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SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT AS A CHRISTMAS POEM

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The Middle English alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has often been called a Christmas poem, "filled with revelry and holiday celebrations in each of its four fits."¹ But the exploration of the seasonal aspect of *Sir Gawain* has stopped at the surface of the poem; it is regarded as a Christmas tale of the supernatural "on the level of ready and obvious meaning,"² or only "superficially."³ Certainly, the Christmas motif is readily observable in the poem's externals, particularly in its setting and in the person of the Green Knight.

The bulk of the poem (37-497, 750-2479) takes place during the Christmas season. "Dis kyng lay at Camylot vpon Krystmasse" (37) begins the action of the poem; the Green Knight's challenge takes place on New Year's day.⁴ A year later, Gawain arrives at Bertilak's castle on Christmas Eve (734, 767); he remains there to be tested by Lady Bertilak for three days, and answers the Green Knight's challenge on New Year's day (1998). Thus the main elements of the plot occur on the Vigil of Christmas and within

¹ Charles Moorman, "Myth and Medieval Literature: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *MS*, XVIII (1956), 164. Throughout this paper I am indebted to Professors John Leyerle, Florence Ridley, and William Matthews for their critical comments.

² John Gardner, *The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet* (Chicago, 1965), p. 71.

³ Moorman, p. 164.

⁴ This and all further references to and quotations from the poem are from J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, eds., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, rev. by Norman Davis (Oxford, 1967).

its twelve days. Moreover, "in each of the sections, the main action is surrounded and enveloped by a picture of Christmas revelry and courtly life which serves to make the poem an almost continuous Christmas celebration."⁵

The Green Knight exudes the Christmas spirit from the moment he appears. He bears with him the seasonal "holyn bobbe" which "is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare" (205-206). His predominant color, green, is traditionally associated with Christmas; the other Christmas colors, red and gold, appear in his "rede yzen" (304) and in the "bryȝt golde" (159) which trims his apparel and weapon. "Whatever else the Green Knight's colors may mean emblematically, surely green, red, and gold carry here some part of their traditional Christmas burden."⁶ The beheading test is proposed by the Green Knight as a "Crystemas gomen" (282); Arthur associates the challenger's antics with the Christmas plays

⁵ Moorman, p. 164.

⁶ Gardner, p. 82. In case a skeptical reader suspects that Professor Gardner is transferring a recent tradition of colors to a medieval context where it does not belong, it may be pointed out that in the later Middle Ages, as now, holly, which at Christmas is both green and red, was firmly associated with the festivities of that season; that in the second of the Shepherds' Plays in the Towneley Cycle the first shepherd gives the infant Christ not a holly-bob, which would be appropriate to Christmas, but a bob of cherries, which was available in the Corpus Christi season and was also green and red. In all the plays (and elsewhere), the gift of the first of the Magi, Jasper, is gold. In Christmas carols and lyrics there is the same association: the shepherd sitting on the hill (presumably green) saw "a star as rede as blode" and leaves his dog to keep his sheep from the golden corn (Chambers and Sidgwick, *Early English Lyrics*, lxvii); and "Holly and his mery men / Sitt in cheires of gold" (*ibid.*, cxli). *Sir Cleges*, which is but one of several Christmas romances, combines the three colors: Cleges, who has generously distributed his gold, prays in his garden on Christmas day underneath a cherry-tree. At his prayer, the dormant cherry miraculously gives forth green leaf and red fruit. In *The Tail of Rauf Collisar*, another Christmas romance, the same three colors are present in the gold armor of Roland, with its green gules and rubies, and in the feast at Charlemagne's court with its red roof painted with green gules. It would be possible to go on at length; such emphatic coloring might be justification (combined with weather) for arguing that romances like *Awntyrs off Arthure* may also have been Christmas poems. In fact, the approach might also lead to some clarification of the times and occasions when the recitation of romances was most popular.

which took place during the holidays in the fourteenth century?: "Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse, / Laykyng of enterludez, to laze and to syng" (471-472).

Critics who see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a Christmas poem are, therefore, correct. To limit this perception to the "ready and obvious" level of externals, is, however, far from correct, for one of the poet's major accomplishments is to demonstrate the meaning of Christmas to his audience by initiating the members of the Round Table who appear in the poem into that same knowledge. Before the court can be educated, the lack of knowledge which necessitates an education must be shown. The *Gawain*-poet establishes this lack by setting "the perfect courtier in the perfect court,"⁸ and then allowing both courtier and court to discover their need for the grace of Christmas.

Many interpretations of the poem center upon the concern for pride in perfection which it displays.⁹ Thus, the Green Knight

⁷ John A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York, 1966), p. 22. In a brilliant lecture delivered before the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at UCLA on March 5, 1970, some months after the present paper was completed, Professor John Leyerle reaffirmed the game element in *GGK*. His case was cogently argued and strongly supported, and it is indeed true that play and game are dominant throughout the poem. But two things might be excepted against his generalization. One, as Professor Matthews pointed out, that the game is a game for Gawain but for the rest of Arthur's court it is no game at all. The other, that it is highly unlikely that the name of the main gamester, Bertilak (the most probable reading of the MS, cf. *GGK*, 2d ed., p. 128) means "bright game" on the basis of English *berht* and Old Norse *leikr*. Not only is that etymology unlikely on linguistic grounds, but it is almost certainly wrong because the same name appears in the OFr Vulgate cycle as *Bertolais* (which had as its earlier acc. form *Bertolac*), and is translated in the M. E. *Merlin* as *Bertelak*. That is, the provenance of the name is French, not Anglo-Norse. Although R. S. Loomis' suggestion that the name derives from Irish *bachtach* (*Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, N. Y., 1927) has been ruled out of court on linguistic grounds, it still seems probable that the name is Celtic in origin. Roland Smith proposed a hypothetical form, *Bresatach* ("Guin-ganbresil and the Green Knight," *JEGP*, XLV [1946], 1-25): that hypothesis would now need some slight emendation, however; and the emendation may be its destruction.

⁸ Gardner, p. 72.

⁹ A few are George J. Engelhardt, "The Predicament of Gawain," *MLQ*, XVI (1955), 218-225; Richard Hamilton Green, "Gawain's Shield and the

makes the relationship between his tests and the Round Table's reputed perfection in the denouement:

“Ho [Morgan le Fay] wayned me vpon þis wyse to
 your wyne halle
 For to assay the surquidré, 3if hit soth were
 Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table . . .”
 (2456-2458)

Arthur's court and its most illustrious member are tried for their “surquidré,” their pride in their own presumed perfection. As a motivation for the tests, the poet reveals the extent of Gawain's and the court's reputation for and belief in their perfection.

Witness to Gawain's reputation for perfection is borne by three circles of believers: those outside Arthur's court, those within it, and Gawain himself. The poet uses three techniques to establish the universality of belief in Gawain's perfection: description of the working of the characters' minds; giving voice to their sentiments; and portrayal of their actions. The first two are employed in creating the outer circles of Gawain's admirers. The innermost circle, that of Gawain's own ego, relies upon all three.

The outermost circle of characters to whom Gawain's renown has extended are those within another court: Bertilak's retainers, his lady, and Bertilak himself. The poet directly conveys the high regard in which Gawain is held by Bertilak's men:

And alle þe men in þat mote made much joye
 To apere in his presense prestly þat tyme,
 Þat alle prys and prowes and pured þewes
 Apendes to hys persoun, and praysed is euer;
 Byfore alle men vpon molde his mensk is þe most.
 (910-914)

The admiration of these men for Gawain openly established, the poet adopts his second technique, direct voice, which is more complex than the first because of the greater range of tone which may lie behind the words. When Bertilak's men declare, “God hatz geuen vus his grace godly for soþe, / Þat such a gest as Gawan grauntez vus to haue” (920-921), they are simply expressing verbally

the attitude which the poet has already shown to be in their minds. But when Bertilak compliments his guest, "Iwysse sir, quyl I leue, me worþez þe better / Þat Gawayn hatz ben my gest at Goddez awen fest" (1035-1036), the reader cannot know what is actually passing through the host's mind. There is no more reason for the reader to doubt the sincerity of Bertilak's expressed admiration for Gawain than for Gawain himself to do so; for not until the scene at the Green Chapel when Bertilak in his disguise as Green Knight taunts Gawain with his identity do the ironic implications of the first remark become evident: "Þou art not Gawayn . . . þat is so goud halden" (2270). Lady Bertilak's admiration for the perfect courtier undergoes a transformation similar to that of her husband's. When she first confronts Gawain with his reputation, she does so affirmatively, expressing a faith that, since he is Gawain, he will behave in the proper manner (1226, 1292-1293). But her second temptation of the knight foreshadows her husband's taunt by using a negative form to cast doubt on Gawain's identity:

"Sir, 3if 3e be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez,
 Wy3e þat is so wel wrast alway to god,
 And connez not of compaynye þe costez vndertake,
 And if mon kennes yow hom to knowe, 3e kest
 hom of your mynde . . ."

(1481-1484)

Both instances of ironic negation rest on a syllogism:

Major: Gawain is perfect.

Minor: The man I am addressing is not perfect.

Therefore, the man I am addressing is not Gawain.

Both, then, derive their irony from Gawain's reputation for perfection.

The second circle of individuals touched by Gawain's impeccable reputation consists of the other members of Arthur's court. Once again, the *Gawain*-poet uses description of mental attitudes and direct voice to convey a society's opinion of Gawain. The high value placed on him by his fellow-knights is evident in the "care at her hert" as he leaves on his journey to an apparently certain death; they mourn that "so worthé as Wawan schulde wende on þat ernde" (557, 559). Arthur's retainers, like Bertilak's, use no

irony when they voice their admiration for Gawain; their thoughts are known, and words and thoughts coincide:

“Bi Kryst, hit is scape
 Dat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!
 To fynde hys fere vpon folde, in fayth, is not eþe.”

(674-676)

Gawain's belief in his own supposed perfection is never expressed so blatantly. Words, thoughts, and behavior are subtly joined in the poet's portrait of a man believing in his own publicity, a portrait which is not presented to the reader at the outset of the poem, but which is drawn for him as the poem proceeds. Gawain's presence first becomes important in the challenge episode, when he transfers the responsibility of answering the Green Knight from Arthur's shoulders to his own (341-360). His speech in this passage has been cited as a “superlative display of the courtesy for which Camelot is famed,”¹⁰ but a closer examination of the speech reveals it to be what medieval theology termed “false humility.” False humility is self-abasement to the lowest place “done merely as to outward signs and pretense: wherefore this is *false humility*, of which Augustine says in a letter (*Ep.* cxlix) that it is *grievous pride*, since to wit, it would seem to aim at excellence of glory.”¹¹ Gawain's self-abasement is excessive in form: he protests that he is “wakkest,” “of wyt feblest,” and “lest lur of my lyf,” being valued only because of his relationship to Arthur. His humility rings false on two counts. First, it is unnecessarily hyperbolic. To take the adventure from Arthur, Gawain only had to explain that his life was less valuable than that of the king; no reason for his being preferred over the other knights of the Round Table was needed — after all, they were scarcely fighting him for the honor. Secondly, it may be seen from what follows in the poem that Gawain does not believe that he is the weakest or the feeblest of wit; that is, his speech does not accord with his later thoughts and actions.

If Gawain's humility were real, he would not expect perfection of himself; he would not be surprised by his failures in wit or in

¹⁰ Larry Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1965), p. 218.

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York, 1947), p. 1948.

strength of character. Yet, in the third and fourth fits of the poem, both characteristics are challenged and his faith in his abilities is revealed. The challenge to his wit stems from Lady Bertilak; in his verbal duels with her, Gawain fights to maintain his reputation as one in whom "cortaysye is closed so clene" (1298). Twice the knight is described as concerned with succeeding in this respect. In the first instance, when the lady taunts him with his identity, Gawain "ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his castes" (1295). In the second, he must fend off her advances without offending her, "lest crapayn he were" (1773). In both instances, if Gawain did not believe in his own reputation, he would not feel compelled to protect it. In the fourth fit, Gawain's strength of character is shown to be deficient; if he regarded himself as the "wakkest" of Arthur's knights, why should he be shocked by this revelation? But shocked he is, as his actions, words, and thoughts make evident. He behaves like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar, throwing the girdle at the Green Knight and indulging in a temper tantrum (2374-2388). Most telling of all is Gawain's embarrassment at public knowledge of his fault. Before the Green Knight's eyes, "Alle þe blode of his brest blende in his face, / Pat al he schrank for schome þat þe schalk talked" (2371-2372). He acts similarly when confessing his fault to Arthur's court: "Þe blod in his face con melle . . . for schame" (2503-2504). Gawain has admitted once that he was the "wakkest," and it should not shame him to admit it again unless the first time was merely a meaningless ceremony of self-abasement.

The most elaborate sign of Gawain's self-confidence is the "pure pentaungel" (664) which he bears on his shield. The poet makes clear the importance of this heraldic device in his twenty-five line exegesis of the meaning of the pentangle (640-665). His detailed explication of the sign has excited the comment of many critics, who have attempted to assign specific meanings to the various groups of fives into which Gawain's virtues are arranged. These groups have been taken to represent, for example, the natural, religious and chivalric orders of existence,¹² or a knight's religious,

¹² Lass, p. 358.

military, and courtly obligations.¹³ Interpretations, in fact, may be as endless as the knot itself; but the meaning of the pentangle itself is not in doubt. The sign "bytokning of trawþe" (626) represents perfection. The heraldic device on a knight's shield was used to identify the man within the armor. But the poet's explication of Gawain's charge conveys the idea that the pentangle is a means of spiritual identification, emblematic of the character of that knight who is "as golde pured" (633).¹⁴ The adoption of the pentangle as his identifying mark externalizes Gawain's point of view with respect to his own character. "The heraldic charge signifies the character of the hero about to undertake the 'anious viage' which will test his right to the device as it will test the right of the court he represents to its reputation for perfection."¹⁵

The fact that Gawain acts not only as an individual, but also as a representative of Arthur's court, indicates that the lesson in the meaning of Christmas is not only for Gawain, but for the court as well. Once again, the poet creates three circles of characters who encompass the court's reputation. First, the narrator himself describes the court in superlative terms:

De most kyd knyȝtez vnder Krystes seluen,
 And þe louelokkest ladies þat euer lif haden,
 And he þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes . . .

(50-52)

The reaction of Bertilak's men to Gawain's appearance demonstrates that the Round Table's reputation has travelled unimpeded through the wild countryside which nearly kills Gawain (901-905). The most significant member of the second circle is Bertilak, who in his guise of Green Knight makes it clear that he tests Gawain not only as perfect courtier but as representative of the perfect court. His original challenge is not addressed to Gawain in particular, but to any member of Arthur's court who is "so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede, / Þat dar stifly strike a strok for an oþer" (286-287). Gawain offers himself as a substitute for Arthur, who as

¹³ Donald R. Howard, *The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World* (Princeton, 1966), p. 224.

¹⁴ Green, p. 127.

¹⁵ Green, p. 135.

king would be the natural representative of the court (340-360). In the scene at the Green Chapel, the Green Knight offers, in a passage cited above, an explanation of both tests which indicates the importance of the reputation of Arthur's court to the theme:

"Ho [Morgan le Fay] wayned me vpon þis wyse
to your wyne halle
For to assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were
Dat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table . . ."
(2456-2458)

The inner circle of those who reveal a familiarity with the court's reputation is the Round Table itself. As in the case of Gawain, the poet does not directly depict the members' belief in their own perfection. Instead, this characteristic is attributed to the court by the Green Knight:

"What, is þis Arþures hous," quoth þe hāþel þenne,
"Dat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?
Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?"
(309-312)

It has been pointed out that the Green Knight is here charging the court with substituting pride in reputation for perfect knighthood.¹⁶ Arthur's response is one of fury. "He forgets that he is 'the hendest,' and he becomes for the moment *démesuré* and churlish."¹⁷ Whatever else this response may signify, it certainly indicates that Arthur feels the Green Knight's words are a defamation; he accepts the challenge because he must protect the court's famed perfection.

Gawain and the court are therefore tested for a pride in perfection which is, in appearance at least, an article of universal belief. This reputed and assumed perfection is related to the Christmas motif which bulks so large in the poem through the medieval interpretation of the concept of perfection. This interpretation was religious in character and several critics have not hesitated to attribute theological learning to the *Gawain*-poet. He is thought to have been familiar with the *Summa Theologia* of St. Thomas Aquinas.¹⁸ "From

¹⁶ Benson, p. 212.

¹⁷ Benson, p. 215.

¹⁸ Larry Champion, "Grace versus Merit in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *MLQ*, XXVII (December, 1967), 413.

his work it is easy to ascertain that he had very intimate knowledge of the Bible and was also well versed in Biblical commentaries. Whether or not he had an ecclesiastical education is, of course, a matter of debate," but despite the excesses to which exegetical interpretation can carry a critic on occasion, a fair certainty remains that the poet was acquainted with a good measure of patristic and homiletic writings, and was familiar with the trends of religious thought,¹⁹ for the tenets of the Christian faith were more widely known and accepted in the Western world at that time than any religious or philosophical system is now.²⁰ Certainly he would have known the Church's teaching on the two themes which are the concern of the present essay, the concept of perfection, and the meaning of Christmas.

The ideal of perfection accepted by the Church in the Middle Ages is that pronounced by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore be 3ee parfit, as and 3oure heuently fadir is parfit" (Matt. 5:48).²¹ The literal fulfillment of this command is obviously impossible, given the point of view from which human nature was seen in the Middle Ages. At the dawn of human history, the parents of the human race, by preferring their own will to God's, suffered "the loss of those supernatural privileges which had directed man to his supernatural end and enabled him to keep his inferior powers in submission to his reason, a rectitude not natural to a being compounded of soul and body such as man."²² This loss has been transmitted from generation to generation of the descendants of Adam until the end of time.²³ The Fall of Adam thus deprived man of the ability to attain perfection.

The concept of human imperfection as brought on by the sin of Adam and Eve is "closely connected with something very central

¹⁹ Hans Schnyder, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Essay in Interpretation* (Bern, 1961), p. 17.

²⁰ Howard, p. 252.

²¹ Lass, p. 355. This and all further references to and quotations from the Bible are from *The Wycliffite Versions of the Holy Bible*, ed. Josiah Forshall and Frederic Hadden (Oxford, 1850).

²² F. L. Cross, "Original Sin," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London, 1957), p. 994.

²³ Aquinas, p. 952.

to the Christian's profession of his faith: that the Father has sent His Son Jesus as Savior."²⁴ The fact of man's fallen nature necessitated the redemption of humanity by Christ. This connection is specifically made, according to Biblical exegesis, by the "proto-evangelium," the first good news of Christ's coming, which follows on the heels of the Fall (Gen. 3:15): "Y schal sette enemytees bitwixe thee and the womman, and bitwixe thi seed and hir seed; sche schal breke thin heed, and thou schalt sette aspies to hir heel." Christ comes to rescue fallen human nature from the consequences of its imperfection; and His coming to do so takes place on that feast which is emphasized throughout the poem, the feast of Christmas. This is, then, the meaning of Christmas in the Middle Ages: Christ's preservation of mankind from the effects of Original Sin.

The effects of Original Sin as described in Genesis 3:16-19 are three. Two of these, pain of childbirth and hard labor for survival, are irrelevant to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The third curse which falls upon humanity through Adam's sin is, however, universal in its application: "Thou art dust, and thou schalt turne azen to dust." That Christians regarded death as a consequence of Original Sin is apparent from St. Paul's epistle to the Romans 5:12: "Bi o man synne entride into this world, and bi synne deth." Imperfection and death are as inevitable as human nature itself; man's only hope is in Christ, Who mitigates the effect of temporal death with the promise of resurrection, "that as synne regnede in to deth, so grace regne bi ríztwísnesse in to everlastyngge líjf, bi Crist Jhesu oure Lord" (Rom. 5:21).

In two compact statements, the *Gawain*-poet conveys the above interpretation of the meaning of Christmas. First, Gawain rides through the wasteland in search of a castle where he might hear "þe seruyse of þat syre, þat on þat self nyȝt / Of a burde watz borne oure baret to quelle" (751-752). The events of the next day take place "On the morne, as vch mon mynez þat tyme / Þat Dryȝtyn for oure destyné to deȝe watz borne" (995-996).²⁵ In neither

²⁴ C. J. Peter, "Original Sin," *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, X (New York, 1967), p. 777.

²⁵ As was observed by a speaker at the 1969 MLA convention in Denver, the note of mutability and death is sounded at the opening of the poem in the reference to the death of Troy.

case is the poet attributing this interpretation of Christmas to one of his characters. In the first instance, the identification of "pat syre" as Christ occurs in the poet's address to his audience, as may be seen from the possessive adjective "oure" which includes the audience, and from the lack of any indication that the thought is Gawain's. The second instance is simply a part of the setting of the action. The poet's orthodox view on the feast of Christ's coming cannot be applied out of hand to Gawain and the other members of the Round Table.

In fact, Gawain's and the court's view of their own natures would prohibit them from holding the orthodox view of the meaning of Christmas. As indicated earlier, Gawain and the court have a reputation for perfection, a reputation in which they believe. But if such a state of perfection were possible in men — if any men had succeeded in avoiding the effects of Original Sin — they would have no need for Christmas. "According to the Catholic Faith we must firmly believe that, Christ alone excepted, all men descended from Adam contract original sin from him; else all would not need redemption which is through Christ; and this is erroneous."²⁶ Arthur and his court have attempted to establish a secular order which would offer its own redemption; underlying it is "the unconscious assumption that through faithful adherence to the code human perfection is possible."²⁷ In doing so, they have erroneously and unwittingly attempted to eliminate the need for Christ's coming.

The elimination of the need for Christ is unwitting, for Arthur and his knights never consciously desert their position as Christians. Gawain bears Mary's image within his shield; he searches for a place where he may hear Mass; he receives the sacrament of Penance. The court is likewise faithful to the outward observances of religion during Christmastide, but the brevity of the description of those observances indicates their lack of importance in the court's Christmas festivities:

Pe chauntré of þe chapel cheued to an ende
Loude crye watz þer kest of clerkez and oþer,

²⁶ Aquinas, p. 954.

²⁷ Gordon M. Shedd, "Knight in Tarnished Armour: The Meaning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *MLR*, LXII (January, 1967), 11.

Nowel nayted onewe, neuened ful ofte;
 And syþen riche forþ runnen to reche hondeselle
 ʒeʒed ʒeres-ʒiftes on hiʒ, ʒelde hem bi hond,
 Debated busyly aboute þo giftes;
 Ladies laʒed ful loude, þoʒ þay lost haden,
 And he þat wan watz not wrothe, þat may ʒe wel trawe.

(63-70)

Like children, the members of the Round Table show more interest in the gifts and games of Christmas than in its religious significance. The secular redemption of courtly behavior means more to these knights and ladies than Christ's redemption of the human race because they do not recognize their own need for this redemption. A contrast is provided by Hautdesert, where "we get a full description of the 'hersum' Christmas Evensong . . . including the observation that the knights 'seten sobroly samen the servise quyle' (l. 940)."²⁸ There is no lack of gaiety in Bertilak's castle, but the gaiety there follows upon the religious meaning of the feast instead of replacing it.

Gawain and his fellow-members of the Round Table require an education into the meaning of the feast they are celebrating, and the Green Knight is to be the instrument of that education. His "hanselle" (491) is his test of Gawain through which he will demonstrate to knight and court that the effects of Original Sin, the imperfection of humanity and the inevitability of death, cannot be remedied by any mere secular order, but only by the order of Christ. Human imperfection is evident in the failure of the most "fautlest freke þat euer on fote ʒede" (2363) to maintain the secular order's perfection for which he is famed. To save his life, Gawain accepts from Lady Bertilak the supposedly magical girdle, but to appease her must promise "for hir sake, disceuer hit neuer, / Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde" (1862-1863). But earlier, Gawain had made a compact with Bertilak in which he swore "with trawþe" (1108) that he would exchange with the lord whatever he gained during the day. Clearly, Gawain cannot keep both promises; he chooses to sacrifice his "trawþe"; he does not give the girdle to Bertilak. "The essence of courtliness, the flower of civilization stands for one moment naked of all artificial refinements and

²⁸ Moorman, p. 171.

permits the natural man to rise to the surface."²⁹ Natural man is in this case imperfect fallen man; "the exemplar of chivalric virtue is false, treacherous, cowardly, recreant in that 'leuté that longez to kny3tez' (2373-2384)."³⁰ Gawain thus demonstrates his affinity with his ancestor Adam. Both "lakked a lyttel" (2366).

The prospect of death which causes Gawain to exhibit his failings is itself one of the consequences of Original Sin, and when Gawain fails in seeking to avoid this consequence, its universality and inevitability are brought home. Death touches all men, even the "fautlest freke" and the "fayre folk in her first age" whom he represents (54). There is no protection from death in the secular order by which Arthur's court attempts to redeem itself, for there will always be the possibility of a Green Knight riding in to prove to the members of the court that they too are sons of Adam. There is no protection in magic girdles, for the girdle Lady Bertilak presents to Gawain is "no damn good."³¹ When Lady Bertilak offers the girdle to Gawain, she says that

". . . quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,
While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,
Þer is no hapel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myzt,
For he myzt not be slayn for slyzt vpon erþe."

(1851-1854)

It is true that when Gawain submits to the Green Knight, he receives not the expected death-blow but a nick on the neck (2312). But according to the Green Knight, Gawain's continued existence is in spite of the green girdle, not because of it (2343-2357). Gawain lives because the Green Knight is more interested in education than in homicide, and because for Morgan's plot to achieve its purpose there must be a messenger to return to the court with the evidence of Gawain's failure. There is no better man for the job than Gawain himself, whose blushes and groans, more than his words, convey his embarrassed sense of his imperfection and the need by even the best of men for the grace of Christmas.

²⁹ William Goldhurst, "The Green and the Gold: The Major Theme of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *CE*, XX (November, 1958), 63.

³⁰ Green, p. 128.

³¹ Professor William Matthews in lecture.

This interpretation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not a suggestion that the poem be interpreted as a stern moral allegory, with Morgan le Fay as God, the Green Knight as Death, and Gawain as Everyman. On the contrary, the purpose of the test is exactly what the Green Knight claims it to be: to demonstrate to the Round Table that their pride in perfection is mere "surquidré," that even their best knight can fail. In other words, the purpose of the Green Knight's test is to cut Arthur and his knights down to size. But in accomplishing this end, the Green Knight reveals to the court the falsity of its assumption that it can redeem itself by attaining a secular order of perfection. "In effect, Gawain's devious attempts to save himself have been ignominiously exposed as shameful and worthless. Both the scar on his neck . . . and the sash which he now insists upon wearing outwardly as a symbol of his guilt and subsequent repentance . . . betoken his dependence upon an outside force superior to his own for his personal and spiritual safety."³²

As Gawain represented the court in his position as perfect knight, so he represents the court in his failure. Gawain himself does not realize this; he groans and blushes in his public confession as if he were the only man who had ever sinned (2501-2504). Expecting perfection of himself, he suffers when he discovers his own faults. The court, receiving the lesson second-hand, maintains a clearer perspective on the incident. Their laughter echoes that of the Green Knight at his shamefaced victim (2389, 2514), and suggests that they have achieved a point of view similar to his. This suggestion is confirmed when the members of the Round Table agree

Dat lordes and ladis þat longed to þe Table,
 Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
 A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryzt grene,
 And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were.

(2515-2518)

Gawain's confreres "insist upon donning similar green sashes to betoken their gladness and to acknowledge their analogous human condition and dependence upon grace for salvation."³³

³² Champion, pp. 416-417.

³³ Champion, p. 417.

The "renoun" of the Round Table now rests with the sign of the court's imperfect human nature (2519). It is a greater renown than the reputation for perfection because it is not mere "surquidré" but, to medieval eyes, a reflection of a fact about man: all are children of Adam, subject, because of his sin, to the imperfections of sin and death. The joy with which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* closes stems not from a denial of this fact, but from the recognition of it and of God's great Christmas "hondeselle" to fallen man.

APPENDIX BY W. M. Some interesting commentary on the personages in *SGGK* is given by a critic almost contemporary with the poem itself, namely the person who did the illuminations for the poem in the surviving MS. These illuminations are reproduced in the EETS facsimile of Cotton Nero A. x: unfortunately not only are the original illuminations rubbed but the photographs are a little blurred too. For brevity, we may restrict ourselves to the illumination which is most familiar, through its reproduction on the cover and frontispiece of Norman Davis' second edition of Tolkien and Gordon's edition of the poem. There, as is shown in the block of part of the illumination which is given opposite the title of Jean Carriere's essay, the lady wears a dress covered with hearts, carries a mask in her hand, and has her left hand stretched out, touching Gawain's face. On the pillar behind Gawain is a face with a beard: over its head is a circle and on the circle is a line slightly curved. On the bed lies Gawain, naked and defenceless except for the slipping cover; his eyes seem closed, except that his left eyebrow is raised, which may, but very improbably, indicate that he is partly awake. The curtains are so drawn that had it been possible, the artist would have shown them as completely surrounding the bed and the three personages depicted. Now the figure on the pillar is clearly Bertilak, and so in the illuminator's opinion the Green Knight was present during this temptation and presumably the two others. The question is, who was he really, in allegorical and tropological terms. This depends on the circle and its mark over his head. If the mark is a horn (and that is the way it is sharpened in the block to Miss Carriere's essay), then it might be, in Sister Mary Francis Neeson's terms, Old Scratch

himself. That is a tempting proposition, for it is what Gawain himself thought (2191-4).

But it seems quite unlikely for a great many reasons: when the Devil has horns he has two horns, not one; a circle never symbolises Satan so far as I know; usually it represents heaven, a saint, something very holy. The most likely interpretation therefore is that the figure represents God, or Christ. The lady, for similar reasons, must symbolise Eve. And that leaves Gawain as Adam, and the bed with its surrounding curtain as the garden enclosed, Paradise, which Adam lost — “And al was for an appil, an appil þat he tok.” If this seems to make the illuminator a forerunner of some of the wilder new critics, let us look briefly at the text of *SGGK*. After Bertilak has explained the whole business of the temptations (he does not bother to say anything about hunts or the beheading game), Gawain bursts out in a savage attack upon women, and his first example is exactly what the illuminator has seized on:

Bot hit is no ferly þaȝ a fole madde,
 And þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe,
 For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled (2414-6)

Gawain, quite clearly, shared the illuminator's opinion, that his situation and Adam's were on all fours: both had been caught napping by a deceiving female. And as he goes on he reflects the ancient, medieval, and modern male viewpoint, the product of chagrin and folly, that “of all Creatures women be best: *Cuius contrarium verum est.*” As for Bertilak, no one could have his head chopped off and still live, no one could be so gay, courteous, reasonable, pious, joyful about life in all its forms, no one could so completely command a complex situation, be absent and present, act as Gawain's moral judge, bring back to the Round Table the joy they had in “her first age,” “þe hapnest vnder heuen,” and be Old Scratch, for Satan lacks all humor, reason, courtesy, piety, gaiety, and beneficence. In any case, his name, Bertilak de Haut-desert, means Bertilak of the high castle (cf. Davis, *op. cit.* pp. 128-9) and the personal part of the name, whatever its ultimate origin, is translated in *Diu Krône* (c. 1320), as Gansguoter, “wholly good.” Since the high castle could symbolize heaven and the only wholly good person is God, the matter is perfectly clear: the illuminator sticks as closely to the text as Jean Carriere.

And that raises the question of the real source of the central story of *SGGK*. Here we can use Ockham's razor. The poet says he heard the story recited in town, describes it as a stiff and strong story "with lel letteres loken," and says of it that "In londe [it] so has ben longe." Commentators, when they do not scout the statement completely, tend to interpret "lel letteres loken" to mean alliterative verse, although there is no extant record of alliterative verse between the 11th and the mid-14th Century. But Norman Davis, very properly I think, since he works from parallel usages of similar date, takes *in town* to mean in a congregation, and the phrase about loyal letters to mean "embodied in truthful words." Now, the only stiff, strong story that had been long in the land and that could have been heard recited in such a town or congregation is the Bible with its story of the Fall and the Redemption. This is what the Green Knight regards as the only important thing in the story, since he neglects all the rest. All this rest, the gaiety in Arthur's hall, the journey to Hautdesert, the two beheadings, the three hunts, the social and religious activities at Hautdesert, the tripling of the temptation, is the embroidery of a story-teller of genius. Whether one needs to go searching in foreign fields, Irish, Welsh, French, Latin, German, for analogues depends on what one wants to do with them. Comparison of treatments can be richly rewarding; but not so much can be said for the bare recognition of "sources" and analogues. It is in no wise unlikely that the *SGGK* poet had read or heard other versions of the story; it is quite certain he must have heard or read other versions of the beheading story. But it is not necessary to regard him as a graduate student, still less a professor. The Bible provides an abundance of examples of temptations by beautiful ladies, and Gawain's final outburst shows the poet's awareness of them; any minstrel such as the man who composed *SGGK* for some northwestern courtly audience must have been amply familiar not only with its social life and milieu but also with its favorite sports; and as for the beheading game, the ample evidence of a variety of English versions establishes beyond question that it was one of the more familiar folk-stories of the time.