

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT AS "CRYSTEMAS GOMEN".

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AS

"CRYSTEMAS GOMEN"

by

Gareth Tudor David, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Gareth Tudor David, B.A. (Wales)

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: The thesis attempts an elucidation of the meaning of the poem when considered as a Christmas piece - that is, an element in the festivities of this season. It tries to show that the author is indulging in a game with his audience, and that this game is of a multi-faceted and ultimately serious nature.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Of the four poems found in the London, British Museum MS. Nero A.x.<sup>1</sup> Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (hereafter referred to as GGK) has caused by far the greatest critical controversy. My own perplexity arises partly from my attempt at sifting through the great mass of critical speculation as to the nature and purpose of the work. But the puzzling factor which motivates this particular examination of the poem is one simple phrase found in the first fitt. This is the Green Knight's asking in line 283 for a partner for his 'crystemas gomen'. This seems to raise the question as to whether the testing of Gawain, and therefore the poem itself, has any moral significance, or is simply a non-Christian story of the trials and eventual triumph of a hero, similar to the early tales of the Mabinogion.<sup>2</sup> What I hope to show in the course of this thesis is that in GGK the poet's concerns are not very far removed from the wholly religious ones to

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<sup>1</sup>The other poems in this MS. in the Cotton collection are Pearl, Purity (or Cleanness), and Patience.

<sup>2</sup>The Mabinogion, transl. Lady Charlotte Guest, with notes by Alfred Nutt (3rd ed., London: Long Acre, 1902).

be found in his other works. I wish to prove that GGK is a very serious work of art and that Gawain's testing is of great significance, while showing at the same time that the poem is, as the Green Knight calls the Beheading Game, a 'crystemas gomen'.

Little or nothing is known as to the character and station of the Gawain-poet, but a reading of GGK suggests that he must have had more than a little familiarity with court life. For the purposes of this thesis I suggest that the poet might well have been presenting his work at some northern English court, and that it is quite probable that each fitt was intended to be read on a separate night of the festivities. Such a feast might have been similar to that described in the poem:<sup>3</sup>

With alle þe mete and þe mirthe þat men couth avyse;  
Such glaum and gle glorious to here,  
Dere din upon day, daunsing upon nyghtes.  
(ll. 45-47)

In this introductory chapter we shall examine the nature and background of Christmas feasts and games in the fourteenth century, and the Church's attitude towards them. This will hopefully lead one to question whether a poet whose concerns in his other works are those of an orthodox Christian would be likely in GGK to revel in the lighthearted,

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<sup>3</sup>All quotations from the poem are taken from GGK ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon revised by Norman Davis (Oxford: 1967).

non-Christian aspect of the Christmas festivities while disregarding the traditional views of the Church. The poem is certainly lighthearted in places and the poet is definitely indulging in a game with his audience, but it is a game with a very serious purpose. There are certain features of the poem - for example, the atmosphere of the supernatural and the detailed description of things of contemporary interest, such as armour, hunting and castle architecture, which are calculated to entertain the poet's audience, but even these are elements in the poet's serious purpose, as will be shown in subsequent chapters.

The Middle English Dictionary has an extensive entry under the word 'gomen', citing eight occurrences of the word in GGK and covering seven different meanings.<sup>4</sup> The meaning with which we are concerned here is that attributed to the word as it occurs in line 283: "Festivity, revelry; a pastime, amusement; music; a play".

This stress on festivity seems quite compatible with the meaning of Christmas as it is celebrated today, but over-indulgence in revelry was frowned upon by the fourteenth-century Church. As can be seen by reference to the Catholic Encyclopedia, or to numerous textbooks on the history of Church festivals, the Christian celebration of the coming of

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<sup>4</sup> Middle English Dictionary, ed. Sherman M. Kuhn (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966). 'gomen', category 2a.

Christ coincided with the old pagan festival of the Feast of the Unconquered Sun -- traditionally a time of great merriment.<sup>5</sup> It was therefore natural for the Church to come out against excessive celebration since this had inevitable associations with paganism.

Dan Michel in the Ayenbite of Inwit stresses the fact that Church festivals are intended for the worship of God, and that at the Christmas feast we should be reminded of the birth of Christ:

Also byep þe festes principals / þet byep yzet ine  
 holy cherche / uor god to bidde / and þonki / serui /  
 herie / and worþssipie of þe greate guodnesses þet  
 he þe heþ y-do / ase holy cherche recorderþ. Ine  
 zuyche festes ase at cristesmesse / his beringe /  
 hou he wes y-bore / of þe mayde.<sup>6</sup>

What Dan Michel said in the Middle Ages represents the continuation of a concern shown by St. Augustine, who wished to assert the real meaning of the feast for Christians, and to avoid confusion with the pagan significance of the season.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example George M. Gibson, The Story of the Christian Year (New York: Abingdon Press, 1945); Francis X. Weiser, A Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs (New York: Paulist Press, 1963); A. Allan McArthur, The Evolution of the Christian Year (London: SCM Press, 1953); Karl Barth, Christmas, transl. Bernhard Citron (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959); Frank E. Wilson, An Outline of the Christian Year, 11th ed. (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1941).

<sup>6</sup> Dan Michel of Northgate, Ayenbite of Inwit, ed. Richard Morris (EETS OS. 23, 1866), p. 215.

<sup>7</sup> Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina, ed. J-P.



There was, throughout the Middle Ages, and down to much more recent times, an awareness on the part of Churchmen that they had to combat the pagan traditions which had grown up around the season of Christmas and New Year.<sup>8</sup> As Rosemary Woolf shows in The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages there still continues an unresolved debate as to whether Christmas carols originated as religious songs or from older and non-Christian dancing songs.<sup>9</sup> John Speirs in A Survey of Medieval Verse suggests that both the songs and ceremonies of the Christmas feast contain

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Migne, Vol. 38, col. 1007: Et quoniam ipsa infidelitas quae totum mundum vice noctis obtexerat, minuenda fuerat fide crescente; ideo die Natalis Domini nostri Jesu Christi, et nox incipit perpeti detrimenta, et dies sumere augmenta. Habeamus ergo, fratres, solemnem istum diem; non sicut infideles propter hunc solem, sed propter eum qui fecit hunc solem. Quod enim Verbum erat, caro factum est, ut propter nos posset esse sub sole. Carne quippe sub sole: majestate autem super universum mundum, in quo condidit solem. Nunc vero et carne super istum solem, quem pro Deo colunt, qui mente cæci verum justitiae non vident solem.

<sup>8</sup> See A.R. Wright, British Calendar Customs, ed. T.E. Lones (London: The Folklore Society, 1940). Of particular interest are p. 221 where Lones discusses the traditional confusion of religious and fertility rites in England during the Christmas period; p. 229 where he mentions the linking of Christ with pagan fairies and pp. 230-73 in which he catalogues the traditions such as the wassailing of the apple trees, which have survived as elements in the Christian celebration but in actual fact have their roots in pagan fertility rites.

<sup>9</sup> Rosemary Woolf, The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 383-84.

many elements of the old paganism.<sup>10</sup> What Speirs says of lyrics may point the way to a possible means of regarding the development of a narrative poem such as GKG:

The Christian lyrics are just as much rooted in the rites and ceremonies of the old Nature festivals as are the so-called secular lyrics. Many of the Christmas songs were evidently associated with the ceremonies, games and plays of the Christmas feast, and are explicitly songs for the bear-feast or ale-feast, as the Christmas feast still largely was. With the more convivial of the Christmas songs we may associate the body of songs and lyrics which express the jollity of the medieval English folk on festive occasions.

The poet's audience might well have expected to hear tales of the supernatural, especially romances, during the Christmas period. But as shall be shown during the course of this work, what the poet actually did was to furnish them only ostensibly with the elements expected in a poem whose purpose was merely to entertain. In actual fact, hidden not very far beneath the surface, he has a very serious purpose, and the point of the game played between poet and audience is that the latter should be able to discover the writer's true aim in creating his work.

The kind of concern exhibited by the Church, and as I hope to show, by the Gawain-poet stems, as M.J.C. Hodgart says, from the fact that: "At Christmas, the

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<sup>10</sup> John Speirs, A Survey of Medieval Verse, in The Age of Chaucer, ed. Boris Ford (2nd ed., London: Pelican, 1954), pp. 43-44.

challenge of paganism was at its strongest."<sup>11</sup> Paul Lacroix in Science and Literature in the Middle Ages has an interesting chapter entitled 'Popular Beliefs'.<sup>12</sup> Although his discussion revolves round French life in the Middle Ages, as does that of E.O. James in Seasonal Feasts and Festivals many of the pagan superstitions, derived from the Roman Saturnalia, to which he refers, were in fact widespread throughout Europe.<sup>13</sup> The French Festival of the Ass and Fool's Feast had their counterparts in Medieval and Tudor England, as Christina Hole observes in Christmas and its Customs.<sup>14</sup> The "Liberty of December" naturally caused consternation in the Church, this being hardly surprising when we consider one of the examples which Lacroix quotes:

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<sup>11</sup>M.J.C. Hodgart, Medieval Lyrics and the Ballads, in The Age of Chaucer, ibid., p. 163.

<sup>12</sup>Paul Lacroix, Science and Literature in the Middle Ages (New York: Ungar, 1878), pp. 237-64.

<sup>13</sup>E.O. James, Seasonal Feasts and Festivals (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961), pp. 278-80. See also ch. vii, 'The Christian Liturgical Year', ch. viii, 'The Drama of the Medieval Church' and ch. ix, 'Folk Drama, Dances and Festivals'.

<sup>14</sup>Christina Hole, Christmas and its Customs (New York: Barrows, 1958). In the same context, note also: R.J. Campbell, The Story of Christmas (New York: Macmillan, 1935), Earl W. Court, Four Thousand Years of Christmas (New York: Henry Schuman, 1953), C.A. Miles, Christmas in Ritual and Tradition (London: Unwin, 1912).

... upon the day of the circumcision in 1444 the priests officiated in the churches, some dressed as women, some as buffoons, some as stage-players, others with their capes and chasubles turned inside out. They elected a bishop or archbishop of buffoons, attired him in the pontifical robes, and received his benediction, chanting an indecent parody of the matins. They danced in the choir, singing ribald songs, ate and drank upon the altar, played dice upon the pavement, burnt old leather and other foul matter in the censer, and incensed the celebrating priest with it, and after this mock mass they promenaded the streets mounted upon chariots, and vying with one another in grimaces and in insolent and impious remarks.<sup>15</sup>

St. Augustine, in Sermon 189, is concerned to remind Christians of the true significance of December 25th<sup>16</sup> and the concern which he shows continues throughout the Middle Ages, Churchmen attacking the pagan elements in the December festivities. Lacroix (pp. 237-38) mentions the Council of Paris, 829, which pronounced against "most pernicious evils, which are assuredly remnants of paganism, such as magic, judicial astrology, witchcraft, sorcery or poisoning, divination, charms and the conjectures drawn from dreams". The Provincial Council of 1466 supported the

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<sup>15</sup> Lacroix, op. cit., pp. 240-41.

<sup>16</sup> P.L. ed. Migne Vol. 38, col. 1006: In principio Verbum, qui nisi haberet humanum generationem, nos ad divinam non perveniremus regenerationem, natus est, ut regenerandus. Cui enim necessaria erat regeneratio, nisi cujus damnata est generatio? Fiat itaque in cordibus nostris misericordia ejus. Portavit eum mater in utero: portemus et nos in corde. Gravidata est virgo incarnatione

assertion of St. Thomas Aquinas, that superstition is a form of idolatry. Prior to this John Gerson had already declared that: "superstition is a vice opposed in the extreme to worship and religion". Lacroix also cites the address of St. Eloi, minister of King Dagobert, and Bishop of Noyon, to his clergy:

Above all, I beseech of you, do not observe any of the sacrilegious customs of the pagans; do not consult the engravers of talismans, or the diviners, or the sorcerers, or the enchanterers, for any cause, even for illness; pay no heed to omens or to sneezing; do not be influenced by the singing of birds when you hear them in your journeys . . . . Let no Christian pay heed to the day he leaves a house, or that upon which he returns to it. Let not anyone at the Feast of St. John celebrate the solstices by dances or incantations.

It might be expected that if these pagan elements were as deeply embedded as Lacroix and Speirs would have us believe, they would prove practically impossible to eradicate. Lacroix says (p. 239) that the Saturnalia and Lupercalia of ancient Rome, as described by Herodian, Macrobius and Dionysius of Halicarnassus are almost identical to the festivals of the Middle Ages which Christianity was compelled to tolerate for a long time, even though it did not accept them. Although such activities were, of necessity, tolerated, they were also

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Christi. Peperit virgo Salvatorem: pariat anima nostra salutem, pariamus et laudem. Non simus steriles: animæ nostræ Deo sint fecundæ.

criticised. The degeneration of holy days is attacked in the sixteenth stanza of the Middle English poem Lerne say wele, say litel, or say no3t<sup>17</sup> while Dan Michel in the Ayenbite is extremely severe in his attitude towards the festivities and games in which people wasted their time, and which no doubt had a special appeal during the Christmas season:

panne þe profete zayþ. uor þet wes þe zenne of  
sodome / þet prede. yedelnesse. and plenté.  
þet is to zigge / þet hi ethen / and uorzuolþe /  
and na3t ne dede. huer-by uillen in-to þe uoule  
zenne þet na3t ne is to nemni. alsuo dep moche  
uolc þet lyeseþ hare time / and hine bezetteþ  
ine ydelnesse / and ine to moche of metes an  
drinke / and ine fole ple3es. ine childhede /  
ine li3thedes / ine zonges / ine karoles / and  
ine tables / ine ches / and ine opre fole gemenes.  
Ine zuyche li3thedes wastep hare time. and  
peruore hi ualleþ li3tliche ine moche uoul zenne /  
and ofte in-to þe pette of helle. þet is at  
pricke of þe dyape / huerof he ne nimp none hede.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lerne say wele, say litel, or say no3t, in  
Twenty-Six Political and other Poems, ed. J. Kail, (EETS.  
OS. 1904, 124), Part I, pp. 14-22.

Sumtyme men halwed the holyday;  
Now holiday is turned to glotonye.  
Sumtyme men vsed honest play;  
And now it is turned to vilonye;  
And paramour is turned to lecherye,-  
Sumtyme was loue of good fay,-  
And shameles haunted so comounly,  
Vnneþe þey recche what men say.

<sup>18</sup> Ayenbite of Inwit, op. cit. pp. 206-207.

Thus far, we have talked of the Christmas period as if it were but one extended feast. In actual fact, of course, it contains several feasts, each day from Christmas Eve to New Year having its own special significance. As far as GK is concerned, however, only two of these days are of importance - Christmas Day and New Year's Day. The feast at Arthur's court lasted the whole week, for in line 37 we are told that:

þis kyng lay at Camylot vpon kryst-masse.  
while by line 60 we are made aware of the fact that it is New Year:

Wyle Nw 3er wat3 so 3ep þat hit wat3 nwe cummen.  
We are also told in line 44 that the feast lasted fully fifteen days, there being no indication that this was interspersed with a period or periods of fasting or temperance.

Although the Green Knight seeks to participate in a Christmas game, his arrival at Arthur's court actually occurs on New Year's Day. It is possible that the festivities in which the poet himself may have been taking part extended over a similarly prolonged period, and that this period was regarded as a continuous feast. We have already looked at the Church's attitude towards the riotous celebration of Christmas Day itself and the Christmas period in general. It is also necessary at this

point to make brief mention of the ecclesiastical attitude towards New Year's Day or the Feast of the Circumcision, which day again coincided with pagan celebrations, as the following passage from the Catholic Encyclopedia shows:

The II Council of Tours 567 prescribes prayers and a Mass of expiation for New Year's Day, adding that this is a practice long in use. Dances were forbidden and pagan crimes were to be expiated by Christian fasts (St. Augustine Serm. cxcvii-cxcviii in P.L. xxxviii, 1024; Isidore of Seville 'De Div. Off. Eccl.' I xli; Trullan Council, 692 can. lxii). When Christmas was fixed on 25 Dec. New Year's Day was sanctified by commemorating on it the Circumcision, for which feast the Gelasian Sacramentary gives a Mass (In Octobas Domini). Christians did not wish to make the celebration of this feast very solemn, lest they might seem to countenance in any way the pagan extravagance of the opening year.

Christian nations did not agree in the date of New Year's Day. They were not opposed to 1 January as the beginning of the year, but rather to the pagan extravagances which accompanied it.<sup>19</sup>

In the Middle Ages non-Christian traditions adhered to the celebration of New Year's Day, and indeed continue to do so even in the world of the present day. Medieval writers were greatly concerned to stress the religious import of the day. Thus the author of The South English Legendary says:

3eresday þe holy feste. he3 dayis and god  
For þulke day oure swete Louerd. ssade verst is  
blod

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<sup>19</sup> The Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913), II, 19.



Ar he ycircumsised were. as it fel in þe olde lay  
 After þat he was ibore. þane ei3teþe day  
 þere he ssade verst is blod. fo[l]3ong he was þerto  
 For oure gult & no3t for his. al it was ydo.<sup>20</sup>

This attitude is again similar to that of St. Augustine who, in Sermon 198 had defined the Christian import of the day while attacking its association with paganism, just as he had done in the case of Christmas Day, in Sermon 189 mentioned above (p. 6).<sup>21</sup> Another medieval occurrence of this theme is found in the Festial of John Mirk:

Then sayth Seynt Austeyn þat, þis day and þis nyght, paynene usen mony fals opynyons of wycheecraft and of fals fayth, þe which ben noght to telle among crysten men, lest þay wer drawen yn vse. Wherfor, 3e þat ben Goddes seruandes, be 3e well war, lest 3e ben deseyvet by any sorcery and by any byleue: as by takying of howselle of on man rayther þen of anopyr,

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<sup>20</sup>The South English Legendary, ed. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mill (EETS 235, 1956), Vol. I, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup>P.L. ed. Migne Vol. 38, col. 1024:  
 Admonemus Charitatem vestram, fratres, quoniam vos quasi solemniter hodie convenisse conspiciamus, et ad hunc diem solito frequentius congregatus; ut memineritis quod mode cantastis, ne sit lingua perstrepens corde muto; sed quod sonuistis voce ad aures invicem vestras, clametis affectu ad aures Dei. Hoc enim cantabitis: 'Salva nos, Domine Deus noster, congrega nos de Gentibus, ut confiteamur nomini Sancto tuo'. Et modo si solemnitatis Gentium, quæ fit hodierno die in lætitia sæculi atque carnali, in sterepitu vanissimarum et turpissimarum cantionum, in conviviiis et saltationibus turpibus, in celebratione ipsius falsæ festivitatis, si ea quæ agunt Gentes non vos delectent, congregabimini ex Gentibus.

othyr forto bye othyr selle, and aske or  
 borue . . . .Anon þen he þat þenkyth bysely  
 on þes seuen dayes, he schall be circumsyset  
 yn þe 3eght day, þat ys to say, he schall  
 kytte away from hym þe lust of his flesche  
 and worldes lykyng; and so schall he come to  
 þe vtas of Cryst, þat ys, to þe joy þat ys yn  
 heuen-blys.<sup>22</sup>

We cannot be sure that the Gawain-poet was actually the author of the other poems found in the Cottonian MS. And in fact these works contain no mention of either Christmas or New Year's festivities. However, there is at least one striking parallel between GKG and Cleanness which suggests that both are the work of the same man.<sup>23</sup> The connections between the feast of Belshazzar described in Cleanness and that at Arthur's court, found in GKG, will be discussed in detail during the course of the next chapter. It is sufficient to say here that the Gawain-poet, if he is in fact the author of Cleanness, has as his prime concern, the desire to emphasise the sinful nature of Belshazzar's feast. The holding of such a feast indicates the king's turning away from God and results in his eventual punishment by God. It may be regarded as a type of the sort of irreligious festive activity which we have been

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<sup>22</sup>John Mirk's Festial, ed. Theodore Erbe (EETS ES 96, 1905), pp. 45 and 47.

<sup>23</sup>Early English Alliterative Poems, ed. Richard Morris (EETS OS I, 1864), pp. 76-88.

discussing, and which the Church from the time of St. Augustine onwards, was so concerned with regulating.

In GKG then, the poet, in describing the feast at Arthur's court, appears to condone the holding of a feast extremely similar to that which he so obviously condemns in Cleanness. In other words, he seems to contradict the views of St. Augustine, already alluded to, those found in the fifty-ninth Dialogue of St. Gregory, applying to the Holy Mysteries, and those current among Churchmen of his own day.<sup>24</sup> This is surely an impossible state of affairs, and in the next chapter I hope to show how he does in fact criticise the activities, both of Arthur's court, and, by implication, those of the court to which his poem is being presented.

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<sup>24</sup>P.L. ed. Migne Vol. 77 col. 428 Caput LIX:  
 Sed necesse est ut cum hæc agimus, nosmetipsos  
 Deo in cordis contritione mactemus, quia qui  
 passionis dominicæ mysteria celebramus, debemus  
 imitari quod agimus. Tunc ergo vere pro nobis  
 hostia erit Deo, cum nos ipsos hostiam  
 fecerimus. Sed sindendum nobis est ut etiam post  
 orationis tempora, in quantum Deo largiente possumus,  
 in ipso animum suo pondere et vigore servemus;  
 ne post cogitatio fluxu dissolvat, ne vana menti  
 lætitia subrepat, et lucrum compunctionis amma per  
 incuriam fluxæ cogitationis perdat. Sic quippe  
 quod proposcerat Anna obtinere meruit, quia post  
 lacrymas in eodem mentis vigore permansit. De  
 qua nimirum scriptum est: 'Vultusque ejus non sunt  
 amplius in diversa mutati'. Quæ igitur non est  
 oblita quod petiit, non est privata munere quod  
 poposcit.

CHAPTER II  
THE DISSOLUTE COURT

Unlike other medieval romances, such as Sir Eglamour of Artois, Morte Arthure, Amis and Amiloun and Sir Torrent of Portyngale,<sup>1</sup> GGK does not begin with an invocation to God or the Trinity, though it does end on a note of conventional piety:

Now þat bere þe croun of þorne,  
He bryng vus to his blysse!

(II. 2529-2530)

However, there are Christian implications in the historical synopsis with which the poem commences. The reference to Aeneas who, we are told in line 4: "Wat3 tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe", recalls Christ who, despite being absolutely 'trwe' was also tried and punished. The westward journey of Aeneas and his descendants:

þat sipen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicom  
Welne3e of al þe wele in þe West Iles.

may be seen as a parallel to the westward journey of the Magi, and to the spreading of the Christian faith by the

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<sup>1</sup>Sir Eglamour of Artois, ed. Frances E. Richardson (EETS OS. 256, 1965); Morte Arthure, ed. Edmund Brock (EETS OS. 8, 1865); Amis and Amiloun, ed. MacEdward Leach (EETS OS. 203, 1937); Sir Torrent of Portyngale, ed. E. Adam (EETS ES. 51, 1887).

Church Fathers. Dante, in the Paradiso contrasts the westward journey of Aeneas with the journey of Constantine, who moved the Church eastwards from Rome to Byzantium:

Poscia che Constantin l'aquila volse  
 contra'l corso del ciel, ch'ella seguio  
 dietro a l'antico che Lavinia tolse,  
 cento e cent'anni e piu l'uccel di Dio  
 ne lo stremo d'Europa si ritenne,  
 vicino ai monti de' quai prima uscio;  
 e sotto l'ombra de le sacre penne  
 governo il mondo li di mano in mano,  
 e, si cangiando, in su la mia pervenne.<sup>2</sup>

After the account of the wanderings of the Trojans, and of the settling of Britain by its eponymous founder, Brutus, who established his settlements with 'wynne' (joy), One might expect that in the wheel or last four lines of the stanza the poet will set the scene for an heroic tale, quite possibly in an idyllic and Christian environment. This, however, is far from being the case. For what we are actually told in these four lines is that what might easily have become an almost perfect place is in fact subject to the whims of fortune, and is a land:

Where werre and wrake and wonder  
 Bi syþe3 hat3 wont þerinne,  
 And oft boþe blysse and blunder  
 Ful skete hat3 skyfted synne.  
 (II. 16-19)

This is followed immediately by the reference, at

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<sup>2</sup>Dante Alighieri, La Divina Commedia, ed. Siro A. Chimenz (Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1966); Paradiso, Canto VI, II. 1-9, pp. 666-67.

the beginning of the second stanza, to men who loved fighting, and who wrought great mischief in times of stress:

Ande quen þis Bretayn wat3 bigged bi þis burn rych,  
 Bolde bredden þerinne, baret þat lofden,  
 In mony turned tyme tene þat wro3ten.

(II. 20-22)

In the second stanza we are introduced to Arthur, the 'hendest' of the kings of Britain, and the third stanza commences with an account of the feast which is later to be interrupted by the intrusion of the Green Knight. We have already seen how the poet uses bathos in leading us to expect an account of a near-perfect kingdom, then characterising it as a strife-torn land. This process of undermining the expectations of audience or reader continues throughout the first fitt, and indeed throughout the entire poem.

One's initial reaction to the feast at Arthur's court might well be a feeling of admiration at the generosity and hospitality of the great king. But several factors combine to modify such an opinion. It has already been seen that lavish celebrations at the New Year's feast were frowned upon by the Church. As one medieval sermon points out, the observing of holy days in such a manner is forbidden by the Third Commandment.<sup>3</sup> We are told

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<sup>3</sup>Middle English Sermons, ed. Woodburn O. Ross,

(II. 41-42) that Arthur's knights amuse themselves in tourneying and jousting at the Christmas feast, the significance of which action will be fully discussed later in this chapter. Instead of fasting, the members of the Round Table eat particularly well on this day: "pat day doubble on þe dece wat3 þe douth serued". (I. 61).

Two other brief references help contribute to this undermining process. In line 53 Arthur is referred to as: "þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes" which seems a very complimentary description. However, there is actually an ambiguity here, which will be discussed presently. There is an even more obvious and immediate ambiguity in the passage which follows this line, where the members of the company in the hall are described as being "in her first age". This phrase might seem to be a reference to their state of innocence and their existence in a Boethian 'Golden Age' similar to that described by Chaucer in

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(EETS OS. 209, 1940), p. 23:

The þride is, þou shalte haue mynde of þin holydaye, to hold and to kepe itt. All-be-itt þat Iewes holydaye is on þe Saturdaye, oure holydaye is on þe Sondaye, for wurshippe of þe resurreccion and many opur causes. On þe halydaye euery man shall 3eue hym to vertewe and plezyng of þe soule, ryght as 3e do on þe weke dayes in youre opur werldely occupacions, and to kepe you from seruyle verkes on þe Sonedaye and on opur halydayes þat ben ordeyned of all holychurche. And 3iff 3e do not, þan 3e displayse God grettely. But 3itt, sir, leue not to do vertevous occupacions on þe holydaye; for Criste hymselfe dud so, as I told 3ere-while, for þat is noo verke of seruage.

use of irony  
- irony to pt at the follies of castle & church

The Former Age.<sup>4</sup> But there is also the possible suggestion that Arthur and his compatriots are somewhat youthful, and consequently susceptible to the follies associated with young people. It is this connotation which becomes of prime importance in line 86, when the poet might seem to satirise Arthur and suggest that he is far from being a mature ruler: "He wat3 so joly of his joyfnes and sumquat childgered". The key word here is 'childgered' which is glossed by Tolkien and Gordon as: 'boyish, merry', and by Sir Israel Gollancz as: 'Of childish cheer, behaviour'.<sup>5</sup> Again it is possible that the poet is indicating Arthur's state of innocence. But there is also the possibility that he is employing litotes to indicate a flaw in the character of the king. If he is in fact criticising Arthur, then his criticism is never blatant or scathing. Rather, it is always couched in subtly ironic form, as for example in the following, seemingly eulogistic lines:

With alle þe wele of þe worlde þay woned þer samen,  
þe most kyð kny3tez under Krystez seluen,  
And þe louelokest ladies þat euer lif haden,  
And þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes.  
(II. 50-53)

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<sup>4</sup>The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F.N. Robinson (2nd ed.; Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1933), The Former Age, p. 534.

<sup>5</sup>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz (EETS OS. 210, 1940).



As mentioned above (p.15) the last line of this quotation seems to contain an ambiguity which might be seen as giving a clue as to the poet's true opinion of Arthur. This is found in the adjective which he uses to describe the king. The word 'comlokest' can mean either 'beautiful' or 'noble' and can be used either of a man or of a woman.<sup>6</sup> This fact might suggest, at the very least, the extreme youthfulness of Arthur. This feature of his personality is soon emphasised and further elaborated upon:

His lif liked him ly3t, he louied þe lasse  
 Auper to longe lye or to longe sitte,  
 So bisied him his yonge blod and his brayn wylde.  
 (II. 87-89)

Not only is Arthur referred to as boyish, but he is also said to be wild of brain. Because of his childishness, he refuses to eat until he hears a tale of some marvel, and not only must he hear it, but he also has to believe it:

. . .he wolde neuer ete  
 Vpon such a dere day, er hym deuised were  
 Of sum auenturus pyng an vncoupe tale,  
 Of sum mayn meruayle, þat he my3t trawe.  
 (II. 91-94)

Laura Hibbard Loomis attaches no importance to this custom of Arthur's, feeling it to be a purely conventional element.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>See the glossaries of Tolkien and Gordon, and Gollancz.

<sup>7</sup>Laura Hibbard Loomis, GGK, in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages - A Collaborative History, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: 1959), pp. 528-40; also found in Critical Studies of GGK, ed. Howard and Zacher (Notre Dame:

However, she surely misses the point of the previous reference to Arthur as 'childgered'. His delight in seeing some strange occurrence or hearing of an unusual event is the product of a childish or foolish mind, and is surely intended to be viewed as such. Such an attitude as Arthur's, even if it does not ignore it completely, certainly relegates the importance of the Christian significance of Christmas, and is the kind of thing which Churchmen from the time of St. Augustine had preached against. This listening to essentially pagan tales is the sort of entertainment which the poet's own audience might well have delighted in, and is the sort of habit which the poet sets out to expose and criticise. The Prologue to the Cursor Mundi contains an extended and scathing attack on people who listen to such tales, particularly to romances.<sup>8</sup>

If one accepts the suggestion that the poet might be adopting a critical attitude towards Arthur, then the statement in line 81 as to the king's acting 'pur3 nobelay'

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1968), pp. 3-23. Mrs. Loomis says: "Sixteen romances tell of this custom. Chretien's Perceval, ed. A. Hilka (Halle, 1932), p. 668; John Reinhard, The Survival of Geis in Medieval Romance (Halle, 1933), pp. 182-95. The reference in Caradoc may be borrowed from a more original part of the Perceval. See Continuations, ed. Roach I, 232; II, 371; III, 196.

<sup>8</sup>Cursor Mundi, ed. Richard Morris (EETS OS. 57, 59, 62, 66, 68, 99 and 101. 1874-93), pp. 11-13, II. 23-82.

('in his magnificence') is an ironic observation. The irony of such a statement could, of course, be greatly heightened if the poet were reading aloud, and to an audience who understood the peculiarities of his humour. If it had not been the poet's intention to satirise the king, it is surely reasonable to suppose that he would have described him in terms more akin to these in the following passage from Morte Arthure:

He may be chosyne cheftayne, cheefe of alle other,  
 Bathe be chancez of armes and cheuallrye noble,  
 ffor wheseste, and worthyeste, and wyghteste of hanndez:  
 Of alle the wyes thate I watte in this werlde ryche,  
 The knyghtlyeste creatoure in Cristyndome haldene,  
 Of kyng or of conqueror, crownde in erthe,  
 Of countenaunce, of corage, of crewelle lates,  
 The comlyeste of knyghtehode that vndyre Cryste lyffes!<sup>9</sup>  
 (II. 530-37)

The criticism of the folly of the king, though only gradually developed in the first fitt of the poem, was in fact hinted at in the opening Troy-passage, discussed above (pp. 12-13). After the account of Britain as an offshoot of defeated Troy - a legend which Geoffrey of Monmouth treated as fact in his History of the Kings of Britain,<sup>10</sup> we have a narrowing of focus, first to a

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<sup>9</sup> Morte Arthure, ed. Edmund Brock, op. cit., p. 17. See also: Arthur, ed. F.J. Furnivall (3rd ed.; EETS OS 2, 1864, p.2, II. 31-54.

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, Historia Regum Britanniae, ed. Jacob Hammer (The Medieval Academy of America, 1951), Liber Primus, pp. 22-40.

description of the court at Camelot, then to an account of the king himself - his personality and idiosyncrasies. One might feel that Arthur's court is meant to represent the highest chivalric ideals - the Phoenix re-born out of the ashes of Troy. But Troy was defeated not only as a result of Greek subterfuge, but also as a result of the folly of its leaders, in dragging the wooden horse into the city. What the Gawain-poet might be suggesting is that just as Britain has inherited the strife with which Troy was beset, so has its ruler inherited the folly of the rulers of Troy.

The results of the childish folly exhibited by Arthur are summarised in a poem by the Duke of Somerset, which Hans Schnyder quotes in his monograph on GJK:

True is the text which we in Scripture read,  
 Ve terræ illi cuius rex est puer:  
 Woe to the land whereof a child is head,  
 Whether child or childish the case one is sure:  
 Where kings be young we daily see in ure  
 The people, aweless, wanting one to dread,  
 Lead their lives lawless by weakness of the head.<sup>11</sup>

At only one point in the poem do Arthur's knights actually criticise the behaviour of their ruler. They question his 'angardez pryde' (I. 681) when they see Gawain departing in search of the Green Knight:

Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take,

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<sup>11</sup>Hans Schnyder, GJK - An Essay in Interpretation (Bern: The Cooper Monographs, 1961), p. 38. The poem which Schnyder quotes is found in E.M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's History Plays (London: 1951), p. 85.

As kny3tez in cauelaciounz on Cryst-masse gomez?  
(II. 682-83)

But the fact that they are not more severe in their criticism of Arthur is, in fourteenth-century terms, a fault in the members of the Round Table. It should also be noted that they have earlier been seen as sanctioning Arthur's decision to allow Gawain to participate in the Green Knight's dangerous 'gomen':

Ryche togeder con roun,  
And syben þay reddene alle same  
To ryd þe kyng wyth croun,  
And gif Gawan þe game.  
(II. 361-65)

The significance of Arthur's actions and the path which should have been taken by his knights are indicated by Hans Schnyder.<sup>12</sup> He points out that although modern readers might be disposed to admire or look uncritically upon the youthfulness and individuality of Arthur, a medieval audience would have regarded these things as flaws, impossible to overlook. As Schnyder observes, medieval thought conceived of a bond of mutual interdependence between ruler and subjects, the affinity between the two parties being so close that a digression on the part of one was thought to reflect adversely upon the merits of the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 38. A contemporary source of the attitude referred to by Schnyder is the poem God Saue the kyng, and kepe the Croun, in Twenty-Six Political and other poems, op. cit., pp. 50-55.

other. He refers to the Policraticus of John of Salisbury, which repeatedly asserts that the offences of a prince's subjects actually detract from his own merits, while the errors of persons of position give their subjects an excuse for and an example of wrongdoing. A prince is made just if his subjects are blameless, while blamelessness on the part of the prince checks excesses on the part of the people. Thus, as Schnyder says, it is hardly surprising to see that Arthur's knights "take after their master in their boyish boastfulness and instability".

Schnyder suggests that the chief sin of which Arthur is guilty is that of pride. It is his concern to construct and maintain a reputation which leads to his unthinking sacrifice of Gawain. In the Middle Ages 'superbia' was often seen as the source of all evil, and in parallel fashion, the proud king was regarded as the source of all corruption in the state. "A proud king, no matter how he had come to the throne, whether legally or as a usurper, was considered a tyrant. And to a tyrant, such is the radical solution of John of Salisbury, the people definitely owe no allegiance, they are even justified in killing him".

Schnyder appears to be striving to show how obvious is the poet's treatment of the pride of Arthur. This, however, is not so. [The Gawain-poet's method of criticism is, at all times, one of ironic implication rather than

specific statement. Ambiguity is of central importance in his description of the court in the first fitt. His account of the table and the guests at the banquet is non-comic and apparently non-ironic. However, when it is remembered that the day on which the banquet occurs was intended by the Church as a day of fasting, we begin to appreciate the poet's subtlety. His criticisms are almost always of this unobtrusive nature, though he does at times emphasise them by such means as referring to Arthur as childish and by making the courtiers appear both cowardly and ungentlemanly in being reluctant to accept the stranger's challenge, and in kicking the rolling head of the Green Knight. At times in the first fitt the comic implications become of prime importance, and there seems to be little doubt that the poet wishes us to laugh at Arthur and the court. The lines in which he describes the changed atmosphere in the court following the entry of the Green Knight contain comic potential in his mention of the hush which descends upon the banqueting hall:

And al stouned at his steven, and stonstil seten  
 In a swoghe-sylence þur3 þe sale riche;  
 As al were slypped vpon slepe so slaked her lotez.  
 (II. 242-44)

In attributing a reason to the silence amongst the courtiers, he makes an ironic comment upon their characters:

I deme hit not al for doute,  
 Bot sum for cortaysye.  
 (II. 246-47)

The effect of such lines could, of course, be emphasised by the poet reading to a familiar audience. He is playing a game with his listeners, 'pretending to be presenting them with a conventional romance, while using comedy and irony to make the central figure appear ridiculous in order to set him up as an example of pride and folly. The kind of tales which Arthur enjoys listening to are those of the romance-type, which are also the kind which the poet's audience would no doubt expect to hear at this particular time of year. They are in fact akin to that with which the poet is ostensibly presenting his listeners, and in implying that Arthur is foolish in desiring to hear such things, he is also satirising the taste of his audience. He actually panders to this taste in his creation of an atmosphere of the supernatural. Thus, after a non-comic description of the table and guests comes an abrupt halt in the first line of the seventh stanza. There is a brief mention of an outside noise, then suddenly - "þer hales in at þe halle door an aghlich mayster" (l. 136). The poet continues in this vein with a three-and-a-half stanza description of the Green Knight, before returning in line 232 to discuss the changed atmosphere in the hall.

He also sustains such an atmosphere by referring to the Green Knight, in line 140, as 'half etayn' or giant. Dorothy Everett points out that this word comes from Old



English 'eoten' and adds: "In Beowulf eotenas are among the brood descended from Cain".<sup>13</sup> The Middle English Dictionary defines the word as meaning simply 'giant' while the Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary has: 'giant, monster, enemy'.<sup>14</sup> The word may several times mean Cain's descendants in Beowulf as Dorothy Everett points out, but as seen by the other definitions, it does not necessarily mean this elsewhere. That is, it does not always have an evil sense, and hence the immediate impression conveyed by the Green Knight should not be that he is an evil figure. (He is described as a giant simply in order to maintain the atmosphere of the supernatural.) What the poet is doing here is similar to what he does throughout the work-taking conventional romance elements and using them in new ways - ways which have caused incredible confusion when critics have come to interpret the poem.

Upon the arrival of the Green Knight, Arthur is the first to speak, and he does so in a courteous manner, until he is quite naturally angered by the strutting and bluntness of the intruder. This scene might be read as

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<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Everett, The Alliterative Revival, in Essays on Middle English Literature, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: 1955), pp. 74-85.

<sup>14</sup> Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, ed. J.R.C. Hall (3rd ed.; Cambridge: 1931).

completely serious, were it not for the comic potential of the lines 242-44, already alluded to, and the comedy of the Green Knight's actions and speech. In asking for a partner for his 'crystemas gomen' he makes the remark that Arthur and his knights are 'bot berdlez chylde' (I. 280). It is laughable to picture the silent courtiers with the green figure strutting before them, hurling abuse:

And rimed hym ful richly, and ry3t hym to speke:  
 'What, is þis Arþures hous' quop þe habel þenne,  
 þat at þe rous rennes of þur3:ryalmes so mony?  
 Where is now your sourquydre and your conquestes,  
 Your gryndel-layk and your greme and your grete wordes?  
 (II. 308-12)

What we have is an ostensibly serious situation undermined by uncomplimentary remarks on the part of the Green Knight, and the poet himself. As well as the latent comedy in the poet's treatment of the cowardly knights, there is also grotesque comedy in the Green Knight's picking up his head and mounting his horse with it in his hand, and in the lips of the severed head opening to remind Gawain to receive the return blow in twelve months' time.

Thus far, we have spoken of the folly and pride of Arthur in rather general terms. The consequences of these were mentioned in the references to the passage from Schnyder's book. It is necessary now to clarify and elaborate upon the significance of these flaws, and this can be done by considering Arthur's ignoring of the true meaning of Christmas, and his allowing Gawain to participate in the

dangerous game with the Green Knight.

Arthur and his knights do not attach more than a perfunctory importance to the significance of the Christmas feast. In lines such as the following the poet describes the Christmas celebrations at the court without any reference to Christianity or morality:

And sithen riche forth runnen to reche hondeselle,  
 3ea3ed 3ear's 3iftes on high, 3elde hem bi hond,  
 Debated busily aboute the 3iftes;  
 Ladies la3hed ful loude tho3h they lost haden,  
 And he that wan was not wrothe, that may ye wel trawe.  
 (II. 66-70)

What the poet is doing here is criticising the way in which the Round Table celebrates New Year, while seeming to be merely praising and admiring their manner of enjoying themselves. Such activities as they indulge in are viewed as pagan by St. Augustine, who advocates an alternative mode of celebration.

Dant illi strenas, date vos eleemosynas. Avocantur illi cantionibus luxuriarum, avocate vos sermonibus Scripturarum: currunt illi ad theatrum, vos ad ecclesiam: inebriantur illi, vos jejunate. Si hodie non potestis jejunare, saltem cum sobrietate prandete. Hoc si feceritis, bene cantastis, 'Salva nos, Domine Deus noster, et congrega nos de Gentibus'.<sup>15</sup>

By celebrating New Year's Day in such a fashion, the entire Round Table is putting itself in peril of incurring

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<sup>15</sup>P.L. ed. Migne, op. cit., Vol. 38, col. 1025.

God's wrath. Warnings against indulging oneself in worldly pleasure abound in medieval literature. An excellent example of the sort of message which the Gawain-poet is attempting to convey to his audience is found in the poem Love god, and drede.<sup>16</sup> Chaucer's Parson also pronounces against such feasts as that at Camelot, in the following terms:

Pride of the table appeereth eek ful ofte; for certes, riche men been cleped to festes, and povre folk been put away and rebuked. / Also in excess of diverse metes and drynkes, and namely swich manere bake-metes and dissh-metes, brennyng of wild fir and peynted and castelled with papir, and semblable wast, so that it is abusion for to thynke. / And eek in to greet preciousness of vessel and curiositee of mynstralcie, by whiche a man is stired the moore to delices of luxurie . . . .<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Love god, and drede, in Twenty-Six Political and other Poems, op. cit., p. 2.

Serue god for helle drede,  
ffle fro synne and al vys.  
And 3e loue god for heuen mede,  
3yue hym thyn hert fro fleschly delys.  
ffor worldly wys is gostly nys,  
And fooles erande may not spede.  
In begynnyng to be wys  
Knowe thy self, loue god, and drede.

And 3e wole wyte, thus mowe 3e lere:  
What man pursueth his soule to saue,  
3if hym be lef of god to here,  
He ableth hym self mercy to haue.  
Richesse and hele maketh wylde men raue,  
That to vertues take non hede.  
Er thy soule be fendes knaue,  
Knowe thy self, love god, and drede.

<sup>17</sup> The Parson's Tale, in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, op. cit., p. 241, II. 443-45.

points to the failure of humankind through mankind

The ignoring of the Christian import of the season is equivalent to a belief in their own perfectibility, on the part of Arthur and his courtiers. This, of course, is both impossible and un-Christian. Jean Louise Carriere makes a concise summary of the meaning of the Christmas feast in the Middle Ages:

Christ comes to rescue fallen human nature from the consequences of its imperfection; and His coming to do so takes place on that feast which is emphasised throughout the poem, the feast of Christmas. This is, then, the meaning of Christmas in the Middle Ages; Christ's preservation of mankind from the effects of Original Sin.<sup>18</sup>

Arthur is concerned for the reputation of the court, believing that it can earn a reputation for human perfection. This is the reason he allows Gawain to participate in the Green Knight's 'gomen' while Gawain himself, as the most perfect knight of the court, is guilty of the sin of elevating himself to the level of the only perfect being - Christ Himself. If Arthur's court, and Gawain in particular, were in fact capable of attaining perfection, then they would have no need of the redemptive feast of Christmas. By ignoring the import of this feast then, they are actually asserting their belief in their own perfection. Instead of celebrating the feasts of Christmas and New Year

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<sup>18</sup>Jean Louise Carriere, GGK as Christmas Poem, in Comitatus (UCLA: December, 1970), pp. 25-42.

in the true Christian fashion, as defined by St. Augustine, they merely ~~indulge~~ indulge in shallow games.<sup>19</sup> The pride exhibited by the court is a result of its having been beguiled by the devil - a situation which Dan Michel warns against in the Ayenbite:

pis zenne of prede / ys to dreduol. uor hi  
 ablent men. zuo þet hi ham-zelue / ne knawep /  
 ne ne zyeþ. þet is þe wel strang / and þe wel  
 special ald / to þe dyeule / huer-of he be-gyleþ /  
 þe he3e men / and þe wayre / and þe riche / and þe  
 wyse / and þe hardi / and þe uorþuolle. And  
 generalliche / ech manere of uolk. ac specialliche /  
 þe greate lhordes / zuo þet by ham zelue / ne  
 knawyp / ne yzeþ / hire misdedes / ne hire folies /  
 ne hire wyttes.<sup>20</sup>

It would appear that the exposing of pride was almost traditionally associated with the New Year's festivities during the Middle Ages. St. Augustine had expatiated upon the sin of pride in his New Year's Day sermon, number 197.<sup>21</sup> Leslie Hotson, in his book on

<sup>19</sup>P.L. ed. Migne, Vol. 38, col. 1025:  
 Itaque multi luctabuntur in corde suo cum verbo quod audierunt. Diximus enim, Nolite strenas dare, date pauperibus. Parum est ut tantum detis, amplius etiam date. Non vultis amplius? vel tantum date. Sed dicis mihi: Quando strenas do, mihi accipio et ego. Quid ergo, quando das pauperi, nihil accipis? Certe non hoc credas, quod Gentes sperant. Ecce si dicis te nihil recipere cum pauperi dederis, factus es pars Gentilium: sine causa cantasti, 'Salva nos, Domine Deus noster, et congrega nos de Gentibus'.

<sup>20</sup>Ayenbite of Inwit, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

<sup>21</sup>P.L. ed. Migne, Vol. 38, col. 1022.

Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, connects this unmasking process with the old pagan Saturnalia of which Twelfth Night, not New Year is the high point:

The time-honoured saturnalian mockery drew its Christian sanction from combating self-love, 'the most inhibited sin in the canon'. In ridiculing ignorant fantastical pride, it aimed to teach a man to know himself, and to take him a peg lower for his own good. Castiglione had particularly warned the courtier against 'self-liking and ignorance' and Jonson's comical Twelfth Night satire on the court The Fountain of Self-Love or Cynthia's Revels closed with a prayer against 'all self-loving humours'. Ovid's 'self-lov'd Narcissus' furnished the accepted type, and the daffodil's colour yellow, symbolized the vice. A Twelfth Night Narcissus had been played at Court in 1572, and two years after the date of our story, in 1603, St. John's College, Oxford, put on their own Narcissus, A Twelfth Night Merriment.<sup>22</sup>

It is a comic spirit akin to that found in the works to which Hotson refers, that seems to exist in GCK. { The criticism of Arthur's court is serious, but the general tone of the poem is far from being didactic. } The criticism of Arthur's banquet is not nearly as direct as that of Belshazzar's feast in Cleanness.<sup>23</sup> There are, on the other hand certain affinities between the poet's method in both works. { Just as in GCK the poet refers to Arthur, for the most part, in terms which appear complimentary, so in

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<sup>22</sup>Leslie Hotson, The First Night of Twelfth Night (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), pp. 76-88.

<sup>23</sup>Early English Alliterative Poems, op. cit., pp. 76-88.

guilty / proud

Cleanness he refers to "pis bolde Baltazar" (I. 1357) and to the king's followers as "þe grete vpon grounde" (I. 1363) and as "dere lordes". In line 1372 Babylon itself is referred to as "þe noble". The banquet at Camelot<sup>24</sup> is described in terms very similar to that in Babylon:

Burnes berande þe bredes vpon brode skeles,  
þat were sylueren sy3t et seerved þer-wyth,  
Lyfte logges þer-ouer et on-lofte coruen,  
Pared out of paper and poynted of golde,  
Broþe baboynes abof, besttes an-vnder,  
Foles in foler flakerande bi-twene,  
And al in asure and ynde enaumayld ryche,  
And al on blokken bak bere hit on honde.  
And ay þe nakeryn noyse, notes of pipes,  
Tymbres and tabornes, tulket among,  
Symbales and sonet3 sware þe noyse . . . .

Not only is there this similarity between the descriptions of the two separate feasts, but there is also another link between the poems in that the three kings in Cleanness - Zeddekiah, Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar - are all guilty of, and are punished for the sin of pride. [Arthur too is guilty of this sin, though unlike the others, he does not suffer for it. The person who does suffer, as the representative of the pride of the Round Table, is Gawain.] Not only is he the representative of this pride, but he is also the greatest sinner in being the proudest member of the whole court, a point which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. ] Not even Gawain, however, suffers

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<sup>24</sup>See GGK, II. 37-84.



so dire a punishment as do the three kings of Cleanness. This is in keeping with the comic or 'gomen' atmosphere of the work as a whole. The poet is not preaching a straightforward, didactic sermon to his audience. Rather, he is entertaining them (which is, of course, the function of a court-poet) while introducing sufficient irony and comedy into his tale to cause them to contemplate his reasons, and consequently appreciate the nature of Arthur's errors and, hence, of their own. His concern in Cleanness is to exhibit the consequences of sin; in GGK it is to make people aware of sin's intrusion even in places where it does not, at first, seem to exist. The listener to or reader of the poem might gain the initial impression that both Arthur and Gawain are exemplary figures, but once he has learned to participate in the author's festive game, he will realise that this is far from being the case.

Another major fault in Arthur's personality is his granting permission to Gawain to risk his life in a trivial game, and his inability to see the true significance of his allowing this. Line 472 contains an implied criticism of the king, who talks of the Beheading Game as merely an interlude - what Laura Hibbard Loomis defines as 'a short dramatic performance introduced between the courses of a banquet'.<sup>25</sup> Arthur cannot see the serious implications of

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<sup>25</sup> Laura Hibbard Loomis, GGK in Critical Studies of  
GGK, op. cit., p. 18 and p. 19n.

his allowing this exchange of blows to take place. As well as indicating the extent of his folly, this delight in tournaments and other such activities has another, deeper significance. Tournaments had been condemned by the Lateran Council of 1179, and the Church had formally prohibited mortal combats. Hans Schnyder quotes two literary examples to show that these decrees had achieved a positive effect.<sup>26</sup> First he mentions The Anturs of Arthur in which Gawain is ready to fight an opponent until he notices the reaction of the king:

'I leve wele, 'quod the kinge, 'this lates are lyg3hte,  
But I wold notte for no lordship se thi life lorne /'

That is, the good king realises that it is morally wrong that his knight should risk his life in a petty quarrel. Schnyder's second example is the one which sprang immediately to my mind when I began to consider this question of Arthur's allowing of mortal combats. [It is the action of Theseus in Chaucer's Knight's Tale in ensuring that the quarrel between Palamon and Arcite does not result in the death of either party.] As Schnyder observes, the reaction of the people to this move on the part of Theseus shows that it was considered greatly praiseworthy:

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<sup>26</sup> Schnyder, op. cit., pp. 37-8. See also Richard Barber, The Knight and Chivalry (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 153-77.

The voys of peple touchede the hevene  
 So loude cride they with murie stevene,  
 'God save swich a lord, that is so good,  
 He wilneth no destruccion of blood'.

There is nothing in the text to indicate that Arthur allows Gawain to risk his life with any other purpose than that of enhancing the reputation of the Round Table.<sup>27</sup> That such a fault would, in the fourteenth century, be considered a grave flaw in a ruler, can be proved by reference to John Gower's Vox Clamantis.<sup>28</sup> In Book V, Chapter I Gower enumerates the functions of knighthood:

Ecclesie prima debet defendere iura,  
 Et commune bonum causa secunda fouet;  
 Tercia pupilli ius supportabit egeni,  
 Et causam vidue consolidabit ope.

Arthur, of course, does not allow Gawain to fight for any of these motives, but rather for the sort of motive which Gower criticises severely:

Non propter famam miles tamen arma gerebat,

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<sup>27</sup> Jean Louise Carriere, op. cit., p. 33:  
 It has been pointed out that the Green Knight is here charging the court with substituting pride in reputation for perfect knighthood (Benson). Arthur's response is one of fury. 'he forgets that he is the hendest and he becomes for the moment démesuré and churlish' (Benson). Whatever else this response may signify, it certainly indicates that Arthur feels the Green Knight's words are a defamation; he accepts the challenge because he must protect the court's famed perfection.

<sup>28</sup> The Complete Works of John Gower, ed. G.C. Macaulay (Oxford: 1902), p. 201.

Set pro iusticia protubit acta sua.  
 Ordinis ipse modum miles qui seruat eundem,  
 Debet ob hoc laudes dignus habere suas;  
 Set si pro laude miles debellet inani,  
 Est laus iniusta, si tribuatur ita.

Langland's Piers The Plowman also contains a reference to the duties of kings and knights, in upholding the rights of the Church:

Kynges and kny3tes. þat kepen holycherche,  
 And ry3tfullych in reumes. reulen þe peple,  
 Han pardoun thourgh purgatorie. to passe ful ly3tly,  
 With patriarkes and prophetes. in paradise to be felawes.<sup>29</sup>

Arthur would have been justified in accepting the Green Knight's challenge if he were defending his religion against the influence of paganism.) But there is no suggestion in the poem that the Green Knight represents such an influence. In fact, the manner in which he celebrates Christmas in his role as Bercilak suggests the exact opposite. Nor does Arthur attempt to justify his actions in such a way. If the Green Knight were actually a pagan, then Arthur would have been justified in allowing Gawain to risk his life. For, as the author of The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye says:

. . .it appiereth manyfestly that warres empyred  
 by iuste cause be permyssed and suffred of god /  
 lyke as we haue founden in þe holy scrypture in

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<sup>29</sup>William Langland, The Vision of William Concerning Piers The Plowman, ed. W.W. Skeat (10th ed.; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1869), p. 79, Passus VII, II. 9-12.

*The rashness of Arthur* 41

many places.<sup>30</sup>

Another criticism that would have been as applicable in the fourteenth century as in our own day is the rashness of the king in accepting the challenge of the Green Knight without consulting his counsellors. Such an acceptance of a challenge is of course, quite conventional in the romance tradition. Knights are expected to experience adventures involving supernatural figures. GCK, however, hardly seems to be a conventional romance. Arthur's actions are the sort of thing criticised by Christine de Pisan,<sup>31</sup> and by the writer of the following stanzas from the poem Treuth, reste, and pes:

What kyng that wol haue good name,  
He wol be lad by wys counsayle  
þat loue worschip, and dreden shame,  
And boldely dar fende and assayle.  
þere wit is, corage may not fayle,  
ffor wysdom neuere worschip les.  
Corage in querell dop bygynneþ pes.

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<sup>30</sup> Christine de Pisan, The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye, trans. William Caxton, ed. A.T.P. Byles (2nd ed.; EETS, OS 189, 1932).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 14, II. 24-33:  
... therefore ought no prynce lightly to put hym  
self in peryll which is for to be determyned by  
the destribucion of fortune / of whyche noman may  
knowe to what syde it shal tourne / Thenne it is  
necessarye that the prynce be wyse / or at the  
lest wylle vse the counseyl of wyse men / for  
plato saith that the royaume or contre is blyssed  
and wel happy where the wyse men gouuerne / and  
thopposite or contrarye it is acursyd and vnhappy  
lyke as witnesseth the holy scripture.

Defaute of wit makeþ long counsayle;  
ffor witteles wordes in ydel spoken,  
þe more cost, þe lesse auayle;  
ffor faute of wyt, purpos broken.  
In euyl soule no grace is stoken,  
ffor wikked soule is graceles.  
In good lyuere goddis will is loken,  
þat mannys counsell makeþ pes.32

introduce  
→ irony, hedonistic  
→ comedy (42) comic

The intimated picture we have of Arthur's court then, is of a collection of proud and hedonistic persons who have moved away from Christian love and awareness of God. This picture is not set down in an immediate and clear form, but is gradually developed by the poet by means of irony, understatement and comedy. However, by the end of the first fitt, it should be fairly clear that all is not well with Arthur's court. Instead of praising God for giving them the opportunity to achieve spiritual rebirth and eternal life, they simply ignore the future in their indulgence of the present. Instead of finding joy in the redemption which Christ has brought them, they need to be jarred out of their complacency and perplexed by the appearance of the grotesque figure of the Green Knight. In the same way the poet wishes to perplex his audience and shock them out of their own state of complacency. He is to the north of England court what the Green Knight is to the court at Camelot - the person to make them aware of their follies and sins. The 'crystemas gomen' which the Green Knight proposes is a parallel to the

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<sup>32</sup> Twenty-Six Political and other Poems, op. cit., p. 12, II 81-96.

poem with which the Gawain-poet confronts his audience.

Both game and poem are lighthearted on the surface, but one does not have to go far beneath this veneer to appreciate the fact that each has a deeper significance.

The question as to the symbolic meaning of the Green Knight has led to interpretations so diverse that it would be both futile and irrelevant to attempt to summarise them here. But it may be profitable to summarise briefly Joseph Eagan's study of the allegorical significance of the colour green in the Middle Ages.<sup>33</sup> Using examples from medieval painting, he says that green can represent 'Hope of rebirth in eternal life'. He points out that green occurs frequently in the early parts of the Divina Commedia but disappears in the Paradiso, since hope is a temporal virtue which reaches fruition in Heaven and therefore the colour green no longer has any meaning. Eagan quotes Marbodius who, in the Vision of New Jerusalem, uses green as a symbol of faith, indicating that the jasper 'signifies the vigor of faith':

Jaspis, colore viridi præfert virorem fidei,  
Quæ in perfectis omnibus nunquam marcescit penitus,  
Cujus forti præsidio resistur diabolo.

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<sup>33</sup> Joseph F. Eagan, The Import of Color Symbolism in GGK (St. Louis University Studies, Series A Humanities, Vol. 1, no. 2, Nov. 1949) pp. 23-24. See also Jean Louise Carriere, op. cit., pp. 26-27, section on 'Christmas colors' - red, gold, and green - associated with GK.

Explorat<sup>1</sup>  
1 G. 16<sup>44</sup>

He then goes on to make brief mention of the use of the colour green in the works of Chaucer:

Chaucer uses green in the Knight's Tale for springtime, chastity, and youth; in the Legend of Good Women for youth, gaiety, and hope; and in The Parliament of Fowls green, as the key color of the poem is the color of Venus and of Nature. This association with Venus, the goddess of the spring and of generation, along with youth and especially fresh youthful love, gave to green the meaning of chastity which was one of its symbolic meanings in the Middle Ages.

Using examples from German literature, he says that green first meant the time of the beginning, since it is the colour of the year's beginning, then the beginning of love and happiness. In Der Magd Krone, a fourteenth Century legend, the colour symbolises the beginning of a great love for Christ.

The appearance of the Green Knight at the New Year's feast is of great significance, unlike the parallel appearance of the messenger from the Roman Emperor in Morte Arthure.<sup>34</sup> The latter demands no allegorical interpretation, and indeed, such an approach would be totally misplaced there. In GGK on the other hand, one feels that an explanation of the symbolic meaning of the Green Knight is essential.

The meanings which are of importance here, derived

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<sup>34</sup>Morte Arthure, op. cit., p. 3, II. 78ff.



from Father Eagan's survey, are rebirth or regeneration, hope of salvation and the beginning of a love for Christ. The Green Knight comes to remind Arthur's court of the significance of the season - it is a time of spiritual rebirth as well as of rebirth in Nature. The fact that this supernatural figure is green might connect him with the idea of a pagan fertility god, as John Speirs suggests, but it does not, as Speirs would have us believe, mean that this connection is actually an equation.<sup>35</sup>

The idea of the Green Knight as representing hope of salvation is akin to that mentioned by Eagan (p. 37) in connection with the Four Evangelists crowned with green to make man aware of Christ, his hope. Finally, green represents the beginning of a love for Christ. This is not to say that in GKG, Arthur and the court become aware of such a beginning immediately upon the arrival of the Green Knight. Rather, it means that his appearance should remind them of the need to enter upon such a relationship, just as the poet's audience could be reminded, by the poem as a whole, of the necessity of their taking stock of their own mode of existence.

It is interesting to note that the ambiguous

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<sup>35</sup> John Speirs, Medieval English Poetry - The Non-Chaucerian Tradition (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), pp. 215-51.

nature of the effect of the Green Knight's appearance in the first fitt has a parallel in one of St. Augustine's sermons. (The Green Knight is grotesque yet awe-inspiring, comic yet frightening.) A similar picture of Christ is painted by Augustine through the use of oxymoron:

Ad hoc processit sponsus de thalamo suo, et  
exsultavit ut gigas ad currendam viam.  
Speciosus ut sponsus, fortis ut gigas, amabilis  
et terribilis, severus ut serenus, plucher bonis  
asper malis, manens in sinu Patris, implevit  
uterum matris.<sup>36</sup>

Like the hand which writes upon the wall at Belshazzar's feast, the arrival of the Green Knight comes as a warning to the dissolute court.<sup>37</sup> Just as Belshazzar fails to comprehend the meaning of the words inscribed by the hand, so Arthur and his court fail to appreciate the reasons for the Green Knight's visit. In Cleanness it is Daniel who solves the riddle of the mysterious words. In GGK the role of interpreter falls to the reader or listener who must gain awareness of the nature of the poet's game and look beneath the semi-comic, semi-romantic surface to the more serious criticisms which are the motivating force of the poem, and which make the visit of the Green Knight necessary, both to the court of Camelot, and to the court at which the author is presenting his work. /

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<sup>36</sup> P.L. ed. Migne, Sermon 195, Vol. 38, col. 1018.

<sup>37</sup> Cleanness, op. cit., II. 1529 ff.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE PERFECT KNIGHT .

The purpose of this chapter is twofold - to consider the lighter kind of humour encountered in the poem, arising from area differences, and then to examine the more important satirical humour aimed at the court of Camelot. It is important to realise at the start that the main events of the poem - the trials and tribulations of Gawain - take place, not in Camelot, but somewhere north of the Wirral. An awareness of this fact leads to an understanding of the lighter kind of humour found in GGK - the humour which is included as a sort of private joke between poet and audience rather than as a severe criticism of Arthur and his knights.

There was in the fourteenth century, just as today, a difference of dialect between the people of northern and southern England. This difference is seen in the language of the Gawain-poet as compared with that of Chaucer, just as today it is seen in the harsh dialects of Lancashire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire as opposed to the more careful and correct speech of the south. Just as today there is a sort of conventional friendly rivalry between north and south which finds expression in humorous references to such things as the apparent lack of sophistication on the part

of northerners as compared to the ostensible excess of that vague quality on the part of their compatriots, so in the fourteenth century such bantering can be seen in literary form. Chaucer, the well-read southerner, makes jokes at the expense of people from the north. He enjoys himself by making the students in The Reeve's Tale speak in northern accents, while the Tales of both Friar and Summoner have a northern flavour. Both are set in the north and show some concern with the depiction of dialect, though not as much as in The Reeve's Tale.<sup>1</sup>

Although there are few literary examples of this kind of humour, it did exist, even in Shakespeare's day, for both Hal and Falstaff in I Henry IV make disparaging remarks concerning the fact that Hotspur is from the north.<sup>2</sup> In the mid-fifteenth century poem The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell<sup>3</sup> the villain, Sir Gromer, refers to his

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<sup>1</sup>G.H. Gerould, The Gawain-Poet and Dante-A Conjecture (PMLA LXXVI, 1961), pp. 7-19. Gerould talks of Dante's Il Convivio which contains a criticism of people who dislike the vernacular. He suggests that the Gawain-poet was doing the same for the West Midland dialect that Dante was doing for the Tuscan. Of The Reeve's Tale Gerould says: "Chaucer the Londoner shows how such dialectical differences struck a contemporary. Alan and John talk like the north country-men they are and add humorous flavour to the story thereby".

<sup>2</sup>See especially Prince Hal's speech, Act II, Sc. IV, l. 100 ff. concerning "the Hotspur of the North".

<sup>3</sup>The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell, ed. Laura Sumner, Smith College Studies in Modern Languages (Vol. V, No. 4, July, 1924).

sister as "that old scott" which is glossed by the editor as 'a term of contempt' but is not listed in any Middle English dictionaries. As this poem was written in the East Midlands, one can assume that the poet is merely indulging in an inter-area joke, such as exist in all countries and at all times.

The Gawain-poet then, in setting the major part of his action in the north, is not only enabled to describe countryside with which the members of his audience were no doubt familiar.<sup>4</sup> He is also able to make local jokes at the expense of people outside of his own area. (In emphasising such things as the excessive courtesy of Gawain and the childishness of Arthur and the rest of the court, he is making fun of what he considers, or pretends to consider, the foppish concern with 'sophistication' among the nobility of southern England. ] It is one of H.L. Savage's chief concerns in his book, to stress the close connections which existed between the castles of the north and the court in London.<sup>5</sup> He says on several occasions that the Gawain-poet was probably familiar with both. Be this as it

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<sup>4</sup>On the relationship between the descriptions of the poem and the Lancashire countryside see H.L. Savage, The Gawain-Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background (Chapel Hill, 1956), pp. 17-18.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. Chapters I and II.

may, however, the fact remains that he chose to write in a northern dialect - one to which his audience presumably had no objection. These people, who had either been born, or had settled in the north, would surely enjoy being entertained by this master of language, speaking the dialect which they possibly spoke and no doubt encountered daily. Whether or not they had been born in the north, they would still delight in his jokes against southerners, as epitomised in the persons of Arthur and his court.

It has to be remembered that Gawain is described as coming from Camelot in the south, and journeying through North Wales and the Wirral, possibly to the very area in which the Christmas festivities in which the poet was involved were taking place. He indulges in another kind of local joke when he says of the Wirral:

wonde þer bot lyte  
 þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied.  
 (701-702)

Savage (p. 7) clarifies the meaning of this reference: "The poet describes the Wirral (the promontory between the Dee and the Mersey in the northwest portion of the county of Cheshire) as a place where there dwelt few who 'either God or fellow-man with good heart loved'. The characterisation was correct; the Wirral (a royal forest and hence the favored resort of criminals and outlaws) was a bad place - so bad that in July, 1376 it was disafforested to permit the entrance of the sheriff of the county".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Savage's note on disafforestation reads:  
 "Disafforestation meant that the laws of the forest (a

I would suggest that there are three possible explanations for this passage. The reference to men who do not love God might reflect a criticism which the people of the south applied to the north in general, and which the poet is deliberately exaggerating in order to turn it back at the latter. It might also indicate a local prejudice - a joke levelled against the Wirral and its inhabitants by the people in the area in which the poet lived. Thirdly, it might even constitute an ironic parallel to Arthur's court who, if they don't actually hate God, certainly limit his importance and ignore the true significance of the festival of the birth of his son.

The poet's humour is again seen when he tells how Gawain, after journeying through North Wales, meets many incredible creatures - the traditional enemies of adventurous knights.<sup>7</sup> But unlike the writer of

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royal forest was not governed by the common law of the land, but by a particular code of its own, 'The law of the forest') were repealed and that the whole of the former forest became subject to the common law and the courts that administered it. It was because Sherwood Forest was free of the common law that Robin Hood and his men lived there".

<sup>7</sup>On 'wodwos' in particular see: H.W. Janson, Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (London: The Warburg Institute, 1952). Richard Bernheimer, Wild Men in the Middle Ages - A Study in Art, Sentiment and Demonology (Harvard University Press, 1952).

*Irish  
Cannon  
p. 90  
right*

The Turke and Gowin<sup>8</sup> in which Gawain also goes to the north and encounters strange creatures, the Gawain-poet mentions the creatures in a completely offhand manner, saying that it would be too tedious to give a detailed account of Gawain's encounters with them:

Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez and with wolues als,  
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarrez,  
Boþe wyth bullez and berez and bores operquyle,  
And etayneþ, þat hym aneledede of þe heʒe felle.  
(720-23)

There are two things which the poet might be doing here. First of all, by treating Gawain's adventures so lightly, he is diminishing the sympathy and admiration which we might still feel for the knight. A similar account of a perilous journey in the romance Sir Orfeo is much more successful in affecting one's feelings for the hero.<sup>9</sup> The other thing which the poet may be doing is taking the barbs which were playfully hurled at his fellow north-countrymen, and by assuming this offhand manner in enumerating the creatures which accost Gawain, turning the reference to his own comic advantage. As has already been mentioned, in The Turk and Gowin, strange beings are found in the north,

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<sup>8</sup>The Turke and Gowin, in The Percy Folio of Old English Ballads and Romances, ed. F.J. Furnivall and J.W. Hales (London: The De La More Press, 1905), vol. 1, pp. 47-58.

<sup>9</sup>Sir Orfeo, ed. A.J. Bliss (2nd ed.; Oxford: 1954), pp. 22, l. 240ff.



and in mythology and legend the north has particular associations with the supernatural. The Devil, in Chaucer's Friar's Tale, tells the summoner that he is from the far north.<sup>10</sup> It is possible then, that in the kind of north-south banterings which are being discussed giants and dragons (creatures with evil connotations) were sometimes jokingly said to actually inhabit the north. By making Gawain encounter such creatures the poet is laughing at those people outside his own area who said that it was inhabited by them, while at the same time retaining a conventional legendary or Romance element. It should be noted that he is no longer referring to the Wirral, but to some area north of there - probably very near to the place where he was reading his poem.

This particular passage can also be seen as possessing allegorical significance, as pointed out by Hans Schnyder (pp. 51-53) who likens the creatures who attack Gawain to the beasts of the Apocalypse. I have no intention here of attempting either to contradict or to elaborate upon the points argued in Schnyder's scholarly analysis. This discussion is merely concerned at present to point out the comic potential which Schnyder's interpretation ignores completely.

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<sup>10</sup> Robinson, op. cit., l. 1413, p. 90.

So much then for the lighter kind of comedy resulting from regional differences. { But Gawain is also more than the representative of the southern court as butt of the poet's lighthearted humour. } It was suggested in chapter one that Arthur's court were only being ostensibly praised. { The question should now be asked as to whether the poet's praise of Gawain is only of such a surface kind. We should consider whether or not Gawain himself partakes of the imperfections of the rest of the court, or whether he is set up as an example to his compeers of what the role of perfect knight involves. }

Several critics have recognised the fact that Gawain can be regarded as a comic figure, but they are reluctant to attribute any satiric intention to the poet. Denton Fox, for example, sees Gawain as "a glorious and slightly ridiculous figure".<sup>11</sup> D.F. Hills sees that he is not perfect, but says that he comes "as near as is possible to the ideal of Christian knighthood".<sup>12</sup> R.H. Bowers puts the same thing in a slightly different way: "He (the poet) depicts Gawain not as perfect in any absolute sense - that

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<sup>11</sup> Twentieth Century Interpretations of GKG, ed. Denton Fox (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968). Introduction p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> D.F. Hills, Gawain's Fault in GKG (Review of English Studies XIV, 1963), pp. 124-31.

kind of perfection is only possible in our Savior - but as perfect as a son of Adam, blemished by venial sin, can be in this transitory world".<sup>13</sup> But what these critics are actually doing is accepting unquestioningly what Gawain would have them believe of himself. In actual fact, Gawain is much less than glorious and more than a little ridiculous.

Before going on to trace the development of the characterisation of Gawain as it appears in the poem, it might be relevant to pause to consider whether or not Gawain is treated as a comic figure in any of the other poems in which he appears. A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500 has the following remarks on this subject:

. . . This noble concept of Gawain as the paragon of Arthurian chivalry predominates in the Middle English romances. Although Gawain's character was blackened as a result of ecclesiastical influence upon the French prose romances and he was contrasted unfavorably with more pious heroes, his glorious reputation remained undiminished in England, except in the stanzaic Morte Arthur and Malory.<sup>14</sup>

However, as Donald B. Sands points out<sup>15</sup> The

<sup>13</sup> R.H. Bowers, GGK as Entertainment, MLQ.XXIV, 1963, pp. 333-41.

<sup>14</sup> A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven, Connecticut, 1967), p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Donald B. Sands, Middle English Verse Romances (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 323-25.

Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell contains a comic treatment of both Gawain and Arthur. Towards the end of this romance Gawain is characterised as uxorious, and is referred to as cowardly:

Gawen louyd that lady Dame Ragnelle,  
 In alle his lyfe he louyd none so welle,  
 I telle you withoute lesyng;  
 As a coward he lay by her bothe day and nyghte,  
 Ther-att meruayled Arthoure the kyng.  
 (805-10)

This romance is, of course, the source of Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale.<sup>16</sup> Gawain is not actually mentioned by name in this tale, but one would assume that the story would be sufficiently familiar for people to associate the knight of the poem with the Gawain of the earlier source. And the picture of Gawain in Chaucer's story is far from flattering. He begins by raping a virgin and during the course of the poem becomes the object of ridicule. His attitude towards the woman he has been forced to marry is a far cry from his attitude in The Marriage of Sir Gawaine, in which poem he is both sympathetic and courteous.<sup>17</sup> In The Avowyng of Arthur, another poem written in the north of England, it is Arthur who comes in for comic treatment, just

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<sup>16</sup>Robinson, op. cit., pp. 84-88.

<sup>17</sup>The Marriage of Sir Gawaine in The Percy Folio, op. cit., pp. 59-66.

as he does in the first fitt of GGK.<sup>18</sup> [ So then, even though Gawain's usual role is that of the romantic hero, he is on occasion treated somewhat differently. As was noted above, in the quotation from the Manual, Gawain's character in French romances was blackened as a result of the influence of the Church. He was contrasted unfavourably with more pious heroes. It is possible that the Gawain-poet, who in his other works adheres closely to religious matters, had heard of this process in French literature. It is even possible that he had read or heard one or more of these tales in which Gawain's reputation suffers by the side of the reputations of more Christian knights. [ Yet in GGK he characterises Gawain as the most pious of all knights. Or, at least, he appears to be doing so. But what I wish to show now is that Gawain's piety is, in fact, very shallow, and that he is not the archetypal hero; in other words, that this poet might be doing the same for the character of Gawain in England, as the Church had done for it in France.

Our first knowledge of Gawain in the poem, aside from the mention of his name in the account of the seating-arrangements at the table, <sup>occurs</sup> is when he rises to offer his services in maintaining the reputation of the Round Table. His first words to the king and court are:

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<sup>18</sup>See Severs, op. cit., p. 64.

I be-seche now with sa3e sene  
þis melly mot be myne.  
(II. 341-2)

But the speech which he subsequently delivers can hardly be said to consist of 'Sa3e sene' ('plain words'). It seems rather to be excessively courteous and circumlocutory - features to which Dorothy Everett assigns the wrong reason:

Naturally courteous in speech, he is exaggeratedly so in his request to Arthur to be able to accept the Green Knight's challenge, for Arthur's prestige has suffered from the insulting behaviour of the Green Knight.<sup>19</sup>

It is wrong to say that Gawain's speech is purely functional here, for it is exactly the same kind as he uses throughout the poem, with the possible exception of the one occasion when the mask slips and he indulges in a diatribe against women (II. 2412-2428).

An excellent analysis of the significance of this speech of Gawain's is that by Jean Louise Carriere, who says that it is an example of what medieval theologians would call 'false Humility'.<sup>20</sup> She quotes St. Thomas Aquinas, who said that false humility is self-abasement to the lowest place, "done merely as to outward signs and pretense:

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<sup>19</sup>Dorothy Everett, The Alliterative Revival, in Twentieth Century Interpretations of GKG, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>20</sup>Jean Louise Carriere, op. cit., p. 30.

wherefore this is false humility, of which Augustine says in a letter (Ep. cxlix) that it is grievous pride, since to wit, it would seem to aim at excellence of glory".<sup>21</sup> Jean Carriere then goes on (pp. 30-31) to show how Gawain's humility is false on two counts:

First, it is unnecessarily hyperbolic. To take the adventure from Arthur, Gawain only had to explain that his life was less valuable than that of the king; no reason for his being preferred over the other knights of the Round Table was needed - after all, they were scarcely fighting him for the honour. Secondly, it may be seen from what follows in the poem that Gawain does not believe that he is the weakest or the feeblest of wit; that is, his speech does not accord with his later thoughts and actions.

If Gawain's humility were real, he would not expect perfection of himself. He would not be surprised by his failures in wit or in strength of character. Yet in the third and fourth fitts of the poem, both characteristics are challenged, and his faith in his abilities is revealed.

What Jean Carriere says of Gawain's speech not according with his subsequent actions, is a sin mentioned in Chaucer's Parson's Tale (I. 480). The Parson says that a man can only be regarded as possessing humility "whan he biknoweth with his owene mouth that he is swich as hym thynketh that he is in his herte". As Jean Carriere points out, this is the exact opposite of what Gawain does. His first speech stresses his lowliness, but his constant

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<sup>21</sup>Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologia, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: 1947), p. 1948.

concern for his reputation indicates that he does not believe or desire this.

The Ayenbite contains a section on false humility, in which mention is made of people who say that they are wicked and sinful in order to be praised by their fellows:

. . .pe vifte is yet more sotil / of ham þet huanne hi willeþ þet me hise praysi / and hi nollep zigge aperteliche: hi hit makeþ a naʒt / and makeþ zuo moche ham milde / and ziggeþ / þet hi byeþ zuo kueade / and zuo onconnynde: þrisipe more / þanne hi by. vor þet me ham herþ / and hyealde: uor wel boʒsam. 'Allas' zayþ saynt bernard 'huer þer me hale ham uor angles. Hy makeþ ham kueade: uor þet me ssolde his hyealde uor good. ne more me ne may ham wreþi: þanne uor to zigge / uor zoþe þou zayst zoþ. To þan belongeþ þe zenne of ham þet zochiþ spekemen ham uor to praysi. and uor to grede hare noblesse / be huas nouþe hi spekeþ / and þe more hardyliche.22

The major portion of this quotation, on the subject of persons who affect humility and strive to emphasise their own sinfulness seems appropriate to Gawain's words and actions. The latter part, about the seeking of 'spekemen' to praise and extol one's virtues might appear somewhat less applicable. There is no evidence that Gawain goes about consciously attempting to inveigle people into singing his praises, but on the other hand, he never shows any sign of disapproval when Arthur's and Bercilak's retainers actually do so. The enjoyment of hearing oneself praised as a good man is characterized by Dan Michel in the

22 Ayenbite of Inwit, op. cit., p. 59.



Ayenbite (p. 25) as the Fifth Bough of the sin of Pride.

According to him the Devil causes man to think his standing with God better than it actually is. Satan causes man to be pleased at hearing himself praised, and makes him desire and seek a good name, not for the sake of God, but merely in order to acquire worldly renown.

Pride in one's reputation for virtue or knowledge is also mentioned in John Mirk's Instructions to Parish Priests, when the author tells the Confessor to inquire of a penitent whether he or she has been proud:

pat no ne3bore ys þe I-lyche,  
Or for þow art a vertues mon  
And const more þen a-noþer con?<sup>23</sup>  
(1152-54)

The extent of the pride of which Arthur, Gawain and the rest of the court seem to be guilty, can again be illustrated by an extract from one of the pieces in Middle English Sermons.<sup>24</sup> The preacher says that men can be guilty of pride in their virtues, their intellects, the strength of their bodies and the extent of their worldly possessions:

. . .men synne in pride in syx maners. Som ben

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<sup>23</sup>John Myrc, Instructions for Parish Priests, ed. Edward Peacock (EETS OS. 31, 1868), pp. 1152-54.

<sup>24</sup>Middle English Sermons, op. cit., p. 50. Another warning as to the manner in which the Devil tempts those possessed of outstanding qualities is found on p. 231 of the same volume.

proude of 3eftes of grace, as ypocrites, þat holden hem-selfe holier þan þei be. Som ben proude of here witt, þat God haþ graciously zeue hem, þat my3th haue made hym a fooll whan hym lykep. Som ben proude of 3eftes of kynde, as of bodely stren3ght or of bodely bewt, and 3itt þe fayrest man þat leueþ and also þe strengest God may make hym ryght fowle and ryght febull lesse þan in an houre. Som ben proude of goodes of forteyn, as happes þat falles to hem, as ryches of worldely good. And so what man þat is proude in anny poynte of pride, he desyreþ hi3nesse a-boven all is oþer bretheren, þat paraunter is to-Godward hi3ere þan he.

Though at first sight it may appear perverse to accuse Gawain of pride when the poet seems to go to so much trouble to idealise him, there is, in the second fitt, and in the remainder of the poem, sufficient evidence to prove that this seeming idealisation is in fact irony. The poet seems to be continuing his game with his audience, scattering his clues here and there in order that his listeners might deduce for themselves the sins and follies of which the apparently perfect knight is guilty.

A crucial passage in gaining an understanding of the subtlety of the poet's irony is the description of the arming of Gawain in the second fitt. The poet paints a vivid picture of the sort of armour and trappings with which the members of his audience were no doubt familiar. However, the very fact that the description is so extensive seems to suggest that the passage constitutes something more than a conventional romance 'topos'. None of the other romances in which Gawain appears contains anything like as

extensive a description, while the account of the arming of Arthur in Morte Arthure extends over a mere fifteen lines.<sup>25</sup>

The Gawain-poet's description of the arming of Gawain is all-inclusive:

penne set þay þe sabatoun3 vpon þe segge fote3,  
His lege3 lapped in stel with luflych greue3,  
With polayne3 piched þerto, policed ful clene,  
Aboute his kne3 knaged wyth knote3 of golde;  
Queme quyssewes þen, þat coyntlych closed  
His thik þrawen þy3e3, with þwonges to tachched;  
And syþen þe brawdren bryne of bry3t stel rynges  
Vmbeweued þat wy3 vpon wlong stuffe,  
And wel bornyst brace vpon his boþe armes,  
(II. 574-82)

And thus it continues for the remainder of the stanza, and for the twenty-eight lines of the next stanza.

But although a vivid description of a knight dressed in the armour fashionable in the fourteenth century, this is very far removed from the ideal of knightly perfection depicted by Chaucer in his portrait of the "verray, parfit gentil knyght" in the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales:<sup>26</sup>

But, for to tellen yow of his array,  
His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.  
Of fustian he wered a gypon  
Al bismotered with his habergeon,  
For he was late ycome from his viage,  
And went for to doon his pilgrymage.

(The General Prologue, II.  
73-8)

Gawain, of course, is just setting out in search

<sup>25</sup> Morte Arthure, op. cit., II. 900-915, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Robinson, op. cit., p. 18.

of adventure, while Chaucer's Knight has just returned from a hard religious war (Gawain's duel, we should note has no religious significance for him). However, were the Knight of The Canterbury Tales setting out for or returning from the wars, it is highly unlikely that he would ever contemplate wearing anything as ostentatious as the helmet which Gawain wears, a detailed account of which is contained in II. 605-18 of GGK. Such an elaborate appendage would be far more suited to the foppish Squire than to his father who:

. . .loved chivalrie,  
 Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.  
 (The General Prologue, II. 45-6)

Nothing could be more inconsistent than to see Gawain, the knight who in the first fitt had pleaded the case for his own insignificance, subsequently decked out with accoutrements which cannot fail to attract attention and (he might well hope), admiring glances. Chaucer's Parson refers to St. Gregory's Homiliarium in Evangelia<sup>27</sup> in criticising ostentation in clothing.<sup>28</sup> He then goes on

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<sup>27</sup> St. Gregory the Great, Homiliarium in Evangelia, ii 40 3, in P.L. ed. Migne Vol. LXXVI col. 1305.

<sup>28</sup> Robinson, op. cit., p. 240: "For certes, if ther ne hadde be no synne in clothyng, Crist wolde nat so soone have noted and spoken of the clothyng of thilke riche man in the gospel. / And, as seith Seint Gregorie, that 'precious clothyng is cowpable for the derthe of it, and for his softenesse, and for his strangeness and degisynesse, and for the superfluitee, or for the inordinat scantnesse of it'. / Allas! may man nat seen, as in oure dayes, the

(II. 431-5) to speak of the sin of equipping horses too magnificently. Gawain's horse, Gringolet, is as strikingly equipped as its rider.

Following the description of Gawain and his horse, the poet goes on to give a detailed account of the knight's shield, and of the device which it bears. The "endeles knot" or pentangle which is painted in gold on the outside of Gawain's shield is the most perplexing symbol in the entire poem. The poet's intention in giving such a device to Gawain has been widely debated, and whole articles have been written on the subject of the shield and its emblem.<sup>29</sup> I am not going to offer any new interpretation of this symbol. Rather, I am content to agree with Jean Louise Carriere in saying that: "The sign 'bytokning of trawpe'

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synful costlewe array of clothyng, and namely in to muche superfluite, or elles in to desordinat scantness?/

As to the first synne, that is in cuperfluitee of clothyng, which that maketh it so deere, to harm of the people; / nat oonly the cost of enbrowdyng, the degise endentyng or barryng, owndyng, palyng, wyndyng or bendyng, and semblable wast of clooth in vanitee; / but ther is also costlewe furryng in hir gownes, so much pownsonyng of chisels to maken holes, so much daggyng of sheres./

(412-17)

<sup>29</sup> See, for example: Richard Hamilton Green, Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection, ELH Vol. 29 no. 2. June 1962, pp. 121-39; Robert W. Ackerman, Gawain's Shield: Penitential Doctrine in GGK, Anglia LXXVI, 1958, pp. 255-65.

(626) represents perfection".<sup>30</sup> But the question has to be asked as to what sort of person would bear such a device on his shield.

H.L. Savage seems puzzled by the fact that he cannot find any examples of pentangles in heraldry. This, however, is hardly surprising, for although medieval knights adopted devices or charges which proclaimed them as strong or even virtuous, it is more than mere conceit to exhibit a charge indicating one's belief in one's own perfection. Books on the subject of heraldry are extremely vague as to whether charges on shields were intended to exhibit qualities which a knight possessed, or to which he aspired.<sup>31</sup> Typical of such vagueness is a statement found in Boutell's Heraldry: "Some took a lion or other beast characterising strength or valour; some took a religious symbol; and many placed on their shields figures forming a play on their names."<sup>32</sup>

From this we might gather that a knight would adopt

<sup>30</sup> Jean Louise Carriere, op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: Boutell's Heraldry, ed. C.W. Scott-Giles and J.P. Brooke-Little (4th ed.; London: Frederic Warne, 1950), pp. 1-12; A.C. Fox-Davies, A Complete Guide to Heraldry (7th ed.; London: Nelson, 1909), pp. 1-26, 57-66, 99-105, 580-99; The Manual of Heraldry, ed. F.J. Grant (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1929), pp. 1-20; A.R. Wagner, Heralds and Heraldry in the Middle Ages (3rd ed.; Oxford, 1939), pp. 12-40, 65-82, 121-35.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

the device of a lion not only to enable himself to be distinguished from other knights, but also to assert his belief in his own strength or bravery. But nowhere in this or in other works on the subject of heraldry is there any mention of knights bearing devices to emphasise their moral superiority over other men, or even of their desire for such superiority.

Even if knights did use figures to indicate their aspirations, this is not what Gawain does. He bears the pentangle to show that he is: "For ay faythful in fyue ane sere fyue sybe3" (I. 632), and to proclaim to the world his belief that he is "voyded of vche vylany" (634). In II. 652-54 we are told that the five lines of the pentangle represent Gawain's perfection in "fraunchyse and fela3schyp . . .clannes and cortaysye . . .and pite". (That is, generosity, love of man, freedom from sin, possession of chivalric virtues, and compassion). In other words, Gawain completely satisfies the requirements of the perfect knight as tabulated by Ramon Lull in the early fourteenth-century work translated into English by Caxton, as The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry.<sup>33</sup> However, not only does Gawain possess such qualities, but he takes great pride in this possession

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<sup>33</sup>Caxton's Ordre of Chyualry, ed. A.T.P. Byles (EETS OS. 168, 1925).

and even advertises the fact in the golden device which he bears on his shield.<sup>34</sup>

This proclaiming of his moral superiority is tantamount to the boasting which is condemned in the Ayenbite.<sup>35</sup> Gawain does not boast verbally as does the 'yelpere' of whom Dan Michel speaks, but his exhibiting of the pentangle seems to be a symbolic means of boasting; similarly, though he does not pay men to extol his virtues, he is far from loth to accept their praises. In his obsession with maintaining a certain image of himself, he is very like the boaster who Dan Michel likens to the Cuckoo, because he can sing only of himself:

þe urþe tuyg / of þe ilke bo3e / huer-by / þe  
proude / sseawep prede / of his herte: is  
yelpinge. þet is / wel uoul zenne / and to  
god: an to þe wordle. þe yelpere is þe  
cockou þat ne kan / na3t zinge / bote of him-  
zelue: þis zenne is ybounde ine þan / þat be  
his o3ene mouþe / him yelpp. oper of his wytte.  
oper of his kenne, oper of his workes. oper  
of his prouesse. Ac he him dobleþ ine ham /  
þet þe yelpere / and þe lozeniour / zechep /  
and redeþ / and yefþ ham of his / uor ham to  
praysi. and uor to zigge of ham: þet ni /  
ne dorre na3t zigge. and uor to lye3e of ham:  
and te grede hare noblesse.

It has to be noted in discussing the pentangle, that we are never told that this symbol was of Gawain's own

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<sup>34</sup>For an examination of the symbolic import of the colour gold see Eagan, The Import of Colour Symbolism in GKG, op. cit., pp. 25-27.

<sup>35</sup>Ayenbite of Inwit, op. cit., p. 22.



Star

Shield  
as pentangle  
as sign of  
perfection 69

conception; it may well have been given him by Arthur or some other patron. However, the very fact that he bears it seems to show that he agrees with the estimation of his character which other people hold. It is just possible that he exhibits the pentangle to illustrate his goal in life, and that other people, including the poet, misinterpret its significance. However, as there is no evidence in the poem for such an assumption, one can only conclude that the pentangle represents perfection, which Gawain believes himself to possess. If it does represent this state of being, then it means that Gawain is elevating himself to the same level as Christ.

star  
Connected with this last point is the idea of the pentangle as star-like. The MS. illustrations to the poem contain no examples of the pentangle, but the diagram which Tolkien and Gordon include in the notes to their edition show that it does actually resemble a star. The star associated with the time of year during which the action of the poem takes place is the star which guided the Wise Men to the stable where Christ was born. Just as the Star of Bethlehem proclaimed the fact that a perfect being had entered the world, so Gawain wishes his star-like device to proclaim the fact that he is a perfect figure. If this is the way in which the poet wished his use of the pentangle-motif to be regarded, then it is, without doubt, the

greatest irony of the entire poem.

An examination of two more connected points involved in the description of the pentangle may help to illustrate further the Gawain-poet's true intention in depicting his central figure. The first of these is the question as to why he refers to Solomon as being the creator of the pentangle, and the second is why he chooses the pentangle rather than some other device. With regard to Solomon, Richard Hamilton Green points out that the poet "could hardly have chosen a more ambiguous patron for Gawain's virtue".<sup>36</sup> Although a figure of perfection, with worldwide fame (3 Kings 4. 29-34) Solomon was also an ambiguous figure in the Middle Ages. As well as being a Christ-figure, the exemplar of wisdom and kingship, and of power over demons, he is in the Bible, and in the exegetical tradition, a flawed figure. Although wise, he is guilty of follies that cost him his kingdom, and though possessing power over demons, he is ultimately their victim, for his weakness for women led him to build temples to them (3 Kings II, 1-9). In the late Middle Ages there was a debate as to whether or not he was saved.<sup>37</sup>

Gawain comforts himself in the fourth fitt of the

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<sup>36</sup> R.H. Green, op. cit., pp. 130-131.

<sup>37</sup> Henri de Lubac, Exercèse médiévale, I (1959) pp. 285-90.

poem by referring to Solomon's weakness for women, also bringing in the examples of Adam, Sampson and David, who were likewise deceived by the wiles of woman (2414-2428). R.H. Green points out (p. 131n.) that the reference to these particular Biblical figures was a conventional means of denoting human imperfection. The Parson's Tale contains a similar reference:

Ful ofte tyme I rede that no man truste in his  
owene perfeccioun, but he be stronger than  
Sampson, and hoolier than David, and wiser than  
Salomon. (I. 955)

Bede's commentary on Proverbs 7. 26 also contains a catalogue of strong men who were deceived by women:

'Et fortissimi quique interfecti sunt ab ea'.  
Ut ipse Salomon sapientissimus virorum, ut  
Sampson fortissimus, ut David mansuetissimus a  
mulierum decipula, ut Origenes ab haeretica  
doctrina, quem post apostolos Ecclesiae  
magistrum fuisse, quandiu recte sapuit, qui  
negaverit, errat. 'Super Parabolas Salominis  
Allegorica Expositio, I vii'. (P.L. 91, 964)

If Solomon is an ambiguous figure, the pentangle which is associated with him is even more so. Gollancz points out in his note to line 620 that according to the OED, this poem is the only work which contains the word 'pentangel'. R. H. Green remarks that it is not found in the Bible, not even in the elaborate decoration of Solomon's temple, though there are several fives and even a pentagon there. Green says that the only place it is associated with Solomon in medieval art and

for the plan is associated  
to the  
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literature apart from GGK is in the books of magic associated with his name and occasionally described as idolatrous books of necromancy. Having summarised his evidence for believing the pentangle to be a magical sign, Green concludes that . . . "in the late Middle Ages in the West, the pentangle was associated with Solomon, and both with magic, in a popular tradition which was condemned by the Church. The Gawain poet's adaptation of the pentangle seems to be wholly original" (p. 131n).

What we seem to have in the description of Gawain's pentangle and its association with Solomon is another example of the poet's irony - in fact the most complex and elusive example in the entire poem. Although apparently describing Gawain as a perfect Christian knight, he associates him with a king who turned away from God and gives him as a symbol of his perfection a sign possessing mystical or magical, rather than specifically Christian connotations. The reference to Solomon serves to emphasise the fact that, whatever he himself may think, Gawain is no more capable of perfection than any other human being.

The significance of the description of the pentangle can be more fully appreciated when we remember that on the inside of his shield Gawain bears a picture of the Virgin - a practice usually associated with Arthur, not Gawain, in

Virgin in shield

the Middle Ages.<sup>38</sup> It would seem that we have a dichotomy here, between Christian and non-Christian symbolism. Inside his shield, Gawain carries a likeness of the Virgin, presumably for inspiration in times of stress, as Arthur is elsewhere described as doing.<sup>39</sup> Yet although he bears this Christian picture for his own inspiration, the badge which he exhibits to the world is essentially mystical or non-Christian, and expresses a non-Christian idea - the belief in his own ability to attain perfection. It is both absurd and non-Christian for this knight, who had earlier expressed such humility, to vaunt his assumed perfection in such close proximity to the image of true human perfection. In showing to the world the symbol of his imagined moral supremacy and hiding on the inside of his shield the symbol of real moral

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<sup>38</sup> See Gollancz's note, op. cit., p. 105.

<sup>39</sup> Middle English Sermons, op. cit., pp. 325-26:  
I rede in Gestis Britonum, et recitat doctor  
Holcote super librum Sapiencie, þat Kyng Artoure  
had in þe innare parte of ys shelde and ymage  
of Oure Lady Mary deprented, beryng a child in  
her armes, þe wiche ymage he wold behold when þat  
he was werry in batell and feynte; and anon for  
conforte and hope þat he had in hure he waked  
freshe and herty a3eyn and in als good poynte for  
to fey3the as he was at þe begynnyng.

See also John Mirk's Festial, op. cit., p. 16  
Mirk says that Mary: "...most redy ys ay to helpe  
all þo þat callyth to hyr yn nede".

greatness Gawain is doing what St. Augustine warned against in one of his Christmas sermons - wishing, in his pride, to be like God, while forgetting that God had, in fact, become man in order to save humanity from the consequences of its own pride:

Tu in latissimo fructuosorum nemorum per dio te perdidisti, obedientiam negligendo: ille obediens in angustissimum diversorium mortalis venit, ut mortuum quæreret moriendo. Tu cum esses homo, Deus esse voluisti, ut perires: ille cum esset Deus, homo esse voluit, ut quod perierat inveniret. Tantum te pressit humana superbia, ut te non posset nisi humilitas sublevare divina.<sup>40</sup>

The Gawain-poet is not doing anything novel in taking a pagan symbol and adapting it to a Christian purpose. He is merely following the advice of St. Augustine, as laid down in On Christian Doctrine.<sup>41</sup> But he is being original in his employing of irony in connection with this transposed symbolism. What Augustine suggests is that pagan symbols (such as the pentangle in our example) can be used in a Christian context, as, for example, to illustrate the ostensible perfection of Gawain. But the Gawain-poet does not simply take a pagan symbol and use it in such a fashion. It is absolutely essential to an understanding of his meaning, that we realise that he is

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<sup>40</sup>P.L. 38, col. 1004.

<sup>41</sup>P.L. 34, col. 65.

not doing this. It has to be remembered that the pentangle is a mystical emblem. Although in the second fitt it is apparently used to illustrate Christian virtues, it is in fact used to show that Gawain, its bearer, is so lacking in humility, and so engulfed by pride, that he is only nominally a Christian.)

In the second fitt, after he has been lost in the bleak countryside, Gawain prays to Mary for refuge and the opportunity to hear Mass in a Christian household, which prayer is granted almost immediately, thereby indicating the power of Mary and the uselessness of Gawain's famed courtesy and perfection without love of, and trust in God. However, following his prayer to Mary, he joins in the Christmas festivities with hardly a thought for the Christian significance of the season. (Just as the festivities in which the poet was taking part might have been largely devoid of any Christian import.) Mary is forgotten as the knight enters into the games of the Christmas season. Gawain goes to Mass, but there is no indication given in the second and third fitts that he is a much more moral person than those with whom he comes into contact at the castle, and therefore any more worthy of the emblem which he so ostentatiously carries about with him.

On the other hand, it may be difficult to see how

Bercilak and his retainers are anywhere nearer being model Christians than are Arthur and his court. They also enjoy themselves at their Christmas feast, drinking, dancing and carolling. There are, however, subtle differences between the descriptions of the two feasts and between the characterisations of the chief personages in each.

Unlike Gawain, Bercilak is not obsessed with the idea of courtesy. As lord of the castle, he is the complete antithesis to Bercilak in his role as Green Knight. In the latter role, he is intentionally brash, but in the former he is the perfect host. His courtesy seems to be a natural part of his character, and because of the absence of a straining after it, we never think of Bercilak as ridiculous. The description of Bercilak as lord of the castle is never undermined by references to childishness, or some such quality, as was the case with Arthur. Gawain's first meal at the castle is, significantly, one of fish. We are never told that Arthur's court fasted on Christmas Eve. Or, if they did, then they probably did so grudgingly, as the poet intimates was the case with the keeping of Lent:

After crysten-masse com þe crabbed lentoun,  
þat frayste3 flesch wyth þe fysche and fode more symple.  
(503-4)

Although the court of Hautdesert celebrate Christmas with dancing and music, there is no mention made of



tournaments, or of pagan tales of the marvellous. They are never described as childish, nor does such an impression ever strike the reader. The references to fasting and to the service in the chapel serve to emphasise the Christian import of the season, while the description of the Christmas feast itself begins with a specific reference to Christ:

On þe morne, as vche mon myne3 þat tyme  
þat dry3ten for oure destyné to de3e wat3 borne,  
Wele waxe3 in vche a won in worlde for his sake;  
So did hit þere on þat day þur3 dayntés mony:  
Boþe at mes and at mele messes ful quaynt  
Derf men vpon dece drest of þe best.  
(II. 995-1000)

It is interesting and important to compare this scene with the initial description of the Christmas festivities at Camelot:

þis kyng lay at Camylot vpon Kryst-masse,  
With mony luflych lorde, lede3 of þe best,  
Rekenly of þe Round Table alle þo rich breþer,  
With ryche reuel ory3t and rechles merþes.  
Per tournayed tulkes by tyme3 ful mony,  
Justed ful jolilē þise gentyle kni3tes,  
Syþen kayred to þe court caroles to make.  
For þer þe fest wat3 ilyche ful fifteen dayes.  
(36-44)

There is no reference here to the religious import of the particular time of year, the emphasis being entirely on the enjoyment of the court. In fact, enjoyment is probably the wrong word to describe their activities. They are not so much enjoyment as sheer indulgence. The poet implies that the members of the glorious Round Table were

Hautdesert  
high place 78

drunk at the Christmas feast:

For þa3 men ben mery in mynde quen þay han mayn drynk,  
A 3ere 3ernes ful 3erne, and 3elde3 neuer lyke.  
(497-8)

Later, at Bercilak's court, Gawain seems to  
continue this distasteful practice of the Round Table:

þat mon much merþe con make,  
For wyn in his hed þat wende.  
(899-900)

Two other factors which distinguish the court of Bercilak from that of Arthur are pointed out by Hans Schnyder.<sup>42</sup> Although Schnyder's view of the journey of Gawain as an allegory of the journey of the human soul is far removed from the present interpretation, what he says of Bercilak's castle can be applied here. On one level, the description of Bercilak's castle, with its many towers and spires, is a conventional 'topos' such as the audience would expect and enjoy. However, as Schnyder observes, the detailed description of the castle in stanzas twelve and thirteen of the second fitt recalls the dreamer's vision of the Holy City in The Pearl - "high-walled, seemingly inaccessible, gleaming, aloft" (p. 55). The name "Hautdesert" means "The High Place" which might denote Paradise, which as Schnyder observes, was traditionally placed on a hill or mountain. He also refers to Piers Plowman and the Ovide

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<sup>42</sup>Schnyder, op. cit., pp. 55-57.

Gawain is famous for 79

Moralisé which both represent the Church as a tower standing on a hill.

But in coming to this High Place, Gawain has not, as Schnyder would suggest, "reached a haven of the spirit" (p. 57). Nor has he "found Jerusalem within himself" (p. 57). There is no evidence in the poem that he has found anything other than physical comfort, and spiritually he is the same person. [Throughout the second fitt he is concerned to maintain his courtesy.] It is important that one realises the nature of the attributes for which Gawain is famous. Bercilak's retinue talk, not of his moral perfection, but of his refined manners, his good breeding, his polite and skilful speech and his manner of addressing ladies:

Vch segge ful softly sayde to her fere:  
'Now schal we semlych se sle3te3 of þewe3  
And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble,  
Wich spede is in speche vnspurd may we lerne,  
Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture.  
God hat3 geuen vus his grace godly for soþe,  
þat such a gest as Gawan graunte3 vus to haue,

ll 415

and thus it continues for another six lines, in the space of which no mention is made of Gawain's moral perfection.

It might be suggested that this impression of the character of Gawain is a mistaken one, and one for which Bercilak's courtiers are themselves to blame. But this is surely the overall impression which Gawain's speech and actions at Camelot in the first fitt were intended to convey. This is also the impression which his actions at Hautdesert

convey. His greeting of Bercilak's wife shows a concern for his reputation for politeness rather than for religious or moral scrupulosity. Such politeness is, of course, compatible with moral goodness. In fact, in the earlier description of the pentangle and its significance 'fel3schyp' and 'cortaysye' are among the qualities represented by the lines of the pentangle. But, in the second fitt, and as will be shown later in the tests of the third and fourth fitts, it is his reputation in the world rather than his standing with God which concerns him most.

While on the subject of Gawain's reputation, it is interesting to note that, despite the great emphasis given to the description of the pentangle by the poet, Bercilak's retainers do not recognise him as a result of the device on his shield. Bercilak, of course, knows who Gawain is, and it is just possible that his retainers also know. Yet they do not acknowledge Gawain as a result of the device he bears, but rather wait for him to introduce himself, after which they praise his social rather than moral attributes.

This failure to appreciate the meaning of the pentangle may actually mean that Bercilak and his retainers are repudiating Gawain's claim to perfection. Even if it is not such a conscious process on their part, the least it can constitute is another hint by the poet that Gawain's

perfection is not as flawless as the knight would have us believe.

The reputation which Gawain tries to uphold at Hautdesert is one of a person possessed of all the social skills. It is in order to enhance such a reputation that he has developed the knack which enables him to please Bercilak's wife in their conversation at the banqueting-table:

Bot 3et I wot þat Wawen and þe wale burde  
Such comfort of her compaynye ca3ten togeder  
þur3 der dere dalyaunce of her derne worde3,  
Wyth clene cortays carp closed fro fylþe,  
þat hor play wat3 passande vche prynce gomen.  
(1010-14)

The words 'play' and 'gomen' are important in the above quotation. They suggest that Gawain and the Lady are indulging in a superficial social game in which the true meaning and significance of human existence have been debased. Gawain is highly skilled in this game and is able to bring forth at will a speech of the utmost politeness:

'Grant merci, sir', quop Gawayn, 'in god fayth hit is yowre3,  
Al þe honour is your awen-þe he3e kyng yow yelde!  
And I am wy3e at your wylle to worch youre hest,  
As I am halden þerto, in hy3e and in lo3e,  
bi ri3t.  
(1037-41)

This speech to Bercilak has the same hollow tone, and is open to the same charge of 'false modesty' as the earlier speech at Camelot, in which Gawain took up the

Knight's challenge.

The Lady also participates in this game, but we are never told, nor is it ever implied that this shallow-mindedness is one of the real features of her personality. She is merely acting a part in the testing of Gawain, and there is no reason to suppose that she is not playing a role in the banquet of the second fitt, just as she is doing in the chastity-tests of the third.

By the end of the second fitt, the more serious kind of satirical comedy has become all-important, and the light humour arising from area differences merely adds to the poem's comic scope without affecting its thematic development. By the beginning of the third fitt Gawain's faults have been exposed as a result of the poet's use of extremely subtle irony. In the latter half of the poem his possession of these flaws of personality is emphasised by the fact that he is tested and found wanting. In the first two fitts Gawain's own speech and actions expose his sins and follies, without much interference from outside sources. In the third and fourth fitts these external influences in the shape of Bercilak, his family and retainers throw further light on Gawain's faults and accentuate their existence. Yet throughout the poem the lightness of tone, absence of didacticism and controlled indirectness of the verse combine to ensure that the work remains a 'gomen' between poet and audience.

## CHAPTER IV

### TRIAL AND VERDICT

This chapter, as its title suggests will be concerned with examining the ways in which Gawain is tested in the third and fourth fitts, and eventually with determining the accuracy of the Green Knight's estimation of Gawain as one of the most faultless men on earth (I. 2363). During this process the idea of the poem as 'gomen' will again be of prime importance, and attempts will be made to illustrate the poet's sustained use of comedy and irony. As in the previous chapters, the points to be made will be backed up, wherever possible, by reference to contemporary or nearly contemporary sources. In order to avoid confusion, the use of twentieth century criticism will be kept at an absolute minimum.

By the end of the second fitt, Bercilak has suggested to Gawain the motif of the Exchange of Winnings, which is usually seen as serving to unite the previous theme of the Beheading Game with the subsequent one of the Chastity Tests. There is one alteration which I would suggest has to be made in this conventional terminology, and that is the omission of the word 'Chastity' since this might well limit one's comprehension of the extent of the

testing which Gawain undergoes. It is better to simply refer at this point to the 'testing' of Gawain, and during the course of the chapter, to examine the various forms which this takes in the poem.

The second fitt concludes on an ambiguous note, with a reference to Bercilak's awareness that good sport is going to ensue:

To bed 3et er pay 3ede,  
Recorded couenaunte3 ofte;  
þe olde lorde of þat leude  
Cowþe wel halde layk a-lofte.  
(1122-25).

The final line of this wheel suggests that Bercilak is in possession of some knowledge of which we are ignorant. (It should be remembered that we are, at this point, unaware of the fact that he is also the Green Knight). Otherwise, why should he look forward with such anticipation to the 'sport' ahead? The final line might be a reference only to his own sport, but the very fact that he has proposed an exchange of winnings with Gawain(who, of course, is going to remain in the castle with the ladies) suggests that this reference is of a wider scope. If we are reading the poem closely then we ought, at this point, to have an intimation either that Bercilak is planning some practical joke, or at least that Gawain is soon to confront some sort of problem. In other words, an aura of suspense is created before the third fitt commences.



Symbolic  
value

85

3 hunts

Part Three, the longest section of the poem, begins with a brief reference to the departure of the other guests, then moves immediately into an extended account of the lord's first hunt. The second stanza contains a plethora of extraneous technical terms which, far from constituting an integral part of the story, are introduced by the poet first of all as pure entertainment - as an appeal to the medieval liking for blood sports. However, just like the earlier accounts of the banquet at Camelot, the arming of Gawain and the appearance of Bercilak's castle, the accounts of the three hunts also have another, symbolic significance.

The parallels between the bedroom scenes and the hunting scenes have been widely noted.<sup>1</sup> A good example of such a parallel is that drawn by Larry D. Benson:

She (the lady) is as intent upon her prey as Bercilak is upon his. Bercilak's pursuit of his quarry becomes a commentary upon the lady's pursuit of Gawain and Gawain's skillful replies become meaningful as the desperate fox 'trantes and tornayez' in parallel fashion, finally attempting to escape through trickery only to fall upon Bercilak's sword.

There are many elaborations upon this theme, and several different ways of understanding the significance of

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<sup>1</sup>Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in GKG (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press; 1965), pp. 158-64, 240-48; J.A. Burrow, A Reading of GKG (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; 1965), 71-112.

*The Hunt*  
*6.00* *70V.*  
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the parallels have been proposed. I have no intention of going into any of these arguments in this thesis. But one point should be emphasised while on the subject of the hunting scenes, and that is the fact that in the final one, Gawain is paralleled to a fox - an animal which was considered a 'low' beast and was rarely hunted in the fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Gawain tries to escape his fate by resorting to an underhanded action, but he is eventually trapped by this very action - a point which will be elaborated upon presently.

Before the lady enters his bedroom for the first time, Gawain is described not only as lying, but also as lurking in his bed. In line 1180 we are told that he: "Lurkke3 quyl þe dayly3t lemed on þe woves".

Tolkien and Gordon gloss the work 'lurkke' as 'to lie snug' but Gollancz's definition has a different meaning: 'lies concealed'. This latter is closer to the meaning of the word as used by Chaucer in The Canon's Yeoman's Tale:

'In the suburbes of a toun', quod he,  
Lurkyng in hernes and in lanes blynde,

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<sup>2</sup>Tolkien and Gordon's note to I. 1699 ff. reads thus: Descriptions of fox-hunting are rare in medieval romance. There is a very brief one in La3amon's Brut (ed. Madden, ii. 451) introduced as a simile of Arthur's pursuit of Childeric.

Whereas thise robbours and thise theves by kynde  
 Holden hir pryvee fereful residence,  
 As they that dar nat shewen hir presence.<sup>3</sup>  
 (II. 657-61)

As used in GGK the word seems to imply a mild criticism of Gawain for lying in bed while his host is out-  
 indulging in the manly pastime of hunting. The animal connotations of the word 'lurkke3' also constitute a foreshadowing of the image-patterns encountered in the remainder of the fitt. [The connection between Gawain alone in the castle and the beasts which are being hunted outside is thus established from the outset.]

His pretending to sleep when he becomes aware of the lady, as well as being funny, also conjures up the idea of an animal threatened with danger, attempting to conceal itself. Just as the hedgehog curls up into a ball, the turtle retreats into its shell or the frog attempts to blend in with its surroundings, so Gawain feigns sleep and hence ignorance of the proximity of the lady.

When Gawain suddenly decides to confront the lady, the description of his waking and stretching can surely be seen in no light other than a comic one.

pen he wakenede, and wroth, and to hir warde torned,  
 And vnlouked his y3e-lydde3, and let as hym wondered,  
 And sayned hym, as bi his sa3e þe sauer to worthe,  
 with hande. (II, 1200-1203)

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<sup>3</sup>Robinson, op. cit., p. 214.

This comic tone is maintained throughout the first two bedroom-scenes between Gawain and the lady. Gawain's naivété when confronted with the advances of the lady is absurd. His protestation that he is unworthy of the privilege which the lady offers him is laughable. The epitome of chivalry is here seen as rambling in a speech which is little short of nonsensical:

'In god fayth', quop Gawayn, 'gayn hit me pynkke3,  
 þa3 I be not now he þat 3e of speken;  
 To reche to such reuerence as 3e reherce here  
 I am wy3e vnworpy, I wot wel myseluen;  
 Bi God, I were glad, and yow god þo3t,  
 At sa3e oper at seruyce þat I sette my3t  
 To þe plesaunce of your prys - hit were a pure ioye'.  
 (1241-47)

Gawain's agreeing to kiss as the lady should command and his subsequent rising and frittering away of the day in eating and playing games are a continuation of the comic tone of the poem. The idea of Gawain paying his debts to the lord of the castle by kissing him is again absurd.

But these comic scenes between Bercilak and Gawain also have more serious overtones. Gawain is adamant in his refusal to inform his host as to the source of the kisses, because 'þat wat3 not forward' (I. 1395) - that is, it was not part of the prior agreement. Yet Gawain forgets all about the terms of his bargain with Bercilak when he accepts and conceals the green girdle in a desperate attempt to

to save his life.

The second bedroom-scene progresses in much the same way as the first, except that Gawain's answers to the lady's questions are now perhaps a little more forthright. The parallel with the boar should not be greatly emphasised, however, since there is no sign of Gawain's counter-attacking the lady through the use of argument. The hunting metaphor is established from the outset, when the poet says that the lady rose early and was soon 'at' Gawain:

Ful erly ho wat3 hym ate  
His mode forto remwe.  
(II. 1474-5)

The comedy of the next scene in which Gawain pays his host the two kisses which he owes him is enhanced by the possible irony in Bercilak's tone when he compliments Gawain upon the treasures which he is accumulating by staying at the castle:

þe lorde sayde, 'bi saynt Gile,  
3e ar þe best þat I knawe;  
3e ben ryche in a whyle,  
Such chaffer and 3e drawe'.  
(1644-7)

The first two bedroom scenes, in which Gawain successfully resists the advances of the lady, serve two functions. First of all, they are funny, and it is surely reasonable to suppose that they would have appeared so to a medieval audience, though such an audience might well consider other things as well; for example, the moral

significance which the poet wished them to see in these episodes, and the extent to which such scenes were traditional or at least similar to others with which they were familiar. Yet Laura Hibbard Loomis ignores such a complexity of response, and particularly distorts the comic nature of the bedroom-scenes:

The poet accents social sophistication; manners are polished, talk is an art. The conversation between Gawain and the lady suggests the advances, the retreats of a courtly dance. Within the set pattern of perfect courtesy, wit meets wit; a gracious comedy of manners is enacted.<sup>4</sup>

It is precisely the things which Mrs. Loomis seems to find so delightful - the sophisticated love-play and the forced, meaningless speech - which the poet seems to be inviting his audience to view as absurd.

The second function of these scenes is to criticise Gawain for struggling to maintain his 'courtaisye' rather than being concerned for the consequences to himself, which would result from adultery with the lady. It is not until the third chastity-test, in lines 1773-74, that the poet mentions sin at all:

He cared for his cortayse, lest crayayn he were,  
And more for his meschef, yif he schulde make synne.

The poet does not permit Gawain to tell the lady that he does not wish to sin. Instead, he himself informs

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<sup>4</sup>Laura Hibbard Loomis, op. cit., p. 21.

Manners E. retain +  
his own +  
his own Manners  
91

us of this fact, through the use of indirect speech. And  
even then he mentions Gawain's care for his courtesy  
before his concern for his spiritual well-being.

Gawain's chief concern when approached by the lady-  
the maintaining of his reputation for courtesy - is a very  
different thing from the moral perfection which many critics  
have seen him striving to maintain. Richard Hamilton Green,  
however, sees these episodes in a somewhat different light:

To read these scenes as if they were a solemn  
exercise of Gawain's chastity, or a demonstration  
of his skill as a courtier who will not, whatever  
the provocation, offend a lady, is to mistake  
game for earnest. This is a gentle mockery of  
manners mistaken for morals, and further evidence  
that Gawain is in fact more vulnerable than he  
knows.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Green does not in fact go far enough in  
referring to the satire merely as 'gentle mockery' but his  
reference to manners being mistaken for morals seems quite  
applicable to Gawain. Although Gawain regards himself as  
a Christian, and carries a likeness of the Virgin within  
his shield, in his relationship with the lady he seems far  
more concerned to avoid violating the mores of his particular  
social class, than with retaining his own moral integrity  
as a Christian.

From the commencement of the third testing of Gawain

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<sup>5</sup>R. H. Green, op. cit., p. 137.

accept 7  
He green girdle.  
92

by the lady, in line 1750, right up to the time when Gawain returns to Camelot (I. 2489) the comic tone becomes somewhat subdued. The gloomy tone with which the account of the third test begins, suggests that it will be more perilous for the knight than the previous tests have been:

In dre3 droupyng of dreame draueled þat noble,  
As mon þat wat3 in mornyng of mony þro þo3tes,  
How þat destiné schulde þat day dele hym his wyrde  
At þe grene chapel, when he þe gome metes.  
(1750-53)

Gawain is no longer seen as naïve or foolish, but rather as human, in his response to the lady's advances, and he is very close to the point at which his resistance must break down:

For þat pryncece of pris depressed hym so þykke,  
Nurned hym so ne3e þe þred, þat nede hym bihoued  
Oþer lach þer hir luf, oþer lodly refuse.  
(1770-72)

However, it is not the chastity-tests which finally bring about the downfall of Gawain. He manages to survive these, but is found wanting by a test of a completely different kind. In accepting the green girdle and in concealing it from Bercilak, Gawain is guilty of two connected sins. In taking the green girdle he is putting his faith in magic and hence forsaking Christianity. In trying to grasp at life in such a fashion he is again showing that he is more concerned with worldly affairs than with his own spiritual good. In concealing the girdle from his host, his guide, and possibly from his confessor, he is



guilty of the sin of lying.

Chaucer's Parson is explicit on the subject of people who place their trust in necromancy:

What seye we of hem that bileeven on divynailes,  
as by flight or by noyse of briddes, or of beestes,  
or by sort, by nigromancie, by dremes, by  
chirkyng of dores, or crakkyng of houses, by  
gnawynge of rattes, and swich manere wrecchednesse? /  
Certes, al this thyng is deffended by God and by  
hooly chirche. For which they been acursed, til  
they come to amendement, that on swich filthe setten  
hire bileeve. / Charmes for woundes or maladie of  
men or of beestes, if they taken any effect, it may  
be peraventure that God suffreth it, for folk  
sholden yeve the moore feith and reverence to his  
name./

(The Parson's Tale, II. 605-7)<sup>6</sup>

This passage is followed immediately by the Parson's analysis of the nature of lies, and a description of the punishments which will be meted out to those people guilty of telling them. Dan Michel, in the Ayenbite similarly connects the forsworn, liars and witches in his section on Apostasy, saying that all sin against their beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

Gawain's action in accepting the girdle in order to prolong his own life is the sort of thing condemned by St. Augustine in Sermon 192:

Hodie 'Veritas de terra orta est', Christus de carne natus est. Gaudete solemniter, et sempiternum diem hodierno quoque admoniti cogitate, æterna dona spe firmissima concupiscite; filii Dei esse accepta potestate præsumite.

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<sup>6</sup>Robinson, op. cit., p. 247.

<sup>7</sup>Ayenbite of Inwit, op. cit., p. 19:

Propter vos temporalis effectus est temporum  
 effector, propter vos in carne apparuit mundi  
 Conditor, propter vos creatus est Creator.  
 Quid adhuc mortales mortalibus rebus oblectamini,  
 et fugitivam vitam, si fieri posset, tenere conamini?  
 Spes longe clarior effulsit in terris, ut  
 terrenis vita promitteretur in cœlis. Hoc ut  
 crederetur, res incredibilior prærogata est. Deos  
 facturum qui homines erant, homo factus est qui  
 Deus erat: nec amittens quod erat, fieri voluit  
 ipse quod fecerat. Ipse fecit quod esset, quia  
 hominem Deo addidit, non Deum in homine perdidit.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of placing his trust in magic, Gawain  
 should have been "constant in adversitee".<sup>9</sup> But unlike  
 Griselda in The Clerk's Tale or the heroes of the East  
 Midland poem, Amis and Amiloun, Gawain is too concerned with  
 what St. Augustine termed the vanities of this transitory  
 life.<sup>10</sup> Like Jonah in Patience Gawain mistrusts God's

Ac specialliche ine þri maneres is man ycleped  
 reney, and uals cristen. oper uor þet he ne  
 beleff / þet he ssolde / ase dep þe bougre: and  
 þe heretik / and þe apostate. þet renayep hire  
 bileaue. Oper uor þat he agelt þe byleaue þet he  
 byleff. Also dop þe uorzuorene. and þe le3ers of  
 þe byleaue. Oper beleff more þanne he ssolde. ase  
 dop þe devines / and þe wichen / and þe charmeresses  
 þet workep be þe dyeules crefte, and alle þo þet ine  
 zuyche þinges yleueþ and dop hire hope: zene3ep  
 dyadliche. Vor alle zuiche þinges byep aye þe  
 byleaue. and þeruore his uorbyet holy cherche.  
 þise byep þe manieres of on-treue / þet is þe  
 uerste bo3 of pryde.

<sup>8</sup>P.L. 38, col. 1011.

<sup>9</sup>The Clerk's Tale, Robinson, op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>10</sup>P.L. 38, col. 1024-25. In this New Year's Day  
 Sermon, Augustine refers to people who believe in magic and

power to save him from worldly danger.<sup>11</sup> This dreading of temporal danger more than the wrath of God is characterised by Dan Michel as the Seventh Bough of the Sin of Pride:

þe zeuende bo3 / of prede / ys / fol drede / and  
fole ssame / huane me let / wel to done / uor þe  
uordle / þet me ne by / yhyealde ypocrite / ne  
papelard / huer me dret more þe uordle: þanne god.  
þe ilke ssame / comp of kueade kuemyng / þet me  
wyle kueme / þe kueade. And þeruore / is hy  
do3ter of prede. and zeuende bo3 / he3liche. and  
makeþ ofte / lete þet guod to done: and do þet  
kuead / uor to kueme kueardliche to þe worlde.<sup>12</sup>

Gawain then, accepts the girdle (I. 1861) and promises to conceal it from his host (I. 1863). However, he is still bound by the agreement with Bercilak, and ought therefore to give him the girdle, just as he gives him the three kisses. But at no time in the poem does such a thought ever enter his mind.) Rather he "Lays vp þe luf-lace" (I. 1874) then immediately goes off to confession.

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are concerned with life's vanities, both of which criticisms might be levelled at Gawain:

Si non credis quod credunt Gentes, non speras quod sperant Gentes, non amas quod amas Gentes; congregaris de Gentibus, segregaris, hoc est separaris de Gentibus. Nec te terreat commixtio corporalis in tanta separatione mentis. Quid enim tam separatum, quam ut credant illi dæmones deos, credas tu qui unus et verus est Deus? sperent illi inania sæculi, speres tu æternam vitam cum Christo? ament illi mundum, ames tu artificem mundi? Quid ergo aliud credit, aliud sperat, aliud amat, vita probet, factis ostendant.

<sup>11</sup>Early English Alliterative Poems, op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>12</sup>Ayenbite of Inwit, op. cit., p. 26.

We are never actually told that Gawain kept the secret of the girdle from the priest, and indeed we are told in line 880 that "he schrof hym schyrly" ('shrove him clean') which would imply that he had concealed nothing from the priest. If he did in fact omit to tell the priest about the girdle then his confession would be invalid since, although he has not yet broken his promise, he has told the lady that he will in fact do so.<sup>13</sup> The poet's remark about his being completely shriven would therefore be yet another instance of irony. One of the questions which John Mirk instructed a priest to ask of a penitent is whether or not he or she has kept all the vows made up to the time of confession.<sup>14</sup> If the priest at Hautdesert asked this of Gawain, then the knight is in a very tenuous position. He has not yet broken his vow to Bercilak, but he has every intention of doing so. Therefore he should confess to the possession of the girdle, since he has already sinned in intention, if not in practice.<sup>15</sup> If he were to tell the

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<sup>13</sup> See John Burrow, "The Two Confession-Scenes in G GK", *M. Phil.* Vol. LVII No. 2., Nov. 1959, pp. 73-9. This is probably the best interpretation of the confession scene at Hautdesert.

<sup>14</sup> John Mirk, *Instructions to Parish Priests*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> *The Parson's Tale*, Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 236, II. 317-319:  
First shaltow understonde that Confessioun is verray

*hypocrisis* 97

priest of his secreting of the article, then the priest could only tell him to offer it up to Bercilak. His subsequent failure to do so would again invalidate his confession.

The stanza hinting at Gawain's false confession closes on an ambiguous note. Gawain is described as having a glow of well-being unlike anything he has exhibited since his arrival at Hautdesert:

Vche mon hade daynté pare  
Of hym, and sayde, 'Iwysse,  
þus myry he wat3 neuer are,  
Syn he com hider, er þis.  
(1889-92)

There is a possibility that this is because he feels his confession to be complete, and indeed we are never specifically told that it was not so. But in the light of what has gone before there is also a very distinct possibility that Gawain is actually living beneath a cloud of false security, confident in the magical powers which he has been told the girdle possesses.

The hypocrisy which seems to be hinted at here is made rather more obvious in the fourth fitt, in Gawain's

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shewynge of synnes to the preest. / This is to  
seyn 'verray' for he moste confessen hym of alle  
the condiciouns that bilongen to his synne, as  
ferforth as he kan. / Al moot be seyde, and no  
thyng excused ne hyd ne forwrapped, and noght avaunte  
thee of thy good werkes./

tell the  
guide abt the  
green girdle (98)

self-righteous remarks to the guide, who has offered to remain silent if Gawain wishes to opt out of his bargain with the Green Knight at this late stage. The guide, of course, is yet another means of testing Gawain. And the only way in which Gawain could come safely through such a test would be to confess the fact that he is there under false pretences, and tell the guide about the green girdle. Instead he launches into a speech of fourteen lines in which he decries cowardice in a knight and says that he has faith in God's power to save his servants - all this while wearing the green girdle about his person:

Bot I wyl to þe chapel, for chaunce þat may falle,  
And talk wyth þat ilk tulk þe tale þat me lyste,  
Worþe hit wele oþer wo, as þe wyrde lyke3  
hit hafe.

þa3e he be a sturn knape  
To sti3tel, and stad with staue,  
Ful wel con dry3ten schape  
His seruante3 for to saue.

(2132-39)

Even when the guide has left him, Gawain still refuses to mention the girdle, and even goes so far as to say that he is entirely obedient to God's will and has committed himself to Him:

'Bi Godde3 self', quop Gawayn,  
'I wyl nauper grete ne grone,  
To Godde3 wylle I am ful bayn,  
And to hym I haf me tone!.

(2156-9)

It may well be true that Gawain is trusting partly in God, but he must surely also be aware of the supposed

protective powers of the girdle. He was certainly careful not to forget it when dressing in the morning, and as the poet informs us, he wore it not for its worldly value or beauty: "Bot forto sauen hym-self, when suffer hym by-houed" (I. 2040).

When Gawain eventually gets to the Green Chapel, and the poet has treated us to a marvellous moment of anti-climax when Gawain observes that it is "nobot an olde caue", his final words before shouting his challenge to the Green Knight are again expressive of confidence in the power of God:

Let God worche; we loo,  
Hit helppe3 me not a mote.  
My lif pa3 I for-goo,  
Drede dot3 me no lote.  
(2208-11)

Thus even when on the brink of meeting what might well be his end, Gawain expresses faith in the power of the Christian God while hiding his possession of and his hope in a non-Christian magical talisman. Gawain has not only lied to Bercilak and the guide, and possibly the priest, but he is now lying to himself in refusing to recognise One of the reasons why he is hopeful and confident. He is also prepared to lie to the Green Knight in not keeping the bargain as it was originally formulated, but rather meeting him under false pretences. These many facets of the guilt of a liar are mentioned by Dan Michel who compares the liar

to the devil, changing in many ways in order to beguile people:

þe lye3ere is amang þe men: ase þe ualse peny  
amang þe guode. ase þet chef: amang þe corn.  
þe lye3ere is ylich þe dyeule. þet is his  
uader. ase god zayþ ine his spelle. Vor he  
is ly3ere / and uader of leazinges / ase he þet  
made þe uerste lea3inge. and yet he hise makeþ /  
and tekþ eche-daye.<sup>16</sup>

The penultimate scene of the poem - the confrontation between Gawain and the Green Knight - is a skilful fusion of comic and supernatural descriptions. Gawain's reference to the Green Chapel as 'þe corsedest kyrk þat euer I com inne' (I. 2196) is a continuation of the comic tone encountered in the previous reference to the Chapel as like an old cave. Then comes an immediate transition in lines 2200-11, in which the poet evokes an atmosphere of the supernatural in his description of the noise which Gawain hears.

The challenge which Gawain flings forth is only comic in that it reveals that Gawain still retains his pride, referring to himself as a good knight:

'Who sti3tle3 in þis sted, me steuen to holde?  
For now is gode Gawayn goande ry3t here,  
If any wy3e o3t wyl, wynne hider fast,  
Oper now oper neuer, his nede3 to spede'.  
(2213-16)

Next we have the comic / grotesque picture of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ayenbite of Inwit, op. cit., p. 62.



Green Knight rushing out of a nook in the rocks, wielding a huge axe which he leans on while hopping over a stream, before advancing fiercely towards Gawain.

The humour disappears for a while during the time that the Green Knight aims the first two blows at Gawain, the poet being content merely to concentrate upon the creation of an aura of suspense. However, it returns after the third stroke, when Gawain has been grazed in the neck.<sup>17</sup> For fifteen lines the poet gives an account of Gawain's pulling on of his helmet, and his warning the Green Knight not to strike again. But instead of answering Gawain in an equally excited tone, the Green Knight merely stands back and leans nonchalantly upon his axe, and eventually speaks in a merry tone, explaining the way in which Gawain has been tested and found wanting. The cut in the neck has been given him because he was not capable of suffering patiently, as recommended, for example, by Chaucer's Parson.<sup>18</sup> He has refused to accept the

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<sup>17</sup>On the significance of Gawain's being wounded in the neck, see Schnyder, p. 72.

<sup>18</sup>The Parson's Tale, Robinson, op. cit., p. 249, II. 658-60:

Pacience, that is another remedie agayns Ire, is a vertu that suffreth swetely every mannes goodness, and is nat wrooth for noon harm that is doon to hym./ The philosophre seith that pacience is thilke vertu that suffreth debonairely alle the outrages of

inevitability of death and prepare for the event, as recommended in the poem Man, know Thyself, and Learn How to Die,<sup>19</sup> or in the following stanza from Treat with God of Love and Peace:

Man, þou wost wel þou shalt dy3e;  
 What dep, ne where, þou nost whenne.  
 And synnes wolde þy soule ny3e,  
 Ay more and more rerage we renne,  
 And sodeyn dep nyl no man kenne.  
 I rede we drede domesday;  
 Be euene wiþ world er 3e gon henne,  
 ffor pere schal be no iour delay.<sup>20</sup>

Thus far, we have discussed the nature of the various tests which Gawain undergoes. The final step now is to consider the Green Knight's ultimate evaluation of Gawain's character: "On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede" (2363).

We have also to decide what would have been the verdict which the poet intended his audience to reach on the subject of Gawain's character. The ending of the poem is extremely puzzling. It is usually thought that Gawain

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adversitee and every wikked word. / This vertu maketh a man lyk to God, and maketh him Goddes owene deere child, as seith Crist. This vertu disconfiteth thyn enemy. And therefore seith the wise man, 'If thou wolt venqussse thyn enemy, lerne to suffre'.

<sup>19</sup> Man, know Thyself, and Learn How to Die, in Twenty-Six Political and Other Poems, op. cit., pp. 27-31.

<sup>20</sup> Treat with God of Love and Peace, ibid., p. 34.

reaches self-awareness after his final testing by the Green Knight, and that he then returns to Camelot, where the court join him in acknowledging their faults. Charles Moorman says that:

. . .the journey of Gawain to the domain of the Green Knight amounts, in mythical terms, to a 'rite de passage' by which Gawain is initiated into a full understanding both of himself and of the values by which he lives and, by way of that knowledge (to return to the terms of the poem), to an understanding of the true nature of the chivalry of Arthur's court.<sup>21</sup>

This seems unsatisfactory for several reasons. First of all Gawain is seen as a ridiculous figure when he declaims against women (II. 2413-28) and he is also rather uncivil in refusing to return to Bercilak's castle to meet his aunt, Morgan la Fay (I. 2471). His pride results in resentment at receiving correction<sup>22</sup> while he is both sorry for and angry at his humiliation.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Charles Moorman, Myth and Medieval Literature: GGK, Medieval Studies, XVIII, 1956, pp. 158-72.

<sup>22</sup>Middle English Sermons, op. cit., p. 68.  
When on chalouns you, þan it is a comon seyinge of þe pepull, '3e latt God and me a-lone'. þei þenke hem-selfe so wurthy þat þey will not be correcte of no man. 3e may not do so. Why? For God is suche a domes-man þat þou may not flee from hym - as þe prophete seis, 'Quia neque ab oriente, neque ab occidente, neque a desertis montibus, quoniam Deus iudex est'.

<sup>23</sup>The Parson's Tale, Robinson, op. cit., p. 243, II. 499-500.  
Agayn God it is, whan a man grucceth agayn the peyne of helle, or agayns poverte, or los of catel, or

Yet in spite of this, Bercilak refers to him as one of the most faultless of men. However, some time after this eulogy, Gawain is again treated comically by the poet, when he blushingly relates the account of his adventures to his companions at Camelot. The reaction of the court is perplexing. In laughing at Gawain and his excessive embarrassment, they might simply be trying to cheer him up, or their laughter might be a more nervous kind, resulting from the fact that they are unable to appreciate the significance of the testing which he has undergone. In adopting the emblem of the girdle, they might be acknowledging their own transgressions, or they might be treating the entire issue as a game - an extension of the term 'interlude' which Arthur applies to Gawain's first confrontation with the Green Knight. The lines in which the poet recounts the adoption of this emblem are highly ambiguous:

Vche burne of þe broþer-hede a bauderyk schulde haue,  
 A bende a-belef hym aboute, of a bry3t grene,  
 And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were.  
 For þat wat3 acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table,  
 And he honoured þat hit hade, euer-more after.  
 (2516-20).

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agayn reyn or tempest; or elles grucceth that  
 shrewes han prosperitee, or elles for that goode  
 men han adversitee. / And alle thise thynges sholde  
 man suffre paciently, for they comen by the  
 rightful juggement and ordinaunce of God./

The question to be asked here is whether or not we are meant to assume from the last two lines above that the green girdle was adopted purely as a result of the pride of the court - as a means of spreading their fame.

Jean Louise Carriere feels that the members of the Round Table do learn something in the poem: ". . .one of the poet's major accomplishments is to demonstrate the meaning of Christmas to his audience by initiating the members of the Round Table who appear in the poem into that same knowledge".<sup>24</sup> My own view is that it is the purpose of the poem to reveal to the audience the true significance of Christmas, but whether or not Arthur and his court partake of this enlightenment is somewhat doubtful.

It seems that there are four possible ways of regarding the progress of Gawain and the court through the poem. The first is to say that both parties become aware of their sins, and adopt the girdle as acknowledgement of them, which is the view taken by Schnyder and other critics. The second possibility is that neither Gawain nor the court realises the true significance of the testing which occurs in the poem. The third is that Gawain doesn't fully realise its significance whereas Arthur and the court do, which is the position taken by Jean Carriere. Finally, we have

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<sup>24</sup>Jean Louise Carriere, op. cit., p. 27.

the converse of this - the possibility that Gawain realises the importance of what has happened to him, whereas Arthur and his knights do not - hence their laughter at Gawain.

It has been one of the major aims of this thesis to show that Gawain is not as perfect as he thinks himself to be. Yet, on the other hand, he is almost completely devoid of really evil intentions. In this he is one of the most faultless of men, as the Green Knight observes. But, even such a man can act for the wrong motives and, as has been shown, can often be seen as foolish, and sometimes as downright ridiculous. Also, the fact that he takes such pride in his character, and continues to do so throughout the poem, is itself a sin.

My own feeling is that the poet is actually playing an elaborate 'crystemas gomen' with his audience. The simpler type of comedy and the various extended descriptions are elements easy enough to recognise, as is the creation of an atmosphere in which supernatural events are not out of place. These are the kinds of things which the audience might expect to find in a Christmas poem. But with the characterisations of the members of the Round Table, the game becomes much more elaborate. It seems that all the knights are joined together at the end, in acknowledgement of their faults, and it appears that better things are to be expected of them. However, on closer reading, it seems

that the poet is still pursuing his policy of undermining any seriousness which might be attributed to the actions of Arthur and his knights.

Perhaps this is a sort of final warning on the part of the poet. He is telling his audience that it is possible to make people aware of their pride, but they will continue to ignore the warning, even when they are aware of its consequences. What he wants them to do is to control their pride, even if Arthur and Gawain are unable to do so, and consequently to realise the true import of the Christmas festivities in which they are taking part.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of the fact that an attempt has been made in this thesis to collect as much contemporary or nearly contemporary material as possible, and to avoid becoming embroiled in the debates which have arisen over GKG in the twentieth century, mainly as a result of subjective criticism, a difficulty of interpretation still remains.<sup>1</sup> The notes to Hans Schnyder's monograph show that he too has adopted a similar method, and yet come up with a very different reading of the poem.<sup>2</sup> This leads one to question whether or not the members of the original mediæval audience would also differ in their views. It is possible that they might see both the allegorical meaning which Schnyder concentrates upon, and the comic potential which I have attempted to elucidate.

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<sup>1</sup>Critical Studies of GKG, ed. Howard and Zacher contains a wider range of essays than Twentieth Century Interpretations of GKG, ed. Denton Fox, but the latter possesses the advantage of containing a selected bibliography (p. 115). The fullest bibliography for anyone wishing to read a cross-section of the disparate opinions on the poem is to be found in A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, ed. J. Burke Severs, op. cit., pp. 75-81.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Schnyder, GKG - An Essay in Interpretation, op. cit., pp. 75-81.



Whatever the case, critics such as Robertson<sup>3</sup> and Schnyder would have us believe that the medieval mind could not possibly conceive of as many separate interpretations as the twentieth century mind has done. This I would entirely agree with, but it is nevertheless wrong to limit the potential interpretations to a very small number. I suggested at several points during the course of my arguments that the poet's audience might have a clearer comprehension of his meaning than we have today, simply because they were familiar with his style of delivery, his use of irony, description, etc. But they were not accustomed to his presenting them with poems such as GGK - at least, we have no other surviving examples of his work which are remotely akin to the poem. Pearl is open to diverse interpretations, and is skilfully written, but it is entirely different from GGK. GGK is also very different from other Romance poems, which stress the heroic rather than the comic and ironic. A person familiar with other stories of Gawain as exemplary hero could scarcely be blamed for trying to fit the chief personage of GGK within this set pattern. But such a person would also be capable of recognising irony which, as the works of Chaucer show, was far from unknown in the fourteenth century. He

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<sup>3</sup>D. W. Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962, pp. 3-51.

would therefore, have to arrive finally at the realisation that the picture of Gawain with which he is being presented is not in fact the usual one. Having arrived at the realisation that irony is being employed, his personal view of the poem might then resemble that of Schnyder, or it might be more akin to my own. Or, more important still, it might well have been something far removed from either of these views.

Supposing then, that among the members of the original audience, several ideas as to the meaning of the poem existed. Nevertheless, certain factors would remain constant. The stress on the pride of Gawain, which figures as prominently in Schnyder's interpretation as in my own is the obvious example here. The number of occurrences of the theme in the medieval literature which remains to us must surely indicate that it is a subject with which the poet's audience would have been very familiar. If one concentrates upon this theme of pride, and pursues it to its logical conclusions, then the range of interpretations must necessarily be contained within reasonable boundaries.

The poet is playing a highly complex game in GGK. He is giving his audience a traditional theme - the chivalrous knight going out in search of adventure - and treating it in a new way. He includes extended passages of description and brings in several kinds of humour with

the objects of entertaining and perplexing before enlightening. Perhaps the medieval audience would have been better prepared than ourselves for solving the puzzles of the poem, since they had been brought up in the Augustinian tradition of separating the meaning of the work from its outer form, of looking through the surface for its true significance, of separating the fruit from the chaff.

However, I would suggest finally that there is one problem which would have proved as insurmountable to the medieval audience as it has to present day critics. This is the question as to the significance of the adoption of the green girdle by Arthur and the Round Table. At the end of the last chapter I mentioned four possible interpretations of this particular action. None, however, is entirely satisfactory. The final example of symbolism seems intended to connect Gawain and the rest of the court in some way; but whether it is meant to indicate their union in folly, self-knowledge or some other abstract state of being is impossible to determine.

Obviously, I would say that the second view of the situation is the most applicable, as it is the most amenable to my own interpretation of the poem. But a nagging feeling of dissatisfaction still remains, because it cannot be immovably cemented to the reading which preceded it. One is reluctant to say that a poet who created such a multi-

faceted work of art could, right at the end of that work, be guilty of allowing a flaw to tarnish the surface of that masterpiece. But if he did not do so, then the present interpretation must terminate with the opinion that the description of events subsequent to Gawain's return to Camelot constitutes a deliberate ambiguity. The purpose of this is to perplex his audience and possibly to lead them to a deeper consideration of the poem. This may seem an unsatisfactory way in which to conclude a great poem, but it has to be remembered that the Gawain-poet, no matter how constricted the age in which he lived, is a highly individual creative artist. Throughout the poem his real meaning has been far from obvious, and the irony is sustained right up to the end. A conventional romance ending, with the hero returned safely, and the invocation to Christ, really means something entirely different, and this hidden meaning might well be akin to that mentioned at the close of the last chapter.

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