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FUSING TRADITIONS:
THE EPIC CONVENTIONS OF ANGLO-SAXON POETRY AND SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

A Dissertation
Presented for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Keith P. Taylor
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my son

Gabriel Preston Taylor

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Abstract

Scholars have embraced a "standard reading" of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in which the constituent elements of the poem have been defined almost exclusively via reference to the conventions of the continental romance. But, such romantic approaches to SGGK are complicated by the presence of the "anti-romantic" features of the poem. The conventions of the romance cannot justify the Gawain-poet's decision to cast Sir Gawain—who epitomized trecherye in the fourteenth century—as the hero of SGGK; neither can they explain the Gawain-poet's pairing of "challenge" and "temptation" motifs or the thematic significance of the laughter with which Arthur greets Sir Gawain's account of his failure at Hautedesert.

The Gawain-poet's choices in this regard become less disconcerting if we consider them in light of the conventions of the Anglo-Saxon epic. Because most Anglo-Saxon epic heroes achieve their status because they overcome a series of obstacles despite others' low expectations of them, Sir Gawain's own inglorious reputation would render him-at least from the perspective of a poet familiar with the conventions of the Anglo-Saxon

tradition—a character of immense "heroic potential." Likewise, if we remain mindful of the moral obligations which bind guest and host in the poetry of the epic tradition as we read the "challenge" and "temptation" episodes of SGGK, it becomes clear that when Gawain chooses to participate in the Green Knight's game—the terms of which call for Gawain to disarm and attack a guest of the court—Gawain behaves as discourteously as he does when he accepts and conceals Lady Bertilak's green girdle from his host.

Gawain finally comes to understand the discourtesy inherent in his conduct and attempts to impart to Arthur the lesson which his trials have taught him. Arthur dismisses Gawain's counsel with a laugh which renders Gawain's sacrifice for the court as tragically ineffectual as that of Cassandra of Troy. With his concluding reference to Troy itself, the Gawain-poet leaves his audience to contemplate the tragedy of Camelot's untimely demise; thus, he imbues SGGK with the thematic sense of waste common to texts of the epic tradition, particularly Beowulf.

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Chapter One

The Best Books of Romance

Since its discovery by William Madden in the early part of the nineteenth century, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (hereafter SGGK) has occupied a place of scholarly distinction. Critics have long considered the poem to be a milestone of Middle English literature and, as one might expect, the high degree of critical interest in the literary and linguistic complexities of SGGK has yielded a voluminous body of scholarship characterized by highly divergent opinions and heated arguments touching many of the particulars of the poem. However, despite critical disagreements concerning such matters as the authorship of SGGK, the meaning of the poem, and the degree to which the poem is evidence of an indigenous insular alliterative tradition, there is little question in the minds of most critics as to the genre of poetry to which SGGK belongs. As far as most scholars are concerned, SGGK is exclusively a romance, certainly the finest of the myriad English verse romances to be produced during the latter part of the fourteenth century. The surety of such a categorical statement, many would suggest, is to be found in the poem itself, for in the concluding lines of SGGK, the Gawain-

poet reminds his audience that he has recounted the events recorded in his poem "As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce" (2521).[1]

Under normal circumstances, such a declaration on the part of a poet would be enough to allay any questions concerning the genre of a poem. But, while most would agree that SGGK includes a number of elements that are rightly attributed to way romance is manifested in England, it is likewise difficult to ignore the numerous features of SGGK that appear to distinguish it from other poems of the genre. Not the least of these is the presence in SGGK of a delicately woven plot combining two distinct literary motifs—the "Challenge" and the "Temptation"; though these motifs appear individually in a number of medieval romances, no known continental source for SGGK can account for the Gawain-poet's decision to pair these motifs in his poem. We likewise cannot account for the Gawain-poet's alliterative meter, the intricate

[1] All references to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarenden Press, 1967). Unless otherwise noted, translations of the poem are my own.

structure of his poem, or the subtlety of his narrative and descriptive technique by turning to the romances of the continent. Clearly, if SGGK is to be taken as a romance, we must concede it to be a romance unlike any other in the corpus of medieval English literature.

Early critics of SGGK, however, were not inclined to question the genre of the poem; rather, they sought to uncover the source or sources of the poem which would demonstrate that SGGK was, in fact, only the next logical step in the development of the insular romance. Out of this desire to account for the unique features of SGGK in light of the genre to which most critics presume that it belongs has arisen an entire school of scholarship which has as its goal the recovery of those "best books of romance" upon which the Gawain-poet presumably drew as he composed SGGK. It is the hope of many critics that these sources, when located, will help to resolve a number of the difficult questions concerning the origin, structure, and meaning of SGGK—problems largely attributable to the uniqueness of the poem—that continue to plague students of SGGK.[2]

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[2] See, for example, Jessie L. Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain: Studies upon its Original Scope and

Many of the early source and analogue studies of SGGK are characterized by a unified goal; the retrieval of a single continental source for the poem, one in which we find, at the very least, a pairing of the challenge and temptation motifs so important to SGGK. Although no single such source for the poem has as yet been recovered, there have been a number of scholarly attempts to reconstruct a source of this type, the most influential of which is undoubtedly G. L. Kittredge's landmark A Study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[3] At the outset of his

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Significance (1897; New York: AMS Press, 1972) 87-102; Coolidge Otis Chapman, "Virgil and the Gawain-poet," PMLA 60 (1945): 16-23; Andrea Clough, "The French Element in SGGK With Special Reference to the Description of Bertilak's Castle in ll. 785-810," NM 86 (1985): 187-96.

[3] G. L. Kittredge, A Study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, (Harvard: Harvard UP, 1916). For another example of a study of this type, see J. L. Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Kny3t," MP 8.8 (1915): 433-62; MP 8.12 (1916): 689-730. Hulbert and Kittredge both are intensely concerned with the recovery of the probable sources of SGGK. Further, the two employ a comparable methodology and, on many fronts, Kittredge and Hulbert

investigation of the poem, Kittredge proposes that "the immediate source of Gawain and the Green Knight was [probably] a French poem," and, operating under this assumption, Kittredge begins his reconstruction of this "lost" French source of SGGK by tracing the development of the challenge episode that provides the framework for the poem (3).[4] He does this, first of all, by pointing out

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draw similar conclusions; both scholars, for example, conclude that "SGGK was not compiled from two stories but is a transformation of a single . . . tale" (Hulbert 730). However, while Kittredge is content to search for a twelfth-century continental source for the poem, Hulbert traces the origins of SGGK to a more "primitive" source, the mythological paradigm of the "fairy-mistress story" (Hulbert 460).

[4] Kittredge does acknowledge the inherent difficulty involved in reconstructing this "lost" French source of SGGK; he concedes that the challenge and temptation episodes that comprise SGGK—and which Kittredge supposes must have coexisted within this hypothetical continental analogue to the poem—must be considered separately because "each [motif] exists elsewhere in literature, and each is quite independent of the other in origin and history" (8).

that the details of the challenge episode of SGGK are roughly analogous those recounted in The Champion's Bargain, the concluding segment of the eleventh-century Irish epic Fled Bricrend, or Bricriu's Feast.[5] After summarizing The Champion's Bargain and drawing the attention of his audience to a number of modest congruities between the challenge episode located in SGGK and that which concludes Fled Bricrend,[6] Kittredge

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[5] Kittredge provides lengthy summaries of each of the texts that he suggests is analogous to SGGK; however, all of the texts mentioned by Kittredge in his argument have been complied in translation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Sources and Analogues, ed. Elisabeth Brewer, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992). See Kittredge 9-14 for his summary of The Champion's Bargain.

[6] For example, Kittredge says that "we should note the upbraiding words of [the Green Knight and the Stranger in SGGK and The Champion's Bargain, respectively] when he has specified the character of his proposal and the knights hang back. 'What!' cries the Green Knight. 'Is this Arthur's house that is so highly renowned in so many realms? Where are your pride and your conquests, your fierceness and your boldness and your great words? Now

concludes that "in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, we are forced to infer that the Challenge in Gawain and the Green Knight goes back, in some way, to an elaborate literary version of The Champion's Bargain in Irish" (17).

It is at this point in his study that Kittredge works to explain the presence of this Celtic literary motif in a poem that he has already suggested is derived from a single French source. He does this, first of all, by arguing that "The Irish tale of The Champion's Bargain . . . must have passed into French at an early date, for it was utilized by four romancers [the authors of Le Livre de Caradoc (part of the first continuation of Chrétien's Perceval), La Mule sanz Frein, the prose Perlesvaus, and the lost French SGGK] who wrote in that language." Kittredge argues, however, that because the challenge episodes in each of the aforementioned texts

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are the splendor and the renown of the Round Table overcome by a word of one man's speech; for all cower in dread, though no blow has been given!' So in the Irish tale:--'Your valor and your prowess are gone, O Ulstermen! Great is the desire of your warriors for the champion's portion, but they are unable to contest it'" (16).

"preserves feature of [the challenge episode extant in The Champion's Bargain] which the [others] have lost," none of these four romancers [could have derived the tale of the challenge] from any one of the other three" (25).

To account for the discrepancies among these texts, Kittredge proposes a rather elaborate pattern of transmission for the challenge episode that has the Irish version of the challenge story passing into Old French first by way of a lost "episodical romance of Gawain [termed by Kittredge 'O'] probably composed in the twelfth century in the Anglo-Norman dialect" (25). It is from this version of the challenge story, he suggests, that the challenge episodes of La Mule sanz Frein, Perlesvaus, and a number of other French texts, most notably the Humbaut, ultimately are derived.[7] Kittredge traces the versions of the challenge preserved in Le Livre de Caradoc and the lost French SGGK, on the other hand, to a hypothetical redaction of 'O' (termed by him 'R') which he suggests was probably written "about 1200 or a little earlier . . . in a dialect of Continental French" (75) and concludes

[7] For a discussion of the Humbaut and its relationship to the challenge and temptation episodes of the English SGGK, see Kittredge 61-66 and 99.

that the authors of Caradoc and the lost French SGGK drew independently upon this "R-text" of the challenge as the source of the challenge episodes that appear in their respective texts. Finally, Kittredge proposes that the version of the challenge episode preserved in the fourteenth-century English version of SGGK must have been derived from the challenge episode as it once existed in the lost thirteenth-century French version of the poem.[8]

Kittredge follows this same line of reasoning as he turns to an examination of the temptation motif of SGGK. He begins by discussing the various forms of the temptation episode that appear in folklore, myth, and religion but quickly restricts his study to the continental versions of the temptation since, as he puts it, "we are concerned [here] not with the possible origins of the formative elements of the Temptation or its dramatis personae, but with the tale itself, with the individual story fully formed and characterized by its own

[8] See Kittredge 38-40 and 66-72 for his account of the 'R' and 'O' redactions that he proposes are ultimately the source of the challenge episode in the lost French SGGK.

peculiar plot" (79).[9] Kittredge points out that the temptation episode of SGGK functions according to the

[9] A number of early studies of SGGK pay careful attention to the mythological and folkloric elements of the poem. For example, E. K. Chambers, The Medieval Stage, vol. 1 (London: Oxford UP, 1903) suggests that the Gawain-poet's characterization of the Green Knight is little more than a transformation of the folkloric "green man of the peasantry, who dies and lives again" (185-6), and Arthur Bernard Cook, "The European Sky God: The Celts," Folklore 17 (1906): 308-48, 427-53, suggests that the Green Knight "is the Italic tree-god Virbius" (340-41). Kittredge is utterly dismissive of approaches to the poem. He says that "Neither the Irish author of The Champion's Bargain nor any of his successors in the line had any notion of associating the challenger with Celtic 'probably arboreal' deities, Arician groves, spirits of vegetation, or the annual death and rebirth of the embodied vital principle. To them he was merely an enchanter, a shape-shifter, or else a human being under spells, and they wasted neither ink nor oil in mythologizing. And so we may drop this question into

paradigm of "test-story" and is similar to temptation motifs contained in the Middle English romance The Carl of Carlisle and the French Chevalier a l'Épée.[10] Various incongruities in the temptation episodes found in Carl and Chevalier lead Kittredge to suggest that the account of the temptation preserved in Chevalier could not have influenced the author of Carl, or vice-versa; rather, he suggests that Carl and Chevalier must both "go back to a common source, which the English Carl represents much more faithfully than the French [Chevalier]" (86). Kittredge buttresses his argument in favor of a common French source for the temptation episodes extant in Carl and Chevalier by pointing to two Italian poems—one anonymous, one by Pucci—that preserve "the essentials of [the temptation episodes found in Carl and Chevalier]" (93). Once again, however, Kittredge asserts that various discrepancies between the temptation episodes recounted in each canzone force us to conclude that the two canzoni must have been

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limbo, with the parting observation that thought is free" (199).

[10] Kittredge 83-85 notes that a similar episode containing a "more primitive form" of the "test-story" motif exists in the OF romance of Yder.

independently derived from "a lost Italian original," itself a derivative of a [second] lost French poem from which both the Carl and the Chevalier are somehow derived" (94-5). Operating under this assumption, Kittredge proceeds to reconstruct the version of the temptation that he believes must have existed in this second lost French romance of Gawain, and finally notes that it is this version of the temptation episode that "the author of the lost French Gawain and the Green Knight combined with the challenge to make up his plot" (106).[11]

Still, in the final analysis, Kittredge finds that no source considered by him in his study—lost or extant—can account for a number of the most characteristic features of SGGK, several of which he catalogues, suggesting that they are "illustrative of the freedom with which the English poet treated his French source" (Kittredge 130).[12] He concludes that SGGK

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[11] See Kittredge 106 for a summary of this reconstructed version of the temptation episode.

[12] In what he calls a "far but exhaustive list," Kittredge notes "the learned introductory stanza summarizing the fabulous settlements of Western Europe and mentioning the Siege of Troy . . . and Felix Brutus of

> must be utterly different in style and poetic manner from the lost French poem on which it is based, for in these particulars, it bears no resemblance to anything in French literature. It marks the culmination of a development of style and poetic manner that is peculiar to England and to a certain part of England (the West Midland and Northern district), just as it marks the culmination of a kind of metrical development similarly limited in geographical scope. (128)

In the eighty years or so since the initial publication of his text, Kittredge's Study of SGGK has generated almost as much critical commentary—and raised nearly as many questions—as the poem about which

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Britain; the description of the Christmas festivities and that of the Green Knight . . . the challenge and the speech of Sir Gawain; the highly poetical stanzas on the changing seasons; the very elaborate description of the process of arming a knight, with the allegorical account of the pentangle of virtues; Gawain's itinerary . . . the winter piece; [and] the justly celebrated account of the three hunts" (130).

Kittredge's study was initially written, and later students of SGGK have questioned nearly every aspect of Kittredge's Study of *SGGK* from his methodology to his conclusions. Still, it is difficult to understate the degree of influence that Kittredge's text has exerted—and, I would argue, continues to exert—upon the state of Gawain-scholarship, for it is in Kittredge's text that we find the forceful articulation of what are arguably the two most important critical precepts concerning SGGK to be introduced by a twentieth-century scholar, both of which have found their way into a number of influential studies of the poem. The first of these (now a critical a priori) is that SGGK is, in fact, a poem in the tradition of the French romance. Although Kittredge was not the first critic to suggest that SGGK is a poem linked to the romance tradition, he was among the first to argue that the Gawain-poet was indebted almost exclusively to texts that were themselves the product of this tradition. Prior to the publication of Kittredge's study, critics had proposed that, in all likelihood, SGGK was born of the Gawain-poet's intimate knowledge of any number of texts, themselves the products of a diverse group of literary

traditions.[13] Following the publication of Kittredge's study, we see a marked decline in scholarship of this sort; in fact, it all but disappears, and one can only assume that this sudden change in the critical climate of SGGK is attributable at least in part to the efficacy with which Kittredge makes his case in favor of a single continental source for SGGK.

It is equally important to note that we see the influence of Kittredge's premise concerning the continental origins of SGGK even in the works of those authors who essentially disagree with his contention that

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[13] For two characteristic studies of this sort, see both Weston's The Legend of Sir Gawain: Studies Upon Its Original Scope and Significance and Bernhard Ten Brink, History of English Literature (to Wycliff), trans. Horace M. Kennedy, vol. 1 (New York: Henry Holt, 1889) 337-51. Ten Brink suggests that the Gawain-poet owes much both the Latin and French traditions; similarly, Weston points out a number similarities that exist between SGGK, Diu Krône, La Mule sans Frein, and Fled Bricrend and proposes that either a common source produced all of these poems or that SGGK has ties to the Celtic, Germanic, and French literary traditions.

only those texts that are themselves the products of the continental romance tradition could have influenced the Gawain-poet as he composed SGGK. Roger Loomis, for example, takes issue with Kittredge and, in a number of studies, proposes that the influence of the Celtic literary tradition on SGGK is greater than Kittredge would have us believe.[14] Still, it is significant that, even as he argues that many significant parallels not mentioned by Kittredge work to link SGGK to the Celtic literary tradition, Loomis never suggests that SGGK might be classified as anything other than a romance; in fact, in his Development of the Arthurian Romance, Loomis concurs that SGGK represents "the masterpiece of the medieval English romance" (153).[15] Even more telling is the fact that Loomis never really moves beyond his consideration of

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[14] See, for example, See, for example, Loomis' "The Irish Framework of Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA 47 (1932): 315-18; The Visit to the Perilous Castle: A Study of the Arthurian Modifications of an Irish Theme," PMLA 48 (1933): 1000-1035; and "More Celtic Elements in Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP 42 (1943): 149-84.

[15] R. S. Loomis, Development of the Arthurian Romance, (New York: Norton, 1963).

Celtic sources of SGGK to suggest that other similar literary traditions—the Germanic or Anglo-Saxon traditions, for example—might have influenced the Gawain-poet. In other words, Loomis essentially confines his own consideration of SGGK to those literary traditions explicitly mentioned by Kittredge in his study.

The second—and more often contested—of Kittredge's critical premises touching SGGK concerns those elements of the poem that are not so easily reconciled with the literature of the romance tradition, those elements in SGGK that Kittredge rightly notes "[bear] no resemblance to anything in French literature." Kittredge posits that these "anti-romance elements" of the poem are certainly the invention of the Gawain-poet but quickly concludes that any modifications or additions made by the Gawain-poet to his source material probably "were not such as to affect the essential integrity of the story" (4). In essence, Kittredge proposes that the "anti-romance elements" of SGGK serve primarily to show that the Gawain-poet possessed what could only be termed an extraordinary "wit," a wit that Kittredge suggests tends towards "poetical embellishment." It is understandably for this reason that Kittredge searches for the meaning of SGGK in

what he presumes to be the source material for the poem.[16] Given the precedent set by the romancers contemporary with the Gawain-poet, this approach to the poem seems only reasonable; concerning the many extant Middle English versions of Old French romances, A. C. Baugh notes that "In cases where the French original can be identified . . . the similarities are often such as to leave little doubt that the English poet was following his source with reasonable fidelity, such fidelity as to suggest that the source lay open in a manuscript in front of him" (431).[17]

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[16] As to this "embellishment," Kittredge notes that "if the French poem is ever recovered, we shall doubtless find that it lacks the fine transitional passage on the changing of the seasons . . . . In like manner, we shall look in vain for the elaborate account of the arming of Gawain, for the spirited details of the three hunting scenes, and for the 'breaking of the deer'; nor will the conversations between Gawain and his hostess appear at such length as in the English, or show such delicacy of characterization" (4).

[17] A. C. Baugh, "Improvisation in the Middle English Romance," Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 103 (1959): 418-54.

Although many scholars follow Kittredge in suggesting that the anti-romance elements of SGGK are the invention of the Gawain-poet, critics have long recognized that studies which presume that, in order to come to terms with the "meaning" of a text, we must first recover or reconstruct a number of hypothetical lost sources of the poem, pose an inherent danger to students of the poem in question in that such studies privilege the hypothetical over the tangible.[18] Thus, where Kittredge suggests that

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[18] William Calin articulates this point nicely in his The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1995); he writes that "one outcome of the hunt for lost sources has been to diminish the parameters of literary creativity on the part of the English romancers, attributing divergences from the French not to them but uniquely to the ontological state of the Urtext." After mentioning several such studies, including scholarly attempts to link the Earl of Toulouse, Sir Degaré, and Sir Orfeo to "lost" French sources because, for example, "the hero [of the Earl of Toulouse] is French and the subject is courtly," Calin concludes that

we will be able really to understand the "meaning" of SGGK only after we have either recovered or reconstructed the "lost sources" of the poem, a number of critics writing after Kittredge—Laura Loomis and Sacvan Bercovitch, to name but two—have suggested that our knowledge of the likely sources of SGGK is important only in so far as it enables us to acquire a better understanding of the aesthetic principles that inspired the author of SGGK to employ the unique combination of romance and anti-romance elements that characterize the poem—an understanding that these critics suggest will better enable us to understand the "meaning" of SGGK. Loomis, for example, begins her 1959 consideration of the Gawain-poet with the nearly formulaic proposition that the source material for SGGK is fundamentally a product of the French tradition. In attempting to explain the Gawain-poet's unique pairing of a beheading episode with a temptation episode in SGGK, she

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> The invention of lost sources would remove from the annals of English literature the original creation of two charming and one great brief narrative. None of this is necessary. It is always preferable to work with the texts we have than the ones we would like to have. (431)

suggests that the Gawain-poet either "derived the Challenge and Temptation from separate lost French texts . . . and fitted the two stories together; or [that] he found this highly artistic combination ready made by some French poet of unusual talent" (17).[19] She goes on, however, to point out that it is by virtue of the Gawain-poet's additions to these proposed sources that SGGK acquires its meaning; after noting some of the French and Celtic origins of the motifs employed by the Gawain-poet, she concludes that "No other medieval poet . . . has so transformed traditional romantic materials by grace of his own spiritual insight, or given them more enduring significance" (23). Likewise, Bercovitch begins his consideration of SGGK[20] by granting primacy to the French

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[19] Laura Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford: Clarenden Press, 1959) 528-40. Rpt. in Critical Studies of *SGGK*, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1967) 3-23.

[20] Sacvan Bercovitch, "Romance and Anti-Romance in SGGK," PQ 44 (1965): 30-37. Rpt. in Critical Studies of

tradition of SGGK but quickly goes on to suggest that "an essential part of the poem's structure and meaning lies in its anti-romance elements" (257). However, Bercovitch ultimately contends that, despite their obvious importance, these anti-romance elements of the poem work merely to cause the reader to "[laugh] at certain romance conventions—and thereby [vitalize] and [enlarge the poem's] affirmation of romance values" (257); he goes on to conclude that "as the 'literary' romance elements are subverted [by the anti-romance elements of SGGK], the poem becomes a 'profound celebration' of courtly life and ideals" (266).

But, even as they discuss the importance of the anti-romance elements of SGGK, it is impossible not to notice that both Loomis and Bercovitch hearken back to Kittredge for the premises upon which they base their respective studies—the notions that SGGK is a romance and that the anti-romantic additions to the poet's sources are the original creations of the Gawain-poet. And, though Loomis and Bercovitch find themselves at odds concerning the relative importance they assign to the anti-romance

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SGGK, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (Notre Dame, U of Notre Dame P, 1967) 257-66.

elements of SGGK, even a cursory survey of scholarship touching the poem shows the aforementioned premises to be almost conventional features of criticism of SGGK, particularly those studies of the poem produced between 1920 and 1965.

In fact, students of medieval literature remained virtually unwavering in their acceptance of Kittredge's critical données regarding the sources of SGGK—and the relative insignificance of the anti-romance elements of the poem—until the 1961 publication Larry Benson's "The Source of the Beheading Episode in SGGK."[21] In his article, Benson questions Kittredge's conclusion that Le Livre de Caradoc and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight were derived from a common but no longer extant French source. He does this, first of all, by pointing out that Kittredge had based his conclusions on an examination of only a single version of Caradoc—the only one available to scholars at the time. On the basis of his examination of three distinct metrical redactions of Le Livre de Caradoc and a later prose redaction of the tale, all discovered long after the publication of Kittredge's Study of *SGGK* ,

[21] Larry D. Benson, "The Source of the Beheading Episode in SGGK," MP 59 (1961): 1-12.

Benson contends that "the principle and direct source of the beheading episode in Sir Gawain is Le Livre de Caradoc" (2). And, although the implications of Benson's study would require the rejection of "most widely accepted theories of the descent of the plot [of SGGK]," Benson concludes that "the knowledge of Caradoc [as] a source for Sir Gawain is more valuable for the possibilities it opens up than for those it closes" (12) and continues his exploration of these possibilities in his 1965 Art and Tradition in *SGGK*.[22]

In what is arguably the most influential study of the Gawain-poet's use of his source material since Kittredge, Benson breaks with critical tradition in suggesting that it is important that we recognize the possible range of literary, folkloric, and mythological analogues to the poem primarily because our knowledge of them "helps us to recognize what a poet is doing by showing us what he chose not to do, what possibilities he chose to ignore" (Art and Tradition 10). Benson prefaces his seminal study with the fairly conventional notion that "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is first of all a romance," (1) but he quickly goes

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[22] Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in *SGGK* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers UP, 1965).

on to dismiss the idea that the contributions made by Gawain-poet to the artistry of SGGK are more like those one might attribute to an unusually talented copyist. Quite the contrary, Benson proposes that the Gawain-poet is actually a

> skilled romancer [who in his role as] 'maker' [and] 'clerk,' . . . capitalizes upon the modification of material that is natural to romance by using an existing tale not only as the clerkly authority essential to the fictional world of this genre but also as a set of possibilities that, in his role as maker, he can realize so far as his abilities allow and his purposes require. (Art and Tradition 9)

Benson's characterization of the Gawain-poet here as a "maker" is particularly telling because, by choosing to characterize the author of SGGK as a "poet" in the literal sense of the word, Benson is attributing to the Gawain-poet the sort of genius that Sidney, in his Defense of Poesy, suggests is characteristic of all "right" poets. Those familiar with the Defense will recall that, in his treatise, Sidney defends poets against the charge that their creations, beautiful though they may be, are mere

ornaments and are intrinsically worthless because they serve only as poor imitations of reality. Sidney suggests that a "right poet"—a maker in the true sense of the term—relies upon his talent to create "little golden worlds," worlds that are better than the reality from which poets draw their inspiration. Similarly, with his reference to the Gawain-poet as a "maker," Benson seems to suggest that the Gawain-poet, like the "maker" of Sidney's Defense, has employed his own artifice to improve upon the source material available to him, and, in the process, to create a "litel golden boke," the "best of book of romance," as it were.[23]

It is upon his notion of the Gawain-poet as a "maker" that Benson's study ultimately depends, for as he concludes his preliminary discussion of the Gawain-poet's handling of the Caradoc story, Benson notes that "like romancers before him, the Gawain-poet reshapes his inherited tales to produce a new theme" (Art and Tradition 55). Benson suggests that in order to understand this new theme, however, we must first examine the most

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[23] Sir Philip Sidney, The Defense of Poesy, The Renaissance in England, ed. Hyder E. Rollins and Herschel Baker (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1954) 605-624.

characteristic feature of SGGK--the Gawain-poet's pairing of romantic and unromantic elements in his text. Benson attributes these anti-romance elements to the genius of the Gawain-poet, himself immersed in the conventions of the insular literary tradition, and goes on to suggest that the "art" of the Gawain-poet rests in his ability to fuse these romance and anti-romance elements in such a way as to create a "balance" of sorts between the continental and insular literary traditions. Benson suggests that we see this balance, for example, in the Gawain-poet's characterizations of Sir Gawain and Bercilak, "an ideally chivalric hero and an equally superlative but in some ways churlish opponent" (Art and Tradition 55); in the style of the poem, which Benson suggests, "like the best Old English poetry . . . is concentrated on a relatively small number of episodes that resemble one another in structure and content" (163); and, most significantly, in the theme of the poem.

Benson suggests that the meaning of SGGK is tied directly to the Gawain-poet's treatment of the theme of his poem, which Benson suggests is one of "renown," "the central ideal of chivalry and a universal topic of medieval romance, in which a concern for fame is the

preoccupation of every good knight" (Art and Tradition 209). Yet, despite what he argues is the poem's conventionally romantic theme, Benson points out that, by means of his pairing of romance and anti-romance elements throughout the episodes of his poem, the Gawain-poet is able to render patently inappropriate a traditional romance ending, one containing "the glorious affirmation of the hero's virtues and the ideal he represents" (Art and Tradition 242). Discussing the disgrace experienced by Gawain upon his return to Camelot, he observes

> Sir Gawain could hardly end in any other way, for this final scene is only an extension of the recurrent alternation of romance and unromantic elements that repeatedly undercuts the high seriousness of the narrative. The poet never allows us to view Gawain's actions in the simple light of romance, and Gawain's heroic deeds and attitudes are constantly juxtaposed with the comic or humiliating. (Art and Tradition 242)

For Benson, then, the meaning of SGGK is almost wholly dependent upon the poet's introduction, "alongside . . . exaggerated traditional elements" of "equally emphatic untraditional materials." He proposes that the

presence of these anti-romance elements of SGGK works to call into question the entire tradition of the medieval romance by "[introducing into the poem] another set of values, drawn from outside the framework of the traditional assumptions with which the romance ideal is usually tested" (Art and Tradition 208). The result of the Gawain-poet's efforts, Benson concludes, is a poem that, in a "festive" tone characteristic of the medieval romance, works

> to [weigh] and gently [criticize] the ideal of literature and life that was romance [while simultaneously suggesting] that this noble ideal can survive only if it takes account of the rest of life and of the human limitations of even its best representatives.[24] (Art and Tradition 248)

[24] See also S. S. Hussey, "Sir Gawain and Romance Writing," Studia Neophilologica 40 (1968): 161-174. Hussey, like Benson, contends that "From the moment Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge, he becomes involved in a questioning of traditional romance values" (174). However, where Benson suggests that it is only through the incorporation of anti-romance elements into his narrative that the Gawain-poet is able to challenge the conventions

In retrospect, Benson's study has proven itself to be a rare work of scholarship, one so influential that, in the process of challenging the conventional wisdom surrounding SGGK, it has caused many students of the text to re-think the very assumptions that underlie their understanding of the poem itself. Prior to the publication of Art and Tradition in *SGGK*, critics of SGGK had been all too quick to dismiss the anti-romance elements of the poem merely as scribal anomalies that we understand to be a function of the process of literary transmission during the Middle Ages. Largely as a result of Benson's convincing argument accrediting the better part of the poem's meaning to the Gawain-poet's careful

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around which most medieval romances are structured, Hussey suggests the Gawain-poet's questioning of romantic conventions is likewise evident in his handling of the romantic elements of his poem. Hussey pays careful attention to the Gawain-poet's "moral approach to the courtly love episodes, his outstanding appreciation of the nuances of much of the language he used, and the tight hold he kept on his story" (173) in order to show that in the paradoxical world of the medieval romance, "only the very best are good enough to fail" (174).

addition of decidedly unromantic elements to material gleaned from his intimate knowledge of the texts of the romance tradition, particularly Le Livre de Caradoc, this position has been all but refuted. The anti-romance elements of SGGK are now acknowledged by nearly all scholars to be at least as significant as those elements of the poem indicative of the poet's familiarity with the conventions of the continental romance, and, in deference to the singularity of his work, the status of the anonymous author of SGGK has been restored to that as a "right" poet, a "maker" in every sense of the term.

After nearly a century of critical commentary concerning the probable sources and analogues of SGGK, we have learned much concerning the genesis the poem; still, many critics have found themselves dissatisfied with conclusions Benson reaches concerning the origins of the anti-romance elements of SGGK. Benson's vague suggestion that the anti-romance elements of SGGK are "the poet's own invention, aided by literary conventions in general rather than any one specific source," for example, raises questions far more pressing than those that it answers ("Source of the Beheading Episode" 11). Perhaps the most important of these centers around our inability to ascribe

the anti-romance elements of SGGK to the influence of a readily discernible literary tradition upon the Gawain-poet. Benson, of course, follows conventional wisdom in proposing that the anti-romance elements of SGGK are the product of the influence of Irish/Celtic literary tradition upon the Gawain-poet. Indeed, as Kittredge and others have shown, some of the more superficial unromantic elements of SGGK—the "rede e3en"[25] of the Green Knight and Bercilak's depiction as a discourteous "churl" upon his initial appearance at Camelot, for example, are easily reconcilable with the conventions of the Celtic literary tradition. But what of those elements of SGGK—the pseudo-historical frame of the poem, the Gawain-poet's vivid descriptions of the natural world and his alliterative style, for example—for which we can find neither a romantic nor an Irish analogue?[26] In the process of

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[25] I should note that, throughout this study, I have used the numeral "3" to represent the ME character "ȝ".

[26] Benson's solution, of course, is somewhat traditional; he credits to the unique literary aesthetic of the Gawain-poet those elements of SGGK that do not appear immediately reconcilable with the conventions of

working to account for the origin of the unromantic elements of SGGK, several recent critics of the poem have found themselves departing from traditional notions concerning the genesis of the poem in order to consider the possible influence of the native English tradition upon the author of the poem. Scholars have long acknowledged the probable familiarity of the Gawain-poet with the literary and linguistic conventions of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Max Kullnick, for example, was among the first to confirm what many critics of the poem had long suspected—that much of the vocabulary of the Gawain-poet is of Anglo-Saxon derivation.[27] Similarly, Frederick W.

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the continental romance or the Irish/Celtic literary tradition, and most critics since Benson have been content to follow in this vein. It is significant to note, however, that there is to date little critical agreement concerning the aesthetic of the Gawain-poet, and to attribute the anti-romance elements of SGGK to an aspect of the Gawain-poet's artistry that Benson himself does not adequately define seems problematic at best.

[27] Max Kullnick, Studien über den Wortschatz im *Sir Gawayne and the grene kny3t* (Berlin: Mayer and Müller, 1902), concludes that, although the lexicon of the Gawain-

Moorman draws attention to the Saxon elements of the poem, primarily "its verse, its diction, and its interpretation of Nature" and even goes so far as to suggest that the "primitive love for winter scenes" exhibited by the Gawain-poet links SGGK to the Old English poetic tradition.[28] Even Benson takes note of certain elements of SGGK—particularly the structure of the poem—that he says may serve as evidence of the Gawain-poet's familiarity with the stylistic conventions of the Anglo-Saxon poetry. In this regard, Benson pays particular attention to the Gawain-poet's arrangement of the episodes that constitute the plot of his poem and ultimately concludes that the structure of SGGK is demonstrative of the Gawain-poet's familiarity with the principle of "structural variation,"

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poet does seem indicative of his familiarity with a number of literary traditions, the highest percentage of the words in the Gawain-poet's lexicon—49% of them—are Anglo-Saxon in origin.

[28] Frederick W. Moorman, The Interpretation of Nature in English Poetry from *Beowulf* to Shakespeare, Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprach-und Culture-geschichte der germanischen Völker, vol. 95 (Strassburg: Trubner, 1905; New York, AMS Press, 1972) 95-102.

a conventional feature of "the best Old English poetry."[29] Benson, however, remains unconvinced that the style of SGGK is ultimately the result of the influence of the Gawain-poet's knowledge of the native English literary tradition. Instead, he turns to Baugh's 1959 study of modes of "Improvisation in the Middle English Romances"[30] in order to buttress his argument that even the stylistic

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[29] Two of the most significant discussions of the principle of structural variation in Old English poetry are, of course, those by Arthur G. Brodeur in The Art of *Beowulf*, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1959): 39-70 and John Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of Beowulf, U of Toronto Quarterly 37 (1967): 1-17. Benson follows Brodeur and Lyerle in pointing out that "poems like The Wanderer and Seafarer depend for their effect on parallel, secular and religious, restatements of the speakers' situations, and Beowulf, like Sir Gawain, is concentrated on a relatively small number of episodes that resemble one another in structure and content . . . and that form significant parallel contrasts" (Art and Tradition 162-63).

[30] For a brief summary of Baugh's argument, see p. 18 above.

and structural similarities that appear suggestive of the Gawain-poet's familiarity with the conventions of Anglo-Saxon poetry actually serve to differentiate between the Old English literary tradition and the tradition that produced SGGK. Benson points out that, although the Gawain-poet "obviously considers alliterative verse a written form of poetry . . . his insistence on oral transmission . . . seems to reflect a transitional stage [in the development of] the metrical romances, the stage of literary composition and oral transmission, a situation that accounts for the survival and spread of oral formulas even after the introduction of written literature"; he concludes that, despite the many stylistic features that link SGGK to the Old English poetic tradition, the degree of influence exacted by non-native literary sources and poetic traditions upon SGGK shows that the native English poetic traditions "must have been very weak by Gawain-poet's time" (Art and Tradition 119-20).

Benson's conclusions concerning the relative weakness of the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition at the time of the supposed composition of SGGK raises an entirely different issue, the question of whether SGGK is the product of an alliterative revival—a sudden and inexplicable resurgence

of interest in the native English alliterative style among poets working in the north of England during the late fourteenth century—or of an on-going tradition of alliterative literature in England.[31]

Clearly, the scarcity of extant 12th and 13th century alliterative poems in English has made it difficult for critics to argue for the existence of an alliterative tradition, as have the conclusions of scholars like Tom Cable, who has demonstrated convincingly that the sheer degree of metrical, linguistic, and stylistic variance discernible in the alliterative poetry of the ninth through the fourteenth centuries makes it nearly impossible to document the presence of anything like a native English alliterative tradition.[32] Further

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[31] Benson, of course, is of the opinion that SGGK is the product of an alliterative revival even though he admits that "the reasons for this rebirth of interest [in alliterative poetry] have never been clear" (Art and Tradition 122).

[32] Thomas Cable, The English Alliterative Tradition, (Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 1991). Cable traces the metrical development of English alliterative poetry in order to demonstrate that the alliterative poetry of the

complicating matters is the fact that many scholars tend to define the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition primarily in light of its single most emblematic feature—its alliterative meter. For this reason, to argue that an English poet of the fourteenth century—the Gawain-poet, for example—was immersed in the conventions of Old English poetry is, in the minds of many, to adopt a position in favor of the existence of an English alliterative tradition, a position that the studies of Cable and others has rendered virtually untenable. Consequently, even those critics who have been willing to suggest that the Gawain-poet may owe a debt much greater than most contemporary critics are willing to allow to the Old

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later Middle Ages bears only a superficial resemblance to that produced by the Anglo-Saxon scop. Cable ultimately contends that since the constituent elements of a text normally indicative of its place within a literary "tradition" are, "upon closer examination, a set of discontinuous parts, sequenced only by time" that are "created anew, recapitulated, and sustained within each individual poet," the notion of a literary tradition of any kind must be largely the product of those scholars who "seek to join or define it" (133-34).

English poetic tradition—the tradition from which the alliterative revival presumably takes its impetus—have done so only tentatively. Paul Christopherson, for example, in his essay "The Englishness of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," makes a number of what appear to be significant connections between the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition and SGGK; he follows early critics of the poem in noting, for example, that the descriptions of "natural scenery" and "wintry weather" in SGGK "show kinship in content [with Anglo-Saxon poetry]," as do the special tests of Gawain's character devised by the Gawain-poet (49).[33] It is in these tests of character, Christopherson suggests, that "one can see a link with Beowulf," a poem that he suggests is, like SGGK, "about a conception of heroism which emphasizes many of the same qualities as the age of chivalry" (53). Despite the novelty of his argument, however, Christopherson makes it clear that his study, like most before his, proceeds from the a priori assumption that SGGK was "conceived as a romance." Although he argues that "the different foreign motifs

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[33] Paul Christopherson, "The Englishness of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," On the Novel, ed. B. S. Benedikz (London: J. M. Dent, 1971) 46-56.

[employed by the Gawain-poet] have been fitted into a unified framework and given a meaning and a tone and a setting that are more English," he is quick to follow Benson in suggesting that the "the excellence of the poem [comes] from the author's own genius" (54-5).

Likewise, in a recent dissertation, Barbara J. Huval has suggested that all of the poems extant in MS Cotton Nero A.x. contain a series of elements which link them to the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition.[34] Huval prefaces her discussion of SGGK by suggesting that "in spite of its romance form and its surface connections with the courtly ethos . . . affinities with Anglo-Saxon literature do exist, specifically affinities with Beowulf, whose hero is the supreme þegn within the world of the comitatus" (164). However, aside from an enlightening discussion of the importance of the avuncular relationship in both SGGK and Beowulf and a well-wrought argument in which she proposes that the Gawain-poet's treatment of the natural perils endured by Sir Gawain during the course of his journey to Castle Hautedesert were informed by "the well established

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[34] Barbara Jane Huval, "Anglo-Saxon Lexical and Literary Implications in the Works of the Gawain-poet," Diss., Rice U, 1985.

[Anglo-Saxon] poetic tradition [governing] the treatment of the harsh winters,"[35] Huval's discussion of SGGK arises primarily out of the high degree of lexical similarity that she finds between Beowulf and SGGK.[36] Primarily on the basis of evidence of this sort, Huval concludes that "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight contains strong evidence that the poet may have been acquainted directly or indirectly with traditions and materials based in Anglo-Saxon, especially Beowulf." But, she is quick to add that

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[35] Huval 192-6 and 186.

[36] One example of the lexical agreement that Huval suggests is indicative of the Gawain-poet's familiarity with the conventions of Old English literature lies in the Gawain-poet's use of the term etyan to describe Gawain's "foes in the forest." Huval argues that etyan is the Middle English equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon eoten, a term she notes "is found frequently in Anglo-Saxon, but only in the unique manuscript of Beowulf" (181-2) and goes on to propose that "since the word eoten appears in manuscript only in Beowulf, we must consider the possibility that the Gawain-poet himself drew his associations from his own acquaintance with the supreme Anglo-Saxon hero (either in manuscript or in oral form) . . . (Huval 184).

we must keep ever before us the notion that the Gawain-poet "was not constructing an Anglo-Saxon epic tale; he was composing a courtly romance" (196). Thus, even as she argues that the "Anglo-Saxon dimension [of the Gawain-poet's works] should not be ignored," Huval's own lexical choices show that her argument likewise is informed by her assumption that SGGK is, first of all, a romance; her suggestion that the Anglo-Saxon lexicon of the poet adds "faint epic tones" to the poem, for example, implies that, in her opinion, clearly does not belong to the epic genre. And, despite the fact that she brings to light a number of substantial Anglo-Saxon lexical elements present in SGGK that previously have been overlooked by critics of the poem, Huval, like Christopherson, never really goes far beyond pointing to the existence of lexical elements that may be indicative of the Gawain-poet's indebtedness to the Old English poetic tradition to suggest a reason behind the Gawain-poet's decision to include in SGGK lexical/poetic elements that clearly are out of place in a poem drawn from the "best book of romance." Thus, at the conclusion of their studies, Huval and Christopherson have managed to argue convincingly that many of the anti-romance elements that appear throughout SGGK may be

evidence of the Gawain-poet's contact with or intimate knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon epic tradition. But, like most critics before them, Huval and Christopherson go on to minimize the significance of these Anglo-Saxon elements of SGGK by suggesting that these elements constitute the additions made by the Gawain-poet to the material he drew from his primary sources, sources that Huval and Christopherson agree are taken primarily from the romance tradition. As a result, the question as to the origin of or potential reasons for the anti-romance elements of SGGK remains essentially unanswered.

This recent renewal of critical interest in the native "English" elements of SGGK has done much to deepen our understanding of the poem. But it is important to note that even the studies of Benson, Christopherson, and Huval—studies that clearly are designed to call into question the collective conclusion of earlier critics concerning the relative unimportance of the "anti-romance" elements of SGGK—remain unwavering in their acceptance of the traditional notion that SGGK is a poem deeply rooted in the conventions of the continental romance. Even though Benson, Huval, and Christopherson make forceful arguments in favor of the importance of what they call the

"unromantic" elements of the poem, it is important to note the even the terminology they use when discussing these elements of SGGK—"unromantic"—clearly works to privilege the influence of the romance tradition over any influence that the native English tradition might have exerted on the Gawain-poet. In this way and despite their eminent value, recent studies of SGGK like those of Huval, Christopherson, and Benson are somewhat limiting in that they work to perpetuate what I would argue has been a central dichotomy in studies of SGGK, a dichotomy that works to focus our critical attention not upon SGGK as a whole but upon its constituent, generically defined "romantic" and "unromantic" elements. And, as Benson demonstrates, because a great many of the constituent elements of the poem, taken individually, are easily reconcilable with the conventions of the continental romance, such studies serve not to deconstruct traditional notions concerning the genre to which the poem belongs; on the contrary, they serve ultimately to ground SGGK even more firmly within the tradition of the continental romance.

But what are we to make of this sine qua non of Gawain-studies, the notion that because the Gawain-poet

incorporates into his poem a number of constituent elements and conventions that resemble those found in much earlier continental romances, SGGK itself must be properly designated a romance? In fact, when we take into account the sheer number of decidedly "unromantic" elements present in SGGK, this designation would seem to raise a number of difficult questions. Perhaps the most important of these concerns precisely what we mean when we call SGGK a romance. In his recent book The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England, William Calin has acknowledged that the problem most central to our study of the medieval romance concerns "the definition and categorization of the genre." He offers this "generally accepted" definition of the romance:

> A romance is a narrative that recounts the fortunes of a simple noble active hero. It tells of his deeds of love and prowess, a story of adventure located in a supernatural setting or with supernatural elements. The hero's career mirrors a pattern of test and ordeal and of initiation and establishment in the world of the court. The narrative pattern is not meant to be mimetic. It is highly idealized,

> concerned with revealing a symbolic structure of archetypal quest, voyage, combat, and marriage, grounded in convention. As a result, good defeats evil, chivalry and moral elevation are upheld, and society's values are reinforced in a denouement of joy. (432)

Considered by these standards, SGGK certainly can be read primarily as a romantic poem. SGGK is nothing if not the story of an active hero whose decidedly supernatural adventures "[mirror] a pattern of test and ordeal and of initiation in the court"; but, strikingly absent in SGGK are the traditional references to love and marriage that are fundamental to our understanding of the romance. Sir Gawain's encounters with Lady Bercilak could hardly be called "trysts"; on the contrary, the encounters themselves combine to form the "trial by ordeal" that Gawain must undergo in the course of his adventure. Similarly, the enigmatic ending of SGGK raises some important questions touching whether, at the conclusion of the poem "good defeats evil, chivalry and moral elevation are upheld, and society's values are reinforced."

But, on the basis of such broad generic distinctions as these, we might just as well consider Beowulf to be a

romance, for that poem likewise recounts the "fortunes of a simple, noble, active hero" whose "career mirrors a pattern of test and ordeal." The narrative pattern of Beowulf is hardly mimetic, and most of Beowulf's adventures incorporate supernatural settings, supernatural elements, or both. One could also easily make the case that, in sacrificing his life to ensure the survival of the Geats, Beowulf, in the final episode of the poem, takes the steps necessary to "defeat evil" and, in so doing, reinforces the values of his society.

Considering the marked similarities that exist, generically speaking, between Beowulf and SGGK, it might be prudent of us to ask ourselves exactly why we have persisted in placing these two poems on opposite ends of the generic spectrum ascribing the former to epic, the latter to romance. Our critical predisposition to discuss Beowulf and SGGK in this manner is, I would suggest, largely a function of our tendency to structure our discussions of medieval English literature around a similar subdivision, one that separates pre-conquest English literature, which incorporates a heavily Germanic aesthetic and is decidedly "unromantic," from post-conquest, or Anglo-Norman and Middle English literature.

This literary rift is largely the result of a lack of extant post-conquest manuscripts written in such a way as to suggest a general familiarity with the elements of the Old English literary tradition; in the absence of such texts, we have come to accept the notion that, at the advent of the Norman conquest, the native "heroic" English literary tradition was suppressed (some would say all but eradicated) in favor of a more "courtly" literary aesthetic introduced into England by the conquerors of the island.[37]

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[37] One of the earliest critics to articulate this distinction between medieval epic and romance was W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature. 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1898.) He opens his discussion by defining the "epic" or "heroic" historically as one of the "number of works belonging to the earlier Middle Ages," a term "freely applied to the old school of Germanic narrative poetry, which in different dialects is represented by the poems of Hildebrand, of Beowulf, of Sigurd and Brynhild." On the other hand, he suggests that Romance, historically speaking, is "by equally common consent . . . [the designation] given to a number of kinds of medieval narrative by which the Epic is succeeded

But, the very history of the English language itself would seem to call this idea into question. Scholars have long recognized that the older dialects of English—West Saxon English, the dialect of Beowulf, for example—are lexically, syntactically, and semantically, the product of

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and displaced; most notably in France, but also in other countries [e. g., England] which were led, mainly by the example and influence of France, to give up their own "epic" forms and subjects in favour of new manners" (3, italics mine). Ker, however, is hesitant to offer generic definitions of these terms; instead, he makes the following initial distinction between the two, now a commonplace:

> Whatever Epic may mean, it implies some weight and solidity; Romance means nothing if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy. A general distinction of this kind, whatever names may be used to render it, can be shown, in medieval literature, to hold good of the two large groups of narrative belonging to the earlier and the later Middle Ages respectively. Beowulf might stand for the one side, Lancelot or Gawain for the other" (5).

Germanic influence; in fact, for all intents and purposes, Old English is little more than a dialect of German—it is a derivative of West Germanic and cousin to Old Low German, to be precise. And, though post-conquest dialects of English—those we term "Middle English"—reflect varying degrees of romantic influence, even a cursory examination of the primary dialects of Middle English—Northern, East Midland, West Midland, Southern, and Kentish—makes it quite clear that the introduction of French into England did little to arrest the influence of the native English (or Germanic) linguistic features upon the development the English language. This is particularly true in the northern region of England, that part of the country furthest from London, the center of the French influence on the island. And it is likewise true of the Northwest Midlands dialect of English, in which SGGK is composed. The syntactic, semantic, and verbal characteristics of the English language as the Gawain-poet understood it clearly indicate that in certain regions of the country, the English language retained many of its fundamentally Germanic features throughout the better part of the fourteenth century.[38] These features serve to link the

[38] Benson discusses these Germanic features of the

Northwest Midlands dialect of Middle English much more closely with the older, West Saxon dialect of English than with more contemporary Southern dialects of the language, Chaucerian English, for example. And, is it not merely logical to suggest that, at some level, the "oral" or "epic" elements of the native English literary tradition, themselves primarily Germanic, survived alongside the Germanic features of the language so dominant in the more conservative Northern dialects of Middle English until well into the fourteenth century?

Tzvetan Todorov's consideration of genre as a function of discourse does much to advance this hypothesis.[39] Todorov traces the origin of genre to the unique semantic, syntactic, and verbal properties that distinguish the discourse of one culture from that of another—the very discursive properties that the poetry written in the Northwest Midland dialect of Middle English shares with those much older poems composed in the West Saxon dialect of Old English. He suggests that "In a

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Gawain-poet's text throughout the third chapter of his Art and Tradition in *SGGK*, 110-166.

[39] Tzvetan Todorov, Genres in Discourse, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.)

given society, the recurrence of [these semantic, syntactic, and verbal] properties is institutionalized, and individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norm constituted by that codification" (17). These sorts of discursive properties come in turn to be associated with certain culturally-specific speech acts and, ultimately, for Todorov, "the identity of the genre comes from the speech act that is at its root" (25-6).[40]

If Todorov is correct in suggesting that texts of the same generic distinction share a common rhetorical positioning—as I believe he is—we would do well to consider for a moment that many of the stylistic elements

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[40] Todorov makes special reference in this case to the genre of the autobiography, which he suggests "is defined by two identifications: the author's identification with the narrator, and the narrator's identification with the chief protagonist." He concludes that, as such, "we are dealing with a speech act that codifies both semantic properties . . . and pragmatic properties . . . . In this form, the speech act is very widely distributed outside literature: it is practiced every time <u>anyone tells his or her own story</u>" (25).

of the Gawain-poet's text work rhetorically to position his text clearly within the boundaries of the native English oral tradition. The alliterative style employed by the Gawain-poet, for example, is much like the style of Beowulf, a poem that we believe was composed and transmitted orally long before it was preserved for posterity in MS Cotton Vitellius A.XV. And, critics have long acknowledged that the Gawain-poet's intimation that he shall tell his story "as [he] in toun herde , / With tongue" (31) and "with lel lettres loken / In londe so hatz ben longe" (34-5), serves to characterize the Gawain-poet essentially as a scop. But, taken together, these and other features of SGGK help the Gawain-poet to position his text as a recitation, the very sort of speech act out of which we believe the West-Saxon epic was born.[41]

[41] The continental romance likewise has its roots in an oral tradition—that of the troubadours and the Chanson de Geste—and is thus the product of a speech act similar to that which produced the West Saxon epic. It is important to note here, however, that by the supposed time of the introduction of the romance into England, the genre had become largely literate and was transmitted primarily by means of text rather than speech, although such romance

Given these sorts of linguistic and discursive properties that serve to link SGGK to the native English poetic tradition, I would propose that it makes little sense to persist in our supposition that, because of the supposed date of its composition, SGGK must be, by

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texts were probably offered for oral performance by a jongleur. John Spiers, Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition (London: Faber and Faber 1957), also makes this distinction between the French and English "romances"; he says that "Whereas the finer French romances [e.g., those of Chrétien] are already [in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries] literary poems, the finer English romances (apart from Chaucer's) are mostly poems that are, at least to a much greater degree, of the nature of the older oral poetry" (109). For a further discussion of the orality/literacy question as it pertains to the transmission of the medieval romance in England (or, more specifically, the transmission of King Horn and Havelok the Dane), see William A. Quinn and Audley S. Hall, Jongleur: A Modified Theory of Oral Improvisation and Its Effect on the Performance and Transmission of Middle English Romance (Washington, D. C.: UP of America, 1982).

default, a romance. Instead, let us consider for a moment the possibility that SGGK owes at least as much to the conventions of the Anglo-Saxon epic (exemplified by Beowulf) as it does to those works (like Le Livre de Caradoc) written in the tradition of the continental romance. It is my contention that a study of SGGK in this light will help us to gain a much clearer understanding of a number of the most difficult cruxes of the poem, including the poem's enigmatic ending. But, more importantly, such a study will show SGGK to contain within it evidence, not of a curious alliterative revival, as many have suggested, but of the survival long into the fourteenth century of the native English epic tradition.

Chapter Two

Patterns of Revision: the Sources of the Gawain-poet and the Anglo-Saxon Tradition

We have long acknowledged Middle English texts to be the products of a literary era that generally prized imitation over creativity, and one would be hard-pressed to find a fourteenth-century text in which the medieval aesthetic of imitatio is more obviously at work than in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. This is particularly true in so far as the initial beheading episode of the poem is concerned. After nearly a century of source and analogue studies treating this first portion of SGGK, we can say with confidence only that the version of the tale as it appears in SGGK is at least partially the result of the Gawain-poet's contact with some of what we believe to have been the many incarnations of the story, particularly its French and Irish variants. However, despite this critical agreement as to the literary indebtedness of the Gawain-poet to material drawn from the French and Irish traditions, scholars remain divided in their opinions as to the literary tradition which influenced the Gawain-poet as he crafted the challenge episode with which he opens his narrative. On the one hand are those scholars, among

them Kittredge, Tolkien, Benson, and, most recently, Putter, who believe that the Gawain-poet had before him a French version of the beheading game, probably a variant of the story found in Le Livre de Caradoc, as he composed SGGK.[1] On the other side of this debate are those critics[2] who suggest that the episode as it appears in SGGK shows a more obvious Celtic coloring and that one of the variants of the tale that appear in the Middle Irish Fled Bricrend (particularly the "Terror" and "Champion's Bargain" redactions of the story) is more directly analogous to the beheading episode as we have it in SGGK.[3]

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[1] In Chapter One of this study, pages 4-9 and 15-20, I have detailed the relevant portions of the arguments of Kittredge and Benson respectively. See also Ad Putter, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the French Arthurian Romance (Oxford: Clarenden, 1995) and Tolkien and Gordon, xiv-xxi.

[2] See especially Loomis, Development of Arthurian Romance 147-161 and Alice Buchanan, "The Irish Framework of Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA 47 (1932): 315-38.

[3] Though, as I have noted above, source and analogue studies of SGGK historically have tended to focus on the indebtedness of the Gawain-poet to specific texts drawn

After careful examination of these positions, though, we must conclude that neither of these approaches is wholly convincing primarily because, even if we presume that the Gawain-poet could have known one or more of the specific variants of the beheading game that figure so prominently in the arguments of Kittredge, Loomis, and Benson, we must remember that none of the surviving variants of the beheading game in French or Irish can account for all of what critics have suggested are the additions that the Gawain-poet made to his source(s) as he

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from the French and Irish literary traditions, it is difficult to understate the critical complexity of this issue. Rather than attempt to address each of what critics have suggested are the many possible literary sources of each episode of SGGK, I intend in this chapter only to focus upon the initial beheading episode in the poem and those texts—Le Livre de Caradoc and the Fled Bricrend—that critics have argued most directly influenced the Gawain-poet as he constructed his version of the story. For a discussion of other possible sources for the beheading episode of the poem, see, for example, Tolkien and Gordon xiv-xvii, and Brewer, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Sources and Analogues.

crafted his unique version of the story. Scholars who would turn our attention to the many Celtic elements of the beheading episode must be willing to explain in terms of the Irish tradition, for instance, the Gawain-poet's decision to employ as the backdrop for his story what has long seemed to critics the most "romantic" settings—the court of King Arthur in what the Gawain-poet terms its "first age / on sille" (54-55). Likewise, those who hold SGGK to be the product of the influence of the French tradition find themselves hard pressed to account for the indisputably "unromantic" elements that punctuate much of the poem; for example, they must explain away the Gawain-poet's decision to cast as the hero of his poem Sir Gawain, whose once courteous reputation had declined by the fourteenth century to the point that the Arthurian poets invoked his name primarily in the course of alluding to the treachery which would come to destroy Arthur's court.

In his 1981 study of the evolving literary paradigms that inform the development of the Arthurian tradition, Joerg O. Fichte offers a tangible explanation for these sorts of incongruities between English Arthurian texts and their Celtic and continental counterparts that have proven

so frustrating to students of the romantic and Celtic heritage of SGGK: the enormous "temporal gap" that separates the literary traditions. He observes that although "a paradigmatic literary type [for the romance] can be proved for France and Germany . . . English Arthurian literature lags about 150 to 250 years behind its continental equivalents." Fichte concludes that though "a continental poetic paradigm underlying and determining the structure of Arthurian Romance" did shape the generic formation of English Arthurian literature, that poetic paradigm was subjected to any number of transformations as it passed from French into English (570).[4] The arguments of Kittredge, Benson, and Loomis, by contrast, presume that the Gawain-poet's decision to borrow from the French and/or Irish versions of the beheading game tale somehow obligated him to shape his text according to some sort of cross-cultural, a-temporal

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[4] Jorge O. Fichte, "The Middle English Arthurian Verse Romance: Suggestions for the Development of a Literary Typology," Deutsche Wierteljahrs Schrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte 55 (1981): 567-90.

paradigm that the Gawain-poet and his audience immediately would have recognized as the "proper" one for the tale.

Clearly, our present critical inability to account for the Gawain-poet's pairing of Celtic and romantic elements in the first fitt of his poem by turning to the extant literature of the French and Irish traditions shows that such a paradigm probably did not exist, at least for the Gawain-poet.[5] Given the medieval penchant towards

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[5] John Speirs, Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) makes a similar point in the course of discussing the many problems of attributing SGGK solely to the genre of the continental romance. He suggests that

> There is no need to deny that the author of SGGK may have had a French romance before him . . . . It is unlikely that he did not read (or listen to) French romances. But even if we establish that a French romance (or group of romances) was the poem's literary source, we have got no nearer the poem itself. The poem is clearly not simply a courtly romance, and it is totally a very different kind of thing from a French romance. Yet, the sheer unlikeness of

literary imitation, it is natural for us to believe that the Gawain-poet would have borrowed liberally from any source at his disposal as he composed the initial beheading episode of SGGK—including the continental and Celtic versions of the tale. But, I would argue that the key to a more thorough understanding of the Gawain-poet's decision to employ a unique pairing of Celtic and romantic elements in his redaction of the archetypal "beheading game" does not rest in the eventual recovery of some lost manuscript. Rather, it rests in our ability to identify the Gawain-poet's own "poetic paradigm" and to understand his authorial choices—however unusual they might seem—as representative of this paradigm, as well as the literary tradition by which it ultimately was informed.

If we are ever to recover the poetic paradigm of the Gawain-poet, however, I would argue that we ought first to review a longstanding critical a priori touching those French and/or Irish texts that critics have argued are ultimately analogous to SGGK. In the course of working to

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> the English alliterative poem to all the French romances we have has not discouraged the attachment of apparently supreme importance of relating it to 'French Romance' (217).

link SGGK either to the Celtic or romantic literary traditions, most twentieth-century critics have followed the example set by Kittredge, Benson, and Loomis; that is to say, they have treated what they consider to be the romantic and/or and Celtic analogues of SGGK only in terms of their narrative dissimilitude. This sort of methodology has worked, I believe, only to perpetuate what has become a critical commonplace concerning the sources of the Gawain-poet, the notion that the versions of the beheading game contained in the supposed French and Irish analogues of SGGK are themselves inherently different tales, each as unique as the manuscripts in which the respective stories survive. Due to what they have presumed to be the roughly symmetrical relationship between the genre of the Gawain-poet's possible sources and that of SGGK, critics have long argued that details drawn from one or the other of the extant versions of the beheading game, but not both, probably formed the basis of the Gawain-poet's own redaction of the story.

But, when one places the events recounted in the versions of the beheading game preserved in the Fled Bricrend and in Le Livre de Caradoc side by side, one almost immediately notices that the French and Irish

versions of the story follow an identical narrative pattern and demonstrate substantial narrative similitude. In both the Irish and French redactions of the story, for example, we find ourselves in the company of a sovereign presiding over a bounteous feast which is interrupted by the appearance of an enormous challenger. This challenger eventually addresses the sovereign first by rehearsing the fame of his court and then by asking that the leader of the company grant the challenger a "boon" or a "game," the terms of which are then set forth by the challenger. This proposal of the challenge is in both cases followed by a digression treating the bewilderment of the court, and in each case, the leader of the company initially is shamed at the failure of a member of his court to step forward to accept the challenge. The challenger then taunts the company until, finally, a member of the court—the hero of the story—agrees to accept the terms of the challenge. At this point in both narratives, the challenge is carried out, and we find graphic descriptions of the beheading of the challenger. Finally, both the French and Irish versions of the beheading episode end on a bitter note, for, having retrieved his head, the challenger departs,

leaving the members of the court in a state of sorrow over what they believe to be the impending demise of the hero.

In fact, only three substantive variants serve to distinguish the Irish and French versions of the beheading game tales from one another; these concern the identity of the challenger, the identity of the hero who answers the challenge, and the nationality of the court in which these events unfold. Two of these elements—the identities of the court and the hero—are especially important, for they function both to perpetuate the story by rendering it continuously relevant to an ever-changing, cross-cultural audience and to lend to the tale the uniquely nationalistic coloring that allows us to demarcate the redactions of the narratives preserved in the Fled Bricrend and Le Livre de Caradoc as specifically Irish or French. In the Irish version of the tale, for example, it is only natural, given the audience for the story, that the beheading game take place in the court of Conchobar, an exemplary Irish ruler and that the champion of the tale should be Cuchulainn, who, in his acceptance of the challenge, exhibits all of the traits characteristic of the heroes of the Celtic sagas. Similarly, the French redactors of the Caradoc pay tribute to their own literary

and cultural heritage by "romanticizing" the specifically Irish elements of the beheading game tale. They set the story in the court of Arthur, a character who, despite his Celtic or English roots, is appropriated by a host of romancers (Chrétien among them) into the great body of romantic literature circulating throughout twelfth-century France, where he becomes something of an icon of the romance tradition. Similarly, for their hero, they turn to Caradoc, whose actions well represent the ideals of chivalric virtue as they normally are depicted in the French court romances.[6] The character of these emendations suggests that the French redactors of this challenge motif closely followed the example of the Irish poets but that they revised the narrative so as to position it within the literary tradition with which their

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[6] For two such discussions of the classically "romantic" hero, see Gerrit Brunt, "An Exemplary Hero: Alexander the Great," Companion to Middle English Romance, eds. Henk Aertsen and Alasdair A. MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1990), 29-55 and Gervase Mathew, "Ideals of Knighthood in Late-Fourteenth-Century England," Twentieth Century Interpretations of *SGGK*, ed. Denton Fox (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968), 68-72.

audiences would have been most familiar, thereby marking their revisions of the story uniquely as the product of the culture that produced it.

Bearing this pattern of revision firmly in mind, let us consider the English version of the challenge preserved for us in SGGK. When we place the Gawain-poet's account of this challenge motif alongside the French and Irish redactions of the story, one point becomes immediately clear; the Gawain-poet preserves in his own revision of the tale many of the narrative elements common to the French and Irish versions of the beheading game (see Appendix).[7] From our vantage point some six centuries

[7] In order to construct the chart which comprises my Appendix, pages 261-62 of this study, I have turned not only to my own examinations of the texts in question but to the observations of Benson concerning the similarities between SGGK and the Caradoc (see Benson, Art and Tradition 16-32, esp. 18-20 and 26-9) and to Alice Buchanan's similar discussion of the relationship between Fled Bricrend and SGGK (328-9). In so doing, I hope to have avoided the pitfall of compiling my data in such a way as to favor my argument over those of other critics, Benson and Loomis in particular.

removed from the Gawain-poet and his audience, it is easy enough for us to consider the series of narrative elements common to SGGK and, for example, Le Livre de Caradoc and/or Fled Bricrend as evidentiary of the Gawain-poet's indebtedness to material drawn from the French and Irish literary tradition(s). But, I would argue that the high degree of narrative agreement linking these texts is hardly surprising and suggests merely that, whatever its manner of transmission, the particular challenge motif which figures so prominently in SGGK had a well-defined archetype, one that remained essentially unchanged for the several centuries it must have taken for the story to circulate throughout Ireland, France and England.[8] For

[8] The narrative similarities that I have suggested link the Irish French and English versions of the tale fuel the argument that these redactions of the beheading game sprang from a common, literate source; at the same time, however, the variants which distinguish the redactions of the beheading game would seem to attest to the oral transmission of the story. With these facts in mind, I have chosen not to consider here the question of the literacy or orality of the Gawain-poet's sources for SGGK, precisely for the reasons that Katherine O'Brien

this reason, I would suggest that the high degree of narrative similitude that exists among the redactions of the beheading game story preserved for us in the Fled Bricrend, Le Livre de Caradoc, and SGGK makes it virtually impossible to argue for either the French or the Irish version of the story as the primary source of the Gawain-poet's own revision of the beheading game.

Interestingly enough, critics generally have justified their unwillingness to consider the possibility that the Old English literary tradition exerted any sort of influence upon the Gawain-poet by arguing that, for

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O'Keefe addresses relative to Old English texts in her Visible Song (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990). She notes that "The [debate on the oral as against the literate nature of Old English poetry], when based upon the stylistics of the text (such as formula, redundancy, generative composition, type scenes), points clearly to an oral origin for the poetry, but, when based upon the dissemination of sources, points just as clearly to a literate origin" and concludes that "There is no way out of this dilemma without making an arbitrary decision on the relative values of the stylistic or source-based approach" (13).

various reasons, it is unlikely that the Gawain-poet could have come into contact with one or more of the small number of manuscripts in which the corpus of Old English poetry survives. But, by the same token, the extant versions of the French and Irish redactions of the beheading game story so often cited by Benson, Loomis and others as possible sources of the Gawain-poet likewise appear in manuscripts that the Gawain-poet probably could not have known. For example, though we believe that Old Irish versions of the beheading game tale were circulating via the oral tradition as early as the 8th century, the two earliest specimens of the beheading game, the "Terror" episode and "The Champion's Bargain," are known to us only through the fortuitous preservation of the Fled Bricrend in a single manuscript dating from about 1160—more than two centuries before we believe SGGK to have been composed. Similarly, the prose redaction of first continuation of Chrétien's Perceval containing the version of the Caradoc story considered by Benson and others to be most directly analogous to SGGK exists in a single manuscript "made in Paris in 1530 [presumably] from an older metrical version" which Benson discusses at length in his Art and Tradition, 16-20. Given the dating and

history of these manuscripts, the odds of the Gawain-poet's having come into contact with either of these versions of the story in manuscript form are scant at best.[9]

As I have noted above, the French and Irish redactors of the beheading game do adhere to a "poetic paradigm" of sorts in that they incorporate into their narratives patterns of revision that work to situate the story within a definite literary tradition by emending the narrative to include a culturally appropriate hero and setting. But, what are we to make of the fact that the emendations of the Gawain-poet relative to these same elements of the challenge would appear not to individualize his text but to situate it squarely between these two traditions? I believe that the answer to this question rests in our coming to terms with the fact that in arguing that the aesthetic of the Gawain-poet was, like many of the

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[9] See also Le Livre de Caradoc in Continuations of the Old French Perceval: the First Continuation, ed. W. R. Roach, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1949) xvi-xli for a thorough discussion of the dating of the various manuscript versions of the OF Perceval and the First Continuation.

constituent elements of his poem, "borrowed" either from the French or Irish literary tradition, we are attributing to the Gawain-poet and his audience an anachronistically modern poetic sensibility, one that is, like our own, capable of understanding the many and varied accounts of King Arthur and his knights circulating throughout Western Europe during the fourteenth century to be the products of a longstanding literary tradition. In the course of ascribing the aesthetic of the Gawain-poet to the influence of this tradition, I would argue that we sometimes tend to forget that, in all likelihood, the Gawain-poet, as well as his fourteenth-century English audience, would have been inclined to understand the events recounted in SGGK not in the context of their place within a particular literary tradition but in terms of their place within the larger framework of British history.

Of course, in arguing that the fourteenth-century audience of SGGK probably would have understood the poem primarily in light of its pseudo-historical rather than its literary context, I do not mean to imply that the Gawain-poet saw himself as an historian rather than a poet or that the Gawain-poet's audience would have been

inclined to respond to the incidents detailed in SGGK as if they themselves were matters of historical record. In his discussion treating the development of the chivalric ideal in medieval Europe and those texts of the Arthurian tradition which he suggests contributed to the evolution of this ideal, Maurice Keene has wisely observed that even the "seriousness of the historical interest in the Arthurian story" on the part of the medieval audience ought not to suggest to us that its members were "prepared to accept as veracious history the whole gamut of fantastic tales woven into [the Arthurian texts]" (113).[10]

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[10] Maurice Keene, Chivalry (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984). Though it is clear that "Few, during the middle ages, doubted the basic historicity of Arthur" (Keene 113), there remains a great deal of manuscript evidence to attest to the scrutiny to which even the most "authoritative" texts treating Arthur and his knights were subjected by the medieval audience. We know, for example, that Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Brittaniae, which contains what is arguably the single most comprehensive (and most popular) pseudo-historical account of the life and works of Arthur to be produced during the early middle ages, was not immune to such scrutiny. In

It is probably due to this well-documented tendency of the medieval audience to question the historical accuracy of those pseudo-historical texts chronicling the exploits of Arthur that so many in the middle ages who undertook to write about Arthur "took the same sort of pains to suggest that their stories were based upon reputable authority as Benoit de Ste Maure did when writing about the Trojan war" (Keene 113). Geoffrey himself does this throughout his Historia Regum Brittaniae. In the dedication that opens his text, for example, Geoffrey notes that the matter of the "certain very ancient book written in the British language" which Geoffrey claims to have been the primary source of the Historia is itself "attractively composed to

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the preface to his own translation of the Historia (London: Penguin, 1966), for example, Lewis Thorpe quotes William of Newburgh, who, in his Historia Rerum Anglicarum, c. 1190, wrote that "everything [Geoffrey] wrote about Arthur and his successors, or indeed about his predecessors from Vortigern onwards, was made up, partly by himself and partly by others, either from an inordinate love of lying, or for the sake of pleasing the Britons" (17). All references to Geoffrey's Historia are to Thorpe's translation.

form a consecutive and orderly narrative." In so saying, he tacitly attributes to the text those qualities of superior arrangement and style that would have earned for this book a place in the library of Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, an obviously well-educated man whom Geoffrey suggests was "well-informed about the history of other countries" (51). In describing Walter in terms that echo Cicero's own description of the orator perfectus, Geoffrey is able rhetorically to characterize what one would suppose to be the most immediate sources of Walter's erudition—his books, including Geoffrey's own source—as themselves historically accurate. In this fashion, Geoffrey is able to authorize his "certain very ancient" source by attributing to it the historical accuracy, orderly arrangement, and elegant style that, taken together, define medieval eloquence. Simultaneously, by positioning himself as translator rather than redactor of his source, Geoffrey is able to authorize his own text by suggesting that he has transplanted into it via imitatio the very rhetorical qualities that he has argued render Walter's "very ancient book" particularly worthy of transmission.

Similarly, in the unique stanzas with which he frames his poem, the Gawain-poet employs a series of rhetorical topoi that, like the material in Geoffrey's dedication to the Historia, performs a series of vital rhetorical functions, all of which appear designed to attest to the authority of the Gawain-poet's own sources, whatever they may have been. In his 1965 consideration of the Gawain-poet's historical frame, Silverstien follows most critics in arguing that the Gawain-poet appears to have designed the frame of SGGK so as to "place the story in a familiar context and [to suggest] to its knowledgeable hearers the nobility of [the story's] line" (191).[11] He goes on to argue, however, that in the stanzas with which he frames his poem, the Gawain-poet, like Geoffrey himself, works to authorize what he suggests are the primary sources for his own text, the generically-titled "bookes of Brutus." He does so, Silverstein argues, first by incorporating into the opening stanza of his narrative a series of references to events—the fall of Troy, the treachery of Aeneas, and the founding of Britain by Brutus, for example—the

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[11] Theodore Silverstein, "Sir Gawain, Dear Brutus, and Britain's Fortunate Founding: A Study in Comedy and Convention," Modern Philology 62 (1965): 189-206.

historical veracity of which would have gone absolutely unquestioned by the medieval audience and then by documenting the truth of these events in the concluding stanza of his poem "by citing the authority of the Brut books for these incidents" (192). And, of course, in pointing out that the stories of Arthur and his knights occupy a space in these "Brut Bookes" alongside such epic events as the fall of Troy and the founding of Rome, the Gawain-poet is able to suggest, at least rhetorically, that the matter of Britain—and, by association, the stories of Arthur contained within it—is likewise deserving of at least a pseudo-historical treatment.

But, whereas critics like Silverstein have argued that the historical references which punctuate the initial lines of SGGK work to demarcate the poem as a romance, I believe that these elements of the poem work to cast much of SGGK in an entirely different generic light. This is particularly true of the Gawain-poet's decision to employ as the backdrop for his story the oft-celebrated "first age" of Camelot. In her book The Voice of the *Gawain*-poet, Lynn Staley Johnson has remarked upon an important common thread that links each of the historical figures and events mentioned by the Gawain-poet in his frame to

the Gawain-poet's initial mention of Camelot.[12] Though she follows critical tradition in pointing out that "in both Troy and Rome, England found an ideal of glory and courage that could inspire the chivalry of the present" (41), she likewise notes that the "Gawain-poet's account of history is [not] entirely positive" (40). She points out that the first stanza of SGGK is "not only a history of the founding of Britain, but also a history of destruction and chaos," one that "begins with the destruction of Troy and moves to Britain, which is characterized by the same national chaos as its mythic parent state" (43). This sort of frame, she suggests, is an especially appropriate one for the Gawain-poet's work, set as it is at Camelot, because the stories treating the fall of Troy and Rome were, to the medieval imagination, roughly analogous to the common pseudo-historical narratives treating of the fall of Camelot. In this capacity, Johnson suggests that

> The lessons Camelot had for England during the fourteenth century, like those of Troy and Rome, also suggested a warning, for the history that recorded Camelot's glory also recorded its fall. The reasons

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[12] Lynn Staley Johnson, The Voice of the *Gawain*-poet (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1984).

> for Camelot's fall are both explicit and implicit in medieval accounts of the Arthurian myth. Adultery and treason were obvious causes for its fall, but the luxury, worldliness, and laxity of Camelot were constant components of descriptions of Arthur's court from Geoffrey of Monmouth onward. (45).

In choosing to frame his poem so as to call to mind the tragic similarities that serve to link the medieval accounts of the histories of Troy, Rome, and Camelot, the Gawain-poet positions his text in such a way as to invite the medieval audience of his poem to hear this account of the first age of Camelot ever mindful of the catastrophic end that, historistically speaking, had long ago befallen King Arthur. In so doing, I would argue that the Gawain-poet simultaneously limits the scope of the poetic license that would be available to him as he worked to craft the representations of Arthur and the members of his court that dominate the opening stanzas of SGGK;[13] this is

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[13] See Scott D. Troyan, "Rhetoric Without Genre: Orality, Textuality, and the Shifting Scene of the Rhetorical Situation in the Middle Ages," Romanic Review 81 (1990): 377-95, for an insightful discussion of the possible effects of recursive rhetorical devices—like the

particularly true because, understood from within the confines of British history, the Gawain-poet's depictions of Arthur and of the state of Camelot itself must ultimately be reconcilable with what would have been to the medieval imagination the historically predetermined outcome of the legend of Arthur. The Gawain-poet, for example, could not show Arthur to be the embodiment of ideal kingship, to be a ruler whose every decision is the product of careful reflection, as "history" had already shown this not to be the case. And, were he to romanticize his depiction of Camelot by showing it to be an ideal medieval court in the tradition of the French romance, a court in which there is, as Benson argues, "no hint of the adultery, incest and treachery that finally brought ruin to the Round Table" (Benson 98), the Gawain-poet simultaneously would abrogate the historical similarities that link Troy and Rome to Camelot and which Johnson notes renders the association of these cities in the opening stanza of SGGK particularly appropriate. Indeed, given the historical status granted to the story of Arthur by the Gawain-poet's fourteenth-century

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Gawain-poet's pseudo-historical frame—upon a newly-literate medieval audience.

audience, it stands to reason that, even in his literal capacity as a "maker," the Gawain-poet would not be able to reverse the (albeit disappointing) outcome of the legend of Arthur any more than Homer, in the course of crafting the Iliad, could have spared Achilles' life.

For some time now, scholars have suggested that the Gawain-poet's decision to employ the unusual pairing of romantic and unromantic elements that characterizes SGGK might have been motivated by a desire to call into question the sorts of values typically espoused by the authors of the medieval romances.[14] In precisely this fashion, I would argue that the Gawain-poet's decision to employ in his text a narrative frame that clearly is designed to emphasize the historicity of Arthur works to distance SGGK from the literary aesthetic that by all accounts governed the production of the romance during the Middle Ages. In his seminal text Epic and Romance, Walter P. Ker argued long ago—and with enduring success—that the central generic distinction separating the "epic" from the "romance" is essentially analogous, historically speaking, "to the difference between the earlier 'heroic' age and

[14] See, for example, Bercovitch's argument to this effect, which I have detailed in Chapter One, 21-22.

the age of chivalry" (3-4). According to Ker, central to every epic is the poet's concern for an "heroic" culture, a culture which Ker defines as any

> Where the centre of life is a great man's house and where the most brilliant society is that which is gathered at his feast, where competitive boasting, storytelling, and minstrelsy are the principal intellectual amusements [,] . . . [w]here fighting is more important than anything else in active life . . . . (12)

Certainly, there is much in the Beowulf-poet's account of Heorot that serves to demarcate Hrothgar's court as the product of an heroic age of the sort described by Ker.[15] Heorot is described by the Beowulf-poet almost entirely in superlative terms. It is called "healærna mæst," [the best of halls](78a), and it is within this best of halls, "heah and horngeap," [high and wide-gabled], (82a) that Hrothgar "Beagas dælde / sinc æt symle" [distributed

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[15] All references to Beowulf are to Beowulf and the Fight at Finnesburg, ed. Fr. Klaeber, 3rd edition (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1950). Unless otherwise noted, translations of the poem are my own.

rings, treasure at the feast] (80b-81a) to his band of retainers, whom we learn "dreamum lifdon, / eadiglice" [lived [there] in joy] (99b-100a) amidst perpetual feasting, celebration and "hearpan sweg, / swutol sang scopes" [the music of the harp, the sweet song of the poet] (89b-90a). Beowulf likewise contains many accounts of the competitive boasting that Ker argues serves to mark a text as the product of a culture that has embraced an heroic ideal; this feature of the poem is especially evident in lines 500-530 of Beowulf, in which Unferth and Beowulf rehearse their accounts of Beowulf's swimming contest with Brecca. Similarly, few critics would dispute the idea first espoused by Tolkien that central to Beowulf are those episodes of the poem in which Beowulf must contend with those monsters—Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the Dragon—whose very presence works to invert the social order of which Beowulf-poet's early account of Heorot is representative;[16] in this capacity, the poem's emphasis on the importance of combat within the heroic culture depicted by the Beowulf-poet is clear.

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[16] J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics," Essays and Studies 13 (1928): 7-27.

If we think of the Beowulf-poet's "epic" account of Hrothgar's court as occupying the space at one end of a literary continuum, then placed at the opposite end of this continuum we will inevitably find the ostensibly "romantic" depictions of Arthur's court popularized by Tennyson, T. H. White, and the countless other writers that have worked in tandem to perpetuate what has become the modern mythology of Camelot. So strong is our predisposition to understand Camelot according to this highly romanticized paradigm that to invoke the name of Arthur's court is now essentially to invoke the chivalric ideal, that set of values which Ker sets in historical opposition to our understanding of the heroic ideal so important to any conventional reading of Beowulf; hence, it is not surprising to find that many critical accounts of the Gawain-poet's Camelot appear to echo the thoughts of A. C. Spearing, who calls the Camelot of SGGK "a delightful place, an innocent version of the ideal aimed at by any of the great courts of Western Europe in the later middle ages" (181).[17]

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[17] A. C. Spearing, The *Gawain*-poet: A Critical Study (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970).

Yet, it is important to note that, taken as a whole, the depiction of Camelot that dominates the first fitt of SGGK appears to have been conspicuously designed by the Gawain-poet to resemble an heroic culture of precisely the sort that we see depicted in Beowulf. At the outset of his poem, the Gawain-poet takes care to focus his audience upon the importance of the role that Arthur, whom he calls "þe hendest . . . of Bretaygne kynges" [the most noble of the kings of Britain] (25-26) and, by extension, Camelot, will play in the "outtrage awenture of Aurthurez wonderez" [strange story of one of the wonders of Arthur] (29) that he promises is to come. The Gawain-poet then proceeds to his oft-discussed account of the Christmas festivities at Arthur's court, an account which I would argue is replete with the very sort of formulaic topoi that punctuate the Beowulf-poet's initial description of Heorot and demarcate it as an ostensibly heroic court. Like Heorot, Camelot is peopled by "þe most kyd kny3tes vnder Krystes seluen," [the most famous knights beneath Christ himself] (51), many of whom the Gawain-poet mentions in a catalogue of the court that appears to have been designed by the Gawain-poet to emulate the style of

the epic.[18] The Gawain-poet also goes on to point out that Arthur's attendants, like the members of Hrothgar's court, find themselves preoccupied

> With alle þe mete and þe mirþe þat men couþe avyse;
> Such glaum ande gle glorious to here,
> Dere dyn vpon day, daunsyng on ny3tes,
> Al watz hap vpon he3e in hallez and chambrez
> With lordez and ladies, as leuest him þo3t.
> [With all the meat and the mirth that man could devise; such merrymaking and glee that was glorious to hear, a pleasant din by day, with dancing by night, happiness upon high in the halls and the chambers with ladies and lords, as it seemed most delightful to them.] (45-49)

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[18] The catalogue, of course, is one of the commonplaces of the epic, and its use across the series of texts that comprise the genre has been both well-recognized and widely documented. But, it is notable that at least one such catalogue appears at lines 1192-1201 of Beowulf, in which the Beowulf-poet pauses to recount the treasure that Beowulf receives from Hrothgar as a token of his gratitude for purging his hall of Grendel.

But, amidst these Christmas games, it is important to note, as the Gawain-poet does, that those activities involving armed conflict are clearly of greatest importance to Arthur and the members of his court. The Gawain-poet is careful to depict Camelot as a fortress in which "tournayed tulkes by tymez ful mony / Justed ful jolilé þise gentyle kni3tes" [men tourneyed at many a time, these gentle knights jousted with great jollity] (41-2); he goes on to intimate that Arthur's own "3onge blode and his brayne wylde" [young blood and wild imagination] (89) had led him to the custom of not eating until either he had heard of some marvelous adventure

> Oþer sum segg hym biso3t of sum siker kny3t
> To joyne wyth hym in iustyng, in jopardé to lay
> Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oþer,
> As fortune wolde fulsun hom, þe fayrer to haue.
> [Or some man sought from him a trusty knight to join with him in jousting, to lay in jeopardy one man's life for another, each to allow to the other to have the advantage as fortune would help him.] (96-99)

Clearly, the Gawain-poet has taken great care to craft his initial account of Camelot so as to suggest

that, in its "first age," Arthur's court is possessed of many of the heroic qualities which characterize Arthur's court as it is described by Geoffrey in his Historia; in so doing, I believe that the Gawain-poet applies to his own redaction of the beheading game story a pattern of revision very much like that to which the beheading game story had already been subjected by the Gawain-poet's French and Irish counterparts. By emphasizing those similarities which link his own account of Camelot in its "first age" to the "first age" of British history itself, I would argue that the Gawain-poet works to position his poem as a uniquely English narrative, and, in the process, renders his own story of Arthur both historically and culturally relevant to his own fourteenth-century English audience.

It seems to me that the Gawain-poet's decision to cast Sir Gawain as the hero of his poem similarly speaks to the "Englishness" of the pattern of revision to which the Gawain-poet has subjected his continental source material of his poem. In order to understand precisely why this is the case, we must first remember that, within the literature of the Arthurian tradition, the evolution of Sir Gawain's character is such that he eventually is

stripped of the bravery, courtesy, loyalty and humility for which he long had been renowned. Whereas the Gawain of the early continental romances—Chrétien's Erec, for example—"ranks first among the knights of the Round Table [and whose] courtesy acts as a foil to the crudity and churlishness of Kay" (Loomis 160), Gawain's name comes by the thirteen century to be synonymous with disloyalty. John Mathews notes, for example, that in the prose Tristan, Gawain is depicted as a man obsessed by thoughts of revenge "against King Pellinore and his family, whom [Gawain and his brothers] blame for the deaths of their father, King Lot, and their mother, Morgause; and that of Gawain alone for Lancelot and his kin, for the death of his brothers Gareth and Gaheries" (163); in the course of pursuing this revenge, Mathews points out that Gawain becomes the partner-in-arms of Modred in a feud that ultimately divides the Round Table. Gawain himself murders Pellinore and assists in the murders of Pellinore's sons (164). His actions throughout the text show him to be discourteous in every way; indeed, he "displays a lustful desire for every woman he sees and is

not above fatally wounding an unarmed escort in order to have his way way" (165).[19]

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[19] John Mathews, Gawain: Knight of the Goddess, (London, Aquarian Press, 1990) 163-72. Mathews also quotes Keith Busby, who likewise points out that

> The author [of the prose Tristan]'s attitude [towards Gauvain] could not be clearer: if Tristan is the defender of chivalry, and its judge too, the Gauvain is its enemy. Because Gauvain used to be a good knight, and because others have now surpassed him in terms of prowess and chivalry, he is often seen to be jealous of the reputations of younger and better knights (especially Perceval and Galahad). This, together with the revenge motif, is one of the causes of the murders of Lamorack and Driant [in the prose Tristan], and is especially noticeable in the plot against Perceval. It must also be the reason for his constant challenging of knights, his denigration of others, and his refusal to admit defeat. (165-6)

For a more protracted study treating the evolution and gradual downfall of Gawain in the literature of the French

This treatment of Gawain extends far beyond the prose Tristan; A. L. Morton carefully traces what he calls the gradual degradation of Gawain's character through the later French romances, particularly those treating the Grail Quest.[20] In the process, he is able to show that although Gawain "originally [was] the hero of the Grail Quest, he is deposed in favour of Lancelot, of Percival . . . and finally by Galahad" (17). Morton suggests that, ultimately, Gawain's character undergoes this sort of decline "because Gawain was a primitive figure, with the character of the pre-feudal age still strong upon him"; for this reason, Morton argues, "he came to seem by Church and feudal standards as morally unacceptable," and since Gawain "was no longer regarded as an especially edifying character," he was allowed by the romancers "to resume his old amoral nature." As evidence of Gawain's corruption in the later French romances, Morton points to

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tradition, see Busby, Gauvain in Old French Literature, (Amsterdam: Rodopoi, 1980).

[20] A. L. Morton, "The Matter of Britain: the Arthurian Cycle and the Development of Feudal Society," Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik 8 (1960): 5-28.

a number of episodes from Malory's Morte Darthur which, taken together, are illustrative of Gawain's declining moral conduct. Among these he includes "the killing of Lamorak and his gross breach of faith in seducing Ettarde after he had promised to win her for Pelleas,"[21] noting that Gawain's actions in these romances "could not possibly be squared with the code of chivalrous behaviour: he is depicted as rash, passionate, and bloody-minded, so that even his own brother condemns him" (18).[22]

Given the popularity enjoyed by Gawain's character during the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, it is difficult to conceive that the audience of SGGK would have come to the poem utterly unaware of Gawain's ignominious reputation. Benson himself notes that the members of the Gawain-poet's audience "were aware that [Gawain] is famed not for courtesy, chastity, chastity,

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[21] See Malory, Works, ed. Eugène Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971) 101-3.

[22] See Malory 114: "For evir aftir sir Gareth had aspyed sir Gawaynes conducions, he wythdrewe hymself fro his brother sir Gawaynes falyshyp, for he was evir vengeable, and where he hated he wolde be avenged with murther: and that hated sir Gareth."

and loyalty, but for courtesy, lechery, and treachery, and they were probably puzzled to find the narrator ignoring these vices and presenting a hero closer to Galahad than to the Gawain of most romances" (Art and Tradition 95). Indeed, the Gawain-poet's choice to place the actions of Sir Gawain at the heart of his poem appears particularly curious if we take into account that the Gawain-poet had available to him an entire canon of more conventionally "romantic" heroes—Lancelot, for instance—who came to him fully formed by the French tradition and around whom it would not have been difficult to structure his poem. It is interesting to note, for example, that it is Lancelot in the later French romances who takes on many of the features originally attributed to Gawain. Morton suggests that this gradual succession of Gawain by Lancelot is partially to blame in Malory's Le Morte Darthur for the "conflict between the two great rival groups in Arthur's court—the kindred and faction of Gawain and the kindred and faction of Lancelot" (19). Morton concludes, however, that this conflict is not merely

> one between individuals or interest factions: it is a conflict between two sets of ideas, two civilizations, two worlds. In it, Gawain

> represents the old. He is Arthur's kinsman, all his deepest feelings are family feelings, his loyalty is the ancient loyalty of the blood bond.

Lancelot, on the other hand

> stands for the new . . . . His loyalty is the new loyalty of vassal for a lord. But this loyalty, in which old and new contend, is confronted with another obligation. His choice between loyalty and love, two absolute duties as the thought of the time conceived them, is thus also a choice between old and new. The claim of love is wholly individual, and represents a set of values wholly new. Lancelot, after a deep inner conflict, chooses the new, emphasizing the sharpness of the difference between himself and Gawain, the man irrevocably rooted in the tribal past. (19-20)[23]

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[23] Morton also quotes Vinaver, who suggests that the degradation of Gawain's character was due in no small part to the influence of the medieval Church:

> The Case of Gawain is particularly interesting. He is one of the most famous knights of the

But, I believe that the Gawain-poet's unlikely decision to cast Gawain as the hero of his poem becomes perfectly understandable if we examine SGGK from the perspective of its place in the English literary tradition, as an English poem in need of an English hero. Let us consider for a moment the nature of heroism as it is defined in the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf. Of course, Scyld Scefing and Beowulf do exhibit such conventionally "heroic" qualities as strength and bravery, and in this regard, they do bear some similarity to the quintessential heroes of the Arthurian romances. But, it is important to

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> Round Table, second only to Lancelot. Most devoted to his king, he is generous and noble, courageous and strong. He possesses all of man's earthly virtues and is very much loved and honoured by both 'countrymen and strangers': . . . But since God has no part in his career, his brilliant qualities do not help him, and he ends as a vile criminal. It was dangerous, perhaps, to make a sinner so attractive, and it was essential to show that his virtues and successes could lead to no result." (17)

note that from the opening lines of the poem, in which he rehearses the story of Scyld Scefing, the Beowulf-poet works to keep his audience ever-mindful that the measure of a hero is not primarily a function of his might. The story of Scyld is of fundamental importance to our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideal; in Beowulf, the story is the first in a series of digressions which function both as historical markers and as touchstones against which the behavior of the principle characters of the poem is to be tested.[24] According to the Beowulf-poet, Scyld eventually achieves power such that

> him æghwylc ymbsittendra
> ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
> gomban gyldan; þæt wæs god cyning!
> [to him each one of the surrounding peoples over the ocean had to obey him, pay him tribute; that was a good king!] (9-11)[25]

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[24] This is, of course, the argument of Adrien Bonjour in The Digressions in Beowulf (Oxford: Blackwell, 1950).

[25] In his own "historical" treatment of Arthur, Geoffrey of Monmouth notes that Arthur, like Scyld Scefing, obsessed with its reputation for valor in arms, whose fame is such that, according to Geoffrey "even the

But, the Beowulf-poet is careful to note that Scyld's glorious reputation—and his status as a "good king"—are due in large part to the fact that Scyld is able to attain this position of authority despite the ignoble circumstances of his birth, the fact that he is at first "feasceaft funden" [found wretched] (7a).

In another of the digressions of the poem, the Beowulf-poet alludes to the fact that Beowulf, like Scyld, experienced a period of adversity in his youth:

> Hean wæs lange,
> swa hyne Geata bearn godne ne tealdon,
> ne hyne on medobence micles wyrðne
> drihten Wedera gedon wolde;
> swyðe (wen)don, þæt he sleac wære,

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man of noblest birth [from the most far-distant kingdom] . . . thought nothing at all of himself unless he wore his arms and dressed in the same way as Arthur's knights." And it is a court ruled by a king whose reputation for "generosity and bravery spread to the very ends of the earth," such that "the kings of countries far across the sea trembled at the thought they might be attacked and invaded by [Arthur], and so lose control of the lands under their dominions" (222).

æðeling unfrom. Edwenden cwom
tireadigum menn torna gehwylces.
(2183b-2189)

[[Beowulf] was despised for a long time, as the sons of the Geats did not count him good. Nor would the lord of the Weders make him the owner of much on the mead-bench. They very much believed that he was slothful, a feeble prince. A reversal of each of those troubles came to the famous man.]

Much has been written concerning Beowulf's "inglorious youth," and, in the process, critics have questioned nearly every aspect of the passage. A particular concern for critics has been the question of the time period in Beowulf's life to which this passage of Beowulf alludes.[26]

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[26] In Digressions, Bonjour suggested that Beowulf's inglorious period occurred sometime in his childhood. Kemp Malone, "Notes on Beowulf," Anglia 69 (1950): 295-300 dissented, suggesting that "in [Beowulf 2183b-2189], there is not the slightest indication that the poet had a period of youth in mind." In contrast, he argues that the Beowulf-poet "made his hero's youth glorious, but gave him besides an inglorious period which presumably came in his young manhood" (296). Bonjour clarified his position in

But, whether we take lines 2183b-2189 of Beowulf as a reference to Beowulf's childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood, the fact remains that it is this portion of the poem which serves to propel Beowulf into the realm of the Anglo-Saxon hero. In light of his inglorious reputation, Beowulf's ability to overcome in single combat Grendel and Grendel's mother—two adversaries that are clearly more powerful than he—becomes even more "heroic" (in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the term) precisely because it is the opposite of what one would expect from him. The same is true of Judith, the hero of a fragmentary Anglo-Saxon poem written in the "epic style" of Beowulf. Clearly, Judith's ability to overcome Holofernes and, in the process, to liberate her people show her indeed to be an "heroic" character in the conventional sense of the term. But,

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"Young Beowulf's Inglorious Period," Anglia 70 (1950): 339-344, noting that, although the Beowulf-poet does not specifically tie Beowulf's inglorious period to his youth, "the audience of Beowulf was conversant with the motive of the sluggish youth" and that "a reference to an inglorious period in Beowulf's early life would have been almost automatically associated by the audience with the hero's youth, unless otherwise stated" (344).

considered in light of her gender, Judith's ability to overcome Holofernes must have at first appeared unlikely—and thus all the more heroic—to the Anglo-Saxon audience of the poem, who probably would not have been inclined to expect such valiant behavior on the part of a woman.[27]

In short, Scyld Scefing, Beowulf and Judith—three exemplary Anglo-Saxon heroes—appear to achieve their heroic status within the poetry of Anglo-Saxon tradition not merely because they accomplish a similar series of nearly impossible tasks but because, in so doing, they defy others' low expectations of them. And, given this peculiarly "English" notion of the heroic ethos, I believe that Sir Gawain's own inglorious reputation hardly would have troubled the English audience of SGGK, for such is the stuff of which the earliest English heroes were made. In fact, I would argue that it precisely because of Sir

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[27] For two discussions of Judith's place within the epic poetry of the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition, see Mary Kay Temple, "Beowulf 1258-1266: Grendel's Lady-Mother," ELN 23.3 (1986): 10-15 and Jane Chance, "Brave Judith, Juliana, and Elene: Allegorical Figures of the Soul, Christ, and the Church," Woman as Hero in Anglo-Saxon England (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1986): 31-53.

Gawain's questionable that he is particularly well suited to function as the hero of SGGK, for Gawain's troubled reputation shows him to be of Arthur's retainers the knight with the greatest "heroic potential," at least in terms of the English literary tradition. Were Lancelot, for example, to answer the challenge of the Green Knight and, in so doing, to bring honor to Arthur's court, I would argue that his actions—though honorable—would not appear particularly "heroic" to the English audience of SGGK, for, as I have noted above, Lancelot's reputation is generally such in the corpus of Arthurian literature that one could hardly expect them to do otherwise.[28] For Gawain to do so, on the other hand, would be for him to defeat the expectations of the Gawain-poet's audience, for in light of his own reputation for treachery, one can only

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[28] In so far as the reputation of Lancelot within the English tradition is concerned, R. W. Barber, Arthur of Albion, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961), for example, notes that Lancelot's reputation is such within Malory that "achievements tend to be measured in terms of personal valor, and valor is rated on a 'Lancelot scale.' Lancelot is the best, and the rest [of Arthur's knights] are judged by how nearly they approach him" (131).

imagine that Gawain's failure in this endeavor must have seemed to them at first inevitable. For this reason, I would suggest that the Gawain-poet saw Sir Gawain as the heir apparent to the heroic ethos of the earliest English poetry. By selecting Sir Gawain hero of SGGK, the Gawain-poet lays for his text a foundation that serves to render his poem compatible with the literature of the native English tradition, for it is primarily by means of this choice that the Gawain-poet is able to imbue his narrative with the spirit of English heroism in a style consistent with that of the earliest English poetry.

In light of the sorts of revision to which I have argued the Gawain-poet subjected the "challenge episode" as he worked to incorporate it into SGGK, I believe we might do well to consider the possibility that it is primarily we who have romanticized the Camelot and Sir Gawain that figure so prominently in SGGK, not the Gawain-poet. In fact, given the significance and function of the pseudo-historical framework of SGGK and the highly mimetic character of medieval poetry, it does not seem logical to argue that, after working so carefully to position rhetorically his narrative as an account of the pseudo-historical "first age" of Camelot, the Gawain-poet would

have in turn patterned his narrative after some fairly contemporary continental model. Quite the contrary, I believe that he would have turned for his inspiration to those stories and conventions that were themselves the product of England's far-distant past—those of the Anglo-Saxon tradition—and that the poetic paradigm codified for us in those extant stories of that tradition naturally would have found its way into SGGK. For these reasons especially, it is my contention that if we read the poem in light of a poetic paradigm that is, like the context which the Gawain-poet provides for his audience via his pseudo-historical frame, more immediately reconcilable with the Anglo-Saxon poetic aesthetic than with that of the continental romances, we will be better able to account for a number of the difficult structural and thematic elements of SGGK that have heretofore been explicable by critics only as the products of the Gawain-poet's singular and ineffable artistry.

Chapter Three

Generic Variation and The Structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

One would be hard pressed to find a single element of the *Gawain*-poet's text more often lauded by scholars than the structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; for this reason especially, it is hardly surprising that a discussion of this feature of the poem has found its way into nearly every critical assessment of the *Gawain*-poet's work. So highly regarded by critics is the *Gawain*-poet's artful arrangement of the constituent narrative episodes of his poem that the structure of *SGGK* has long been compared by scholars to the pentangle, that sign of perfection that adorns Sir Gawain's shield. Yet, despite their best efforts to untangle for their readers the *Gawain*-poet's own "endles knot," critics have found themselves generally unable to account for the *Gawain*-poet's decision to pair in his text a challenge episode with a temptation episode or for the methodology by which he was able to weave this unique combination of narrative elements into a single, organic unit.

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters of this study, traditional wisdom holds that the intricate

combination of narrative motifs that distinguishes SGGK probably was not original with the Gawain-poet. Operating under this assumption, it was Kittredge who first proposed that, as he composed SGGK, the Gawain-poet probably had before him a manuscript containing a French text in which he found combined a challenge episode similar to that detailed in the Livre de Caradoc and a temptation episode of the sort that had become a commonplace in the literature of the romance tradition.[1] Of course, even if this mythical immediate source of SGGK did at one time exist, the likelihood that the (probably unique) manuscript containing that text would have survived much beyond the fourteenth century is scant at best, and critics, finding themselves after many years still unable to locate this "lost" source of SGGK, have all but forsaken their attempt to account for the unique structure of poem via source and analogue study. Instead, they have worked to heighten our appreciation of the structural complexity of the Gawain-poet's work by turning their

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[1] I have detailed this facet of Kittredge's argument concerning the structure and origin of SGGK in Chapter One.

attention to the series of artful intricacies that define the structure the poem.

In his Art and Tradition in *SGGK*, Larry Benson has argued that the symmetry which permeates the Gawain-poet's text comes largely as a result of his use of "structural variation," a narrative technique in which

> Scenes and episodes . . . [form] part of a series of variations composed of other passages similar in form and content, [whereby] the meaning of each is modified and illuminated by its variations, even though . . . their relation is implied rather than stated explicitly. (158)

In his own discussion of the structure of SGGK, Martin Camargo mentions many of the corresponding narrative elements of SGGK which Benson and others have taken to be exemplary of what Camargo calls the Gawain-poet's "pervasive" use of structural variation as narrative technique.[2] Camargo points out, for example, that

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[2] Martin Camargo, "Oral Traditional Structure in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Comparative Research on the Oral Tradition, ed. John Foley (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1987) 122-37.

> The festivities at Camelot obviously balance those at Hautdesert the following year, just as Arthur and Bercilak, both of whom are called upon to welcome and, so to speak, 'entertain' a Christmas guest and both of whom preside over a Christmas game, balance each other. Similarly, the events at Hautdesert are echoed by those at the Green Chapel . . . . The challenge at Camelot is balanced by the fulfillment at the Green Chapel, and the two halves of the beheading game encapsulate and parallel the exchange-of-winnings game. Finally, the games themselves are separated from each other by prominent parallel motifs like Gawain's two armings and his two journeys and the pentangle shield with its counterpart, the green girdle. (122)

Yet, it is important to point out that, even in such recent discussions concerning the structural topoi employed by the Gawain-poet as those that I have noted above, critics continue to follow Kittredge in discussing SGGK as if it were a poem comprised of two wholly separate episodes skillfully woven together, a "beheading episode"

which functions as a test of the hero's courage and a temptation episode, the goal of which is, first of all, to try the hero's chastity. However, that in the course of defining the structure of the poem along the lines suggested by what clearly are the highly romanticized "standard readings" of the constituent episodes of SGGK, critics working to account for the unique structure of the poem have inadvertently created for themselves a barrier far greater than the ravages of time, for to delimit their search in this fashion is to presume a general agreement concerning the genre and function of the "challenge" and "temptation" episodes of the poem that simply does not exist.

In fact, in recent years, a number of critics have begun to call into question the romantic "standard readings" of SGGK that led us initially to define as we have the parameters of our search for the manuscript source that we have long believed would illuminate for us the structural paradigm employed by the Gawain-poet as he worked to compose his text. Victoria Weiss and Sheri Ann Strite, for example, have separately argued that though we have come by convention to refer to the initial episode of SGGK as the "beheading game," the challenge levied by the

Green Knight in the first episode of SGGK differs from the corresponding challenges found in the Caradoc and Fled Bricrend in that the Green Knight's challenge lacks any of the characteristic references to beheading that would permit the contest he proposes to be designated a "beheading game" per se.[3] Similarly, though we have long acknowledged the second episode of the poem to function as a temptation scene, critics have seldom found themselves able to agree upon precisely what quality (or qualities) of Gawain are tested in this episode of the poem. Alongside such traditional interpretations of the temptation episode as that offered by Benson, who sees the test as one of primarily of Gawain's chastity, we find the readings of A. C. Spearing, who suggests that the temptation episode functions as a test of Gawain's cortasye and clannesse, R. E. Kaske, who posits that the test is one of Gawain's troth and lealte, and Christopher Dean, who argues that "the lady's ultimate temptation is

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[3] Victoria Weiss, "Gawain's First Failure: the Beheading Scene in SGGK," Chaucer Review 10.4 (1975): 361-62; Sheri Ann Strite, "SGGK: To Behead or Not to Behead—That is a Question," PQ 70 (1991): 1-3.

the apparent offer of life (i. e. by means of the magic girdle) in the face of seemingly inevitable death." (5)[4]

Throughout my previous chapter, I have argued that as he worked to craft the "challenge" episode that ultimately would comprise the frame of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Gawain-poet applied to his sources a pattern of revision designed to render his own text immediately compatible with the poetic conventions of his native English literary tradition and that our tendency to cast this portion of the poem in a romantic light despite such revisions suggests that it may very well be we who have romanticized SGGK rather than the Gawain-poet. And, though I would argue that this tendency to romanticize our readings of SGGK has led us to many a critical impasse, I believe that no single group of scholars has been placed at a greater disadvantage by our habit of unnecessarily romanticizing our reading of the challenge episode of SGGK

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[4] See Benson, Art and Tradition, (41-43), A. C. Spearing, The *Gawain*-poet, (198-199), R. E. Kaske, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Medieval and Renaissance Studies 10 (1979): 24-44, and Christopher Dean, "The Temptation Scenes in SGGK," Leeds Studies in English 5 (1971): 1-12.

than those critics working to articulate the structural paradigm by which the Gawain-poet was able to fashion the challenge and temptation episodes that comprise his poem into a wholly unified narrative. In fact, I think that our habit of casting the challenge episode in a primarily romantic light has tacitly perpetuated our critical predisposition to discuss the "challenge" and "temptation" components of SGGK only as if they were wholly separate episodes, each designed to function independently, each with the goal of showcasing Gawain's possession of that series of qualities—corage, troth, lealte, courtasye, and gentilesse—assigned by convention to the hero of a romance. Indeed, considered separately, they do appear to perform precisely this function in the poem. But, I believe that such readings of the challenge episode in SGGK simultaneously have worked to hinder our understanding of the poem's structure by obscuring from view the presence of a larger and much more significant structural paradigm that I believe to be the primary vehicle by which the Gawain-poet ultimately is able to render his text both structurally and thematically symmetrical. An examination of this larger structural pattern, which I would term "generic variation," will help

us, I think, to better account for the unusually tight structural and thematic unity which characterizes SGGK by allowing us to read the challenge and temptation episodes of the poem not as independent narrative motifs, each showcasing the heroic qualities of Gawain, but as a group of unified episodes designed to address a single thematic concern from two distinct generic perspectives: those of the epic and the romance.[5]

Let us turn in this regard first to a consideration of the "challenge" episode of SGGK. Critics for some time have been predisposed to understand this portion of SGGK along the lines suggested by the corresponding episode in Le Livre de Caradoc, which, as Benson suggests, is probably the most immediate source of the episode as it appears in SGGK. Indeed, much of the traditional reading of the challenge episode of SGGK is predicated upon the critical assumption that the initial account of Arthur's court in the poem works at it does in the Caradoc to

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[5] For more on the concept of "generic transformation," see Kevin Brownlee and Marina Scordilis Brownlee, ed., Romance: Generic Transformation from Chretien de Troyes to Cerventes (Hanover: U of New England P 1985).

demarcate the poem generically as the product of the romance tradition. For this reason, it is only natural that scholars would define the "game" proposed by the Green Knight as if it were likewise a conventionally "romantic" contest designed to challenge the mettle of Arthur's knights. But, as I have pointed out in the second chapter of this study, the Gawain-poet appears to have incorporated into his account of Arthur's court a great many of the "heroic" conventions common to the epic. If we reconsider the terms of the "Crystemas gomen" proposed by the Green Knight in light of these same epic conventions—particularly those governing the importance of the guest-host relationship within the poetry of the epic tradition—I believe we shall see that the "challenge" episode of SGGK functions not primarily as a test of Gawain's bravery but as a trial of Arthur's personal integrity and, by extension, the character of his kingship.

The Green Knight has long been characterized by scholars as a malevolent aggressor, a figure whom the members of the court at Camelot would have good reason to fear. Indeed, many critics have argued that by attributing to the Green Knight both his titular "enker-

grene" hue and enormous size and strength, the Gawain-poet shows the Green Knight to be a product of the supernatural world, a creature to be feared rather than trusted.[6] But,

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[6] The Green Knight has been identified, for example, as the reincarnation of the "literary wild man" by Benson, Art and Tradition 72-95; as "The Green Man of Knowledge" by Hamish Henderson, Scottish Studies 2 (1958): 47-85; and as a "fiendish tempter" by Dale B. J. Randall, "Was the Green Knight a Fiend?" SP 57 (1960): 479-491. But, though many and varied have been the critical accounts of the Green Knight, nearly all such texts have at least one common thread--they take for granted that the Green Knight is a baneful creature and seek only to find the source of his malignancy. I believe that a central reason for this assumption on the part of most critics is the Gawain-poet's intimation at line 140 of his text that the Green Knight is "half-etayn." The term "etayn," of course, is derived from the Anglo-Saxon eoten, or "giant"; this term appears exclusively in Beowulf and is most often used in reference to Grendel and, by extension to the sons of Cain, from whence the Beowulf-poet suggests all evil sprang. See R. E. Kaske, "The Eotenas in Beowulf," Old

it is important to note that the Gawain-poet structures his initial description of the Green Knight so as to suggest that, despite the Green Knight's forbidding appearance, he poses no immediate threat either to Arthur or to the members of his court. The Green Knight couples his intimation that the size Green Knight causes him to appear as if he were "half etayn" [half-giant], for example, with a passage which suggests that, despite his enormity, the Green Knight is "bot mon most" [but mostly a man],

> And þat þe myriest in his muckel pat my3t ride;
> For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne,
> Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale,
> And alle his fetures fol3ande, in forme þat he hade,
> ful clene.
> [And the most cheerful of his size that might ride; for though in regard to his back and his breast, his body was of forbidding appearance, both his paunch and his waist were fittingly small, and all his features following, in the very elegant shape that he had.] (146-50)

English Poetry: Fifteen Essays, ed. Robert P. Creed (Providence: Brown UP, 1967) 285-310.

In this same fashion, the Gawain-poet balances his observation that "Hit semed as no mon my3t/ Vnder his dynttez dry3e" [It seemed as if no man might survive under his blow] (201-02) with a series of details which, taken together, suggest that the Green Knight is altogether unprepared for combat. We learn, for example, that the Green Knight does not sport the accoutrements of a knight who intends to do battle, the he bears "no helme ne hawbergh nauþer / Ne no pysan ne no plate þat pented to armes, / Ne no schafte ne no schelde to schwue ne to smyte" [neither a helmet nor a coat of mail, nor a breast-plate that pointed to combat, nor a spear nor a shield to show or to strike] (203-05). The Green Knight is, of course, armed with an enormous battle-axe, a weapon that the Gawain-poet calls "a spetos sparþe to expoun in spelle, quoso my3t" [a cruel battle-axe to describe with words, whosoever might try] (209); however, the Gawain-poet is careful to include alongside his account of the more ominous qualities of the Green Knight's axe—its razor sharp edge, for example—a series of details which hint that the Green Knight's weapon, though potentially lethal, is not intended for use in combat.[7]

[7] The Gawain-poet tells us that the axe itself is "of

There is likewise a good deal of textual evidence to suggest that, though Arthur's retainers exercise appropriate caution in their initial encounter with the Green Knight, their reaction to him is rather the opposite of what one would expect from a group of people paralyzed by fear. The Gawain-poet is careful to point out that the members of Arthur's court do not shrink from the Green Knight. Instead, they test the Green Knight's resolve; they "[stalke] him nerre / Wyth al þe wonder of þe worlde

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grene stele and of golde hewen" [hewn from green steel and gold] and covered by

> A lace lapped aboute, þat louked at þe hede,
> And so after the halme halched ful ofte,
> Wyth tried tasselez þerto tacched innoghe
> On botounz of þe bry3t grene brayden ful riche.
> [a lace folded about it, that was fastened at the head, and in this same fashion was fastened about the handle, with enough fine tassels attached thereto, on richly embroidered buttons of bright green.] (217-20)

Clearly, the rich decoration of the Green Knight's ax suggests that it is primarily ornamental, as its adornments would make it very difficult to wield effectively in battle.

what he worche schulde" [draw near to him, wondering for all the world what he would do] (237-38). And, though we learn that upon hearing the Green Knight speak, the members of Arthur's court sit "al stounced at his steuen . . . / In a swoghe silence þur3 þe sale riche," [astonished at the sound of his voice . . . in a swooning silence through the rich hall] (242-3), we must remember that the Gawain-poet carefully balances his intimation that "to answare watz ar3e mony apel freke" [many a noble man was afraid to respond] (241) with what the Gawain-poet calls his "judgement" that Arthur's men do not respond to the Green Knight "not al for doubte / Bot sum for cortaysye" (246-7). In so saying, I would argue that the Gawain-poet himself effectively mitigates what appears to be his statement that Arthur's men do not respond to the Green Knight's first address to the court primarily because they fear him. Instead, the Gawain-poet seems to suggest here that Arthur's men do not respond to the Green Knight for two reasons. First, because they know so little about the Green Knight, they choose to exercise discretion at this juncture in their encounter with him. Secondly, they appear to recognize that once the Green Knight has made clear that his wish is to

address the "leader of the group," it falls to Arthur to identify himself and to answer the Green Knight; for one of Arthur's retainers to do so in his stead would constitute a gross violation of decorum.[8]

Similarly absent from Arthur's own response to the Green Knight is any hint that Arthur is the least bit intimidated by the Green Knight's presence in his court. In fact, we learn from the Gawain-poet himself Arthur was "neuer rad" [never afraid] and the young king's initial reaction upon learning of the Green Knight's desire "speke

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[8] Traditionally, students of SGGK have translated lines 246-7 of the poem, "I deme hit not al for doute, / bot sum for courtesy" as "I believe [that the inaction of Arthur's men occurred] not only out of fear, but partly because of courtesy." However, as the MED notes, the term "al," when preceded by a negative, is typically glossed not as "completely" but as "in any way" (c.f. Chaucer, CT VII 170); hence, the lines can be rendered "I deem it not in any way because of fear, but in great part out of courtesy." This translation is certainly more consistent with what the Gawain-poet details as the unflinching reaction of Arthur's retainers to the Green Knight's appearance in their court.

resoun" with "þe gouernour of þis gyng" (224-25) serves to underscore the veracity of this statement. Arthur's immediate response to the Green Knight's request is to welcome the Green Knight to Camelot and to invite him to "Li3t luflych adoun and lenge, I þe prey, And quat-so þy wylle is we schal wyt after" [dismount graciously and stay, I beg you, and whatsoever you should desire we shall speak of after] (254-55).

The Green Knight responds to Arthur's fairly conventional offer of his hospitality in an equally conventional fashion by lauding, in turn, Arthur's reputation, the reputation of Arthur's retainers, and the reputation of Camelot. The Green Knight begins by explaining to Arthur that he has journeyed to Camelot because "þe los of þe, lede, is luft vp so hy3e" [the praise of you, lord, is raised up so high] (258); he proceeds to praise Arthur's retainers as the best of men, "Stifest under stel-gere on stedes to ryde, / Þe wy3test and þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde," [strongest under armor to ride upon steeds, the most valiant and noble of all people] (260-61) and finally points out that Camelot itself is renowned as a court where "kydde [is] cortaysye" [courtesy is shown] (263). After having given due praise

to Arthur and the members of his court, the Green Knight tells Arthur what the Gawain-poet's account of the sparsely armed Green Knight already has led the audience of the poem to suspect—that in journeying to Camelot, the Green Knight means to "passe as in pes, and no ply3t seche" [pass as in peace, and seek no condition] (266); he says to Arthur,

> For had I founded in fere in fe3tyng wyse,
> I haue a hauberghe at home and a helme boþe,
> A schelde and a scharp spere, schinande bry3t,
> Ande oþer weppenes to welde, I wene wel, als;
> Bot for I wold no were, my wedez ar softer.
> [For had I journeyed here in a company in a warlike fashion, I have a mail-coat at home, as well as a helmet, a shield and a sharp spear, shining bright, and other weapons to wield as well, but as I desire no conflict, my garments are softer.] (267-71)

The exchange I have detailed above is of critical importance to any reading of the first episode of SGGK, for it is in this passage that Arthur extends to the Green Knight an invitation that establishes between them a guest-host relationship of the sort that has figured prominently into every epic text from The Odyssey to

Beowulf and beyond.[9] In their respective roles as guest and host, the Green Knight and Arthur would be bound by

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[9] Putter 51-99 discusses at length the conventional features of hospitality as it is depicted within the roman courtois. For more on the romantic conventions of hospitality, see Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, Narrative Invention in Twelfth-Century French Romance: The Convention of Hospitality (1160-1200), (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1980). As Bruckner points out, the sorts of conventional hospitality sequences which we see within the literature of the romance tradition can be divided into the "Welcome," "Suppertime," "Bedtime," and "Departure" motifs. Each of these is likewise composed of a series of conventions; she notes, for example, that the "Welcome" typically details "the arrival at a lodging, with an implicit or explicit arrangement for the exchange of hospitality. The host greets his guest(s), helps him dismount and disarm, sees that his horse is taken care of, and leads him inside" (29). Though we see many of these same conventions at work in the "challenge sequence" of SGGK, Bruckner's study as a whole indicates that it is this very sort of highly-ritualized behavior which is at the heart of romantic "hospitality" tends to de-emphasize

convention to honor a series of obligations, the most important of which are both implicit and reciprocal; as the Green Knight's host, Arthur would be required to show the Green Knight "hospitality" by providing him with food and shelter and by honoring any reasonable request that the Green Knight might make of him. Arthur and the Green Knight would likewise be required to abide by their word, to treat one another with respect, and most importantly, to keep one another from harm. Indeed, the sacred nature of the epic guest-host relationship is difficult to understate, and, for this reason especially, to violate the implicit terms of the guest-host relationship would be to damage one's reputation irreparably.

To this point in their encounter, however, both Arthur and the Green Knight have well executed their respective roles of host and guest. Arthur has extended his hospitality to a stranger in his kingdom, and the Green Knight, after rehearsing the fame of Arthur's court, has assured his host that he has come to Camelot in

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the importance of the ties which bind not only guest and host but their descendents into perpetuity in the literature of the epic tradition, as in the Iliad, Book VI, 119-231. The different character of these

peace.[10] However, we find Arthur's fitness to act as the Green Knight's host—along with the reputation of Camelot itself—suddenly called into question by Arthur's response to the Green Knight's statement to Arthur that "if þou be so bold as alle burnez tellen / Þou wyl grant me godly þe gomen that I ask / bi ry3t" [if you are as valiant as all men say, you will courteously grant me the game that I ask, as is my right] (272-74). Though the Green Knight clearly has done little more here than to suggest that Arthur can demonstrate the hospitality for which Camelot is so well known by indulging the Green Knight's request for a game, Arthur misconstrues the Green Knight's

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[10] Steve Reece, The Stranger's Welcome: Oral Theory and the Aesthetics of the Homeric Hospitality Scene (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993) 12-39, discusses in a comprehensive fashion the conventions governing the guest-host relationship in the Homeric epics. It is interesting to note that, upon his first appearance in Arthur's court, the Green Knight adheres with careful precision to the conventions of the Homeric hospitality scene until Arthur's discourteous response to his request for a Christmas Game suddenly precludes the perpetuation of an atmosphere of hospitality at Camelot.

statement, taking it instead as if it were designed as a personal affront. Arthur's reply to the Green Knight is decidedly inhospitable; despite the lengths to which the Green Knight has gone both to rehearse the sterling reputation of Camelot and to convey his peaceful intentions to the court, Arthur threatens his guest, telling him that if he "craue[s] batayle bare," [craves out-and-out battle], he will not fail to find a fight at Camelot (277-78).

Despite Arthur's overt hostility towards him, the Green Knight continues to conduct himself in a generally courteous fashion; he reiterates his peaceful intentions to Arthur, this time emphasizing the fact that for him to attack any of Arthur's men would be not only discourteous but decidedly unfair, as his own stature shows him to be too formidable an opponent for any of Arthur's retainers. He goes on, however, to commend for a second time the reputation of the "berdlez chylder" that populate Arthur's very young court before proposing to Arthur the terms of his "Christmas Game":

> If any so hardy in þis hous holdez hymseluen,
> Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
> Þat dar stifly strike a strok for an oþer,

I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche,
Þis ax, þat is heué innogh, to hondele as hym lykes,
And I scahl bide þe fyrst bur as bare as I sitte.
If any freke be so felle to fond þat I telle,
Lepe ly3tly me to, and lach pis weppen,
I quit-clayme hit for euer, kepe hit as his auen,
And I schal stonde him a strok, stif on þis flet,
Ellez þou wyl di3t me þe dom to dele hym an oþer
Barlay . . . .

[If any in this house holds himself so hardy, to be so brazen in his blood and mad in his mind that he dare unflinchingly to strike one blow for another, I shall give him as my gift this beautiful ax, that is heavy enough to handle as he likes, and I shall abide the first blow without any armor. If any man be so bold as to undertake that which I describe, let him leap swiftly to me and take hold of this weapon, I give it over for ever, [he] may keep it as his own, and I shall withstand a stroke from him, provided that you will give me the judgment to deal him another without fail . . . .] (285-96)

A re-examination of this passage in the context of the convention of hospitality as it is depicted within the

texts of the epic tradition immediately allows us to see the nature of the test that lies hidden beneath the surface of what has long been dubbed the "challenge" of the Green Knight. Essentially, the Green Knight here has proposed that either Arthur or a member of Arthur's court violate the terms of their guest-host compact by approaching him, accepting from him a gift which will leave him utterly defenseless, and then attacking him; in short, he has proposed a game that is clearly designed to test the reputation that Camelot has acquired as a place where hospitality is understood and practiced, for the tenets of cortaysye would prohibit Arthur from endorsing any such action against a guest of his court.[11] Further,

[11] The Green Knight's use of the term 'bolde' to describe the person who might undertake to participate in his game has often been construed as a suggestion that only the "bravest" of Arthur's retainers could hope to best him in combat. But, it is important to remember that, according to the MED, 'bolde' more often means "shameless" or "brazen" than it does "brave" (c.f. Chaucer, CT IV 2269 and VIII 1415, respectively). Hence, the Green Knight's use of term here constitutes a important double-entendre that reveals much about the

it is important to note that the Green Knight has structured the terms of his game so as to render it impossible for Arthur to win. In the moment that he agrees to the terms of the Green Knight's game and allows it to go forward, Arthur will sully his own reputation by showing himself to be a discourteous host, for not only will he have allowed harm to come to a guest of his court, he himself will have become the instrument of that harm. Indeed, at least for Arthur and his knights, the only way to win the game proposed by the Green Knight is simply not to play it.[12]

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character of Arthur's court. Obsessed as they evidently are with trials by combat, it would only be natural for Arthur's men to hear the Green Knight's proposition as an affront to their bravery, in the process missing altogether the fact that for Arthur or one of his men to take part in the Green Knight's game would show them, ironically, to be so "shameless" as to be willing to attack an unarmed guest for the sake of preserving their reputation.

[12] The inaction on the part of Arthur's knights here is appropriate if we consider it in terms of the epic conventions relative to the guest-host bond. We see

Apparently recognizing the gravity of the consequences that could befall the court if one of them were to consent to the terms of the Green Knight's game, Arthur's retainers do not respond to the Green Knight's request; they wait, as they should, to see what action Arthur will take. But, when no one from Arthur's court volunteers to engage him, the Green Knight questions the reputation of the court, saying

> What, is þis Arþures hous . . .
> Þat al þe rous rennes of þur3 ryalmes so mony?
> Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
> Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?

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precisely this same sort of behavior in Book VI of the Iliad, in which Diomedes and Glaukos prepare to engage one another in single combat. But, as Glaukos recites his lineage, Diomedes recognizes the name of his grandfather, Bellerophontes (or Bellerophon), as that of a man who had once been a guest of Oineus, his own grandfather. For this reason, Diomedes proclaims that, although they are at war, the guest-host relationship enjoyed by their grandfathers binds them forever to behave as "guests and friends" and refuses to fight Glaukos (119-231).

> Now is þe reuel and renoun of þe Round Table
> Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wy3es speche,
> For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!
> [What, is this Arthur's house . . . the fame of which is recited in so many realms? Where now is your pride and your boasts, your fierceness and your conquests? Now is the revel and the reputation of the Round Table overthrown with a word of but one man's speech, for all cower in fear without a blow shown.] (309-15)

Of course, as we read this passage of SGGK, we must remember that, though the Green Knight has suggested that it is cowardice on the part of Arthur's men that has precluded their participation in his game, the refusal of Arthur's knights to take part in the Green Knight's game hardly constitutes a blotch on Camelot's reputation for hospitality; on the contrary, the fact that they are unwilling to attack a guest of the court in the fashion that the Green Knight has proposed offers tangible evidence of their own cortaysye. However, while I would agree with most critics the Green Knight's suggestion to Arthur that his retainers have refused to engage him "for doubte" rather than "for cortaysye" is clearly designed to

goad Arthur into acting on impulse and agreeing to carry out the terms of the game that the Green Knight has proposed, I believe that, given the context in which it appears, this passage serves another, more significant function: it constitutes a second, more aggressive test of the reputed courtesy of Arthur and the members of the his court.

Once the Green Knight has called into question the reputed bravery of Arthur and his men, the Gawain-poet tells us that Arthur loses any remaining semblance of his self-control. We find not only that Arthur "greues" at the words of the Green Knight but that "Þe blod schot for scham into his schyre face and lere" [the blood shot for shame into his faire face and cheek] (316-17), and it is at this moment that Arthur, in a fit of rage, descends from the dais to confront the Green Knight.[13] In the

[13] It is important to remember that, even as he rehearses the terms of his game, the Green Knight calls for a contestant who is a "brazen" person of "wild imagination." Interestingly enough, in line 89 of his poem, the Gawain-poet has made a point of ascribing precisely these traits to Arthur; hence, it should be

midst of this confrontation, Arthur concedes to his guest that the terms of the game he has proposed are "nys" [foolish] and refers to the game itself as "foly" (323-4); but, despite these facts, Arthur quickly agrees to "bayþen þy bone" [consent to the boon] that the Green Knight has asked of him (327). Ironically, however, in his haste to defend the honor of his court, Arthur fails to consider the fact that his very willingness to participate for any reason in a game—the terms of which require him to attack an unarmed guest of the court—will hardly serve to solidify the reputation of his court as a place where courtesy is practiced; quite the contrary, it will serve only to show Arthur to be a king who does not understand the meaning of hospitality or of courtesy. And, clearly, it is in the moment that Arthur shows himself willing to forego the implicit terms of his guest-host compact with the Green Knight in order to take an action that he foolishly believes will secure the reputation of his court

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unsurprising at this point that it is Arthur who rises from the dais to confront the Green Knight.

that Arthur fails this second of the Green Knight's tests.[14]

It is, of course, Sir Gawain who finally offers to take part in the Green Knight's game; but, even as he endeavors to defend the reputation of Camelot, Gawain's behavior before the Green Knight demonstrates that he too lacks even a fundamental understanding of hospitality and courtesy, those traits for which Camelot is renowned. After petitioning Arthur for the right to confront the Green Knight and receiving Arthur's blessing, Gawain approaches the Green Knight, who asks Gawain to reiterate the terms of the game he has proposed.[15] Gawain acknowledges to the Green Knight his willingness to

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[14] Benson has similarly suggested that "Arthur's failure is that when he does take up the challenge he does so in exactly the churlish manner that the Green Knight had demanded. His shame and anger lead him to forget his famous courtesy entirely" (216).

[15] Interestingly, Thomas J. Jambeck, "The Syntax of Petition in Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Style 7 (1973): 22-23 has noted that, in his petition to Hrothgar that he might be permitted to "purge Heorot of Grendel's malevelonce," "Beowulf's petitions anticipates

bede þe þis buffet, quatso bifallez after,
And at þis tyme twelmonyth take at þe an oþer,
Wyth what weppen so þou wylt, and wyth no wy3 ellez on lyue
[offer [him] this buffet, whatsoever befalls after, and at this time a year hence to take from [him] another, with whatsoever weapon [he desires], and from no other man alive] (381-85).

Of course, it is important to note that by specifying here that he will be relieved of his obligation to abide the return stroke due him if for any reason the Green Knight is unable to deliver it himself, Sir Gawain hints to the Green Knight—and to the audience of SGGK—that it is his intention to circumvent his obligation to the Green Knight, presumably by delivering to the Green Knight not

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with striking similarity the contextual as well as structural features of Gawain's corresponding request to Arthur that he be substituted for the king as the Green Knight's opponent."

merely a stroke, but a death blow.[16] The Green Knight himself appears to recognize Gawain's intentions and goes to great lengths to make certain that Gawain understands that the game he has proposed does not require him to deal him such a blow. He reminds Gawain, first of all, that it is his intention to repay Gawain with "such wages / As þou deles me to-day bifore þis douþe ryche" [the wages that you deal me today before this rich company] (396-7). This statement indicates that the best way for Gawain to survive the Green Knight's return blow would be to serve the Green Knight with a stroke which Gawain knows will not injure him, a stroke of precisely the sort which the Green Knight will afford to Gawain in the concluding lines of the poem; in so doing, he simultaneously would show appropriate hospitality to his guest by indulging his

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[16] In this regard, Sir Gawain appears to have taken his cue from Arthur, who advises Gawain to "Kepe þe, . . . þat þou on kyrf sette, / And if þou redez hym ry3t, redly I trowe / Þat þou schal byden þe bur þast he schal bede after" [take care . . . that you lay forth the blow, and if you manage him correctly, readily do I believe that you shall be able to withstand the blow that he shall deliver in return] (372-74).

request for a game and make it possible for him to face without fear the wages promised him by the Green Knight. At this point, however, Gawain is apparently set in his course of action; knowing full well that he intends to deliver to the Green Knight a stroke that will make it impossible for the Green Knight ever again to rehearse his lineage, Sir Gawain inquires as to how he might find the Green Knight when the time comes for him to fulfill his part of their compact. The Green Knight answers him for a second time in a fashion designed to hint that it is unnecessary for Gawain to deliver to him a death blow. He tells Gawain that he will happily reveal his name and the location of his home "quen I þe tape haue / And þou me smoþeley hatz smyten" [when I have the tap, and you have courteously stricken me](406-7).

It is at this point, however, that the Green Knight suggests to Gawain that there is a more ominous way that he may avoid the return stroke due him; he tells Gawain that if, after Gawain has dealt him a stroke, the Green Knight is unable to tell Gawain where he might be found, the outcome of their game will "spedez [Gawain] þe better, / For [he] may leng in [his] londe and layt no fyrre [profit Gawain the more, for he may linger in his land and

proceed no further in this business](410-11). Such a statement on the part of the Green Knight could only constitute a third and final test of Camelot's reputation and, indeed, given the well-known outcome of this portion of the Green Knight's "game," it is a test that Sir Gawain, like his uncle before him, fails miserably.[17] But, even more distressing than the overt lack of courtesy that the Green Knight suffers at the hands of Arthur and his retainers is the fact that, upon the Green Knight's

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[17] Victoria Weiss likewise notes that "the challenge [of the Green Knight] leaves Gawain free to determine the kind of blow he should deliver" and that "One wonders also at Gawain's impulsive decision to strike a death blow, since the Green Knight's statement seems to indicate that Gawain will receive the same kind of blow as he delivers" (362). But, while I agree with Weiss that Gawain upon first delivering his stroke to the Green Knight "could not have known that the knight would be able to withstand the blow of [the] huge axe" (364), I cannot conclude, as she does, because, "unable to grasp the concept of game without dangerous combat" (363), Gawain simply does not understand that he need not behead the Green Knight in order to fulfill the terms of the Green Knight's game.

departure from Camelot, neither Arthur nor his retainers appear to understand the immediate significance of their actions. Arthur suggests to Guenevere that, at Camelot, such "adventures" are common, and he commands that the Green Knight's ax be hung above the dais in a place "Þer alle men for meruayl my3t on hit loke" [where all men might look upon it as a marvel] (479). Thus, for the members of Arthur's court the very instrument by which Gawain and, by extension, Arthur have disgraced the reputation of Camelot becomes a trophy of sorts, and, having satisfied his thirst for adventure, Arthur and Gawain returns to their meals even as the Gawain-poet urges Sir Gawain to ponder the impending consequences of his own discourteous behavior.

It is, of course, in the "temptation episode" of his poem that the Gawain-poet details for his audience Sir Gawain's quest for the Green Chapel and the various trials that he undergoes at the hands of Bertilak and his wife. It would be difficult—if not impossible—to argue convincingly that the events detailed in the second and third fitts of SGGK are not informed by the conventions of the romance tradition; indeed, given his obvious familiarity with the conventions both of the epic and of

the romance, it is not surprising that the Gawain-poet abandons the epic style that characterizes the first fitt of his poem at the moment he begins his tale of Sir Gawain's quest. But, if we are to understand what might have led the Gawain-poet to combine as he has the ostensibly romantic "temptation episode" of SGGK with the initial episode of the poem, which is decidedly not romantic in origin, we must remember that central to any conventional reading of the tests that Gawain endures in the third fitt of SGGK is an understanding of the obligations that bind Gawain and Bertilak as a result of the guest-host compact which Bertilak establishes to exist between Gawain and himself in the moment that he proposes that Gawain participate with him in what we have come to call an "exchange of winnings game."

Interestingly enough, scholars have long searched for a romantic analogue to the "exchange of winnings" game detailed by the Gawain-poet in the third fitt of SGGK, but I would propose that we have yet to locate one because the "exchange of winnings" which often takes place between a guest and his host is a convention of the epic rather than of the romance. The Beowulf-poet himself alludes to this convention throughout his poem by suggesting that Beowulf

does not keep for himself any of the trophies that he "wins" throughout the course of his poem. While a guest of Heorot, for example, Beowulf presents to Hrothgar both the severed arm and head of Grendel as well as the enchanted sword by means of which he was able to emerge victorious from his encounter with Grendel's mother (828b-36; 1644-50; 1677-79a); in return, Hrothgar accords to Beowulf in each case a store of valuable treasure (1043-49; 1866-69). Beowulf in turn exchanges this treasure with Hygelac, his own lord, for a series of gifts, each of which attests to the high stature which Beowulf's honorable behavior has won for him among the Geats (2152-62; 2190-99). Similarly, though the part of the Beowulf-manuscript which presumably explains the reason for the Dragon's attack on Beowulf is badly damaged, conventional wisdom holds that this portion of the poem details the story of a man who, wishing to gain acceptance into Beowulf's comitatus, steals from the Dragon's hoard a golden cup which he intends to present to Beowulf—his would-be host—as a token of his esteem (2214-20). It is likewise important to note that Gawain himself seems to understand that his status as Bertilak's guest obligates him to participate in an "exchange of winnings" with his

host; indeed, in suggesting that he shall accept the terms of the "exchange of winnings" game that his host has proposed because he is required to do so "bi ry3t," Sir Gawain here mirrors the Green Knight's initial address to Arthur, who suggests that, because he is Arthur's guest, Arthur is likewise obliged "bi ry3t" to honor the Green Knight's request for a game.

Though there is little new in acknowledging that our estimation of Sir Gawain's behavior in the central fitts of SGGK varies in direct proportion to the extent to which Sir Gawain shows himself to be a guest worthy of Bertilak's generous hospitality, it does seem particularly noteworthy to me that each of the three tests to which Sir Gawain is subjected while a guest of Bertilak and his wife appears to have been designed by the Gawain-poet to mirror with remarkable precision the series of trials to which the Green Knight subjects Arthur and the members of his court during the course of his own Christmas Game. For example, even as he details for us the first of the three meetings that take place between Sir Gawain and Lady Bertilak, the Gawain-poet points out that Sir Gawain initially exercises in the presence of Lady Bertilak the very sort of caution that Arthur's retainers demonstrate

in the presence of the Green Knight. As Lady Bertilak enters Gawain's bedchamber for the first time, Gawain, unsure of her intentions, decides that it might be wise first for him to ascertain what the purpose of Lady Bertilak's visit to him might be, and it is important to note that, in choosing as he does to "[laye] hym doun lystyly, and let as he slept" [lie down craftily, and let on as he slept] (1190), Sir Gawain greets Lady Bertilak with the same "swoghe sylence" that Arthur's retainers initially afford the Green Knight. And, in language that closely parallels his intimation that, upon seeing the Green Knight for the first time, each of Arthur's retainers "had meruayle quat hit mene my3t, / Þat a haþel and a horse my3t such a hwe lach" [did marvel at what it might mean that a man and a horse might take on such a hue] (233-34), the Gawain-poet tells us that Sir Gawain remains silent in the presence of Lady Bertilak "a ful longe quyle / Compast in his conscience to quat þat cace my3t / Meue oþer amount—to meruayle hym þo3t" [a great long while, ponder[ing] in his conscience what that occurrence might mean or amount to—he thought it a marvel] (1195-97).

When Gawain finally responds to Lady Bertilak, the Gawain-poet tells us that he does so only because he wishes to show himself to be a courteous guest; Gawain concludes that, rather than shun the wife of his host, "More semly hit were / To aspye wyth my spelle in space quat ho wolde [it would be more courteous to speak to her and to learn what she would desire] (1198-99) and in his own first address to Lady Bertilak, Sir Gawain shows to her all of the courtesy that Arthur himself affords to the Green Knight in extending to him the hospitality of Camelot. Gawain tells Lady Bertilak that, as her guest, whatsoever she commands, "Me schal worþe at your wille, and þat me wel lykez / For I 3elde me 3ederly, and 3e3e after grace / And þat is þe best, be my dome, for me byhouez nede" [it shall be done to me according to your will, and that pleases me, for I yield myself promptly and cry out for grace, and that is best, in my opinion, for I am obliged to so by necessity] (1214-16). And, in her response to Sir Gawain, Lady Bertilak mimics the response of the Green Knight to Arthur's greeting by praising Sir Gawain's reputation; she lauds Gawain as a man "Þat alle þe worlde worchipez quere-so 3e ride; / Your honor, your hendelayk is hendely praysed / With lordez, wyth ladyes,

with alle þat lyf bere [that all the world worships wheresoever [he] rides; whose honor and courtliness is graciously praised, by lords, by ladies, by all persons living] (1225-29). It is at this point, however, that Lady Bertilak goes on to suggest to Gawain that they engage in a game of her own design; she tells him that

> My lorde and his ledez ar on lenþe faren,
> Oþer burnez in her bedde, and my burdez als,
> Þe dor drawen and dit with a derf haspe;
> And syþen I haue in þis hous hym pat al lykez,
> I schal ware my whyle wel, quyl hit lastez,
> With tale.
> 3e ar welcum to my cors,
> Yowre awen won to wale,
> Me behouez of fyn force
> Your seruaunt be, and schal.

[My husband and his retainers are gone far away, other men are in their beds, as are my ladies, the door is closed and fastened with a stout latch; and since I have in this house he whom all like, I shall pass my time well, while it lasts, with stories. You are welcome to my body, your own course of action to

devise, for, as I am obliged by pure necessity to be your servant, I shall be.] (1231-40)

Scholars have long taken Lady Bertilak's statement here that Sir Gawain is "welcome to her person" to constitute a trial of Gawain's chastity, but I would argue that, in the larger scheme of the poem, Lady Bertilak's tender of herself to Sir Gawain here constitutes a trial not only of his chastity, but of his willingness to honor the most important of the implicit terms of the guest-host compact into which he has entered with Bertilak. Since for Gawain to engage in any but the most innocuous contact between him and the wife of his host would be for him to violate the terms of the compact to which he is bound as Bertilak's guest, Lady Bertilak's intimation to Gawain that it is ultimately he who will "determine his own course of action" in deciding whether (or how) to respond to her offer to him presents Gawain with the opportunity here to demonstrate whether or not his reputation for courtesy is well-deserved. For this reason, I would argue that Lady Bertilak's intimation to Sir Gawain that, in the absence of her husband, Sir Gawain is "welcome to her body" almost certainly constitutes a test of Gawain's character that is designed by the Gawain-poet to emulate

the test to which the Green Knight subjects Arthur and his court in proposing the terms of his Christmas Game. Clearly, Sir Gawain can "win" the "game" proposed by Lady Bertilak only by refusing to participate in it.

Sir Gawain responds to Lady Bertilak's proposition with the very sort of apprehension that initially leads Arthur to regard the Green Knight's suggestion that the two participate in a Christmas Game as an affront to his personal honor. Rather than show himself to be a discourteous guest, however, Sir Gawain encourages Lady Bertilak to revise the terms of the "game" she has proposed. He calls himself a "wy3e vnworþy" [man unworthy] of her company and offers instead to undertake "At sa3e oþer at seruyce þat I sette my3t / To þe plesaunce of your prys—hit were a pure ioye" [any word or deed that [he] might perform for [her, for to do such] would be a pure joy] (1244-47). Lady Bertilak works swiftly, however, to allay Gawain's misgivings in a fashion that calls to mind that portion of fitt one of SGGK in which the Green Knight works to assure Arthur that, despite his ominous appearance, he has come to Camelot unprepared for confrontation. She begins by suggesting to Gawain that she has come to visit him only

that she might praise "Þe prys and þe prowes þat plesez al oper" [The excellence and the prowess that is pleasing to all] (1249). She goes on to assure him that, though there are "ladyes inno3e þat leuer wer nowþe / Haf þe, hende, in hor hold, as I þe habbe here . . ./ Þen much of þe garysoun oþer golde þat þay hauen" [ladies enough whom it would delight more to have you, good sir, in their hold, as I have here . . . than much of the treasure or gold that they have], she herself is content to "louue þat ilk lorde þat þe lyfte haldez," [praise the very lord who holds the heavens], for she has "hit holly in [her] honde þat al desyres, / þur3e grace" [it wholly in her hand, that which all desire through grace] (1251-58).

Clearly, Lady Bertilak's words here only partially serve their purpose; though she does manage by them to allay some of Sir Gawain's initial fear of her, the Gawain-poet notes that, throughout their conversation, Gawain "ferde with defense, and feted ful fayre" [behaved defensively, and very courteously] (1282), always careful to show to Lady Bertilak all of the courtesy due her as the wife of his host. In so doing, Gawain praises Lady Bertilak's "fraunchis nobele" [glorious generosity](1264), and he even goes so far as to repay Lady Bertilak's

generosity by giving his word to act as her servant (1278). But, Gawain has scarcely pledged his troth to Lady Bertilak when she shocks him with what the Gawain-poet calls a speech of "ful store worde3" [very severe words] in which she suggests that the restraint Sir Gawain has exercised in her presence has served only to damage his reputation for courteous behavior. She tells him that,

> So god as Gawain is gaynly is halden
> And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen,
> Couth not ly3tly haf lenged so long wyth a lady
> Bot he had craued a coss bi his courtaysye,
> Bi sum towch of sum tryfle at sum tale3 ende
> [As good as Gawain is rightly considered, and as courtesy is contained so completely in him, he could not have lightly lingered so long with a lady unless he craved a kiss on account of his courtesy, by some hint of some small matter at the end of his tale.] (1297-1301)

Lady Bertilak's speech here is ostensibly designed by the Gawain-poet to function as a more aggressive test of Gawain's courtesy, and, like the statements by which the Green Knight succeeds in goading Arthur into participating

in his game, the statements that Lady Bertilak makes here are inherently fallacious. Of course, it is entirely untrue that Gawain's refusal to pursue a physical relationship Lady Bertilak would show him to be discourteous; indeed, for Gawain to do otherwise would be for him to echo the treachery of Paris, who, in seizing for himself Helen of Troy, the wife of Menelaus, his host, showed himself to be arguably the single worst guest in the history of western literature. Despite these difficult circumstances, Gawain does his best to honor the implicit terms of the guest-host compact into which he has entered with Bertilak without offending the lady. He tells Lady Bertilak that he will honor her request, but he makes it clear that he has only agreed to "kysse at [her] comaundement, as a kn3yt falle3" [kiss at her command, as is befitting a knight] but, having granted her request, he asks her to "plede hit no more" [plead it no more] (1303-4). Likewise, upon Bertilak's return to Hautdesert, Gawain honors his compact with his host by exchanging for the trappings of the deer that Bertilak has hunted the kiss the Gawain has received from his wife. But, when Bertilak inquires as to the source of the kiss that he has received, Gawain refuses to reveal to his host the origin

of his "gain" and suggests to Bertilak only that he "question him no further" (1395), and the fact that he does so suggests that Gawain recognizes the fact that in kissing Bertilak's wife, he has breached perhaps the most important facet of the unspoken compact between a guest and his host, one which clearly prohibits Gawain from so much as kissing the wife of his host.

The ordeal that Gawain faces on the second of his three days at Castle Hautdesert proceeds in a fashion that shows it to be, like the first test that Gawain endures at the hands of Bertilak and his wife, nearly identical in form and structure to the Green Knight's trial of Arthur's court. But, it is on the third day of Gawain's stay at Castle Hautdesert that Lady Bertilak, after greeting Gawain, questioning him, and insisting once again that he give to her what has become their customary kiss, deviates from her normal course of action by proposing that she and Gawain exchange tokens of their affection. She offers to him all manner of rich arraignments, as well as her infamous "green girdle," but Gawain wisely refuses to accept any such gift from her. Gawain suggests to Lady Bertilak that he does so because "he nold neghe in now wyse/ Nauþer golde ne garysoun, er God hym grace sende /

To acheue to þe chaunce þat he hade chosen þere" [he would not touch in any way either gold or treasure, before God sent him the grace to fulfill the destiny that he had undertaken there] (1836-38), but, I would argue that, in declining her gift, Gawain is merely taking the next in a series of steps that he hopes will disguise what Gawain clearly believes to have been his discourteous treatment of his host. Of course, Gawain is as yet unaware that it is Bertilak himself who has orchestrated the daily meetings that have taken place between Sir Gawain and his wife, and it is clear that, by refusing to reveal to Bertilak the origin of the kisses he has gained while a guest in his home, Gawain believes that he must either conceal from his host the "trysts" he has enjoyed with Lady Bertilak or show himself to have violated the most sacred of the implicit terms of his guest-host compact with Bertilak. If he were to accept one of Lady Bertilak's personal effects, Gawain would only create for himself a situation much like that which Arthur creates by allowing himself to be goaded into accepting the terms of the Green Knight's game; he would either have to forsake his word by concealing the gift from his host, or he would have to present to Bertilak the "ocular proof" that he has

repaid Bertilak's generous hospitality with the most vile sort of treachery.[18]

Gawain quickly relents, however, when Lady Bertilak rehearses for him the qualities of her enchanted girdle, which she claims will shield its wearer from harm. She tells Gawain that "quat gome so is gorde with þis gene lace, / While he hit hade hemely halched about, þer is no haþel vnder heuen tohewe hym þa my3t, / For he my3t not be slayn for sly3t vpon erþe" [whatsoever man is girt with this green lace, while has it neatly fastened about him, there is no man under the heavens who might cut him down, for he may not be slain by any earthly device] (1851-54).

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[18] There is, of course, a wealth of textual evidence that Sir Gawain recognizes that the dubious nature of his actions, if discovered, have the potential to destroy his reputation. For example, the Gawain-poet tells us that, on the day of his final tryst with Lady Bertilak, Sir Gawain "cared for his cortaysye, lest craþen he were, / And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne, / And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t [took care to remain courteous, lest he be considered a churl, but more so for the disaster to himself if he should commit a sin, and in so doing be a traitor to his host.] (1773-75)

Upon hearing these words, the Gawain-poet tells us that Gawain immediately accepts Lady Bertilak's gift—along with her condition that Gawain conceal it from her husband—apparently because it occurs to him that "My3t he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe sle3t were noble" [if he were able to escape being slain, any means to do so were accounted noble] (1858). It is interesting to note, however, that the Gawain-poet is careful to point out that this thought comes to Gawain not from his mind—the center of reason—but from the seat of his emotions—his heart. Unfortunately, however, Gawain does not pause to consider that Lady Bertilak herself hinted to him that her girdle is a gift that will "gain him less" than he expects (1829).[19] Neither does Sir Gawain hear the warning

[19] Of course, this statement is literally true; the girdle itself is indeed worth less than the gold ring which Lady Bertilak offers to Gawain in lines 1817-20 of SGGK. But, it is important to note that, Gawain clearly accepts the girdle only because Lady Bertilak persuades him that, in so doing, he might render himself impervious to the Green Knight's return blow. In retrospect, it becomes quite clear that the girdle figuratively gains Gawain significantly less than he had hoped that it would

implicit in Lady Bertilak's account of the range of the girdle's power; given her description of it, it is clear the girdle would do little to protect Sir Gawain from the Green Knight, who has already shown himself to be imbued with an other-worldly power that makes him much more than a "man under heaven." He accepts the gift, thinking only that, if he is able to survive the Green Knight's return blow, he will bolster his reputation among the members of Arthur's court by surpassing their expectations of him and returning to Camelot not as a martyr, but as their champion.[20] Clearly, in the moment that he chooses

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for, as we learn in the final stanzas of the poem, the girdle itself is invested with no such power; it serves instead only to evidence Gawain's discourteous treatment of his host and thus becomes the symbol of his shame.

[20] Sir Gawain admits as much to the guide whom Bertilak charges with the task of overseeing Gawain's journey to the Green Chapel. Though the guide pleads for with him to abandon his foolish quest, Sir Gawain suggests that he cannot do so because if he "Founded for ferde for to fle, in fourme þat þou tellez" [hastened afar to flee, as [the guide] has described], he would be accounted a "kny3t koward" [cowardly knight], and for that

simultaneously to accept the green girdle and—more importantly—not to surrender this gift to his host, Gawain likewise chooses to forego the terms of his guest-host compact with Bertilak, ostensibly because to do so is the most expedient means to what Gawain construes to be a single, all-important end: his survival. In so doing, Sir Gawain demonstrates in this third fitt of SGGK that he, like his uncle, does not understand the meaning of the courtesy attributed to him.

Were the Gawain-poet to have omitted the central portion of his poem, it would be easy enough for us to read the trial to which the Green Knight subjects Arthur and his retainers as a test of their bravery; similarly, unframed by the first and final episodes of the poem and devoid of any reference to the "exchange of winnings game," the "temptation episode" of SGGK almost certainly would constitute a test of only Gawain's chastity. And, though these episodes do function at one level both as bravery and chastity tests respectively in SGGK, I believe that these two episodes of SGGK simultaneously work together to make clear that, even in their younger years,

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transgression he "my3t not be excused" [might not ever be forgiven] (2130-31).

neither Arthur nor Gawain understand or practice the cortaysye for which the Green Knight suggests they are renowned. This fact, I think, makes it possible for us to recognize the structural paradigm that might have led the Gawain-poet to combine as he has what appear at first glance to be the two seemingly unrelated narratives that constitute SGGK, for given the similarity of their form and function, I would argue that the central episode of SGGK constitutes a skillfully crafted generic variation of the events detailed in the opening sequence of the poem. By including in the third fitt of his text an "awenture" in which Gawain demonstrates for a second time the discourteous behavior that leads him in the first fitt of the poem to attempt to murder the Green Knight so that he might avoid his obligation to withstand the Green Knight's return blow, it would seem that the Gawain-poet all but begs us to re-think our understanding of the events that he has detailed in the first fitt of the poem so that, in the course of our epic quests for fame, we might avoid the folly of Arthur and of Gawain.

Chapter Four

Caveat Auditor: Gawain's Lesson, Arthur's Failure and the Theme of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

At lines 633-634 of SGGK, the Gawain-poet tells us that "Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as golde pured, / Voyded of vche vylany" [Gawain was known for good, and, as gold refined, bereft of all discourtesy.] Given the unequivocal nature of this statement, it is somewhat ironic that, in studies treating the theme of SGGK, Gawain is often remembered by scholars not for his successes but for what many would argue is his single failing. Most critics would be quick to agree that the meaning of SGGK is somehow bound to the significance of this error on Gawain's part—his decision to conceal from Bertilak the green girdle with which Lady Bertilak presents him in the third fitt of the poem. But, a central problem for students of SGGK is that the Gawain-poet does not employ the masterful homiletic style of his Pearl, Cleanness, and Patience to comment upon the meaning of Gawain's error and, by analogy, the theme of SGGK itself. Given the narrative ambiguity which we have long recognized to be an important—albeit troubling—stylistic feature of the poem, this is not altogether surprising; as Lois Bragg has

noted, such is the norm for the Gawain-poet, whom she argues works very carefully to obscure the meaning of SGGK by including in it "an abundance of clear yet contradictory statements [made] by a narrator who seems to be missing the point of his tale" (483).[1] But, in so far as the significance of Gawain's error is concerned, it is interesting to note that we find even the narrator of the poem unusually silent, apparently in deference to that series of passages which scholars have come to term the "three judgments of Gawain." However, it would seem that these portions of SGGK, which are central to most interpretive readings of the poem, have done at least as much to hinder our understanding of SGGK as what Bragg has termed the Gawain-poet's "elusive" narrative style, for in each of these three "judgments" of Sir Gawain, the Gawain-poet provides for his audience a contradictory account of both the significance of Sir Gawain's error and the degree of his culpability.[2]

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[1] Lois Bragg, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Elusion of Clarity," NM 86 (1985): 482-88.

[2] See J. J. Anderson, "The Three Judgments and the Ethos of Chivalry in SGGK," Chaucer Review 24 (1990): 337-355.

After revealing to Sir Gawain that it was he, in the guise of Bertilak, who had devised the three trials to which Sir Gawain had been subject while a guest at Hautedesert, the Green Knight becomes the first in the poem to offer such an appraisal of Sir Gawain's fault. The Green Knight's judgment of Sir Gawain is perhaps the least ambiguous of the three; though the Green Knight does fault Gawain for his decision to conceal the green girdle from him, he comments throughout his judgment upon what he argues is the relative insignificance of Gawain's failure. Indeed, the Green Knight suggests that, with this one exception, Gawain's conduct has shown him to be

> On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede;
> As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,
> So is Gawayn, in God fayth, bi oþer gay kny3tez.
> Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewté yow wonted;
> Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, no wowyng nauþer,
> Bot for 3e lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame.
> [One of the most faultless men that ever walked; as a pearl is of greater value than the white pea, so is Gawain, by God, in comparison to other knights. But here you lacked a little, sir, and you fell short of

loyalty; but that was not because of deception, or of wooing, but because you loved your life; therefore, I blame you the less.] (2363-68)

Of course, Sir Gawain's own appraisal of his actions is far less forgiving than that afforded him by the Green Knight. But, I think it is important to note that Gawain seems to be less concerned with his acceptance of the girdle than with what he suggests are the "cowarddyse and couetyse" which he has demonstrated in betraying the trawþe of his host (2374). Gawain argues that these two traits are indicative of the "vylany and vyse pat vertue disstryez" [ill-breeding and vice that destroy virtue] (2375) and that, for this reason, his conduct has shown him to be utterly undeserving of the Green Knight's estimation of his worth. He explains that

> For care of þy knokke cowardyse me ta3t
> To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake,
> Þat is larges and lewté þat longez to kny3tez.
> Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer
> Of trecherye and vntrawþe: boþe bityde sor3e and care!
>
> [Cowardice taught me to accord with covetous out of fear of the stroke, to forsake my nature, which is

the largess and loyalty that belongs to knights.
Now, I am faulty and false, and always have been
afraid of treachery and falseness: both cause
nothing but sorrow and care!] (2374-84)

The third of Gawain's judgments, that proffered him by Arthur and the members of his court, has likewise proven itself difficult to reconcile either with the two judgments of Gawain which precede it or the events detailed within the narrative of the poem itself. Upon Sir Gawain's return to Camelot, Gawain relays to Arthur the unusual outcome of his "awenture" and proposes to keep the green girdle about him as a perpetual reminder of what he has concluded to be his iniquity. Yet, despite what Gawain suggests to Arthur is his obvious failure, Arthur's judgment of Sir Gawain implies that Arthur does not believe Gawain to have erred in the least. Quite the contrary, the Gawain-poet tells us that

Þe kyng comfortez þe kny3t, and alle þe court als
Lau3en loude þerat, and luflyly acorden
Þat lordes and ladies þat longed to þe Table,
Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde
haue,
A bende abelef hym aboute of a bry3t grene,

> And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were.
> For þat watz acorded þe renoun of þe Round Table,
> And he honoured þat it hade euermore after . . . .
> [The king comforts the knight, and all the court with him laughs loudly at Gawain's story, and they accord out of love that lords and ladies that belonged to the table, each man of that brotherhood, should have a baldric, a band about him of bright green, and should follow suit in wearing it for the sake of Gawain. In this way, the baldric was accorded the renown of the Round Table, and he honored that had it forever after . . . .] (2513-20)

By including in his text that series of antithetical passages touching the nature and significance of Sir Gawain's error to which I have alluded above, the Gawain-poet has made it possible for a scholar working to explain the "meaning" of SGGK to craft a persuasive argument for virtually any reading of the poem simply via reference to the particular judgment of Gawain that best appears to support the case he or she wishes to make. Scholars who wish to argue, for example, that Sir Gawain's error was motivated by the natural (though perhaps in appropriate) desire to save his life have only to turn to the judgments

of the Green Knight and Arthur for ample textual evidence to support their claim; on the other hand, critics who are of the opinion that the gravity of Gawain's error is far greater than either the Green Knight or Arthur realize have only to cite Sir Gawain's judgment of himself in order to make an equally convincing case. But, since each of the three judgments of Sir Gawain—and the account of Gawain's error contained therein—stands in opposition to the others, it becomes necessary for any scholar who wishes to clarify the meaning of SGGK first to define the precise nature of Sir Gawain's transgression. The inconsistency which characterizes the three accounts of Gawain's error offered by the Gawain-poet has made this a difficult task to be sure; hence, scholars typically have been forced to base their assessments of Gawain's error upon the single account of Gawain's transgression that to them appears most consistent with what they believe to be the temper of the poem as a whole. This practice has led us to produce a body of scholarship treating the transgression of Sir Gawain that can be characterized only by the diversity of opinion contained therein. As Bragg points out,

> Some of us find that Gawain's sin in accepting the girdle was covetousness, some believe that it was dependence on pagan magic, some see it as merely cheating at a game, some as a violation of a knight's sworn word, some as a breach of the laws of hospitality, some as a figurative violation of chastity, and some of us believe our elusive narrator when he tells us that Gawain took it only to save his life. (488)

The articles of William Goldhurst, J. F. Kiteley, Avril Henry, and Richard Newhauser are particularly illustrative of the critical condition which Bragg describes. In his article, "The Green and the Gold: the Major Theme of Gawain and the Green Knight," Goldhurst argues that, in accepting the girdle, Gawain succumbs to "the basic human instinct for survival asserting itself"; for this reason, he finds the theme of the poem to reside within the "conflict that causes Gawain sorrow and guilt later in the poem"—the conflict between "the essence of courtliness" and "the natural man" (63); Kiteley, however, takes Gawain's sees Gawain's action as evidentiary of the "cowarddyse" typically attributed to him by the authors of the Arthurian tradition. Likewise, in "Temptation and

Hunt in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Henry suggests that, in the third fitt of the poem, because Gawain falls victim to covetousness, the temptation scenes must have been devised by the Gawain-poet so as to allow us to witness Gawain's "diminution" at the hands of Lady Bertilak. But, whereas Henry finds that "Gawain's attempt to avoid the death of his body . . . apparently merits damage (the nick in the neck) or even death" and that "it may endanger his soul"(194), Newhauser argues that the medieval audience of SGGK would have understood that, in acting to preserve his life, Sir Gawain had committed a mortal sin—that of avaritia vitae (411-14)—and had in the process forever jeopardized the well-being of his soul.[3]

However, there is a central problem with any reading of SGGK that has been constructed in the fashion I have

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[3] William Goldhust, "The Green and the Gold: the Major Theme of Gawain and the Green Knight, College English 20 (1958): 61-65; J. F. Kiteley, "The Knight Who Cared for His Life," Anglia 79 (1962): 131-37; Avril Henry, "Temptation and Hunt in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Medium Aevum 45 (1976): 187-199; Richard Newhauser, "The Meaning of Gawain's Greed," SP 87 (1990): 410-426.

described above: because the three judgments of Sir Gawain differ in terms of the degree of culpability with which the Green Knight, Gawain, and Arthur invest the actions of Sir Gawain himself, no single account of Gawain's error offered in the poem is sufficient to allow scholars to craft a steadfastly consistent reading of the events detailed in the final two fitts of SGGK. A. C. Spearing makes much of this point in what is arguably the most influential treatment to date of the meaning of SGGK. In his The *Gawain*-poet: A Critical Study, Spearing carefully illustrates that the contradictory judgments of Gawain leave the audience of SGGK with

> two alternative views of the later stages of the poem: one that sees Gawain's understanding of his adventure as being essentially the same as the poet's, while the Green Knight is misleading and Camelot mistaken; the other that sees the poet as sharing the lenient judgment on Gawain that he attributes to the Green Knight and the court, and as presenting Gawain's own perception and understanding as seriously flawed. (231)

Spearing himself opts for the second of these possible interpretations of the poem for reasons which he

articulates throughout his own carefully wrought argument. He suggests, for example, that because Gawain has shown himself more than once in the poem to be "highly fallible interpreter of the moral nature of his position" (224), the Gawain-poet has given us good reason to believe "that Gawain does not fully grasp the meaning of the test he undergoes" (227).[4] Spearing goes on to explain Gawain's harsh judgment of himself in light of the romance tradition, pointing out that it is a commonplace of the romance to overstate the importance of a relatively insignificant event (229-30). And, in this regard, Spearing finds the laughter with which Arthur and the members of his court greet Gawain's story of his failure to be wholly appropriate, particularly given what he has argued is the comic tone of the Gawain-poet's treatment of his hero and the conventions of the romance tradition itself.[5] Spearing thus concludes that "When the court

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[4] Spearing suggests, for example, that Gawain "wrongly fails to recognize that [his intended retention of the girdle] is a sin" (225).

[5] See also P. B. Taylor, "Gawain's Garland of Girdle and Name," English Studies 55 (1974): 6-14. Like Spearing, Taylor sees in the final lines of the poem "a

laugh at Sir Gawain, their reaction is a healthy one, and should guide our own, for they see that he is giving excessive importance to a minor failing in an impossibly difficult task" (230).[6]

Of course, in arguing that we understand the response of the court along the comic lines that he suggests, which are themselves obviously informed by his own fluency with the texts of the romance tradition, Spearing is hardly alone. In his Art and Tradition, Benson similarly argues that the tone of SGGK is finally comic and that "the laughter with which the action concludes is exactly the right note, for whatever deeper concerns it has touched and however serious it almost becomes, Sir Gawain is

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tone of gentle mockery . . . as if the poet is himself bemused by a hero who is anti-heroic, by a romance tradition which makes too much of too little, and by a courtly society in which there is little but accumulated wisdom to temper ideals" (14).

[6] For Spearing, the impossibility of Gawain's predicament at Castle Hautedesert rests in the fact that he can find no way "of offending against either cortaysye or clannesse" in his dealings with Lady Bertilak without simultaneously becoming "a traytour to his host" (208).

predominately a festive poem" (248). Burrow likewise finds that "we cannot . . . properly appreciate Sir Gawain, either as a lay or moral tale, without keeping a grasp on the rather obvious fact that it is a comic poem" (185).[7] He accounts for the laughter of the court by pointing out that, were the court to castigate Gawain for his failings, they would succeed only in showing themselves to be discourteous, and he takes the court's response to Gawain to be reflective, not of their naïveté, but of the longevity of "their own grace and courtesy."[8] For this reason, Burrow concludes that the laughter which punctuates the final lines of SGGK shows us that, despite the best efforts of Morgan Le Fay, "the Green Knight has

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[7] For the whole of Burrow's discussion treating the comic theme of SGGK, see his A Reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* (Routledge: London, 1965), 149-86.

[8] In defense of his position, Burrow argues that the court does not comment upon Sir Gawain's error because "it is not for them to do so. The court is involved in the case neither as injured party nor as judge: there is plainly no call for them to pour 'biting wine' into the wound. Their part is, like Spenser's Una, to 'rejoice' and to 'cherish' the returned knight" (158).

not succeeded in his attempt to overthrow 'þe reuel and þe renoun of þe Round Table' (159).[9]

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[9] In his article "Interpretive Laughter and SGGK," PQ 70 (1991): 141-47, Robert Longsworth has cautioned us against the very sorts of readings proposed by Benson, Spearing, and Burrow, all of which appear to be predicated upon the premise that laughter itself can function only as an expression of happiness. Longsworth points out, however, that "under the guise of simplicity, [laughter] is in fact liable to be quite equivocal. Laughter may represent approbation or derision; delight or discomfort; satisfaction or embarrassment; estrangement or complicity" (142). For this reason, Longsworth finds the conclusion of SGGK to be, like much of the poem, wholly ambiguous. He notes that "Gawain's remorse and Arthur's effort at consolation are overwhelmed by the social laughter that surrounds them," and he concludes that "Ardently as we may wish to penetrate the interpretive mystery of that response, we cannot be sure that the courtiers are signaling approbation or mockery, sympathy or alienation, pleasure in reunion or absolution of a real or imagined transgression" (146).

Spearing, Benson, and Burrow each make a similarly convincing case that, thematically speaking, SGGK ought to be understood as primarily comic, for by reading SGGK in this fashion, they are able to resolve many of the difficult critical questions raised by the Gawain-poet's inclusion in his poem of three several judgments of Sir Gawain. Yet, I would argue that, despite their obvious strengths, such comic readings of the poem—which are representative of the best that contemporary scholarship has to offer—teach us that even when the most gifted of scholars work to clarify the meaning of SGGK by sifting the final fitts of the poem through the sieve of the romance tradition, the readings of the poem which result are beset with inconsistencies which I think we would be incorrect simply to disregard. Perhaps, for example, we are to believe the Green Knight's suggestion that Sir Gawain is only minimally culpable for his error in that he took the girdle primarily because he believed that it would save his life; but, if this is the case, how are we to account for those portions of the poem which clearly indicate that, even after accepting the girdle, Sir Gawain believes that he will not survive the blow of the Green Knight? In this respect, we must not only explain away

the fact that Sir Gawain flinches from the two feigned blows with which the Green Knight first requites him; we must similarly contend with problematic lines 1877-84 of the poem, in which we learn that, after accepting the girdle from Lady Bertilak, Sir Gawain goes to chapel and confesses his sins, "þe more and þe mynne," apparently under the impression that, for him, "domezday schulde have ben di3t on þe morn" [the morn would show itself ordained to be doomsday] (1784). Likewise, if we are to attribute Arthur's jubilant reception of Sir Gawain in the final lines of the poem to the comic conventions of the romance tradition, we must first work to explain the rationale by which Arthur could believe, despite Gawain's own protestations to the contrary, that Sir Gawain has returned to Camelot in triumph rather than disgrace. In order to do so, we would first have to redefine our understanding of the very touchstone against which I would argue that we ourselves have long tried the behavior of Sir Gawain—the chivalric ethos attributed by convention to Arthur and the members of his court. Indeed, even Spearing, who argues throughout his treatise that Sir Gawain shows himself to be the personification of the chivalric ideal, is willing to concede that Gawain's

conduct shows him to be an imperfect knight, and I think we ought to wonder what it means that Arthur and the members of his court clearly show themselves unable to recognize Gawain's failure as such.

We might, of course, simply attribute the sorts of difficulties that arise from a comic reading of SGGK to the elusive style of the Gawain-poet; however, I would argue that that the central difficulty that has precluded our ability to produce a comic reading of SGGK that is both narratively and thematically consistent has much more to do with a central assumption which underlies virtually all such readings of the poem. This is, of course, that Gawain errs but once in the whole of SGGK. The generic expectations which critics have brought with them to their respective studies of the poem, particularly those studies treating its challenge episode, have helped to perpetuate the long-standing acceptance of this critical premise. When we remember, as Julian Wassermann and Robert Blanche have, that "a critical assessment of the court in the opening scene of Gawain shapes the overall reading of the poem" (176) it is not difficult to understand why this has

been the case.[10] Because the narrative details which comprise the first fitt of SGGK bear such a striking resemblance to those found in the corresponding episode of Le Livre de Caradoc, critics have become predisposed to understand the challenge episode of SGGK—and the whole of the poem by extension—as if it had been likewise designed by the Gawain-poet primarily to showcase both the bravery and courtesy of Sir Gawain himself. When we read the first episode of SGGK in this manner, we are left with little choice but to believe that Gawain's failure could only reside in his acceptance of the green girdle from Lady Bertilak; consequently, the theme of the poem becomes largely a function of what we must take to be a single, relatively insignificant action on the part of Sir Gawain, an action which scholars have held to be least characteristic of his behavior. If we work to understand the poem from this critical perspective, the comic readings of the poem put forth by Spearing, Benson, and Burrow make absolutely perfect sense, for each would be

[10] Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, "The Medieval Court and the Gawain Manuscript," The Medieval Court in Europe, Ed. Edward R. Haymes, Munich: Wilhelm-Fink, 1986, 176-83.

quite right that, in his own judgment of himself, Gawain makes far too much of far too little.

However, in the third chapter of this study, I have made the case that Gawain's acceptance of the green girdle is not his only error; in fact, I have argued that, given the conventions of hospitality governing the guest-host relationship which exists between Arthur and the Green Knight, Gawain first errs in the moment he decides—at Arthur's behest—to dispatch unceremoniously an unarmed guest of the court. If we understand the "challenge" episode in this fashion, Gawain's acceptance of the girdle becomes important principally in that it is an extension of his attempt to behead the Green Knight, for both actions show Gawain willing to breach what he professes to be his code of ethics, so long as he believes that, in the process, he might put himself at an advantage. But what might this pattern of behavior on Sir Gawain's part signify to the Gawain-poet? I believe the meaning of SGGK is to be found in the Gawain-poet's own answer to this question, which I would argue rests in the exegesis he has provided for the series of biblical exempla to which the Gawain-poet alludes throughout Cleanness, his own treatise on spiritual purity. If we consider Sir Gawain's actions

throughout SGGK against the thematic touchstones which form the basis of Cleanness, I believe we will find that, in the eyes of the Gawain-poet, Sir Gawain's error lies primarily in the fact that his pattern of behavior shows him to have followed the example of Arthur, who appears to have adopted as the standard of his court a code of conduct which the Gawain-poet takes to be illustrative of the most perilous sort of moral corruption.

Cleanness has proven remarkably less troublesome for students of the Gawain-poet than has SGGK, chiefly because, throughout the poem, the Gawain-poet employs the distinctly homiletic style for which his works—SGGK excepted—have long been renowned. As he works to extol the virtue of cleanness, or "purity," the Gawain-poet references a series of biblical exempla, each of which is illustrative, interestingly enough, not of the heavenly rewards which await "þe haþel clene of her hert," [the man who is pure of heart] (27), but of the terrible punishments accorded to those who would defile kingdoms of heaven and earth with their fylth. Yet, it is important to note that each of the exempla cited by the Gawain-poet likewise serves as a gloss on the attributes of cortaysye—the central concept of SGGK—and the spiritual cleanness of

which the Gawain-poet argues that courteous behavior is indicative.

In the case of the first exemplum in Cleanness, which takes the form of Christ's parable of the wedding feast,[11] the Gawain-poet contrasts the hospitable behavior of the lord who presides as host over a wedding feast with the discourtesy evidenced by the behavior of a single, inappropriately-attired guest. The parable of the wedding feast recounts the story of a nobleman who, having prepared an elaborate banquet to celebrate the marriage of his first-born son, finds that those persons of similar estate with whom he would share the feast have frivolously rejected his invitation to it. Unwilling to allow that which he has prepared to go to waste, the lord commands his servants to fill his hall with "Boþe burnez and burdez, þe better and þe wers, / Laþez hem alle luflyly to lenge at my fest, / And bryngez hem blyþly to bor3e as barounez þay were [both men and women, those of high and low estate, courteously invite them all to linger at my feast, and bring them joyfully into the city as though

[11] This account of the parable which the Gawain-poet includes in Cleanness is derived from Matthew 22: 2-14 and Luke 14: 16-21.

they were barons] (80-82). His servants do as he has commanded, and, in his role as "host" of the wedding feast, the lord demonstrates the limitless nature of his own hospitality by affording to each of his guests a place of honor within his palace:

> Wheþer þey wern worþhy oper wers, wel wern þay stowed,
> Ay þe best byfore and bry3test atyred,
> Þe derrest at þe hy3e dese, þat dubbed wer fayrest,
> And syþen on lenþe bilooghe ledez inough.
> And ay as segges serly semed by her wedez,
> So with marschal at her mete mensked þay were.
> Clene men in compaynye forknowen wern lyte,
> And 3et þe symplest in þat sale watz serued to þe fulle,
> Boþe with menske and with mete and mynstrasy noble,
> And alle þe laykez þat a lorde a3t in londe schewe.
> [Without regard to their station, well were his guests lodged; in each case, the most dearly dressed, those who were dubbed the fairest, the best and most brightly attired, were seated at the high dais; and afterwards along the length of the table below people enough, and in each case as they seemed by the

clothing they wore, in this fashion they were honored at the feast. The pure men were hardly neglected, and yet the meekest among them were served to the full, both sorts accorded courtesy and food and noble minstrelsy, and all the behavior that a lord ought to show in his land.] (113-122)[12]

Yet, in the course of surveying his guests, the lord spies "A þral þry3t in þe þrong vnþryuandely cloþed, / Ne

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[12] In noting as he does in line 117 that the persons in attendance at this feast "were seated as suited their stations, according to their clothes, on the dais," the Gawain-poet appears to suggest that those persons of the means to richly array themselves for the lord's feast were accorded a place of honor by him. What the parable seems to suggest, however, is that the persons in attendance at this wedding feast are seated by the lord not according to their social station, as would be the norm, but in accordance with the respect that to their lord they showed by attiring themselves as best they were able for his celebration. For notes concerning the obscurity of this passage of Cleanness and the textual difficulties presented by line 117 of the poem as it appears in MS Cotton Nero A.x., see Andrew and Waldron 116-7.

no festiual frok, bot fyled with werkkez; / Þe gome watz vngarnyst with god men to dele" [A fellow among the throng inappropriately attired, not in a frock befitting a feast, but one defiled by labor; the man was not properly dressed to associate with good men] (135-37). At the lack of cortaysye demonstrated by this man, who had not taken time to attire himself in a fashion appropriate to the occasion at hand, the lord becomes enraged; he expels this ungrateful guest from his feast, commanding his torturers to

> Byndez byhynde, at his bak, boþe two his handez,
> And felle fetterz to his fete festenez bylyue;
> Stik hym stifly in stokez, and stekez hym þerafter
> Depe in my doungoun þer doel euer dwellez,
> Greuing and gretyng and gryspyng harde
> Of teþe tenfully togeder, to teche hym by quoynt."
> [Bind both of his hands behind his back, and swiftly fasten cruel fetters to his feet; stick him firmly in stocks, and enclose him thereafter deep in my dungeon, wherein dwells sorrow, grieving and weeping and gnashing of teeth, to teach him to behave in accordance with wisdom.] (155-60)

In this fashion, explains the Gawain-poet, it is because of his own "hospitality" that God would afford to each of the inhabitants of the earth a place of honor within his heavenly kingdom; but, while those who arrive in his presence courteously attired will be permitted by him to remain at his side, those who deign to stand before him in arrayed in fylth shall be cast down and condemned, like Satan, to dwell forever in a state of eternal separation from God.[13] Having thus concluded his account of the

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[13] In lines 161-68 of Cleanness, the Gawain-poet significantly expands upon Matthew 22:14, "Many are called but few are chosen," to explain that among the few who will be chosen are those, like the Pearl-maiden, who have died prior to reaching the age of accountability, as well as those, like the appropriately-attired wedding guests of the lord who is the subject of this parable, who take care prior to their departure from this world to make certain that their figurative "wedez ben clene" [clothes are clean] (165). See Andrew and Waldron 118 for an interesting note as to the method by which the Gawain-poet revises the biblical source of lines 161-68 so as to render it more immediately applicable to the themes he will develop in Cleanness.

parable of the wedding feast, the Gawain-poet poses to his audience the question wherein he lays the foundation of the argument which is to comprise the remainder of his treatise. "Wich arn þenne þy wedez þou wrappez þe inne," the Gawain-poet asks, "Þat schal schewe hem so schene schrowde of þe best? / Hit arn þy werkez, wyterly, þat þou wro3t hauez, / And lyued with þe lykyng þat lye in þyn hert" [What then are the clothes that you wrap yourself in, that shall show themselves in this fashion to be lovely garments of the best sort? They are clearly the works that you have performed in accordance with the inclination of your heart] (169-72). In responding to this question as he does, the Gawain-poet argues for the first of many times in Cleanness that the inherent condition of each person's soul is made manifest to God and man alike by the cortaysye—or lack thereof—which characterizes his actions.

In each of the exempla which the Gawain-poet cites in Cleanness, he continues to develop what he suggests is the analogous relationship between the degree of cortaysye with which a person adorns his actions and the inherent state either of spiritual cleanness or moral corruption in which the soul of that person ultimately resides. But,

nowhere in Cleanness does the Gawain-poet makes this point more forcefully than in his account of the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, throughout which he contrasts the courteous behavior of Abraham and Lot—both righteous men—with the licentiousness which typifies the conduct both of Lot's wife and the Sodomites themselves. However, I would argue that this portion of Cleanness becomes of particular importance to our consideration of the theme of SGGK when we notice that the Gawain-poet establishes the cleanness both of Abraham and Lot by offering as evidence of each man's cortaysye a detailed account of the hospitality which each man affords to those who are guests in his home.

We witness the extent of Abraham's hospitality early in this episode of Cleanness. Finding himself to be suddenly in the company of three travelers whom he does not at first recognize, the Gawain-poet tells us that Abraham rises, greets these men "as to God" (611), and then humbly offers to provide them with food, drink, and a place to rest from their journey:

Hende Lorde,
3if euer Þy mon vpon molde merit disserued,
Lenge a lyttel with Þy lede, I lo3ly biseche;

Passe neuer fro Þi pouere, 3if I hit pray durst,
Er Þou haf biden with Þi burne and vnder bo3e
restted,
And I schal wynne Yow wy3t of water a lyttel,
And fast about schal I fare Your fette wer waschene.
Resttez here on þis rote and I schal rachche after
And brynge a morsel of bred to baume Your hertte.
[Noble Lord, if ever a man upon the earth deserved such merit, I humbly beseech you to linger here for a while with your companions; pass not from your humble servant, I beg you, before you have rested with him under this bough, and I shall quickly fetch for you a little water, and with it I shall wash your feet. Rest here on this root, and I shall go forth and bring a morsel of bread to ease your heart.] (612-20)

At the request of this company, which we soon learn to be the embodiment of God himself, Abraham hurries to his home, where he properly prepares a feast which he shares with his guests "As sewer in a god assyse . . . Whyth sadde semblaunt and swete of such as he hade," [in the fashion of a good steward . . . with all such dignity and courtesy as he could marshal] (639-40). And, the Gawain-poet is quick to point out that the cleanness of Abraham,

evidenced by the hospitality which he exhibits before God, is such that "God as a glad gest mad god chere / Þat watz fayne of his frende, and his fest praysed" [God made merry, glad to be his guest; he was happy to meet his friend, and he praised his feast](641-42).

Shortly thereafter, it is Lot, Abraham's nephew, who finds himself in the company of what appear to be two travelers, "myry men 3ong" which the Gawain-poet notes are in actuality two angels which God in his own cortaysye has sent to Sodom that Lot might be forewarned of the city's impending demise (783). In words evocative of the invitation of Abraham and illustrative of his own cleanness, Lot proffers his own hospitality to these would-be travelers:

> Syrez, I you byseche
> Þat 3e wolde ly3t at my loge and lenge þerinne.
> Comez to your knaues kote, I craue at þis onez;
> I schal fette you a fatte your fette for to washe;
> I norne you bot for on ny3t ne3e me to lenge,
> And in þe myry mornyng 3e may your waye take.
> [Gentlemen, I beseech you to come to my home and linger therein. I beg you here and now to come to your servant's cottage; I shall fetch for you a tub

that your feet may be washed; I urge you but for one night to linger in my home, and in the merry morn you may take to your way.] (799-804)

At first, of course, the angels refuse Lot's invitation; when they finally acquiesce to it, they do so, the Gawain-poet intimates, only because Lot "laþed so longe wyth luflych wordez / Þat þay hym graunted to go and gru3t no lenger" [urged them for so long with such courteous words that they agreed to go with him and refused him no longer] (809-10). Once they have arrived at his home, Lot, in the fashion of Abraham, demonstrates the extent of his hospitality by commanding that his servants prepare a meal worthy of his guests. He is even careful to take steps to ensure that they will find the food with which he presents them palatable; it is for this reason that he cautions his servants to "þenkkez on his be þrefte what þynk so 3e make, / For wyth no sour ne no salt seruez hym neuer" [remember to leave unleavened whatsoever you think to prepare; do not serve these men either with leaven or with salt under any circumstances] (819-20).

In stark contrast to the courteous treatment afforded by Lot to his guests, however, is that which they suffer at the hands both of Lot's wife and the Sodomites, whose

behavior in this episode of Cleanness embodies both spiritual fylth and the discourteous conduct that accompanies it. In a passage which constitutes an addition to the biblical account of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Gawain-poet tells us that Lot's wife "wrathed oure Lorde" both by leavening the food that is to be served to Lot's guests—despite his explicit instructions to the contrary—and because, having done so, she "scelt hem in scorne þat wel her skyl knewen" [reviled them scornfully who knew well what she had done] (827).[14] But, it is only in the moment that the Sodomites come to Lot in a throng to demand that Lot relinquish his guests to them so that they might "lere hym of lof, as oure lyst biddez" [teach them of love, as our lust demands] (843) that the Gawain-poet makes clear to his audience the extent of the fylth

[14] Though this account of the conduct of Lot's wife is hardly original with the Gawain-poet, it is important that he includes it here for, in so doing, he further amplifies the connection which he develops between the virtue of cleanness and "courteous," e.g. "hospitable" behavior, here by demonstrating that the actions of Lot's wife, taken as she is by the fylth as Sodom, are neither courteous nor hospitable.

for which the city has become infamous. Not only do the Sodomites suggest that it is "þe asyse of Sodomas" [the custom of Sodom] to so abuse the "seggez þat passen" [those men who pass through the city] (844). When Lot, who is himself a guest of Sodom, comes to the defense of the angels, the Sodomites label him a "carle" and explain that, if he does not comply with their demands, they might just as easily "kylle of þyn heued" [cut off his head] (876).[15] As befits the theme of Cleanness, the Gawain-poet concludes his account of Sodom and Gomorrah by pointing out that that the punishment which God metes out to those who, caught in the clasp of such unabashed depravity, behave in the fashion of the Sodomites, is both swift and severe. The Gawain-poet tells us that, in his wrath, God so smites the cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Zeboim, and Admah that "Al þe citees and her sydes sunkken to helle" [all the cities and their surroundings sunk into hell] (968), and when Lot's wife, finding it impossible to divorce

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[15] Though lines 875-76 of Cleanness constitute a paraphrase of Genesis 19:9, the Gawain-poet's conspicuous inclusion of a reference to beheading in his account of the story does not appear to have biblical or liturgical counterpart and thus seems to have originated with him.

herself completely from the fylth of Sodom, turns to witness the city's destruction, she finds herself transformed, appropriately enough, into "a stonen statue þat salt sauor habbes" [a statue of stone that savors of salt] (995).

It is thus by way of Cleanness that the Gawain-poet himself creates for his readership a working definition of a central concept of SGGK—that of cortaysye—which I would argue extends far beyond that typically offered by contemporary critics and editors of the poem. Whereas virtually all editions and translations of SGGK gloss the Middle English term cortaysye simply by way of substituting its Modern English equivalent, it is clear that our understanding of the term as indicative simply of polite or appropriate behavior is insufficient to convey what is apparently the significance of the term to the Gawain-poet.[16] For him, cortaysye appears to be a divine

[16] In their edition of SGGK, Tolkien and Gordon gloss cortaysye as "courtesy, (manners and virtues of chivalry)" (173). A. C. Spearing, "Gawain's Speeches and the Poetry of 'Cortaysye,'" Critical Studies of *SGGK*, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1968), 174-81, glosses cortaysye in a similar fashion.

virtue, one best exemplified by God's practice of meting out to all who desire it the measure of grace necessary to restore them from their inherently fallen condition to the state of spiritual cleanness by which they might come to enjoy the limitless hospitality afforded to all those who dwell within the kingdom of heaven. To properly practice cortaysye, then, is to emulate the very benevolence which God himself shows to us; it is the ocular proof of our own cleanness and the quality which leads us, in the fashion of Abraham and Lot, to afford without measure our own hospitality to others. By the same token, however, to act inhospitably is to evidence the discourtesy indicative of fylth, or moral corruption, and the Gawain-poet goes to

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Spearing places the terms cortaysye and vylanye in opposition, suggesting that "just as cortaysye means in one sense the polite behavior appropriate to a courtly person, so vylanye means the offensive behavior appropriate to a vilain, a peasant" (175). The gloss of cortaysye provided by Andrew and Waldron (like that of the MED) however, is particularly noteworthy, as it goes beyond the notion of polite behavior to include figurative glosses of the term, for example "goodness, moral virtue, generosity, (divine) grace" (311).

great lengths in Cleanness to demonstrate for his audience that those who persist unrepentant in this type of behavior ultimately will find themselves, like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, subject to the unmitigated wrath of God.[17]

With this definition of cortaysye firmly before us, let us return to our consideration of the meaning of SGGK. It has become a commonplace of contemporary scholarship treating SGGK to point out that, in the opening stanzas of his poem, the Gawain-poet works to demonstrate for his audience that Arthur's court is hardly a paragon of

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[17] In Cleanness 13-16, the Gawain-poet is especially critical of hypocrites in this regard; he notes, for example, that if priests, while professing themselves to be servants of God and would-be exemplars of the faith,

> . . . counterfete crafte and cortaysye wont,
> As be honest vntwyth and inwith alle fylþez,
> Þen ar þay synful hemself, and sulpen altogeder
> Boþe God and His gere, and Hym to greme cachen
> [counterfeit wisdom and lack courtesy, as to be outwardly honest but filthy within, they are sinful themselves, and sully both God and his clothing, and goad him to wrath.]

cortaysye. To support this contention, scholars have pointed primarily to that series of events included by the Gawain-poet in his initial account of the goings-on at Camelot. In this light, critics have remarked upon the types of frivolous activities in which the court is engaged at the traditionally somber Yuletide season, as well as the fact that the Green Knight apparently finds Camelot to be in such a pervasive state of disorder that, at first glance, he is unable to discern for himself whom among the members of the court is the "gouernour of þis gynge" (226).[18] However, I would argue that if we re-examine the events detailed in the first episode of the poem in light of the working definition of cortaysye that the Gawain-poet himself provides for us via Cleanness, it becomes eminently clear that, at least in so far as the Gawain-poet is concerned, Camelot is plagued, even in its

[18] For more on the contrasts which critics have suggested distinguish Arthur's court from that of Bertilak, see Blanche and Wasserman, "The Medieval Court and the Gawain Manuscript," and Lauren Lepow, "The Contrasted Courts in SGGK," The Medieval Court in Europe, ed. Edward R. Haymes (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1986), 200-209.

younger years, by a type of corruption that is far more grave than most critics of the poem heretofore have recognized. In this respect, I would argue that the depravity of Camelot is best evidenced by the overt hostility which characterizes Arthur's treatment of the Green Knight. When the Green Knight initially addressees Arthur, taking care to point out that, despite his forbidding appearance, he "no ply3t sechez," Arthur's sole response is to threaten his guest. When the members of Arthur's court tacitly refuse to participate in the perverse "game" proposed by the Green Knight, which I have argued is designed to test not the bravery, but the cortaysye of the court, it is Arthur who "wexes wroth" at them and agrees to take up the game himself. And, though it is Sir Gawain who actually beheads the Green Knight, we must remember that he does so only at Arthur's suggestion that, by acting in this fashion, he might avoid the return blow of the Green Knight. But, perhaps most significant—and most disconcerting of all—is the fact that Arthur apparently does not recognize his own treatment of the Green Knight to be abhorrent; quite the contrary, he applauds the inhospitable behavior which he has afforded the Green Knight and praises Sir Gawain for his

unsuccessful attempt utterly and unceremoniously to dispatch him.[19] It is thus by virtue of his account of the pervasive discourtesy which characterizes the treatment afforded the Green Knight by Arthur and Gawain that the Gawain-poet establishes Arthur's kingship to be invested of such moral and spiritual turpitude that, immersed in it as they are, Arthur and Gawain themselves have become unable to recognize it.

In fact, the concluding stanzas of SGGK seem to suggest that the type of conduct that proper cortaysye entails is so alien to Sir Gawain that when the Green Knight opts to spare Sir Gawain's life by substituting a mere "tap" of his ax for the death blow to which Sir Gawain's actions have entitled him, Sir Gawain finds himself unable to recognize the cortaysye of the Green Knight as such. In fact, once he finds that he has survived the return blow of the Green Knight, Gawain requites the Green Knight's benevolence with a hostility which is reminiscent of his conduct in the first fitt of

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[19] I have previously discussed at length the behavior of both Arthur and Gawain in the first fitt of SGGK as it pertains to the concept of "hospitality"; see Chapter 3, "Generic Variation and the Structure of SGGK," 122-37.

the poem, a hostility that seems to suggest that Gawain believes he has survived the Green Knight's return stroke only because the girdle wrapped about his waist has rendered the Green Knight powerless to harm him. The Green Knight, however, is quick to point out to Sir Gawain that such is not the case. He explains to him that "Iif deliuver had bene, a boffet paraunter / I coupe wropeloker haf waret, to þe haf wrot3t anger [if I had been nimble, I could perhaps have harmed you, requited you with a far fiercer blow.] In so saying, the Green Knight hints at what has by this time has become obvious to all but Sir Gawain himself: the actual source of Gawain's salvation is not the girdle which he wears but the measure of hospitality which the Green Knight has chosen to afford to Gawain, who is himself at this point in the poem a guest of the Green Chapel.[20]

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[20] I find it especially telling that, during the course of his appraisal of Sir Gawain's conduct before him, the Green Knight praises him for his "trawþe" and calls him "On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede" but never once suggests that during the course of their encounter, Sir Gawain has exhibited cortaysye.

If we understand the events detailed throughout the poem in the manner I have outlined above, it becomes far less difficult to reconcile the Green Knight's judgment of Gawain with Gawain's own appraisal of his actions. The Green Knight's judgment of Gawain, we must remember, focuses on but a single action on Sir Gawain's part—his acceptance of Lady Bertilak's green girdle, and the Green Knight is correct when he suggests that Gawain's decision to accept the green girdle shows him to have "lacked but a little"; indeed, it is difficult to imagine that any member of the Gawain-poet's audience, finding him or herself in Gawain's predicament, would not have made the very same choice. But, I believe in the moment that Sir Gawain realizes that he owes his very life to the largess which the Green Knight has shown to him, Gawain comes to recognize the degree of discourtesy inherent in his own initial treatment of the Green Knight. Indeed, in attempting to behead the Green Knight as he does in the first fitt of the poem, Sir Gawain has afforded to a guest of his court the very sort of "hospitality" that the Sodomites themselves suggest that, given the opportunity, they would likewise have afforded to Lot.

But, we must remember that in conducting himself as he has, Sir Gawain is merely emulating the standard of behavior set by Arthur in the first fitt of the poem. In acquiescing to the challenge of the Green Knight as he does, Arthur, apparently motivated by a desire to preserve his honor, shows himself willing to forsake the tenets of cortaysye when it appears to him advantageous to do so. Likewise, Gawain has demonstrated throughout the poem that he is willing to go to any length—however discourteous—to preserve his life. Thus, Gawain is quite right when he berates himself as "faulty and false" in the course of his own judgment. Considered as a whole, his actions throughout the poem demonstrate that he has chosen to internalize the standard of behavior set and endorsed by Arthur, an amoral standard of behavior which the Gawain-poet argues throughout Cleanness is indicative of spiritual fylth. In so doing, Gawain has shown himself to be, quite literally, a microcosm of the corrupt court to which he belongs. The "cowarddyse and couetyse" which Gawain suggests have driven his actions have shown him to be, like his uncle, utterly bereft of the cortaysye for which he is renowned, and it is thus the discourteous character of the whole of his behavior—and his inability

to recognize his conduct as such—for which I would argue Gawain berates himself during the course of his own judgment.

Indeed, the Gawain-poet's use of the term couetyse, literally "covetousness," throughout Gawain's confession has led a great many readers to understand that, in lines 2374-84 of the poem, Gawain suggests that he betrayed the troth of his host because he "coveted" the girdle which he believed would save his life. While this may indeed be the case, as I have noted on pages 176-77 above, Newhauser has argued convincingly that, based on the Gawain-poet's use of the term, "couetyse" was for him virtually synonymous with the Augustinian concept of avaritia vitae (411), which the audience of the Gawain-poet would have taken to constitute a mortal sin. If we read the term "couetyse" in this fashion, we might just as well take lines 2379-81 to mean that, during the course of his first encounter with the Green Knight, Gawain came to believe that he would be unable to survive a return stroke from his opponent; this fear, illustrative of his "cowardice," caused him to care for his life, and that for this reason, he took an action designed to preserve the life which he sinned in coveting: he beheaded the Green Knight, hoping

in the process to render him unable to deliver his promised return blow. In so doing, he failed to demonstrate "the larges and lewté þat longez to kny3tez" (2381), the very sort of conduct which would have shown him to be courteous.

Thus, when Sir Gawain returns to Camelot that he might submit himself to the judgment of his king, it is appropriate that he approaches the court attired in the belt which has become to him, like the "clothing" to which the Gawain-poet alludes in the initial episode of Cleanness, emblematic of what he now understands to be the discourtesy which has characterized his conduct and the literal state of "disgrace" to which his works have entitled him. This truth, I would argue, is at the heart of the lesson which Sir Gawain's trials have taught him, a lesson which he has purchased at the expense of his honor, his reputation, and, very nearly, his life. It is likewise a lesson from which the court, given what the Gawain-poet has established early in his poem to be the state of its own corruption, certainly stands to benefit. Thus, it is appropriate that, in what is to be his final address to the court, Gawain attempts to impart the central truths of this lesson to Arthur himself by

explaining to him the significance both of the girdle and the scar which the Green Knight's axe has left upon his neck:

> Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek,
> Þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I la3t haue
> Of couardise and couetyse þat I haf ca3t þare;
> Þis is þe token of vntrawpe þat I am tan inne,
> And I mot nede hit were wyle I may last;
> For man may hyden his harme, but vnhap ne may hit,
> For þer it onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer.
> [This is the band of the fault that I bear on my neck, this is the injury and the damage that I have born because of cowardice and covetousness that I have caught there; this is the token of treachery in which I am seized, and I must wear it as long as I live; for man may conceal his sin, but he cannot remove it, for where once it is fastened, there it will always remain.]
> (2505-12)

But, it is important to note that in praising his nephew as he does for what Sir Gawain has explained to be

the trecherye inherent in his actions, Arthur shows that he himself does not understand the costly lesson which Gawain has purchased for him. And, in light of those texts which the Gawain-poet would have understood to comprise the history of Arthur's reign, Arthur's decision to adopt the girdle—and, by extension, the conduct of which Gawain has explained it to be emblematic—as the standard of his court is little short of prophetic. The literature of the Arthurian tradition teaches us that though they are once renowned for their cortaysye, Arthur's knights, like Arthur himself, eventually come to embody the "couetyse and colwarde and croked dedez," (180) the "traysoun and trichcherye and tyrauntyré," (187) which the Gawain-poet suggests in Cleanness to be sure signs of the spiritual corruption by which Camelot ultimately is be destroyed from within. For this reason, it is wholly appropriate that the Gawain-poet concludes his "awenture" of Arthur with a reference to the city of Troy, whose inhabitants, choosing to spurn the warning of Cassandra, admitted to the city the Trojan Horse which would become the instrument of their own untimely demise.

Scholars have long concurred that a central feature of SGGK is the quest which its hero undertakes and the

trials by which, in the course of his journey, Sir Gawain gleans those truths that have the potential to bring him closer to spiritual maturity. In this regard, the events detailed in the second and third fitts of SGGK serve clearly enough to evidence the Gawain-poet's familiarity with the conventions of the romance tradition, as does his account of the celebration which accompanies Sir Gawain's return to Camelot. But, it is important to note that by alluding as he does throughout his poem to the tragedy which will befall Arthur and the members of his court, the Gawain-poet departs from the romance tradition by shifting the theme of his poem to focus, not upon the knowledge which Sir Gawain gleans during the course of his quest, but upon what literary history will prove to be the inefficacy of it. For this reason above all, it would appear that the tone of the note on which the poem concludes is far darker than that which we imagine to have been sounded by the romancers, from whose songs sprang the conventions which would shape the romance tradition with which SGGK has been associated for what is now the better part of century.

Instead, I would argue that the conclusion of SGGK and the historical backdrop against which the Gawain-poet

has so carefully cast it shows the poem to have far less in common with Le Livre de Caradoc than it does, at least thematically speaking, with Beowulf. As critics of Beowulf have long recognized, central to the theme of the poem are the historical digressions against which the Beowulf-poet has cast the actions of his own hero, for, positioned as they are within the poem, each of these digressions works to remind the audience of Beowulf that Beowulf's deeds—despite the extraordinary heroism which they entail—will ultimately prove insufficient to belay the workings of history. The Beowulf-poet makes this point most clearly via that portion of his poem in which he details the tragic outcome of Beowulf's confrontation with the dragon who has laid siege to his kingdom. Though Beowulf is mortally wounded during this course of this conflict, the Beowulf-poet explains that "Biowulfe wearð / dryhtmaðma dæl deaðe forgolden" [Beowulf was repaid for his death with the share of that treasure] (2842b-3); in other words, he secures for his people—at the greatest personal expense—that store of treasures which constitutes the dragon's hoard. In his penultimate address to Wiglaf, whom he will name as his successor, Beowulf explains to him that he has purchased this treasure for his people

that the Geats might benefit from it even after his death. Beowulf thus instructs Wiglaf as to its proper use:

> Ic ðara frætwa Frean ealles ðanc,
> Wuldurcyninge wordum secge,
> ecum Drhytne, þe ic her on starie,
> þæs ðe ic moste minum leodum
> ær swyltdæge swylc gestrynan.
> Nu ic on maðma hord mine bebhote
> frode feorhlege, fremmað gena
> leoda þearfe; ne mæg ic her leng wesan.
> [I give thanks with my words to the Lord, the eternal prince, the King of glory, for all of the treasure which I look upon here, that I might gain such for my people before the day of my death. Now that I have purchased the treasure hoard with my wise, old life, look that you further advance the needs of the people; I may not remain here long after.] (2794-2800)

Wiglaf, however, does not heed Beowulf's instructions that he is to use the hard-earned contents of the dragon's hoard to further the welfare of the Geats and instead commands the treasure be placed on the bier of Beowulf in tribute to his fallen leader. For him to do so, of

course, is to ignore the explicit instructions of his king, but the extent of the hardships which the Geats will suffer as a result of Wiglaf's error becomes clear only in light of the lengthy historical digression which comprises lines 2910b-3007a of Beowulf, in which the Beowulf-poet alludes to what history records as the crushing defeat which the Geats will suffer at the hands of their neighboring enemies, particularly the Swedes.[21] In exchanging his life for the wealth of the dragon's hoard, Beowulf has provided for his people the means by which they might avoid this fate, for had they held the treasure according to Beowulf's instructions, the Geats would have found themselves possessed of the resources necessary to assuage, at least temporarily, the wrath of those who would conquer them. But, because they apparently are unable to understand either the nature of his sacrifice for them or the rationale behind his instructions governing the proper use of the treasure, the Geats inter the very treasure which, had they put it to proper use,

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[21] William Witherle Lawrence, *Beowulf* and the Epic Tradition, (New York: Hafner, 1961), 89-106 offers a concise recount of the history surrounding the conflict to which the Beowulf-poet alludes in this digression.

would have virtually ensured their own survival; in this fashion, they pave the way for their own destruction by rendering the fruit of Beowulf's labors, like the hard-won lesson with which Gawain returns to Camelot, "eldum swa unnyt, swa hi(t æro)r wæs [as useless to men as it was before] (3168).

It is thus that the Beowulf-poet concludes his poem with an historical reference which leaves his reader to ponder, not merely the sacrifice of his hero, but the impending demise of the nation unable to comprehend the meaning of his sacrifice for them. In this fashion, the Beowulf-poet imbues his poem with the sense of tragic loss which William Lawrence takes to constitute "the artistic effect" of an epic, which he defines as a story which teaches us, by virtue of the historical exempla contained within it, that "greatness is but the prelude to tragedy," and "sufferings more poignant than those inflicted by demons arise from ambition and greed" (27). Immersed as he is within the liturgical tradition, these are, I think, the very sorts of lessons which the Gawain-poet would hope to impart to the audience of SGGK. For him, the tragedy of Camelot's fall from grace seems to be not that it was inevitable, but that the flawed character of Arthur's

kingship eventually made it so. I believe that this is the message of the Gawain-poet to his audience, the caveat by which they might choose to eschew the failings of Arthur and so spare themselves the tragic sense of loss which I believe, in the final analysis, permeates both SGGK and the very best poetry of the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

Chapter Five

The Fusion of Traditions

In the years following Kittredge's landmark study of the Gawain-poet's debt to the French tradition, scholars have come to embrace a "standard reading" of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in which they have defined the various narrative, structural, and thematic elements which comprise the poem almost exclusively via reference to the conventions of the continental romance. When we read the initial fitt of SGGK in this fashion, the Camelot of the Gawain-poet becomes, like the Cardeuil of the Caradoc-poet, a "delightful place" (Spearing, The *Gawain*-poet 181), an ideal feudal court in which cortaysye is both properly understood and generally practiced. In contrast, the Green Knight who journeys to Camelot that he might propose his "challenge" to the court comes to exemplify churlish behavior, and his "beheading game" becomes a conventional test of bravery. Similarly, when we read the central fitts of SGGK in light of the romance tradition, we find that the trials which Sir Gawain endures at the hands of Lady Bertilak become immediately identifiable as a series of fairly conventional chastity tests, and Gawain's ability to courteously resist the lady's sexual

temptation of him serves only to strengthen what many would argue is the Gawain-poet's depiction of Sir Gawain as an ideal chivalric knight—a perfect "romantic" hero. Indeed, in a conventional reading of SGGK, Gawain's decision to conceal Lady Bertilak's green girdle from her husband constitutes his sole error in the poem, and the fact that both the Green Knight and Arthur readily forgive Gawain for his transgression in their subsequent judgments of his performance serves only to reinforce the comic tone which scholars have come to expect by convention to permeate the poem as a whole.

But, such purely "romantic" approaches to SGGK have traditionally been complicated by the fact that the Gawain-poet has punctuated his poem with a series of what scholars have termed "anti-romantic" elements, those features of the poem for which there are no apparent romantic analogues. Alongside the alliterative style of the poem—its single most often discussed "anti-romantic" feature—we find, for example, that while none of the Gawain-poet's French sources for the "challenge" episode of SGGK allude to the eye color of the knight who comes to test the bravery of Caradoc, the Gawain-poet attributes "rede y3en" like those of Beowulf's Grendel to his own

incarnation of Green Knight (304). There is also the fact that, in his account of Sir Gawain's journey to Castle Hautedesert, the Gawain-poet recounts none of the episodic adventures which typically allow the heroes of the romance tradition an opportunity to demonstrate their prowess. Instead, he adopts the rhetoric with which the Anglo-Saxon poets expressed the difficulty of exile to suggest that the greatest trial which Sir Gawain undergoes during the course of his quest is the weight of his own solitude. This burden, the Gawain-poet suggests, is most apparent to Sir Gawain

> When þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadde,
> And fres er hit falle my3t to þe fale erþe;
> Ner slayn wyth þe slete he sleped in his yrnes
> Mo ny3tez þen innoghe in naked rokkez,
> Þer as claterande from þe crest þe colde borne rennez,
> And henged he3e ouer his hede in hard iisse-ikkles.
> [When the cold clear water fell from the clouds and froze before it might fall to the earth; more than enough nights he slept in his armor nearly slain by the sleet upon bare rocks, where cold streams ran

from the mountain top and hung over his head in hard icicles.] (727-32)[1]

Of course, because they do not seem to impinge upon the meaning of SGGK as a whole, anti-romantic elements of this sort generally have not proven problematic for those critics who would deepen our understanding of and appreciation for the influence of the French tradition upon the Gawain-poet. Typically, such scholars have been content to address these features of the poem simply by acknowledging their existence, labeling them "anti-romantic," and suggesting that we owe their presence in SGGK to some aspect of the Gawain-poet's artistry which we have yet to fully understand. However, these are hardly the only "anti-romantic" elements in the poem, and it is important to note that no critic has as yet been able to craft a purely "romantic" reading of SGGK that is both thematically consistent and sufficient to answer each of the questions that have been generated by those features

[1] These are, of course, but three of the anti-romantic elements of the poem which have provide great fodder for scholarly debate. I have discussed many more such elements at length in Chapter One, "The Best Books of Romance," 31-43.

of SGGK which have proven to be irreconcilable with the conventions of the romance. The romance tradition does not tell us, for example, why the Gawain-poet chooses to undercut his conventional account both of the Christmas festivities at Camelot and the celebration which accompanies Sir Gawain's return to the court by placing these portions of his poem alongside historical material which alludes to the predestined fall of Arthur's court. It does not explain why, with a virtual canon of conventionally romantic heroes before him, the Gawain-poet might elect to cast as the hero of his poem Sir Gawain, a character whose reputation had declined by the fourteenth century to the point that his name had become virtually synonymous with trecherye rather than cortaysye. There is no extant continental text which would allow us to explain what led the Gawain-poet to combine as he has a redaction of the "beheading game" with the story of the trials to which Sir Gawain is subjected during his sojourn at Castle Hautedesert. And, aside from suggesting to us that a romance ought to end comically, none of the Gawain-poet's French sources can help us to elucidate the thematic significance of the curious laughter with which Arthur

greets Sir Gawain's distinctly "anti-romantic" account of his own obvious failure.

As the conventions of the romance tradition can tell us little that would allow us to reconcile these "anti-romantic" features of the poem with the context provided by its "highly-romanticized" standard reading, I have argued that it makes little sense to hold fast to a purely romantic reading of SGGK. Indeed, I believe that such readings of SGGK have ultimately proven problematic for students of the Gawain-poet primarily because they simply do not take into account the fact that the Gawain-poet and the Caradoc-poet have done much more to their source material than translate it into English or French. In the second chapter of this study, I have illustrated that, as the "beheading game" story which figures so prominently in both the Caradoc and SGGK passed from Ireland to France and then from France to England, the Caradoc-poet and the Gawain-poet each worked to revise the otherwise archetypal challenge motif so as to render it culturally relevant to their respective French and English audiences. The French redactor of the beheading game tale preserved in Le Livre de Caradoc, for example, very carefully "romanticizes" the otherwise archetypal story first by transplanting the

whole of the tale from Ireland to France, setting it in an exemplary "romantic" court—that held by Arthur at Cardeuil—rather than in the Celtic court of Choncobar. Similarly, as we would expect, the redactor of the Caradoc excises any mention of Cuchulainn, the Celtic champion of the Fled Bricrend, from his revision of the beheading game tale. Instead, he chooses Caradoc—an exemplary romantic hero—to be the champion of his tale, and indeed, both Caradoc's reputation for bravery and his actions throughout Le Livre de Caradoc show him to epitomize the sorts of values—bravery, courtesy, and loyalty—which we believe to have been valued by the French audience of the earliest Arthurian romances.[2]

At first glance, the revisions which the Gawain-poet has made to the French redaction of the beheading game story would seem to demarcate SGGK itself as the product of the romance tradition. Of course, the Gawain-poet does relocate his rendition of the story to England, but he

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[2] See both Chapter Two, "Patterns of Revision," 65-67, and Appendix One for a comparison of the features of the Fled Bricrend and Le Livre de Caradoc which I have argued show these poems specifically to be the products of Irish and French culture, respectively.

sets it in a court which itself has become to the modern imagination essentially synonymous with the romance tradition—that of Arthur at Camelot. It is important to note, however, that the Gawain-poet takes great care in the initial lines of his poem to point out that his is to be a story of Camelot in what he calls its "first age"; he likewise works to position his poem as a pseudo-historical account of one of Arthur's many "awentures." In so doing, I believe that the Gawain-poet hopes to recall to the minds of his English audience the earliest English accounts of Arthur's reign—stories like those preserved by Geoffrey in his Historia—which are, after all, both pseudo-historical and set in a distinctly English cultural milieu—that of Saxon England. As we well know, Arthur is recognized as an "ideal" king in the earliest English treatments of his reign not for his gentillesse or cortaysye, but for his "generosity," his "bravery," and his ability to subjugate those who would oppose him (Historia 222)—the very qualities for which both Scyld Scefing and Beowulf are themselves renowned in what is the sole surviving testament to the literature of the epic tradition in Anglo-Saxon England.[3] And, in light of his

[3] See Chapter Two, 71-81 for a discussion treating

suggestion that his is to be a story of Camelot in its first age, I find it especially noteworthy that the Gawain-poet's initial description of Camelot bears a series of marked similarities to the Beowulf-poet's own descriptions of Heorot.[4]

The Gawain-poet likewise deviates from his French source material by casting Sir Gawain rather than Caradoc as the hero of his poem, and Sir Gawain's early reputation within the romance tradition for unflinchingly courteous behavior does at first suggest that the Gawain-poet's choice in this case must have been informed by the conventions of the romance tradition. But, as I have noted above, we know that by the fourteenth century, Gawain's reputation within the literature of the Arthurian tradition—even within the continental Arthurian romances—had deteriorated to the point that his name had become

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the way in which I believe the pseudo-historical elements of the Gawain-poet's frame serve to reinforce the suggestion that he has worked to rhetorically position his story of Arthur within the culturally determined confines of the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

[4] See Chapter Two, 81-88 for my comparison of Heorot and Camelot in this regard.

virtually synonymous with trecherye rather than cortaysye.[5] Thus, the Gawain-poet's decision to place Sir Gawain at the locus of his poem has proven an understandably difficult one for scholars working to reconcile the Gawain-poet's challenge episode the conventions of the romance tradition.

But, I believe that the Gawain-poet's decision to cast Sir Gawain as his hero becomes entirely understandable if we consider his decision to do so in light of the conventions of the native English poetic tradition. We have long recognized the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideal to have been quite different from the romantic notion of heroism which is defined for us within the literature of the French tradition. Whereas Lancelot and Galahad become exemplary romantic heroes because they are able to overcome with cortaysye and grace the series of Herculean obstacles which the French romancers set before them, the heroes of the earliest English poetry—Beowulf,

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[5] See Chapter Two, 88-95 for a discussion of the gradual degradation of Gawain's character within the literature of the romance tradition, which is specifically evidenced by the treatment of his character in both the prose Tristan and Malory's Morte Darthur.

for example—achieve their heroic status not merely because they accomplish a series of nearly impossible tasks but because, in so doing, they defy others' low expectations of them.[6] In this regard, I believe that Sir Gawain's own inglorious reputation would show him to be—at least from the perspective of a poet familiar with the conventions of the native English tradition—a character of what I have previously termed immense "heroic" potential. For this reason especially, I believe that the Gawain-poet's decision to cast Sir Gawain as the hero of SGGK, considered in tandem with the pseudo-historicity of his poem and his generally anti-romantic depiction of Arthur's court, ought to suggest to us that the Gawain-poet has attempted to position his own redaction of the beheading game story within what I believe both he and his fourteenth-century audience would have understood to be the pseudo-historical "first age" of British history and the literary tradition associated with it—that of the Anglo-Saxons.

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[6] This is certainly the case with Scyld Scefing, Beowulf, and Judith, whose "heroic" attributes I have discussed at length in Chapter Two, 95-100.

In short, the pattern of revision to which the Gawain-poet has subjected the French source of his challenge episode clearly seems to indicate that the Gawain-poet has worked in the early stages of SGGK to position his poem—at least rhetorically—as the product of the influence of the earliest English poetic tradition upon him. With this fact in mind, I have attempted throughout the preceding consideration of the poem to illustrate my own contention that if we read SGGK ever mindful of the conventions of the Anglo-Saxon epic, a number of the difficult cruxes which have long plagued students of the poem immediately become far less mysterious. This is certainly true in the case of the Gawain-poet's decision to pair as he has within his poem a "challenge" episode and a "temptation" episode—a choice on the part of the Gawain-poet for which scholars have as yet been unable to explain via reference to the conventions of the romance.

In chapter three of this study, I have argued that a close reading of the first fitt of SGGK ought to suggest to us that the Green Knight's challenge probably was not designed by the Gawain-poet to showcase the bravery of Arthur's retainers. It is important to note, for example,

that the Gawain-poet carefully structures his initial account of the Green Knight's appearance at Camelot so as to suggest that he poses no immediate threat either to Arthur or the members of his court. Alongside his intimation that the Green Knight's stature shows him to be a forbidding opponent, for example, the Gawain-poet is careful to point to those physical features of the Green Knight which show him to be "mostly a man"; similarly, the Gawain-poet's skilled account of the awe-inspiring battle ax borne by the Green Knight seems designed to suggest that, though the ax itself is potentially lethal, it is primarily an ornamental weapon, one not intended for use in battle.[7] Likewise, the Gawain-poet observes that the actions of Arthur's retainers are such that they evidently do not fear the Green Knight, and he has skillfully woven the Green Knight's initial address to the court so as to suggest to the audience of his poem that it is Arthur's reputation for cortaysye, not the Green Knight's desire

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[7] See Chapter 3, "Generic Variation," pages 113-16, esp. n. 6.

for combat, which has led him to Camelot that he might enjoy the hospitality of Arthur's court.[8]

In fact, I believe it to be significant that it is only after Arthur and the Green Knight have established to exist between them a guest-host relationship of the sort so often detailed in the literature of the epic tradition that the Green Knight proposes to Arthur and the members of his court that they participate with him in a "Christmas game," the "rules" of which would essentially require Arthur or one of his retainers to disarm and attack the Green Knight. Because the Green Knight has established himself to be a guest of the court, for Arthur to allow any such action against the Green Knight to proceed would clearly require him to forsake the most sacred tenet of the guest-host compact—the obligation of a host to protect his guest from harm. Arthur's retainers appear to recognize this fact and are understandably reluctant to take part in the Green Knight's "challenge."

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[8] I have endeavored in the third chapter of this study to refute the critical contention that Arthur's retainers do not at first respond the challenge of the Green Knight because they fear him; see pages 117-19 and 129-31.

But, at the Green Knight's suggestion that it is their fear which has led Arthur's retainers to refuse to participate with him in his "game," the Gawain-poet tells that Arthur "wexes wroth," descends from the dais, and prepares to take up the Green Knight's challenge; in the moment that he does so, Arthur shows himself willing to forego his obligations as the Green Knight's host that he might respond with force to what he understands to be a question of the honor of his court. For this reason, Arthur fails the Green Knight's test of his hospitality and, in this fashion, I believe the Gawain-poet teaches us that Arthur himself does not understand the very tenets of the cortaysye for which Camelot, even in its "first age," was renowned.

In choosing to behead the Green Knight as he does, I have argued that Sir Gawain emulates the discourteous behavior of his uncle.[9] I have likewise suggested that this decision on Gawain's part to breach the implicit conditions of the epic guest-host compact in what obviously constitutes an attempt to preserve his life is but the first of two significant errors which he commits during the course of the poem. The second of these

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[9] See Chapter Three, 131-38.

errors, of course, is that detailed by the Gawain-poet late in the third fitt of SGGK. On what is to be the final day of his sojourn at Castle Hautedesert, Lady Bertilak offers to provide Gawain with a green girdle which she suggests will allow him to escape the potentially lethal return blow of the Green Knight unscathed. Gawain, of course, eventually accepts Lady Bertilak's infamous gift, along with her condition that he not reveal to Bertilak that he has done so, and scholars have long understood Gawain's error in this case to rest primarily in his acceptance of Lady Bertilak's girdle itself. But, Gawain's decision to conceal the green girdle from Bertilak seems to me to constitute a far more significant error on his part, for in order to do so, he must first abandon the terms of the epic "exchange of winnings" covenant into which both he and Bertilak have entered as guest and host. While the questionable behavior which Sir Gawain exhibits in his dealings with Bertilak certainly shows him to be a very poor guest, it is important to note that Gawain himself intimates to the audience of SGGK that he opts to keep the "enchanted" girdle from his host primarily because he believes that "My3t he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe sle3t were noble"

[if he were able to escape being slain, any means to do so were accounted noble] (1858). This statement on Gawain's part is, I think, particularly noteworthy, for it serves to remind us of that moment in the first fitt of the poem at which Gawain inhospitably attempts to dispatch the Green Knight—himself a guest of Arthur's court—apparently taking his cue to do so from Arthur's suggestion to him that "if þou redez hym ry3t . . . þou schal byden þe bur þast he schal bede after" [if you manage [the Green Knight] correctly . . . you shall be able to withstand the blow that he shall deliver in return] (373-74).

Clearly, in choosing to conceal the girdle from Bertilak, Gawain demonstrates for a second time in the poem that he is only too willing to forsake the tenets of courteous behavior when he believes that, in so doing, he might preserve his life. For this reason, I have argued that if we read the behavior which Sir Gawain exhibits throughout SGGK in light of the epic conventions governing the obligations of guest and host to one another, it becomes much less difficult to identify the rationale which might have led the Gawain-poet to pair within his poem what critics immersed in the romance tradition have long characterized as inherently disparate narrative

episodes. Understood within the context provided for us by the convention of the guest-host relationship within the literature of the epic tradition, both episodes of the poem work to illustrate a pattern of error on the part of Sir Gawain, one which appears to have been designed by the Gawain-poet so as to suggest that, even in the "first age" of his fame, Gawain is already possessed of the trecherye for which he ultimately will be remembered within the canon of the Arthurian literature.

In the fourth chapter of this study, I have argued that the conventions of the epic tradition also have the potential to provide us with a good deal of insight into the thematic implications of the enigmatic concluding stanzas of SGGK, which detail a series of passages that critics have termed the "three judgments" of Gawain. As most students of the poem have noticed, Sir Gawain's own suggestion that his performance throughout the poem has shown him to be a "faulty" and "false" knight is nearly impossible to reconcile with the appraisals of his behavior offered by both the Green Knight and Arthur. Though the Green Knight does acknowledge that Gawain has erred in concealing the girdle from him, he is far more forgiving of Gawain's fault than is Sir Gawain himself; he

suggests that because, in his estimation, Gawain's error was motivated by what the Green Knight calls his "love of life," he is to be "blamed all the less" for his transgression. Arthur, on the other hand, seems unwilling to acknowledge Gawain's error as such; he and the members of his court respond to Gawain's admission of his failure with a hearty laugh and jointly decree that, "for sakke of þat segge," (2518), they will adopt as the standard of the round table the very girdle which Gawain himself has pledged to wear as a perpetual reminder of his shame.

Because, taken at face value, the three judgments of Gawain offered by the Gawain-poet are mutually exclusive, scholars typically have dismissed Gawain's harsh judgment of himself as somehow ill-informed, apparently in the interest of generating for the poem a comic reading of the sort required by the conventions of the genre to which they have presupposed SGGK to belong.[10] But, if we read the three judgments of Gawain ever mindful of the working definition of cortaysye which the Gawain-poet himself provides for us in Cleanness, it becomes clear that it is

[10] This is, of course, A. C. Spearing's argument, which I have detailed in Chapter Four, "Caveat Auditor," 165-68.

Arthur, not Gawain, who fails to understand the implications Gawain's questionable performance in the poem. Throughout Cleanness, the Gawain-poet suggests that properly "courteous" behavior functions as a spiritual barometer of sorts in that it allows us to distinguish those persons invested with cleanness, or spiritual purity, from those persons steeped in the fylth of moral corruption. But, more to the fore of my reading of SGGK is the Gawain-poet's subsequent intimation that it is via the hospitable treatment that one affords to others that one evidences the cortaysye indicative of cleanness itself. To exemplify for his audience the cleanness of which he writes, the Gawain-poet turns first in Cleanness to the biblical parable of the wedding feast, in which he contrasts the innate hospitality of the host who ensures that each of his guests—regardless of their station—is well-served with the distinctly discourteous behavior of the guest who is expelled from this feast for failing to properly attire himself for the occasion. In precisely this fashion, he turns in the subsequent lines of his poem to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, in which he contrasts the cleanness of Abraham and Lot—evidenced by the limitless hospitality which they courteously proffer their

respective celestial guests—with the fylth of the Sodomites, who themselves suggest that it is their custom to abuse guests of their city in what is arguably the most grievous fashion imaginable. Thus, for the Gawain-poet, God's decision to spare Lot and his family from the judgment of Sodom comes to signify the hospitality which leads God himself to protect those persons whose cleanness shows them worthy to become his "guests" in the kingdom of heaven; conversely, the punishment which God in his wrath metes out to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah works to remind the audience of the Gawain-poet of the horrible fate which awaits all those who foolishly choose to persist unrepentant in their fylth.[11]

If, as the Gawain-poet suggests in Cleanness, the measure of cortaysye—of hospitality—which a person affords to his guests varies in direct proportion to the degree of spiritual cleanness in which that person ultimately resides, then there can be little doubt that the behavior of Arthur in the initial fitt of SGGK serves only to illustrate the morally corrupt state of his own kingship.

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[11] For my discussion treating Cleanness as I have argued it relates to SGGK and the Gawain-poet's concept of cortaysye, see Chapter Four, 176-91.

It is Arthur, after all, who greets the Green Knight's initially benign proposition that the members of his court participate in with him a Christmas Game by threatening this newfound guest of the court with violence. It is Arthur who "wexes wroth" when his retainers refuse to participate in this "game"—the terms of which would require them to disarm and attack a guest of the court—and moves to take up the Green Knight's challenge himself. And, most importantly, it is Arthur who first suggests to Gawain that it would be more expedient for him to deal the Green Knight a death blow than to offer him a more courteous stroke of the sort for which the terms of the Green Knight's "game" seem to call, one like that which the Green Knight himself courteously proffers to Gawain in the concluding stanzas of the poem.

In like manner, at his uncle's behest, Gawain shows himself to be an inhospitable "host" by attempting unsuccessfully to dispatch the Green Knight, apparently under the impression that, in so doing, he will be able to avoid the danger inherent in the Green Knight's promised return blow. Similarly, he shows himself to be a very ungrateful guest by violating both the implicit terms of his guest-host compact with Bertilak and the explicit

conditions of their "exchange of winnings" covenant in what clearly constitutes Gawain's second attempt in the poem to circumvent his obligation to abide the lethal stroke due him by the Green Knight. Thus, I have concluded that Gawain's actions throughout the whole of SGGK ought to suggest to us that he has internalized what is obviously the morally corrupt standard of the court to which he belongs. Just as Arthur is willing to abandon the tenets of courteous behavior in an attempt to quell what he takes to be the Green Knight's affront to the reputation of his court, Gawain demonstrates that, when he finds himself to be in jeopardy, he too is willing to resort to any course of action—however discourteous—provided that, in so doing, he believes that he might preserve his life.

After he has repaid Gawain's trecherye with a nick on the neck, the Green Knight reveals to Sir Gawain both that Gawain has survived the return blow due him only because the Green Knight has courteously chosen to release Gawain from his lethal obligation and that the initial purpose of the Green Knight's visit to Camelot was to try the reputation of the court. It is at this point that the Green Knight tenders his evaluation of Gawain's

performance, but it is important to note that the Green Knight's judgment of Gawain focuses upon but a single erroneous deed—Gawain's decision to conceal the girdle from Bertilak, his host. The Green Knight, therefore, is probably quite right when he suggests that Gawain is to be "blamed the less" for this decision on his part, motivated as it was by "lof of lyfe." In his subsequent judgment of himself, on the other hand, Gawain appears preoccupied with the "cowarddyse and couetyse" which has characterized his conduct as a whole, for as he rightly notes, these are the traits indicative of the "vylanye and vyse, þat vertue dystreyz."[12] Clearly, the judgments of Gawain offered by the Green Knight and Sir Gawain are very much alike in

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[12] As I have pointed out in Chapter Four, 164-65, Richard Newhauser has suggested that the "couetyse" to which Sir Gawain alludes in these lines is probably "avaritia vitae," "the covetousness of life," which the audience of SGGK would have taken to constitute a mortal sin. Understood in this fashion, it becomes difficult to construe Gawain's statement that in embracing such behavior, he gave way to the "vylanye and vyse, þat vertue dystreyz" as anything short of a factually accurate statement on his part.

that they both point to the fact that Gawain's behavior throughout the poem has proven him to be—in albeit varying degrees—a knight both "fawty and falce."[13]

In his judgment of himself, Gawain seems to indicate that, largely as a result of his experience at the Green Chapel, he has finally come to understand that his conduct has shown him to be, quite literally, the moral corruption which plagues the court to which he belongs. It is this difficult lesson—which he has gained for the benefit of the court ostensibly at the expense of his honor—that he attempts to impart to Arthur and his retainers in his final address to the court. But, it is clear from the response with which Arthur greets Gawain's attempt to instruct him that Arthur is himself immersed in the

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[13] I think a number of critics have construed the Green Knight's suggestion that he blames Gawain "þe lasse" (2368) to constitute some sort of absolution offered by the Green Knight to Gawain. But, I have argued that this is not at all the case. In his judgment of Gawain, the Green Knight never suggests that Gawain is to be held blameless for his actions; neither does he ever suggest that Gawain has lived up to his reputation for cortaysye. see Chapter Four, 194-98, esp. n. 20.

corruption of Camelot to the point that he is unable to recognize the warning implicit in Gawain's confession of his fault. Arthur's decision to adopt the sign of Gawain's shame as the standard of his court thus becomes little short of prophetic, for we know from the literature of the English Arthurian tradition that it is the discourtesy, treachery, and deceit evidenced by Arthur and his retainers that ultimately will result in the dissolution of the round table and the tragic fall of Camelot itself; these are precisely the traits with which the girdle has become identifiable in the concluding stanzas of the poem. It is, therefore, completely appropriate that the Gawain-poet ends his poem as he began it with a reference to Troy, a city which the epic tradition tells us fell when its citizens, despite the protestations of Cassandra, opened their gates to the Trojan Horse, the embodiment of Greek trecherye and the instrument of their own untimely demise.

This reading of SGGK accounts for the three judgments of Gawain in a fashion which I believe renders them thematically reconcilable; it similarly casts SGGK in a light which shows the poem to anticipate what will become in the English Arthurian tradition the preoccupation with

the tragedy of Arthur and the reasons for his fall. And, though the thematic implications of this reading of the poem are utterly irreconcilable with the conventions of the romance, they are quite in line with what we have come to expect from the epic poetry of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Beowulf itself concludes on just such a thematic note. In the final stanzas of the poem, Beowulf quite literally sacrifices himself that the Geats might gain the use of the dragon's hoard, a store of treasure sufficient to ransom the Geats from the impending wrath of the Swedes. Beowulf's instructions as to the proper use of this treasure to Wiglaf, whom he names as his successor, are quite specific; but, despite Beowulf's admonition to him, Wiglaf chooses to inter the treasure with his fallen leader in tribute to him rather than to put it to what Beowulf suggests is its proper use. Wiglaf thereby inadvertently renders the dragon's hoard "eldum swa unnyt, swa hi(t æro)r wæs [as useless to men as it was before] (3168). The Beowulf-poet's inclusion of an historical digression which alludes to the ensuing subjugation of the Geats by the Swedes serves only to strengthen the "epic effect" of the poem upon his audience, the sense of waste generated by their knowledge

that, in light of Beowulf's sacrifice for them, the Geats need not have fallen in battle.[14] Clearly, the Gawain-poet's intimation that Camelot might have endured had the court merely heeded Sir Gawain's advice imbues the conclusion of his own poem with a similar epic sense of waste; for this reason, I believe that the final stanzas of SGGK speak very clearly to the influence of the epic tradition upon the Gawain-poet.

The Gawain-poet certainly owes much to the French tradition, for it was within such poems as Le Livre de Caradoc that he found much of the material which would come to form the basis of his poem. But, for far too long, we have marginalized those features of SGGK which provide us with ample evidence that the Gawain-poet was equally indebted to the literature and conventions of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. This practice has been, I think, both detrimental to scholars and unfair to the Gawain-poet, for to read SGGK as if the very presence of a series of romantic elements within the poem somehow endows the poem with the French sensibility that is characteristic of

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[14] See Chapter Four, 206 for a more detailed discussion of what William Lawrence has termed the "artistic effect" of the epic.

Chaucerian literature is to greatly diminish the importance of the Gawain-poet's role as the creator of his poem. Indeed, SGGK is a rare masterpiece only because its author is a poet in the true sense of the word, a "maker" who, by fusing elements drawn from the two traditions which his culture set before him, was able to craft a poem which is finally identifiable as neither German nor French, but English; neither epic nor romantic, but tragic.

Of course, barring the recovery of a lost poetic codex invested with the sort of cultural and historical information that would permit it to perform the function of the Rosetta Stone, we shall never be able to say for certain how the Gawain-poet came to know the conventions of the epic tradition which clearly informed him as he worked to produce SGGK. But, while it is unlikely that the Gawain-poet read Beowulf—or at least not the copy of it which has survived to us—I hope to have illustrated that there is much in SGGK to recommend to us that the Gawain-poet did know the conventions of the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition. For this reason above all, I believe that SGGK gives us ample reason to reconsider the sorts of assumptions which have long prohibited medievalists from

considering the influence of the Anglo-Saxon tradition upon the poetry of the fourteenth century, particularly the commonly-held belief that the Norman conquest so utterly arrested the development of the insular epic tradition that, by the fourteenth century, no traces of it remained to influence either the Gawain-poet or any his contemporaries. Once we have begun to work ourselves free from these sorts of self-imposed critical constraints, I believe we shall find that the depth of the historical fissure which appears to separate the earliest English poetry from that of the fourteenth century is not nearly so great as we ourselves have imagined it to be.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Comparisons of the Irish, French, and English Redactions of the "Beheading Game"

Fled Bricrend	Composite Redactions of Caradoc	SGGK
1. Story unfolds at the court of Conchobar during a celebratory feast.	1. Arthur holds court at Cardeuil; events of the story unfold there during a feast. at Pentecost	1. Story unfolds at Camelot in the presence of King Arthur. during a Christmas feast.
2. Many of Conchobar's knights are in attendance.	2. Many of Arthur's knights are in attendance.	2. Many of Arthur's knights are in attendance.
3. (no equivalent)	3. Arthur refuses to eat until a marvel appears.	3. Arthur refuses to eat until a marvel appears.
4. Challenger enters.	4. Challenger enters.	4. Challenger enters.
5. Wears a gray cloak; comes bearing a tree above him.	5. Dressed in green trimmed with ermine; wears a garland of flowers.	5. Clad entirely in green; carries a holly sprig.
6. Has a "beard like a bush."	6. (no equivalent)	6. Has a "beard like a bush."
7. Has fierce yellow eyes.	7. (no equivalent)	7. Has fierce red eyes.
8. Carries a large, sharp weapon (axe).	8. Carries a large, sharp weapon (sword).	8. Carries a large, sharp weapon (axe).
9. Approaches Conchobar at "the fork beam."	9. (no equivalent)	9. Approaches Arthur at the dais.
10. Recites fame of the court and asks "fair play."	10. Recites fame of the court and asks "a boon."	10. Recites the fame of Arthur and asks "a game.

APPENDIX

Fled Bricrend	Composite Redactions of Caradoc	SGGK
11. Proposal of the challenge.	11. Proposal of the challenge.	11. Proposal of the challenge.
12. Wonder of the court.	12. Wonder of the court.	12. Wonder of the court.
13. Challenger taunts court.	13. Challenger taunts court.	13. Challenger taunts court.
14. Sencha agrees to the terms of "fair play."	14. Arthur agrees to grant the "boon."	14. Arthur agrees to "play the game."
15. Cuchulainn accepts challenge.	15. Caradoc accepts challenge.	15. Gawain accepts challenge.
16. Challenger receives blow; loses head.	16. Challenger receives blow; loses head.	16. Challenger receives blow; loses head.
17. Challenger retrieves and replaces head.	17. Challenger retrieves and replaces head.	17. Challenger retrieves and replaces head.
18. (no equivalent)	18. Challenger warns hero to prepare himself to receive the return blow.	18. Challenger warns hero to prepare himself to receive the return blow.
19. Departure of the Challenger.	19. Departure of the Challenger.	19. Departure of the Challenger.
20. Horror of the court at the hero's impending demise.	20. Horror of the court at the hero's impending demise.	20. Horror of the court at the hero's impending demise.

VITA

Keith P. Taylor was born in Nashville, Tennessee on July 18, 1967. He was educated first at Middle Tennessee State University, where studied English language and literature and earned B. A. and M. A. degrees in 1989 and 1991 respectively. He went on to study Anglo-Saxon and Middle English language, literature and culture at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville under the direction of Joseph B. Trahern, Jr. and Thomas J. Heffernan. He was awarded a Ph.D. in these fields from the University of Tennessee in 1998.

Taylor is the author of several recent articles, including "Mazers, Mead, and the Wolfs-head Tree: a Reconsideration of Old English Riddle 55" (Journal of English and Germanic Philology 94 (1995): 497-512) and "Beowulf 1259a: the Inherent Nobility of Grendel's Mother" (English Language Notes 31.3 (1994): 13-25). He has also contributed to a series of larger related projects, including the Chaucer Encyclopedia and the ongoing revision of Wells' Manual of Writings in Middle English. His current research interests center on the relationship between language and genre in the literature of early modern Europe.