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SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT AND THE CHIVALRIC IDEAL OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
University of Richmond

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

The fourteenth-century alliterative, metrical romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one of the most brilliant examples of medieval verse. In spite of persistent study, scholars have been unable to identify the poet, but the genius of the man is easily realized. The *Gawain*-poet, as he must be called, combines brilliant realism with the fabulous, elements of the Christian ideal with pagan folklore, as the nuances of mood balance on the exactness of wording and description.

Since the poem was first published by Sir Frederick Madden in 1839, it has initiated much discussion and much study. For the most part, the emphasis of nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship has been placed on the interpretation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Unfortunately the question is an elusive one. Critics, hoping to find a clue to the meaning of the poem, have sought to trace the origins of the three basic motifs--the Beheading Game, the Temptation, the Exchange of Winnings themes--through various folklore patterns. Contemporary scholarship has sought to identify the archetypal patterns of the poem. Each element of the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*--the pentangle, the

shield, the colors of green and gold--has been examined for symbolic meaning. Numerous candidates have been proposed as being the counterpart of Sir Gawain or the Green Knight. The concluding motto, "Hony soyt qui mal pence," has led to the suggestion of certain correlations between the poem and the Order of the Garter. In spite of such thorough analysis, critics have yet to agree as to the essential meaning of the poem.

It will be the object of this paper to review the various approaches to the poem and to show that most of the available study and analysis tends to lead to one basic interpretation. The point of common emphasis is that the poet lived in an age which sought to revitalize the ties with England's glorious past. England of the fourteenth century under the direction of Edward III knew many successes on the battlefields through the valour of its armies and leaders. England of the fourteenth century witnessed the founding of a new Round Table and the Order of the Garter. Both organizations harkened to the chivalric code of the ancient Arthur. The England of the fourteenth century evidenced the sophisticated society of a court which had the leisure to cultivate the pleasantries of life and living. Whether the poet knew or thought of the archetypal patterns of which he made use can only be surmised. That the poet incorporated such patterns, coupled with folklore motifs, to create a work which would champion

the chivalric ideal can be readily seen. Whether the poet sought to eulogize a noted fourteenth century hero can only be surmised. That the poet personified the knightly virtues in the most perfect knight of Arthur's court can be readily seen. Whether the poem be definitely identified with the Order of the Garter can only be surmised. That the poem makes use of certain courtly traditions concerned with the founding of a royal order can be readily seen. Viewing the poem in such a way leads to the inevitable conclusion that the poet--regardless of specific personal inferences--had a basic aim, to illustrate how man could and should act in the most difficult of situations. In short, the poet sought to revitalize the chivalric tradition, as a way of life for the fourteenth century, by showing the nobility and significance and strength of such a tradition.

The poem deals with the entry of the Green Knight amidst the Christmas festivities at Camelot. He issues a rather startling challenge--he will accept a blow from a single knight in order to return the blow a year hence. Gawain is the only knight who steps forward and begs Arthur's permission to accept the challenge. Permission is granted and Gawain proceeds to behead the Green Knight who--in knightly fashion--picks up his head and leaves with the instruction that Gawain will find him at the Green Chapel the next New Year's day.

Activities of the year are dealt with in a minimum of detail until All Hallow's Eve as Gawain prepares to seek the Green Chapel. His search leads him through dangerous forests and bouts with fantastic creatures and the wintry elements. In desperation, Gawain prays to the Virgin for aid. His prayer is immediately answered when he finds Bercilak's castle ahead. Gawain reaches the castle with its warmth and comfort on Christmas Eve. He is welcomed and enjoys the holiday festivities and the hospitality of Bercilak and his wife. Later in the week, Bercilak proposes a game wherein he will hunt for three days while Gawain rests at the castle. Each evening the two will exchange any "prizes" taken during the day.

The first day of hunting finds Bercilak chasing a stag and Gawain hunted by the lady of the household. In response to the hostess's overtures, Gawain offers a kiss. At day's end Bercilak and Gawain exchange the stag and the kiss. The hunts of the second day result in the exchange of a boar from Bercilak and two kisses from Gawain. The third day's hunt brings complication. Bercilak hunts and kills a fox and is unhappy over the ignoble kill. Gawain not only accepts three kisses from Bercilak's wife but also accepts a girdle or lace which has certain life-saving powers. That evening Gawain receives the fox and offers the three kisses; he says nothing of the girdle since he has

hidden it for his own use.

The next day, New Year's day, Gawain leaves for the Green Chapel. His guide tries to persuade Gawain to flee; Gawain, of course, refuses. The Chapel is reached, but it is only a clearing in the wood rather than a church or chapel. The Green Knight appears and feints with his ax twice before finally nicking Gawain in the neck.

After the third stroke Gawain leaps to his defense; it is then that the Green Knight reveals himself as Bercilak. He further explains that he has been a vehicle of Morgan le Fay to test Arthur's court. The tests offered by Bercilak's wife had been made toward Gawain at Bercilak's insistence as the girdle had been given Gawain with Bercilak's knowledge.

Gawain is most grieved when he realizes his broken vow and pledges that he will always wear the girdle as a remembrance of his shame. He returns to Camelot and explains to Arthur the badge of shame. Arthur sees strength in Gawain's quest and nobility in Gawain's failure and asks all of the knights to wear the same badge to make it a badge of honor.

This brief summary in no way gives evidence of the brilliant descriptive passages or of the delicate balance of imagery and action achieved by the creative genius of the unnamed poet. The following pages will attempt to show how the poet shaped his numerous resources to present a

poem vital and alive with themes, symbolism, and characteri-
zation directed to the revitalization of the chivalric ideal.

CHAPTER II

ORIGINS OF THE POEM

There can be little doubt, in light of modern criticism, that the Gawain-poet followed the pattern of his times and borrowed heavily from other sources for his themes, his motifs, and his story. Because of the extended work of Loomis and Kittredge, agreement has been reached concerning the Celtic origins of the poem.

The poem revolves about three basic themes, the "Beheading Game" and the "Temptation," both of which are deeply rooted in Celtic tradition, and the "Exchange of Winnings" theme, of Latin origin. It is understood that these themes originated in distinctly separate and unrelated stories. Whether the Gawain-poet derived his themes from a single French source or from several different sources, remains a point of conjecture.[1]

The Beheading Game has been traced to an Irish manuscript of 1106. There the love triangle of Cuchulain, Blathnat, Curio foreshadows the Gawain, Bercilak's wife, Bercilak triangle.[2] In the "Terror" version a number of correlations

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[1] Laura Alandis Hibbard, Adventures in the Middle Ages: A Memorial Collection of Essays (New York, 1962), p. 303.

[2] Alice Buchanan, "The Irish Framework of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, XLVII (1932), 316.

with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be made. In both versions the challenger is anxious to submit to the stroke of an ax on the condition that he be able to return the blow. The bargain is completed in both versions in a wild, uninhabited area. Each hero is guided to the meeting place by his host. Each challenger lowers the ax three times, and in each episode the host and the challenger are revealed to be the same individual.[3]

Throughout the "Visit to Curio's Castle" in *Bricius' Feast* comparisons may be made with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In each may be found the "Temptation" theme. In each work the host's wife greets her guests with familiarity and cordiality. In each poem the purpose of the visit is that of a test which is arranged--in the *Bricius' Feast* through the connivance of Curio and Blathnat--as it is done in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by Bercilak and his wife. In the Irish work three heroes are tested during the host's absence, much as Gawain is tested three times. The parallel here, of course, is in the fact that there are three tests.[4]

In "The Death of Curio" in *Bricius' Feast*, Cuchulain must wait a year, as does Gawain, before answering the challenge.

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[3] *Ibid*., p. 317.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 325.

Both heroes must seek the challenger since his location is unknown. The heroes must go to a "Terror" or "Shape Shifter" who then proposes the head-cutting test. The way to the "Terror" is found through the visit to the host's home, and both challengers feint with their axes three times.[5] In both poems much stress is laid on the description of clothing. The challenger of the Irish poem is dressed in grey and rides a grey horse. The Green Knight not only is dressed in green and rides a green horse, but also has green flesh and green hair. The grey and green present little problem since grey in Irish often means green. It is therefore logical to say that "The pattern of the old story . . . can be distinctly traced in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and the modifications can be explained."[6] According to Hibbard, "When this legend passed out of Ireland, it lost its most primitive and savage elements, and, somewhat rationalized and simplified, it passed eventually into several Arthurian romances."[7]

Minor Celtic elements reflected in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight appear in the use of the girdle and the pentangle. The girdle, also referred to as a lace or belt, appears in

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[5]Hibbard, op. cit., p. 298.

[6]Buchanan, op. cit., pp. 325-327.

[7]Hibbard, op. cit., p. 296.

The Violent Death of Curio, and The Cattle Raid of Cooley.[8] While the pentangle as a part of Arthurian heraldry is found only in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, its use as a Christian symbol was well-known. The pentangle appears on the Carmelite Priory of Aberdeen and is found in the illumination of the Tiptoft Missal which was copied into English about 1325. The number five as a Christiah number is evidenced through John of Gaunt's request for his funeral arrangements: "en l'onur des cink plaies principalx nostre seigneur Jesu . . . ."[9]

The name "Bercilak" is also a possible tie with Celtic tradition. It seems that the name is actually a portmanteau of the Celtic "Guingambresil," from the Celtic Acallamh ná Senorach. In this poem the hero Ban is described as: "mac Bresail bratuaine" or the "green-mantled son of Bresal" (l. 1391). This indicates, certainly, possible evidence of the Irish source providing a green knight. The argument gains impetus when it is realized that the "ach" suffix is common in the Irish and Celtic languages. Thus "Bresalak" meaning "contentious" is derived from the Irish "Bresal."

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[8] Roger Sherman Loomis, "More Celtic Elements in Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP, XLII (1943), 152.

[9] Ibid., pp. 167- 168.

Supported by such a possibility, Roland Smith has said: "All signs point to written transmission of Irish names and the evolution is due to scribal misreading."[10]

Another possible solution is that the challenger in the "Champion's Bargain" is called "Bachlah" meaning "churl." According to Hibbard the challenger in _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ "plays the _same role_, is the _same character_ as the challenger in the 'Champion's Bargain.'" It is thus reasonable to assume that the Irish common noun survived in the English name.[11]

Another of the early sources which may have been available to the _Gawain_-poet is in the _Livre de Caradoc_. This earliest known version of the challenge or "Beheading Game" presents the closest correlation to _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_.[12] Both poems transform the court of Ulster to that of Arthur and refer to his custom of delaying the feast until a marvel has occurred. The queen is present in both poems and the challenger is well described as he comes riding into the hall. Both challengers, dressed in green, offer a combination of merriment, beauty, and

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[10] Robert M. Smith, "Guinganbresil and _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_," _JEGP_, XLV (1946), 2-19.

[11] Hibbard, _op. cit._, p. 297.

[12] _Ibid._, p. 296.

menace. Each prefaces his challenge with praise for Arthur.[13] In each poem the challenger taunts the court for its hesitance in accepting the challenge. On this point of the green knights' ridicule, both poems elaborate on the Ulster version. The acceptance is made by a single hero who calls himself Arthur's nephew and the most foolish of knights. Both courts agree that anyone accepting the challenge is quite mad, and at the heroes' departure to answer the anniversary challenge, there is a feeling of woe and grief.[14] The return blow in both cases is a light one, and as the hero fulfills the bargain, he is praised by the challenger. This attitude can be explained since both challengers are closely related to the heroes. In _Caradoc_ the hero's father is the challenger while in _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ Morgan le Fay, the prime motivator of challenge, is Gawain's aunt.[15] Faced with such correlations, it is suggested that the _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ and the _Livre de Caradoc_

> were individual versions of a lost French story . . . for only thus could those Irish features which are found exclusively in one poem or the other be accounted for.[16]

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[13] Larry D. Benson, "The Source of the Beheading Episode in _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_," _MP_, LIX (1961), 3.

[14] Hibbard, _op. cit._, pp. 296-297.

[15] Benson, _op. cit._, pp. 7-9.

[16] Hibbard, _op. cit._, p. 297.

The temptation theme has been traced to Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's Lanzelet, translated from the Anglo-Norman in 1194. In this work the host's daughter tempts three knights on three successive evenings. Here the young temptress sits beside each knight's bed, waits for him to awaken, and later offers him a gift--a gold ring. Although her proposals are frank and urgent, the daughter is rejected. She, like Bercilak's wife, is a youthful, attractive, generous hostess. Her father, Galandriez, resembles Bercilak in that he is a human figure and, while playing the host, suggests little of the supernatural. He challenges Lanzelet to a contest where each will throw knives at the other. This poem provides, according to Hibbard, the "earliest instance of the combination of the Challenge theme with that of Temptation."[17] However, it should be noted that in the Lanzelet no mention is made of the host's and wife's collaboration against the hero.

Morgan le Fay enters the poem in the Vulgate Lancelot. She tries, in this work, three times to seduce the hero. Her attempts are in vain so she then sends her daughter to repeat the overtures toward the recumbant knight. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight echoes this situation through the effective contrast drawn between the aged Morgan and the young temptress who is perhaps Morgan's other self; in both

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[17] Ibid., p. 300.

poems Morgan could be called the "prime mover of the plot, and the agent of temptation."[18] It should be remembered that never does the *Gawain*-poet indicate that the host and hostess are morally responsible for their actions. Both Bercilak and his wife seem to be vehicles for the powers of the vicious Morgan. Apparently her magic and vindictiveness are explanation enough, with the result that Gawain and his host are able to separate on a friendly basis.[19]

The earliest evidence of the temptation theme resembling that of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is that found in the eleventh century "Mabinoge" of *Pwyll*. The rather broad similarity in this Welsh poem is found in Arawn, a huntsman, who also poses as an Otherworld King. It is said that

> Arawn hunts with fairy hounds, wears grey wool, and engages in annual combats with Havgan (Summer-Winter)--an apparent reminiscence of the strife of summer and winter.[20]

He has his wife tempt Pwyll in order to test the latter's chastity; a year later Pwyll battles a supernatural enemy at a river crossing. Hibbard summarizes the correlations

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[18] *Ibid.*, p. 301.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 302.

in these poems by saying:

> The differences in Pwyll and GGK forbid any though[t] of direct literary connexion . . . . Undeniably Pwyll offers the oldest example of a traditional story pattern in which carnal temptation, whether passively or actively offered, and a Hospitable Host who constrains wife or daughter to tempt a guest, are recurrant themes.[21]

The "Exchange of Winnings" motif is possibly derived from a medieval Latin poem Miles Gloriosus. In this work a poor knight and a rich citizen are friends. The citizen's wife becomes the knight's mistress; she, in turn, steals her husband's treasure and gives it to the knight. This twelth century fabliaux shows the citizen driven from his home while the knight thrives in his newly established security.[22]

Other sources which were available to the Gawain-poet were numerous myths and archetypal patterns. Whether these motifs were used purposely by the poet can be only surmised. However, certain patterns such as the vegetation myth have been traced through Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Critics have yet to agree, however, to the role of this myth in the poem. Although Hibbard argues that since the Green

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., pp. 303-304.

Knight and Bercilak "have only mid-winter associations, their greenness . . . can hardly be due to vegetable traits," other critics argue for the vegetation myth influence.[23] Nitze derives "the challenge from vegetation ritual or myth."[24] Speirs argues that the ritual underlying the story and "the poet's belief in its value as myth [are] what gives the poem its life."[25]

Francis Berry offers, possibly, the most valid approach by saying that the poet's awareness of

> the generic forces of life . . . realizes itself in the image of the Green Knight. . . . He [Gawain-poet] testifies to an assumption that moral behavior . . . is subservient to and dependent on the same original patterns.[26]

It is in the French Perlesvaus that the most obvious tie with vegetation ritual can be found. Here the theme is a part of the wasteland motif, and Lancelot--as the first

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[23]Ibid., p. 299.

[24]W. A. Nitze, "Is the Green Knight Story a Vegetation Myth?" MP, XXXIII (1936), 354.

[25]John Speirs, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Scrutiny, XVI (1949) 274.

[26]Francis Berry, The Age of Chaucer (New York, 1944), p. 157.

knight to keep the covenant--enables the city to be repeopled. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight deals with the cyclic, annual pattern in the beheading (death) and life of the Green Knight as well as with Gawain's facing of death to save others at Arthur's court. The poem takes place during winter, the death season, and also during Christmas which has ever represented the time of birth and salvation. The chapel scene is barren and the nearby mound has an opening at either end, possibly to indicate the 'womb, tomb' nature of earth.

> Hit hade a hole on þe ende and on
> ayþer syde,
> And ouergrowen with gresse in glodes
> aywhere . . . .
> (ll. 2180-2181) [27]

To pursue the myth pattern or archetypal study of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it is necessary to follow this theme into other areas. Both in Sioux myth and in Vedic tradition stories abound concerning monsters with severed heads. The head, in these cases, bounces away to become the sun--itself a life-giving source. The separation theme, as such, occurs in the separation of heaven and earth, the mortal and the immortal, and countless other examples. The sacrificial death usually makes possible the

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[27]All quotations from the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight come from the J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Oxford, 1925).

release of prisoners or more often imprisoned, life-giving water. In the Vedic myth Indra, the hero, severs the head of Namuci or Pharoah who will not release the flood waters or the people in bondage. Through the sacrificed king, the people and waters are freed and the wasteland becomes again repopulated.[28]

Following this tradition into Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it is significant that Arthur and his court cannot eat until some miracle or feat has been performed.

> And also an oþer maner meued him eke
> Þat he þurȝ nobelay had nomen, he wolde neuer ete
> Vpon such a dere day, er hym deuised were
> Of sum auenturus þyng an vncouþe tale,
> Of sum mayn meruayle, þat he myȝt trawe,
> Of alderes, of armes, of oþer auenturus . . . .
> (ll. 90-95)

Later Gawain must go into the wilderness to face his enemy, and when he passes the test, he is made whole and set free again. Such correspondences have led to the possible conclusion that

> . . . the romances repose eventually not upon a poet's imagination, but upon the ruins of an august and ancient ritual, a ritual which once claimed to be the accredited guardian of the deepest secrets of life.[29]

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[28] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Indra and Namuci," Speculum, XIX (1944), 104-109.

[29] Ibid., p. 125.

It is easy to see in Gawain the image of the sacrificial lamb as he willingly takes upon himself the quest which any of Arthur's court could have accepted--but did not. Friedman believes that Morgan le Fay sent Bercilak to Camelot to "purge and heal the court of its moral corruptness . . . through Morgan le Fay's plan the beheading episode is no less an apotheosization of chastity . . . ."[30] These traditional patterns found in _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ have yet to be thoroughly identified and traced through the poem. But they do offer an interesting approach to the text.

It is safer, however, to interpret the poem in light of what is known about the fourteenth century--its events and traditions--which could have positive influence on the _Gawain_-poet.[31]

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[30]Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan Le Fay in _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_," _Speculum_, XXXV (1960), 264.

[31]For correlations between _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ and earlier works see Appendix I, p. 86.

CHAPTER III

CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES

Like most authors and poets, the _Gawain_-poet seems to have been greatly influenced by contemporary attitudes and happenings. Whether his intent was to honor the Round Table of Edward III, or to honor some now forgotten hero, or to commemorate the founding of the Order of the Garter, or to stimulate lagging interests in the fading courtly traditions remains elusive in spite of energetic, scholarly pursuit. At the present time it is possible to interpret the poem in a number of ways--and to pursue that interpretation thoroughly. But until more conclusive evidence is uncovered, it remains for us to continue speculation and examination of what is known of the contemporary situation--ever correlating _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ with the possible intent of the poet himself.

The poem deals rather clearly with the ideals which were at the very base of knighthood--refined love and loyalty. As Gawain accepts the challenge, "I beseche now with saȝeȝ sene/ Þis melly mot be myne," (ll. 341-342) and is tempted by Bercilak's wife, much of his reaction is prompted in the first incident by his love and loyalty to Arthur, and in the second incident, he is constantly aware that he is Bercilak's guest. In both situations, Gawain reacts with

dignity and courtesy. In so doing he becomes the embodiment of the perfect knight.

> Fyrst he watȝ funden fautleȝ in his fyue
> wytteȝ,
> And efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue
> fyngres,
> And alle his afyaunce upon folde watȝ in
> þe fyue wounde
> Þat Cryst kaȝt on þe croys, as þe crede
> telleȝ:
> (ll. 640-643)

The poem begins and ends in the most colorful, most glorious center of English history--the court of King Arthur. What better choice could be made if the author sought to revitalize, through Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the patriotic fervor of his countrymen.

In order to present more convincingly and more realistically the chivalric ideal, it is conceivable that the Gawain-poet patterned his hero after one of the outstanding heroes of the fourteenth century. Henry Savage believes such a knight to be Enguerrand de Coucy. Coucy, like Gawain, journeyed into a far country to fulfill a feudal obligation. Through the victories of Edward III, Charles V of France was forced to concede to the victor numerous hostages; Coucy was of that number. During his stay in England Coucy married Isabella, eldest daughter of Edward III. His marriage freed him of the responsibilities of a hostage. Since he found great favor with Edward III, Coucy was given numerous

landholdings which had been earlier confiscated from some of his ancestors in England. These holdings were, for the major part, in Lancashire, the suggested home of the Gawain-poet.

Shortly after his marriage, Coucy was admitted to the select society of the Order of the Garter even though he was still technically in the service of Charles V of France. As a result Coucy was placed in an equivocal position, as Gawain was. While Gawain was a guest of Bercilak and owed his host loyalty and allegiance, he was tempted by his host's wife. Gawain was thus faced with the situation of betraying the host to appease the wife or appeasing the wife and betraying his host. In either solution, he must break his knightly oath. The situation is both false and impossible.

Coucy maintained such a position from 1363-1377. In 1377 while in France, he decided to reject his wife and his English alliance. Isabella returned to England in grief and humility.[1] Coucy sent to Richard II, now, king,

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[1] A couplet, written in a different hand above the Cotton Nero A X manuscript, could easily allude to the distresses suffered by Isabella de Coucy, Countess of Bedford. The couplet indicates certain sympathy as it says:

> My minde is mukel on þat wil me noȝt amende
> Sum time was trewe as stone and from scham
> couþe hir defende

Henry Savage, The Gawain Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background (Chapel Hill, 1956), p. 212.

his resignation from the Order of the Garter and released his claim on his English landholdings. A short while later, a new order, L'Ordre de la Couronne, was established in France either to honor Coucy or at his insistence. The order created by Arthur at the end of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was established in honor of Gawain upon the completion of his quest.

> Þe kyng comfortez þe knyȝt . . . and
> luflyly acorden
> Þat lordes and ladis 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.
>
> (ll. 2513-2518)

The following lines, which may describe Gawain's colors, possibly allude to the Coucy arms which were six bars of gules and vair (ver):

> Sone as he on hent, and happed þerinne,
> Þat sete on hym semly wyth saylande skyrtez,
> Þe ver by his uisage verayly hit semed
> Welnez to vche haþel, alle on hwes,
> Lowande and lufly alle his lymmez vnder,
> Þat a comloker knyȝt neuer Kryst made hem
> þoȝt.
>
> (ll. 864-869)

Gawain's colors include vair (ver, l. 866) or tincture of white. The ver has caused much confusion in translation

and perhaps it means, as Savage indicates, that Gawain "was wearing a robe of alternate bands of vair and gules, and that there were six of these bands."[2]

A battle cry is alluded to in the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and it seems that Coucy had several such battle cries. His best known was: "Notre-Dame au seignieur de Coucy."[3] Gawain also appealed to the Virgin in moments of duress, for he had an image of the Virgin painted inside of his shield so that he might gain inspiration through her visage.

> Þat alle his fernes he feng at þe fyue
>   joyeȝ
> Þat þe hende heuen quene had of hir chylde;
> At þis cause þe knyȝt comlyche hade
> In þe more half of his schelde hir ymage
>   depaynted,
> Þat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer
>   paryed.
>   (ll. 646-650)
>
> . . . .
>
> And þerfore sykyng he sayde, I beseche þe,
>   lorde,
> And Mary, þat is myldest moder so dere,
> Of sum herber þer heȝly I myȝt here masse. . . .
>   (ll. 753-755)

Thus immediately can be seen several basic correlations

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[2] Ibid., p. 186.

[3] Ibid., p. 116.

between the romance, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and the reality of the life of Enguerrand de Coucy: the rejection of the lady, the infraction of an oath, the foundation of a new order of chivalry, and the similarities in colors and oaths.

Savage involves the Pentangle in his treatment of the Coucy-Gawain correlation. In 1351 Jean le Bon of France established the Ordre de l'Etoile, perhaps in opposition to the English Order of the Garter. The French order sought also to revive the Round Table idea and invoked the guidance of St. George, the Virgin, and the Lady of the Fleur-de-lis. One feast day was held on January 6, 1352, the Feast of the Three Kings. The costume of this group included a red mantle, furred with vair, over a white surcoat. On the shoulder of the mantle was a white star clasp. The star worn by a knight was white (argent); that worn by the king was gold. The device of a gold star on red became the device of the French kings. Although the order under Charles V collapsed through lack of his support and interest, the star was continued as an honored decoration. It was possibly granted to Coucy in 1358 shortly before he became an English hostage.[4] It should be remembered that the gold star on red was borne on Gawain's shield:

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[4] Ibid., pp. 161-163.

> Þe apparayl of þe payttrure and of þe
> proude skyrtez . . .
> And al watz rayled on red ryche golde
> naylez . . . .
> (ll. 601-603)

and:

> Then þay schewed hym þe schelde, þat was
> of schyr goulez
> Wyth þe pentangel depaynt of pure golde hwez.
> (ll. 619-620)

Since it is generally accepted that the *Gawain*-poet spent much of his life in the Northwest Midland area, and that the dialect of the poem is of this area, it is entirely possible that the poet lived in one of the two larger estates of this section--the home of Coucy or his brother-in-law John of Gaunt. These were the only two knights of the Garter in the Northwest Midlands. In either household Coucy, even after his return to France, was held in esteem. He had always been a favorite of John of Gaunt. Philippa, the daughter of Isabella and Coucy, had been very close to her father and after her mother's death enjoyed a reunion with the famous Coucy. Such a poem as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which possibly honored Enguerrand de Coucy and viewed sympathetically the position in which he had been placed, would have been welcomed in either household.[5]

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[5]*Ibid.*, pp. 211-213.

CHAPTER IV

INFLUENCES OF THE ORDER OF THE GARTER

The motto of the Order of the Garter "Hony soyt qui mal pence," which appears at the end of the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, has initiated much speculation as to the poem's relation to the Order, because the motto, written in a later hand than that of the rest of the manuscript, was added to the poem as an obvious attempt by either the poet or the copyist to relate the poem to the Order of the Garter.[1] The parallels in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Order of the Garter, suggests Jackson, are "too close to be accidental."[2]

Edward III in 1344, in an attempt to revitalize fading courtly traditions, sought to honor many of his outstanding knights and so re-established the Round Table. So great was his interest that he called some three hundred knights to take their vows on sacred relics and to swear to uphold the order. This assembly was called on Whitsunday, a feast day in the Arthurian tradition. From this rather unwieldy group came, some four years later,

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[1] Savage, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

[2] I. Jackson, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Anglia*, XXXVII (1913), 399.

the more select, more secret Order of the Garter. This group, it is understood, was not subject to English Common Law. It is difficult to specify particulars of the Order of the Garter since, according to Garrett, the Order's "records before the time of Henry V have mysteriously disappeared."[3]

The vestment of the order included cloak, hood, surcoat and garter. Generally the order was known as the Blue Order for the predominant color of its costume; however, the colors of the garments changed yearly.[4] Correlation between the Order of the Garter costume and that worn by Gawain can be seen in the following lines:

> He were a bleaunt of blwe þat bradde to
> þe erthe,
> His surkot semed hym wel þat softe watʒ
> ferred,
> And his hode of þat ilke henged on his
> schulder
> Blande al of blaunner were boþe al aboute.
>
> (ll. 1928-1931)

The green girdle of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight possibly equals the collar of which the ornaments and long braid

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[3]Robert Max Garrett, "The Lay of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP, XXIV (1925), 125-126.

[4]Oscar Cargill and Margaret Schlauch, "The Pearl and Its Jeweler," PMLA, XLIII (1928), 119.

became a feature of the Garter costume.[5] According to Loomis such girdles or belts or laces were often worn as a baldric over the shoulder.[6]

Since the Order of the Garter's early records are few, many of the ancient symbols--including the garter itself--have lost their meaning. G. Beltz, the historian of the Order of the Garter, believes that the garter may have been intended as an emblem

> of the tie or union of warlike qualities to be employed in assertion of the Founder's [Edward III] claim to the French crown; and the motto as a retort of shame upon him who should think ill of the enterprise, or of those whom the king had chosen to be the instruments of its accomplishment . . . . The tastes of that age for allegorical conceits, impresses, and devices, may reasonably warrant such a conclusion.[7]

The garter, worn on the left leg, according to Savage, "symbolized the bond which united him [the knight] with his fellow members in support of the royal claim to the throne of France."[8]

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[5] Ibid., p. 120.

[6] Loomis, op, cit., p. 151.

[7] Savage, op. cit., p. 155.

[8] Ibid., p. 104.

A more colorful version of the origins of the Order of the Garter has been generally disregarded as having any pertinent significance to the organization. In that story Edward III gallantly recovered the lost garter of the Countess of Salisbury and then placed the garter on his arm. To prevent any embarrassment to the Countess he acclaimed: "Hony soit qui mal pence." Edward later gave symbolic garters to his friends, and so--according to tradition--established the Order of the Garter.[9]

Gawain returns to Arthur's court and discusses his wearing of the girdle or baldric by saying:

> Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek . . .
> Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tanne inne,
> And I mot nedeȝ hit were wyle I may laste. . . .
>
> (11. 2506-2509)

If the "bende" passed across the shoulder, it could reflect the well-known "bend of shame" as it is represented in English heraldry. Since the bend of shame was adopted as a badge of honor by other members of the order, the motto, "Hony soit qui mal pence," gains more significance and meaning.[10]

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[9] _Ibid._, p. 156.

[10] Jackson, _op_. _cit_., p. 418.

It is known that the Order of the Garter invoked St. George as its patron and that the fifteen days of the Garter festivities equal that fifteen-day feast held by Arthur at Camelot. In the St. George legend there is certain correspondence with _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_. St. George beheads a dragon as Gawain beheaded the Green Knight. St. George requests the lady in attendance to pass a girdle around the waist of the dragon to render it harmless in much the same way that the green girdle renders the ax harmless. Although the story may not be a source for _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_, it does have certain similarities to the poem and establishes the possibility of the poem as a Garter poem.[11]

It is generally agreed that the Order of the Garter was established in 1348.[12] Perhaps the youthful appearance of the knights surrounding Arthur reflects the infancy of the organization. The Green Knight calls Arthur's knights "berdleȝ chylder" (l. 280), and Gawain claims to be the weakest of all. This portrait, of course, varies from the traditional portrayal of the strong and powerful Gawain.

If _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ is a Garter poem, there is reason to believe that many of the trials through

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[11] Cargill and Schlauch, _op. cit._, p. 120.

[12] Savage, _op. cit._, p. 145.

which Gawain must pass should be equated with initiation rituals which usually accompany membership in a secret order. It is therefore easier to understand and to interpret some of the actions of the Green Knight. For instance, the Green Knight's ax is decorated so as to suggest an instrument of initiation.

> Wyth tryed tasseleȝ þerto tacched innoghe
> On botounȝ of þe bryȝt grene broden ful riche.
>
> (ll. 219-220)

The Green Knight sets the return bout a year and a day from the first beheading scene. This is, perhaps, reminiscent of the periods of "good conduct" often required of an initiate before he is granted full privileges in a secret order. The chastity tests to which Gawain must submit as well as those tests of loyalty and fidelity complete the year's period for the initiate. The pentangle, representative of the five knightly virtues, becomes a fitting symbol of perfection which Gawain must prove worthy to carry. Finally, the three ineffectual strokes of the Green Knight's ax are echoic of the dubbing of the novice in the knighting service. Pointing out these correlations, Cargill suggests that "the point to be noted is the obvious connections of the poem with some secret order."[13] *

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[13] Cargill and Schlauch, op. cit., p. 119.

* For complete listing of orders founded in the late fourteenth century see Appendix II, p. 87.

CHAPTER V

THEMES

Upon reviewing the themes of the poem, there seems to be little doubt that the Gawain-poet used mythological and archetypal patterns, Celtic and Irish traditions to create a poem designed to arouse patriotic interest in the revival of the chivalric tradition. It is only reasonable that such a revival would be stimulated by King Edward III and his newly-established Round Table and the later Order of the Garter. Any poem dealing in the courtly tradition in general and one of the orders specifically was very likely to find a receptive audience.

It is entirely possible that the Gawain-poet, in light of the chivalric interest, created a work to show how the best of knights would react in the worst of situations. A real knight, Gawain, is pitted against the fabulous, the Green Knight and Morgan le Fay. The opening challenge of the Green Knight

> Forþy I craue in þis court a Crystemas gomen,
> For hit is ȝol and Nwe ȝer, and here ar ȝep móny:
> If any so hardy in þis hous holdeȝ hymseluen,
> Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
> Þat dar stifly strike a strok for an oþer. . . ,
>
> (ll. 283-287)

tests Gawain's loyalty to Arthur. Although Gawain admits to being the "wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest" (l. 354) of all the assembled knights, he alone stands beside his lord and meets the challenge of the Green Knight. Through his acceptance of the challenge, Gawain sets, perhaps, the theme of the poem and summarizes the author's intent. Gawain reacts in the way that all men should in facing the impossible:

> Quat schuld I wonde?
> Of destinés derf and dere
> What may mon do bot fonde?
> (ll. 563-565)

A year later, as Gawain goes to meet the Challenger, he faces the hostile elements of winter alone save for his horse Gringolet.

> Þe gome vpon Gryngolet glydeȝ hem vnder,
> Þurȝ mony misy and myre, mon al hym one. . . .
> (ll. 748-749)

There is nothing about Gringolet which makes him anything more than a noble beast. There is nothing of the fabulous about him. But Gawain, the fine equestrian, treats Gringolet as the excellent knight should and sees to the steed's comfort before seeking his own comfort.

> Sere seggeȝ hym sesed by sadel, quel
> he lyȝt,

> And syþen stabeled his sted stif men
> innoȝe.
> Knyȝteȝ and swyereȝ comen doun þenne
> For to bryng þis burne wyth blys into
> halle. . . .
>
> (ll. 822-825)

The love test wrought through Bercilak's wife again places Gawain in a real situation. Three times he faces the test of chastity; three times he refutes the challenge. Through his acceptance of the girdle, the poet makes Gawain intensely human. He presents a man who realizes that he faces certain death, and sees in the girdle a chance to survive the coming match. Would any man do less?

It is to be remembered that Gawain, throughout the Arthurian material, has been associated with the solar deities. His strength is said to wax and wane with the strength of the sun. But in _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ there is _nothing_ which indicates that Gawain is more than man. He is, rather, the embodiment of all that man should be. One critic suggests that Gawain is

> the ideal feudal Christian knight who not only represents the very highest reaches of human behavior but who also holds out for our evaluation those qualities in a man which his age, and the feudal age at large, admired most.[1]

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[1]Alan M. Markman, "The Meaning of _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_," _PMLA_, LXXII (1957), 576.

The poet painstakingly indicates how Gawain stands as the best knight who ever lived. He has the physical fitness required of the excellent knight--strength, endurance, skill in weaponry and horsemanship. For instance, Gawain is strong enough to wield the Green Knight's ax, and with one blow Gawain decapitates the Challenger and drives the ax into the floor:

> Gauan gripped to his ax, and gederes
> hit on hyȝt,
> Þe kay fot on þe fold he before sette,
> Let hit doun lyȝtly lyȝt on þe naked,
> Þat þe scharp of þe schalk schyndered
> þe bones,
> And schrank þurȝ þe schyire grece, and
> scade hit in twynne,
> Þat þe bit of þe broun stel bot on þe
> grounde.
>
> (ll. 421-426)

As Gawain begins his quest, he is forced to ride into the Wirral forest. Here the poet uses the elements of a <u>real</u> situation, a situation familiar to his audience in order to intensify the reality of the dangers which the hero must face. A fourteenth century audience recognized the forests as a menace to the traveler. The Wirral forest was on a promontory between the Dee and Mersey rivers in the northwest portion of the county of Cheshire.[2]

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[2]Savage, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 7.

The robbers and thieves who inhabited the forest created such havoc in the surrounding countryside that the citizenry of that area petitioned Edward III to have the woods deforested. In answer to this plea, writs were granted by Edward III on July 20, 1376, which established special commissions to arrest all criminals in the Wirral area. The problem was so persistent that such writs were again issued in 1386 and 1392.[3] Both audience and poet would have been aware of the dangers and terrors of the Wirral. It is a tribute to the genius of the poet that he used a contemporary situation to heighten the terror which Gawain faced. The poem thus becomes more realistic, more believable.

Not only must Gawain face the evil of the forest, but he must also face an even greater adversary--the winter season. The elements are more hostile than all the <u>wormeȝ</u> and <u>wolues</u> and <u>wodwos</u>, <u>bulleȝ</u> and <u>bereȝ</u> and <u>boreȝ</u> that he faces in the wilderness.

> For werre wrathed hym not so much, þat
>   wynter was wors,
> When þe colde cler water from þe cloudeȝ
>   schadde,
> And fres er hit falle myȝt to þe fale erþe;
> New slayn wyth þe slete he sleped in his
>   yrnes
> Mo nyȝteȝ þen innoghe in naked rokkeȝ,
> Þer as claterande from þe crest þe colde
>   borne renneȝ,

---

[3] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 455.

And benged heȝe ouer his hede in hard
iisse-ikkles.

(ll. 726-732)

Gawain survives this test in spite of his own despair of success.

Later at the Green Chapel when he has received the return blow and is wounded in the neck, Gawain again exhibits his physical prowess as he moves with deftness and agility to place himself in a defensive position.

Þat þe schene blod ouer his schulderes
schot to þe erþe;
And quen þe burne seȝ þe blode blenk on
þe snawe,
He sprit forth spenne-fote more þen a
spere lenþe,
Hent heterly his helme, and on his hed
cast,
Schot with his schulderez his fayre
schelde vnder,
Braydez out a bryȝt sworde, and bremely
he spekez--

(ll. 2315-2319)

In addition to these physical qualities and the demonstrated intiative, courage, and fortitude, the Gawain-poet has combined in his hero all of the knightly virtues--humility, courtesy, and loyalty.

As is shown in Gawain's acceptance of the challenge (ll. 341-354), his humility is well established early in poem since he indicates that it would be better to sacrifice the least of the knights, himself, than any other of the

Round Table. This humility is further illustrated through what should have been Gawain's most triumphant moment--when he has met the challenger and survived the return blow. The Green Knight reveals himself to be Bercilak and explains that he had sent his wife to Gawain with the gift of the girdle. The Green Knight then praises Gawain, but the latter--shamed by the memory of his false moment--can only grieve:

> Þat oþer stif mon in study stod a gret
> whyle,
> So agreued for greme he gryed withinne;
> Alle þe blode 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 cowardyse and couetyse boþe.
> In yow is vylany and vyse at vertue disstryeȝ.'
> Þenne he kaȝt to þe knot, and þe kest lawseȝ,
> Brayde broþely þe belt to þe burne seluen:
> 'Lo! þer þe falssyng, foule mot hit falle!
> For care of þy knokke cowardyse me taȝt
> To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to for-
> sake,
> Þat is larges and lewté at longeȝ to knyȝteȝ.
> Now I am fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben
> euer
> Of trecherye and vntrawþe boþe bityde sorȝe
> and care!
>
> (ll. 2369-2388)

Of Gawain's courtesy, much can be said, for the poet devotes numerous stanzas to revealing Gawain's refutation of the Lady's overtures. Each parry and thrust is couched in terms of courtliness and delicacy as Gawain seeks to remain loyal to his host without arousing the lady's anger

or displeasure. This same courtesy, the same finesse of expression was exhibited in Arthur's court as Gawain requested his lord's permission to accept the challenge of the Green Knight.

> Wolde ȝe, worþilych lorde,' quoþ Wawan
> to þe kyng,
> Bid me boȝe fro þis benche, and stonde
> by yow þere,
> Þat I wythoute vylanye myȝt voyde þis table,
> And þat my legge lady lyked not ille,
> I wolde come to your counseyl bifore your
> cort ryche.
>
> (ll. 343-347)

Of all these attributes of Gawain, loyalty is perhaps the strongest, most powerful accoutrement in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. It is loyalty, after all, which motivates the action of the poem. It is Gawain's loyalty to Arthur which moves him to accept the Green Knight's challenge. It is loyalty which forces him to keep the appointment, an appointment which indicates certain death:

> Forþe, iwysse, bi ȝowre wylle, wende me
> byhoues,
> Naf I now to busy bot bare þre dayeȝ,
> And me als fayn to falle feye as fayly
> of myyn ernde.
>
> (ll. 1065-1067)

It is loyalty to Bercilak which keeps Gawain from capitulating to the invitations of the host's wife. And it is loyalty to the lady when Gawain refuses to reveal her identity

when questioned by Bercilak as to the origin of those kisses.

> 'Þat watȝ not forward,' quoþ he, 'frayst me no more-
> For ȝe haf tan þat yow tydeȝ, trawe ȝe non oþer-
> (11. 1395-1396)

It is the strong sense of duty, of loyalty, that compels Gawain to do whatever must be done at a given moment.

In the ultimate test on Gawain's loyalty, he fails. By refusing to relinquish the girdle to Bercilak, Gawain violates his own word and the pledge to his host. When he returns to Arthur's court, he determines to wear until death the badge of shame.

> Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne,
> And I mot nedeȝ hit were wyle I may last;
> (11. 2509-2510)

Arthur turns the badge of shame into one of honor, and all of the court come to wear the symbolic girdle. Does it not appear that the badge becomes a symbol of the need for loyalty? In the final moment, loyalty is the basis for the entire courtly, feudal society. Without it, that society, like Gawain, will fail.

True to the knightly tradition Gawain is a favorite of the ladies, as Bercilak's wife freely admits:

> 'Þe prys and þe prowes þat pleseȝ al oþer,

If I hit lakked oþer set at lyȝt, hit
were littel dayntè;
Bot hit ar ladyes innoȝe þat leuer wer
nowþe
Haf þe, hende, in hor holde, as I þe
habbe here,
To daly with derely your daynté wordeȝ,
Keuer hem comfort and colen her careȝ,
Þen much of þe garysoun oþer goldeþat
þay hauen.

(ll. 1249-1255)

It would be easy to combine these characteristics and conclude that Gawain of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is simply too good to be real. If this were indeed the case, then the Gawain-poet would have defeated his purpose. Had the poet made his hero more than man, Gawain would cease to be the effective man that he is. The genius of the poet presents a hero who through his action and behavior is distinctly human. For example, Gawain is near despair as he faces the forces of winter.

He rode in his prayere,
And cryed for his mysdede,
He sayned him in syþes sere,
And sayde, 'Cros Kryst me spede.'

(ll. 758-762)

He accepts the girdle in order to save his life in the most human of reactions.

He þonkked hir oft ful swyþe,
Ful þro with hert and þoȝt.
Bi þat on þrynne syþe
Ho hatȝ kyst þe knyȝt so toȝt.

(ll. 1866-1869)

It is here that it is realized that the temptation theme has not really tested, not actually challenged Gawain's vows of chastity. The larger test was a test of his integrity--and that test he fails in part. Gawain has been distracted by the feint of the chastity tests and has become a victim of the unsuspected. When he realizes that he has been tricked his response is a natural one: "Bot your gordel quoþ Gawayn 'God you forȝelde" (1.2429).

As Gawain's departure from Camelot causes much weeping and despair, his return causes feasting and celebration. Both sets of circumstances create exceptionally believable situations, and Gawain's reaction at both times shows him to be serious, devout, capable, and humble. Never does the poet make him more than he could be, but he is always all that he should be. As such he fulfills his function as a romance hero, the champion of the human race.

Much of the poem's charm, however, lies in those elements of romance found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The *Gawain*-poet begins his poem with historical references felt to be authentic--Troy, ancient Briton, Camelot. Camelot, with its color and glitter, seemed to be the very seat of England's glorious past, a past real to the fourteenth century. Amid a scene of festivity, a scene which must have been familiar to the medieval courtly audience, the poet introduces the somewhat spectacular Green Knight.

The gigantic green figure, with his amazing hold on life, his curious color, personifies the unreal, the unexplained, the unknown terrors which all men fear. It is through the device of the Green Knight that one can say the "known is brought into contention with the unknown."[4] Since Gawain combines the finest of human characteristics, it is necessary that something more than human test him. By creating a world that is half real (Arthur's court) and half unreal (Green Knight-Bercilak's castle), the poet creates a world which allows the hero to face any situation and to demonstrate his finest qualities. A more-than-human element appears in the Green Knight later revealed to be Bercilak who is a normal, pleasant individual caught in the hold of Morgan le Fay:

> 'Bercilak de Hautdesert I hat in þis londe.
> Þurȝ myȝt of Morgne le Faye, þat in my hous lenges,
> And koyntyse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned-
> Þe maystrés of Merlyn mony ho hatȝ taken. . . .
>
> (ll. 2445-2448)

As the role of the Green Knight is that of the antagonist, he is a vehicle of the sorceress. The Green Knight-Bercilak combination exists to carry out the will of Morgan, who is essentially the link between the real world and the unreal.

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[4] Markman, op. cit., p. 576.

Since Morgan is often portrayed as the sister of Arthur and her anger toward Camelot was well known, the fourteenth-century audience--familiar with these traditions--could easily have found in Morgan le Fay a unifying force in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Actually the ten per cent of the poem given to the marvelous can be traced to the machinations of Morgan. And the poet uses the elements of the marvelous to bind the basic motifs--the Beheading Game, the Temptation, and the Exchange of Winnings themes--together. The Beheading Game is the force behind Gawain's journey; his journey leads him to Bercilak's castle.

The combination of the real and unreal gives play to the poet's imagination and his genius. The realistic description of the forest Wirral:

> . . . a forest ful dep, þat ferly watȝ wylde,
> Hiȝe hilleȝ on vche a halue, and holt-wodeȝ vnder
> Of hore okeȝ ful hoge a hundreth togeder;
> Þe hasel and þe haȝþorne were harled al samen,
> With roȝe raged mosse rayled aywhere,
> With mony bryddeȝ vnblyþe vpon bare twyges,
> Þat pitosly þer piped for pyne of þe colde.
>
> (ll. 741-747)

Contrasts with the fabulous description of the area immediately approaching Bercilak's castle:

> Nade he sayned hymself, segge, bot þrye,

Er he watȝ war in þe wod of a won in
a mote,
Abof a launde, on a lawe, loken vnder
boȝeȝ
Of mony borelych bole aboute bi þe
diches:
A castel þe comlokest þat euer knyȝt
aȝte,
Pyched on a prayere, a park al aboute,
With a pyked palays pyned ful þik,
Þat vmbeteȝe mony tre mo þen two myle.
Þat holde on þat on syde þe haþel auysed,
As hit schemered and schon þurȝ þe schyre
okeȝ. . . .
(ll. 763-772)

The reality of Gawain's prayer contrasts with the unrealistic and sudden appearance of the castle itself. Gawain's relief and joy at finding a moment of respite contrasts with the hazards which he is about to face. He has unsuspectingly walked into the second test--the test of temptation.

It is at this point that many of the themes and literary devices of the age are drawn on to enhance the nobility of Gawain's character. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, like most of the literature and art of the Middle Ages, abounds in symbolism, allegory, and imagery. The struggle which Gawain faces becomes something of the struggle which all men must face. The struggle between the natural impulses as opposed to the more refined attributes imposed by civilization gives a key to the universal attraction of the poem. It is here perhaps that the greatness of the poem lies. Like the pentangle, the perfect, endless knot,

Gawain is thought to be without a flaw. Because he comes closest to the realization of perfection, the pentangle becomes a fitting emblem for him to bear.

The most ancient associations of the pentangle are to be found in the secret rites and practices surrounding Pythagorus and his followers. It is also connected with the ancient rites of the Greek Christians, the Jews, and with King Solomon. The letters S A L U S were often written at each point of the pentangle to represent health, completeness, soundness of body and mind. The number five, being composed of both odd and even numbers, contained both good and bad properties. However, five could also stand for the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of the Virgin. Five, because of its holy implications, was often invoked to ward off beasts and unknown evils.[5] The pentangle with its numerous implications thus becomes a symbol of perfection, the goal to which all knights should strive. The pentangle as a holy device serves to protect Gawain from the evils which he must face. It should be remembered that when Gawain is so armed he is infallible.

Because Gawain is a man, because he is human, he is subject to temptation, to weakness. He realizes his own inadequacy even if others do not. Therefore, he does rely on the protection of the Virgin Mary. He is not

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[5] Savage, op. cit., pp. 158-159.

unmindful of his need of her nor of his devotion to her.

> Gret perile bitwene hem stod,
> Nif Maré of hir knyȝt mynne.
>
> (ll. 1768-1769)

As he lies in bed, stripped of his armor, stripped of the shield bearing the pentangle and the likeness of the Virgin, he becomes most vulnerable. It is then that he is most open to temptation; it is then that he succumbs to temptation and accepts the girdle of Bercilak's wife.

Although he seeks to safeguard his body with magic, with the talisman, he is not unmindful of the danger to his soul. He therefore seeks on numerous occasions the blessings of the mass. As Gawain prepares to leave Arthur's court he hears the mass.

> So harnayst as he watȝ he herkneȝ his masse,
> Offred and honoured at þe heȝe auter.
>
> (ll. 592-593)

After each temptation by Bercilak's wife, Gawain goes to hear the mass.

> And he ryches hym to ryse and rapes hym sone,
> Clepes to his chamberlayn, choses his wede,
> Boȝeȝ forth, quen he watȝ boun, blyþely to masse;
>
> (ll. 1309-1311)

and:

> Then ruþes hym þe renk and ryses to þe
> masse,
> And siþen hor diner watȝ dyȝt and derely
> serued.
>
> (ll. 1558-1559)

Because he is only a man, Gawain seeks the protection and solace which the Church affords. Because he is less than immortal, Gawain also succumbs to the security that superstition can also afford. It is through this capitulation that he succumbs to the temptation of the world. The fall is that suffered by mankind, but the recognition of weakness is admitted by only the finest of men. And, it is then that Gawain comes to know himself--for to know oneself is to know one's weaknesses. Englehardt summarizes Gawain's development in this way:

> Gawain had resisted the flesh, he had defied the devil, he had succumbed to the world, and he had come to know himself. His humility, which in the beginning had savored somewhat of polite self-deprecation (ll. 354-357), had now become pure and genuine. The endless knot had been superseded by the knot of green silk. This was enough.[6]

It should be remembered that as Gawain prepares to face the Green Knight on New Year's day, he wears the green girdle <u>over</u> his surcoat. In other words, he allows

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[6] George J. Englehardt, "The Predicament of Gawain," <u>MLQ</u>, XVI (1955), 225.

superstition (the girdle) to take precedence over the holy symbol of perfection (the pentangle).

The flaws which belie the outward façade of Gawain's perfection are typical of numerous points of contrast found throughout the poem. Such descriptions as the roughness of nature as opposed to the glittering comfort of the court, the coldness of winter versus the warmth of Bercilak's home, the temptations offered versus the resistence of purity, the elegance of dress of Bercilak's lady versus the nakedness of her breasts and neck, all establish the constant struggle which challenge the human spirit. It can be said then that the "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a penetrating study of the two aspects of human experience, the two conflicting tendencies in the life of those times--and any time--which battle for dominance in man's soul."[7]

The Green Knight himself becomes the embodiment of these forces, his greenness (nature) and his knighthood (court). The girdle is perhaps representative of primal urgings while the gold becomes man's effort to be social. Gawain wears both to save himself. Goldhurst best summarizes this discussion by saying:

Gawain has yielded to the green of the

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[7]William Goldhurst, "The Green and the Gold: The Major Theme of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," CE, XX (1958), 63.

> girdle . . . the cause of his shame, for his entire way of life should have led him to resist the primal call of nature, and to cling to the gold of the image: courtliness, grace, and the denial of natural impulses.[8]

Faced with such struggle, with the decisions which Gawain of necessity must make, it is possible to see in him all mankind. He succeeds as only the finest can succeed; he fails as only the human can fail.

Now, if it is the poet's idea to emphasize the human frailty, it is not difficult to find in the third temptation scene the introduction of the theme of penance. The confession scene, according to Burrow, is the

> beginning of a shift in balance which is to carry the poem out of the public world of mirth into the private world of penance. Its function is proleptic . . . as it anticipates the main penitential theme of the fourth fitt.[9]

In the earlier exchange of winnings scenes, Gawain is the first to step forward and willingly offers up the kisses. In the final exchange of winnings scene, he offers the kisses but makes no mention of the girdle. Perhaps

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[8] Ibid., p. 64.

[9] John Burrow, "The Two Confession Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MP, LVII (1959), 74.

Gawain clings to the girdle in a frantic attempt to save his life for he knows that on the very next day he must face his adversary at the Green Chapel. Perhaps Gawain is already ashamed that he has broken his word before Bercilak ever returns to collect the day's winnings. Gawain had already "hid hit [the girdle] ful holdely . . ." (l. 1875), thus indicating that he never had any intention of giving the girdle to Bercilak. Nevertheless, it is easy to find in the Green Chapel scene the pattern of the confessional. Gawain becomes the penitent as the Green Knight becomes the confessor. The three acts of the penitent--contrition, confession, and satisfaction--can be thus traced. Gawain's <u>schome</u> leads him to confess:

> For care of þy knokke cowardyse me
> taȝt
> To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde
> to forsake,
> Þat is larges and lewté þat longeȝ to
> knyȝteȝ.
> Now I am fawty and falce, and ferde
> haf ben euer
> Of trecherye and vntrawþe. . . .
>
> (ll. 2379-2384)

His confession leads him to satisfaction:

> Leteȝ me ouertake your wylle
> And efte I schal be ware.
>
> (ll. 2387-2388)

The Green Knight then absolves Gawain as he says:

> I halde þe polysed of þat plyȝt, and
> pured as clene
> As þou hadeȝ neuer forfeted syþen þou
> watȝ fyrst borne;
>
> (ll. 2394-2395)

This scene should recall the earlier confessional with the priest at Bercilak's castle, for the two scenes are closely paralleled.[10] The poet says of the priest

> . . . he asoyled hym surely, and sette
> hym so clene
> As domeȝday schulde haf ben diȝt on þe
> morn.
>
> (ll. 1883-1884)

As Gawain turns to the comfort of the Church, he is recognizing and admitting the transitory nature of life. It has been suggested that the "colors of green and gold traditionally symbolize vanishing youth."[11] Perhaps it is here that the poet is seeking to place certain emphasis. The youthful Gawain, the noblest of Arthur's court, has failed in the ultimate test of loyalty. In spite of his youth, his courage, his strength, he has been defeated. Perhaps the poet is saying that regardless of the accoutrements one might have which enable him to lead the noble

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[10] Ibid., pp. 75-76.

[11] John S. Lewis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," CE, XXI (1957), 51.

life, without loyalty life and living come to nothing.

The argument gains further impetus when it is realized that the opening lines (ll. 1-19) tell of the seige and destruction of Troy, that once glorious city which is now "þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondeȝ and askeȝ" (l. 2). The downfall of that ancient city was brought about through the treachery of "þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt . . ." (l. 3). Even in the beginning of the poem, the Gawain-poet is speaking of the fast-fading glories of man and the evil that comes from lack of loyalty.

The hunting scenes which the Gawain-poet goes to such lengths to describe must also be of symbolic value. The obvious correlation is that Gawain--like the stag, the boar, and the fox--is the hunted. But the meaning goes much deeper. Since the poet lived during a time when heraldry was well known and easily recognized by the members of the court, it is best to turn to English heraldry to find the most reasonable meaning behind the three hunting scenes.

Accordimg to John Guillim, author of A Display of Heraldry, first published in 1610, the stag is thus presented:

> Nature having denied this Beast other securities, hath indued him with two

> excellent Favours above others; the One, exceeding quickness of Hearing, to foreknow his Hazards, and so the sooner to prevent them (for which Cause the Stag is among the Emblems of the five Senses, representing the Hearing); the other exceeding Speed of Foot, to fly from the Danger when it approacheth. . . .[12]

Guillim continues his discussion as he speaks of those who bear the stag or hart on their arms:

> Hart born in Arms . . . betokeneth sometimes one skilful in Musick, or such an one as taketh a Felicity and Delight in Harmony. Also a man that is wise and politick, and well forseeth his Times and Opportunities; a Man unwilling to assail the enemy rashly, but rather desirous to stand on his own Guard honestly, than to annoy another wrongfully.[13]

In this discussion close correlation can be found between Gawain on his first day of temptation and the stag on the first day of the hunt. The stag fails to break into the open until he absolutely has to. Gawain lies in bed and feigns sleep until he absolutely has to acknowledge the presence of Bercilak's lady.

> . . . and þe burne schamed,
> And layde hym doun lystyly, and let as he slepte;
> . . . .

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[12]Cited in Savage, op. cit., p. 40.

[13]Cited in Savage, op. cit., p. 41.

Þe lede lay lurked a ful longe quyle,
Compast in his concience to quat þat
cace myȝt
Meue oþer amount--to meruayle hym þoȝt,
Bot ȝet he sayde in hymself, 'More semly
hit were
To aspye wyth my spelle in space quat ho
wolde.'

(ll. 1189-1199)

Like the stag, it is <u>sound</u> which makes Gawain aware that his chamber has been entered, and that he himself is under attack.

And as in slomeryng he slode, sleȝly
he herde
A littel dyn at his dor, and derfly
vpon;
And he heueȝ vp his hed out of þe
cloþes
A corner of þe cortyn he caȝt vp a
lyttel,
And wayteȝ warly þiderwarde quat hit
be myȝt.

(ll. 1182-1186)

Throughout this duel the jests fly lightly and quickly much as the stag breaks through the thicket.

'Ȝer ar a sleper vnslyȝe, þat mon may
slyde hider;
Now ar ȝe tan astyt. Bot true vus may
schape,
I schal bunde yow in your bedde, þat be
ȝe trayst':
Al laȝande þe lady lanced þo bourdeȝ,
'Goud moroun, gay,' quoþ Gawayn þe blyþe,
Me schal worþe at your wille, and þat me
wel lykeȝ,
For I ȝelde me ȝederly, and ȝeȝe after
grace,
And þat is þe best, be my dome, for me
byhoueȝ nede':

> And þus he bourded aȝayn with mony a
> blyþe laȝter.
>
> (ll. 1209-1217)

The entire discussion shows that Gawain is elusive and nimble much as is the stag which is eventually caught by Bercilak.

The boar of the second day's hunt is something of another matter. But according to English classification of animals, the boar is still of the first rank of animals. As Gawain is the finest example of knighthood, the stag and boar are considered to be "beasts of venery" or animals of the highest order.[14] Guillim discusses the meaning of the boar in English heraldry in the following terms:

> Bearing of the Boar in Arms betokeneth a Man of bold Spirit, skilful, politick in warlike feats, and One of that high Resolution, that he will rather die valorously in the Field, than he will secure himself by ignominious Flight. He is called, in Latin, *Aper ab asperitate*, because he is so sharp and fierce in conflict with his Foe. And this is a special Property in a Souldier, that he be fierce in the Encountering his Enemy, and he bear the Schock or Brunt of the Conflict with a noble and magnanimous Courage. . . .[15]

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[14]Henry L. Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes," *JEGP*, XXVII (1928), 7.

[15]Cited in Savage, *The Gawain Poet*, p. 43.

Gawain's attitude toward Bercilak's lady on the second day of temptation is marked by greater restraint and heaviness of tone.

> Why! ar ȝe lewed, þat alle þe los weldeȝ?
> Oþer elles ȝe demen me to dille your dalyaunce to herken?
>
> (ll. 1528-1529)

Gawain thus appears more direct, like the boar, in his confrontation of the adversary. On this day, Gawain makes no pretense at being asleep.

Bercilak's wife, likewise, is more forthright as she challenges the recumbant hero. She--like the hunter--persists in the conquest.

> Þus hym frayned þat fre, and fondet hym ofte,
> For to haf wonnen hym to woȝe, whatso scho þoȝt elleȝ:
>
> (ll. 1549-1550)

The parallel continues as both Bercilak and his lady pursue noble "game" on the first two days of the temptation sequence. On the third day the situation changes.

Bercilak's pursuit of the fox is ruthless, vengeful. He shows no mercy toward the elusive animal. And upon his return, Bercilak shows no pride in the day's kill.

> For I haf hunted al þis day, and noȝt haf I geten
> Bot þis foule fox felle--þe fende haf þe godeȝ.
>
> (ll. 1943-1944)

His reaction is consistent with the English approach to both the hunt and to heraldry. The fox was considered to be something like vermin, an animal to be caught in any manner and to be destroyed. No honor, no respect was directed toward him. As a result, the fox is seldom found in British heraldry.[16]

Correlations are easily found, however, between Bercilak's hunt on the third day and Gawain's bout with the lady of the household. Bercilak's day was not one of sport, for once the "false beast" was aroused in the forest, the hunter's intent was to kill. Gawain is revealed on this third day to be a "false man." Bercilak's wife is more direct, more open than on the previous days; she, too, is determined to triumph. Gawain accepts the girdle, fails to give it to his host, and proves to be false to a generous host.

The fox in the wood makes a false turn in order to escape the fatal stroke:

> And he schunt for þe scharp, and schulde
> haf arered;
> A rach rapes hym to, ryȝt er he myȝt
> And ryȝt bifore þe hors fete þay fel on
> hym alle. . . .
>
> (ll. 1902-1904)

[16]*Ibid*., p. 46.

In making the false move the fox falls into the jaws of death.

Gawain feels that he has survived the tests of chastity. He fails to realize immediately that he has failed the other, more important test of loyalty toward his host. By a trick, Gawain--like the fox--has fallen; the use of trickery is the direct cause of the undoing of both false beast and false man. Although Gawain does not die, his treachery would be heinous to the medieval audience.

Perhaps the poet is implying that life is an illusion just as the tests were essentially not what they were thought to be. Such contradiction appears throughout the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gawain, believed to be the perfect knight, is proved to be a human being. The Green Knight is merely a mask for the designing Morgan le Fay as she works through Bercilak. The old, apparently harmless lady in Bercilak's hall is really a witch. Bercilak's wife only seems to be unfaithful since she actually is doing her husband's bidding. Arthur's court is capable of both cowardice at facing an enemy and nobility in accepting the fallen hero and sharing his guilt among them. Bloomfield summarizes this approach to the poem by saying that the *Gawain*-poet shows through his work that "Life is a tissue of contradictions, even in its most aristocratic and idealized

form."[17]

In summary it seems that the Gawain-poet is seeking to illustrate and to emphasize the fact that life is rarely as it appears and that success is elusive. By using all of the observed points of contrast, by involving a wide usage of symbolism and parallels, the poet shows that the only life, the only society which can obtain some semblance of greatness and truth, is that life, that society, which harkens to the chivalric ideal. Of all the virtues promoted by chivalry the one most basic to the well being of life is that of loyalty. Loyalty as the center of society, since ancient times, has been the basis of the English approach to government. It is loyalty which prompts Gawain to accept the quest; it is loyalty which insists he keep the appointment at the Green Chapel; and it is the lack of loyalty in the final moment which promotes his fall. The thread of loyalty seems indeed to wind throughout the poem as it binds Bercilak's lady's actions to her husband's will, and Bercilak's actions to Morgan le Fay. This basic theme seems to be too obvious, too strongly emphasized, to be overlooked in any discussion of the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

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[17] Morton W. Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," PMLA, LXXVI (1961), 19.

CHAPTER VI

THE GREEN KNIGHT

No study of _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ is complete without certain discussion of the unusual figure of the Green Knight. It has been mentioned that the Green Knight possibly has roots in vegetation myth and in Celtic tradition. These discussions certainly lend themselves to study; however, it is well to survey the contemporary attitudes of the fourteenth century to find what implications could have also influenced the _Gawain_-poet. It is within the realm of possibility that the poet patterned the Green Knight after a popular fourteenth century knight. If indeed this were the case, is it not also possible that the poet drew on those situations, those individuals familiar to the medieval audience, to emphasize further the chivalric ideal. By patterning the Green Knight after an outstanding contemporary knight, the poet might further emphasize the need to cherish loyalty even at the cost of one's life.

The Green Knight fails to appear in any other Arthurian material. It is therefore possible to conclude that he may have entered the poet's imagination through myth, through other works, or through contemporary events. Possible

correlation and identification may be found in ancient and contemporary works. For instance, in the Champion's Bargain the antagonist appears carrying an ax in his right hand. In the Mule sanz Frein a "vilain" appears carrying a great ax. In Perlevaus the knight enters carrying a great ax, and in the Livre de Caradoc the knight carries a long sword.[1]

In addition to the over-sized weapon, the knight is made even more ferocious through his appearance. In the Champion's Bargain he is a hideous giant with yellow eyes; in the Mule sanz Frein he emerges from an underground vault. However, in Perlevaus and Livre de Caradoc the knight appears to be a handsome figure richly attired, a device used, perhaps, to contrast his beauty with his sinister activities. Through each of these works, the knight acts as something of an immortal executioner. As such he could easily be equated with Death.[2]

Another of the marvelous attributes of the Green Knight is, of course, his greenness. Krappe suggests that the color green is that of the usual dress of the Irish fairies, that "virtually all elfin folk in Britain and Ireland dress in green."[3] Remembering the evil task of

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[1]A. H. Krappe, "Who Was the Green Knight?" Speculum, XIII (1938), 207.

[2]Ibid., p. 208.

[3]Ibid., p. 211.

the Green Knight, it is not difficult to equate him with the underworld.

The association of green with death can be traced through medieval tradition in such elements as an ancient riddle where death is said to be "greener than grass." Randall points out that in the "Cruel Mother" the ghosts of the children are dressed in green "To show that death they had been 'in." In the "Twa Sisters" the drowned girl appears as a "ghaist sae green," while in the ballad "The Wee Wee Man" there are twenty-four little people "A' comely cled in glistering green." And in "Thomas Rymer" the hero wears "the grass-green silk." In the more widely read Canterbury Tales, Chaucer's Friar tells of a "gay yeoman" dressed in green, who admits to being a "feend dwellyng in helle" (l. 1448).[4]

Throughout the Middle Ages, the devil as a Christian symbol and as the counterpart of death wore a green coat. It can thus be said of the Green Knight that "his color, quite as much as his dark and grim appearance in the older texts, is indicative of his true nature. There is therefore no reason to presume that this feature [the greenness] is a late invention."[5] This interpretation gains

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[4] Dale B. J. Randall, "Was the Green Knight a Fiend?" SP, LVII (1947), 480.

[5] Krappe, op. cit., p. 212.

further support when it is realized that All Hallow's Eve in the Old Celtic tradition also was celebrated as New Year's Eve and as a feast for the dead.[6]

The Green Knight enters bearing the bough of holly in accordance with the ancient association of evergreens--the holly included--with death. Krappe suggests that

> there is sound reason to believe that in the Celtic lands the holly was closely associated with the powers of death, that it was a symbol of death, subsequently to develop into a symbol of the time of the year when the world of the dead stood open and when the poor souls were free to haunt their old abodes to warm themselves by the fire of the Yule Log . . . . The holly bough . . . [is] a fitting emblem of the Lord of Hades . . . placed in the hand of the grim executioner . . . .[7]

The holly was often displayed during the Christmas and New Year season. According to tradition the dead souls were free to visit their families and friends during this season on the condition that they return to their graves when the holly was removed from the hall.[8] This ancient tradition can be readily recognized as the belief that, as Krappe suggests, there is "nothing more terrible than Death and it

[6] Ibid., p. 213.

[7] Ibid., p. 215.

[8] Randall, op. cit., p. 486.

requires a knight _sans peur et sans reproche_ to accept his grim challenge and to brave him."[9]

According to medieval tradition, green was also the color most often associated with hunters. It is easily seen that by using a "natural" color, the stalking of game would be facilitated. The association of the devil with a hunter can be made as he stalks his human prey. Through medieval literature the devil is said to appear "with some frequency as a hunter and a knight in a green mantle."[10] Loomis suggests that "in Welsh and Celtic lore, the phantom hunter has been identified with the Devil or with some wicked mortal."[11] The Green Knight is obviously seeking prey as he enters Arthur's court. Later Bercilak stalks Gawain as he subjects his guest to a triple temptation. In the final beheading scene, Bercilak or the Green Knight stalks Gawain and toys rather mercilessly with him as he lowers the ax three times. The Green Knight-Bercilak transition is in keeping with the ancient tradition of the devil as a shape-shifter--a tradition which perhaps begins with the serpent which tempts Eve in the Garden of Eden.

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[9]Krappe, _op. cit._, p. 215.

[10]Randall, _op. cit._, p. 481.

[11]Roger Sherman Loomis, _Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance_ (New York, 1927), p. 59.

The Gawain-poet's use of the green flesh in addition to the green habit is perhaps to heighten the dramatic intensity of the opening scene. Such a device would be consistent with the poet's taste for the dramatic and the spectacular.

During the Middle Ages demons were often thought to be capable of certain good work. Bercilak is, in many ways, the kind, hospitable host. Another popular concept was that the devil often joined hands with a sorceress as Bercilak does with Morgan le Fay.[12] The Green Knight's association with the devil can be further substantiated when it is remembered that Gawain, in order to find the Green Knight, must travel into the north country which was traditionally classified as a region inhabited by the devil.[13] The Green Chapel, with its opening into the ground, is an obvious allusion to the entrance to the underworld. If one wished to continue the devil-death interpretation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it would be well to remember that Gawain must cross a river to reach the Green Chapel:

> A balȝberȝ bi a bonke þe brymme bysyde,
> Bi a forȝ of a flode þat ferked þare:
>
> (ll. 2173-2174)

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[12]Randall, op. cit., p. 485.

[13]Ibid., p. 489.

He does so in the tradition of Homer, Virgil, and Dante. The Green Knight vaults the stream as though the water would be injurous to him; this idea is in keeping with the tradition that otherworldly creatures would be dissolved by water.

In spite of the discussions which attempt to equate the Green Knight with death or with the devil, such interpretations cannot be firmly related to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. No man, regardless of his ability, can win against death. It is to be remembered that Gawain--in spite of his successes and, more importantly, his failure--does survive. He survives, even triumphs over certain death. His triumph is possible merely because of the Green Knight's help through the gift of the girdle, which may or may not have the ability to save life. If the Green Knight had been determined to have Gawain's life he could have easily done so. The Green Knight could have withheld the girdle; he could have taken it from Gawain since the girdle is worn openly; or the Green Knight could have done more than nick Gawain in the neck. The Green Knight does none of these things. Other than frightening Gawain by the feints with the ax, the Green Knight is rather pleasant with the young Gawain.

It is possible that the poet, while dramatizing his

creation through the devices of color and shape-shifting, actually patterned the Green Knight after a contemporary hero.

During the fourteenth century it was not unusual for knights to associate themselves with a color. Often the color name became more famous than the Christian name as in the case of Edward, the Black Prince, and Amdeus II of Savoy, the Red Count.[14] Such a man was Ralph Holmes, identified by Froissart as the "Green Squire." Holmes was decapitated in March, 1369, along with King Pedro of Spain and one James Roland, by the king's bastard brother Henry of Trastamara.[15]

> There was slain with him [Pedro] a knight from England called Sir Raoul Helme [Ralph Holmes], who had formerly the surname of the Green Squire, and another esquire of the name of James Roland, because they had put themselves in postures of defense.[16]

The assassinations horrified medieval England where Pedro's cause was favored. It is within the realm of possibility that the poet wrote the poem to commemorate the death of

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[14] Haldeen Braddey, "Sir Gawain and Ralph Holmes the Green Knight," MLN, LXVII (1952), 241.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Cited in Braddey, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

Holmes, known to the medieval audience; he could have been used by the _Gawain_-poet to emphasize the role of the noble knight--his loyalty, his bravery, and his sacrifice. However, the evidence here is too slim at this time to enable one to draw any definite conclusion.

It should be remembered that the Green Knight--in spite of his unusual coloring, gigantic stature, and tenacious hold on life--really does nothing which is evil. His challenge, though terrifying at first thought, remains merely a challenge. For once the challenge is accepted, the success of Gawain seems to be assured. The Green Knight is merely the vehicle through which the challenge is issued. In short, the challenge is necessary, not only to motivate the action of the poem, but also to establish the latent strength of Arthur's court. That strength, as Gawain proves, is in his loyalty to his lord. That strength is confirmed by the knights of the Round Table as they swear loyalty not only to Arthur and Gawain but also to each other. The strength in the chivalric code becomes an obvious lesson.

CHAPTER VII

STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

That the *Gawain*-poet was an experienced and effective story teller is obvious upon reviewing the themes and the adventures of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. That the *Gawain*-poet was an expert craftsman is also obvious upon reviewing the numerous literary techniques used within the poem. It is because *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an interesting story expertly told, the poem is considered to be the fine romance that it is.

Much of the effectiveness of the poem depends on points of balance. For instance, the gay, convivial atmosphere of Arthur's court is interrupted by the horror accompanying the Green Knight's entry and decapitation. The coldness of the winter contrasts sharply with the warmth of Bercilak's castle. The comfort of this castle gives no indication of the certain death which Gawain feels he is about to face.

Actually the narrative is carefully contrived, as is evidenced by the development of its several parts. The second fitt (ll. 995-1125) in particular gives evidence of the poet's ability to handle a difficult situation. Gawain arrives at Bercilak's castle on Christmas

Eve. Although there are seven days between Christmas and New Year's day, the poet can weave only six of them into the fabric of the story. The Christmas festivities continue for three days, the hunt continues for three days. The problem of the "seventh" day is handled so skilfully, is telescoped into the other days so smoothly, that it is possible to overlook the problem, to fail to see it at all. This, of course, was the poet's intent.

Gawain arrives at Bercilak's castle in time for the Christmas feast which naturally falls on December 25:

> On þe morne, as vche mon mynez þat tyme
> Þat dryȝtyn for oure destyné to deȝe watȝ
> borne,
> Wele waxeȝ in vche a won in worlde for
> his sake:
>
> (ll. 995-997)

The poet continues to describe the activities of the twenty-fifth at some length (ll. 997-1020). However, the twenty-sixth is mentioned briefly: "Much dut watȝ þer dryuen þat day [Christmas Day] and þat oþer [the twenty-sixth]" (l. 1020). Concerning the twenty-seventh, the poet is equally abrupt; however, he does go to certain length to convey the idea that the gestes daunsed late into the evening (ll. 1024-1028). As the guests leave, Gawain questions his host about the Green Knight and the Green Chapel:

> Þat ȝe me telle with trawþe if euer ȝe
> tale herde
> Of þe grene chapel, quere hit on grounde
> stondeȝ,
> And of þe knyȝt þat hit kepes, of colour
> of grene.
>
> (ll. 1057-1059)

It is through this conversation that the poet disposes of the problem of the extra day. Although Gawain is speaking on the twenty-seventh, he states: "Naf I now to busy bot bare þre dayeȝ" (l. 1066). The solution is so well contrived that one critic summarizes the manipulation in this way:

> The poet has so skilfully managed the allusions to dates and times that an extra day has seemed to pass. The three days of the hunt seem to bring the poem to New Year's day.[1]

Not only does the *Gawain*-poet handle his material well, but he also calls on a number of the literary types of his age to increase the effectiveness of the romance. In the opening scene the Green Knight rides into the court of Arthur. This event and the following ones use the devices of the mumming play.[2] This is more easily discerned when it is later revealed that the Green Knight is none other than the courtly, gentlemanly Bercilak.

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[1]Melvin R. Watson, "The Chronology of Gawain," *MLN*, LXIX (1949), 6.

[2]Elizabeth M. Wright, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *JEGP*, XXXIV (1935), 159.

Bercilak has, in effect, been masquerading as a monster. As the amateur actor, Bercilak "hales in at þe halle an aghlich mayster" (l. 136) dressed in green and riding "A grene hors gret and þikke . . ." (l. 175), and waves his green and gold ax which is forty-five inches long, "þe hede of an elnȝerde þe large lenkþe hade," (l. 210). There can be little doubt that the Green Knight enjoys his role as he rides out of the hall, head in hand:

> For þe hede in his honde he haldeȝ vp
>   euen,
> Toward þe derrest on þe dece he dresseȝ
>   þe face,
> And hit lyfte vp þe yȝe-lyddeȝ and loked
>   ful brode,
> And meled þus much with his muthe . . . .
>
> (ll. 444-447)

For timing, effect, and sheer drama, this is surely one of the most spectacular exits in English literature.

Further awareness of dramatic technique of the Middle Ages is shown by the Gawain-poet as he calls the Green Knight's decapitation scene an interlude:

> Wel bycommes such craft [Green Knight's
>   decapitation and departure] vpon
>   Cristmasse,
> Laykyng of enterludeȝ. . . .
>
> (ll. 470-471)

Indeed, the Green Knight scene comes during the banquet. The Green Knight enters immediately after the opening

course is served:

> And þe fyrst cource in þe court kyndely serued,
> Þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster . . . .
>
> (ll. 135-136)

Immediately following the Green Knight's departure, Arthur bids Gawain hang the ax "abof þe dece" (l. 478), and then Arthur and his court

> . . . boȝed to a borde þise burnes togeder,
> . . . and kene men hem serued
> Of alle dayntyeȝ double . . . .
>
> (ll. 481-483)

The third of the literary techniques used by the poet is in the genre of the poem itself. The poet announces in the opening stanzas: "If ȝe wyl lysten þis laye bot on littel quile, / I schal telle hit. . . ." (ll. 30-31). There must have been definite reason for calling the poem a "laye." Garrett suggests that the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was

> an offering on the shrine of English patriotism, an English equivalent, in English verse, of that daintiest of forms which treated of the glories of the British past--the Breton lai.[3]

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[3]Garrett, op. cit., p. 129.

The poem does concern itself with the aristocratic world and does contain the unified structure of the Breton lais.[4] The incongruity is obvious if the poem is one of patriotic nature and yet incorporates a "foreign" technique as a vehicle for expression. It has been proposed that the author confused the names Britain and Brittany:

> So close was the relationship between the Bretons and the English, that a law purporting to come from Edward the Confessor reads: "The Bretons or Armoricans when they come into this realm, must be received and protected in this realm as its own citizens. They formerly went out from the body of this realm, of the blood of the Britons of this realm."[5]

By incorporating the ancient lay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well as drawing subject matter from England's glorious past, the *Gawain*-poet was seeking, perhaps, to increase the tribute directed toward the chivalric ideal.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is found today in "a single vellum manuscript" measuring seven inches by five inches and bound with three other fourteenth century poems, *Patience*, *Purity*, and *The Pearl* in the manuscript known as the Cotton Nero A X now in the British Museum.[6]

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[4]Hibbard, *Adventures in the Middle Ages*, p. 304.

[5]Garrett, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

[6]Brian Stone (trans.), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Baltimore, 1964), p. 127.

According to Brian Stone

> the writing, which is in the same hand throughout, is late fourteenth century, and not only has the ink become faded, but some of the pages were closed before the ink was dry; hence the great difficulty of reading the poem, although many of the blurred letters have been interpreted by reading the blotted impressions with a mirror.[7]

Dating the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is, at the present time, a difficult task at best. However, because of the type of illuminations in the manuscripts, the descriptions found in the text of the poem of the arming of Gawain, the costumes, and the architecture, critics are brought to general agreement that the poem dates from the latter half of the fourteenth century.[8] To be more specific is to base arguments on supposition.

The Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a poem of 2,530 lines, chiefly of unrhymed alliterative verse. As though seeking to achieve a tie with the past, the Gawain-poet used the alliterative pattern and stressed verse of ancient English poetry. The poem contains a hundred and one stanzas of varying lengths; however, each stanza is

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[7]Ibid.

[8]Martha Carey Thomas, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Comparison with the French Percival (Zurich, 1883), p. 25.

completed by the "bob and wheel"--or five short rhyming lines. Although no attempt is made to interlock the rhyme scheme of the "bob and wheel," the five final lines end in an alternating rhyme pattern. The general metrical pattern of the "bob and wheel" is ◡/◡/◡/ with the occasional addition of a syllable or a feminine ending.

Since there is no regular metrical pattern throughout the poem, the long lines usually fall into one of three groups:

1. Metrically clear lines indicating a four-stress scansion.
2. Metrically clear lines indicating a seven-stress scansion.
3. Metrically ambiguous lines which can be read without distortion according to either scansion.[9]

The extended long lines seem to be of two types:

1. The first half-lines can be adapted to a reading with two chief syllables in which a secondary emphasis is not required.
2. The first half-lines contain three heavy syllables or two major syllables and one minor syllable.[10]

Sir Frederick Madden, who first published the poem

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[9]Summarized from the discussion presented by Marie Borroff, _The Style of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ (Northampton, 1960), p. 178.

[10]_Ibid._, p. 198.

in 1839, established the traditional four divisions of the poem.[11] His divisions were based on those marked by four large initial letters which are said to be blue flourished with red.[12] These letters, according to Hill, possibly indicate

> some awareness of the intricate texture of the narrative fabric which has given us _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_, an awareness . . . which could hardly have originated with the scribe of the Cotton Nero A X.[13]

Perhaps there should be nine divisions within the poem since there are, in addition to the four large initials, five smaller scribal initials. It is entirely reasonable to assume that the smaller initials as well as the larger ones indicate certain divisions within the poem. Each initial does occur at a recognizable stage of the story.[14]

The arguments concerning the divisions of the poem may be of interest; however, the divisions in no way change the meaning of the poem. The poet remains the master craftsman and his poem remains a monument to the chivalric ideal.

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[11]Hibbard, _Adventures in the Middle Ages_, p. 294.

[12]Laura Lyttleton Hill, "Madden's Divisions of _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ and the 'Large Capitals' of _the Cotton Nero A X_," _Speculum_, XXI (1946), 67.

[13]_Ibid_., p. 71.

[14]_Ibid_., pp. 70-71.

CHAPTER VIII

OF THE POET HIMSELF

Of the *Gawain*-poet himself, much has been said but little has been definitely established. From *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is easy to surmise certain characteristics of the poet's personality and some of the influences which worked on him. However, at the moment, little factual information has come to light which definitely identifies him.

Since the other poems of the Cotton Nero A X, *Patience*, *Purity* and *The Pearl*, resemble *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in structure and verse patterns, it is generally believed that they were composed by the same author. These poems certainly indicate that their author was a man of considerable artistic taste and talent, that he had an eye for detail and, according to Savage, was

> a moralist . . . with a lively interest in nature, costume, armor, jewels, furniture, and the ways of the courtly circle, but one who nevertheless conceives of art and poetry as handmaidens to virtue and religion.[1]

Since the poet's vocabulary in *Sir Gawain and the*

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[1]Savage, *The Gawain Poet*, p. xvi.

Green Knight incorporates a number of words of Scandinavian origin and the dialect used is that of the Northwest Midland area or, more specifically, that dialect used in the Peak District of Derbyshire or possibly in Yorkshire West Riding of Lancashire, there seems to be little doubt that the Gawain-poet had firm associations with that area.[2]

The inflection of the present indicative, for example, corresponds to the dialects of Cheshire, Lancashire, and most of the Northwest Midland counties. The es in the preterit singular has been found in Lancashire; the use of schin and schun as the plural for shall has been found in Norfolk. Representation of the Old English a before single nasals as o as in mon, and use of the Old English eo as u and ue tend to emphasize the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Northwest Midland ties.[3] Not only does the poet use the language of the Northwest Midland area, but he also shows a familiarity with customs peculiar to that area. The holly bob, for example, carried by the Green Knight was a sign of peace, of truce, in Lancashire.[4]

The story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight appears

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[2]Ibid., p. 8.

[3]R. J. Menner, "Notes on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLR, XIX (1934), 504-511.

[4]Savage, The Gawain Poet, p. 16.

to be too wordly to have been written by a cleric unless he took orders late in life. In order to recall and to describe so accurately such scenes as the court of Arthur, the arming of Gawain and the hunt scenes of Bercilak, the poet must have been attached to a wealthy household of the Northwest Midland area. It has been mentioned that the only two knights of the Order of the Garter having such holdings in Lancashire were Enguerrand de Coucy and John of Gaunt.[5] It is therefore easy to surmise that the poet was associated with one or both of these households, for it is necessary to create from one's experiences--few artists can describe convincingly situations with which they have had no contact.

It is certain that the poet had certain knowledge of legal terminology, if he indeed did not work in some such legal office as the Chancery. Such legalisms as "fyn forwarde and faste" (l. 1636) do, suggests Savage, "betray the poet's course of thinking in leisure . . . and show the conflict in his own mind between the law (man-made or divine) and human frailty. How far were men bound by the solemn obligations that they themselves assumed?"[6]

In short there is little which can be said specifically

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[5]Ibid., pp. 10-11.

[6]Ibid., p. 21.

of the Gawain-poet. Until further information is uncovered, it is best to turn to the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and the other poems attributed to the poet, for the slight hints concerning the author. He must have been a man of keen insight with an eye for artistic detail. He must have had certain associations with the court or with those close to the king, for the poet creates detailed and believable scenes of the courtly life. He must have understood human frailty and gloried in human nobility. He was probably as sensitive to the events of the fourteenth century as he was to minute detail. It is, therefore, entirely credible that the Gawain-poet felt the need to contribute to the re-establishment of the grandeur of the chivalric code in response to the actions of Edward III. The king re-established the Round Table and created the Order of the Garter to achieve this end. The Gawain-poet created Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Could a loyal subject have done less?[7]

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[7]For Savage's suggestions for the identification of the Gawain-poet see Appendix III, p.

SUMMARY

Although no one can look into the mind of the *Gawain*-poet, although no time-machine can thrust the student into the fourteenth century, although one can only surmise the poet's intent, it seems reasonable to say that the poet--with a sensitive, creative mind and an intellect tuned to the excitement incited by the rebirth of the chivalric tradition--created a work to embellish this movement. The very themes of sacrifice, of loyalty begotten in the ancient comitatus of Anglo-Saxon Britain, the very names of Bercilak, Gawain, and Arthur rooted in Celtic tradition, the very choice of verse form in the lay, all seem to have been garnered to present a tribute to the chivalric ideal.

Because of extensive modern scholarship, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has been examined from every vantage point. Its themes, its origins, its symbolism, its structure have been exposed to such close scrutiny that it is possible to overlook the obvious intent of the poem. The choice of setting, the choice of characters, the choice of themes, and the choice of verse form all have in common at least one basic intent. That intent seems to have been to bring before the courtly fourteenth century audience the glittering picture of the chivalric code with all of its historic and traditional implications.

Into this audience is brought the young and naive Gawain who shows his allegiance to his lord and accepts the awful challenge by saying:

> Quat schuld I wonde?
> Of destinés derf and dere
> What may mon do bot fonde?
>
> (ll. 563-565)

It is perhaps here that the discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* should begin.

APPENDIX I

Buchanan provides the following chart of parallels of the temptation motif:[1]

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT	CURIO'S CASTLE	CARL
	1. Three heroes	1. Three heroes
	2. Arrive at castle at nightfall	2. Arrive at castle at nightfall
3. Gawain is hero	3. Chief hero-Cuchulinn	3. Chief hero-Gawain
4. Entertained by Green Knight's wife	4. Entertained by Curio's wife	4. Entertained by Carl's wife
5. She carries out Green Knight's instructions	5. She is carrying out Curio's instructions	
6. Three-day test period	6. Three-day test period	
7. Green Knight absent during tests	7. Curio absent during tests	
	8. Failure of Loegaire and Conall	8. Failure of Baldwin and Kay
	9. Beasts attack Cuchulinn	9. Inimical beasts
	10. Spear hurling	10. Spear hurling
11. Test by Green Knight's wife		11. Test by Carl's wife
12. Gawain best knight	12. Cuchulinn is champion	12. Gawain best knight

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[1] Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

APPENDIX II

Hulbert's list of orders established in the late fourteenth century:

"Duke John IV of Brittany, Order of the Ermine, 1381

"Albert of Bavaria, Count of Hainault, Order of St. Anthony, 1382

"Enguerrand de Coucy, Earl of Bedford, Order of the Crown, 1390

"Alphonso XI of Castile, Order of the Band, 1332

"King John of France, Order of the Star, 1351

"Louis of Tarento, Order of the Holy Spirit, 1352

"Louis II, Duke of Bourbon, Order of the Shield of Gold, 1369

"Louis of France, Duke of Orleans, Order of the Porcupine, 1394

"Boucicant, Marshal of France, Order of the White Lady with the Green Shield, late fourteenth century

"Count of Burgundy, Cavaliers of St. George, late fourteenth century."[1]

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[1]Hulbert, *op. cit.*, p. 715.

APPENDIX III

Henry Savage's suggestions concerning the identity of the Gawain-poet:

"A searcher through the Register of John of Gaunt, the Calendars of Close, Patent, and Charter Rolls, and unpublished material in the Public Record Office of the Duchy of Lancaster in the fourteenth century, finds frequent mention of members of the Lancashire family of Hornby. The family, apparently of North Lancashire origin, followed the fortunes of John of Gaunt and his close kinsfolk, and profited by doing so.

"A John de Hornby in 13 Ed. II was possessed of freewarren in Ireby (Lancs.); Cal. Rot. Chart, p. 153. Ireby is part of Thornton parish (Yks.). The township is situated east of Whittington (Lancs.). Whittington Manor and the advowson of Thornton church were part of the Coucy holdings. John Hornby purchased land in N. Lancs. in 35 Ed. I, (Lands. Fines, Part II, p. 41, note 1). An Edmund de Horn(e)by held three oxgangs of land in Claughton-in-Lonsdale in 1346 (Vict. Hist. of Lancs. 211). The Hornby who seems to have made the family fortunes was William, a trusted servant of John of Gaunt. He had also served in the Hanaper (Dept. of Enrolling and Sealing) of the royal chancery ("clericus Hanaperii regis et ducis,") D. King's Rememb. 32,

Append I, 354, Roll of Fines, Letters Close and Pat., and Charters). He must have been a notable pluralist, for he had been rector of the church at Ribchester (1349-64), Vict. Hist. of Lancs. 7. 41, note 45, and was holding from 1367-88 (ibid, p. 265) the church of St. Michaels-on-Wyre (Cal. Close Rolls 1369-74). Enguerrand de Coucy's Nether Wyresdale lordship included a large part of Wyresdale parish (Vict. Hist. of Lancs. 7. 300). The reference from the Close Rolls cited a short while ago also tells us that Hornby had at one time been granted possession of land and rent in Whittington, a manor held either wholly or in part by Coucy (Vict. Hist. of Lancs. 242-43). One wonders whether he had secured his grant through the favor of the Earl or Countess of Bedford, or by virtue of Gaunt's influence with his sister. He was receiver for the Duchy of Lancaster in John of Gaunt's household by August, 1371 (Reg. of John of Gaunt 1372, no. 780) and in 1383 chancellor of the Duchy exchequer (reg. of John of Gaunt 1379-83, I. xxii-iii). Tenure of these positions evidently gave him opportunity to grow wealthy, for we find frequent mention of his name in agreements or deeds concerned with the holding or transfer of lands in the county. Recognizance deeds of D. K. R. (32 App. I, p. 362) show that he was in the custom of making loans

to the smaller landholders of his county. The fact that he is named as one who had an interest in a lawsuit over a moity of the manor of Winmarleigh in Garstang, formerly held by William de Coucy (was it granted again to Enguerrand after his appearance in England?), shows that he had connections within the area of the Earl of Bedford's landed interest; see Vict. Hist. of Lancs. 7. 306, note 11. "More interesting than William is a certain Robert de Hornby. In 1358 he mainprizes John de Ditton, king's clerk; see Cal. Fine Rolls, 1356-68, 7. 57. He is mentioned as a king's clerk in 1360 (op. cit. 7. 125-26). On June 1, 1365, he was appointed along with William de Wykeham, as an attorney for Enguerrand de Coucy for two years (Cal. Pat. Rolls 1364-67, p. 105). Appointment was doubtless made because as a Lancashire man he must have been thoroughly familiar with Coucy's holdings in that county. Is he the same Robert de Hornby to whom, and to his wife Margery and son William, Gilbert de Kighlye (ey) granted in 1357 his share of the stream and fishing of the river Wyre between Crossford and Skepulford (Vict. His. of Lancs. 7. 277 note 8)? It is interesting to note that the lordship of the territory mentioned above had belonged to William de Coucy. Between 1366 and 1371 a certain Thos. de Rigmaiden demised Wedacre in Garstang (a Coucy lordship) to his son John, if he married Margaret, daughter of Robt. de Hornby (Vict. Hist. of Lancs. 7. 316). Is

this last Robert identical with the preceding one, or with Robert the king's clerk?

"A certain William de Hornby (evidently not John of Gaunt's receiver) appears to have risen high in the last years of Richard II. He is mentioned as king's attorney (Cal. Close Rolls 1389-92 pp. 114-267) and apparently attained the high dignity of sergeant of the law (Cal. Pat. Rolls 1396-99, p. 2) in 1396. A William de Hornby, a yeoman of the livery of the crown, was appointed on April 22, 1397, keeper of Rysebank Castle near Calais (Cal. Pat. Rolls 1396-99, p. 112), but he may have been a relative of William the attorney. In 1387 Sir Richard de Hoghton demised his lands in Great Sowerby--part of the Wyresdale lordship belonging to the Guines family in 1324--to William de Hornby the younger for life. Whether this William be the William last mentioned (or the king's attorney, if that official be not the yeoman of the livery), I have not as yet been able to find out, but it is noteworthy that a Hornby is again mentioned in connection with the Coucy lands.

"On May 10, 1391, pardon is granted to Richard de Hornby for illegally crossing the sea with the dowager Countess de Vere, Philippa de Coucy's mother-in-law, to see her son (Cal. Pat. Rolls 1388-92, p. 407). Was this the same Richard who in 1372 was indicted for robbery committed in

Lancashire (Cal. Pat. Rolls 1370-74, p. 217)? Finally, in a letter patent dated June 2, 1377, Sheen, mention is made of Wilkin de Hornby as "a former servant of the Earl of Bedford" (Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1374-77, p. 477). "It is, then, possible that the last name of the G-poet might have been prosaic Hornby, though it is impossible to find a single piece of direct evidence that justifies us in the surmise. If it be objected that it would have been unlikely that busy and hard-headed men of affairs as the Hornbys wrote or had time for poetry, we must not forget Chaucer."[1]

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[1]Savage, The Gawain Poet, pp. 213-216.

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