not only is Morgan le Fay well-known for her great enmity toward Arthur's court and his queen, an enmity, incidentally, which contrasts the old Celtic fée with the new styled French courtly heroine, but also the great ritualistic convention is to place as the two parts of a mysterious whole the young woman as seductress and the old woman as her guide, youth acting and age manipulating. This manner of presentation, common to folk-lore, serves to emphasize the dual nature of woman. The ambiguity present here is very real, and yet the poet presents the two women at every point in a relationship which will be made clear to the audience as to Gawain in the end. That

is, the reader is no more tricked by Bercilak's revelation that the old woman, Arthur's half-sister, is responsible for his actions than by the Green Knight's final admission that he is the Host and Bercilak is his name. Gawain, like the reader, is indeed tricked, but it is fair trickery according to tradition. To level the charge that this problem is insurmountable and prevents the two motives from being joined perfectly together is to ignore tradition and the concern for a relatively sophisticated, realistic presentation which is present in SGGK.

If the characterization in this romance must be dealt with in the light of one sort of problem, the poet's extraordinary use of natural description forms yet another area of investigation without which the poem would appear patchy indeed. The lyrical passages, some of which can be read comfortably out of context, serve to advance the action. Like the poet's symbols, the descriptive sections are so carefully worked into the fabric of the poem that they are sometimes overlooked. But these stanzas--like the ride through the dark, wintry wood to the castle and then that one to the Green Chapel--are usually ascending ones emotionally, at the end of which the narrative part of the poem can begin with heightened tension if not with an increase in pace. Even such brief interludes as that at the beginning of Fit IV, in which the knight lies with closed eyes listening to the wild storm outside, set the emotional tone graphically and yet without any overt senti-

ment or any careful dictation by the poet. He handles his symbols easily after the manner of the Middle Ages, but his command of the lyric and his use within the poem of this form are surely the foremost proof of his genius.

Throughout this paper, I have used the three words magic, myth, and ritual in a rather generalized way. Actually, of course, the three are firmly and inextricably linked in their meanings as a result of the long tradition of human psychological and religious experience. More specifically, myth seems to be that background area where in the beginning abounds, for mythology is the study of beginnings in belief and behavior which became religion, sometimes, and legend at others, but which always are both basic and universal. Ritual is the outgrowth of myth, but paradoxically enough it is also the means by which myth is perpetuated, or handed down so that the origins are eventually lost. Perhaps because myth is of the psychological and hence of the tenuous abstract and because ritual is often myth made concrete, the latter has been retained although the original has been lost from the racial memory.

The connection here with Gawain is in his role as a mythic hero. It is not so much that Gawain is Everyman on his journey to the grave as it is that Gawain is a concrete specific of a detail of that journey, the initiation and return, and that he is a heroic manifestation of this detail is but another in a long line of evidence that

humanity's reach usually exceeds its grasp. Undoubtedly Gawain's mythic connection as a hero, like those of Bercilak or Morgan, owes much to ritualistic observances which the poet knew well: sword dances, perhaps, or intimate knowledge of the Grail quest and all its surrounding panoply. Bercilak's two personalities, his castle set in the midst of a wooded wasteland, and his vigor all place him in this Grail tradition as well as that ritual which celebrates the healing of the fisher-king and the return of fertility to his kingdom. Many parallels have been found, and probably more remain, but the significance of these two terms has been clarified, I hope, particularly according to their usage here.

Magic is a term which is used in diverse meanings, I am afraid, in these pages, but then it is at best an ambiguous word and at worst completely incomprehensible, especially to the modern mind. Frazer catalogs and defines the various kinds of magic which primitive people use, and most searchers in the woods of the Middle Ages often find a careful line drawn between natural magic and "black" or the devil's magic. These are our keys, probably, to understanding much of the basic ambiguity in SGGK, for magic is of different sorts, and most are found in this romance. There is the magic which is an integral part of myth: the magic of ritual, for instance, by which the king is healed and assumes his youth, or the magic of vision which is part of the aura of destiny which separates the heroic success

from the failure of the fated nonentity. This magic is the primitive kind by means of which pagan peoples assured the continuance of their land's fertility: regicide or elaborate taboos safeguarding the king, and so on. This kind of magic is an important part of SGGK as it contains myth based on ritual.

The other sort of magic is of a later date and perhaps is descended from the first. It is the result of a more sophisticated society and yet one with little basic comprehension of the world surrounding it. This is the magic of the twilight world of the Celts, a twilight which to the Christians of a succeeding age was to become the devil's night. It is with this magic that Bercilak changes his shape to that of the Green Knight, and he admits freely to Gawain that Morgan taught him the art, and she in her turn got it from Merlin, whose mistress she had been. This magic is ambiguous in itself, probably because it is transitional between two entirely different periods of belief. Because of this ambiguity, the characters most concerned are ambiguous, for they have a foot in both camps: Bercilak is the best example, but immediately behind him stand Morgan and her youthful ward, his wife. The places where this magic still clings strongly, like morning mist in the deep valleys, are mysterious and fearful: e.g., the barrow which Gawain is surprised and not a little frightened to find is the Green Chapel and which he calls "a chapel of mischance," or "the cursedest kirk" where the devil might say his

prayers. This magic, which attempts not only to explain the workings of the world but also to turn the operation to the magician's advantage, to manipulate it as it were, had to be overthrown by the Church, and in the fourteenth century she was getting very near her goal. The real ambivalence of the poet's feelings is everywhere clearly near the surface, expressed as it is in the person of Gawain as well as in that duality of feeling which still is evoked from the reader as to the relative "goodness" or "badness" of the Host and his lady. And so magic is an outgrowth of ritual, particularly that dealing with religious beliefs, as well as a way of coping with problems of emotional expression in which one acquired belief is at war with an earlier knowledge.

As a work of art, SGGK must not be obscured by engulfing it in a wave of scholarly nit-picking, concentrating on a few areas of the poem to the exclusion of the work as an entity, and a successful one at that. The romance does feature wonderful examples of parallel structures, both of comparison and contrast, and the texture, enlivened as it is by the conflict between the figures of Gawain and Bercilak as well as the inner conflict within these characters, is remarkable for its complete absorption into the action of the plot. Because the poem features this wealth of material lying ready at hand to be investigated by the scholar, its thematic and structural integrity is too often overlooked or else passed over lightly in dis-



cussion. Certainly I have not meant to ignore the forest for the trees, although this paper has been primarily concerned with some isolated aspects of the poem, or problems, in an attempt to get at some of the interesting developments which arise sooner or later to the attention of the reader. And yet these problems are not of a magnitude to obscure the inherent artistic qualities of the poem, and perhaps the value of this investigation has been to prove that, although there are certain difficulties in this poem as in any other work of art and as fully troublesome to get at as any other, they are not impediments but rather challenging thresholds which can lead the reader to farther involvement with the story and all the great body of human experience which underlies it.

The consensus of these chapters might be that there are succeeding levels of characterization, as in the three main figures; there is widespread use of symbols, some of which are painstakingly glossed for the audience. The parts of the poem, the two motives and the "glue" which is the descriptive passages, fit together with few seams evident, and the unity which was the result of such careful workmanship as we find here ought not be set aside by reason of a few interesting critical analyses which come and go with fashions in criticism. The Gawain-poet is not perfect, but like the knight who bore away the pentangle on his brave quest, he is the nearest thing we have to per-

fection in his time and in the genre which he dignified with his genius. And so for all readers and all students and especially all critics, the most fitting motto to end here is that which closes Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in manuscript:

Hony soyt qui mal pence.

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