

A READING OF "SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT" AS A SPIRITUAL
THEOLOGY OF IMPERFECTION

A THESIS

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I dedicate this work to my loving wife, Andrea Elizabeth, who gives meaning to everything I do.

ABSTRACT

This thesis presents the findings done from investigating the spiritual theology of the fourteenth-century English poem, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” Firstly, the poem is situated within its medieval context. Specifically, the teachings of medieval mystics on the spiritual journey is examined. Secondly, the poem itself is considered in greater detail. The journey of one Christian, a knight from Arthur’s court, Gawain, is explored. The life-altering challenges and failures faced by the protagonist are studied, as are the relationships Gawain has with those around him. His practice of Christian piety and virtues are also central to who he is, how he relates to others, and what he learns, or fails to learn, on the journey. Lastly, then, the thesis draws conclusions from all this information as to the spiritual teaching contained within this poem. The knight’s stubbornness and apparent inability to come to terms, at least in the immediate aftermath, are regarded as central to the *Gawain*-poet’s determination of the spiritual life. This determination is that the inner reality of a person is more important than the outer *persona*, and that the roles that one plays can become quite constricting to the spiritual life, especially when failure—or what is regarded as failure—is not an option. This thesis concludes that the poem presents us with a teaching on the risks of leading a spiritual life wherein the person attempts to act perfectly.

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Introduction

This thesis aims to uncover and explore *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* teachings on Christian spirituality (henceforth, the poem shall be referred to simply as *Gawain*). Specifically, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that its particular reading of the poem discloses a spiritual theology of imperfection.

In fact, the poem offers much to this reading: The *Gawain*-author seems to delight in the paradoxes and uncertainties of life. If anything, the author himself¹ seems the trickster figure--not unlike the personage of Morgan le Fay in the work. Paralleling the latter, the poet enjoys throwing doubt on certainty, challenging simplistic views of divine grace, and shooting a not-quite-but-almost-perfect Christian figure down into the mud of weakness and fear. Our fallen knight learns, much to his chagrin, of his all-too-human imperfection. This provides a lesson for us all.

This thesis will frequently emphasize the notion, proffered by the poem itself, that Christian rebirth/transformation involves elements much greater than the individual can comprehend. Such a rebirth lies not only outside of the control of the person, but entails much irony, many twisted paths, and, not least of all, plentiful divine grace. The *Gawain*-poet has created a good-humored poem that pokes fun at those of us who take ourselves and our ideals too seriously. Each human must inevitably experience the Quest--doing so without

inflexibility and narrowness of vision. Christians must reject any need for perfection, and must view the spiritual life as open-ended. Sin rears its ugly head when one fails to heed this wisdom.

Ever the quick-witted spiritual guide, the *Gawain*-poet explores the various issues around conversion. Transformation can occur at both the individual and societal levels. The *Gawain*-poet seems interested in the relationship between the transformed individual and the community. In the two tests of chivalry, the Beheading and Wooing Games, Gawain, as Arthur's greatest knight, represents the entire court of Camelot. In this way the author demonstrates an obvious interest in the societal aspect of Christianity.

Yet ultimately the topic of the spiritual theology of imperfection, as discussed in this thesis, will emphasize the individual's journey—because I am choosing to uncover the poem's teachings on the journey of the individual. This viewpoint is supported throughout the work by much information on the solitary journey. For instance, it was Gawain who rode out alone from Camelot's gate, who traveled alone through the wilds, and who alone of all those from Camelot put his neck on the chopping block—with no partisans in sight. The poem emphasizes the Christian journey of transformation as a solitary and very lonely journey. Camelot and Castle Hautdesert's court hold importance only in their shaping of one person's Quest. As we will see, at the end, Arthur's court does not seem to fully grasp or accept Gawain's experience. The hero thus remains alone in the misery his newfound self-knowledge has created.

The hero needs his painful adventure to bring important aspects of his faith to life. He needs to experience and accept sobering conditions of Christian spirituality that demonstrate his humanness. The author has our hero perform such an adventure largely by way of the

hero's failure to exercise his adopted virtues. These virtues reside in the difficult if not impossible relationships he sustains with people on this adventure. Perhaps the most painful element of this journey for Gawain centers on his realization that he can no longer rely so completely on his certainties—on his virtues and, specifically, his devotion to Mary.

At the end, neither Gawain nor the reader can form a sentimental view of the Christian life; these virtues harden into superstition or meaninglessness, or become dangerous delusions, when used as mere signs or as another piece of the knightly armor that protects the one inside; they possess a force of their own. And even one's devotions forever bear imperfection: One must rely on more than one's works and commitments to the spiritual life, for these remain as imperfect as the person practicing them.

I do not argue that the *Gawain*-poet intentionally wrote this work primarily to present a spiritual theology, that is, as a teaching on the ins and outs of the spiritual life for the Christian reader. I liken my reading of the poem to how an archeologist unearths bits and pieces from the past and from that work offers one or more hypotheses. In my reading, I hope to unearth various fragments of evidence—some of which form central elements of the story, some of which do not—and tie them together to produce a coherent picture of the poem's spiritual teaching or teachings.

I concern myself less with the contents of faith about which the author wrote (that is, I am not interested in the poem's contribution to the Christian heritage as a systematic theology), and primarily with the poet's teachings on the necessary attitude one must take to life if one is to grow spiritually—if one is to deepen one's relationships with and understanding of oneself, God, other humans, and the rest of Creation. In reading the poem's teaching on the Christian spiritual life, I am going beyond the author's abstract theological

speculations, and examining how he applies Christian beliefs to concrete experiences.

Anthropology, that is, the poet's thoughts on human nature, bear importance. The author has a great ability to allow the reader into the world of Gawain, and it is here that we can discern such an anthropology.

As we shall see, at the poem's beginning the virtues and devotions of Gawain seem hollow; untried, they carry little meaning or power. Yet he does take these things seriously. If anything, he remains too serious, the only one in the entire story who never seems to laugh and enjoy himself. Because his adopted virtues and devotions are hollow, he "absolutizes" them, making them into gods. He does not yet see that the virtues, like all of life other than God, is imperfect, that all of life is relative, including his personal values.

In this Quest, Gawain leaves the world of the virtues-oriented innocent for the world of a more mature yet somewhat world-weary adult who understands, finally, the complexities of these truths. Truth, Gawain and the reader find out, is neither easy nor simple. *Gawain* is a poem of spiritual awakening.

The Spirituality of Imperfection, co-authored by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, has exercised a major influence on how this thesis reads *Gawain*, on how we can define "spirituality" and "spiritual imperfection." The major premise of Kurtz and Ketcham is that errors and shortcomings, rather than things we must avoid, actually play a vital, irreplaceable role in one's spiritual journey.² That journey holds little integrity or zest without such seemingly negative realities. We are most human, according to this stance, when we fully face these issues--in their words, when "we confront our helplessness and powerlessness, our *woundedness*."

Denial, then, presents a grave obstacle on the journey. We frequently regard failure, dark areas, neuroses, and hurtful emotions as obstacles to better living. However these are, in reality, not obstacles but opportunities. True, these traumas and painful difficulties present us at our most vulnerable. But they therefore offer us the greatest opportunities for deeper living. Thus our reactions to them, specifically our inability to confront them, become the real spiritual issue. These troubling areas carry much importance, and so the authors go so far as to define spirituality itself as *seeing*, *understanding*, and *accepting* these imperfections. Our attitude towards such blemishes play such a central role because imperfection “lies at the very core of our human *be-ing*.”³

This notion of spirituality applies to my reading of *Gawain*. Our hero seems to use his religious practice as a way to avoid confronting life’s gray areas. This thesis will investigate how Gawain plays the role that he does in order to avoid confronting his own humanity. His piety prevents him from living from his woundedness, since, until the very end, he does not seem to struggle with his journey at the core of his very identity or being. He simply answers all challenges from his religiosity (that is, from his pious devotions and his attempt to live the Church-authorized virtues).

In other words, any struggle that he undergoes provokes him to attempt to maintain equilibrium: He aims to solve every unsettling situation that he faces not by allowing that instability to overtake him or teach him. Rather, he seeks to control each challenge--to courteously subdue the lustful woman, to rectify the tension at Camelot at the beginning after Arthur has lost his temper, or to avoid even admitting to his great sin and his fears when preparing himself for the final journey from Castle Hautdesert to the Green Chapel.

Gawain has too much morality. By that I mean that he lives not from his center of woundedness and humanity, but from a series of *shoulds* that he has learned from the ecclesiastical hierarchy and courtly society. His reactions to the various stressors of life remain, unfortunately for his spiritual growth, formulaic. The task that he faces on this particular journey from Camelot out to the Green Chapel *via* Castle Hautdesert center around his need to live more authentically, more from the core of his very being. Rather than shielding himself from the challenges he faces, he must meet them from somewhere deeper within.

Gawain's journey calls forth the need for a paradigm shift, a transformation from the hero being virtues-oriented to being centered from his being, from his soul. Kurtz and Ketcham's words speak of this paradigm shift:

The first supposition that requires revision is the belief that spirituality involves perfection. Spirituality has to do with the reality of the here and now, with living humanly as one is, with the very real, very agonizing "passions of the soul."⁴

In the spiritual journey, in other words, we begin to realize the extent to which we are really strangers from ourselves. We thenceforth live from a new depth, from a part of ourselves we had not known to exist—a piece with previously unknown needs, desires and identities. Gawain's pain arises largely from his new learning. He has met the area of himself from which he had been estranged, and has consequently come to see himself in a deeper, enlightening sense. In the end, his journey holds authenticity. It is not surprising that he feels so uncomfortable: His old, familiar circumstances have vanished in an instant, replaced by something seemingly less comforting.

One might perceive the outlook of this thesis as "Pauline," or as something one could term as "sixteenth-century Protestant." This judgment may come from three places: (1) My

criticism of Gawain's need for the sacramental reality (and reassurance) of the Church; (2) my resulting reproach on the hero's inability to discover any individual identity or values; and (3) my possible or even apparent reading into the poem of the inevitability of original sin to weigh down and crush any attempt of the individual to solve his or her problems. I argue that such a judgment on this thesis would be too simplistic an interpretation of my own argument (for instance, I take a chapter to establish that countless medieval mystics and spiritual teachers emphasized the utter dependence of the individual on divine grace), and unfair to the complexities of the medieval world, where a great diversity of theological (and other) opinions held sway.⁵

Thus one cannot assume that fourteenth century European Christianity did not contain the seeds of a later, Protestant thinking, for surely the Protestant reformers had been influenced by that which came before—Luther, for instance, by Bernard of Clairvaux, John Tauler, and the *Theologica Germanica*, the latter two of which came from the late medieval period in which *Gawain* was written.⁶ One cannot assume, therefore, that all fourteenth century Christian intellectuals would place their whole faith in Mother Church and good works, including the good work of depending on Mary. We can therefore assume that the *Gawain*-poet was as able to critique, albeit indirectly, the late medieval reliance on Mother Church and, perhaps, the overly-excessive morals-based religiosity—just as Calvin, Luther *et al* would be doing less than two hundred years later (not to mention the “proto-Protestants” Jan Hus (d. 1415) and John Wycliff (1325?-1384), both of whom had lived during the same time as the *Gawain*-poet, and both of whom had enjoyed popular support⁷).

Thus Chapter Two, “Ideals 1: Virtues and the Spiritual Journey,” outlines medieval Christian spirituality, aiming to demonstrate the diversity of opinion concerning, in

particular, various teachings on the Christian virtues. It also aims to show that medieval spiritual teachers emphasized, much like the Protestant teachers of the sixteenth century, that without the gift of divine grace, all was hopeless. This is, ultimately, a major lesson for Gawain, one that humbles him to such a degree that the reader can never be sure whether our hero will overcome his malaise.

Let me state three things this thesis will not try to accomplish. While literary critics' thoughts on *Gawain* raise important questions for any consideration of the poem, this project will not itself attempt any literary critique. Any discussion of style will play a minor role. For example, the poem's interesting vocabulary and alliterative style will remain of secondary importance. Conversely, literary critics advance very helpful insights into the meaning of various symbols, such as the pentangle and girdle, the weather, the hunts as commentaries on the bedroom scenes, and countless other central issues.

Secondly, unlike many works on *Gawain*, this project will not discuss the other poems found in the same manuscript. *Gawain* by itself offers an engaging-enough challenge. Lastly, while the wider medieval literary history can enrich any discussion of the poem, this present argument already risks offering too expansive a discussion, and so concepts of chivalry or the *Gawain*-poet's plausible sources for the Beheading and Temptation Games remain subordinate. A discussion of early medieval European mythology lies at the outer edge of this thesis, rather than the heart.

Any literature review of the secondary sources on *Gawain* at this level needs to concentrate not so much on the deficiencies of each work; as stated before, so many different points of entry exist in studying this poem that it would take an inordinate amount of space to debate the pros and cons of each source's vantage point and the sufficiency of the argument.

Rather, this discussion will highlight the viewpoint each work has taken and then briefly judge the value of that perspective for this thesis. I do not aim to challenge or even corroborate what others have said before; this project seeks to study the poem as a spiritual theology treatise, something that, it seems, others have left undone.

Wendy Clein's book, Concepts of Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1987), discusses the *Gawain*-poet's presentation of the paradoxes of chivalry in fourteenth-century England. Clein places *Gawain* in its wider background by addressing medieval chivalry and general attitudes to death. It presents a comprehensive introduction into the world of *Gawain* and its audience. On a more specific level, the book addresses Gawain's chivalric ideals and his failure to live up to them. She points to the underlying tensions in "military, religious, and courtly chivalry" as the source of the tensions and ambiguities in the poem, and ultimately as the source of Gawain's failure.⁸ Clein does not focus on *Gawain* as a spiritual journey *per se*, but this book offers much in terms of investigating chivalry as a vocation, and Gawain's attitude towards his vocation. This book will supplement my discussion of the Christian anthropology of the *Gawain*-poet.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance by Ad Putter (1995) also situates *Gawain* within a larger background--this time placing the work within the world of Arthurian romance, and specifically that of the French. Even so, Putter does spend much time examining Gawain, centering on the psychological and social vision of the *Gawain*-poet, writing that the poet's

romance consistently subordinates action to reflection, armed combat to psychological drama. It humanizes the hero, implicating him in an intricate plot that tests and strains his commitments to promises.⁹

As with Clein, Putter also investigates the ideals of chivalry, both in *Gawain* and in the wider literary tradition, and of how the *Gawain*-poet adapts “Arthurian matter for the concerns of his own day and age.”¹⁰ Being a study on the wider topic of Arthurian romances, Putter’s work includes a section on the heroic ideal.

The Knight on His Quest: Symbolic Patterns of Transition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1996) by Piotr Sadowski adds a more specialized view of the poem, discussing the Jungian and psychological significance of the poem’s various symbols, themes, and figures. For instance he envisions a quest as “a sequence of related events usually framed within a fictitious, imaginary life span of the protagonist, or at least within a crucial part of his life, with particular emphasis on moments of transition.”¹¹ Sadowski’s discussion of the inner dynamics of the quest, of how the *Gawain*-poet really intended the reader to see Gawain’s internal journey, will figure prominently in my own thoughts on the spiritual theology of the poem. I agree with Sadowski that Gawain’s adventures represent “a metaphor for human life as a spiritual quest.”¹² Sadowski’s book also addresses the *Gawain*-poet’s attitude towards late medieval issues such as the royal court, chivalry, ideals, and so forth. The Knight on His Quest does not render my own project redundant. As Sadowski attempts to address these inner issues in relation to the world outlook of the poet rather than regarding the poet as a theologian or spiritual writer, as I do.

R.A. Shoaf’s The Poem as Green Girdle. *Commercium* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1984) takes an even more specialized account of the poem, concentrating on the “economic, legal, political, theological”¹³ contexts in which the *Gawain*-poet wrote. While this stance may seem too far from my own to offer anything, in fact Shoaf examines values important to the author, specifically those of chivalry as they conflicted with the new,

increasingly imposing commercial virtues. Presenting such a specialized study, Shoaf adds insights into the nature of these values, especially as he views the poem, in its commercial aspect, as specializing in relationships and relativity. This makes the work valuable for my thesis, as I will examine the ambiguities of the spiritual life.

Shoaf's book also makes a unique contribution to the way one can interpret the poem's central images and symbols; The Poem as Green Girdle surveys the vocabulary of the poem largely in terms of commerce: Exchange ("discourse, intercourse, currency"¹⁴) Shoaf places the poem's hero in the midst of these competing values and visions. He concludes that that the poem's "vision of man's middled and muddled estate [lies] . . . somewhere between personal loyalties and abstract market forces."¹⁵

Another highly specialized book, The Gawain Country (1984) by R.W.V. Elliott, will add less to my project, as it goes into great detail on the linguistics of the poem, of the meanings and relationships of obscure or interesting words that describe geography and nature. It does aid in a fuller understanding of the poet's intention for such words as *coue*, *dene*, *cumbe*, *dell*, and *slake*.¹⁶ Its linguistic work does suggest some insights into the images, types, and symbols important to my discussion. For instance, it looks at the landscape found in the poem, and relates this to the larger notion of quest. It contains a chapter entitled "The Landscape of Spiritual Pilgrimage," which centers more on *Piers Plowman*; although in speaking of vocabulary (especially words related to the journey and the physical landscape), the movement of the hero, and the poem's major characters, the chapter's findings will add something to my thesis. On the whole, since my own project will not be concerned with the linguistics of the poem, the book functions largely as a reference for some difficult terms.

Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (1968), edited by Denton Fox, presents many different angles and interpretations on the poem. The chapter by John Speirs examines the various characters in the poem, relating them to earlier English literary and religious traditions. He finds a strong parallel between the Green Knight and the mythical Green Man of early medieval English festivals. Speirs also addresses the place of nature in the poem's story. Even the chapters on style offer something to my own thoughts, as the authors stay close to the action and sense of the poem.

W.R.J. Barron, in Trawthe and Treason, adds a highly specialized study to the literature on *Gawain*. He deals with the third section (the sections, four in total, will henceforth be referred to as *fitts*), and the precise nature of Gawain's sin. Trawthe and Treason examines the relationship between the hunts and the bedroom scenes. In particular, Barron judges the extent to which Gawain has lived up to the virtues of the pentangle and of knighthood in general. In terms of the values of knighthood Barron discusses the feudal relationship between Bertilak and Gawain. Trawthe and Treason also considers, in the face of Gawain's acceptance of the lady's kisses, whether the hero has respected the rules of romance. As with many other scholars, Barron regards the hunts as the *Gawain*-poet's commentaries on the success or failure of Gawain in these love-tests. Barron provides some important concluding thoughts on the nature and seriousness of Gawain's guilt, something important to my discussion of the poem's outlook on spirituality.

The Gawain-Poet by Henry Savage spends some time studying the general features of the poem, highlighting its allegorical nature. Thus the work contributes important insights into plausible meanings of such symbols as the fox as hunted game on the vital third day. Yet Savage spends a great deal of time situating the poem's author in the socio-political

environment of the time, and in particular on the relationship between King Richard II's aunt, Princess Isabella, and the latter's husband, the Sire de Coucy. Savage speculates on the connections between some of the events found in *Gawain* and those that occur in the life of Isabella and her husband. As stated before, my project will not ponder the origins of *Gawain*; it will spend little if any time on the political history of the era, so Savage's discussion will contribute only background information.

Naturally, one cannot completely ignore the milieu from which *Gawain* came. Larry D. Benson's study, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (1965), permits the student of *Gawain* a better understanding of the poem by placing it in its medieval heritage. As Benson observes,

to modern readers the Gawain-poet frequently seems obscure when he is most clear, and simple when he is complex. To read the poem without an understanding of the relations of that art to the traditions that the poet used is to miss much of the meaning and many of the pleasures that *Sir Gawain* offers.¹⁷

The author aims to broaden our understanding of this poem by comparing it to other medieval romances. He begins by examining the early sources of the poem before offering a discussion on the nature of the green knight in this poem and its possible origins in European folklore. He concludes by discussing Gawain's sin and the ending of the poem. As with some of the other works discussed, Art and Tradition will add another important angle to my own understanding of the poem and its characters in particular.

Hans Schnyder's thoughts in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Essay in Interpretation (1961) also aid the modern student entering the wider imaginative world of the Middle Ages. This essay defines the important place of allegory in the medieval world with *Gawain* in mind. Schnyder makes the important point that the medieval understanding

regarded stories, whether from the Bible, folktales, or literary works such as *Gawain*, as containing multiple levels of meaning for the audience, ranging from the literal to the allegorical. Schnyder warns that one must apply an allegorical approach to medieval literature even when this seems unnecessary. We risk missing an intended meaning if we neglect this.¹⁸ Schnyder's work, by concentrating more on how to read the poem rather than on aspects of the poem itself, provides an important missing piece on *Gawain* scholarship, even if one does not always agree with his specific allegorical interpretations of various figures. I will undoubtedly find this book of importance since I too am interested in the poem's allegorical meaning.

Charles Moorman's *The Pearl-Poet* (1968) "is intended as a general introduction to one of the great English poets."¹⁹ As such it can offer only limited insights into *Gawain*, although these insights may be unique because Moorman concerns himself more with the poet than with *Gawain per se*. Since Benson, Schnyder, and Moorman all place *Gawain* into a different general background, all three offer different perspectives on the poem.

Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (1968), edited by Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher offers many varied articles on style, criticism, characters, setting, as well as more general interpretations of the poem. Laura Hibbard Loomis in her chapter discusses the religious nature of the poem, of how it concerns itself with good and not evil; of the curious lack of religious visions or mystical experiences in the poem; and of the earthy rather than "supernatural" goodness of the hero.²⁰ Paul Delany discusses the role of the guide in the fourth fitt, something with which few others have concerned themselves. Other chapters deal with the green girdle, the green chapel, and the notion of anti-romance in the poem.

Conclusion

This thesis attempts, as the title suggests, a *reading* of the poem. That is, it does not argue that *Gawain* can only be interpreted in this certain way by everyone, but only that it is one possible stance. Because Christian spirituality inhered so deeply to the medieval worldview, other ways of reading this poem, such as Shoaf's *Commercium*, hold great interest to this study; ultimately economics, chivalry, and so on, from various medieval outlooks, carried spiritual significance. Therefore, these issues will influence this discussion. Yet, being a study of the poem's spiritual theology, this thesis will begin first by identifying and defining important aspects of medieval Christian spirituality, but only after doing the same to medieval chivalry.

¹ While I admit to the importance of gender neutral pronouns, the author was almost certainly male, since few females were accorded, in the medieval, patriarchal culture, the level of theological learning exhibited by the poem's author. Thus, a gender neutral pronoun in referring to the *Gawain*-poet is unnecessary.

² Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵ Reflecting that complex diversity, Joseph Campbell calls the twelfth century the birthplace of modern individualism, and sees in the real-life drama of Abelard and Heloise, as well as in the courtly romances and the works of troubadours (with the stories of Tristan and Isolde among others), "the courage, namely, to affirm against tradition whatever knowledge stands confirmed in one's own controlled experience." This "majesty of love" operated, from the twelfth century onwards, "against the supernatural utilitarianism of the sacramental system of the Church." Joseph Campbell, *Creative Mythology* (New York: Penguin Arkana, 1991), pp. 54-55.

⁶ Bradley P. Holt, *Thirsty for God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), p. 70. Williston Walker, *et al*, *A History of the Christian Church*, Fourth Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), p. 424.

⁷ To reach even earlier into the medieval period for such thinking, one can refer to the twelfth-century Waldensians, who, as Joseph Campbell describes, shared many of the same complaints as Luther *et al*: "[The Waldensians] were Christians, but strongly anti-papal, rejecting all clerical practices that lacked New Testament authority." Campbell, *Creative Mythology*, p. 162.

⁸ Wendy Clein, *Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1987), p. 100.

⁹ Ad Putter, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹ Piotr Sadowski, *The Knight on His Quest* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), p. 52.

¹² Sadowski, p. 13.

¹³ R.A. Schoaf, The Peom as Green Girdle *Commercium* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984), p. vii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁶ R.W.V. Elliott, The Gawain Country (West Yorkshire: Leeds Texts and Monographs, 1984), p. 104.

¹⁷ Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press), 1965, p. ix.

¹⁸ Hans Schnyder, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* An Essay in Interpretation (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1961), p. 16.

¹⁹ Charles Moorman, The *Pearl-Poet* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 7.

²⁰ Laura Hibbard Loomis, "*Gawain and the Green Knight*", Critical Studies of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher, eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 22.

Knighthood

It goes without saying that *Gawain* is not a spiritual treatise *per se*. My reading of the poem largely as if it were such a work necessitates a chapter explaining why I can do such a thing. There does not exist an insurmountable gulf between medieval spiritual treatises and medieval poetry. Neither does there exist such an impassible obstruction between medieval chivalry and medieval Christianity. In fact, chivalry, as this chapter will demonstrate, rose in part from medieval beliefs. This chapter aims to explain, then, why it is that I can claim that a medieval story about a Christian knight can serve as a pedagogical tool in Christian spirituality. It does so largely by examining the links between chivalry and Christianity.

Medieval Knighthood

By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries knighthood as a military institution had grown into an entire ideology. Early medieval rulers needed dependable fighters who met irregularly but with a lifetime's commitment. Over the centuries, the notion of service took on a more encompassing sense. This growth ensued from the knights' ever-changing relationship of service to their lords.¹

The modern scholar Jean Flore names obedience the most important virtue of the medieval cavalier.² Knights played a foundational role in the maintenance of the social status quo, subject to the whims and needs of their lord, while themselves responsible for (and therefore demanding from) many lesser noblemen and peasants under them. Social and political rebellion, although an historic reality, does not inhere to this ideology. The ideal knight offered to risk everything, including life and family, for the lord.³ The chivalric code placed these men into tightly-fitted roles, deviation from which could lead to death by hanging on orders of the lord and with the support of the Church. Knighthood being a relationship of service, the men received great privilege from their superiors in return for performing their duties. The land granted them by their superior represented the greatest privilege.

Service to the Church afforded the knight some freedom in his relationship with his lord, for a man submitted to his seigneur only within the limits of ecclesiastical teaching. The knight as a Christian served the Gospel, as interpreted by the Church, before all else, including personal necessity. This encouraged a chivalrous devotion to God through the person of Jesus Christ, a devotion that led the knight to trust in God while on his errands or in battle, to attend Mass frequently, and to Confess sins regularly.⁴ In fact, the undertones of chivalry became so religious that a fourteenth-century scholar, Geoffrey Charney, names knighthood and priesthood as the Church's dual religious orders.⁵

Knights' vocation as such "holy" soldiers deepened in religious piety in general from the eleventh-century onwards, and was a movement that also found expression in the growth and reform of monasteries and general ecclesiastical and papal corrections.⁶ The crusades evidence the belief that in battle Christ not only stood with the fighting men, but actively

engaged in battle too. Crusaders literally became soldiers of Christ, able to practice their murderous ways with theological justification as Christ's army, engaged in a "just war."⁷ Again, this combat followed from the notion of service. Frequent stories of Muslim attacks on Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land emboldened the Church in 1095 to call on Christian warriors to serve by protecting sacred Christian sites.

The last key to chivalry centered on the knight's moral conduct. This included virtues such as courage, sincerity, faithfulness to one's word, truthfulness, and generosity (or *largesse*).⁸ The last ideal called on the knight to take care of widows, the sick, frail, elderly, and orphans. This set of morals followed from the notion of a knight as one who actively supported the social order, for this order presumably upheld justice. The ideal deemed the Church-sanctioned hierarchical order as just and fit for all. Loyalty to the Church, the lord, and the social arrangement thus underlay these beliefs. The ideal set out cowardice, disloyalty, and faithlessness, all of which could destroy society, as the negative counterparts to positive virtues.⁹

Knightly Romances

Richard Barber explains that "the apogee of the knight as fighting man—and hence as hero—coincided with the first flowering of a literature in everyday language."¹⁰ Thus it became the case of art imitating life which imitated art: Chivalry's development began far before the growth of such writings, but romances changed knighthood's direction by infusing romantic elements. This literature became the ideology of chivalry, establishing the expectations and ideals a knight was to follow.

Historical circumstances aided the power of this literature to alter the course of knighthood. The growth of errant knights, usually younger sons who were squeezed out of any inheritance and who therefore had to make a name for themselves, illustrates the changing society that allowed for such a course.¹¹ These men fought but, living so independently, they also had the leisure time necessary to listen to and be influenced by such stories.¹²

Wendy Clein writes that “romances are the vehicles for the demonstration of a range of chivalric virtues: prowess, loyalty, mercy, and courtesy,” and religious piety.¹³ Fellowship also played a vital role. The Round Table, advocating equality over seats of honour, instanced this virtue.¹⁴ Naturally fellowship makes sense, given that knights as a class could maintain their privileges against the lower classes only when united. A lack of fellowship could endanger the entire system; fighting each other would give lower classes or invaders an opportunity to change things. Thus fellowship, or even *largesse*, did not guarantee a democratic, egalitarian kind of social justice. Romances certainly did not advocate such order, but concerned themselves more with an inner-class justice. The task of the knight, regarding the other two estates, the clerical and peasant, was to uphold the social order, that is, to enforce the social contract.

Romances influenced knighthood by moving the ideal away from the fighting man and towards that of the courtly man. Two worlds existed according to such writings: Civilization, that is, life within the confines of the castle; and wilderness, that is, life outside the walls of the castle.¹⁵ These romances pulled the knight more and more into the arena of the court; the knight became a courtier, a man of leisure who spent a great deal of his time in society, observing very strict social rules. He left this only for battle, and even battle often

became, in these romances, secondary to courtly society. The *Gawain*-poet, for instance, does not tell us much about the hero's real engagements against dragons, trolls, and outlaws while on his way to the Green Chapel; the only battle we really witness is the "Christmas Game"--a kind of sorcerer's tournament--where the battle focuses on Gawain's inner reality. Thus the inner man becomes central to chivalry, where the accent falls on virtues, Christian morality, the "proper" treatment of women, and so on, rather than on sheer brute strength and fighting ability.

Romances also influenced the knightly ideal through their Christian values. Chretien de Troyes' knights spent a great deal of time in Confession.¹⁶ But like fellowship, this religious ideal made sense considering the roots of knighthood, for a developed conscience could only aid in the mutual relationship of service that had already existed before the age of romances. Confession thus not only regulated one's relationship with God, but also social relationships.¹⁷

Conclusion

The *Gawain*-poet uses romance convention as the frame for his spiritual treatise. The poet creates a world in which people build great façades based on ideals. Those same people, in particular Bertilak, Morgan le Fey, and the Lady of the castle, use those masks for a deeper purpose: "The gestures of hospitality (and temptation)," Ad Putter writes, "are a perfect false front for a lethal trap."¹⁸ Gawain "fails" because he concerns himself too much with convention, with performing for that convention, that he fails to understand what is really going on inside of him, not that such an understanding would come easily. But even at the

end of the story, as we will see, he is still somewhat caught up in this false world, and so even then he does not comprehend the deeper issue. Thus even then, his transforming experience seems incomplete.

¹ Joachim Bumke, The Concept of Knighthood in the Middle Ages, W.T.H and Erika Jackson, trs. (New York, N.Y.: Ams Press, Inc., 1982), p. 51.

² Jean Flore, L'Essor de la Chevalerie (Geneve: Librairie Droz, 1986), p. 250.

³ Leon Gautier, Chivalry, D.C. Dunning, tr. (London: Phoenix House, 1965), p. 22.

⁴ Gautier, pp. 11, 13.

⁵ Richard Barber, The Reign of Chivalry (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 112.

⁶ Walker, p. 283.

⁷ Flore, pp. 195-7.

Jeremy Johns, "Christianity and Islam," The Oxford History of Christianity, John McManners, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 176.

⁸ Gautier, pp. 22-5.

⁹ Barber, p. 60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹¹ Raymond Rudorff, Knights and the Age of Chivalry (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), p. 79.

¹² Barber, p. 19.

¹³ Clein, pp. 19-20.

¹⁴ Putter, pp. 165-6

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

Ideals 1: Virtues and the Spiritual Journey in the Middle Ages

This chapter discusses medieval spiritual teachings in Western Christendom in order to demonstrate the importance, to this era, of divine grace to the spiritual life. While this chapter may appear to accord the role of virtues in this journey a relatively minor or even somewhat negative one, the point to be made is of the fundamental importance, for many medieval Christians, of grace, and of the fact that virtues result from the health of the spiritual journey. Virtues reflect a soul in good grace. As we will see, many teachers from the era deny that virtues can put that soul into good grace. Virtues, from this viewpoint, are the after-effects, not the first-effects, of a blessed soul. Virtues are the fruits of unearned grace bestowed as a freely-given, never-earned divine gift.

From the perspective of this thesis, the poem centers on Gawain's attitude to his personal virtues and Christian piety. "Virtues," for the purposes, generally speaking, of many medieval Christian spiritual teachers, refer to those moral decisions and actions one carries out in order to lead a more Christ-like existence.¹ True enough, Aristotle, Old Testament prophets, and even Chaucer touting the virtues of the spring rains, all use virtue in a different or wider context. But for the purposes of this study, "virtue" refers to the attempt at *imitatio Christi* through the adoption of various modes of behavior. As the previous chapter on

knighthood indicates, notions of virtues, as applicable to the cavalier, would also be influenced by societal expectations of its fighting men.

Medieval and Roman Catholic religious piety, in turn, encompasses devotions, private and corporate, such as prayers to the Christian saints and Mary, and the faithful observance of rituals such as the Mass or matins.

The *Gawain*-poet outlines a spiritual theology of imperfection by critiquing the hero's actions and, more specifically, the attitudes that lie behind these actions. The problem does not issue from what the hero stands for, but from *how* he stands for it. That is, the virtues and piety Gawain has adopted as a sort of identification do not form the crux of the matter. *How* Gawain embraces virtues and piety concerns the author. The poem therefore does not critique Gawain's five virtues or the place of religious devotions in the life of the medieval Christian community. Much of the action, such as found in the hunting scenes, represents an analysis of or judgment on Gawain's practice of these.

The poet focuses on the hero's scrupulous application of the virtues, examining how this underlies the knight's every action. *Gawain's* commentary on the protagonist's comportment echoes the warning of the thirteenth-century Beguine mystic Hadewijch on perfectionism's spiritual pitfalls: "When a man sees he possesses overflowing sweetness, he begins little by little to believe in his own perfection, so that he takes insufficient care to uplift his life."²

By situating the poet's concern for virtues within some currents in wider medieval Christian society, this chapter attempts to relate *Gawain*, as a pedagogical tool for the spiritual life, to other such works. In particular, one notes, *Gawain* examines in depth the beginning stage of the spiritual journey about which many Christian mystics, such as John of

the Cross and Teresa of Avila, have written. While the poet focuses on piety just as much as on the virtues (and Gawain's piety will serve as the next chapter's topic), I will limit this survey to virtues. A full investigation of piety would replicate this discussion on the virtues, as the same issues inhere to both. Also, although the Christian community calls many of the medieval writers salient to this chapter "mystics," this inquiry does not try to advance Gawain or the *Gawain*-poet as mystics.

The Virtues and the Middle Ages

One cannot underestimate the important place medieval Christians granted the Christian virtues. Naturally, knightly classes would have constructed an entire assortment of values and virtues based not only on the faith but also on social and military obligations. In looking at Christian virtues alone in this chapter, without disallowing the importance of the knightly virtues to the story and consequently to this thesis (as we will see), one finds concord on the importance of virtues in the journey towards Christ. An early Franciscan exemplifies the widespread attitude by likening virtues to a ladder that, operating from grace, lead souls to heaven.³ Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* echoes this, stating that "human virtue is a habit perfecting man in view of his doing good deeds."⁴ The practice of virtues leads to an openness towards the divine. Without this openness, no amount of divine grace can change one.

In referring to medieval mystics, theologians, and poets, one finds no consensus on the exact designation, number, and nature of the virtues. The variegated outlook proceeded from the early church's inconsistency on the topic. Each Church Father seems to submit his

own ideas, frequently without referring to catechisms or other theologians. Augustine in Book XIX of The City of God sets Christian prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice as superior to any pagan virtues.⁵ Offering a different view, Hesychios of Jerusalem in the fifth century speaks of the four virtues of moral judgment, wisdom, righteousness, and fortitude.⁶ From the same era, St. Mark the Ascetic in turn names humility, vigilance, self-control, and long-suffering.⁷

Teachers in the High Middle Ages failed to clarify this discussion. Bonaventure's "Breviloquium" presents a traditional list of the virtues, the "Seven Cardinal Virtues," which include the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and the virtues of prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude.⁸ The distinctiveness of these seven virtues proceeds from the diverse functions and duties humans exercise.⁹

Not all theologians and mystics speak of the "Seven Cardinal Virtues." An early Franciscan, Brother Giles, identifies love, faith, humility, fear of the Lord, patience, solitude and watchfulness, contempt of the world, chastity, penance, prayer, and obedience as virtues.¹⁰ The Englishman Walter Hilton in the fourteenth century designates humility, patience, purity, temperance, and love as the virtues, claiming that these can grow only through prayer.¹¹ In the same epoch, "The Cloud of Unknowing" simplifies things, describing virtue as the "blind reaching out of love" to God.¹² Virtue is but the affection that one directs towards God, for no other purpose or good than God.¹³ The author lists love and humility as the key underlying virtues to this action.

Teachers discussed the virtues from personal experiences and perspectives. Meister Eckhart (1260-1329) names obedience the root of all virtues.¹⁴ This follows from his instruction on the need for "detachment" from worldly things and even from one's "need" for

God.¹⁵ Dante in his “Comedy” also stresses the importance of detachment, which he regards as central to justice. In the poet’s vision, God grants fewer heavenly favors to those who during their earthly existence practice virtues while attached to personal gains from such an exercise: A virtuous action thus tainted reaches “To its objective with less lively rays.”¹⁶

While this listing demonstrates the lack of medieval Christian cohesion in the discussion of the virtues, as stated before, teachers of Christian spirituality in the period agree on the need for the virtues on the journey. Most echo Aquinas’s view: “Now, in order to do good deeds, it matters not only what a man does but also how he does it.”¹⁷

Gawain does not seem to break much, if any, new ground in its view of the necessary attitude Christians must take regarding the virtues. While the poem follows the norm of naming and discussing its own virtues, it also adheres to the medieval consensus regarding *how* one should practice these issues. As stated, it appears that the *Gawain*-poet accentuates the *how* over the *what*. The poet seems to reflect Augustine’s warning in The City of God that virtues are only true, good, and Christian when the person places faith in God rather than in the virtues themselves. Augustine cautions that the great pagan philosophies such as Stoicism also preached virtues. The fault of people who subscribed to such philosophies lay in their inability to see beyond this life and human strength and will.¹⁸ Christian virtues must point the person above everything, including the virtues themselves. As stated, virtues must open one up to divine grace. We see the blindness that can overwhelm even a virtuous person in the poem most strongly in Gawain’s shocking discovery at the end concerning the gravity of his sinful nature; this sinfulness contrasts greatly with his simplistic spiritual pride issuing from his earnest belief in practicing the virtues.

The Spiritual Journey and the Virtues in the Middle Ages

In turning to this spiritual movement, one finds commonalities amongst medieval teachers of spirituality and spiritual theology. Virtues retain an important albeit less than central place in their thought. Many treatises lay out a step-by-step approach to spiritual growth. Medieval writers tended to place God at the core of the virtues and of piety in general: Writers regard God alone as the source but also, as discussed by “The Cloud of Unknowing”, as the goal of the virtues. As we will see, *Gawain* agrees entirely with this, and finds Gawain guilty of idolizing his virtues, of placing them at the center of things. The central movement towards union with God issues not the exercise of the virtues, but from the growth of self-knowledge (something, it seems, Gawain gains by the *end* of his journey) and humble prayer that opens the heart to God.

St. Mark the Ascetic warns about frequent temptations when one attempts to exercise the virtues. Relying on the virtues alone, without prayer, entangles one ever deeper in the passions and temptations.¹⁹ The life of virtues thus bears a double-edged sword. St. Mark warns that one’s attitude determines whether we take the path of holy virtue or that of sinful vice: “Fulfilling a commandment means doing what we are enjoined to do; but virtue is to do it in a manner that conforms to the Truth.”²⁰ Lacking the right spirit, based on the grace born from the Truth, the virtues become oppressive laws.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) revolutionized medieval mysticism, particularly with his affective language about God.²¹ John Sommerfeldt, in The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux, claims that Bernard assigns the virtues an important albeit always secondary place in the spiritual journey: Bernard denies that spiritual growth depends on the development of specific proficiencies, such as the virtues, even if such habits

can aid.²² Ultimately, Bernard esteems God as the Great Educator.²³ Humans must open themselves to the work of grace; rather than acting on their own accord, they must wait and watch.

Sommerfeldt terms humility, love, and contemplation Bernard's three stages of the journey towards God. These three arise from the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we must therefore regard them as the works not of humans but of God. In fact, Bernard warns that trusting in one's own actions ensures the loss of the graces of humility and love. Bernard, then, adheres to the wider medieval understanding, claiming that the human journey proceeds from the work of the Lord. For Bernard the Christian does play a major role, but in slowing down the movement of love²⁴; humans obstruct their own progress.

Etienne Gilson in The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard offers a second view of the saint's spiritual theology. Gilson discusses the issue of love, with merely a cursory glance at the place of virtue in Bernard's thought. The scholar speaks of the saint's different kinds or stages of love on the journey as corresponding to the depth of one's relationship with God. Bernard declares the love of God as both the means and the ends of the spiritual journey.²⁵

Gilson thus turns to the different types of love which Bernard finds along the way. Our enfleshed nature pushes us towards egotistical self-love.²⁶ At this beginning stage, self-attachment overcomes love of God because we have always concerned ourselves, up to this point in the journey, with our bodily necessities and by extension with our quest for pleasure, even though God by right as Creator and Redeemer deserves our devoted affection.²⁷ This incongruity leaves us dissatisfied, since our restless yearning cannot find relief in self-love nor in loving created goods.²⁸

The solution does not come easily; by ourselves we cannot mitigate the situation. Self-knowledge marks the first step. This wisdom occasions the humility Sommerfeldt judges as so important to Bernard. Gilson writes that Bernard's human, corrupted by original sin, no longer enjoys the freedom necessary for escaping the bonds of sin or the "impotent" will.²⁹ The *Gawain*-poet very keenly understands this predicament: The perfect Christian knight, under extreme pressure from a seductive lady and from his imminent death, fails, even when armed with a deeply-rooted piety and commitment to the virtues. Gawain could do nothing, it seems, except surrender to God. This is an important thing he did not do, the one thing that might have prevented failure.

One can easily see in medieval thinking the futility of a graceless existence. In exercising the virtues, one still depends utterly on God. Any one virtue, to effect movement of the soul towards God, must receive divine grace. In writing of the virtue of holy poverty, Bernard asks in a letter, "what sort of thing is this that, without the help of angels or men, simply by trusting in divine grace, is able to penetrate of itself to the vision of glory, to reach the summits of existence, to scale the very heights of all splendor?"³⁰ Virtues hold enormous power, but solely as conduits of divine grace.

In their fallen state, humans cannot turn from sin. The Fall has destroyed the virtues' efficacy. This is important, for Bernard regards the virtues as those habits which would enable humans, in their untainted free will, to choose that which would prevent them from sinning.³¹ The virtues issue from human love for God. Unfortunately, after the Fall, humans love earthly things more than heavenly things, rendering human practice of the virtues unavoidably imperfect.³²

While human sin has, in this sense, annihilated the virtues, love never fails. Thus Bernard turns to the Benedictine / Cistercian antidote for human fallenness: Love of God and others.³³ As John Sommerfeldt explains, for Bernard “all loves are part of one love which is the proper ordering of the will toward the good. . . Bernard’s message is clear: one must love to be complete, whole, happy.”³⁴ The virtues exert influence, but only when filled with love. This movement of love occasions the virtues’ growth.³⁵ But love and the journey towards God do not depend on the exercise of good habits. Quite the opposite: The virtues must grow from love and the relationship with God. This seems perfectly logical for Bernard. Love needs to transform the will. A will before this conversion cannot practice the virtues.³⁶

Catherine of Siena in the fourteenth-century also imparts to the virtues a secondary place in the spiritual quest. She does so by frequently keeping silent about these habits while explaining other (presumably more important) necessities of the spiritual life. This silence on the virtues grows as she investigates the journey’s mature stages. Her “Dialogue” begins with the restless soul yearning for God. She points to virtues’ great importance here. One relates more deeply to God after exercising the virtues and “dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge in order to know better God’s goodness toward her.”³⁷ Good habits enable the focus this greater self-knowledge demands.

Maintaining silence on the virtues, she emphasizes the role of “humble prayer” in eventual union with God. Through this prayerful regime one follows Christ’s footsteps. Catherine fails to discuss the role of virtues in this *imitatio Christi*. In a vision she sees the human soul adorned with words that refer to the virtues; once again, though, she limits the place of these virtues, writing that the words in general specify union with God occurring

through love.³⁸ Rather than good habits, self-knowledge and an ever-deepening relationship of love with God occasion the necessary purity for such spiritual blessings.³⁹

When the saint does break her silence on the virtues, she emphasizes the love that fills them. She does not limit them to mere practice, but finds something deeper. In speaking of contrition's importance for the journey, she points to the love for God—the “infinite desire”—behind it rather than to the virtue itself.⁴⁰ The satisfaction that humans can offer God issues not from any virtue but ultimately from knowledge of God and “the bitterness and contrition the heart finds in the knowledge of itself and its own sins. Such knowledge gives birth to hatred and contempt for sin and for the soul's selfish sensuality.”⁴¹

Catherine identifies humility as the “mother” virtue. Consistent with her teaching, she locates this good in self-knowledge.⁴² Again, humility carries a deeper sense, for this good arises “when you see that even your own existence comes not from yourself but from [God].”⁴³ Catherine establishes the root of this mother virtue, then, in knowledge of God and the understanding of love. She judges any other humility as hollow and useless.

The notion of futility underlies the medieval analysis on the place of virtues in the spiritual journey. One's actions, however grand, can never suffice. Bonaventure, in “The Journey of the Mind to God,” emphasizes the need for divine grace; the Christian cannot overcome the ego except by means of a “superior power.”⁴⁴ The exercise of the virtues, undoubtedly important, ultimately fails to aid this ascent. Bonaventure sees only futility in the human attempt at this journey: “No matter how well we plan our spiritual progress, nothing comes of it unless divine assistance intervenes.”⁴⁵

Utterly dependent on divine grace, the saint parallels Catherine of Siena in naming prayer the sole antidote to human sin and fragmentation.⁴⁶ What and how Bonaventure

instructs the reader to pray also carries significance: In our dependence, we must pray as perpetual beginners accepting our ignorance.⁴⁷ Bonaventure renounces human efforts and intellect. Prayer, then, is neither a virtue nor, in a sense, an automatic pietistic devotion as practiced by Gawain.

Despite this human dependence, Bonaventure does not prescribe a wholly passive attitude. He invokes our senses, imagination, reason, understanding, intelligence, and moral discernment.⁴⁸ But we must act on these from the attitude of prayer and complete reliance on God's grace, because sin has distorted the senses, imagination, and so on. Our good use of these once again counts on divine blessings and, from the human end, on humbly opening to this grace.⁴⁹ The saint cautions against vainglory by describing the fallen state of humans that has corrupted us: "Man [sic], blind and bent down, is sitting in darkness, where he cannot see the light of heaven unless he is assisted by grace and righteousness against concupiscence, and by knowledge and wisdom against ignorance."⁵⁰ We depend completely on grace, and gain "spiritual vision" solely through Jesus Christ.

Bonaventure does assign an important position in the journey to the three theological virtues. Without the practice of these virtues—which cleanse, enlighten, and perfect—the soul cannot order itself for the ascent to God.⁵¹ Rather than placing the work of the habits at the beginning of the spiritual journey as Catherine does, Bonaventure terms them the "middle steps" that create the inner space from where we contemplate God.⁵²

Ultimately paralleling Saint Catherine, Bonaventure concludes that "All this is brought about by sincere love for Christ, *poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*"⁵³ The latter statement emphasizes that virtues, then, center less on the effort of the individual and more on the work of divine grace. Good habits receive their

energy and effectiveness through God's movement. Otherwise, they remain as hollow as they sometimes seem for Gawain.

The Spiritual Journey and Suffering

As a spiritual treatise, *Gawain* does not outline the complete pilgrimage. We see, in fact, only the very beginnings of the journey that culminates, ideally, in a loving union with the divine. Our hero has nonetheless made vital headway with his reluctant step of purgation. Without such a stage, the Christian teachers warn, one risks practicing a sentimental, naïve, and childish spirituality. The mystics agree that a stripping away must occur. For transformation, the personality must sustain a painful, disturbing reorientation.⁵⁴ This change centers on first eliminating all that prevents inner unity and then on perceiving something greater than the needs and understanding of the self, the ego.

Spiritual teachers write at length on the purgation stage of the journey. In fact, Catherine of Siena (as we have seen), John of the Cross, and Theresa of Avila employ much more effort on this part than on the nature and merits of the virtues.⁵⁵ John of the Cross likens this stage to death, stating, in fact, that for many the course actually feels like dying.⁵⁶ The old must die in order to make way for the new; the old and the new, for the Christian, cannot co-exist. This agonizing process destroys the soul's attachments to non-divine goods (such as the "virtues" in Gawain's case), thereby disorienting the person since much of what God strips away is, in fact, inherently good.

The problem lies not in the objects themselves but in our attachments to lesser things than God. To repeat myself, then, the *Gawain*-poet centers on how Gawain utilizes the

virtues, on how the knight becomes overly attached to these. Gawain relies too much on the virtues (although we will see that his piety does speak of a relationship with God).

Attachments obstruct fuller relationship with the divine. The Holy Spirit consequently works at destroying these false supports.⁵⁷ Carole Lee Flinders sums up the issue as seen by Eckhart:

There are three obstacles to God-realization: multiplicity, temporality, and corporeality. Our difficulty is not so much with the concepts themselves, but with the hold they have over us: the belief that we are many, and not one; that we are at the mercy of time (and therefore death); and that our very being is physical—that we *are* our bodies.⁵⁸

Eckhart offers a grave warning. Human desire is so immense, “immeasurably so,” yet through human knowledge we cannot grasp God. An enormous challenge results, for “where knowledge and desire end, there is darkness, and there God shines.”⁵⁹ We must overcome this insatiable desire, but not by trying to satisfy it. We can hear the voice of God only when we remove ourselves from all that we consider as ours.⁶⁰

God’s love is a tough love. The teachers warn that fuller living does not mean hanging on to everything and acquiring even more. It involves leaving many things behind and travelling ever more lightly. One must eliminate the need for “more” out of life and aim, instead, for “less.” Hadewijch describes this journey with a non-sentimental realism and a certain toughness acquired along the way:

Abasement and hard adventure
Have I suffered many a day.
Bitter to me are all things
That my eyes ever looked upon.
How can I get off cheaply?
Love, sweetest above all that is sweet,
And who can give all things,
Detains me indeed in woe and bitterness.
I shudder how I keep on.⁶¹

John of the Cross's "dark night of the soul" offers much insight into the nature of the problem from the Christian, and *Gawain*-poet's, perspective. John claims that human passions distort reason so that our perverted reason then creates idols. We become enslaved. Our only way out hinges on the process by which our gaze turns from these idols to looking at God. Yet because of the immensity of God, we cannot simply change from worldly goods and gaze directly at God. Rather than looking at the bright light of the Godhead, then, we are moved by something we cannot see—in other words, by the dark light of God. The soul gropes around in darkness, travelling a path it does not see towards a goal it can never understand nor fathom. Thomas Merton sums up the nature and reason for this purgation: "Before the spirit can see the Living God, it must be blind even to the highest perceptions and judgments of its natural intelligence."⁶²

Tremendous spiritual pain results, since the process demands that we give up everything and receive, in the meantime, only incertitude, discomfort, and dis-equilibrium. As Merton again concludes, because of the Fall, "the only way to true life is a kind of death."⁶³ John of the Cross offers stark words rather than comfort to the suffering spiritual pilgrim:

When a soul finds no pleasure or consolation in the things of God, it also fails to find it in any thing created; for, as God sets the soul in this dark night to the end that He may quench and purge its sensual desire, He allows it not to find attraction or sweetness in anything whatsoever.⁶⁴

Merton terms this the "precipice." This spells the death-throes of the ego, and it comes about when we desire to possess and know nothing so that we can truly live the First Commandment—to love God with all our hearts.⁶⁵

Evelyn Underhill would agree that these Christian teachers experienced, inevitably, both pain and pleasure on the journey towards God.⁶⁶ She characterizes the pilgrimage as constantly challenging the self, the ego, to look towards God and away from its needs.⁶⁷ To emphasize just how rudimentary Gawain's spiritual awakening relates to the larger picture, Underhill would not characterize such an awakening as even close to a spiritually transforming experience: Gawain feels the complete opposite of what such conversion brings: defeat, an absence of divine consolation, and unconcern for God.⁶⁸

Two other aspects of Underhill's discussion carry importance. Conversion, characterized by a sudden awakening of the self, is unwanted and largely out of the control of the self, coming from somewhere deep inside. Thus she writes of St. Francis:

In a moment of time, Francis's whole universe has suffered complete rearrangement . . . The change, which he cannot describe, he knows to be central for life. Not for a moment does he think of disobeying the imperative voice which speaks to him from a higher plane of reality and demands the sacrifice of his career.⁶⁹

She also writes that "pure mystical perception" followed this experience.⁷⁰ Gawain experiences neither the awakening nor any such perception. True, he does undergo an unwanted, expanded self-awareness, but it originates from outside, from the initiative and actions of others.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that Gawain has just started down that path Hadewijch knows so well. His ego will experience countless such reversals and blunt awakenings that tell him the

“more” of life is actually inside; this could prompt a greater openness to God’s voice, similar to how St. Francis’s old ways of rowdiness, gang warfare, and general excess no longer worked for him. The Spirit does not blow through Gawain’s life any more gently than through those of others. The hero conscientiously exercises his Christian piety, hoping that this will suffice. He retains, more or less, a faith in his virtues, and thus stands at Catherine of Siena’s first stage. His one great mistake has taken him to a place he wants to avoid, a place of self-doubt where he realizes that the supports on which he has always depended will fail him in life: He learns, much to his chagrin, that life’s complications and demands overwhelm these supports. At the end of the adventure, we see Gawain entering a dark time in his life where, we know from John of the Cross, much growth can occur. Yet, like so many others, he remains most unwilling.

¹ St. Maximus the Confessor, a Greek church father, writes that “virtue is a stable and utterly dispassionate state of righteousness. Nothing stands opposed to it, for it bears the stamp of God, and there is nothing contrary to that. God is the cause of the virtues; and a living knowledge of God is realized when the person who has truly recognized God changes his inner state so that it conforms more closely to the Spirit.” The Philokalia, Vol. 2, G.E.H. Palmer *et al*, eds. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 261.

St. Theodorus the Great Ascetic noted in the ninth century that “energies that spring from the virtues are good.” The Philokalia, vol. 2, p. 47.

² Hadewijch, “Virtues the Measure of Love”, Hadewijch The Complete Works, Mother Columba Hart, tr. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 68.

³ “The Sayings of Brother Giles”, The Little Flowers of St. Francis, Raphael Brown, tr. (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1958), p. 261.

This concept originated with Plato’s ladder of perfection.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, The Summa Theologica, Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trs. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), p. 43.

⁵ Augustine, The City of God, Gerald G. Walsh, *et al*, trs., (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1958), pp. 439–42.

⁶ St. Hesychios the Priest, “On Watchfulness and Holiness”, The Philokalia, vol. I, G.E.H. Palmer *et al*, eds. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 168.

⁷ St. Mark the Ascetic, “On Those who Think that They are Made Righteous by Works: 226 Texts”, The Philokalia, vol. 1, p. 128.

⁸ Bonaventure, “The Breviloquium” in The Works of Bonaventure, vol. II, Jose de Vinck, tr. (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1963), p. 193.

⁹ Bonaventure, “The Breviloquium”, p. 194.

¹⁰ “The Sayings of Brother Giles”, pp. 264–88.

¹¹ Walter Hilton, The Ladder of Perfection, Leo Sherley-Price, tr. (London, England: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 14–15.

¹² “The Cloud of Unknowing”, in The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works, Clifton Wolters, tr. (London, England: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 77.

¹³ "The Cloud of Unknowing", p. 77.

¹⁴ Meister Eckhart, "The Talks of Instruction", Meister Eckhart Selected Writings, Oliver Davies, tr. (London, England: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 3. Although Eckhart does not here define obedience, Evelyn Underhill's definition would probably suffice. She emphasizes the importance of obedience (along with poverty and chastity) in the stage of purification, characterizing obedience as "the poverty of the will". She terms this process "that abnegation of selfhood, that mortification of the will, which results in a complete self-abandonment, a 'holy indifference' to the accidents of life." Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism (Strand: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1911), p. 205.

¹⁵ Eckhart, "The Talks of Instruction", pp. 41-2.

¹⁶ Dante Alighieri, The Comedy of Dante Alighieri Paradise, Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, trs. (London: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 100.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, vol. II, p. 39.

¹⁸ Augustine, The City of God, pp. 427-42.

¹⁹ St. Mark the Ascetic, "On the Spiritual Law: 200 Texts", The Philokalia, vol. I, p. 123.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²¹ Carole Lee Flinders writes: "It is reasonable to say that up until this point in history [Bernard's time], the God of Christians was imagined as a king or judge, and the basic model of Christian experience reflected the feudal structure of life itself; Christ's followers were 'warriors of God' in the great cosmic battle between good and evil. Bernard's teachings brought a new and powerfully attractive metaphor into play." Bernard, Flinders continues, advised his monks to see themselves as the brides of Christ, as he interpreted the *Song of Songs* in a new way. This advice "swept like wildfire across the monastic orders of his time." Carole Lee Flinders, Enduring Grace (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), pp. 1-2.

²² John R. Sommerfeldt, The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), p. 45.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁴ The main sense of this paragraph was taken from Sommerfeldt, pp. 47-50.

²⁵ Etienne Gilson, The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard, A.H.C. Downes, tr. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications 120, 1990), p. 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁷ Sommerfeldt, p. 112.

²⁸ Gilson, p. 45.

Sommerfeldt, pp. 112-13.

²⁹ Gilson, p. 51.

³⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux, The Letters of Bernard of Clairvaux, Bruno Scott James, tr. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1998), p. 151.

³¹ Gilson, p. 52.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 62.

³⁴ Sommerfeldt, p. 116.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-23. For Bernard, the virtue of humility actually plays a large role in the entire process of love and the journey towards God. Yet this humility is born of self-knowledge, and most specifically the knowledge that as humans we are turned towards evil. Self-knowledge is as important to Bernard as it is to Catherine of Siena. For Bernard, true self-knowledge leads to sorrow, forgiveness through repentance, and "spiritual awakening." Yet, again, this "cleansing" is effected by the Holy Spirit. Thus Bernard is careful to put the virtues in proper perspective, something Catherine and Bonaventure do as well. The whole key to the movement, for all three teachers, is the reliance on God rather than on one's notions and practice of virtues.

³⁷ Catherine of Siena, "The Dialogue", Saint Catherine of Siena The Dialogue, Suzanne Noffke, tr. (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 25.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁹ Catherine frames the nature of this self-knowledge in the form of a prayer: "O eternal Father, I accuse myself before you, asking that you punish my sins in this life." Catherine of Siena, p. 27.

⁴⁰ "Because their virtue is practiced and their suffering borne with infinite desire and contrition and sorrow for sin, it has value." Catherine of Siena, p. 28.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴⁴ Bonaventure, "The Journey of the Mind to God", *Mystical Opuscula The Works of Bonaventure*, vol. I (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1960), p. 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ "Teach me, O Lord, Your way, that I may walk in Your truth; direct my heart that it may fear Your name."

Bonaventure, "The Journey of the Mind to God," p. 9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁴ Underhill, pp. 176-77.

⁵⁵ John of the Cross, in fact, warns about the pride that issues from practicing devotions, virtues, etc. He warns that such people often end up sounding and behaving like the Pharisees who hounded Jesus and others. John goes even further: "In these persons the devil often increases the fervour that they have and the desire to perform these and other works more frequently, so that their pride and presumption may grow greater. For the devil knows quite well that all these works and virtues which they perform are not only valueless to them, but even become vices in them. And such a degree of evil are some of these persons wont to reach that they would have none appear good save themselves." John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, E. Allison Peers, tr. (New York: Image-Doubleday, 1990), pp. 39-40.

Teresa of Avila in *Interior Castle* bases the first movements of the spiritual life on prayer and meditation. The human must reject the world of busy-ness and turn inwards. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, E. Allison Peers, tr. (New York: Image-Doubleday, 1989), p. 31.

Inherent to Teresa's theology is the notion of self-surrender. Virtues are never enough. E. Allison Peers, *Introduction*, *Interior Castle*, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁶ "The Divine assails the soul in order to renew it and thus to make it Divine; and, stripping it of the habitual affections and attachments of the old man, to which it is very closely united, knit together and conformed, destroys and consumes its spiritual substance, and absorbs it in deep and profound darkness." John of the Cross, p. 104.

⁵⁷ "Inasmuch as God here purges the soul according to the substance of its sense and spirit, and according to the interior and exterior faculties, the soul must needs be in all its parts reduced to a state of emptiness, poverty and abandonment and must be left dry and empty and in darkness." John of the Cross, p. 106.

⁵⁸ Flinders, p. 22.

⁵⁹ Eckhart, Sermon, p. 185.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁶¹ Hadewijch, p. 241.

⁶² Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), p. 50.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶⁴ John of the Cross, p. 64.

⁶⁵ Merton, pp. 52-4.

⁶⁶ Underhill, p. 168.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-9.

⁶⁸ Underhill writes that the mystic conversion has "three marked characteristics: a sense of liberation and victory: a conviction of the nearness of God: a sentiment of love towards God. We might describe it as a sudden, intense, and joyous perception of God immanent in the universe." Underhill, p. 179.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

Ideals 2: The Certainty of Christian Piety

Then there are people who rely on certain magic signs and prayers thought up by some pious imposter for his own amusement or for gain—they promise themselves everything, wealth, honours, pleasure, plenty, continual good health, long life, a vigorous old age, and finally a seat next to Christ in heaven.¹

Gawain is a very devout Christian knight, but relates to God from this devotion. He relies, in fact, too much on this way, becoming overly concerned with perfectionist practice to the detriment of his relationship with God that such observance supposedly serves. Gawain's penchant for "perfectionism" in his religious practice is difficult to prove by looking at specific parts of the text. When, for instance, he is increasingly concerned, while on the initial journey out of Camelot, as to whether he will be able to attend Mass and recite his devotions (750ff), this may indicate, as a single episode, the great virtue of constancy in the face of hopelessness or personal danger. Again, when riding out from Hautdesert to the Green Chapel (2069ff), the hero places his faith in the Lord (2138-9). This, too, as a single episode, can be taken more as an exemplary act of constancy in the face of almost certain death. But the latter episode, in particular, when contrasted with Gawain's sin of betraying his faith in Mary for the magical talisman that occurred the day before, as well as his blindness to this sin, makes a sort of mockery not only of his supposed constancy while on the final journey. It makes a bit of a mockery of his entire religious practice, for he gave up when it really mattered—when he most needed such faith.

His last-minute rebuff of his religion betrays a crack in his pious armor, and this crack evidences his perfectionism in that we can no longer accept with certainty that all his religious deeds issue from depth. This crack leads one to ask if they are no more than an attempt at a good performance that, oftentimes, avoids a deeper spiritual engagement. This thesis asserts later that his piety does seem heart-felt, that his relationships with Mother Mary and Jesus seem real. However, given the end result of this journey, his piety seems a little too forced because he has lived it and practiced it all the while unawares of his sinful side. Because he fails to see the reality of original sin in his own life, one can conclude, especially after seeing the wisdom of John of the Cross, Catherine of Siena, and others, that our hero is at times simply acting. This production is a good one, and one has the impression that he has even fooled himself. Thus his bitter astonishment at the end: He too has a dark side. His is a perfectionist performance because it has prevented him from seeing his imperfect nature; he has been more interested in form than substance.

We will divide Gawain's devotion into two parts, one centering on his five virtues, and the second concerning his relationships with the divine, (including Mary and the saints), and how these relationships affect Gawain's attitudes and interactions with other people. This chapter will examine the second aspect of Gawain's devotion, henceforth referred to as "piety" or simply "devotion," while the following one will more fully study the hero's virtues and how he lives them.

These two chapters seek to discuss Gawain's starting point on this journey in order to examine the building blocks of his pilgrimage. These building blocks and the roots of the Christian faith carry great significance, as Piotr Sadowski notes:

The quest theme in *Sir Gawain* is embedded within the temporal scheme of the Church's liturgical calendar with its

feast days and related rituals and customs, and harmonized with the natural cycle of the seasons of the astronomical year as well as with the popular beliefs and folk customs associated with them.²

Gawain's religious observances seem to designate him the perfect Christian knight; but deeper problems exist. Particularly at his "pre-enlightenment" stage, Gawain seems to have eschewed his own imperfection and broken-ness. In the sixteenth century Erasmus of Rotterdam warns how such a false conditioning (even regarding piety, one presumes) can obstruct one from God: "Man's [sic] mind is so formed that it is far more susceptible to falsehood than to truth."³ Gawain's piety prevents him from seeing the truth. This is so because the man has developed a devotion that, although not superficial or wholly sentimental, has not, it seems, encountered any great obstacles. It is the piety of a youthful Christian who lacks experience and critical self-awareness. Erasmus's In Praise of Folly claims that spiritual maturity demands this awareness and a painful integration of one's experiences: A "gain in happiness costs very little, whereas real facts often take a lot of trouble to acquire."⁴

In Gawain's stage at the story's beginning, his Christian practices act as a kind of drug, enabling the knight to cope with life through a few simple words or deeds. These practices frequently seem to buffer Gawain from a deeper interaction with life. Again, this does not necessarily indicate a superficial personality or devotion. This chapter seeks to demonstrate, in fact, that his beliefs and spiritual practices issue from deep within. The end of the adventure unavoidably effects so much pain for Gawain precisely because of this depth. Any change or challenge to Gawain's religious outlook would cause the knight severe pain, since his identity revolves around his Christian and knightly piety.⁵ His religious beliefs and practices impart to him a sense of certitude. Observing religious customs produces certainty

and security in almost any given situation. We will see this in the bedroom scenes or when he is journeying from Castle Hautdesert to the Green Chapel.

Gawain suffers a very significant wound, largely because of his perfectionist, pious observances and because he hides behind false securities. We will speculate later about the spiritual road ahead for him after this jolt. For now, we will look at what lies in Gawain's heart, that is, what resources he can use for his journey. Very clearly, he has a sound base from which to begin the more difficult, post-shock journey, as he lives his faith boldly, faithfully, and joyfully. This thesis in no way seeks to accuse Gawain of stupidity, insincerity, or faithlessness.

In fact, while alone on the journey towards the Green Chapel in the second fitt, during his tenure in courtly society at Castle Hautdesert or Camelot, or when in the company of another person such as the Lady of the Castle, Gawain maintains a remarkably consistent level of religious awareness and speech. He refers repeatedly to God, Providence, Mary, and the saints, regardless of the wider subject under discussion, and he blesses people in God's name when taking his leave, reflecting a certain joy and ease in this faith.

Second Fitt

As the first fitt deals mostly with the scene at Camelot before and during the visit of the Green Knight, we learn little to nothing about Gawain's religious piety. The second fitt introduces us more fully to the hero and his beliefs and practices. The reader soon witnesses Gawain's profound yet simple trust in Providence. As he prepares to leave Arthur's court for the Green Chapel the next day, he gives his worries concerning the whereabouts of the Green

Chapel over to God: “As God wyl me wysse” (549).⁶ We cannot know Gawain’s inner emotions and musings, but can probably assume that he has, to a large degree, comforted himself with such meditation on God.

For instance, Gawain voices the above prayer even as his apprehension blocks him from talking to others about the road ahead.⁷ Alone in his fears and turmoil, the knight wishes to keep only God close, to share these fears solely with his Creator. It is a blessing that Gawain opens to the divine when in his darkest moments, since he will face many of these alone on the journey. We have the sense that, accepting this journey as a possible death march, he acknowledges and reconciles himself to a life that has largely escaped his control, and that has therefore come to depend on God more than ever. His devotion does contain a great authenticity to it in the form of this dependence. The problem, we will see, follows from his use of piety to try to control life.

In describing Gawain’s formal send-off from Camelot the next day, the author places the protagonist’s Christian devotions into perspective: Line 641 briefly refers to the knight’s military skills, with the remainder of the section concentrating much more fully on his devotion. Thus the reader senses the relative importance of this latter to Gawain.⁸ Christian devotions overtake his personality when the specter of death haunts him.

The pentangle on one side of Gawain’s shield symbolizes much of the knight’s Christian (and knightly) devotions. It first signifies Gawain’s trust in Christ and the redeeming suffering of the Lord: “Ande alle his afaunce / vpon folde wat3 in þe fyue wounde3 / þat Cryst ka3t on þe croys” (642-3).⁹ In his own anxious torment, Gawain probably identifies more deeply than ever with the suffering of Jesus. We glimpse Gawain’s deeply rooted, childlike trust in Christ (the term “childlike” is used here as a criticism of the

hero rather than as a compliment of his faith).¹⁰ God's redeeming love for Gawain seems as certain and real as the pentangle itself, and so this symbol becomes a talisman. It serves as the armor on Gawain's shield, becoming, in other words, the knight's real protective gear.

The *Gawain*-poet's next words also indicate a great deal about this childlike piety. The knight believes in Christ's five wounds "as þe crede telle3" (643).¹¹ Gawain obediently acknowledges, accepts, and trusts the Creeds and teachings of the Church. The hero, anything but a heretic or an original and rebellious thinker, adopts a very traditional, orthodox piety drawn from Mother Church. As a son of the Church, we can guess that he fully accepts as truth the promises of this Mother, specifically that devout participation in the Mass and devotions taught by ecclesiastical authorities guarantee the blessings of God in this life and the next. His words of the previous day, so quietly confident, issue from this belief. However, Gawain's obedient dedication contains the seeds for a hard fall, for Gawain seems incapable of leaving these walls behind for an individual relationship with God.¹²

As with our hero's "childlike" piety, one can only discern this rigidity, and its negative effects on Gawain, by looking at the poem as a whole (see footnote 10). Lines 2138-39 in particular indicate the crux of the problem: "Ful wel con Dryȝtyn schape / His seruauntez for to saue."¹³ Gawain has clearly, the previous day, decided to rely firstly on the girdle rather than primarily on anything divine. Yet the next day he speaks so readily and quickly of his faith in God (2138-39). This readiness adds to the lack of critical self-awareness concerning the damage to his relationship with God that turning away from Mary, his chosen heavenly patron and protector, and towards the magical girdle has caused. His is a soul in trouble, for it is a soul that has forsaken God, at least partially. Worse, if the Green Knight were to kill him, given the state of this soul thus turned away from God, the hero

could only offer his ignorance as a saving grace. Gawain's over-reliance on pious claims about God taking care of God's servants rings hollow. If at this point the pious talk would have failed him he might have come to his senses without the brutal awakening of the Green Knight.

Erasmus finds that such a rigid faith often contains little authentic love for humans or God, and that, practiced from obedience, it fails to lead towards *imitatio Christi*.¹⁴ Erasmus goes so far as to call such living "silly," and wonders what would happen, both to the ecclesiastics and the individual, if someone were to suggest that rather than any pious devotions, the Christian follows aspects of the actual life of the saint.

Gawain's pious perfectionism masks the fact that he has yet to find his own path to God. The Christian community does play a vital role in one's relationship with the divine. However, at some point each Christian needs to individualize the journey, finding their personally unique way.¹⁵ Gawain's piety imprisons him in a narrow role that others have constructed; this role prevents him from exercising his unique path within the Christian community. This rigidity ultimately fails him.

To be fair to Gawain, he does seem to desire something more individual, even within the firm confines of devotion. As a Christian knight, he devotes himself specifically to Mary. The second side of Gawain's shield depicts an image of the Virgin. Gawain identifies himself as a confident, trusting, and faithful knight of Mary:

And quere-so-euer pys mon in melly wat3 stad,
His þro þo3t wat3 in þat, þur3 alle oþer þynge3,
þat alle his forsnes he fong at þe fyue joye3
þat þe hende heuen-quene had of hir chylde (644-7).¹⁶

Whenever Gawain looks at this image of Mary "his belde neuer payred" (650).¹⁷

This relationship reflects the desire for individuality, as Gawain has chosen Mary when others might choose St. Christopher, St. George, or someone else as an object of devotion. And Gawain does not seem to follow the Church's customs merely for show. His closeness to Mary and confidence in her protection reflect his deeper, very personal practice. This dedication has led to a deepening relationship with Christ and the Mother of the Lord that holds great and immediate effect in his real life. This aspect of Gawain's Christianity contains the seeds for much growth, but is limited by the knight's lack of pliability. A spirit of openness is important because Gawain's piety encompasses his whole existence. In the brief part of his life during which this adventure takes place, Gawain does not seem to fragment his life into "Christian" and "not Christian" (although, as stated, he still lacks some integration concerning his self-awareness). However, he risks an all-or-nothing attitude because of inflexibility and a lack of alternatives in how he perceives things.

Gawain's relationship with God parallels the one with Mary in that it contains seeds of openness while imperiled by inflexibility. As we see the knight on the beginning of his journey, the poet reminds us twice that Gawain does not feel alone: He has not lost faith. Uncertain of his path, Gawain leaves Camelot for the great unknown "on Gode's halwe" (692).¹⁸ Thus he represents his God, thinking not of a treacherous or dishonest way of avoiding the meeting with the Green Knight, but rather of how his part in the Beheading Game mysteriously ensues from something greater. Gawain aims to serve the divine will. As confusing as this supposed divine will seems to the modern reader, given other strange elements of the poem--such as a tall green giant who can pick up his beheaded head, address Camelot, and then ride off--we do not have to justify Gawain's attitude, but simply accept it.

Gawain's inflexibility leads to a hardihood in his actions and attitude. While boldly riding through the woods, truly alone for the first time on the journey, we read of Gawain's felt closeness to God: "Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp" (696).¹⁹ Confronted by beasts both animal and human-like, Gawain still keeps the faith.²⁰ In fact, the *Gawain*-poet portrays a very devout knight whose constancy alone keeps him alive. Significantly, the poet acknowledges Gawain's piety, rather than his fighting prowess or adherence to some chivalric code, as the cause for victories over murderous beasts. This boldness may act more as a hindrance than a help later on (he does not seem resolute when with the Lady, but his acceptance of the girdle and deception of Bertilak are in fact very courageous moves to preserve his life). But for now, alone on the perilous journey, this audacity serves him. Again, this is a matter of flexibility. He needs to behave as a brave and daring Christian knight when danger imperils his physical safety, but become more reliant on God than these confident, perhaps immodest wits when seduced by the Lady or confronting the reality of his imminent death.

Rather than feeling estranged from the divine while riding from Camelot, Gawain uses his piety to lean on God's support, a method that works *at this time*. This stance works here because our hero, in these life and death struggles, is in his element. He has met such challenges countless times before. Old pious habits suit old, easily-surmountable challenges. Therefore, although the journey seems very discouraging and regrettable, the hero senses that God nevertheless stands with him. Thus the man's convictions do not diminish even as his loneliness grows when he fails to make connections with the "locals," who know neither God nor the place of the Green Chapel, and who extend hostility rather than hospitality.²¹

The knight successfully uses his piety to control things, to make dangerous situations end most beneficially for him. His life depends on his piety. More specifically, his life depends on the divine answer to this piety. At least for now, this response acts in Gawain's favor. Conversely, along with his boldness, this need for control shall cause him to sin later on. His over-reliance on Church custom and personal devotion prevent him from responding to a new situation, later on in the Castle, with new tactics.²²

The most remarkable and life-saving divine reaction to the knight's piety occurs shortly after the author's portrayal of Gawain's success against the wild beasts. Just as things become unbearable, due to the wintry weather and isolation, and Gawain suffers at his last wits, he prays to Mary that she direct him to appropriate shelter (736-9).²³ As Gawain rides the next day, the poet reminds us of the knight's profound devotion:

Carande for his costes, lest he ne keuer schulde
To se þe seruyse of þat syre, þat on þat self niȝt
Of a burde watȝ borne oure baret to quelle (750-2).²⁴

Our hero then prays once again, actually bargaining with Mary that he will observe his devotions after settled in the necessary dwelling. He promises her his attendance at Mass and the matins honouring her feast day the next morning, and even recites, in good faith and preparation, his *Paternoster*, *Ave Maria*, and *Credo*.²⁵

Gawain here controls the situation through his piety. His devotion pays off. He suddenly beholds what turns out as Castle Hautdesert which, as we will learn, lies near to the goal of the journey. Yet this prayer of control has not only addressed Gawain's need for warmth and physical comfort, but also issues from his need to control his soul's health and ultimate destiny, a concern of course made all the more urgent by his "appointment" with death.²⁶

As before, we see that Gawain's piety, however flawed with this obsession for control, is not superficial; it does not disappear once he discovers the Castle. Instead he reverently thanks Jesus and Saint Julian for this blessing.²⁷ We can speculate on the theology behind the constancy of faith we have witnessed since we first met Gawain: The knight draws a close connection between his prayers and the events in his life. Thus in difficult times his faith becomes, in a sense, his shield (literally exemplified, as discussed, with the pentangle and figure of Mary depicted on his armor). In his battles with dragons, trolls, and other opponents earlier in the journey, Gawain depends more on Jesus, and other Christian figures, than he does on his knightly strength and fighting prowess, although, as stated, these are old situations for a knight, so he need not change his spiritual habits at that point.

This piety reflects the intimate connection between Gawain's existence and that of "spirits." The latter world comprises Mary, Jesus, and Christian saints who now dwell in some afterlife. These beings take a very deep interest in Gawain's reality—sometimes interfering for his sake when he prays. Yet our hero's spirituality is not "otherworldly" but instead orients itself towards his material world. He frequently uses his prayers as a means of controlling what happens in the here and now.

But this concern for his world does not lead to "godly" self-absorption. Although inflexible, Gawain's spirituality adopts a wider view of things. For instance, he does not retreat into a shell, but understands one's actions as producing a sort of karmic effect because of their centrality to the community. Overwhelmed by the Castle's friendly welcome, Gawain wishes upon the Castle's lord, Bertilak, a "good karma" that this hospitality deserves: "‘Graunt mercy,’ quoth Gawain, ‘þer Kryst hit yow forȝelde’" (838-9).²⁸ Good and pious actions, such as those followed by Gawain through his prayers or those of Bertilak's

welcome, are rewarded by Christ, both in this life (as per Gawain after he prays for a dwelling) and, presumably, in the next one. Jesus' love and treatment of us largely depends on our religious devotions and treatment of others.

Once at Castle Hautdesert, a final albeit important aspect of Gawain's personality becomes quickly apparent to the reader—his tendency to fill his conversation with references to God, Christ, Mary, and other figures of his faith. This practice probably issues from two sources. Firstly, this manner of speaking is a custom in a Christian society. But secondly, this habit reflects an important aspect of Gawain's piety which the reader has glimpsed before (as when he prays out in the cold, depending on more than his own wits). Gawain constantly retains these spiritual figures at the edge (perhaps one could say the roots) of his consciousness. Thus we once again find Gawain, when still unaware of the Green Chapel's proximity, acknowledging Providence in ensuring his timely arrival for his meeting (1053-55).²⁹ Again speculating on this theology, he refers so constantly to this heavenly world because he considers it as real and near as the person to whom he is speaking. We thus see his piety centering on real relationships with God, Mary, *et al.*, rather than growing from a purely cerebral or fanciful idea of the divine. Unfortunately, as stated previously in this chapter, these relationships are endangered by the hero's refusal to wholly embrace the First Commandment, to love God completely, even if this means letting go of his desire to follow his virtues.

In any case, this manner of speaking inheres to his inflexibility and, even more, to his need for control. His words can seem, at least to a modern reader, somewhat superstitious. Pronouncing "holy" names keeps him safe. Erasmus decries this need for control, speaking of "the people who've adopted the foolish but pleasurable belief that if they see some carving

or painting of that towering Polyphemus, Christopher, they're sure not to die that day."³⁰

These holy names are every bit the talisman that the green girdle later becomes. Again, we witness in this early part of the story the seeds of Gawain's sin.

Third Fitt

Gawain's rigid Christian piety determines his reaction to the Lady of the Castle's attempted seduction. Caught completely off guard, Gawain first feigns sleep then mechanistically crosses himself as she enters his room and sits on his bed. He thinks, perhaps superstitiously, that this latter action offers protection (1178ff).³¹ W.R.J. Barron regards this crossing as the blasphemy of misusing a "sacred symbol," although not a completely willful sin, as the knight is crossing himself in surprised panic.³² Yet given that we have seen Gawain constantly mindful of the divine reality, one can argue that this action parallels Gawain's prayers to Mary for shelter when the cold and aimlessness of the journey tire him. When in distress, Gawain calls for divine help.

It is important to emphasize that, even with Gawain's need for control and superstitious tendencies, his faith still contains aspects necessary for spiritual growth. For example, in this bedroom scene he does not suspend his trust in God even when given the opportunity and a very good excuse (a woman's obvious desire) for a sexual encounter with a beautiful woman. He perseveres as a Christian knight at the supreme moment of temptation. While Barron might see this scene as Gawain at one of his worst moments, I would hazard to say that the knight's reaction to this extreme situation might represent Gawain at one of his best Christian moments. The knight's fidelity indicates something deeper than a mechanistic

piety, although he fails to give himself entirely over to God at the precipice, where God seems absent, but is, according to John of the Cross, most present.³³

We do witness a positive aspect of his faith. As the Lady finally prepares to take her leave after failing to seduce Gawain, the latter blesses her: “Mary yow 3elde” (1263).³⁴ Perhaps I am again making too much out of social convention. But judging from his prayer life and instinctive faithfulness to God when wooed by the Lady, one can only assume that, social convention or not, Gawain truly entreats these words. As when he first arrives at the Castle, Gawain’s Christian piety reaches out to the larger Christian community. He expresses his faith not only in selfish or self-centered ends. He also regards Jesus, Mary, and the saints as divine guardians of the wider community. The seeds of more than a mechanistic or controlling piety are certainly present (although Gawain fails to develop them on the third day of the Lady’s attempted seduction, when he needs something more than his tradition-oriented piety).

While his previous prayers have largely centered on his personal needs, given Gawain’s consistent piety, this blessing might indicate a piety that takes a wider view of things. In fact, so strong is this urge to reach out to the wider community, Gawain twice more extends divine blessings on the Lady before she leaves (1279, 1307), and does the same the next day to her even as she attempts to seduce him again (1535).

Healthy and strong aspects of Gawain’s relationship with the divine become clearer still on the third day, when the poet notes that only Gawain’s trust in God is keeping him from acting on the Lady’s requests for lovemaking: “Gret perile bitwene hem stod, Nif Maré of hir knyȝt mynne” (1778-9).³⁵ The knight himself admits this in the face of her very

pressing advances: “God schylde . . . þat schall not befalle!” (1776-7).³⁶ His faith keeps him from committing adultery.

Unfortunately, his mechanistic spirituality overwhelms his ability to see the faults of lying to his host and depending on a talisman instead of God for survival. The poet informs us that the hero’s confession on the third day transpired without event, and that the knight merely gave his heartfelt sins to the priest with no note of wrestling over anything (1876ff). Once again, we find our knight concerned with his soul, with making his peace with God, but doing so from an inflexible view of things. He is probably feeling good and pious because he resisted the Lady’s sexual advances for the third day. This feeling of triumph over the sin he did not commit blinds him to the truth of the sins he is committing at that moment.

This is an important blindness on Gawain’s part—perhaps even a “saving” blindness had the Green Knight killed him—since only with a relatively pure conscience can he meet his death with the hope of salvation. But this false security issues from Gawain’s participation in the life of the Church, both devotional and sacramental. Gawain once again acts like a faithful and obedient son of the Church. He looks to the institution for all his spiritual needs, taking seriously the Church’s belief in itself as a spiritual panacea. He fails to take the responsibility for his own spiritual health that flexibility and openness to the spiritual life could produce. He prepares for death largely at a sacramental level. He also prepares according to the wisdom and spirituality of someone else, as our hero begs his confessor to teach him how to save his soul when faced with death (1877ff). While we can observe many mature aspects to our hero’s spirituality (such as his concern for others), one of his fatal flaws is this childish reliance on the Church and his eagerness to give up his spiritual powers

to someone else, the latter tendency of which we see in his quick acceptance of the girdle, as well as in his appeal to his confessor, on the same day, for spiritual teaching.

It is within the hero's character, then, that he also relies on the talisman, for it lies outside of himself (just as his devotional practices came from the outside in the form of ecclesiastical teaching). The hero wants life at all costs, even if it means, possibly, the forsaking of eternal life. John of the Cross, rather than sixteenth-century Protestant theology, seems to draw out the crux of the issue: As stated before, our hero fails to follow the First Commandment, for this would demand what Merton, in his summary of John of the Cross's teaching, a "black-out of desire."³⁷

John regarded "spiritual gluttony" as a dangerous sin by which Christians idolize their relationship with God and the fruits of that bond. Gawain's confession, wherein he asks for advice on the spiritual life but fails to identify his great sin, arises perhaps from this need to perform for the Church simply for performance's sake, rather than for the good of his soul. John criticizes such spiritual exercises, however much the Church officially sanctions them:

Inasmuch . . . as in behaving thus such persons (who excessively follow penances and other Church-sanctioned spiritual exercises) are working their own will, they grow in vice rather than in virtue; for, to say the least, they are acquiring spiritual gluttony and pride in this way, through not walking in obedience.³⁸

We see the protagonist's spiritual pride as he rides to the Green Chapel from Hautdesert, in his dishonest portrayal of himself to the guide as a good and faithful Christian who has placed his fate entirely in the hands of God. Gawain says this with a "gruchyng" tone, that is, with ill-humour and probable arrogance. As we know, Gawain has really placed his faith in the talisman, and so he has no basis for such arrogance.

Gawain's faith in ecclesiastical formulae leads to his post-confession euphoric behaviour. Although he is to meet his fate the next day, after "purifying" his soul he

mace hym as mery among þe fre ladyes,
With comlych caroles and alle kynnes ioie,
As neuer he did not þat daye, to þe derk nyȝt,
With blys (1885-8).³⁹

Yet at this point in the story, and with his joy, we can hardly doubt Gawain's sincerity, however childish it seems. Therefore, to repeat myself, I would argue that he does not consciously see his sin, and that he confessed sincerely. He enjoys his last day with a clear conscience, his soul prepared for death.⁴⁰ Even Barron gives Gawain the benefit of the doubt because of the extreme pressure under which the knight has lived over the last few days:

At the climax of a sequence in which his self-awareness has been increasingly preoccupied by his own reputation, by concern for his chivalry in the approaching test at the Green Chapel, scrupulosity may have been overwhelmed by the natural human instinct for self-preservation.⁴¹

His rigorous piety fails him when it most counts. His personal inventory of sins, taken before seeing his confessor, fails to include his lack of faith in Mary and reliance on magic to keep him alive.

Fourth Fitt

Still, the depth and potential for Gawain's freedom from this rigor and limited self-awareness seems clear. As stated before, Gawain sincerely blesses others. He does so not merely out of social convention or mechanistic piety, but retains a freedom and personal style when doing so. We see this twice as he leaves the Castle for the Green Chapel. He blesses the Castle and its inhabitants under his breath, out of the earshot of his hosts: "þe Hapel hem

3elde þat halde3 þe heuen vpon hy3e” (2055-6).⁴² He then entrusts the Castle to Christ as he rides off (2067). Gawain’s sense of community seems clear. Just as he has commended his soul to God, he now confides this Christian Castle to God. He concerns himself not only with his own soul. As stated, his piety is not limited to himself. In his piety he reaches out to others in community-building.

Neither can we term this devotion a “Sunday morning” piety, as we see Gawain cross himself, seemingly automatically (2071), as he rides out. This indicates once again faith and piety permeating every aspect of his life, even if, more negatively, this often leads to a machine-like spirituality. In a positive sense, it reflects how his relationship with the divine bears on everything he does. He excludes nothing from the domain of this faith. Consciously, he does not seem to lead a fragmented life--although he is about to find out that he is anything but integrated.

Of course, he does lead a fragmented life--but is wholly unsuspecting. As stated, when the guide tempts him by offering a way out (2118ff), Gawain portrays himself as depending completely on divine resistance:

þa3e he be a sturn knape
To sti3tel, and stad with staue,
Ful wel con Dry3tyn schape
His seruante3 for to saue (2136-9).⁴³

Gawain does not mention his dependence on the girdle to the guide for the obvious reason that he has promised the Lady he would keep silent. Even so, he seems very sure of himself, as confident in divine protection as he did the previous day when spending time with the Castle’s female inhabitants.

This moment could be as blasphemous as when he crosses himself in the first bedroom scene and when he confesses his sins minus those connected to the girdle. Yet, as

with these two cases, his response is not as hypocritical as it may appear: He has trusted in Providence all along, from the very first moments when he rode out from Camelot. He has steadfastly adhered to his convictions. Judging from this constancy, his faith in Providence is stronger than his unconscious fragmentation. He has not “sold out” his faith for a talisman. His maintains his faith, although he has added a little boost from the girdle. His faith, he is to learn shortly and to his chagrin, is imperfect.

Judging from his confession and from this response to the guide, it seems that it has not yet dawned on him just how his acceptance of the girdle has compromised his faith. If one gives Gawain the benefit of the doubt here, as I think he deserves, one can see this as Gawain not at his blasphemous, lying worst, but at his pious best. Also significant to his speech, he refers to himself as a servant of God (2139). Once again, then, we see Gawain as the Christian knight riding out on God’s errand, depending on God and not solely on the girdle. It seems that Gawain appends the girdle to the core of his faith. This does not minimize his sin. It simply acknowledges the truth. Gawain’s response to the guide seems to provide evidence that he is not selling out to the girdle in his moment of crisis.

Lines 2156ff and 2208ff also show us Gawain at his pious best (or blasphemous worst according to some critics), as he twice surrenders to God’s will. In his hour of darkness he remains true to God. He has identified the “Green Chapel” mound as the devil’s place (2189ff) and expects his doom shortly. Yet the knight shows no sign of feeling deserted by God, nor does he entertain any thoughts as to making a deal with the devil to save himself. Once again, selling out his beliefs does not occur to Gawain, even if these beliefs have, with the girdle, become somewhat fragmented. He will not sacrifice whatever faith he has. This steadfastness, built on the solid foundation of his devotion, is probably Gawain’s greatest

spiritual asset--and will see him persevere through the dark times that will follow his realization of the truth.

Gawain's stance, at the mount, reinforces the argument that at Confession, when crossing himself in the bedroom scene, and when evoking his hope in God while with the guide, he has done so with a pure heart. Even with the girdle one can perceive his purity, that in his naïveté or moral blindness he has not fatally damaged his soul or forsaken his Christian beliefs. He remains as a good son of the Church, albeit less perfect than he presently thinks.

Conclusion

We will leave Gawain and his piety as he readies himself to face death. This final encounter with the Green Knight / Bertilak alters his entire worldview, forever changing his piety. The second section of the thesis, which deals with how the Quest moves Gawain into a destabilizing spiritual, emotional, and psychological space, will examine this ending.

We have seen up to this instant our hero's piety based on certainties and a great deal of perfectionism. Imperfect though it is, it is also heartfelt. This sincerity issues from deep within Gawain's psyche. Every thought, speech, and action flows from those Christian roots. The next chapter will address his virtues as the second aspect of those roots.

¹ Erasmus of Rotterdam, *In Praise of Folly*, Betty Radice, tr. (London: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 127.

² Sadowski, p. 53.

³ Erasmus, p. 135.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁵ Wendy Klein makes the point that Gawain "defines his vocation in terms of religious, military and courtly ideals, synthesizing the modes of chivalry current in the fourteenth-century." Klein, p. 37.

⁶ "As God shall guide me." The line number from SGGK is in brackets after the citation, and in these footnotes I will give the translation, which is from W.R.J. Barron, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1974), p. 57.

⁷ "Ȝe knowe þe cost of þis cace, kepe I no more

To telle yow tenez þerof, neuer bot trifel." (546-7)

"You know the nature of this affair, and I do not care to speak to you further about the difficulties involved, it would only be a waste of breath." Barron, p. 57.

⁸ Klein, p. 93.

⁹ "and all his trust on this earth was in the five wounds which Christ received on the cross." Barron, p. 61.

¹⁰ As stated, the term “childlike” is used here as a criticism of the hero rather than as a compliment of his faith (It would be a compliment if he were following the spirit of Matthew 19:14: “but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs’”). We can discern the negative, childlike quality to Gawain only by looking at the protagonist’s actions as a whole, as found throughout the entire poem. No one single episode demonstrates this. We can see this childishness in the incongruities of the hero’s behaviour, especially towards the end of the adventure, on the day before and the day of the fateful meeting with the Green Knight. We can see the most “childish” aspect of Gawain’s spirituality in his complete blindness to his great sin concerning the green girdle. Countless medieval spiritual teachers, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila among them, demand an important level of critical self-awareness. Welch, pp. 39-46. Gawain’s piety, and therefore his faith in Christ, is “childlike” in that it does not prompt him to acknowledge and understand his sinful side. He fails to question his motives behind accepting the green girdle, especially when he is in the confessional. And when riding out to the Green Chapel, he seems to have forgotten the deal with the Lady over the magical girdle.

A mature, critically self-aware spirituality would not compartmentalize things so. It would not switch on one side of the personality—the pious Christian part—and at the same time switch off the other side—the part grasping for anything, even magic, in order to stay alive. We find, in other words, a very severe lack of integration. Given that the hero has only one day previously turned from Mother Mary’s protection to that of the green girdle, it is quite a contrast to observe this “pious” hero riding out to the final confrontation full of so much speech about God’s protection (2138-9).

¹¹ “as the Creed tells.” Barron, p. 61.

¹² One can argue, of course, that in fourteenth-century Roman Catholic England it would be difficult to follow a more individual path than the one our hero has. But this is the century of Hus, Wycliff, and the Lollards, as well as the latter days of the entire medieval period in which the Church had enjoyed a powerful position.

¹³ “The Lord is strong to save: / His servants trust in him.” Barron, p. 135.

¹⁴ Erasmus, 130.

¹⁵ The idea for this comes from Henri Nouwen, who writes that “The time seems to have to come when I can no longer stand back with the remark, ‘Some say . . . others say,’ but have to respond to the question, ‘But what do you say?’” Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (New York: Image-Doubleday, 1986), p. 14.

¹⁶ “And wherever this man was beset in battle, his steadfast thought was upon this, above all else—that he should draw all his fortitude from the five joys which the gracious Queen of Heaven had in her child.” Barron, p. 63.

¹⁷ “his courage never failed.” Barron, p. 63.

¹⁸ “in God’s name.” Barron, p. 65.

¹⁹ “and no one but God to talk with by the way.” Barron, p. 65.

²⁰ Sumwhyte wyth worme3 he werre3, and with wolues als,
Sumwhyte wyth wodwos þat woned in the knarre3,
Bope wyth bulle3 and bere3, and bore3 operquyle,
And etayne3 þat hym aneled of the he3e felle;
Nade he ben du3ty and dry3e, and Dry3tyn had serued,
Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte. (720-725)

“Sometimes he fought with dragons, and with wolves also, sometimes with forest trolls, who lived in the rocks, with bulls and bears too, and at other times with boars, and ogres who pursued him from the fells above; had he not been bold and unflinching and served God, without doubt he would have been struck down and killed many a time.” Barron, pp. 65, 67.

²¹ “wonde þer bot lyte þat auþer God oper gome wyth goud hert louied.” (702) “Few lived there who loved either God or man wholeheartedly.” Barron, p. 65.

²² It does seem, however, that when he takes the girdle he is really not relying enough on his piety. However, his failure to turn fully to God on the third day of wooing reflects how Gawain has been depending on prayers and virtuous acts rather than on a relationship with God (not that such a relationship does not exist for him). John of the Cross’s teachings on desire can help us see the real problem. Gawain has made idols out of his religious practices, since when his greatest challenge is looming, the second meeting with the Green Knight, his God seems absent. The green girdle, at the hour of anguish, seems more real to the protagonist than the divine. This failure to behold his lack of faith seems all the more glaring a sin given the fact that the knight’s prayers have

proven very effective before, as when, out in the wilderness and in danger of missing Mass and other devotions, his prayer for a chapel is gloriously and immediately answered (750ff).

The knight's relationship with God seems frigid: without devotions and rituals handed to him by the Church, and especially when left in the dark, at the edge of the "precipice," as Merton characterized it, our hero declines to stay the course. He refuses to place his entire trust in God, and so gives a major portion of that trust over to magic. The knight is so used to pious devotions that when pushed into a corner, when he finds himself all alone, without any instrument of piety—when Mother Church can no longer come to his rescue (for even one of its faithful, supposedly pious daughters, the Lady of the Castle, appears less than virtuous and less than devoted to her sacramentally sealed, Church-sanctioned and blessed relationship with the Lord of Hautdesert)—Gawain gives a large part of his faith up.

The guide episode, and the blindness of the hero to his sin, reflect the knight's over-reliance on society or Church-sanctioned pious formulae and an under-reliance on an ever-growing, ever-fluid relationship with God. When invited by circumstances (however difficult they may be) to step out into Merton and John of the Cross's precipice, our hero draws back, and simply looks to the girdle as a replacement for the piety of the Church.

²³ Þe knyȝt wel þat tyde

To Mary made his mone,

Þat ho hym red to ryde

And wysse hym to sum wone.

"Then the knight duly made his prayer to Mary, that she would direct his course and guide him to some dwelling." Barron, p. 67.

²⁴ "concerned about his religious duties, lest he should not manage to see the service of the Lord, who on that very night was born of a virgin to end our troubles." Barron, p. 67.

²⁵ "... 'I beseech þe, lorde,

And Mary, þat is myldest moder so dere,

Of some herber þer heȝly I myȝt here masse

And þy matyneȝ to-morne, mekely I ask,

And þerto prestly I pray my pater and aue

And crede.'" (753-8)

"'I beseech you, Lord, and Mary, your most dear and gentle mother, for some shelter where I may devoutly hear Mass and the matins of your feast day tomorrow, meekly I ask it, and in preparation I here and now recite my Paternoster and Ave Maria and Creed.'" Barron, p. 67.

²⁶ W.R.J. Barron, *Trawthe and Treason* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 19.

²⁷ Þenne hatȝ he hendly of his helme, and heȝly he þonkeȝ

Jesus and sayn Gilyan, þat gentyle ar bope," (773-4)

"then he reverently removed his helmet, and devoutly thanked Jesus and St. Julian." Barron, p. 69.

²⁸ "'Many thanks,' said Gawain, 'may Christ reward you for this.'" Barron, pp. 71, 73.

²⁹ "'I ne wot in worlde whederwarde to wende hit to fynde.

I nolde bot if I hit negh myȝt on Nw Ȝeres morne

For alle þe londe inwyth Logres, so me oure lorde help!'"

"I have not the least idea where to go to find it. I would not for all the land in Logres fail to reach it on New Year's morning, so help me God!" Barron, p. 83.

³⁰ Erasmus, p. 126.

³¹ "And sayned hym." (1202)

"crossed himself with his hand." Barron, p. 91.

³² Barron, *Trawthe and Treason*, p. 91.

³³ Merton, p. 51.

³⁴ "may Mary reward you." Barron, p. 95.

³⁵ "there was great peril between them, should Mary not be mindful of her knight." Barron, p. 121.

³⁶ "God forbid . . . That shall not happen!" Barron, p. 123.

³⁷ Merton, p. 54.

³⁸ John of the Cross, pp. 54-55.

³⁹ "And then the knight enjoyed himself with the noble ladies, with pleasant merry-making and every kind of delight, more than he had done on any day, with great happiness, till night nightfall." Barron, p. 129.

In the next few lines the guests remark that Gawain is in his best spirits since his arrival at the Castle.

⁴⁰ Barron suggests in Trawthe and Treason that Gawain is not blaspheming because of this easy conscience. Nor is Gawain really sinning over the girdle, "since sin involves full understanding and consent on the part of the sinner." At issue, for Barron, then, is the "question of intention." Barron, Trawthe and Treason, pp. 85-6. One wonders, though, if Gawain's "ignorance" is perhaps a "willful" ignorance; perhaps the hero deliberately avoids reflecting on what he is doing. His merriment in Castle Hautdesert after Confession may be his successful attempt to forget his sins.

⁴¹ Barron, Trawthe and Treason, p. 91.

⁴² "May the Lord who rules the heavens above reward them, and all of you as well." Barron, p. 137.

⁴³ "Though he may be a grim fellow to deal with, and armed with a club, the Lord is well able to protect his servants." Barron, p. 141.

Ideals 3: The Certainty of Christian Virtues

“...a tragic romance with the sad moral that perfection is beyond our grasp.”¹

Gawain attempts to personalize his faith by embracing specific virtues. More significantly, however, this adoption drives him towards absolutism. Just as he depends on the outer authority of the Church for a great deal of his spiritual practices and world outlook, so he looks to the virtues as another authority. These virtues influence his personality just as the Church does: They push him into an inflexible role, where he must perform as a “perfect Christian knight.” Our hero, somewhat childishly, hopes that the virtues, along with the Church and piety, can serve as his bedrock.

In reality, the virtues block Gawain from a deeper relationship with God and a more authentic, truthful interaction with his own life and the people in it. The virtues help keep him safe and secure, within the illusion that he controls a significant part of his life. These good habits become idols for the knight. Gawain’s sincere attachment to his moral code proceeds from this great vice of absolutizing them as his life’s ultimate motivation. Worse, Gawain absolutizes *himself* as able to perfectly meet their demands. His entire life therefore becomes a formula.² This attitude plays a key factor in the poem since, as Charles Moorman notes, the *Gawain*-poet is willing “to see human conduct and morality as in the end irreducible to precepts and formulas.”³

Gawain's relationship with his moral code causes him great chagrin at the story's end. His virtues fail him. Only a deeper relationship with God would have saved him from sinning. This situation concerning the virtues parallels that of his pious practices: The underlying sin--the perfectionist attitude that causes him to rely on a talisman and to lie about it--does not seem very evident.

Gawain has been performing very well for all concerned. He appears to himself, to his fellow courtiers, and to the reader, as the taintless Christian knight. This very perfectionism, however, masks his unfaithfulness to God. The great shock at the end issues from his hardened shell of virtues and piety that he adopts as a panacea. As Merlin the Magician says in the movie *Excalibur*, evil is "where you least expect it, always." Gawain finds his brokenness and sin where he expected joy and wholeness. We can locate this brokenness in the aspects of his personal piety that we have already examined, especially how he has enclosed himself into a box of religiosity. Not surprisingly, he also remains faithful to his virtues until near the end because he must prove to himself (and to others, he assumes) his perfect Christian knighthood.

To more fully understand Gawain's virtues, we must keep in mind his audiences at Castle Hautdesert and Camelot. Gawain is very much a product of his courtly society. He cares very deeply about the judgments of others. He performs for these people, as for himself. At Hautdesert, he remains under tremendous social pressure because of the high view others have of him, which they announce soon after he arrives (908ff).⁴ They perceive him as the greatest Christian man of arms, as the knightly embodiment of Camelot, and tell him so (910ff). From the moment Gawain enters Castle Hautdesert, we see him become a sort of walking exposition of gallantry, under constant scrutiny, as

Vch segge ful softly sayde to his 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’ (915-919).⁵

Gawain’s devotion to his pentangle entraps him into a role, since this symbol speaks of an other-worldly ethical ideal of stability, certainty, and security.⁶ In this outlook, the virtues never clash with each other (one can remain courteous to a Lady without compromising one’s purity⁷), and so remain the faultless guidelines for living, a sort of Christian and knightly moral *how to* on living.

The five points of the pentangle represent the five virtues of Gawain: *fraunchyse*, *fela3schyp*, *clannes*, *cortaysye*, and *pit  *. This chapter need only study *cortaysye* to argue Gawain’s perfectionism, as this virtue seems to demand much of the man’s energy. In fact, the discussion will leave *clannes* and *pit  * out completely, and only briefly address *fle3schyp* and *fraunchyse*.

Fraunchyse

The poet names generosity, or *fraunchyse*, first. As mentioned in the chapter on knighthood, *largesse* played a large part in the knight’s mystique. The pseudo-clerical cavalier served the less-fortunate as part of his Christian duty. Yet we witness very little of this in the story, as most of the narrative concerns itself with Gawain in courtly society. In his one great act of *fraunchyse*, he takes over the burden of the Green Knight’s challenge from the King, who in his rage and wounded pride has spoken too soon.⁸

We view a lack of *fraunchyse* on the trek towards the Green Castle. This journey is not marked by generosity to the people he meets. Although he seems to play the hero in defeating trolls, forest men, and dragons (715ff), we also sense exasperation in the knight when local peasants fail to direct him to the Castle (701ff). Yet we cannot judge the protagonist too harshly, as he is on a pilgrimage towards a very possible death. In any case, the *Gawain*-poet fails to give us enough information to judge Gawain's performance on this virtue.

Fela3schyp

While generosity is understated in the poem, fellowship, as we have observed from some of Gawain's pious practices, enjoys a balanced if not overly-developed place in Gawain's actions. As a good knight and Christian, our hero concerns himself with the privileged society to which he belongs. With his pious wishes of God's blessings on everyone, regardless of the circumstance (such as after the Lady of the Castle has tried to woo him), the reader can form the picture of a person whose self-image largely issues from his relationships with the wider community. Fellowship as a virtue has become a fervent need for our hero. He reacts with such pain at the end because of his felt betrayal by his courtly associates.

The first opportunity we have to watch Gawain in action in the fellowship occurs at Camelot, after Arthur has in his insulted rage taken up the beheading challenge. Gawain immediately steps in to protect his king (343ff). While this sequence is best studied when we look at the virtue of courtesy, Gawain's action does indicate a strong sense of identity

derived from his community, something that forms the basis of his fellowship with other knights. He aims for perfection in this virtue, working very hard at establishing a communal bond. This, again, is best seen in his pious practices, as when he blesses the community of Castle Hautdesert as he leaves for the Green Chapel (2052).

Cortaysye

We could spend much more time on the above virtue; however, the point of this chapter is to argue that Gawain is a perfectionist in his actions in general, and from the vantage point of his moral code, as stated, we note this perfectionism best with *cortaysye*.

We witness Gawain at his courteous best in the first fitt, when he intervenes in Arthur's enraged response to the Green Knight. The intruder, through his total lack of knightly courtesy, has come to challenge the very ideals of chivalry that Camelot claims to uphold.⁹ While Arthur with his loss of control, and the court through its silent reception of the guest, have utterly failed the Green Knight through discourtesy, Gawain remains the very essence of this quality.¹⁰

The latter succeeds in restoring the courtly manners one would expect from Camelot, but doing so with tact and without judgment on his fellow knights.¹¹ Neither does Gawain for a moment give in to the understandable temptation of descending to the Green Knight's violent behavior in order to settle the confrontation then and there.¹² We know Gawain succeeds in restoring chivalry, as Arthur quickly regains his composure, becoming cheerful and courteous again:

And he luflyly hit hym laft, and lyfte vp his honde,
And gef hym Godde3 blessing, and gladly hym biddes

þat his hert and his honde schulde hardi be boþe (369-71).¹³

Gawain, through his courtesy, takes control of the situation when Arthur utterly fails. Here, at least, the hero appears more advanced in knightly virtues than even the King.

We learn that Gawain stands as Arthur's best knight not necessarily because of fighting prowess but due to courtly behaviour.¹⁴ Gawain thus clearly passes the first test of the Green Knight, of worthiness for the Beheading and Wooing Games that this latter horseman has come to begin. If Gawain had acted like Arthur, the Green Knight may have simply turned around and returned to Castle Hautdesert, informing Morgan le Fey that Camelot was more adolescent than they had originally suspected, and that the Games were unnecessary, as these men would obviously fail even the smallest challenge to their chivalry.

Through this scene we also learn something very positive and important to the entire story. Of all the knights of the Round Table, including its King, Gawain alone can measure up to the challenge. Only he does not either lose his composure or keep a shocked silence. Gawain is "of a different moral calibre" than the others.¹⁵ Gawain has better developed and practiced the virtues. But here we glimpse the seeds of the fall of this man, as we will learn that this moral code, having become so developed, has caused Gawain to become lost in it.

The man's entire manner of relieving the King of the burden of the Beheading Game reveals Gawain's great courtesy. Gawain approaches Arthur with the utmost humility, linking his own personal worth to his blood kinship to Arthur, his uncle (356). Even with this connection, Gawain maintains his courteous humility: "I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest, And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes þe soþe" (354-5).¹⁶ With these words, we see early on in the story, then, Gawain's perfectionist streak: "No bounté bot your blod I in my bodé knowe" (357).¹⁷

Gawain's humility is, of course, convention. We should not therefore dismiss his demeanor. In fact, the role of convention in Gawain's exercise of virtues becomes a crucial point to my entire thesis discussion. Although we cannot look into his heart, we can suspect that his humility is not real; humility is probably not something he *feels* so much as something he *acts*. Gawain's spiritual and moral perfectionism, as exemplified with this humility, derives from the role he must play.

Through this show of courtesy he establishes his identity within very confining boundaries. Identity comes not only through blood ties (with the King), but from the social standing this association offers, because this social standing constricts Gawain into performing as the perfectly courteous knight. In fact, the reader does not really see the individual personality and characteristics of Gawain, but rather the man as "an exemplar of knightly courtesy and self-control."¹⁸ We see the "shell" of courtesy. Thus here he becomes the perfect exemplar of humility in the face of chaos and boorishness.

The noticeable difference between how Arthur takes up the challenge and how the King's nephew does deserves a last comment. The latter reacts very calmly, making for a somewhat surreal setting in that a green monster has just broken into the court and brazenly challenged any of its members to a life-threatening duel, and at Christmas time no less. It seems that, unlike Arthur, Gawain can express little-to-no instinct or spontaneity; whatever rage our hero feels from such an arrogant, mocking intruder, he shoves deep inside himself. Reminding us of Gawain's many pious practices, we see that his reaction to an awe-inspiring, enraging person remains bottled-up within convention. This etiquette masks the whole man. One must not be overly critical of Arthur for losing control. At least we can observe him as a

human being. We more readily relate to him than to Gawain, who seems in his role playing, perhaps, as unreal as the Green Knight.¹⁹

The protagonist remains as artificial while in the society at Castle Hautdesert (815ff). When he first enters the Castle he passively accepts the society's grand welcome. While he is obviously relieved and ecstatic at finally chancing upon shelter (especially such a magnificent shelter), aside from his pious thanksgiving to Jesus and St. Julian (773-4), he expresses nothing. He maintains his stiff upper lip, and does not share any emotions, even after his hosts lead him to a more private bedroom or to the comfort of a grand chair before the fire (875). The hero sometimes seems more like an automaton than anything, being led around by others, doing their bidding, and above all fitting into his role. This is, it seems, a large part of the story of his life.

In fact, Gawain is so rigidly formal and reserved that the poet turns our attention to the details of clothing and castle furnishings (853ff). The poet finds more excitement in these fixtures than in a knight on a quest in the midst of a beheading game from which, a few days hence, he might lose his life. We watch our courteous gentleman behaving perfectly at dinner. Again, rather than recounting his adventures or speaking of the Green Knight, Gawain "calde hit a fest ful frely and ofte" (894).²⁰ Only when fellow diners prod him does he in fact share his full identity with the society (901ff). This humility, then, overtakes our hero's personality, as it is the courteous way to act.

Later on we see the contrast between Gawain and Bertilak--when the two spend time with the ladies. The latter man's comportment reminds us of Arthur's at Camelot: spontaneous, energetic, full of life and play, and exhibiting the ability to enjoy life:

þe lorde luflych alofte lepe3 ful ofte,
Mynned merthe to be made vpon many syþe3,

Hent heȝly of his hode, and on a spere hinged,
 And wayned hom to wynne þe worchip þerof
 þat most myrþe myȝt meue þat Crystenmas whyle (981-985).²¹

We do not really know if Gawain is enjoying himself, or merely attending to the ladies and the host out of courtesy (perhaps Gawain himself does not really know why he does things, other than out of courtesy). Gawain is courteous; Bertilak (as Arthur before) is human.²² It seems, in fact, that Bertilak through such games as in this scene (981-85), attempts to encourage his guest to come out of his role, as the author in fact states (988-9). True, the hero has something terrible hanging over his head, but that fact plus a vigorous, engaging host, ladies, and wine should produce some sort of effect in Gawain, leading him, for example, “to cry in his beer” over his fate. He remains, it seems, stiffly formal.

When Bertilak draws the knight away from the festivities and privately asks him why he was passing by the Castle (1046ff), Gawain does not even then lose his courteous composure—even when speaking of the game that might actually turn into a death sentence (1104-6). The hero maintains his disposition under this intense pressure, just as he did at Camelot in front of the Green Knight; he bows to the host (1104) and accepts, out of courtesy, Bertilak’s new game of exchanging the day’s winnings with each other (1105ff), as if the Beheading Game does not lay heavily-enough on his mind.

Once again, then, we see Gawain accepting someone else’s contest out of courtesy,²³ against what would seem to be his own best interests: He is exhausted, malnourished, and scared for his life. Yet he keeps performing. Just as at Camelot, he has passed the initial test of courtesy, maintaining a proper demeanor even when probably dying for a good night’s sleep. This perfection prompts Bertilak to engage him in this other amusement.

The Exchanges Game, especially in its wooing aspect (which, Gawain does not realize until the end, plays an integral role in this Game), drives the man's courteous perfection to its limits, making him appear more human, if only momentarily. The wooing moves Gawain further and further towards the limits of his knightly role until, finally on the third day, he breaks down, momentarily and unconsciously, under the extreme pressures of the Lady and his imminent, and seemingly hopeless, meeting with the Green Knight.

The protagonist's attempt at perfect courtesy dictates his reactions to the Lady's first attempt at seduction. Upon recognizing the Lady as the intruder, he feels shame for being caught in such a compromising position (1189). In his first endeavor at maintaining courtesy, he hopes to deceive her by pretending to sleep, thereby offering the Lady an escape if she has entered his room by mistake. Thus his intense desire to maintain his virtues causes him to forfeit the truth (1190ff). The reader has the advantage of knowing his stratagem, as we witness his somewhat confused thoughts: "More semly hit were To aspye wyth my spelle in space quat ho wolde" (1198-9).²⁴

After such a terrible shock, Gawain not only regains his composure but acts as the perfectly courteous knight. Reminding us of his comportment with the Green Knight, this flawlessness seems almost unreal. The Lady has broken significant codes of Christian and societal decency in disrespecting his privacy and attempting to seduce her guest. Yet the latter acts perfectly natural, only momentarily asking, though not very forcefully (again, in keeping with his courteous demeanor), to rectify this situation by leaving so he may dress and join her in public (1218-1221). She responds by more openly seducing him:

3e ar welcom to my cors,
Yowre awen won to wale,
Me behouez by fyne force
Your seruant be, and shale (1237-40).²⁵

Gawain, the perfectly courteous knight, responds meekly and almost submissively, doing so, as we have seen from his above request, against his greater instincts: ““In god fayth,” quop Gawayn, ‘gayn it me bynke3’” (1241).²⁶ These words disappoint: Gawain has sold his decency and will in order to maintain his flawless *cortaysye*. He succeeds as a courteous knight, but is less than truthful, both to his own better judgment and to his seductress. Again, one wonders if, after they have spent some time together, he is saying what he really believes: “For I haf founden, in god fayth, yowre franchis nobele” (1263).²⁷ Then Gawain offers his knighthood to her: “And yowre kny3t I becom” (1279).

The reader has the sense that Gawain’s need to behave as the perfect Christian knight leaves him open to the manipulation of the Lady, who seizes the opportunity to force him into a less than honest relationship. Through this need for courtesy he becomes a “people-pleaser.” She uses Gawain’s need for perfect courtesy to score a kiss for herself (1297ff) when this is improper, granted their private situation and her attempt at seduction. Our hero gives himself entirely over to her (a dangerous thing, with her being a seductress): “I schal kysse at your commandement, as a kniy3t falez, And fire lest he displease you” (1303-4).²⁸

Barron has suggested that the wording of the hunt on the first day, particularly the word *asay* (1328), refers to the Lady’s testing of Gawain’s character.²⁹ The bedroom scene has confirmed the reader’s earlier suspicions about Gawain: He is a sincere, nice person who takes certain aspects of knighthood, especially courtesy, so seriously, that we fail to really see anything but a “knight.” Gawain seems to use these aspects as a wall—as a means of actually not entering into deeper, more truthful relationship with people close or friendly to him. He lives a series of *shoulds*, and takes no chances, minimizing acts of indecency and denying his own natural reactions.

The *shoulds* that run his life come from as deep a place as his pious practices, for given an extreme situation like the bedroom scene, Gawain can easily fall into his role, unconsciously and unthinkingly, just as he prays so automatically in any circumstance. This leads to a less deeply-lived life, as he fails to honour his most heart-felt needs and opens himself to the manipulations of other people or various circumstances. He does not meet a fresh challenge with fresh ideas. The Lady can thus rest assured, even after only one extended meeting with him, that he will fall victim, before New Year's Day, to some ruse of hers. She knows that she can back him into a corner and make him fall. And worse, Gawain not only allows this manipulation, but does so under the worst possible scenario, without being aware of the manipulation. His blind following of piety and courtesy (and other virtues) has taken away true awareness of what is going on.

The second day Gawain, fully expecting the Lady, has already adopted his courteous role (1477). He has sold out his first day's instinctual response completely. That day's response reflected the knight's very deep feeling of the impropriety of her actions. Perhaps we witnessed a bit of King Arthur's impulsive energy. Now we see no sign of instinct or spontaneity but instead an actor performing his role, and trying to do so perfectly. He even takes the initiative, very early on, in kissing her, "at your commandement" (1501). He has completed his sell-out to courtesy, if he had not done so before. He had offered the briefest of resistance.

Things grow even worse as he then listens to her long words on his reputation as a lover (1508ff), and how she wants him to teach her the art of love, "Whil my lorde is from hame" (1533). This is extremely blunt, but we see no instinctual dismay or repulsion. Notwithstanding, if Gawain truly serves God as willingly as he seems to in his pious

exhibitions, this instant might represent the time to speak out against her lewdness. However, when he replies, he turns her away without discourtesy; for the second day in a row he successfully remains within his rigid, perfectionist role:

Bot he defended hym so fayr þat no faut semed,
Ne non euel on nawþer halue, nawþer þay wysten
Bot blysse (1551-3).³⁰

He even lets her kiss him a second time in the same meeting.

Everything hinges on the third day of seduction. We have already seen the Lady take advantage of Gawain's attempt at faultlessness. She is the one on the third day who attains perfection, as she so completely outwits our hero. It starts, as on the previous day, with Gawain not even feeling the first day's *schame* (1189), or the faintest opposition to her improper presence. He sells out for the third day to courtesy: "Bot quen þat comly com he keuered his wyttes, Swenges out of þe sweuenes and swarez with hast" (1755-6).³¹ He goes so far as to welcome her "worpily with a wale chere" (1759).³²

We see Gawain once again performing, and the reader has no idea if his actions contain any sincerity. The knight probably does not know either. Having so identified himself with his courtesy, anything deeper finds no expression. It does seem, in fact, that courtesy has taken deep roots in Gawain, as the author alludes to his reaction to the Lady's presence as one of "wallande joye" in his heart (1762). Gawain, through his performance, has fallen almost entirely under the Lady's power, and will offer only incomplete resistance to her final manipulations. In fact the poet informs us that Mother Mary alone keeps the hero from conceding to the Lady's seduction (1768-9).

Even the possibility of Mary's assistance does not prevent Gawain from succumbing to the Lady's ruse of the green girdle. First the Lady requests a token from Gawain (1798),

who refuses on the grounds that he has nothing to give, as he is on “an erande in erdez vncoupe” (1808).³³ She then offers him an expensive ring, which he refuses because of his own momentary penury (1817ff). Having thus *softened up* Gawain, she proposes to him an inexpensive green girdle that possesses the magical properties of protecting its bearer from being cut through (1846ff), if only Gawain promises to conceal it from Bertilak (1863).

We witness in this scene a clear example of how Gawain's need for perfect courtesy actually removes him from reality,³⁴ for he fails completely to understand what has just taken place and, after accepting the plan, even spends the rest of the day in a joyful mood, as discussed in the previous chapter (this joy may primarily arise from the relief that he now has some magic to prevent the Green Knight from slicing through him). He is enthralled with himself, with the fact that he has not failed the Lady in his courtesy nor given in to her advances. The poet advises us, in fact, that this "victory" of courtesy has left the knight

As neuer he did bot þat daye, to þe derk nyȝt,
 With blys.
 Vche mon hade daynté þare
 Of hym, and sayde, 'Iwysse,
 Þus myry he watz neuer are,
 Syn he com hider, er þis' (1889-1892).³⁵

observation that “youthful idealists . . . are particularly vulnerable to idolatry because of their devotion to the inherent value of signs.”³⁷ Gawain has used the various facets of his spirituality and knightly role as a weapon against the truth—against his truth.³⁸ This is important, for, as Wendy Clein points out, “an essential chivalric attitude is fidelity to one’s word.”³⁹ As holy and pure as he might feel, Gawain is never so far from God as at this point in time, when he faces almost certain death.⁴⁰

¹ Larry D. Benson, “Art and Tradition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Denton Fox, ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 30.

² R.A. Shoaf in *The Poem as Green Girdle* argues that the poem is, from the point of view of commerce, about “comparisons and measurements, of doublings and tests, of games and relationships, *Sir Gawain* structures a vision of relativity and relationship in human exchange,” p. 2. We also see these themes when we read the poem as a spiritual treatise.

³ Charles Moorman, *The Pearl-Poet* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), p. 112.

⁴ “Having won his fame, a knight is obliged to maintain it by acting in the manner for which he is reknowned.” Larry D. Benson, “The Meaning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 298.

⁵ “Each one said quietly to his neighbour: ‘Now we shall have the pleasure of seeing masterly displays of good manners and hearing the polished phrases of courtly discourse; we can learn without inquiry what profit there is in the art of conversation, since we have welcomed here this perfect master of good breeding.’” Barron, p. 77.

⁶ Denton Fox, *Introduction, Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 10. Cf. Clein, p. 13: “Gawain’s quest dramatizes the tensions inherent in conforming to chivalric ideals. Sir Gawain defines his public personality in his pentangle version of chivalry. The pentangle represents an elaborate ethical code by which the hero must continually measure his behavior.”

⁷ Moorman writes that in the poem “pure heavenly values contrast with the tarnished and shifting standards of earth,” p. 115.

R.A. Waldron notes that “ideal chivalry is being tested in situations which approximate, in complexity and indeterminateness, to those of real life,” p. 6.

Ad Putter in turn observes that “*Gawain* problematizes the moral laws we live by.” P. 6.

⁸ Sadowski, p. 136.

⁹ Clein, pp. 81-2.

¹⁰ Moorman, p. 110.

¹¹ Clein, pp. 82-3. Barron, *Trawthe and Treason*, p. 13: “Gawain has tactfully imposed order and good sense on what had threatened to become chaos.”

¹² Fox, p. 9.

¹³ “And he (Arthur) graciously surrendered it and, lifting up his hand, gave him God’s blessing, and cheerfully commanded that his heart and his hand should both be resolute.” Barron, p. 47.

¹⁴ “If Gawain’s knighthood was to be fully tested, the poet had to find some means of trying those more peaceful virtues that distinguish a gentleman from a mere warrior.” This test “is conducted not in the realm of violence and high romantic adventure but in that courtesy and sometimes low comedy, and here the necessary virtues are those of the hall and bower rather than of the battlefield.” Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 42.

¹⁵ Hans Schnyder, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Essay In Interpretation* (Bern: Francke Verlag, The Cooper Monographs 6, 1961), p. 44.

¹⁶ “I am the weakest, I know, and the most deficient in understanding, and my life would be the smallest loss if the truth be known.” Barron, p. 47.

¹⁷ “I acknowledge no virtue in myself except your blood.” Barron, p. 47.

¹⁸ Barron, *Trawthe and Treason*, p. 15.

¹⁹ Naturally, in medieval society one was looked upon favorably when one respected convention. Thus taken as an independent episode, it is Arthur who, having lost his courtesy and challenged his holly-bearing (therefore peace-bearing) guest to battle, looks the worse. Yet given the entire poem, Arthur's less repressed character seems better suited to the spiritual teaching of *Gawain*. Again, this is a question of drawing bits and pieces of information together concerning the spiritual teaching of the poem. The same instinctive, impulsive energy that pushes the King into his outburst is the same energy that at the poem's end allows him to look at Gawain's adventure with a more open judgment. Gawain's rigidity, which in this episode with the Green Knight makes Arthur's knight appear superior in courtesy to the King, does not serve the hero well at the end—in that it does not serve the hero's spiritual growth well. Given that this thesis provides a commentary on the spiritual teaching of the poem rather than primarily a commentary on courtly virtues, this is an important point. At issue is not who behaves better, Arthur or Gawain, but who, at the end, has actually learned something about life—about spirituality and, in particular, about what it means to be human, with human limitations and imperfections. Arthur has, it seems, an openness in that he is not exasperated with Gawain's great sin (even though this sin reflects on Arthur as much as it does on his knight because Gawain has been Camelot's representative), whereas Gawain seems, at least for the moment, completely crushed by what he regards as a failure. My point is that perhaps if our hero would allow himself to fail, at least minimally, at virtuous behaviour (or would allow himself the *prospect* of such failure) he could, at the end, learn something about his great fault rather than feel bitterness and self-pity, and in his anguish totally miss the lesson.

²⁰ "The knight very readily and repeatedly called it a feast." Barron, p. 75.

²¹ "The lord, often leaping to his feet in friendly fashion, repeatedly urged others to make merry, gaily snatched off his hood, hung it on a spear, and challenged them to win the honour of possessing it, whichever of them could stir up the greatest mirth at that Christmas season." Barron, p. 79.

²² Bertilak is also courteous—much more courteous than Arthur was when faced with the Green Knight. But with the hunts at Hautdesert we see a second, more savage side to the lord of Hautdesert. This savagery, given that it is expressed on the hunt, is perfectly acceptable, whereas Arthur's rage was unacceptable, since it occurred in court. It is a question, then, of Bertilak venting his excess "energy" or "savagery" in an appropriate manner, which allows him to maintain his courtesy.

²³ The second test is a "pale but exact reflection of the beheading game: in both cases there is an exchange, in both cases Gawain seems to be given the advantage, and in both cases he accepts out of courtesy." Schnyder, p. 11.

²⁴ "It would be more fitting to find out by asking immediately what she wants." Barron, p. 91.

²⁵ "To me you are very welcome, and may do just as you wish; I am perforce in duty bound to be your servant, and I shall be so." Barron, p. 93.

²⁶ "'Really and truly,' said Gawain, 'this seems to me very agreeable.'" Barron, p. 93.

²⁷ "'Truly, I have found in you a noble generosity.'" He goes on to say that it is to her own credit that she behaves as such. (1267) Barron, p. 95. Gawain makes her out to be much more wonderful than she has been acting.

²⁸ "Certainly, be it as you please; I shall kiss at your command, and more, as befits a knight to do, lest he displease you, so urge it no further." Barron, p. 97.

²⁹ Barron, *Trawthe and Treason*, p. 49.

³⁰ "but he defended himself so skilfully that no offence was apparent, nor any impropriety on either side, nor were they conscious of anything but contentment." Barron, p. 111.

³¹ "But when that lovely lady entered he came to his senses, starting out of his dreams, and answered hurriedly." Barron, p. 121.

³² "with a pleasant demeanor." Barron, p. 121.

³³ "I am here on a mission in regions unknown." Barron, p. 125.

³⁴ Mother Angela Carson writes that Gawain has an "apparent predisposition to being deceived." "The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and Its Function," *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher, eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 254.

³⁵ "Everyone there delighted in his company and said, 'Indeed, he has never before been in such high spirits, since he came here.'" Barron, p. 129.

³⁶ Shoaf, p. 24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³⁸ Charles Moorman: "Gawain fails in being obedient to his word in spite of the symbolic protection of his armor with its pentangle of Christian virtues and the personal guidance of the Blessed Virgin." P. 115.

³⁹ Clein, p. 20.

⁴⁰ R.A. Shoaf writes that "Gawain . . . is guilty of idolatry—of letting his service to the ideal of the pentangle become his sole concern—because of his youthful idealism that motivates him to serve the ideal so passionately and that drives him to incarnate it so completely." Shoaf, p. 33.

Reality 1: Tensions and Conflicts

Important to my reading of *Gawain* as a work that posits a spirituality of imperfection, the poem marks the hero's journey as full of tensions and conflicts that strongly imperil his attempts at flawlessness. These tensions and conflicts seek to strip Gawain bare of his idealized claims to perfection and turn him towards reality. They threaten to leave him naked, forcing him to depend utterly on God rather than on perfect virtues and religious piety. Worse for the moment, the discord he faces at the story's end moves him to even feel divine abandonment. Tensions and conflict impose themselves on the hero so greatly that we will see in this section how Gawain's journey does not seem to fall into that of the typical "hero" of Joseph Campbell's "nuclear unit of the monomyth":

*A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.*¹ (Italics original)

Of course, no hero's journey is ever as clear as these words of Campbell would, taken out of their context, seem to indicate.

Gawain does indeed enter a supernatural realm of a Green Knight, a magical castle too good to be true, and an ancient enchantress with mysterious powers whom he underestimates. And again, he does return with a certain endowment, but it issues from the new order of the green girdle established not by him but by his fellows of the Round Table.

(The endowment may also be the new self-knowledge the hero has attained—in this case not from any knightly victory but from the struggle that seems to have defeated him.) This garter's energy is really recognized by Camelot and its members. Thus they, and not Gawain, retain the newly gained power in the sense that only they understand the joyful significance of the green girdle. Lastly, Gawain does not come back as anything but a defeated hero, at least in his own eyes.² Tension and conflict have indeed stripped the hero of everything. His world is upside-down, and worse, he sees nothing good in this. He has learned that life is more complex than he had realized. Thus, for instance, virtuous living, however he defines it, cannot always guarantee a way out of every conundrum. What he has failed to learn is to accept this humanity of his, even though Camelot and Hautdesert seem to fully accept him in all of his humanness. Perhaps his resentment marks the romance as anti-romance, and our hero as anti-hero.³

Given the protagonist's lack of openness to his journey's events, Thomas Merton more keenly than Campbell's words above sums up the main thrust of the poet's spiritual teaching that we will examine in the three chapters of this second section of the thesis:

‘Trying to adjust’ involves a whole galaxy of illusions. First of all you take yourself very seriously as an individual, autonomous self, a little isolated world of reality, something quite definitive, something established in its own right: the thinking subject.⁴

Gawain clearly takes himself, his ideals, and his religious beliefs and practices too seriously.

Carl Jung writes of such people:

We meet in all cases with one particular feature: a more or less patent clinging to the childhood level of consciousness, a resistance to the fateful forces in and around us which would involve us in the world. Something in us wishes to remain a child, to be unconscious or, at most, conscious only of the ego.⁵

Because of this clinging to his childish, idealized perfectionism, Gawain is the only one unable, at the end, to laugh at the whole adventure. Rather, he acts like a stubborn child, unable to release his hurt and put his experience into perspective.

John of the Cross's teaching on idolatry comes to mind. Merton writes that the effectiveness and usefulness of John's notions issue from how "he probes into the soul that is apparently healthy and full of life, in order to show the great harm done by the infection of desires that scarcely anyone fears."⁶ On the outside, then, it seems that all is well with our Christian knight—at least until the final events of the adventure. Certainly no one, neither Arthur's court nor Gawain nor the confessor on the last day object to the man's piety.

The cavalier experiences such bitter pain because he has found a great sin where he had always expected and needed a great virtue. For John of the Cross, "the heart easily mistakes the traces of God for God."⁷ Where Gawain had thought he could count on God's presence the most, it turns out to be the hero's great chagrin as the area of God's greatest absence. It was the place of Gawain's greatest self-delusion.

It is here that the dark light of God shines on the man, but again, much to the hero's great chagrin. It seems that the protagonist may be, at this point, asked by God to no longer know by knowing, but to "know by an unknowing."⁸ John of the Cross terms this spiritual poverty, defining it as a letting go of everything that one has known and taken for granted. John might see this bitter stage of Gawain's journey as the opportunity for greatest growth, for it might be a time of "purification:"

These times of aridity, then, cause the soul to journey in all purity in the love of God, since it is no longer influenced in all its actions by the pleasure and sweetness of the actions themselves, as perchance it was when it experienced sweetness, but only the desire to please God.⁹

Gawain clearly aims for a conflict-free spirituality, desiring anything but a purifying dark night. The *Gawain*-poet as spiritual teacher warns us of the vicissitudes of the spiritual life, understanding that spirituality is found not in perfection but in paradox and, especially, in helplessness, powerlessness, and woundedness.¹⁰ Gawain's ideal of perfection, contrasted with the reality in which he finds himself, forms the over-arching tension to the story. Gawain's desire for the bright light of God starkly contrasts with the dark light that God seems to give him. Words from The Spirituality of Imperfection give us a clear definition of this tension:

The first supposition that requires revision is the belief that spirituality involves perfection. Spirituality has to do with the reality of the here and now, with living humanly as one is, with the very real, very agonizing 'passions of the soul' . . . Spirituality involves learning how to live with imperfection.¹¹

The tensions inherent in the poem play a major role in the poet's spirituality of imperfection, as they compromise Gawain's religious and moral flawlessness.

This chapter will discuss the place of three major tensions and conflicts in the poet's spirituality of imperfection.

Nature versus Court

We witness the savagery of nature in two major ways, the first being Gawain's journey out of Camelot, and the second in the descriptions of the hunting. The savagery of the wilderness contrasts with the refinement of the courtly societies of Camelot and Hautdesert. More specifically in the case of the hunting adventures, these contrast sharply with the three wooing episodes; in the former settings we witness nature but, more so, the

cruelty of the hunt, led by an otherwise sophisticated Bertilak who here brings to fruition the hints of spontaneity and energy we have seen in the Castle. The wooing episodes, on the other hand, witness the courteous love-talking between a man and a woman in a very elegant castle.

Gawain's acceptance of the Beheading Game forces him out of the "social joys" of Camelot into "the savagery of nature's winter, careless of human needs"¹²:

When þe colde cler water fro þe cloude3 schadde
 And fres er hit falle my3t to þe fale erþe.
 Ner slayn wyth þe slete he sleped in his yrnas
 Mo ny3te3 þen innoghe, in naked rokkez
 þeras claterande fro þe crest þe colde borne rennez
 And henged he3e ouer his hede in hard iisseikkles.
 þus in peryl and payne and plytes ful harde (727-33).¹³

One scholar goes so far as to remark that Gawain's "hard journeys over inhospitable country are measures of payment for the court festivities they follow."¹⁴ As Gawain journeys from Camelot we have thus already been witness to such joy. In one case, this happened before the Green Knight came to challenge the court:

Fro þe kyng wat3 cummen with kny3tes into þe halle,
 þe chauntré of þe chapel cheued to an ende,
 Loude crye wat3 þer kest of clerke3 and oþer,
 Nowel nayted onewe, neuened ful ofte.
 And syþen riche forth runnen to reche hondeselle,
 3e3ed 3eres-3iftes on hi3, 3elde hem bi hond.
 Debated busyly aboute þo giftes;
 Ladies la3ed ful loude, þo3 þay lost haden,
 And he þat wan wat3 not wrothe, þat may 3e wel trawe (62-70).¹⁵

This "purposefully exaggerated" presentation of Camelot "smacks of nostalgia for the Golden Age and trouble-free childhood."¹⁶ We have the sense that Camelot is a world unto itself, full of pageantry and abundance.

From the standpoint of my reading of the poem—of the dark night of Gawain's soul—it seems that this innocence corresponds to the soul before it has endured a few bumps and bruises: Camelot's innocent naiveté parallels the naiveté of Gawain's spiritual disposition. The hero seems, throughout the story until his shocking discovery, as naïve and simplistic in his faith in devotions and virtues as Camelot is innocently childish. Gawain's soul is in for a big fall, just like a court as naïve as Arthur's is prone to the kind of treachery to which Troy (the subject of the poem's opening and closing verses) was subject.

The harsh wintry contrast seems to jolt Gawain (and the reader) out of this innocent perfection.¹⁷ Even if Gawain's hardships do not denote payment for these good times, the contrast between the welcoming, civilized court and this harsh wintry landscape brings some reality into the knight's life. Creation extends far beyond the picture-perfect world of Camelot that he has just left. Ironically, Arthur's boyish, guileless demand for a marvel, issuing from this almost-otherworldly perfection, drives his best man into winter's reality, perhaps serving to introduce the king and his court to reality, where the action is much less sentimentally perfect, where people do receive hurts and bruises, physically and otherwise, and where the journey includes cold and discomfort.

Tough, rude people populate the natural world Gawain rides through, people who remain as coldly indifferent to Gawain's predicament of finding the Green Chapel as nature is: "wonde þer bot lyte þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied (701-2)."¹⁸ We do not have to read this section allegorically to gain the sense of something brewing in the hero's soul, since this wilderness, as a literal event, puts such a strain on the knight. Thus if Hans Schnyder is right, that "in the wilderness of Wyrle (the wild part of the kingdom through which the hero rides) Gawain finds himself in the waste land of his own soul,"¹⁹ perhaps this

issues from his adventure out in the midst of imperfect life. These “wilderness” people contrast with the warmth, care, and concern Camelot’s citizens had shown their departing hero.

Penne þe best of þe burȝ boȝed togeder,
 Aywan, and Errik, and oþer ful mony,
 Sir Doddinaual de Sauage, þe duk of Clarence,
 Launcelot, and Lyonel, and Lucan þe gode,
 Sir Boos, and Sir Byduer, big men boþe,
 And mony oþer menskful, with Mador de la port.
 Alle þis compayny of court com þe king nerre
 For to counseyl þe knyȝt, with care at her hert (550-557).²⁰

The court’s familial atmosphere, so easy to live in, contrasts with the *strangeness* of his wild surroundings, and the difficulties with which he rides through this countryside: “Mony klyf he ouerclambe in contrayeȝ straunge; Fer floten fro his frendeȝ fremedly he rydeȝ” (713-4).²¹ The out-of-this-world Castle Hautdesert reinforces winter’s contrast. So much about this court seems magical, foreign to the natural world. In fact, the Castle “is almost magically conjured up by Gawain’s invocation to Mary and the Savior . . . and his triple crossing of himself.”²² Gawain literally enters a new world by riding over the drawbridge.

Castle Hautdesert’s inhabitants provide a relief from the cold and the cold people living in the countryside, as these former lead him, literally it seems, by hand to the warmth of his private bower and a great chair in front of a fireplace (885 lff). “Home, at last”: The sigh of relief is palpable, and Gawain finds himself back in his element: A knight of the court, indeed, finally safe from the wilderness.²³ The author could not have found a greater contrast to sleeping in cold knightly metal under icicles than this “easy chair.” The hero’s aimlessness, growing frustration, and obvious misplacement when out in nature becomes fully evident only now, when he returns to courtly society.²⁴ Our hero enjoys the courtly life.

Yet to emphasize just how unpredictably imperfect life is, even for the Christian knight, the author has really placed the protagonist into a grand trap. In this perfect setting Gawain will undergo his great lesson on perfection's impossibility: It is specifically the bedroom scenes that bring about Gawain's downfall. He cannot escape danger, aimlessness, and frustration, even when in the faultlessness of the court. In fact, we see Gawain most endangered, confused, and frustrated in his instincts when in his bower.

Hautdesert is as imperfect as nature, and its contrast with winter is less extreme than the reader initially expects: "In Bertilak's court . . . Gawain is immersed in relation . . . in a sea of troubles."²⁵ Even though he eventually finds more troubles at Hautdesert than in the wilderness, he becomes most concerned for his soul on his journey out of Camelot, reminding himself of his pious duties to Mary and Christ.²⁶ He lets his guard down once comfortable at Hautdesert.

We see the beginnings of our hero's downfall on the first day of the Lady's seduction, when he so quickly and (almost) completely acquiesces to the Lady's desire by letting her kiss him.²⁷ (While this is simply a kiss, the fact that it occurred when the two are alone, in Gawain's bedroom while he, just waking up, is wearing God-knows-what, if anything, under the covers, imparts to the reader the impression that it is an acquiescence.) His religious mood changes dramatically at Hautdesert, and by the third day of wooing, just when he is in most sin, he feels most comfortable and joyous in his Christian practice—just at the moment when the previous spiritual vigilance would have served him the best. And later, on Gawain's return trip to Camelot, after he has discovered this sinful lack, we do not hear of the people and monsters he must fight; these battles now seem incidental; nature's wrath seems minute by comparison to the ruthlessness of courtly society.²⁸

As stated, then, the wooing scenes do not contrast as greatly with the savage hunting as one suspects after a first reading. As W.R.J. Barron points out, “in retrospect, this interval of restful recuperation may well appear a vital testing time for the hero, its inactivity concealing the central and crucial action of the poem.”²⁹ The “uncertainty and disorder, violence and cruelty” apply just as much to the bedroom scenes as to the hunting.³⁰ Only Gawain, it seems, remains unaware of this, perhaps because of his obsession with playing his knightly role perfectly. Thus the Lady relishes her power over Gawain on the first day (1251-2).³¹ In fact, she seems to hold more power over Gawain than the wilderness did, as he loses his composure over what appears at first to be a “little domestic incident,” despite never letting down when fighting so many monsters and thieves on his terrible journey to Hautdesert.³²

Yet this loss of composure does not appear as such a great incongruity when we remind ourselves of the highly complex social situation at such a court as Hautdesert, which involves Gawain “in multiple, apparently conflicting obligations—to God, to the Round Table, whose representative he is, to his personal honour, to his host and hostess.”³³ In such a demanding, troublesome setting, Gawain’s confused and distressed spirit finds best expression in the reactions of the hunted animals to the sounds of the hunt:

At þe fyrst quethe of þe quest quaked þe wylde;
 Der drof in þe dale, doted for drede,
 Hiȝed to þe hyȝe, bot heterly þay were
 Restayed with þe stablye, þat stoutly ascryed (1150-1154).³⁴

Just as the following lines describe the power of life and death these hunters hold over the quarry, so the Lady holds great power over her knight: in both instances, these hunted have become powerless in their surprised confusion.

Yet we can see this only when we compare the outer, physical situation of the hunt to Gawain's inner terrain. The Lady tests this terrain just as Bertilak and his men hunt the prey; "the emphasis," Denton Fox reminds us, "is not so much on action as on states of mind and moral problems."³⁵ The wilderness journey to Hautdesert, while taxing physically and mentally, represents more of an inconvenience than anything, and we must not read too much into it. Thus the perfect majesty of Hautdesert takes on a new significance, for this excellence signifies it as "a place where the hero is tested, not against monster and physical perils, but against interior dangers."³⁶

On the second day, Gawain has one great thing in common with the boar that the Castle's men are hunting. For some time, the boar's heavy armor effectively repels the onslaughts of the men:

Schalke3 to schote at hym schowen to penne,
 Haled to hym of her arewe3, hitten hym oft;
 Bot þe poynte3 payred at þe pyth þat py3t in his schelde3,
 And þe barbe3 of his browe bite non wolde (1454-7).³⁷

Ultimately, the boar's tough hide fails him, as Bertilak goes eye-to-eye with the boar and pierces the latter's heart (1580ff). So it is that Gawain on the second day, as on the other two days, cannot use his fighting skills against the Lady.³⁸ His armor fails him utterly, and like the boar the action will leave him with a pierced heart.

Even his armor of courtesy disappoints him, for the first two days he must, as we have already discussed, sell out his better instincts about the propriety of the Lady's secret meetings and flirting; in fact, a significant albeit subtle shift has occurred in the protagonist's attitude towards the Lady's wooing, for on the second day, while still unwilling to give in to her seduction, "he cannot help a certain pleasurable acceptance of the renewed attempts. Far

from feigning sleep he lies gaily in his bed.”³⁹ On the third day, we know, his courtesy leads him to an even greater, and eventually more publicly humiliating, sell out of himself.

Thus on the third day, as on the previous two, the hunt provides the reader with not so much a contrast as a commentary of the bedroom scenes. If the first two days’ quarry were honourable animals, literary critics inform us that medieval society regarded the fox with loathing, as vermin.⁴⁰ Thus we witness Bertilak’s disdain for his catch:

‘Mary,’ quop þat oper mon, ‘myn is bihynde,
For I haf hunted al þis day, and no3t haf I geten
Bot þis foule fox felle—þe fende haf þe gode3!’ (1942-4).⁴¹

Are we thus to believe that our perfectionist hero is akin to vermin, at least in his actions? This represents quite a come-down for the hero, or at least it will at the end when he realizes the truth of his actions: Gawain is, when cornered, more like a fox than a noble deer or a mighty boar, at least in his behaviour. He is not a very courteous Christian knight. Savage’s conclusion does seem a bit harsh—“A false beast is roused in the forest, and a false man revealed in the castle.”⁴² Yet the poem does explore to great extent this fox-like nature of Gawain. The hero’s duplicity, under such extreme circumstances, does remind the reader of the fox. The extent of the hero’s dishonesty is important, since this falsity is, in the end, the protagonist’s great error.⁴³

Barron’s analysis of the medieval view of the fox sheds worse light on Gawain’s imperfection: “. . . ignoble game, vermin, unfit to eat, infamous in popular tradition as shrewd, malicious, greedy, destructive of other game, and above all, a thief.”⁴⁴ Hans Schnyder adds that the fox also represents not only “hypocritical and heretical people” but the devil himself.⁴⁵ Gawain does indeed act devilishly when he fails so completely, at this point, to place his life in divine care (although later he does express faith in God). Barron’s

modern translation of the hero's thoughts on lines 1855-8 offer us a striking image of a devilish ruse: "Then the knight considered, and it occurred to him that it would be a godsend for the perilous adventure which was assigned him: if, when he came to the chapel to meet his doom, he managed to escape being slain, it would be an excellent device."⁴⁶ Gawain's fox-like treachery is complete, cutting through his knightly perfection, as we read his final thoughts on this matter: "He þonkked hir oft ful swyþe, Ful þro with hert and þo3t" (1866-7).⁴⁷

"With heart and soul": Finally, we see our hero as fallible human rather than as a caricature of some ideal. It has taken the Green Knight / Bertilak and his Lady so much effort to expose this. Gawain is here accepting the girdle out of his very human fear: He yields "to temptation after such a prolonged and courteous resistance."⁴⁸ In a sense, it is this yielding that represents a spiritual breakthrough for Gawain, however sinful morally. From a spiritual-growth perspective, as stated, it is a good thing that he has finally expressed some understandable, human fear of dying. The Green Knight, at the end, also rejoices in Gawain's sudden humanness, accepting him as the greatest knight:

On the fautlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede;
As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,
So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay kny3te3 (2363-5).⁴⁹

In this same scene, the Green Knight concludes by naming Gawain's sin of deception as motivated by love of life; and fully forgives the man of any wrongdoing against himself as host, offering instead of condemnation his cheerful understanding to Gawain for the sin (2366-8). The Green Knight can laugh at the entire happening, not in a teasing manner but, it seems, in his relishing of life's quandaries (2389). The man goes so far in his acceptance of Gawain's humanness to absolve him of all wrongdoing (2391ff). Reflecting his complete

acceptance, he invites Gawain back to the Castle, where, no doubt, all will laugh at humanity's imperfections, to which even the world's greatest knight falls prey (2400ff).

Schnyder reminds us, in his same discussion of the fox and Gawain's fox-like nature, of how the perfect world of Camelot was "rudely shattered" by the Green Knight "and the subsequent humiliation of Arthur."⁵⁰ Gawain's façade of perfection is likewise shattered by these events at Castle Hautdesert and the Green Chapel, as he, and the reader, realize that underneath the shell of the perfect Christian knight there lies a fox. Upon closer re-readings of the story, it seems fitting that Gawain should evade the Green Knight's first blow at the Green Chapel, just as the fox did the day before.⁵¹ We are thus shown for a second time this side of the hero. The Green Knight goes so far as to wonder out loud if this can really be Gawain:

And þenne repreued he þe prynce with mony prowde wordeȝ:
 'þow art not Gawayn,' quoth þe gome, 'þat is so goud halden,
 þat neuer arȝed for no here by hylle ne be vale,
 And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmeȝ!
 Such cowardise of þat knyȝt cowþe I neuer here' (2269-73).⁵²

To press his point, the Green Knight reminds our hero that when the former struck him at Camelot he never flinched (2274-5). The perfect Christian knight is thus bested by a wild, green monster who had seemed so out of place in the center of chivalry. In the end it is this outsider who is the most chivalrous.

Finally, Barron also claims that the fox symbolized deceit.⁵³ In Gawain's case, it is a matter foremost of self-deceit. As discussed before, he enjoys the third day, especially after an uneventful confession, as if no sins are hanging over his head. The hero can only maintain his delusions of perfection if, throughout life in general and not simply with this sin, he fails

to see the truth about himself. In order to believe that he stands a fighting chance of perfection, he must lie to himself about the nature of humanity—and his sharing in it.

The hunting scenes, less a contrast and more a commentary on the bedroom scenes, as already stated, ends fittingly on the third day with the fox, as this animal best represents the protagonist's true nature. After a few readings of the entire story, we perceive Gawain's perfectionist character, and we know that he really has no choice, in this un-freedom, but to eventually "fox" his way out of the difficult situation, especially since the Lady so skillfully plays her part of the game. The hero's basic sin, his addiction or un-freedom, is his inability to see the truth about himself. Jean Vanier writes that

To be free is to know who we are, with all that is beautiful, all the brokenness in us . . . it is to be anchored in a vision and a truth but also to be open to others and, so, to change.⁵⁴

In his un-freedom, Gawain could do nothing but act treacherously. His fall, so long in coming, is a happy fall (even if he does not think so), for it brings him the pain and wounds wherein he can finally discern his imperfection: he has finally decided to join the human race, although one wonders if at the end he has become too discouraged. (This will be discussed later.)

Gawain's courtesy has failed him, and Vanier again helps us see why: "Freedom lies in discovering that the truth is not a set of fixed certitudes but a mystery we enter into, one step at a time. It is a process of going deeper and deeper into an unfathomable reality."⁵⁵

Pentangle and Green Girdle

The Pentangle Knight returns home a Green Girdle Knight: The perfect knight returns home a human being. This presents a stark contrast, and marks again *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as anti-romance and in opposition to Joseph Campbell's normative "hero," in that the protagonist supposedly leaves as an incomplete hero and returns as a full one.⁵⁶ Yet the contrast does fit in with *Gawain* when we read it as a Christian spiritual treatise, for Christian spiritual authors speak of the need for God in the face of human imperfection. Hadewijch views this imperfection as unimportant; only one's relationship with God carries significance:

It is very sweet to wander lost in love
 Along the desolate ways Love makes us travel
 This remains well hidden from aliens;
 But they who serve Love with truth
 Shall in love walk with Love
 All round that kingdom where Love is Lady,
 And united with her receive all that splendor
 And taste to the full her noble fidelity.⁵⁷

It bears repeating that Gawain uses the pentangle as a way to control life, his relationship with God, and his place in society; he uses it as a shield against his own imperfection. While he accepts divine providence in his journey, he uses his piety and moral code—the pentangle—as less a way to wander in Love and more a means of controlling life and therefore this love. Gawain does not "serve Love with truth," but answers first of all to his perfect virtues and pious practices, smoothing over the truth of his own flaws. As we have seen, he is less than honest in maintaining these virtues.

Gawain's fear of death leads him to accept the girdle, and so the talisman becomes, at the story's end, the symbol of the knight's fear of death.⁵⁸ The pentangle, in contrast,

signifies the hero's fear of life, for its pious and moral meanings draw Gawain into a perfectionist shell. This role of the pentangle has already been examined, and so in this section we will turn to the girdle. In a sense, the girdle represents the entire journey on which Gawain has traveled, for it has turned into a journey of enlightenment, where the knight sees, so clearly, his imperfection. Sadowski calls the lace a stain on Gawain's armor.⁵⁹

It seems, however, to be something more than a mere stain: It represents an entire new disposition, as the lace challenges the perfectionist code of chivalry, witnessing to the impossibility of any such flawlessness. The girdle signifies Gawain's spirituality of imperfection. It signifies Gawain's humanity. As a result, if fully accepted by its new owner in its seemingly-unpleasant meanings, it releases Gawain from his un-freedom of having to be and perform as the perfect Christian knight.⁶⁰ Interestingly, the poet fails to mention the pentangle at the end, a "thundering" silence given the sign's prominence at the beginning of the journey. Gawain has all but forgotten his pretensions to perfection.

The pentangle values, as we have seen, are utterly useless to Gawain when faced with a beautiful woman's seduction and the fear of death. Or perhaps one should be more precise: The virtues serve Gawain as a guideline to Christian living, but it is he who has failed. He has failed to live up to them because he is not prepared to apply them to such complicated circumstances. His application of them is as untested as Camelot, in its youth, is untested in the world. The pentangle was the chief mark of Camelot he brought with him out into the world. While such a sign might suffice, at least for some time, in the magical kingdom of Camelot, the wider world's complications have prevailed against the pentangle. Thus Gawain's over-reliance on the sign causes a mess, which leads him, and perhaps us, to view the girdle as a sort of booby prize. The hero does not really want to bring it back to the

perfect court, and yet it is the world's offering to Camelot⁶¹: It is the world's response to Camelot's claims to a surreal, perfect society and a champion knight right in the midst of Creation's imperfection.

The booby prize makes nonsense of such claims of flawlessness: "Henceforth, Gawain must live with relativity and relationships, the human experience of measurement and comparison, despite the constant temptation to succumb to pride!"⁶² In other words, the booby prize will play a vital role, alongside a muted pentangle, in the process of defining Gawain and Camelot's identity.⁶³

In fact, Camelot wholeheartedly and good-naturedly affirm their fellowship with their imperfect knight by accepting the green girdle as a symbol for a new order.⁶⁴

þe kyng comforteþ þe knyȝt, and alle þe court als
 Laȝen loude þerat, and lufly acorden
 þat lordes and ledes þat longed to þe Table,
 Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
 A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryȝt grene,
 And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were (2513-18).⁶⁵

Gawain does not understand the court's light-hearted response, as only he has personally suffered perfectionism's curse. His identification with flawlessness, in fact, has pushed him to define the girdle as a condemnation on his Christian self and his knighthood, for his "elevated notion" of knighthood denotes for him that "to fail a little means to fail utterly."⁶⁶

This is significant for Gawain, for he has lost the life-compass—the reputably perfect pentangle—that allowed him to so boldly take up the Beheading Game, strike out on All Soul's Day without a clue of the whereabouts of the Green Chapel, and persevere in his faith until his supplication was answered in the form of Castle Hautdesert. At the story's end we wonder, in fact, how such a lost soul can make his way home. The girdle symbolizes Gawain's complete stripping down, and this serves as a stark contrast to the pentangle shield.

Utterly direction-less, the hero returns to Arthur's court without uttering so much as a prayer (at least that we hear of).

Perhaps the reason Gawain cannot forgive himself as the others do⁶⁷ lies in his continued grasping of the pentangle's flawlessness. The others, never having fused their identity so completely with the symbol, can put the adventure into perspective. Not Gawain: He has to build a whole new identity, for in his enlightenment he has realized that who he thought he was does not encompass who he really is. He does not shy away from this realization: "Integrity knows no compromise. Wholeheartedly Gawain recognizes this rigorous truth and contrition overwhelms him."⁶⁸

As Chapter Six will discuss in further detail, the sole issue concerning the green girdle is whether he will perfectly identify with the sin and imperfection it symbolizes, and thereby drown in an un-Christian self-pitying despair.

The Auncian Lady and the Young Lady

We meet the beautiful Lady of the Castle soon after Gawain enters the fortress:

Ho wat3 þe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre,
And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oþer,
And wener þen Wenore, as þe wy3e þo3t (943-5).⁶⁹

And the author ensures that we see the contrast with the "venerable" lady at the beauty's side:

Bot vnlyke on to loke þo ladyes were,
For if þe 3onge wat3 3eo, 3ol3e wat3 þat oþer;
Riche red on þat on rayled ayquere,
Rugh ronkled cheke3 þat oþer on rolled;
Kerhofes of þat on, wyth mony cler perle3,
Hir brest and hir bry3t prote bare displayed,

Schon schyrer þen snawe þat schede3 on hille3;
 þat oþer wyth a gorger wat3 gered ouer þe swyre,
 Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn with chalkquyte vayles,
 Hir frount folden in silk, enfoubled ayquere (950-9).⁷⁰

The poet bluntly sums things up:

Hir body wat3 schort and þik,
 Hir buttoke3 bal3 and brode;
 More lykkerwys on to lyk
 Wat3 þat scho hade on lode (966-9).⁷¹

Wendy Clein finds in this sharp juxtaposition the “theme of mortality,” for the old woman was once as young as the other Lady, and the latter will, sooner than one thinks, become as “auncian” as the former.⁷² But more important for this thesis, we can also note in the comparison the theme of imperfection, for just as the young woman’s beauty is perfect—she is more beautiful than Arthur’s queen, after all—so we have the sense that one can hardly look upon the old woman, so horrid are her looks. The perfect beauty, in one day becoming like the old one, already carries the seeds of this imperfection. In a sense, the beauty shares something with Gawain in that she too lives within a shell of flawlessness, at least from the poet’s vantage point.

Interestingly, we hear of no such older person at Camelot. Perhaps Hautdesert is less perfect than the reader first thinks, for such an “ungodly” woman in the midst of such magic seems out of place. Gawain certainly dwells more on the beauty, for he joins the two, the poet tells us, after laying eyes on the younger (970ff). Given this interest in the young Lady, the older woman seems like a “third wheel.” We see the special relationship between Gawain and the young Lady at mealtime, when only the young one sits beside the hero, while the venerable one is either not mentioned (1657ff) or sits at the place of honour (1001-2).

The old lady is “around” all the time, in the midst of things, yet she seems to play a marginal role in the court’s society. Her place of honour is respected, though the reasons for this respect are withheld by the poet. Hovering, all the time, over Gawain and the Castle’s social events, the woman is like imperfection hovering over Gawain. After a few readings of the story one can speculate that she is watching the guest for weakness, perhaps giving orders to her younger companion, who has undoubtedly shared the events in the bedroom with her elder.

We do find out, at the end, that this older woman has played a much more pivotal role than anyone could have guessed. Yet this role remains mysterious; “the old woman is so peripheral and her unmasking as Morgan le Fay so unintegral to Gawain’s adventure, that her meaning suggests itself only indirectly, as a reflection of larger themes and attitudes.”⁷³ Bertilak simply informs Gawain that as Green Knight and the lord of Hautdesert he was acting through the power of this old woman, who is a sorceress and perhaps even a goddess taught by Merlin the Magician in the arts of magic (2446-55). The following words of Bertilak make her out to be a sort of representation of imperfection, for “Welde3 non so hy3e hawtesse þat ho ne con make ful tame” (2454-5).⁷⁴ She has brought out the imperfection in Gawain, thus humbling this once proud man. S. Bercovitch goes so far as to suggest that “the fearful Fay seems, when all is said, a rather sentimental, kindly, and honored old lady.”⁷⁵

Of final interest, the comparison between the old and the young seems, as Clein mentions, to serve as commentary on death and life. The young woman seems so full of life, whereas we almost expect the older woman to drop dead at any moment: She already looks dead, after all. Yet it is the latter woman who really wields tremendous life-energy, enough, in fact, to alter the entire attitude Gawain holds towards his own existence. It is her life-

energy that runs throughout the entire story: she alone can, through the Green Knight, leave Camelot speechless and transform the gallant King Arthur into a raving lunatic. Of course, at the end, she even breaks Gawain's shell of perfection. That seems to be her greatest achievement, although the humbling of Camelot, both at the story's beginning and ending, is no small feat: This is the greatest court in civilization. The old lady seems to have power *over* life rather than simply having life-energy.⁷⁶ At the end, we see that even the young Lady, so full of life, is peripheral to the power, wisdom, and magic of the old one. The latter is, after all, a goddess.

Conclusion

All is not what it seems when it comes to some of the contrasts found in the story: Gawain's inner turmoil matches any violence or confusion on the knight's initial journey out of Camelot or Castle Hautdesert's hunts. He is not his outer, perfect shell of Christian knighthood. His inner life is much more complicated, mysterious, human—much less perfect, in other words—than he admits to himself and others. We also see that the lady with the real vigor is the older one, the one seemingly so close to death that, as W. Clein has discussed, she actually represents death. Surprisingly, she and not her young companion actually represents life in that she seeks to poke and prod around in Gawain's sturdy armor of pentangle virtues and religiosity until she finds some humanness. She succeeds where the younger one fails—in bringing forth Gawain's human side.

As for the girdle, it is less a contrast to the pentangle than a companion to it. Only the perfectionist hero would see any incongruity in their association. There is nothing wrong

with the pentangle's values. Gawain simply needs the green girdle as a reminder of his imperfection when he practices those values. We have seen that the green girdle is in fact indispensable to Gawain's ability to practice Christianity and knightly virtues. Previous to the girdle, Gawain was guilty of idolatry of the pentangle and its values.⁷⁷ The green girdle has made our hero a more mature "steward of the idea," for through the lace's wisdom, "he questions even the value of the ideal; he recognizes that pride can also insinuate itself where one is most careful against it."⁷⁸ The green girdle has ultimately freed Gawain from his slavery to his values. Unlike before, he can now respond creatively and with integrity to such impossible situations as he experienced in the bedroom scenes.⁷⁹

¹ Joseph Campbell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces (Princeton: Princeton University Press: Bollingen Series XVII, 1973), p. 30.

² "Unlike other Arthurian heroes, he returns to Arthur's court, not in conventional glory, but in self-confessed shame." Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher, eds. (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 22.

³ Sacvan Bercovitch, "Romance and Anti-Romance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," p. 258, writes that "each stage of [the scenes] alternates a traditional romance episode with a humorous and realistic scene that implicitly undercuts its predecessor."

⁴ Thomas Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (New York: Image-Doubleday, 1989), p. 264.

⁵ Carl Jung, "The Stages of Life," Aspects of the Masculine, R.F.C. Hull, tr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 27.

⁶ Merton, The Ascent to Truth, pp. 55-6.

⁷ Welch, p. 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁹ John of the Cross, p. 86.

¹⁰ Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, The Spirituality of Imperfection (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 2. They write that "spirituality is discovered in that space between paradox's extremes, for there we confront our helplessness and powerlessness, our woundedness."

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹² Boris Ford, ed., The Age of Chaucer, vol. 1, Hammondsorth: Penguin, 1961, p. 152.

¹³ "when the cold, clear rain was shed from the clouds, and froze before it could fall on the faded earth. Almost slain by the sleet, he slept in his irons night after night amongst the naked rocks, where the cold burn came crashing down from the cliff-top, and hung high above his head in hard icicles. So through pain and peril and the greatest hardships this knight went riding." Barron, p. 67.

¹⁴ The Age of Chaucer, p. 154.

¹⁵ "When the king had come with his knights into the hall, the singing of Mass in the chapel having drawn to an end, a loud hubbub was raised there by clerics and others, Christmas was celebrated anew, 'Noel' called out again and again. And then nobles came forward to offer good-luck tokens, called aloud 'New Year gifts,' proffered them in their hands. There was eager contention over the presents; ladies laughed loudly, even though they had lost, and he who won was not displeased, that you may well believe." Barron, p. 31.

¹⁶ Sadowski, p. 185.

¹⁷ Fox regards the Camelot of the opening scene as full "of youthfulness and untried innocence." Fox, p. 8.

¹⁸ "few lived there who loved either God or man wholeheartedly." Barron, p. 65.

- ¹⁹ Schnyder, p. 49.
- ²⁰ "Then the best knights in the castle came together, Ywain, and Erec, and very many others, Sir Dodinel de Savage, the Duke of Clarence, Lancelot, and Lionel, and the good Sir Lucan, Sir Bors, and Sir Bedivere, both eminent men, and many other nobles, including Mador de la Port. All this courtly company gathered around the king to advise the knight, with grief in their hearts." Barron, 57.
- ²¹ "He clambered up many a cliff in strange regions; having wandered far from his friends, he rode as a stranger." Barron, p. 65.
- ²² Sadowski, p. 152.
- ²³ Clein, p. 96.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95: "Bertilak's court seems so like Arthur's that it appears to offer Gawain a familiar refuge in alien territory. The orderliness and beauty of the castle recall the civilized world of Arthur's court."
- ²⁵ Shoaf, p. 63.
- ²⁶ Barron, Trawthe and Treason, p. 19.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ²⁸ Derek Pearsall, Old English and Middle English Poetry, Vol. 1 (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul), p. 174.
- ²⁹ Barron, Trawthe and Treason, p. 2.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ³¹ Bot hit ar ladyes inno3e þat leuer wer nowþe
Haf þe, hende, in hor holde, as I þe habbe here." (1251-2)
"For there are many ladies who would rather have you, dear sir, in their power now, as I have you here." Barron, p. 95.
- ³² Barron, Trawthe and Treason, pp. 21-22.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- ³⁴ "At the first utterance of the baying hounds all wild creatures trembled; deer rushed along the valley, crazed with fear, quickly making for the higher ground, but suddenly they were checked by the ring of beaters, who shouted vigorously." Barron, p. 89.
- ³⁵ Fox, p. 6.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ³⁷ "Then men pressed forward to shoot at him, loosed their arrows at him, hitting him repeatedly; but the points which struck the hide on his shoulders were blunted by its toughness, and the barbs would not pierce his brow." Barron, p. 105.
- ³⁸ Barron, Trawthe and Treason, p. 54.
- ³⁹ Schnyder, p. 62.
- ⁴⁰ Henry Littleton Savage, The Gawain-Poet, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1956, p. 33.
- ⁴¹ "'Marry,' said the other, 'mine is inferior, for I have hunted the whole of this day, and nothing have I gained but this miserable fox skin—the devil take such goods!'" Barron, p. 131.
- ⁴² Savage, pp. 36-7.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- ⁴⁴ Barron, Trawthe and Treason, p. 65.
- ⁴⁵ Schnyder, p. 66.
- ⁴⁶ Barron, p. 127.
- ⁴⁷ "He thanked her readily and repeatedly, most earnestly with heart and soul." Barron, p. 127.
- ⁴⁸ Barron, Trawthe and Treason, p. 82.
- ⁴⁹ "(you are) the most faultless knight who ever lived; as a pearl in comparison with a dried pea is of greater value, so, truthfully, is Gawain beside other gallant knights." Barron, p. 153.
- ⁵⁰ Schnyder, p. 67.
- ⁵¹ Savage, p. 38.
- ⁵² "and then he rebuked the prince with many haughty words: 'You are not Gawain,' said the man, 'Gawain who is considered so good a knight, who never feared any power on earth, and now you are flinching for fear before you feel any injury! I never heard of such cowardice on the part of that knight.'" Barron, p. 149.
- ⁵³ Barron, Trawthe and Treason, p. 101.
- ⁵⁴ Jean Vanier, Becoming Human (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Limited, 1998), p. 117.
- ⁵⁵ Vanier, p. 117.

⁵⁶ The poem "as a whole is extremely atypical. Gawain fights no knights or dragons and neither rescues nor woos any fair ladies, and in short is permitted none of the normal chivalric heroisms. On the contrary, he is forced to fend off the Lady and to submit meekly to the axe of the Green Knight." Jan Solomon, "The Lesson of *Sir Gawain*," *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 272.

⁵⁷ Hadewijch, "Becoming Love with Love," *Hadewijch The Complete Works*, p. 225.

⁵⁸ Sadowski, p. 105.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶⁰ Shoaf, p. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Clein, 125.

⁶⁵ "The king consoled the knight, and all the court likewise laughed loudly over it, and agreed for friendship's sake that the lords and knights who belonged to the Round Table, every member of the brotherhood, should have a baldric, a band of bright green worn crosswise about him, and, for the knight's sake, to wear it just like him." Barron, pp. 161, 163.

⁶⁶ Clein, p. 122.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁶⁸ Loomis, p. 22.

⁶⁹ "She was the fairest of all in her person, in body and face, and in figure, complexion and bearing, and lovelier than Guenevere, so the knight thought." Barron, p. 77.

⁷⁰ "But the ladies were very different in appearance, for as the young one was fresh, the other was withered; a fine red colouring everywhere adorned the one, rough, wrinkled cheeks hung sagging on the other; the kerchiefs of the one, with many lustrous pearls, exposed her breast and white throat uncovered, shining more brightly than the snow which falls upon the hillsides; the other was clothed about the neck with a gorget, swathed over her swarthy chin with veils white as chalk, her forehead entirely muffled up, enfolded in silk." Barron, pp. 77, 79.

⁷¹ "Her body was short and stout, her hips bulging and broad; more pleasing to the taste was she whom she was leading." Barron, p. 79.

⁷² Clein, p. 97.

⁷³ Bercovitch, p. 263.

⁷⁴ "there is no one so arrogantly proud whom she cannot humble utterly." Barron, p. 159.

⁷⁵ Bercovitch, p. 264.

⁷⁶ Morgan's test, which deceived Gawain, "from start to finish was not what it seemed. In good faith and innocence Gawain was deceived by the host, the Lady, and the Green Chapel itself." Mother Angela Carson, "The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and Its Function," *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 254.

⁷⁷ Shoaf, pp. 32-3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷⁹ As Kurtz and Ketcham warn, p. 134, "'set practices leave us unable to respond to the real demands of actual situations, with the result that, 'under the colour of holiness,' we enslave ourselves.'"

Reality 2: Bertilak / The Green Knight as Shadow

Many people pass through life on the stage, convinced that nobody notices they are acting a part. In their enjoyment of themselves in the role, they deceive both themselves and those around them. . . For the persona is, up to a point, something unreal, or, like a part in a play, at one remove from reality, the natural man with his many layers being, as it were, overlaid by a second, more polished version.¹

The Shadow of Imperfection

While Jungian psychology lies outside the scope of this thesis, an essential aspect of the *Gawain*-poet's spiritual theology of imperfection centers, obviously, on our hero's all-too-human shortcomings, an incompleteness that Sir Gawain has completely chased into the closet of his awareness, into what we can call his shadow. Given his very focused persona, he seems to experience difficulty in accepting an alternative to his conscious view. Such an alternative might suggest, for instance, an animal-like instinct of spontaneity during festivities at Hautdesert, the ability to cut through his mien of courtesy to criticize the uncouth Green Knight at the story's beginning, or the integrity to stand fast against his seductress.

This thesis has criticized Gawain as somewhat superficial and as lacking integrity—as too compromising of his first instincts in order to remain perfect.² His first instincts on how to maintain courtesy when faced with the Lady's advances exemplify this. These observations cohere with Jung's warning that without the shadow we “become flat and

without substance.”³ Gawain frequently appears flat and without substance, such as in the bedroom scenes or, when he goes to confession, in his complete blindness to the sin he has committed on the third day of wooing. Jung further warns that we cannot deny this shadow for long, but must acknowledge it so as to avoid its unruliness: “This body is a beast with a beast’s soul, an organism that gives unquestioning obedience to instinct.”⁴ Our hero lacks the integrity to accept, even at the smallest level, his beastliness.

The Trickster, Bertilak / the Green Knight, cuts through the hero’s certainties throughout the tale.⁵ The Trickster, as an aspect of the shadow, courts ambiguity, uncertainties, the failure of old standbys, and doubt in any truths.⁶ It comes as no surprise, given all this, that Gawain falls into such a state of shock by the end of his adventure, when he learns the destabilizing truth of his sin.

The greatest tension we seem to find in the story, even more than in the wooing scenes, plays out between Gawain and Bertilak / the Green Knight, though often not directly but simply through the contrast of their personalities as seen over the entire story. This chapter will address that tension and also the figures of Bertilak and the Green Knight as aids to the poet’s spiritual theology of imperfection.

Gawain and this boisterous, less-than-courteous other, do a kind of dance throughout; yet, of course, only Bertilak knows for the whole time of his own fuller personality as both the lord of Hautdesert and the knight who rode in on Camelot. Through this dual role, Bertilak / the Green Knight witnesses more about Gawain than our hero can suspect: Bertilak knows first-hand how Arthur’s best knight reacted at Camelot to the green intruder and he knows full well why the knight has come to Hautdesert; thus as concerned and curious host he is simply playing a game in taking his guest aside on the last day of the Christmas holiday

(and just before the hunting and wooing scenes begin) to query as to the reason for the latter's journey (1046ff). The Green Knight by the fourth fitt, on the other hand, knows about Gawain's stay at Hautdesert, even, through the Castle's Lady and Morgan, the details in the guest's bower. As Hans Schnyder observes, unlike Gawain, Bertilak "sees all the single incidents in their wider context."⁷ Gawain remains wholly unsuspecting of this all. Bertilak / the Green Knight's unanticipated knowledge, as well as his shape-shifting ability, parallel two aspects of the Trickster figure.⁸ One scholar notes that the Green Knight appears larger than life, for in all his "rôles, aspects, and appearances, there is a common amplitude and an amoral enjoyment of life that transcend limited human capacities."⁹

The contrast of Bertilak / the Green Knight with Gawain offers us a commentary on the hero, since the latter, seemingly denying his own shadow, appears a shallow and superficial figure boxed into his knightly persona. Bertilak / the Green Knight suggests to Gawain an alternative mode of behaviour, an alternative way of being Christian and a knight. As a consequence of this close association to the protagonist, it appears that Bertilak and his monstrous alter-ego play as important a role in the story as the leading man does, while all other characters stand in a secondary place¹⁰—even, it seems, Morgan le Fay, whom some critics have suggested finds a place in this poem simply to provide a motivation for the Games and to maintain Bertilak / the Green Knight's guiltlessness.¹¹

Morgan le Fey

Bertilak / the Green Knight's ambiguity arises not only from the dual role, a duality about which our hero (like the reader) does not learn until the end, but also from the

mysterious relationship he retains with the story's real albeit unsuspected mover and shaker, Morgan le Fay. Perhaps, because of her role, this chapter should address her place and image in the story as Trickster. However, without delving into topics outside the scope of this thesis, such as her place in other medieval romances or the psychology of the anima or of the devouring mother archetype,¹² we could only proceed from the few bits and pieces offered us by the poet. We can say, possibly, that we see her through Bertilak and the Green Knight, and that these characters really mask her. From this viewpoint, the dual personage therefore says more about her than about the man who plays the mask.

On second thought this does not make sense, as it seems that this man possesses a strong identity in his own right. Bertilak displays proficiency at the hunt, and also enjoys himself as host to Gawain, appearing genuine in his playfulness:

þe lorde luflych aloft lepeþ ful ofte,
Mynned merthe to be made vpon mony syþeþ,
Hent heþly of his hode, and on a spere henged,
And wayned hom to wynne þe worchip þerof
þat most myrþe myȝt meue þat Crystenmas whyle (981-5).¹³

Here we see the merry, instinctive nature of Bertilak as host. While we do not enjoy access to his inner thoughts, it seems that, unlike Gawain, he has no obsession with courtesy or any other role, but here simply wants his guests to share with him in having a good time.

In addition to this instinctual nature, the fact remains that Morgan does pick Bertilak to carry out her bidding, and allows him to play his role, generally, in the way that he does.¹⁴ This in itself warrants some discussion of the knight. After all, Morgan could have chosen someone else, or done things differently. In this chapter, then, it suffices if we go no further than accept Charles Moorman's observation that "the tradition of Morgan le Fay does include her role as healer and tester; and it is perfectly in character . . . for her to test the honor,

fidelity, and morality of individuals.”¹⁵ Perhaps Morgan represents the entire unconscious, while Bertilak / the Green Knight designates the bidding of this unconscious as the more specialized Trickster figure.

Fitt I: Green Knight: Instinct, Energy, Power at Camelot

The Green Knight stuns Camelot into silence—into an unmannerly silence—through his own uncouthness, as he barges in and carries himself very boldly before the king and court: “He ferde as freke were fade” (149).¹⁶ We witness in this introduction the raw, almost insuppressible energy that, in opposition to Gawain’s perfectly contained emotions and instincts, we will observe later in Bertilak:

He loked as layt so lyȝt,
So sayd al þat hym syȝe;
Hit semed as no mon myȝt
Vnder his dynntes dryȝe (199-202).¹⁷

The giant’s eyes, exhibiting his energy, threaten the court as much as the knight’s great size does.

The Green Knight, as in his role as the lord of Hautdesert, contains “the unlimited energy of a symbol.”¹⁸ The following words concerning this character apply most significantly in our introduction to the monster at Camelot: “The poet’s awareness of the generic forces of life and growth and richness and energy—all seemingly independent of men’s choice or desire, and able to mock these—realizes itself in the image of the Green Knight.”¹⁹ The Green Knight / Bertilak’s threat to Camelot, and to Gawain’s shell of perfectionism in particular, perhaps reflects the poet’s belief that creative, life-energy carries

great power and significance in the spiritual journey, even though moral behaviour is also important.²⁰

No human can shove instinct into the closet of human consciousness without causing significant turmoil and the eventual release of an uncontrolled, “beastly” energy. In the person of the Green Knight / Bertilak, the poet embodies certain non-human elements, such as divine wisdom, more-than-humanly-possible energy and might, and, of course, the regenerative ability (after having one’s head chopped off), a capacity that, along with the colour green, perhaps signifies the giant as literally a man of the earth.²¹

Actualizing such a force of life in all its cycles, mystery, and incongruity, at this early stage in the story we note the poet establishing the Green Knight’s Trickster-like ambiguity, for the man fails to carry the usual weapons needed for combat. The poet mentions first “in his on hand he hade a holyn bobbe, þat is grattest in grene when greueþ ar bare” (206-7).²² This, of course, symbolizes that the man comes to Camelot in peace.²³ The man holds this symbol with the obvious intent that all see it, thus signifying his disinterest in battle.

Yet in his other hand he carries an axe so much greater than a normal battle-axe that the poet spends many precious words describing it:

And an ax in his oþer, a hoge and vnmete,
A spetos sparþe to expoun in spelle, quoso myȝt.
þe lenkþe of an elnȝarde þe large hede hade,
þe grayn al of grene stele and of golde hewen,
þe bit burnyst bryȝt, with a brod egge
As wel schapen to schere as scharp rasores (208-213).²⁴

The green holly can symbolize peace and life, while the axe obviously points towards the brutal, forceful, and violent cutting away of something by a powerful being. As Trickster, the Green Knight has come to cut away—to cut the shell of Gawain’s perfectionism—in order to

effect new life. And he does this in peace, rather than in order to do harm to Gawain personally.²⁵

The Trickster, like the shadow in general, carries no evil *per se* nor opposes the divine will.²⁶ Rather, Bertilak / the Green Knight functions as the great destabilizer, generating contradictions and tensions as a way to produce a fuller, more truthful view of reality in all its complications; in other words, he acts, as a Trickster, “as a counterpoint to one-sided perceptions and behaviors.”²⁷ “Badness” does not inhere to the Trickster force, although humans commonly fear it does since the Trickster so powerfully questions and defeats our strongly-held perceptions and sacred cows.²⁸

To repeat, then, we see the Green Knight acting ambivalently as intruder at Camelot: Through the great axe, the man maintains the threat of violence, thus countering the claim to peace represented by the green holly. Thus after a moment of mutually silent staring, the Green Knight moves boldly forward into the hall, “dut he no woþe; Haylsed he neuer one, bot heȝe he ouer loket” (222-3).²⁹ “Regardless of danger,” the giant moves and fearlessly looks up into the group of famous knights, perhaps determining if he can provoke anyone to violence. He plays a high tension game, ensuring that everyone believes his capacity and willingness for violence. He brings peace violently.

Perhaps this boldness signifies the man’s directness, something necessary to his role as a Trickster. The Trickster brings to the surface inner, repressed tensions and realities; it fragments us, or, rather, stirs up repressed fragments, to effect a greater conscious integration and integrity in our actions. This requires directness and a certain amount of violence, threatened or otherwise, for it demands that the Trickster not respect people’s spaces, but that

the Trickster jump right into the midst of things and make himself right at home, as the Green Knight seems to do here.

At no time from this moment onwards do Bertilak / the Green Knight, Bertilak's wife, or Morgan le Fay fully respect Gawain. Both the Green Knight and the Lady boldly intrude into Gawain's physical space, while Bertilak and Morgan practice sneakiness and deceit by concealing from their guest at Hautdesert the true nature of things. The Green Knight acts deceitfully in this opening scene in claiming to want no strife (271) when in fact he comes to cause great strife.³⁰ Again, though, we see ambivalence since, insofar as he is not seeking physical combat, as Trickster the Green Knight indeed tells the truth in claiming peace—the truth from a certain point of view.

He tells another half-truth, that he has come to propose a “Crystemas gomen”—a Christmas Game (283). Of course the adventure's conclusion bears it out as a game, and Camelot with its laughter seems to agree. But it lacked the fairness, and therefore the honour expected of all chivalric contests—because from this beginning onwards Gawain does not know all the rules; he does not know the Game's true nature and purpose—that, for instance, Bertilak's seemingly innocent Exchange's Game forms a crucial part of the Beheading Game.

Part of the deceit and ambivalence issues from the fact that the hero loses control of his destiny to the Trickster, Bertilak / the Green Knight (and Morgan le Fay behind the scenes), from the moment he accepts the Green Knight's challenge to the Beheading Game, since Morgan has designed the two Games he plays to demand the impossible from the perfect pentangle virtues. The Trickster, as one specific and important aspect of the shadow, becomes particularly active when the seemingly inferior parts of one's person-hood,

imperfection in Gawain's case, remain ignored and repressed. Deldon Anne McNeely sums up the situation with the Trickster this way: "When we identify with the Hero, if we do not also relate well to the Trickster, chances are these two archetypes will meet in us in a troublesome way, often with the Trickster diminishing the Heroic potential."³¹ Gawain enjoys very little input into how this clash will unravel.

The unexpected survival of the Green Knight after the protagonist severs his head points not only towards the unfairness of the game—for how could Gawain know, in accepting, that his mighty blow would not suffice?—but towards the tremendous, otherworldly strength of the Trickster. If Gawain has lost control of his destiny, this follows largely because he now finds himself way over his head. He remains but a "berdle3 chylde" (adolescent), as the intruder has called the entire court (280).

The poet's teachings on the spiritual journey, paralleling the instruction of many spiritual treatises, hinges on this very loss of control and inability to see things clearly. Christian spiritual teachers emphasize that for the most part we travel blindly through the pilgrimage, able to see but the merest glint of light or reason. Teresa of Avila writes in Interior Castles, for instance, that "It is no small pity, and should cause us no little shame, that, through our own fault, we do not understand ourselves, or know who we are."³² St. Catherine of Siena writes of God's reason for this pilgrimage of ignorance:

But their [humans'] love is imperfect, for they serve me for their own profit or for the delight and pleasure they find in me. . . I take back my spiritual comfort and let them experience struggles and vexations. I do this to bring them to perfect knowledge of themselves, so that they will know that of themselves they have neither existence nor any grace. I want them, in time of conflict, to take refuge in me by seeking me and knowing me as their benefactor, in true humility seeking me alone.³³

The Round Table takes refuge, at this point, in escapism rather than in God, as an air of unreality permeates Camelot after the Green Knight picks up his head, addresses his audience for a last time, and leaves. Arthur tries to return things to normal, to the festive celebrations, as if these strange occurrences simply make up a story (468ff). The court does not accept the obvious life-altering situation this Game will inevitably become for the story's hero.

The last note on this section again points to the ambiguity of the Green Knight: At first glance an uncouth monster who represents the shadow—the opponent—to chivalry³⁴, he nonetheless maintains a certain level of knightly courtesy in his comportment and does so in the face of Camelot's discourteous silence. For instance, he trusts Gawain's word that after the latter man strikes him in the neck and ostensibly chops off his head, Arthur's knight will honour his side of the agreement (390ff). The Green Knight expects both himself and the members of Camelot to act honorably in the pact. And when the protagonist does swing at the Green Knight, the latter informs Gawain in the fourth fitt, after the hero shirks from the first blow, that he did not shirk (2274-5). Thus the monster possesses a great deal of knightly honour—enough to stand fast under an enormous battle-axe and enough to make deals with the greatest, most chivalrous men under heaven. He interacts with them at their level of courtesy.

Fitt 2: Bertilak as Courtly Knight

The Green Knight's greatest ambiguity centers on his character as "both monster and courtier."³⁵ The two middle fitts bear witness to this latter aspect. Yet in these courtly

situations, we can still note an edge of beastly instinct, just as the Green Knight retains in the first and last fits a level of courtesy. At first glance, though, Castle Hautdesert seems in its perfection as out of a dream, recalling the “orderliness and beauty” of Camelot.³⁶ Bertilak and his society do not disappoint, as they render great courtesy unto their guest in a scene we have already discussed: The Castle’s inhabitants welcome Gawain while he still sits on his horse, and they lead him inside, help him change out of his rusty armor (which they even shine up for him for his journey to the Green Chapel (2018)), and seat him in a cozy chair in front of a fire.³⁷ Gawain himself judges the host as “a bolde burne” (843).³⁸

But the host does not let courtesy or other knightly values prevent him from also displaying instinct, energy, and spontaneous life and warmth. When he “learns” (of course, he already knows) of Gawain’s association with Camelot, “Loude laȝed he þerat” (909).³⁹ As already stated, we learn in this fit how much the host energetically enjoys a good and playful time,

þus wyth laȝande loteȝ þe lorde hit tayt makeȝ,
For to glade Sir Gawayn with gomneȝ in halle
þat nyȝt (988-990).⁴⁰

The lord seems to bellow in glee at every turn, for when Gawain explains his predicament of finding the Green Chapel, Bertilak laughs before telling the guest of its close proximity (1068ff). While Bertilak seems to laugh a lot, Gawain rarely does; he laughs in relief when informed of the proximity of the Green Chapel (1079), but it seems that he does not roar for the zest of life the way the host does. The protagonist laughs again when the others do so, after he and Bertilak have agreed to the Exchanges Game (1113). In this case, perhaps Gawain laughs simply out of courtesy, to go along with the others. He does not laugh easily, naturally, and solitarily, like the jocular host does.

Fitt 3: Bertilak the Hunter

The central contrast in this fitt follows from the great deal of energy and wildness expended by the host while on the hunt in opposition to the stiff courtesy of the hero, who also sleeps in long after the hunters have left for the day. Thus, “By þat any daylyȝt lemed vpon erþe, He with his hapeles on hyȝe horsses weren” (1147-8).⁴¹ We then witness the fierceness of the hunt in all its realism, beginning with the noisy pandemonium of the hounds and hunters let loose:

Blwe bygly in bugleȝ þre bare mote.
Braches bayed þerfore and breme noyse maked,
And pay chastysed and charred on chasyng þat went (1141-3).⁴²

We witness here a ferocity in Bertilak we could never hope to in Gawain, who seems too tamed by his obsession for following the virtues such as courtesy to become so wild and spontaneous, to allow the thrill of the chase and such life-energy to course through him. For Wendy Clein, these hunts celebrate “life and the chivalric triumph over death.”⁴³ Clein makes the significant observation that the hunt, in its “violent, noisy, colorful celebration of life,” is nonetheless morally neutral.⁴⁴ Instinctive life-energy, the kind that powers the Green Knight / Bertilak, and the same energy that Gawain forsakes in order to maintain courtesy, is, of itself, okay. Messy, dirty, and cruel (and “beastly,” according to Jung), it exists nevertheless, and therefore each must acknowledge it.

We see in this fitt the lord of Hautdesert acknowledging and relishing instinct and wild energy with a great spontaneous ferocity:

þe lorde for blys abloy
Ful ofte con launce and lyȝt,
And drof þat day wyth joy
Thus to þe derk nyȝt (1174-7).⁴⁵

Bertilak seems more human than our hero in his greater wholeness, as he acts more “beastly,” and therefore less perfectly virtuous. Perhaps the *Gawain*-poet refers only in general terms to Gawain’s clashes with trolls, monsters, and local villagers while the hero rides out from Camelot in the second fitt so we do not see this aggressive, out of control side to him. From what we witness of Gawain in the story, he seems too tame, too subdued to practice this sort of thing. It seems more fitting for our hero to doze on in the morning’s light (1180-1), while this ferocity occurs outside, away from him. Gawain acts as more of a courteous “ladies man” than a hunter and a fighter, as he discourses with the seductress, “þe freke ferde with defence, and feted ful fayre” (1282).⁴⁶ This contrast continues in the same way throughout the fitt.

Fitt 4: Green Knight as Confessor, Redeemer, Baptist

The poet’s appreciation for the depth and mystery of life becomes evident when he turns the Trickster into the hero’s Confessor: The best Christian knight in the world finds forgiveness of what may be the sin of pride (*surquidre*)⁴⁷—but what he himself identifies as cowardice and covetousness (2374)—from the one who has brought him down, by the one who deceitfully led him into and through this entire painful adventure.⁴⁸ The perfect Christian knight finds forgiveness and compassionate non-judgement from the one who seems throughout to carry the greatest amount of shadow (perhaps the dual character’s awareness and acceptance of his shadow allows him the authority to truly forgive):

þou art confessed so clene, beknown of þy mysses,
And hat3 þe penaunce apert of þe poynt of myn egge,
I halde þe polysed of þat ply3t and pured as clene

As þou hade3 neuer forfeþed syþen þou wat3 fyrst borne (2391-4).⁴⁹

In his generous forgiveness, the Green Knight goes so far as to compare Gawain to one of the greatest earthly goods: “As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more, So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay kny3te3” (2364-5).⁵⁰ This statement emphasizes the relativity of life rather than any absolute judgment.

We see, in fact, the Green Knight as a genuinely “good guy” after all, as he even invites Gawain back to the Castle despite his guest’s deceitful concealment of the green girdle:

And 3e schal in þis New 3er agayn to my wone3,
And we schyn reuel þe remnaunt of þis ryche fest
Ful bene.
þer laped hym fast þe lorde
And sayde: ‘With my wyf, I wene,
We schal yow wel acorde,
þat wat3 your enmy kene’ (2400-2404).⁵¹

Nor does the lord of Hautdesert condemn Gawain for exchanging kisses with the Lady of the Castle, his wife, even though he surely knows what occurred in the bower.

As a Trickster, Bertilak / the Green Knight has also acted deceitfully and from his own shadow, and so he does not judge. He exhibits an easy familiarity with Gawain’s dark side, as if he has known human brokenness before, and by now fully accepts it as a given. Thus the green man stands back, leans on his axe, and relaxes, even as Gawain readies to fight, presumably to the death (2331ff). Faced with this level of intense aggression from Camelot’s greatest knight, the Green Knight “meles muryly.”⁵²

The Trickster’s familiarity contrasts with Gawain’s sudden enlightenment; one’s relaxed demeanor contrasts with the other’s tense reaction. Ironically, we now see the Green Knight as the calm and courteous knight while Gawain, as we shall see more fully in the next

chapter, completely throws off his courteous, virtuous shell and acts as the raging, instinctive beast. Things have come full circle. Perhaps Bertilak / the Green Knight saw as a given, from the moment he entered Camelot and proposed the Game, that Gawain would at some point “fail” in his perfection and meet the shadow, and that this failure simply amounted to a matter of testing various weak spots. The Green Knight, unlike Gawain, has therefore fully prepared himself for this unorthodox ending to the unorthodox Game.

The Trickster redeems Gawain not only of the latter’s sin of deceit and pride, but, in the larger, more radically life-changing perspective, does so in reorienting the hero away from his perfectionism: “The Green Knight finally leaves Gawain with not only knowledge of the weight of the flesh but also the humility to acknowledge his own foolish pride.”⁵³ Gawain has learned his lesson: “He will never again be so proud as to forget that he is only human”⁵⁴ and therefore without perfection. The “nirt” on Gawain’s neck signifies a penance (as he has just had confession the day before, and we do not learn of the confessor’s instructions therewith); the Green Knight celebrates again Christ’s payment for the debt of Gawain’s sin.⁵⁵ Despite the pain this has caused Gawain, we can see it as the hero’s shame “gave him new grace, and the Round Table achieved a new nobility by its act of compassionate fellowship.”⁵⁶

The Green Knight · Bertilak as Gawain's Shadow

Gawain’s spiritual growth hinges on his ability to come to terms with his shadow of imperfection. Such a “breakdown,” or disintegration of his perfectionist disposition, however painful, would facilitate a new assimilation of reality, a larger, more truthful way of looking

at himself and others.⁵⁷ Such a collapse would enable the knight to find an effective, honest way of adopting the pentangle virtues. Thus the author orients the entire story around the hero's sudden awareness of his greatly disquieting imperfection. Without this disturbance, Gawain could only stagnate in his demeaning, minimizing role as a flawless Christian knight.⁵⁸ He could only live in unreality.

A Jungian psychologist warns that "to forget the role of the trickster is to court chaos."⁵⁹ Our hero proceeds chaotically on his adventure, failing to achieve a level of control he thinks he has; only at the end does he learn, much to his chagrin, of the highly public nature of the test. The chaos, in other words, issues from the large incongruity between Gawain's perception of events and those, such as the Lady, Bertilak / the Green Knight, and Morgan, who have really controlled things. To state it simply, Gawain has remained completely "out of the loop." His experience has revolved around a great unreality built on courtesy and religiosity.

With the Trickster's presence, our hero cannot stagnate as the perfect Christian knight, but finds himself pushed into a broader, albeit temporarily more painful, reality. Gawain's crisis at the end issues from his complete identification with his persona: Gawain personalizes the affront to his mask.⁶⁰ This conviction produces the crisis in him, as he feels failure not only in deed but in his very being. Thus he cannot laugh and embrace a more mature perspective on things, at least not for a while.

As a shadow to Gawain, we find the "Other" in his dual roles as frequently being everything that Gawain is not, although he also shares some aspects of Gawain's personality, such as a certain amount of courtesy. But as host, Bertilak does not stiffly practice this virtue. The lord of Hautdesert seems, even in this role, to live from his drives. This instinctive living

forms an essential piece to the role of the shadow, according to Jung: “To unite oneself with this shadow is to say yes to instinct, that formidable dynamism lurking in the background.”⁶¹ Bertilak / the Green Knight, as such an imperfect exemplar of courtesy, forces the hero to acknowledge his own beastly, humanly imperfection, against all will. Things are not as straightforward as they appear.

Thus Hans Schnyder goes so far as to see the Green Knight, on an anagogic level, as Christ—as God interfering in human affairs.⁶² Schnyder points to pride as the underlying sin of Camelot, as personified in Arthur’s boastful behaviour at the story’s beginning.⁶³ The Green Knight acts Christ-like in his comportment at Camelot, for he carries an absolute sense of superiority and self-confidence, yet comes not in hostility but “to speak reason” with Arthur.⁶⁴ Moreover, the poet clearly states that the intruder finds no match at the Round Table.⁶⁵ Schnyder concludes that the Green Knight’s “behaviour is rather that of a benevolent though severe father who deems it necessary to admonish unruly children.”⁶⁶

While Schnyder does not specifically mention the Green Knight as functioning as a shadow to Gawain, his thoughts prove helpful to this present discussion: The Green Knight enjoys superior strength and ferocity, as he seems to almost terrify the Round Table to silence, and superior personality, as he immediately seizes control of the situation at Camelot (inducing the gracious king into a temper tantrum):

Ther wat3 lokyng on lenþe, þe lude to beholde,
For vch mon had meruayle quat hit mene myȝt
...
þerfore to answere wat3 ar3e mony aþel freke,
And al stouned at his steuen and stonstil seten
In a swoghe sylence þur3 þe sale riche (232-3; 241-3).⁶⁷

As a sort of un-acknowledged shadow of the hero’s ego, the Green Knight carries enormous weight and personifies some of the protagonist’s repressed aspects. He embodies the

requisite fly in the ointment to Gawain's perfection, the impetus for the change Gawain so desperately needs. Jung writes of the necessity of such energy to human transformation:

Life, being an energetic process, needs the opposites, for without opposition there is, as we know, no energy. Good and evil are simply the moral aspects of this natural polarity. The fact that we have to feel this polarity so excruciatingly makes human existence all the more complicated. Yet the suffering that necessarily attaches to life cannot be evaded. The tension of opposites that makes energy possible is a universal law.⁶⁸

Not surprisingly, then, Gawain's un-acknowledged shadow of imperfection hovers over the hero's entire adventure—probably over all his life—just as the Green Knight hovers over Camelot. The latter man seizes absolute control, seemingly effortlessly, over the court, and indeed, it seems, over Gawain's life from that time onwards until the end of the experience. Yet without this man, Gawain would have taken much longer to discover the truth about himself. Bertilak / the Green Knight's energy forces the hero off the chair of complacency.

¹ Jolande Jacobi, *Masks of the Soul*, Ean Begg, tr. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), p. 45.

² As stated before, Gawain's piety and virtuous practices are deeply rooted. But his instincts are deeply rooted as well—perhaps, since they are not learned actions and responses, as his piety and virtues are, these instincts are even more deeply rooted. Thus Gawain is superficial in that one level of his reality seems to overbear a deeper level. Gawain's superficiality seems, therefore, to arise from an inner fragmentation—he is warring on the inside, with instincts losing out (therefore, according to Jungian psychology, becoming in this repressed state even more dangerous). What is also superficial is how at no point in the story, except perhaps at the end, do we have any indication that our hero is aware of this inner warfare.

³ Carl Jung, "The Psychology of the Unconscious," *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Vol. 7, R.F.C. Hull, tr. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 29.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵ Stephen Manning, "A Psychological Interpretation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 282.

⁶ Deldon Anne McNeely, *Mercury Rising* (Woodstock: Spring Publications, Inc., 1996), p. 20.

⁷ Schnyder, p. 63.

⁸ McNeely, pp. 19-21.

⁹ Ford, p. 157.

¹⁰ Larry Benson notes that the Green Knight is described in the poem in as much detail as Gawain is and is given as much speech as the hero. Moreover, Bertilak's Castle rivals Camelot, with its festivities and beautiful women. Benson, p. 36.

¹¹ Benson argues that the author uses Morgan as a scapegoat so that responsibility for the entire ruse is lifted off the shoulders of Bertilak. Benson, p. 35.

¹² The psychological aspect of Morgan le Fey is discussed briefly in Manning's essay.

- ¹³ "The lord, often leaping to his feet in friendly fashion, repeatedly urged others to make merry, gaily snatched off his hood, hung it on a spear, and challenged them to win the honour of possessing it, whichever of them could stir up the greatest mirth at that Christmas season." Barron, p. 79.
- ¹⁴ "It is she (Morgan) who instigates the action against Arthur and Guenevere by sending the Green Knight, but it is Bercilak who takes over the testing of Gawain in personal terms." Manning, p. 287.
- ¹⁵ Moorman, p. 107.
- ¹⁶ "he bore himself like a bold man." Barron, p. 35.
- ¹⁷ "His glance flashed bright as fire, so all who saw him said; it seemed as though no man could survive under blows from him." Barron, p. 39.
- ¹⁸ Ford, p. 158.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.
- ²¹ Ford writes that "the poem involves the divine and the human, the natural and the magical, and presents a pattern of these categories in which potential antagonisms between them are conciliated." P. 158.
- ²² "in one of his hands he had a spray of holly, which is at its greenest when the woods are bare." Barron, p. 39.
- ²³ Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), note to line 206f, p. 215.
- ²⁴ "and in his other (hand) an axe, a huge and monstrous one, a cruel battle-axe to describe in words, if anyone could. The great head was more than a yard in length, the blade all forged of green and of gold, the cutting surface burnished bright, with a broad edge as well prepared for cutting as a sharpened razor." Barron, p. 39.
- ²⁵ Manning argues unconvincingly that the axe symbolizes the shadow's destructive side. Manning, p. 283.
- ²⁶ McNeely, p. 19.
- ²⁷ John R. Van Eenwyk, *Archetypes and Strange Attractions* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1997), p. 98-9.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- ²⁹ "regardless of danger; he greeted no one, but looked high over their heads." Barron, p. 39.
- ³⁰ Of course, he claims to come in total peace. But by the end of the poem, when we see the ruse that he has helped perform on Gawain and, by extension, all of Camelot, one has the sense that such an elaborate plot was intended, at least in its basic outlines, from the beginning. At the end, the Green Knight even informs Gawain that the impetus for all of this included to scare Guinevere to death (2460). This sounds like a very violent plot.
- ³¹ McNeely, p. 20.
- ³² Teresa of Avila, p. 29.
- ³³ Catherine of Siena, p. 113.
- ³⁴ Clein, p. 120.
- ³⁵ Moorman, p. 111.
- ³⁶ Clein, p. 95.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- ³⁸ "a valiant knight." Barron, p. 73.
- ³⁹ "he laughed aloud at the news." Barron, p. 75.
- ⁴⁰ "So with laughing words the lord made merry, to cheer Sir Gawain with social pastimes that evening." Barron, p. 81.
- ⁴¹ "By the time some daylight shone upon the earth, he and his men were on their tall steeds." Barron, p. 89.
- ⁴² "loudly sounding on their horns three single notes. At that the hounds bayed, and made a fierce din, and those that went chasing off were whipped in and turned back by a host of huntsmen." Barron, p. 89.
- ⁴³ Clein, p. 102.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- ⁴⁵ Barron, pp. 89, 91: "The lord, beside himself with delight, galloped ahead and dismounted again and again, and so passed the day in pleasure till the dark of night."
- ⁴⁶ Barron: "The knight acted with constraint and behaved most politely," p. 95.
- ⁴⁷ Shoaf, p. 6.
- ⁴⁸ One may be able to identify Gawain's sin as pride if one looks at the poem as a whole, and thereby observes the protagonist's perfectionist performance and belief that his piety and virtues could suffice, and if one continues the argument of John of the Cross: Gawain has pridefully chosen his way over that of God's, simply because the cavalier could not be certain of where God was in terms of saving the neck of Arthur's knight from the chopping block. Gawain refused to accept God's "tough love" on God's own terms. Gawain believed that he knew a better way.

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- ⁴⁹ "You are made so clean by confession, by admission of your faults, and having openly done penance at the point of my blade, I consider you absolved of that offence and purged as clean as if you had never sinned since the day you were born." Barron, p. 155.
- ⁵⁰ Barron, p. 153: "As a pearl in comparison with a dried pea is of greater value, so, truthfully, is Gawain beside other gallant knights."
- ⁵¹ "And you must come back again to my dwelling at this New Year season, and we shall revel very pleasantly for the remainder of this high festival.' The lord pressingly invited him there, saying: 'We will, I know, reconcile you perfectly with my wife, who was your keen opponent.'" Barron, p. 155.
- ⁵² "spoke cheerfully." Barron, p. 153.
- ⁵³ Shoaf, p. 24.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ⁵⁶ Loomis, p. 23.
- ⁵⁷ McNeely, p. 38.
- ⁵⁸ "Tension between opposites is the precondition for psychological growth, for it provides an alternative to the status quo." Eenwyk, p. 112.
- ⁵⁹ Eenwyk, p. 99.
- ⁶⁰ June Singer, Boundaries of the Soul (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1972), p. 160.
- ⁶¹ Carl Jung, "Two Essays On Analytical Psychology," Collected Works, R.F.C. Hull, tr. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 29. Jung does not say that we are to live our lives as Nietzsche's *Overman*, entirely obedient to our instincts. Jung is simply saying that the shadow and its power—its instinctive power—must be recognized for what it is. We cannot fight against it or deny its reality, but must accept it and live more in balance.
- ⁶² Schnyder, p. 41.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 41.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ⁶⁷ "For a long moment they stared back, gazing at him, for everyone wondered what it could mean . . . For that reason many a noble knight was afraid to reply, and all were stunned by his words and sat stock-still in a dead silence throughout the royal hall." Barron, p. 41.
- ⁶⁸ Carl Jung, "A Psychological Approach to the Trinity," Psychology and Western Religion, R.F.C. Hull, tr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 93.

Reality 3: The Despair of Reality

Gawain's Despair

Caught up in his perfectionist persona, Gawain does not adjust well to his instantly-acquired larger consciousness. He falls instead into deep despair. The poem's teaching on the spirituality of imperfection centers largely around the hero's reaction at the end, around how Gawain cannot laugh about his adventure and personal flaws, cannot return to Hautdesert to pay his respects to the two ladies, and fails to change his bitter comportment even when back amongst his supportive court. The first part of Gawain's despair issues from the shock itself, from his coming to awareness of the reality of the fallenness of humanity, and his sharing of this:

þat oper stif mon in study stod a gret whyle,
So agreued for greme he gryed withinne;
Alle þe blod of his brest blende in his face,
þat al he schrank for schome þat þe schalk talked.
þe forme worde vpon folde þat þe freke meled:
 'Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetyse bope!' (2369-2374).¹

This reaction points to the author's genuine and profound understanding of human spirituality. Exemplified in the words of Joseph Campbell, Gawain displays his greatest humanness through his horror and despair; many human beings experience, at some time, such feelings about ourselves and the human race:

The crux of the curious difficulty lies in the fact that our conscious views of what life ought to be seldom correspond to what life really

is. Generally we refuse to admit within ourselves, or within our friends, the fullness of that pushing, self-protective, malodorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell. Rather, we tend to perfume, whitewash, and reinterpret; meanwhile imagining that all the flies in the ointment, all the hairs in the soup, are the faults of some unpleasant someone else. But when it suddenly dawns on us, or is forced to our attention, that everything we think or do is necessarily tainted with the odor of the flesh, then, not uncommonly, there is experienced a moment of revulsion: life, the acts of life, the organs of life, woman in particular as the great symbol of life, become intolerable to the pure, the pure, pure soul.²

While the first aspect of the protagonist's despair proceeds from the dismay we all commonly feel when we realize the full sense of our humanity, the second component centers around the disbelief that a way out does exist.³ Gawain's journey towards acceptance will not proceed with ease, as we can see in his initial, stunned reaction to the Green Knight's explanation of the truth; the hero does not immediately take full responsibility for his imperfection, but blames his sinful actions upon the imperfect world, upon women specifically:

Bot it is no ferly þa3 a fole madde
 And þur3 wyles of wymmen be wonen to sor3e,
 For so wat3 Adam in erde with one bygyled,
 And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsone3

...

Now þese were wrathed wyth her wyles, hit were a wyne huge
 To luf hom wel and leue hem not, a leude that coupe (2414-17; 2420-1).⁴

While Gawain does acknowledge that he has sinned, he still blames a large part of his actions on others. To take full responsibility for his actions would force him to acknowledge his own inadequacy. He seems stuck in an *if only* thought process: *If only women would not deceive men, I would not have sinned here.*

Thus at Gawain's moment of forgiveness, redemption, and baptism, he turns his back on grace and continues stubbornly, at least for the moment, down the path of self-reliance.

Thomas Merton warns that such a path of self-love can only produce despair: “Despair is the absolute extreme of self-love. It is reached when a man deliberately turns his back on all help from anyone else in order to taste the rotten luxury of knowing himself to be lost.”⁵

This thesis has skirted over the great sin of Gawain’s that lies beneath his perfectionism—the sin of pride. He frequently seems unable or unwilling to perceive any reality that differs with his own perfectionist ways of doing things. We see this pride at Gawain’s every turn in the story, but it comes out, raw, spontaneous, and instinctive, in his invective against women; he has the temerity to blame “women” for his own brokenness and sinfulness. He blames the “other,” woman, for the fact that God made him in such a way that without grace nothing will go well nor occur without causing great sin. Judging from his reactions at the story’s end, pride actually seems to present at that point a greater problem than at the story’s beginning (although this stubbornness probably follows from the severe shock he has received). We see this pride most powerfully through despair, as Merton reminds us:

Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves.⁶

Merton praises pride’s opposite, humility, as containing “in itself the answer to all the great problems of the life of the soul.”⁷

Gawain’s “Dark Night”

One’s sins and weaknesses press in and undermine any sense of worth. Life’s limitations are painfully experienced. Anxiety and

bitterness spread through the soul. The fundamental trust in life's promises and one's own worth has evaporated and now no one and nothing is trustworthy.⁸

We must not paint our lead in completely negative terms; after all, only now does he finally learn something about the real meaning of being human. The Christian teaching on the 'dark night of the soul,' reflected in John Welch's above words, may help us understand Gawain's situation as well as the poet's teaching. I do not think that the poet wants us to condemn or dislike the protagonist: The author, as stated, holds too deep an understanding of the human character to encourage easy judgments from the reader.

Rather, we can see a deeper reality: Gawain finds himself in the process of losing everything. Christian knightly virtues mean much less to him now. He therefore has no bearings, and has become blind. While the author of the "Cloud of Unknowing" may refer with ease to a blind reaching out to God⁹, for our hero, as for all humans, this proves easier said than done.

The spiritual teachings we have canvassed in this thesis would characterize Gawain at this point as really a beginner of the journey. He has just entered what could result in his own dark night. John of the Cross's description of the spiritual "beginner," one just becoming aware of the spiritual journey, reflects Sir Gawain's reality before the great shock:

As these beginners feel themselves to be very fervent and diligent in spiritual things and devout exercises, from this prosperity . . . there often comes to them, through their imperfections, a certain kind of secret pride, whence they come to have some degree of satisfaction with their works and with themselves.¹⁰

John's next words aptly describe our hero's reaction to the truth of imperfection:

Some of these beginners, too, make little of their faults, and at other times become over-sad when they see themselves fall into them, thinking themselves to have been saints already; and thus they become angry and impatient with themselves.¹¹

The dark night, John explains, draws the Christian away from self-love and the “ignoble” love of God.¹² This drawing away causes so much pain because, as we have seen in Sir Gawain’s case, the person has completely identified with this sinful outlook and so many false gods. We observe in the knight’s initial, stunned reaction (as quoted on the chapter’s first page) his rejection of these idols. He realizes at that time that he has not acted as a courteous knight, but in his blindness was really a rascal.

To read the poem at more than one level rounds out our understanding of the poet’s spiritual theology of imperfection. He does not write from a naïve or sentimental faith. He emphasizes the Christian pilgrimage as fraught with danger, loneliness, combat, and so on. We see this symbolized in the story’s physical landscape: Violence, confusion, loneliness and other painful realities figure prominently in the first part of Gawain’s physical journey. As he leaves the comforts, certainties, and pleasures of Camelot for the unknown, these difficulties seem absolute: “He wende for euermore” (669).¹³ The author depicts Gawain’s soul’s interior journey in the simple, direct description of the protagonist’s exterior journey:

Be knyȝt tok gates straunge
In mony a bonk vnbene;
His cher ful ofte con chaunge,
Bat chapel er he myȝt sene (709-12).¹⁴

We have discussed the difficulties of the journey; sleeping under sleet and icicles, battles against all sorts of things, little rest, unrelenting cold, and so on. Gawain at the story’s end has left the comforts, certainties, and pleasures of his persona for the confusion (witness his outburst and dejection), loneliness (witness his inability to laugh with his Round Table brothers), and unwilling asceticism (witness his refusal to return to the grand society of Hautdesert to enjoy himself) of the soul’s dark night.

For Schnyder, the hero's real journey occurs inwardly, and the outer pilgrimage functions as Dante's "dark wood," symbolizing the spiritual space where all seemed lost and confusing: "Gawain is . . . impeded in his course by a dense entanglement of thorny undergrowth" in his soul.¹⁵ The bleakness found in Gawain's proud, perfectionist soul that fails to truly surrender to God, and that remains unaware of this block, finds a parallel in the "bleakness" of nature¹⁶: "Þus is peryl and payne and plytes ful harde Bi contray caryeþ þis knyȝt tyl Krystmasse euen, al one" (733-5).¹⁷

Given this chronic undergrowth in the soul, we can see Gawain's sin as a happy sin, but only if he can accept his dark night, only if he does not construct another god to replace his virtues. The "Cloud of Unknowing's" striking advice seems apt here: "Feel sin in its totality—as a lump—without specifying any particular part, and that all of it is you. And then cry ceaselessly in your spirit this one thing: 'Sin! Sin! Sin! Help! Help! Help!'"¹⁸ If, instead of despairing, he surrenders his strong will and ego to this process, and accepts the Mystery of God rather than the certainty of his pentangle virtues or an alternative, he will indeed experience a fresh depth to his spirituality and a new energy in his relationship with God. This follows with Teresa of Avila's promises. We see in her observation the story of Gawain: "[She] concluded that God does not wait until we get our life in order. God meets us where we are and asks us to trust that acceptance."¹⁹ Even though our hero is clearly a rascal—and unconscious of his nature until the end—according to the poet God still works to touch the man, even if through a dishonest Game. God "writes straight with crooked handwriting." The Christian story of redemption repeats itself again.

Gawain's Pride

More precisely, the Christian story of redemption has *begun* again, but it remains Gawain's task to see it through. As we note with John of the Cross, the real issue centers on whether the hero surrenders to the difficult situation.²⁰ Will he adopt the humility Merton finds so essential? Gawain has begun to learn, but will fully understand through humility, that "the only way to possess His greatness is to pass through the needle's eye of your own insufficiency."²¹

He must go beyond his tremendous shell of pride. This sin powerfully contributes the protagonist's shell of perfectionism. To even half-seriously lay claim to perfection, let alone take it as far as Gawain has in this story, necessitates an arrogant rejection of one's creatureliness, of one's imperfection, of one's need for God. It rejects the Christian assumption of humanity's dark side, ignoring the warning of a Jungian author, "Forget your dark side and it will bite you in the ass." It minimizes the need for God.

Shoaf's book, The Poem as Green Girdle, in addressing the commercial aspect of the poem, offers much to this issue of pride in the discussion on relativity. For Shoaf, the fundamental shift in Gawain's world-view centers on his movement away from absolutism and toward the acceptance of a life of relativity.²² Gawain can accept this relativity at the end because the adventure has "chastened" his pride: "He has learned that he does not measure up."²³ Laura Loomis adds that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* concerns not evil but goodness, and more specifically, "not that [Gawain] fell into vulgar sin, but that he failed to keep goodness perfect."²⁴ Gawain is not evil; he just fails, like any human being, to remain perfectly good. Until the end, he did not fully realize this was the case.

The poet provides a last, interesting contrast between this pride and the hero's sudden and humbling enlightenment in the form of Gawain's reaction to the guide on the way out from Hautdesert to the Green Chapel. The guide provides a final temptation to Gawain (2118ff); in fact, he provides two inducements to sin, one overt and one more hidden. In the first, he promises that he will maintain silence if the hero runs away from the contest. This offer masks a second, much more subtle temptation. The guide knows full well with whom he speaks, and that the most courteous and honourable knight in the world would never renege on his word. But the guide also knows of the protagonist's pride, and so he entices Gawain to respond with this pride to the overt bait. Gawain, in his ignorance of the real issue, succumbs easily to this second temptation, as he does throughout the story:

‘Grant merci,’ quoth Gawayn, and gruchying he sayde:
 ‘Wel worth þe, wyȝe, þat woldeȝ my gode,
 And þat lelly me layne I leue wel þou woldeȝ.
 Bot helde þou hit neuer so holde, and I here passed,
 Founded for ferde for to fle, in fourme þat þou telleȝ,
 I were a knyȝt kowarde, I myȝt not be excused’ (2126-31).²⁵

Gawain sins here in his patronizing attitude to the guide. His attitude reflects his failure to acknowledge any imperfection in himself. He denies that the thought of flight has crossed his mind when it most likely has. Once again, then, we can locate Gawain's sin in the proud rejection of his humanity, of his imperfection. No human riding out on such a “mission of death,” where he must passively place his neck before an enormous, unsightly monster, could fail to entertain, however briefly, thoughts on flight. Gawain, in the moments of his death, seems hampered by denial, as he still plays the perfect Christian knight.

We witness here a second dimension to Gawain's pride. In rejecting his humanity, he rejects a total dependence on God. That led to his acceptance of the lace in the first place. We have discussed this before, and now need only highlight the extremity of his ignorance of his

sin. In his patronizing response to the guide, he misrepresents the level of his dependence on God: “Ful wel con Dryȝten schape His seruaunteȝ for to saue” (2138-9).²⁶ As discussed, Gawain does have an intense trust in God, but having accepted the lace he does not fully believe what he says to the guide.

In this exchange, then, we can see the acumen of the author’s teachings on pride and perfectionism: A large part of our problems as we journey follows from self-deception. Gawain seems to sincerely defend his trust in God, and so maintains the denial and ignorance that we saw the day before in his incomplete confession. This reminds us, again, of Teresa of Avila’s central discovery that we do not know ourselves: “We wander outside the castle of our lives, preoccupied with many things, in each of which we search for something more.”²⁷ Gawain’s condescension seems pitiful upon a rereading of the poem, when something of his true nature is known. His pride follows from a good dose of unreality. As we come to better know ourselves, the author teaches us, we realize the depth of our imperfection. God invites us to face the truth of our fallenness, so that we can turn fully to God rather than to idols and false supports such as magical green laces.

Gawain’s ignorance seems to remain even after his great shock, for in this moment of despair he accuses himself of covetousness, infidelity, dishonesty, and treachery (2378ff). He fails to mention pride. One critic suggests that for the hero covetousness means seeking “consolation in transitory things”—in this case the green girdle.²⁸ It could also remain “a state of inordinate love for oneself, and it is just such a disposition that Gawain has shown in accepting the girdle to save his life.”²⁹ Thus the hero has found himself guilty of sin, but in his ignorance he fails, at least at first, to understand the true nature of his sin.

In fact, Gawain's inability to fathom the real depths of his sin raise the possibility that he remains just as ignorant of his root sin as before, and that therefore his sudden enlightenment is not as complete and beneficial as we had thought. His despair therefore proceeds not from his realization of what it means to be a human, but from his failure to uphold his word and remain honourable. He seems in his reaction to maintain his high standards. He judges himself while still encased in the shell of knightly perfectionism. The danger lies in that "next time" he will endeavor to "try harder" rather than surrendering to God. Gawain's belief in the attainability of these perfect standards by a human continues as strong as ever; his root sin exists as before. He has yet to challenge the very existence of such standards; he has yet to embrace imperfection, and chastises himself for being imperfect. He sees himself as a fallen god rather than as a very good human.

V. Y. Haines' observation, that Jesus "emphasized the demons of temptation rather than the Fall as the way to understand evil,"³⁰ applies to Gawain's reaction. The temptation of perfection, the temptation of playing God, has not altered. Our hero seems to form the wrong conclusion of the events. He does not accept the notion of original sin, the notion that *he* can do nothing about this reality. There was, most likely, nothing he could have done to find his way out of the mess at Hautdesert once he had accepted the challenge.

Gawain dreads death. Thus he accepts the girdle.³¹ He fears death because he does not fully accept that he is not God. Without the belief in a larger reality, he questions whether something lies on the other side of physical death. The girdle symbolizes his belief in himself as more than human. In blaming women instead of this delusion, we see another aspect of his continued ignorance. Barron believes that "the manner in which [Gawain] wears the girdle as

he rides away from the Green Chapel shows his awareness of the part which chivalric pride played in his downfall."³²

But it remains doubtful whether he realizes the full extent and nature of his pride. Gawain has submitted physically to the Green Knight's axe. The Christian journey demands that we submit spiritually to another axe, one that cuts away the old life of sin.³³ Gawain's "nirt"—his superficial physical wound—perhaps symbolizes what we can see as only a superficial spiritual cutting away. The adventure cut the top, most obvious layers of the man's sinful nature, but deeper roots remain. The cut needed to go deeper.

¹ "The other bold man stood a long while in silent thought, so overcome with mortification that he shuddered inwardly; all his heart's blood rushed into his face, so that his whole being winced with shame at what the man had said. The first words the knight actually spoke were: 'A curse upon cowardice and avarice too!'" Barron, pp. 153, 155.

² Campbell, pp. 121-2.

³ Thomas Merton writes in New Seeds of Contemplation (New York: New Directions Book, 1972), p. 180: "Because our own resources inevitably fail us, we are all more or less subject to discouragement and to despair."

⁴ "But it is no wonder if a fool behaves foolishly and is brought to grief through the wiles of women, for Adam while on earth was thus beguiled by one, and Solomon by many different women, and also Samson. . . Now since these were brought to grief by the wiles of women, it would be far better to love them well and trust them never, if only one could." Barron, p. 157.

⁵ Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 180.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁸ John Welch, The Carmelite Way (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 73.

⁹ The Cloud of Unknowing, p. 101. The treatise also instructs: "Let this thing deal with you, and lead you as it will. Let it be active, and you passive. Watch it if you like, but let it alone." P. 101.

¹⁰ John of the Cross, p. 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹³ "for ever, as he thought." Barron, p. 63. In noting Gawain's loneliness, Klein observes that Arthur's knights, lines 674-83, disassociate themselves from Gawain and the adventure, as they fear his certain death: "The hero's adventure cuts him off from the court in more than just a physical sense," p. 90.

¹⁴ "The knight took unfamiliar paths among many dreary hills; his mood changed many times before he came to see that chapel." Barron, p. 65.

¹⁵ Schnyder, pp. 50-1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁷ "So through pain and peril and the greatest hardships this knight went riding across the country until Christmas Eve, all alone." Barron, p. 67.

¹⁸ "The Cloud of Unknowing," p. 108.

¹⁹ Welch, p. 76.

²⁰ Merton adds that "Only God can bring you to that purity through the fires of interior trial." New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 183.

²¹ Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, p. 182.

²² Shoaf, p. 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁴ Loomis, p. 22.

²⁵ "'Many thanks,' said Gawain, and he added coldly: 'Good luck befall you, sir, who wish my good, and I am quite sure that you would keep my secret loyally. But however faithfully you kept it, if I passed by this place, took to flight out of fear, in the way you suggest, I should be a cowardly knight, and there would be no excuse for me.'" Barron, p. 141.

²⁶ "The Lord is well able to protect his servants." Barron, p. 141.

²⁷ Welch, p. 39.

²⁸ David Farley Hills, "Gawain's Fault in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, pp. 312-8.

²⁹ Hills, p. 321.

³⁰ Victor Yelverton Haines, The Fortunate Fall of Sir Gawain (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), p. 3.

³¹ Barron, Trawthe and Treason, pp. 124, 127.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³³ Snyder, p. 43.

Conclusion

Many spiritual treatises, such as those of John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila, discuss the spiritual life in terms of progress and / or radical change. Teresa speaks, for instance, of the different rooms of the interior castle, and of how one “progresses” or moves from one room to the next. *Gawain*, in emphasizing a spirituality of imperfection, remains more ambiguous and open-ended, highlighting the spiritual life’s uncertainties, downplaying or even ignoring “spiritual growth.”

We can, nonetheless, discern a patterned outlook to the poet’s spiritual theology. The *Gawain*-poet highlights the cyclical character of nature, as every critic of the work notes. Life and death, growth and decay inhere to this cyclicity. Within this nature-setting, a big green man cuts off the pride of a knight, a pride distinguished by a green girdle, and this penultimate scene occurs at the Green Chapel, which, disappointingly, turns out to be nothing more than a mound of green earth outside the civilized air of Hautdesert in the middle of wild nature.

It seems that every literary critic points out the color green as marking life but also death, for decaying matter often turns green. I would emphasize the former significance—that the green of this story really represents the dead-of-the-winter-green of the “holyn bobbe” the monster brought to the court. It is a green that suggests life in the middle of death and decay, in the midst of winter.

The death and decay in the story is, of course, the state of the soul of our hero. So this spiritual treatise, it seems, argues for the possibility of new life even in the wintry death of too much pride. It is not so simple, however, to find the new life in this journey. An interesting transformation occurs in Gawain by the story's end, as we have discussed. He moves from pride to despair. The ending does not leave him a more humble man, but a more despairing man. It leaves him, as argued, just as proud as before. So maybe this treatise does not tell of one Christian's redemption, but instead examines the nature of sin, and how deep and dirty it can really prove to be. We see Gawain's pride as very strongly embedded.

As Merton comments, despair indicates anything but faith in God. Yet we cannot judge the protagonist too harshly, as the story's end does not take us much beyond the immediate reaction. One can debate forever whether Gawain has learned anything at all. The author specializes in unanswerable questions, and seems to want a story as open-ended, ambiguous, and messy as the spiritual journey itself. The story is not neat and clear-cut. Although *Gawain* does have an ending, the ending really introduces cyclicity again. Rather than bringing closure to Gawain's adventure with a definitive direction for this knight, it invites the notion that things do not ever end, and that this sort of spiritual adventure just happens again and again, and does so within the wider avenue of the rulers and dynasties and histories of England and the world in general. Gawain's pride and despair, mixed with his profound piety and devotion to the Lord, will undoubtedly continue, although never as naively-simple as before.

The poem is a big question, just like life is a big question. The poet leaves everything hanging at the end, just as in life so much is left hanging. We leave so much unfinished, and so many questions remain. As a spiritual treatise that emphasizes human imperfection,

Gawain holds great power because it invites us to ask questions about it that we can also ask of ourselves: Will the hero ever realize the full extent of his sin? Will he ever move past his despair? Will he quit blaming others for his actions? Has Camelot finally grown up? Where do we locate wisdom? Why did such a profound happening occur under such deceitful circumstances? Can we locate God in all of this? Has God abandoned our hero? What is the nature of human sin? It is truly the adventure of *Everywoman* / *Everyman*.

Gawain's journey forces us to think about our own. But many other literary works and movies provoke such thoughts as well. Yet whereas these stories often offer us a solution, this poem challenges us to live with the unanswered questions. The answer is that there is no answer. This is a profoundly Christian message because it issues from the conundrum of sin. The poet's spiritual theology of imperfection states, loudly and clearly, that humans cannot not sin. It is impossible for a human to not be imperfect. The perfect Christian knight, the most elegant courtier, was so handily defeated by a bunch of occasionally disrespectful, deceitful, and not-always-chivalric people who live far away from Camelot. And worse, they did not really have to try all that hard to bring their target down.

Gawain invites us to see that at our very core we cannot do it alone. This mirrors a central theme of Christianity. Know that you have a shadow. Only when we can accept this, what Kurtz and Ketcham in *The Spirituality of Imperfection* term our "creatureliness," can we truly do the most Christian thing, as quaint as it seems: ask for help. This is the one thing Gawain did not do when the situation demanded it. He did it earlier, automatically, out of piety.

Gawain's outburst against women offers us a key to the theme of the spiritual treatise. At that point, he is still not even close to understanding—he is not even close to asking for

help. But his lack of understanding follows not from ignorance anymore, but from pure will. He could understand if he wanted to. His sin has been laid out before him in all its truth, and yet he chooses to point his finger. He locates the sin everywhere but where it actually dwells. We so imperfectly accept our imperfection.

This spiritual treatise advances a traditional Christian anthropology, locating sin in its true place. “Feel sin in its totality,” writes a fourteenth-century religious. Yet the Christian can only say this, without bitterness or despair or finger pointing, when turning to divine love for the solution: “Sin! Sin! Sin! Help! Help! Help!” Despair is thus replaced by hope. Witness the kind of despair we see in Gawain at the end, and we witness Christian atheism. Gawain’s only real hope is God. “It is enough that you should feel moved lovingly by you know not what.”¹ The new life brought about by the Trickster can only grow with Gawain’s assent.

The largest question of all is the last one we will deal with. Where was God in all of this? In the form of the Trickster, or Morgan le Fey? In that case, it is a disappointing theology, for reducing God to a simple Trickster seems too constricting. *Gawain* seems too ambiguous a poem to make things so simple. The poem seems to remain silent on God. Certainly we could believe that a miracle happens when Gawain is lost and, upon praying, comes across Hautdesert. But that appearance seems to have more to do with Morgan’s magic than with miracle.

This is a difficult spiritual treatise, because unlike St. Catherine of Siena or Julian of Norwich, we have no visions or voices of God. Neither do we witness the kind of deep-seated, intuitive “knowing,” the kind of spiritual relationship with God about which Teresa of Avila spoke so convincingly. As in life, we are left to ourselves to contemplate the place of

God in Gawain's journey. Most of us do not have the certainty of God's work and presence that these mystics experience. Most of us seem to hear a thundering silence. Most of us, at some time in our lives, are like Gawain in our despair, rigid piety, and reactive self-defense.

The poet does not speculate on God, or on God's work in all of this, except by inviting us to read between the lines. Just as in life, in other words, we have to do the thinking ourselves in the midst of such silence. The difficulty with this is that we may read into the theology the wrong thing. It sometimes seems that *Gawain* is really about whatever one wants it to be about. Yet the story does address the Christian journey. But it addresses a great many things.

The poet does not give us a clear statement of anything. In this sense, the reader's conclusions tell us more about the reader than about the story; the story acts as a mirror of ourselves. The reader can easily identify with Gawain, the all-too-human-hero who fails to understand his humanity. We all experience a difficult time understanding what it means to be human. We feel despair and act like fools when discovering something about our humanity, just as Gawain does.

Gawain is so diverse, multifaceted and multi-layered, that it deeply and personally engages the reader. It prompts the reader's own thoughts on sin, redemption, Tricksters, and such. Perhaps the only thing we can conclude about the teaching of this poem is that these events—of a perfectionist Christian meeting his imperfection—will surely happen again.

¹ "The Cloud of Unknowing," p. 101.

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