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SHIFTING SHAPES: ANGLO-CELTIC CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM IN "SIR
GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT"

Lehigh University

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SHIFTING SHAPES: ANGLO-CELTIC CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM
IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by
Margaret Curtis Cuda

A Dissertation
Presented to the Graduate Committee
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ABSTRACT

Symbolic criticism has shaped scholars' interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the "jewel" of fourteenth century literary art. As a symbolist theorist, Jessie Weston first championed Sir Gawain in 1897-98 both as the proper bearer of the "mystic" Pen-tangle and the resurrection of the ancient Celtic Cuchulinn. With a sharp eye for the poem's fine details, H. L. Savage first explored heraldic allusions in SGGK's interlaced third section in 1928 and attempted, in 1956, to identify the poem's principal human character with Enguerrand de Coucy and the Order of the Garter. As opposed as they seem, the studies of both these scholars agreed that the poem is fundamentally symbolic and cannot be accurately interpreted without a grasp of that conceptual nexus which imbues its inseparable parts with extraordinary meaning.

This study examines the work of those scholars in particular who followed Weston's lead and attempted to locate the poem's conceptual nexus by treating the work, primarily, as a whole. In this effort, source studies have played a crucial role, seeking to establish, beyond

all reasonable refutation, that tradition to which SGGK also belonged as one part of an even larger whole. G. L. Kittredge's highly Aristotelian A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight taught most scholars to read the poem as a uniquely successful combination of "The Challenge" and "The Temptation" story types. His careful treatment of SGGK's Irish sources and Continental analogues established beyond question that the poet himself esteemed ancient sources and that he preserved, intact, many of their essential elements. Thus Kittredge's analysis leads to the conclusion that, for the SGGK poet, his story overall was symbolic, carrying within it a meaning too important to be abridged. While Kittredge emphasized the non-English origins of the poet's written source materials, W. A. Nitze attempted to describe the poem's action in ritualistic and, thus, more general terms. J. R. Hulbert also continued to defend Weston's chosen focus on the Celtic "fairy princess" type as a key not only to the unity of SGGK but also to its most widely recognized source, the Fled Bricrend. R. S. Loomis amplified both Weston's and Hulbert's readings of the poem in his Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance, which treated SGGK as the re-enactment of a solar myth.

After considering that scholarship which has concluded, primarily on the basis of the poem's Celtic

sources and analogues, that SGGK itself is a work of pagan inspiration, this study reassesses these Irish works. In this process, it discovers the major theme of "sovereignty" in works such as "Niall of the Nine Hostages," "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley," and "Aidead Muirchertaig maic Erca." It is the identification of this major theme which allows, in turn, for the possible discovery of SGGK's alliterative source, the "Kentish Psalm" to be found in Cotton ms. Vespasian D. vi in the British Museum, ff. 70 ff. The author of this poem requires that David, the model for all good kings in the Middle Ages, recognize that Christ is "King of kings, and Lord of lords." This Old English poem is echoed explicitly in SGGK's conclusion (ll. 2374, 2380, 2508) when Gawain performs verbal penance for the sin of "couetyse," the same sin which David acknowledges he committed with Bathsheba in l. 24 ("gitsunga") of the "Kentish Psalm." From this psalm, or a very similar work, the SGGK poet also took his name for the Green Knight: "Bernlak," as the name was printed in early editions of the poem, or "bernelāc," as it appears in the Old English poem (l. 124). The word means the "burnt-offering" of a cleansed conscience which Gawain, as a good Christian and shiven sinner, brings to his "lorde" at the end of SGGK; according to the symbolism

of the Christian liturgy, which is embodied in the "Offertory," this word also applies to the offering Christ makes perpetually to the Father.

These identifications justify the conclusion that there is a serious need in scholarship on the poem's symbols for a thorough critical reassessment of both SGGK and its Celtic sources. Old English religious materials especially need to be integrated into comprehensive treatments of the poem's purpose and structure. In future research, special attention should be awarded both to the Bible and the Christian liturgy as influences on the poet's thought. It is in these sources specifically that scholars can discover, together, the written, oral, and ritualistic elements which critics have pursued divergently in the past.

Introduction

Ever since Sir Frederic Madden unearthed the unique manuscript of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in the British Museum in 1839, readers of the poem have been universally impressed with the work's beauty and wisdom. There has never been any question that what Madden had found was a lost masterpiece. For this very reason, scholars' difficulties in agreeing on the poem's purpose and meaning have proved one of the more baffling puzzles in the history of literary criticism. The work's characters and objects seem charged with a significance which surpasses their individual identities: no major phenomenon in the poem appears without a parallel or doublet of that same phenomenon making a subsequent (re)appearance. Given the critical disagreements over the poem's meaning, it would be convenient to describe SGGK's elements as a series of multiple equations. However, the poem's most obvious figures do not support such an interpretation; the lines composing the Pentangle's star and the Round Table's circle may be continuous, but, geometrically, these structures are still symmetrical and closed. Implicitly, they have centers,

and to the extent that these figures embody the poem's overall design, SGGK itself should have a central element, a residual core of meaning. It is this particular challenge--the location of the poem's symbolic center--which is the subject of this study.

Those scholars who have considered this problem have inevitably turned to the word "symbol" in an attempt to articulate that conceptual nexus which they admittedly seemed to glimpse in SGGK as through a glass darkly. They have not used this word with any more consensus on its meaning than they have expressed on the overall significance of the poem. They have resorted to the word, instead, because the poem's consistent parallels are too numerous to be adequately described by the terms "metaphor" or "simile"; in such a relentless technique there is a cumulative effect, finally, which seems to imbue those phenomena participating in it almost with a life of their own. This effect extends to the tale overall, in which parallels seem to turn quite naturally upon themselves, in the process creating a whole series of reversals: Bercilak's lady becomes Gawain's huntress; Gawain the courageous becomes a victim; and Bercilak the headsman becomes a compassionate judge. Noting the poem's parallels and reversals plays an important role in understanding the work's structure; still, such

observations are incomplete unless one notes as well that something on the order of a transformation occurs in the poem, and this metamorphosis in both character and events is also most commonly spoken of by critics as being "symbolic." The word is used in this case because, to a modern reader, the changes which occur appear both artistically perfect and yet beyond a completely logical explanation. There is no modern law of biology, for example, which can account for either the Green Knight's color or his double aspects. Thus critics resort to the assumption that the poet introduced such elements into his work because he was following a mode of thought which either preceded the development of modern scientific concepts (such as cause and effect) or was essentially foreign to it. It is this whole mode of thought transcending the material level which critics also refer to implicitly when they speak of the poet's work as being essentially "symbolic."

This study considers and evaluates the major scholarship on the poem which has contributed most to a clear understanding of how the poem's symbols function. Jessie Weston stands foremost among SGGK's symbolic critics: her work includes the first observation that the poem's symbolism is "mystic"; she is also unique in suggesting, but not developing, the idea that the poem's

symbolism may be related to the theme of "sovereignty." The studies of H. L. Savage offer a natural supplement to Weston's, for he examines exactly what she ignores--the extent to which the poem's symbolism may depend on the poet's probable provenience in the Northwest Midlands of England in the 1370's. The highly authoritative source studies of G. L. Kittredge, on the other hand, must be credited with leaving an indelible impression on most scholars' minds that the poem is profoundly Celtic: therefore any symbolic meaning which is discerned in SGGK must be, in some way, consistent with the Irish origins of its pre-existent written story materials. In an attempt to counter Kittredge's stand, W. A. Nitze emphasized that the poem's paralleled patterning bears the ear-marks of prehistoric ritual; thus, implicitly, its action overall should be recognized as being symbolic in the sense that its characters may be acting out a cyclical nature myth. By contrast, the scholarship of J. R. Hulbert and R. S. Loomis clearly reveals that the study of symbolic names has had a profound effect both on poets' designations of their characters and scholars' interpretations of them. While both of these scholars focus on "Blathnát," the name of the Celtic original they identify with Bercilak's unnamed lady, it is Hulbert in particular who was most

responsible for convincing subsequent editors of SGGK that the Green Knight's name should be "Bercilak" or "Bertilak," rather than "Bernlak," as the word was originally transcribed from the poem's fading fourteenth-century manuscript. The first two names carry no particular significance, in and of themselves, which scholars have been able to identify; but the word "Bernlak" carries a burden of religious meaning which has not hitherto been recognized. It is with a consideration of this point that this study will close.

Throughout this paper, the poem will be referred to as SGGK, rather than GGK; similarly, its author will be called the SGGK poet, rather than the Gawain poet, as is customary. These appellations have been deliberately chosen in the interest of objectivity and with a cautious reservation in judgment: given a focus on the poem's symbols, there is no reason to award Gawain more significance than, in the course of this study, his character may be shown to warrant. To place his Christian name first in the poem's title and to identify the poem's author solely with this character may be to draw more attention to him than the poet ever wished. Since the poet has not been identified and the work's title is the product of a tradition originating in Madden's designation of the work, the full abbreviation

for the title will be used or the work will be referred to simply as "the poem" or "the work." These choices have been arrived at as temporary compromises between the traditional appellation of the poem and that title which this study will, finally, suggest. It must be acknowledged that Madden's title is consistent with the work's central doublet of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; but it should also be recognized that this pair constitutes only one among numerous paired characters in the poem, including Arthur and Bercilak as well as Bercilak's lady and Morgan. To call the work SGGK fairly reflects the poet's fondness for parallels, but it also establishes a perspective on the poem which is simultaneously dual and exclusive and thus frustratingly inconsistent with any single, unified core of meaning that may be identified in the work. To the extent that the poem is symbolic, and may be proven to be intentionally so, it may reasonably be suggested that its title should also contain its central symbol, who may, indeed, be "Bernlak."

It is working against tradition to ask readers of this poem, the most highly appraised "jewel" of medieval English romance, to consider giving it a new name. But such a suggestion is nevertheless consistent with the oldest practices of literary scholarship: these are to consider the source and to look to the text.

CHAPTER I:
THE SYMBOLIC NEXUS

Symbolic criticism of SGGK begins in 1897 with the work of Jessie L. Weston, the most provocative and troublesome of SGGK's commentators. Her studies include The Legend of Sir Gawain (1897), a prose translation of SGGK (1898), The Legend of Sir Perceval (1909), and From Ritual to Romance (1920).¹ With one foot planted firmly in the nineteenth century, and the other sliding into the twentieth, Miss Weston is simultaneously a student of mythology, a manuscript editor, a coiner of terms, and a symbolist theorist. Her work on SGGK's sources is less systematic than that of her successors, but nevertheless provides stepping stones to both Kittredge's and Loomis's more authoritative studies. Her perspective on the poem is extremely broad, since she is interested not just in SGGK specifically but in the ultimate source of all

¹ Jessie L. Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain: Studies upon its Original Scope and Significance (London: David Nutt in the Strand, 1897); Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Middle-English Arthurian Romance Retold in Modern Prose (London: David Nutt in the Strand, 1898); The Legend of Sir Perceval: Studies upon its Origin, Development, and Position in the Arthurian Cycle (London: David Nutt at the Sign of the Phoenix, Long Acre, 1909); From Ritual to Romance (1920; rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1941).

Arthurian literature. Gawain is for her an archetype of the English national hero: she was a nationalist at a time when nationalism was becoming one of the chief plagues of Europe. As she was a follower of Sir James Frazer and William Butler Yeats, so, in their emphasis on ritual, are both T. S. Eliot and William Albert Nitze her disciples. Nevertheless, her studies suggest a greater variety of historical terms for SGGK's symbols than the work of any other writer.

Weston's work calls special attention to the nationalistic element in Arthurian literature. To some extent, her purpose is to prove, if possible, that the "Matter of Britain" (the most widespread and pervasive of romance categories) is symbolic in the sense that it celebrates English history and English character in the persons of King Arthur and Sir Gawain, that knight who, especially in SGGK, stands closest to him. Evidence to support this idea certainly exists. Geoffrey of Monmouth claimed in his Historia Regum Britanniae, written in 1136 (?), that Arthur "had a claim by rightful inheritance to the kingship of the whole island."² Not long

² Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of the Kings of Britain, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 212. Appropriately enough, Weston begins her "Introductory" to The Legend of Sir Gawain with a reference to Geoffrey of Monmouth. See Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 1.

after 1190, Layamon ended his Brut with an encomium that "Arthur should yet come [again] to help the English."³ In 1469, Sir Thomas Malory penned Le Morte D'Arthur, which celebrated Arthur as "King born of all England."⁴ As an Arthurian writer, the SGGK poet would then seem to be following a long and honorable tradition when he speaks authoritatively for the English, implying both a sense of familiar inclusiveness and yet also of geographical limits: in the form of "*þe endeles knot*," he says, Gawain's heroic emblem is known "oueral" England (SGGK, l. 630). There is a definitely nationalistic element in the surge of interest in Arthurian literature; this is true of the fourteenth century with its Hundred Years War no less than the twentieth century with its World Wars.⁵ And just as Arthur alone could liberate Excaliber from its rock, so both the Green Knight and Arthur promise

³ Eugene Mason, trans., Wace and Layamon: Arthurian Chronicles, "Introduction" by Gwyn Jones (New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 264.

⁴ Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte D'Arthur, trans. Sir John Rhys (New York: Dutton, 1972), I, 10.

⁵ See Friedrich Heer, The Medieval World: Europe 1100-1350, trans. Janet Sondheimer (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1961), pp. 354-5. Heer points to the intense nationalism which fosters "national literature" in Europe, and particularly in "the British Isles," during both the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. This phenomenon can easily be seen as overflowing into the following centuries.

Gawain that the fantastic weapon he wields in SGGK's Christmas game will belong to him, "to hondele as hym lykes," (l. 289) to "keep" (l. 372). The once and future Arthurian hero is undeniably a proud warrior who does battle for what he considers his by a right accorded him by both prowess and providence.

Weston is also correct in emphasizing this central irony of Arthurian literature: that while "we [the English] alone may claim King Arthur by right of birth . . . , nevertheless the great mass of Arthurian romance exists in languages other than English.⁶ The tendency of scholars such as Kittredge to attribute even SGGK's combined plot to a "lost" French original illustrates this fact. At the date of Weston's writing, the most respected treatises on the matter of Britain tended to be monumental works such as Gaston Paris's Histoire Litteraire de la France, which declared SGGK to be "the jewel of English mediaeval literature,"⁷ and Heinrich Zimmer's "Keltische Studien," "Bretonische Elemente in der Arthursage des Gottfried von Monmouth," and "Beiträge zur Namenforschung in den altfrans. Arthurepen," which collected and summarized tales involving Cuchulinn and

⁶ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 1.

⁷ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 85.

offered identifications of names in Arthurian materials.⁸ One of the historical facts lying behind this ironic literary situation is, of course, the conquest of England by William of Normandy in 1066: the result was, that while many of the Arthurian romances may have been composed in England, their writers were Anglo-Normans and their language French. Works which Weston recognizes as "honourable exceptions" to the general lack of English contributions to the field of Arthurian scholarship, however, include the following: Sir John Rhys' Studies in the Arthurian Legend and Mr. Alfred Nutt's Mabinogian Studies, which agreed on identifying the historical Arthur as one of the Comes Britanniae; Dr. Oskar Sommer's "Introduction" to Le Roman de Merlin, which postulated a simple original saga underlying the grand maze of tales derived from it; and, most significantly, Sir Frederic Madden's Sir Gawayne, which offered the first collection of romances (including SGGK) connected with Gawain. Weston's response to this scholarly situation reveals her tendency to romanticize history: the dearth of English books on "a subject so essentially national in spirit" as Arthurian literature strikes her "disagreeably";⁹ her

⁸ Weston, "List of Books Consulted," The Legend of Sir Gawain, pp. xiii-xiv.

⁹ All cited in Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, pp. 2-5.

scholarly work has the overtones of a crusade to reclaim for Britain what she believes is simply its own. But perhaps this fault in her work should not be judged too severely; if English scholars were truly confident of their own heritage, surely fewer of them would complain about the difficulties inherent in SGGK's dialect, which is certainly closer to Old English than it is to Old French.

Repeatedly, Weston emphasizes not only the English character of SGGK, but also its ancient origins. These two features of the poem seem to proceed hand in hand for her, as they did, it must be observed, according to that tradition which led both Geoffrey of Monmouth and the SGGK poet to begin their works with references to Troy. This emphasis leads Weston, in turn, to look toward Celtic sources and to see the characters of the poem, especially Gawain, in symbolic terms. Her central thesis on SGGK is that it preserves, "with singular fidelity," the original features of, and a hero belonging to, an early stage of Celtic saga.¹⁰ One of the striking

¹⁰ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, pp. 85, 102. Weston's assessment of the poem's indebtedness to Celtic materials is not only correct, but it is even conservative. Helaine Newstead has recorded the fact that none of SGGK's analogues preserves so many details derived from Irish saga as SGGK. See Helaine Newstead, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500, volume 1, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven, Conn.: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), p. 55. George Lyman Kittredge has

features of this ancient prototypical Gawain character, as preserved in Le Roman de Merlin, as well as Gautier de Doulens' (Chretien's continuator) Conte del Graal and Sir Thomas Malory's Morte D'Arthur, is the waxing and waning of his strength as the day advances and declines.¹¹ Weston sees in "this growth and waning of Gawain's power, directly connected as it is with the waxing and waning of the sun, a proof that this Celtic hero was at one time a solar divinity." This identification has been endorsed and fully amplified by the renowned Celticist Roger Sherman Loomis.¹² Such associations with light are reinforced in SGGK, too, by Gawain's apparent, brief transfiguration in lines 866-68:

þe ver by his uisage verayly hit semed
Welneȝ to vche haȝel, alle on hwes
Lowande and lufly alle his lymmez vnder¹³

emphasized, of course, that the SGGK poet's faithfulness to his Irish original for "The Champion's Bargain" includes his literary art as well as his material. See George Lyman Kittredge, A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916). p. 15.

¹¹ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, pp. 12-13.

¹² See Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 13. See also Roger Sherman Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), pp. 65-79.

¹³ See J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, ed., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 2nd ed. revised by Norman Davis (London: Oxford University Press, 1967). This edition of the poem is used here, and subsequently, in this study.

Certainly an awareness of those changes which Weston claims occur daily in Gawain's strength intensifies the suspense, for the reader, of SGGK's bedroom scenes; a certain vagueness is carefully preserved about the exact hour of the lady's appearance ("And Gawayn þe god mon in gay bed lygeȝ,/ Lurkkeȝ quyl þe day lyȝt lemed on þe wowes/ . . . sleyȝ he herde/ A littel dyn at his dor" ll. 1179-80, 1182-83) and the duration of her visits ("þay lazed and layked longe . . ." l. 1554).

It is Weston's assumption that such associations, constantly pointing back through each Gawain tale toward an archaic original, form the proper criteria for a consideration of the poem's sources. Thus her interest in symbolism has a definite effect on and reciprocal relationship with her scholarly assessment of historical documents. Weston seems at least slightly enamored of her hero, convinced as she is that he is the embodiment of extraordinary valor, a quality she locates in a character who may justly be called "Cuchulinn-Gawain."¹⁴

¹⁴ See Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 100. It must be observed that in her consideration of this combined character, which is her own creation, SGGK's Gawain necessarily loses a good portion of his humanity. Further, it must be noted that it is the poem's humanity, its compassion for and generous treatment of man's mortal nature, which is most commonly celebrated even by critics whose approaches to the work do not otherwise agree. In this regard, see George Kane, Middle English Literature: A Critical Study of the Romances, the Religious Lyrics, Piers Plowman (London: Methuen & Co., 1951), p. 75; W. A. Davenport, The Art of the Gawain-Poet (London: The

In all those works which she accepts as being legitimately connected to SGGK, she also discovers traces of the Chautau Merveil episode, which requires "special deeds of valour by which [the hero] won the favor and the hand of his 'other-world' bride."¹⁵ Coming to the same conclusion that Kittredge would reach in 1916, the oldest source for SGGK which she identifies is the Dun Cow version of the Fled Bricrend ("The Champion's Bargain"), in which Cuchulinn successfully proves his valor in a beheading game with a giant who strikes him only once in return (using his own axe, blunt edge down), and then declares Cuchulinn to be the chief hero of Ulster; finally the giant reveals himself to be Curoi Mac Daire, the famous Munster warrior and magician.¹⁶ It appears to be on the basis of the giant's accolade to Cuchulinn as well as his self-revelation as a magician that she

Athlone Press, 1973), pp. 193-4; Alan M. Markman, "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, 72 (1957), 574-86, rpt. in Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays, ed. Robert J. Blanch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 175; Stephen Manning, "A Psychological Interpretation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Criticism, 6 (1964), 165-177, rpt. in Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 293-4.

¹⁵ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 102.

¹⁶ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 94. See also Kittredge, pp. 74-5.

prefers this version of the story as a source of SGGK to what she believes is a slightly later version of the tale (the Uath version), written toward the end of the eleventh or beginning of the twelfth century, and containing three feints by the giant in Cuchulinn's test. But her tendency to worry over the various versions of the tale anticipates the later work of R. S. Loomis, who would conclude in 1926 that the Uath tale had also contributed to Gawain's character in SGGK.¹⁷ Always keeping in mind her hero's romantic entanglements, however, she also notes that in the German Diu Krône Gawain submits to a similar test of his courage, which concludes with two feints and the shape-shifter's self-identification as Gansguoter, a magician with whom Arthur's mother had eloped and, at the same time, the uncle of Amurfina, Gawain's lady-love. The French La Mule sans Frein again contains the beheading game, which proves once more to be a test of Gawain's valor. While the parallels that Weston calls attention to between these works and SGGK certainly uphold her emphasis on the heroes' consistent demonstrations of courage, her conclusions do not seem to take into account the fact that in SGGK Gawain's victory in the beheading game depends specifically on his graceful

¹⁷ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 93. See also R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, pp. 68-69.

resistance to Bercilak's lady.

Weston's case seems stronger, though, when she turns from such associations--which involve a virtual telescoping of Sun-Solar Deity-Cuchulinn-Merlin's Gawain-Syr Gawayne-Sir Gawain--to an identification of SGGK's Gawain in terms of his traditional Celtic accoutrements. These she typically refers to as "relics" and "talismans," words she uses most frequently as being synonymous with "symbols." As an Arthurian poem, SGGK does, of course, include direct references to ancient Irish characters, "Morgne la Faye, þat in my [Bercilak's] hous lenges,/ And þoynþe of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned,/ þe maystres of Merlyn mony hatz taken--." (ll. 2446-48) Indeed, if one is to believe the SGGK poet, the plot of the whole poem is supposed to depend on these characters. Weston herself notes that the lady's girdle, which she says had not received much scholarly attention preceding her observations on it, is also found in other sources and always with the virtue of conferring magical powers on its wearer. Thus in Diu Krône Gawain also possesses a magic girdle of fairy origin with the power of preserving the wearer from harm. Similarly, the hero of Wigalois is given an enchanted girdle which binds him, in some sense, to his wife; when he parts with it, he cannot find his way back to her. Cuchulinn also had a magic girdle, and Weston sees in the powers conferred by

it "a connection with the invulnerability generally ascribed to the northern hero Siegfried."¹⁸ Indeed, as Roger Sherman Loomis has subsequently proven, Weston might have strengthened her argument for SGGK's Celtic origins even further by noting that in this poem the supposedly magic girdle is associated sequentially with all three of the major characters, each of whom could be construed as fitting those character types she draws attention to in her source studies--the shape-shifting magician, the tempting lady, and the valorous hero.¹⁹

But Weston's treatment of Gawain's lace as the virtual equivalent of Cuchulinn's battle-belt also reveals the arbitrary nature of her archetypical approach to SGGK. R. S. Loomis has identified the specific source upon which her analogy is based as a descriptive passage from the eighth-century saga of "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley"; this document has also been evaluated by the Irish archeologist R. A. S. Macalister as being preserved in a twelfth-century manuscript but accurately reflecting beliefs and practices from as early as the

¹⁸ For Weston's comment concerning the influence of other versions and the girdle, see Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, pp. 90-101.

¹⁹ Roger Sherman Loomis, "More Celtic Elements in Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP, 42 (1943), 152.

sixth century.²⁰ Loomis translates from this work as follows:

Over him [Cuchulinn] he put on the outside his battle-girdle (cath-chriss) of a Champion, of rough tanned, stout leather cut from the forequarters of seven ox-hides of yearlings, so that it reached from the slender parts of his waist to the stout parts under his armpits. He was used to wear it to keep off spears and points and irons and lances and arrows. For in like manner they would bound back from it as if from stone or rock or horn they rebounded.²¹

Weston's identification of this article with SGGK's delicate lace makes no allowance for both the ancient Irish and fourteenth-century writers' capacities to say exactly what they mean, although each has obviously taken considerable pains to describe two different articles in considerable detail. The passage from "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley" quoted above contains the same kind of

²⁰ R. A. S. Macalister, Ancient Ireland: A Study in the Lessons of Archaeology and History (London: Methuen & Co., 1935), p. 127.

²¹ R. S. Loomis, "More Celtic Elements," 166. Thomas Kinsella translates what appears to be the same passage from "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley" as follows: "Over them [his tunics] he put on his heroic deep battle-belt of stiff, tough tanned leather from the choicest parts of the hides of seven yearlings, covering him from his narrow waist to the thickness of his armpit" Kinsella is the editor and translator of The Tain (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). The quoted passage from Kinsella's translation of Tain Bo Cuailnge (The Cattle-Raid of Cooley) appears in Katherine Scherman's new volume, The Flowering of Ireland: Saints, Scholars and Kings (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1981), pp. 42-3.

reference to oxen and yearlings that appears also in the famous Lebor na hUidre (or Book of the Dun Cow) manuscript of the Fled Bricrend.²² These references are not to be ignored: they speak for the fact that the ancient Irish were a cattle-keeping people and were accustomed to making measurements and estimates in terms of their own cultural commodity.²³ As their representative, Cuchulinn girds his loins with his people's wealth in its most common form. To make this observation is to demean neither Cuchulinn nor his battle-belt: "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley" is the story of a series of battles over "Findbennach" or "White-horn," who was variously a sacred bull, a shape-shifting doublet figure, the "palladium" (protector) of his province, and the incarnation of the Ultonian god.²⁴ If Weston is truly interested in mythology and comparative religion, such matters deserve her attention.

Even Loomis's support for Weston's identification of Cuchulinn's battle-belt with SGGK's lace calls attention to the dissimilarity between the two items. His

²² See Kittredge, p. 11.

²³ On the cattle-keeping culture(s) of Ireland and Scotland, see Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 128.

²⁴ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 134.

thorough research reveals:

Light silk girdles, decked with gold "bars" and jewels, were worn indifferently by men and women in the fourteenth century, so that there was nothing surprising in the fact that Bercilak's girdle was worn not only by himself and Gawain but also by his wife.²⁵

Clearly, Cuchulinn's battle-belt is not similarly wearable by Bercilak's lady, not unless she is a female athlete of a very particular kind. As described, with its contoured shape and tough leather material, the ancient Irish harness has its modern counterpart in the back-bracing leather girdle of championship weight lifters. Such a device is commonly only slightly less than one quarter of an inch thick and could be expected to resist most of the penetrating weapons described by the ancient Celtic author. That Irish magic derived at least part of its efficacy from practical techniques in self-preservation--of this fact, Weston's modern English mythological analysis never takes cognizance. It cannot be accidental that the famous traditional Scottish Games (faithfully attended in the modern era by the reigning British monarch) to this day include the tossing of the caber, a wrenching event which challenges the contenders' weight-lifting prowess in combination with their coordination and balance. Scotland, of course, is the

²⁵ R. S. Loomis, "More Celtic Elements," p. 150.

original name for Ireland (North Britain was not called Scotia, or Scotland, until an advanced period of the Middle Ages; then it was called Scotia Minor to distinguish it from Ireland, which was Scotia Major).²⁶ If Cuchulinn is to be identified with the battle-belt in "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley," he is also honored as the supreme champion of Ireland in "The Challenge" episode of the Fled Bricrend. The setting of this episode is immediately following the "games,"²⁷ when the contenders might be expected already to be spent. On that occasion, Curoi Mac Daire's final tribute to Cuchulinn has little in common with Weston's emphasis on this character's valor as it relates to winning the hand of his lady-love. That astute judge of character says simply:

The sovereignty of the warriors of Ireland to you from this hour, and the Champion's portion without dispute, and to your wife precedence of the women of Ulster forever in the house of drinking!²⁸

In general, however, Weston's suggestions that certain objects recurring in Arthurian tales have a hidden and probably occult meaning is not as far-fetched as it may seem. In From Ritual to Romance, for example, she

²⁶ William Dool Killen, The Ecclesiastical History of Ireland: From the Earliest Period to the Present Times (London: Macmillan and Co., 1875), p. 5.

²⁷ Kittredge, p. 14.

²⁸ Kittredge, p. 14.

argues forcefully that stones and circles (among several other items) are typically treated in the Grail romances as if they were "invested with a certain atmosphere of awe, credited with strange virtues, with sanctity itself"²⁹ There is more evidence to support this idea than she offers in her studies. In the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth had explained that Stonehenge was created of stones connected with secret religious rites, stones of mystery with a healing power against many ailments; furthermore, these stones had been arranged in a circle called by Merlin the "Giants' Ring," and, Geoffrey says, were brought by means of his "engines" from Ireland to England where they were set up exactly as they had been before.³⁰ In accord with Weston's search for ancient sources of mythological information, the origin of Stonehenge is now known to predate the inhabitation of the island by Saxons, Danes, and Romanized Britons;³¹

²⁹ Weston, From Ritual to Romance, pp. 63; 68, 74.

³⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth, pp. 196-211, 262. Laura Hibbard Loomis emphasizes that Geoffrey's reader should appreciate two factual elements in his apparently fabulous account of Stonehenge. First, some of the stones of Stonehenge were in actual fact imported from a region remote from Salisbury Plain, the present location of the monument. Second, while the circle of Stonehenge is not in itself identical with one located once in Africa and then in Ireland, it is nevertheless akin to stone circles immemorially existent both in Africa and Ireland. See Laura Hibbard Loomis, PMLA, 45 (1930), 410.

³¹ Gerald S. Hawkins in collaboration with John B. White, Stonehenge Decoded (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1965), p. 27.

there was building activity from 2000 B. C. until 1500 B. C.³² It is now also recognized, of course, as Geoffrey could not know, that this structure was an early astronomical observatory.³³ Its function, then, is perfectly in accord with Weston's overall interest in ancient sun-worship. A multitude of similar archaic stone circular monuments in both Ireland and England, along with their associated legends, might have offered the literal evidence of symbolic groupings which Weston needed for solid verification of her theories; for clearly, at Stonehenge, the meaning of the monument depends on both its substance (stone) and its shape (circle). Its medium is huge, cold, and permanent; the man standing inside it, seeing the sun flash through its doorways on schedule, must have enjoyed some sense of penetrating the secrets of the universe.

Exactly how such Druidic pleasures might relate to a work such as SGGK, though, is hard to say. Certainly the poet omits any mention of the fact that the points of Gawain's pentangle are supposed to be, as Weston implies,³⁴ inscribed specifically on the circumference of a

³² Hawkins and White, p. 169.

³³ Hawkins and White, p. 117.

³⁴ Weston, From Ritual to Romance, p. 74.

circle. For him, the concept of truth, as well as the connotation of unity, seems adequately expressed in his inter-locked five-pointed star. Even exhaustive archeological research would not necessarily link ancient circular stone monuments by signification with SGGK, where the whole subject of the Round Table, with its circular shape, is treated with distinct brevity. The poet only suggests the image of a green circle, finally and indirectly, when all the members of the Round Table deck themselves in green baldrics for Gawain's sake (ll. 2513-21). In fact, that research which Macalister completed in 1931 on Tara, one of Ireland's most ancient monuments, only compounds those categories which Weston's theories work relentlessly to limit. For all her sources of information, Weston's ideas rely fundamentally on a grand simplicity if they are to be comprehensible at all; she must reduce her symbol groups to a small number--she chooses four: the cup, lance, sword, and dish³⁵--in the interest of clarity. Macalister's research has verified, however, that Tara does not lend itself easily to such simplification: it includes the remains of both the legendary "Fort of the Kings" and the burial mound of the "Foundress."³⁶ In addition, the

³⁵ Weston, From Ritual to Romance, pp. 73-74.

³⁶ R. A. S. Macalister, Tara: A Pagan Sanctuary of Ancient Ireland (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), pp. 1-81.

story of "The Mound of Tea" (found in two fourteenth-century manuscripts, The Book of Ballymote and The Yellow Book of Lecan), which celebrates events associated with Tara, offers in combined signification a magical cup of truth, the test of a warrior's pledge, three delayed guerdons, a return guest, and a branch of comfort.³⁷ These materials were not available to Weston, but they underscore the central weakness in her approach to literature: while she is probably perfectly correct in emphasizing the literal basis of old legends, as she does in speaking of both "talismans" and "relics," the individual work also has its own integrity; its details were not included just so they could be overlooked or rearranged in the interests of a comprehensive, uniform theory. If there ever was a single literary Garden of Eden which spawned all Arthurian literature or an Arthurian literary progenitor by name "Bledhericus, famosus ille fabulator,"³⁸ the existence of neither will probably ever be proveable, given the attrition of evidence in the course of human history. Repeatedly, Weston's work is vulnerable to the suspicion that, consistent with her symbolist sympathies, she is not so much

³⁷ Macalister, Tara, pp. 21-24.

³⁸ For Weston's treatment of Bledhericus, see Weston, From Ritual to Romance, pp. 178-96. See also Weston, The Legend of Sir Perceval, pp. 250-51.

practicing literary criticism as rewriting religious history.

Three distinct but related definitions for the word "symbol" thus emerge from Weston's studies. The first is "relic,"³⁹ a term with various meanings which Weston does not sort out. Given the SGGK poet's knowledge of ancient story materials and languages, however, the oldest meaning for the word should be the most important: this derives from religious use, especially in the Roman Catholic and Greek Churches, and refers to some object, such as a part of the body or clothing, an article of personal use, or the like, which remains as a memorial of a departed saint, martyr, or other holy person, and as such is carefully preserved and held in esteem or veneration.⁴⁰ This meaning of the word points to SGGK's girdle, since it is an article of clothing adopted by the Round Table Members, apparently in honor of Gawain; this item is clearly revered and awarded a religious meaning in the poem, but its link with Gawain specifically would seem tenuous, since he has not departed, in any sense, from the Round Table when its members adopt his sash for their own use. Other possible meanings for the

³⁹ See, for example, Weston, From Ritual to Romance, pp. 9, 64.

⁴⁰ The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), II, 2480.

word "relic" may point to the pentangle, the girdle, the axe, and even the story itself: the word may be applied to the sacred objects of the ancient Jewish and pagan religions; a precious or valuable thing; something kept as a remembrance or souvenir of a person, thing, or place; the remnant of a nation or people.⁴¹

Weston's second term for a symbol is "talisman," which seems promising as a means of expressing Weston's theories which require symbols to interact in groups: the primary meaning of the word is a stone, ring, or other object engraven with figures or characters, to which are attributed the occult powers of the planetary influences and celestial configurations under which it was made; it can also mean any object held to be endowed with magic virtue.⁴² It is this word which Weston equates with a symbol in From Ritual to Romance.⁴³ "Talisman" is not properly used with reference to SGGK, however, since its earliest use occurs in the seventeenth century.

But as early as 1898, in her "Introduction" to her translation of SGGK, Weston had already identified SGGK's

⁴¹ OED, II, 2480.

⁴² OED, II, 3228.

⁴³ Weston, From Ritual to Romance, p. 64.

pentangle as a "mystic symbol" with a hidden meaning. Whenever she uses this combined term, Weston is suggesting a third, and the most profound, meaning that the word "symbol" can carry: a formal authoritative statement or summary of the religious belief of the Christian Church, or a particular church, or sect; even a creed or confession of faith, specifically the Apostles' Creed. This use is traceable to Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (c. 250 A. D.), who applies the Latin "symbolum" to the baptismal creed, this creed being the "mark" or "sign" of a Christian as distinguished from a heathen.⁴⁴ Interestingly enough, with the exception of "talisman," Weston's terms point in a single direction: to the extent that her other terms apply to SGGK, they reinforce the conclusion that SGGK is a profoundly Christian work. This is a point which Weston herself, of course, did not recognize.

Weston's treatment of SGGK's symbols finds its natural complement in the work of H. L. Savage. Her energetic excursions into arcane lore are balanced by his meticulous investigations of medieval heraldry. Where her scope is enormous and mythological, his is contemporary with the poet and concrete. Considered sequentially, their work establishes the range of perspectives

⁴⁴ OED, II, 3206.

which symbolic criticism offers on SGGK. Overall, Weston's influence appears to be dominant: her interest in ancient rites is sustained by W. A. Nitze; her symbolic treatment of Gawain as the ancient Irish Cuchulinn is vastly expanded by R. S. Loomis. But the most widely respected scholar on the poem's sources, G. L. Kittredge, achieves his stature, in part, because his work (following Weston's and preceding Savage's) encompasses both Weston's Celtic interests and Savage's exactitude. (For Kittredge's contribution to symbolic criticism of SGGK, see Chapter II; for Nitze's symbolic treatment of SGGK in terms of ancient ritual, see also Chapter II. For R. S. Loomis's symbolic interpretation of both Gawain and the Green Knight as ancient Celtic deities, see Chapter III.)

Historical criticism on SGGK's symbols comes to a hard-edged focus in the work of Henry Lyttleton Savage. This scholar's studies, beginning with "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" in 1928 and culminating in The Gawain Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background in 1956,⁴⁵ have contributed more to symbolic criticism of the poem's third

⁴⁵ Henry Lyttleton Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP, 27 (1928), 1-15, rpt. in The Gawain-Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), pp. 31-48.

section than the work of any other single individual. The theories he advances are the more impressive because of this archivist's scrupulousness in drawing a clear line between hypothesis and fact. His analysis not only offers a concrete definition of the poem's symbols in the form of heraldic devices, but also clearly demonstrates that symbolic criticism of the poem necessarily also involves questions concerning the work's authorship, historicity, and purpose.

It is not surprising that Savage's attention is drawn first to the hunting scenes in SGGK, for here one finds all together activities, landscapes, equipment, and animals presented with such vividness and familiarity as to arouse Savage's belief that in this sequence especially the SGGK poet must be writing from his own personal experience. "The accounts of the chase in the poem," Savage writes, "certainly warrant our regarding their author as a keen sportsman" ⁴⁶ Savage also states other reasons for investigating these scenes closely. One is a matter of proportion, since, as he observes, "some 280 lines [out of 2530] of the poem are devoted to the hunting scenes, and some 370 to the interviews between Sir Gawain and the lady." ⁴⁷ Another is the

⁴⁶ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 31.

⁴⁷ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 31.

fact that the SGGK poet has specifically paralleled Bercilak's hunts with his wife's approaches to Gawain, both in terms of their simultaneous occurrence and by virtue of Bercilak's and Gawain's agreement to exchange their respective trophies.⁴⁸ Thus Savage's reader discovers three different critical methods being dovetailed in his work: 1) the historical approach, a search for external evidence to support 2) a sensitive reading of the poem, which, in turn, begets 3) the beginnings of a structural interpretation of SGGK.

What Savage does not say in the early stages of his analysis is very important, however, for it determines the sources he seeks out to unlock the meaning of what he quite clearly considers symbols in the poem. Furthermore, what he has already begun to assume colors which characters he eventually groups as "hunters" and "foxes," the activity of hunting having already occupied such a central position in his thought that it must shed light on the bedroom scenes, rather than the reverse process being even a possibility open for consideration. Without arguing the point, Savage has assumed that the SGGK poet is thinking primarily as a huntsman, or, at the very least, a hunting poet; and that, furthermore, the animals in the poem and the act of hunting itself will necessarily mean to the poet what they would mean to other

⁴⁸ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 31.

medieval hunters in general. Having made these assumptions, he must assume that hunting is the dominant motif of the poem, at least for Section III of the work, and that, insofar as the act of hunting or the beasts of chase serve a symbolic function in the poem, a symbol is only a single, literal, unilateral equivalence, or what most literary critics would call a metaphor. It reveals the judgment which the author himself passes on his characters' actions; but it allows the author to incorporate this judgment into his tale, thus tightening the structure of his work, without making a direct statement of his own intent.

It is worth noting that such a limited understanding of a symbol is sufficient only for the third section of SGGK. In every other section of the poem, a whole series of marvels--a self-regenerating green giant, wood-trolls, a castle which appears in answer to Gawain's prayer--repeatedly strain both the reader's and Gawain's confidence in the reliability of appearances--in life, that is, lived abundantly enough on the literal level.

Numerous critics have emphasized this very point, including John Gardner, R. H. Bowers, and J. A. Burrow.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ John Gardner, The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet: In a Modern English Version with a Critical Introduction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 40; R. H. Bowers, "Gawain and the Green Knight as Entertainment," MLQ, 24 (1963), 335; J. A. Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New York: Barnes & Bobble, 1966), p. 179.

Even in the third section of SGGK, moreover, a single, literal, unilateral equivalence provides an inadequate description of Bercilak's role in the poem; for the reader of the entire poem knows that Bercilak is not only a fine hunter chasing prey but also the Green Knight himself, who, in turn, is the object of Gawain's quest (a kind of hunt) throughout most of the poem. Indeed, as Morton Bloomfield has observed, the relationship between Gawain and Bercilak is complicated enough that they may even function as doublets.⁵⁰ Thus Savage's understanding of the term "symbol" offers, as he himself indicates, a series of starting points for interpreting the meaning of the poem.⁵¹ It offers keys to a body of knowledge to which the poet, as well as his original audience, was privy by virtue of a passion and pursuit which they shared and a modern audience does not, at least not the way they did. Savage's "symbols," however, are not what the author himself would call a "sign" or a "figure" (SGGK, 11. 625, 627); Savage's chapter on "symbols and allegory" in SGGK is devoted exclusively to an analysis of the hunting and temptation scenes, not the more obvious pentangle. According to the way Savage uses

⁵⁰ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," PMLA, 76 (1961), 7-19, rpt. in Howard and Zacher, p. 37, n. 22.

⁵¹ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 217.

his terms, the poet's symbols cannot involve anything which the author says through direct statement, for they work by indirection and must be deduced from the text.

Savage's research into medieval hunting treatises and heraldic manuals allows him to establish quite clearly that the beasts pursued by Bercilak on his three consecutive hunts fall into two categories: noble game and vermin. The former category of beasts, which includes both females of the red deer and females of the fallow deer (hunted by Bercilak on the first day), as well as the wild boar (hunted by Bercilak on the second day), was highly respected by medieval huntsmen: beasts in this group gave good "'runs' which were varied by the red deer's habit of taking to water, and by the wild boar's habit of turning frequently to bay."⁵² Thus they represented a stiff challenge, worthy opponents for the medieval hunter, who was, it would seem according to Savage's sources of information, above all a superb gamesman. The fox (hunted by Bercilak on the third day), on the other hand, was a disappointment: he didn't flee at full speed like the deer, and he didn't charge like the boar; instead, he used any means possible, cunning and deceit being his favorites, to elude death.⁵³

⁵² Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 33.

⁵³ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 37.

Thus he was not the proper object of a sporting hunt at all but, rather, a villain to be exterminated by any means possible; his end, and not the means by which that end was to be accomplished, constituted the only legitimate consideration.⁵⁴

The direct applicability of this information to SGGK's third section, however, is more difficult than Savage acknowledges it to be. While no one is more aware of the problems resulting from an inadequate conception of symbolism than this scholar, he still makes no claim that his analysis transcends the problems attendant on the changes in cultural perspective accomplished by six centuries. "We have lost the voices," he writes, "which came to medieval men and women through symbolism or through a liturgy that carried more than one meaning to those who heard it."⁵⁵

Savage's symbolic treatment of SGGK's bedroom scenes depends on Gawain's comparability to Bercilak's prey during each of the poem's three successive hunts. In order to analyze Gawain's behavior in animalistic terms, Savage consults A Display of Heraldry by John Guillim, a learned herald of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth

⁵⁴ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 34.

⁵⁵ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 27.

centuries.⁵⁶ During Gawain's first interview with the lady, Savage believes the knight demonstrates "one trick of the deer, that of lying low in covert until it is absolutely necessary to break out." As substantiation for this comparison, he points to ll. 1187-1203 in the poem. Overall, during the first interview, Savage judges Gawain's behavior to be worthy of the heraldic device of the stag: according to Guillim, this insignia properly distinguished "a Man that is wise and politick . . . a Man . . . rather desirous to stand on his own Guard honestly, than to annoy another wrongfully." On this occasion, Savage concludes, "the knight is perfection itself. . . . The lady has taken a great liberty." On the second day, however, Savage suggests that Gawain's behavior reveals more ferocity and bluntness than before. He contrasts the first two interviews in this manner:

On that day [the second day] his conduct shows the resolution and directness that characterize the boar. He puts on no pretence of sleep [as he did on the first day], feigns no surprise at the visitor or the early hour of her visit, does not make the sign of the cross, but meets the lady as she comes, face to the front, as the boar is to meet her husband later on that very day.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ For Savage's favorable evaluation of Guillim's judgment, and for corroboration of Guillim's statements concerning the deer, see The Gawain-Poet, pp. 40-42, nn. 22, 23, 24.

⁵⁷ All cited in The Gawain-Poet, pp. 41-44.

For his symbolic treatment of the third day's events, Savage is relying on the fox's generally unsavory reputation with the nobility and hunters, heralds and vox populi. However, reputable heraldic writers do not agree on the fox's representation among specifically English heraldic devices; in a footnote, Savage acknowledges this fact.⁵⁸ His own summary of the third day's events states the parallels he attributes to the artist's intention

⁵⁸ The fox's proportionate appearances among armorial lists should be purely a matter of numbers. Such a mathematical question should also be a tangential issue, not necessarily related to the fox's dominant heraldic characteristics. But Savage's handling of his source material becomes significant, in this case, because his research raises questions which he does not address. "About the fox," Savage says, "Guillim is practically silent." The source that Savage cites in his text (Woodward and Burnett) claims that "'the fox is an animal seldom met in British Heraldry.'" (The Gawain-Poet, p. 46.) In another context, however, Savage characterizes this source of information as follows: "The Treatise on Heraldry, British and Foreign (London, 1892) of Woodward and Burnett is good, but not particularly illustrative of medieval practice, and contains a deal of unchecked material." (The Gawain-Poet, p. 184.) In a footnote Savage acknowledges that Arthur Charles Fox-Davies specifically contradicts Woodward and Burnett; Fox-Davies says the arms of Lord Ilchester and Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, among "countless" others, include the fox. In addition, this scholar reports that the fox may be found in the arms or on the crests of families named Fox and Colfox. He explains that heraldry enjoyed its characteristic jokes; as in the case of the bear, an animal might appear on a family crest because its name echoed the animal's name in a "canting" fashion. See Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, A Complete Guide to Heraldry, revised ed. (London: T. C. & E. C. Jack, Ltd., 1929), pp. 197-8. Savage rejects Fox-Davies' assertion, and accepts Woodward's and Burnett's judgment, without addressing the specific examples that Fox-Davies offers in A Complete Guide to Heraldry. See The Gawain-Poet, p. 46, n. 36. The reason for his preference remains obscure.

admirably: "a false beast is roused in the forest, and a false man revealed in the castle; a sly fox is caught in the wood, a "sly fox" in the castle."⁵⁹

Thus, Savage seems to believe that for the SGGK poet symbolism played a major role in the development and treatment of his characters. But in this regard his evidence is uneven. Its bearing on the poem seems most certain in the case of the deer because Savage's sources themselves repeatedly, with both variety and specificity, cross over from the animal's given traits to the human manifestations of those identified with him.⁶⁰ It is just at this point, however, that the applicability of his evidence to SGGK becomes troublesome. While Savage seems perfectly correct in seeing some connection between Gawain's behavior in the first temptation scene with Bercilak's lady and Bercilak's simultaneous hunting of the deer, the nature of that connection remains ambiguous and is even confused by the evidence that Savage brings to his analysis. If, as Savage argues, Gawain is boar-like (that is, fierce) on the second day when Bercilak is hunting a boar and if, furthermore, Gawain is fox-like (that is, cunning) on the third day when Bercilak catches a fox, then one would think Gawain should

⁵⁹ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 37.

⁶⁰ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, pp. 40-43.

resemble the females of the red and fallow deer during the lady's first visit, because Bercilak restricts himself to pursuing just these animals on his first hunt.

þay let þe hertez haf þe gate, with þe
 hedes,
þe breme bukkez also with hor brode paumez;
For þe fre lorde hade defende in fermysoun
 tyme
þat þer schulde no man meue to þe male dere.
(SGGK, ll. 1154-57)

Savage's evidence, however, focuses on the heraldic significance of the stag;⁶¹ his two different sources of information, the hunting manuals and the heraldic treatises, do not treat the deer of both sexes in a consistent manner. His analysis offers no explanation for this obvious contradiction: how can the SGGK poet be awarding his approval to Gawain by comparing him to the noble stag when it is specifically this animal that Bercilak does not hunt? Or is Gawain supposed to be honored in this sequence because he specifically resembles that animal which is not Bercilak's prey? Exactly how does the hunting motif function in the poem? In general, Savage's analysis is germinative because it draws such questions to the reader's attention; but in its treatment of details it breaks down.

It is important to note that Savage's suggestions concerning the relevance of heraldic devices to SGGK's

⁶¹ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 40.

symbols function up to a specific point. In two instances out of those three cited above, Bercilak's hunts virtually act out the standard purpose of banner-bearing pageantry, publishing to those personally unacquainted with the residents of the castle the characteristic behavior they can expect from them.⁶² Consistent with Savage's analysis, the same point could have been made, albeit less literally, if on the three consecutive days of Bercilak's hunts, his servants had paraded before the castle wearing helmets or carrying standards bearing only the animals' images. But in this case, the SGGK poet's literal-mindedness seems to exceed Savage's. The poet prefers to incorporate into the poem the real animals rather than representations of them. At the same time, the poet also seems more spiritual minded than Savage, rendering an ideal (truth) in the mathematically perfected form of the pentangle, which Savage chooses to treat principally as the heraldic device of Enguerrand de Coucy.⁶³ It seems fair to conclude, as Savage fails to, that the poet treats in detail what he can (the deer, boar, and fox), rendering what he cannot claim to envision in the same sense (the Virgin) in the form of a fleeting image. Because Savage's analysis of SGGK's

⁶² Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 39.

⁶³ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, pp. 158-68.

symbols does not take such variety into consideration, it can justly be said to lack depth. While SGGK itself recedes into time, faithfully incorporating narratives from as early as the eighth century,⁶⁴ Savage's treatment of it tends to proceed along the horizontal, as if not just tropes but history, too, could only be construed on a single plane.

Even if the SGGK poet is interested in heraldry, as Savage insists he is, there is no reason to believe this interest excludes other interests. Neither is there any reason to assume that foxes or cunning, deceitful human beings turn up only on a hunting ground or in castles. The author of "A Bestiary" to be found in Arundel MS 292, dating from about the middle of the thirteenth century and translated from the Latin Physiologus of Theobaldus, has an opinion of foxes which is very similar to the SGGK poet's, although his text offers no evidence that he is predominantly concerned with either heraldry or hunting. Interestingly enough, this author's comments are equally applicable to Bercilak's lady and to Gawain.

⁶⁴ Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," in Howard and Zacher, p. 7, rpt. from Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 528-40.

De deuel if tuf ðe [fox] ilik
mið iuele breidef and wið fwik;
and man al fo ðe foxf name
arn wurði to hauen fame;
for wo fo feieð oðer god,
and ðenkeð iuel on hif mod,
fox he if and fend iwif,
ðe poc he legeð nogt of ðif⁶⁵

The accessibility of this work to the writers of fourteenth-century England is evidenced by the fact that the SGGK poet's contemporary, Chaucer, quotes a line from it in his "Nun's Priest's Tale."⁶⁶ But with striking similarity to SGGK also, two different texts of the famous Ancrene Riwle associate foxes with falseness: the Royal text says that foxes are false men; the Nero text says that foxes are false anchoresses.⁶⁷ Thus it seems reasonable to suspect that those correspondences which Savage develops between SGGK's symbols and heraldic devices are probably part of a larger phenomenon. In so

⁶⁵"A Bestiary," in An Old English Miscellany Containing A Bestiary, Kentish Sermons, Proverbs of Alfred, Religious Poems of the Thirteenth Century, EETS 49, ed. Rev. Richard Morris (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1872), p. 14. See also pp. 11-12. Here, the hart also is presented as a figure of the "new man" who 1) resists rage by casting off pride and 2) assists his neighbors as though they were his brothers.

⁶⁶Morris, EETS 49, pp. vii-viii. See also Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," in The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), pp. 204, 754. Line 3271 of "The Nun's Priest's Tale" echoes line 570 of "A Bestiary."

⁶⁷A. C. Baugh, ed., The English Text of the Ancrene Riwle, EETS 232 (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. xi.

far as the SGGK poet uses heraldic devices as symbols, one must acknowledge that Savage's entire analysis of SGGK's hunting scenes could be valid and his evidence would still not prove that the meaning of the poet's symbols is restricted to their heraldic associations.

But symbolic associations between the boar and SGGK's ideal knight still deserve further scrutiny by historical scholars. Evidence of a long English tradition involving the symbolic sacrifice of this animal may be found in the carols of the boar's head collected by Richard Leighton Greene. In these songs, as in SGGK, the animal's head is the focal point of the celebrants' attention. The first verse of one sixteenth century song begins:

The Boar's head in hand bear I,
Bedeck'd with bays and rosemary,
And I pray you, masters, be merry,
Quot estis in convivio.

This song would easily suit the festivities gathered around "*be hoge hed*" (l. 1633) which Bercilak offers Gawain; and one must wonder if this carol, or a very similar song, might be among the "coundutes of Krystmasse and carolez newe" (l. 1655) which are supposed to ring in Bercilak's castle after the second day's hunt. Another carol in Greene's collection states the specific purpose and meaning of the boar's feast:

The borys hede that we bryng here
Betokeneth a Prince withoute pere
Ys born this day to bye vs dere;
Nowell, [nowelle.]
This borys hede we bryng with song
In worchyp of hym that thus sprang
Of a virgine to redresse all wrong;
Nowelle, [nowelle.]⁶⁸

Thus, in these songs, the sacrifice of the Yule boar is implicitly paralleled to the sacrifice of Christ. If these traditional carols reflect symbolic equivalences dating back to the fourteenth century, then SGGK's boar as well as *Gawain* and the *Green Knight*, may function as Christ-figures⁶⁹ by virtue of their seasonal participation in beheading games. To the extent that the SGGK poet may have employed such underlying symbolism to unify his work, however, it is necessary to emphasize that he sustains the same festive mood in his poem that is apparent throughout the boar's head carols: "The boris hede, I vnderstand,/ . . . Servitur cum sinapio."⁷⁰

Neither Savage nor Weston, it should be noted, addresses his attention to the boar's head carols, nor do

⁶⁸ Both songs appear in Richard Leighton Greene, ed., The Early English Carols (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 92.

⁶⁹ For an analysis of the *Green Knight* as Christ, see Hans Schnyder, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Essay in Interpretation (Bern, Switzerland: Francke Verlag, 1961), p. 41.

⁷⁰ Greene, p. 91.

they seem to agree on the function of the symbols they detect in the poem. There is one key phrase, however, which appears in both scholars' studies. This is the term "mystic symbol," which, as has been pointed out above, Weston applied to the Pentangle in 1897. But Savage also employs the adjective "mystic" repeatedly, in his own comments on this figure. He summarizes the traditional meanings for this sign as follows: "As the symbol of Christ, the Pentangle is . . . the Star of the Magi. It was, he goes on to say, "so recognized in medieval symbolism, and is so recognized in Freemasonry today."⁷¹ In this summary, it should be observed, Savage has implicitly telescoped selected meanings ("symbol of Christ," "Star of the Magi") for the figure from among the many which have existed over the vast span of Western history. J. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon catalogue the meanings of this "mystic symbol" as follows: 1) for the Pythagoreans, the Pentangle supposedly functioned as a symbol of health; 2) for the neo-Platonists, it is said to have represented perfection; 3) it was known to the Jews, who called it "Solomon's seal"; 4) it is related to the hexagram, which, when inscribed in a circle, was eventually adopted as the symbol of Judaism; 5) the Pentangle itself was adapted to Christian symbolism,

⁷¹ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 160.

signifying, sometimes, the five letters of Jesus' name or His five wounds.⁷² (For a fuller treatment of the Pentangle's relationship, specifically, to the Star of David, see Chapter V of this study.) Given this long series of traditional meanings which accrue to the Pentangle and culminate, historically, in its Christian use, both Savage and Weston should have explored Christian materials in relation to SGGK if they wanted to call the poem's most mysterious figure a "mystic" symbol. Both, however, excluded such materials from their consideration when they treated the poem's purpose overall. (On the basis of their choice of terms, this omission cannot be justified. For the poem's relation to Patristic materials and the Bible, see Chapter V of this study.)

The contribution which Weston's and Savage's work has made, and may still make, to symbolic criticism of SGGK depends finally on what is implicit, as well as explicit, in their scholarship. The most important lesson which they can teach their reader is to think, fundamentally, in terms of the poem's "connections." Weston

⁷²Tolkien and Gordon, p. 93.

uses this word while discussing the powers of Cuchulinn's magic girdle; therein she discovers "a connection with the invulnerability generally ascribed to the northern hero Siegfried."⁷³ Thus Weston herself employs the word "connection" without directly acknowledging that, within SGGK, the green girdle is not only a "connection" but the nexus⁷⁴ which binds all the poem's characters to each other in a design as carefully interwoven as the Pentangle. It is left to R. S. Loomis to emphasize, quite correctly, that "the lady's girdle" (as Weston refers to this object) belongs also to Gawain and to the Green Knight.⁷⁵ But Loomis's observation also deserves clarification: the green girdle is the Green Knight's

⁷³ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 101.

⁷⁴ See OED, I, 1921. Three meanings for this term may be found in the OED. The first is "a bond or link; a means of connection between things or parts." The second meaning is the "causal nexus, the necessary connexion between cause and effect." The third meaning is "a connected group or series." All of these meanings for the English word post-date the poem. The Latin word has the same basic significance plus one other meaning.

"Nexus" means "a binding, tying together, entwining, connecting." In the preceding sense, the word occurs in Cicero, Ovid, and Tacitus. This is the second significance for the Latin word: "an arrangement between debtor and creditor, by which the debtor pledged his liberty as security for his debt." Used in this sense, the word appears in Cicero and Livy. See D. P. Simpson, Cassell's New Latin Dictionary (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1960), p. 392.

⁷⁵ R. S. Loomis, "More Celtic Elements," 152.

possession; it only becomes Gawain's accountrement in the course of the poem. Insofar as the green girdle belongs to the Green Knight, as Gawain is forced to acknowledge it does (l. 2429), then the Green Knight himself is also a nexus in another sense of the word. He is the central "connector"⁷⁶ from whom all the poem's green girdles orbit outward to delineate the Round Table itself. To the extent that the members of SGGK's Round Table are bound together by a design which is thoroughly interlocked, to the same extent the poem's Round Table also functions as an enlarged edition of the Pentangle. The studies of both Weston and Savage require the reader to follow that design which is accomplished in SGGK by a series of interconnections: Savage implicitly equates the words "connected," "nexus," and "symbol" at the very beginning of the chapter he entitled "Symbolism and Allegory in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language, College Edition (Chicago, Ill.: Consolidated Book Publishers, 1975), p. 1004.

⁷⁷ See Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 31. In stating the questions which led him to write that chapter he ultimately entitled "Symbolism and Allegory in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Savage writes: ". . . does not their [the hunting scenes'] apparent importance in the mind of the poet mean that they are more closely connected with the events going on all the while at the castle than we, perhaps, have realized? But is it not possible that an even closer nexus between the

In the history of scholarship on the poem's symbols, Jessie Weston and Henry L. Savage set the standards for those who would follow. It is not merely by the critic's identification of secondary meanings for individual objects or characters that the major critic, in this field, is defined. It is, rather, by his ability to establish a number of "connections." First, he must identify an underlying principle in SGGK which reveals the configuration of the whole; Weston, quite properly, emphasizes the Arthurian critics' need to grasp a given work "as a connected whole,"⁷⁸ and, in the process, sets this goal. Second, the critic must account for the relationships among the poem's parts; Savage initiated the critical effort in this direction with his treatment of the poem's third section as an integrated assemblage. Third, the critic needs to suggest a viable continuum between the world within the poem and the world outside it: both worlds would seem to be, for the poet, essentially mysterious and nonetheless literally real. To varying degrees, these are the achievements of those

hunting scenes and the happenings at the castle may be found?" Overall, Savage is much more likely to speak of "symbols" than allegory: see The Gawain-Poet, p. 27, where he speaks of "symbolism" and the "liturgy" in the same context.

⁷⁸Weston, From Ritual to Romance, p. 64.

scholars considered in this study. To the extent that each one succeeds, the poem assumes a different shape, for the reader, than the one characterizing it before. It is a tribute to the symbolism of the SGGK poet that his work both withstands and sustains a variety of critical interpretations. (For pagan interpretations of SGGK, see Chapters II and III; for Christian treatments, again see Chapter V.)

CHAPTER II:
THE SYMBOLIC TALE

In the history of scholarship involving SGGK's symbols, it is George Lyman Kittredge who sustains Weston's determination to treat the poem "as a connected whole."¹ In A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight, published in 1916, Kittredge repeatedly illustrates this point: ". . . the poem as we have it is a skilful combination of two entirely independent adventures so managed as to produce a harmonious unit."² While Kittredge's own concern lies with SGGK's plot, what he takes the pains to prove with numerous parallels concerning the poem's narrative structure is equally true of the poem's objects: both are interwoven--indeed, even interlocked--to create a truly unique work in the annals of western literature. The implications of this consistency for a consideration of the poem's symbols are sizeable

¹ Weston, From Ritual to Romance, p. 64. Weston writes: "Before commencing the investigation there is one point which I would desire to emphasize, viz. the imperative necessity for treating the Symbols or Talismans, call them what we will, on the same principle as we have treated the incidents of the story, i.e., as a connected whole."

² Kittredge, p. 107.

indeed; for, by establishing the amalgamation of the poem's two major motifs ("The Challenge" and "The Temptation"), Kittredge manages to conclude that all the essential elements of the new plot function as "the fore-ordained machinery of disenchantment."³ This is a position which has been challenged by critics, such as W. A. Nitze, who emphasizes SGGK's ritualistic elements, and Larry S. Champion, who would contend that the poem dramatizes a topical conflict between faith in God and self-determination.⁴ A careful consideration of Kittredge's work, however, necessitates the conclusion that any emphasis on conflict in the poem must be located in Gawain's character and that Kittredge's insistence on the essentially unified world of the poem (which Gawain does not quite understand) is correct. If Kittredge's position on SGGK's interlocked structure is as sound as it is generally considered to be, then the story itself functions according to the same principle manifested in the interlocked Pentangle and may be no less symbolic.

Kittredge clearly identifies Celtic material as supplying the ultimate source, and thus the first major

³ Kittredge, p. 115, italics mine.

⁴ William Albert Nitze, "Is the Green Knight Story a Vegetation Myth?" MP, 33 (1936), 351; Larry S. Champion, "Grace Versus Merit in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLQ, 28 (1967), 420.

step, in the process of poetic amalgamation which resulted in SGGK. His identification of this source agrees in part with Weston's, although he treats this matter with greater caution and deliberation than she does. The story of "The Challenge" (the exchange of blows or beheading game in SGGK) existed, he says, "in literary shape," in Ireland "long before the earliest date which can be assigned to any conceivable French work embodying this incident in its developed form."⁵ One version of this story appears as "The Champion's Bargain" in the Lebor na hUidre (or Book of the Dun Cow) manuscript of the Fled Bricrend along with another version of "The Challenge," the story of Uath mac Imomain, or "Terror, the son of Great Fear."⁶ Kittredge agrees with Weston on the date of the manuscript (the end of the eleventh or the beginning of the twelfth century), but pushes the date of "The Challenge" as a distinct Irish story back at least as far as the tenth century.⁷ Kittredge sees the two coexistent versions of the same story in the one manuscript as evidence of the composite character of the extant text of the Fled Bricrend and the combining

⁵ Kittredge, pp. 9-10.

⁶ Kittredge, pp. 10, 17.

⁷ Kittredge, p. 20.

tendencies of the manuscript's scribe(s).⁸ This is a significant point because Weston would ascribe this combining tendency chiefly to the SGGK poet,⁹ while Kittredge, in this case, points to a long tradition practiced by the scribes of the ancient epic sagas. On similar grounds, Kittredge refuses to accept Weston's original identification of "The Challenge" with Cuchulinn-Gawain, arguing instead for the prior existence of universal mythology surrounding bodies of water (such as the loch in the Uath version of "The Challenge") associated with serpent-monsters, or elemental water demons, all of whom have the uncanny ability of reuniting their heads with their trunks.¹⁰ As far as Kittredge is concerned, this category of beings supplies the antecedents for SGGK's Green Knight only because all of its members are, in general, supernatural beings, and not wood deities or vegetation gods, as Weston and E. K. Chambers would have them be.¹¹ For Kittredge, then, the ancient Celtic material of SGGK specifically does not

⁸ Kittredge, pp. 18-19.

⁹ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 99.

¹⁰ Kittredge, p. 20.

¹¹ Kittredge, pp. 198-99. cf. E. K. Chambers, The Mediaeval Stage (London: The Clarendon Press, 1903), I, p. 186, n. 1.

include the Green Knight's green-ness. It includes only those elements of SGGK which manifest detailed parallels with the content of "The Champion's Bargain." He hypothesizes that a manuscript, containing this material "in a highly elaborated literary form," came by unknown means "into the possession" of a French writer who originally combined the two plot lines found, subsequently, in SGGK.¹²

Kittredge builds a persuasive case that the SGGK poet's debt to his primary Celtic source, "The Champion's Bargain" or an Irish literary version of the same material differing from it in few particulars, includes both the matter and the manner of treatment to be found in "The Champion's Bargain." First, the poet borrowed the circumstances of a highly dramatic plot: a huge uncanny stranger visits the court of a great national king on a high feast-day and challenges the assembled company to an exchange of blows with an axe; the stranger declares that he has come to test the valor of the court on account of its high reputation for bravery and other noble qualities; the king does not subject himself to the test; one knight only is found who dares fulfill the compact, and he is the most distinguished of all; the stranger spares this knight, proclaiming him the best

¹²Kittredge, pp. 199, 139.

of heroes.¹³ Second, in borrowing this material, the SGGK poet has also utilized and extended the literary art which is characteristic of his original: the suspense which grows out of the warriors' consternation and hesitation, as well as the stranger's taunts; the rhetoric which consists, at least in part, of a game of words whereby the challenger repeatedly and simultaneously celebrates, goads, and upbraids the knights.¹⁴ Translating numerous speeches, Kittredge underscores such parallels. In the Irish saga, the stranger declares, "Since you Ulstermen have distinguished yourselves above the hosts of all those lands . . . find from among you one man who shall fulfill toward me the quest in which I am [engaged]."¹⁵ In SGGK, the Green Knight states, "If thou art as bold as all men say, thou wilt grant me the game that I ask."¹⁵

With many such detailed parallels, Kittredge impresses upon his reader the curious impersonality of SGGK's matter and method. His concentration on the story's structure is so thorough that it almost precludes personal sentiments; nowhere in his study does one discover any response to the poem similar to Weston's fondness for Gawain or Savage's determination to find

¹³ Kittredge, p. 15.

¹⁴ Kittredge, pp. 15-16.

¹⁵ Kittredge, p. 16.

the SGGK poet. For Kittredge, as for the poet, the story seems to be a donnée: it deserves and receives his total, detailed attention. Yet he can be irritated, almost audibly, when other scholars introduce material into their treatments of SGGK which he considers essentially foreign to the perimeters of this subject. In the following lines, he defines his purpose, as he sees it, in relating SGGK to its Celtic source; at one and the same time, he is also implicitly attacking Weston's and Chambers' mythological interpretations of the poem:¹⁶

Our starting point for this study lies not in the misty mid-region of Weir, not in the pan-Celtic Cloudcuckooland of myth and speculative folk-lore It is just as fixed and definite as the point of our destination. We begin with The Champion's Bargain, an Irish tale in a carefully elaborated literary form, preserved in a manuscript of about the year 1100. We end with Gawain and the Green Knight, an English romance in a carefully elaborated literary form, preserved in a manuscript of about 1400. Those points in which the latter document differs from the former are changes The questions are, with regard to each of them: Who made the change--the Englishman or one of his predecessors? and, if one of his predecessors, which one? These questions I have done my best to answer.¹⁷

¹⁶ For Kittredge's explicit references to these scholars, as well as mythological critics in general, see Kittredge, pp. 138-42, 198-99.

¹⁷ Kittredge, pp. 142-43.

In its concentrated parallelism, it should be noted, Kittredge's work enjoys a consonance with SGGK itself. At the same time, his study implies that literature, as it is represented by "The Champion's Bargain," consists primarily of careful elaborations upon extant materials, and that the SGGK poet necessarily endorsed this idea, too, when he borrowed a good portion of his content from the Irish tale.

Implicitly, moreover, Kittredge would extend the SGGK poet's debt to his first Irish source even further. By his very terminology, Kittredge is suggesting that SGGK's author has taken over from his Irish original the idea of a story-type called "The Challenge." In the context of his treatment, this phrase takes on the meaning of an abstract concept or symbolic act clearly fleshed out in characteristic particulars (the stranger, the knights, the exchanges, etc.), which are recognizable and moveable, as a skeletal group, from one context to another, ready to receive other associations and yet so firmly established that they still retain their own essential identity as a particular kind of tale. When Kittredge pushes the date for such an Irish story-type back to the tenth century,¹⁸ however, he is antedating his own source for this concept, the Fled Bricrend.

¹⁸ See n. 7 above.

"The Challenge" itself thus comes to occupy a position of pre-eminence in Kittredge's work, and both "The Champion's Bargain" and SGGK tend to be subordinate to it, existing sequentially for the purpose of illustrating its prior and yet continuous existence.

For Kittredge, then, architectonics is supreme; there is no small amount of classical philosophy involved in his chosen focus on an apparently preternatural source, which illuminates the meaning of all subsequent recensions. Yet this concept, "The Challenge," arises also out of the process of combination; it probably existed, "a priori," as "a mere bit of floating folk-lore," Kittredge theorizes, long before it became attached to Cuchulinn.¹⁹ Nowhere does Kittredge acknowledge that much of the courtliness which he would ascribe to later additions²⁰ is an essential part of both Old Irish and Old English epics, and that the combining principle describes the very structure of such works.²¹ Nowhere does he admit that ancient epics such as the Fled Bricrend and Beowulf typically managed also to combine

¹⁹ Kittredge, pp. 19-20.

²⁰ Kittredge, p. 75.

²¹ Fr. Klaeber, ed., Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburgh, 3rd ed. (1922; rpt. Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1950), pp. lv, xx-xxiv.

in one work both brutal blood-letting and a strict adherence to good manners. The challenger in "The Champion's Bargain" is a grotesque, dangerous, magical character; nonetheless, he abides by "fir fer," the rules of fairplay, the truth of men.²² At least some of those elements which appear to moderns as contradictory were naturally combined in the minds of ancient authors. Exactly what, then, was the original raw material subjected to the poetic process of combination? Kittredge's answer--story types--is not entirely satisfactory. Nevertheless, his intricate, multifold analysis of the poet's art from version to version of the same tale may describe the very process of literary history, through which a story can carry with it a symbolic meaning down through the ages until plot and meaning together are eclipsed or transformed into another whole. It is with just this sort of analysis that Kittredge lays the foundations for and outlines the techniques of the study of the relationship between art and tradition in an acknowledged masterpiece (which belongs to its own age and yet helps to define it), the kind of analysis which Larry D. Benson was to expand in 1965 into his own study of Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

²²Kittredge, p. 11.

The clarity of Kittredge's own vision of the processes involved in literary history leads him into postulating a hypothetical history for SGGK even if he must supply, by supposition, the missing links of a chain, which, without his additions, might remain a series of disjointed facts. That the original story of "The Challenge" passed from an Irish version into French and only then into English--of this he is sufficiently certain that he is willing to reconstruct three separate French versions of the tale (the Anglo-Norman "O," the Continental French "R," and a French Gawain and the Green Knight), leaving no credit to the English SGGK poet for the combined plot, which Kittredge, among others, believes to be one of the finest among the medieval romances and certainly also one of the chief virtues of the Middle English SGGK.²³ Aside from a courtly and polished manner,²⁴ exactly what French influences found their way through three French revisions into the finished poem is a question which he does not consider, since he is intent, instead, on tracing the survival of the poem's Celtic source materials in a relatively intact state.

Ironically, what Kittredge's intermediary French sources especially do not account for is the very antique

²³ Kittredge, pp. 3-4.

²⁴ Kittredge, p. 75.

nature of the poem, which he himself emphasizes. His theory also specifically ignores SGGK's consanguinity with the alliterative revival of the mid-fourteenth century in England and Scotland,²⁵ a national movement which repudiated French culture and French versification and revived Old English forms in their place. In his article, "The Lay of Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight," written in 1925, Robert Max Garrett describes two phenomena which may have had the most direct bearing on SGGK's creation. First, in 1344 Edward III revived the Round Table of Arthur with a magnificent assemblage lasting for four days; the final institution of the Order of the Round Table, which was to consist of three hundred knights, never took place, "excertis causis," says the record mysteriously.²⁶ But out of this attempt

²⁵ J. P. Oakden, Alliterative Poetry in Middle English: The Dialectical and Metrical Survey (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1930), p. 244.

²⁶ Robert Max Garrett, "The Lay of Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight," JEGP, 24 (1925), 126. For additional information see also Roger Sherman Loomis, "Chivalric and Dramatic Imitations of Arthurian Romance," in Medieval Studies in Memory of A. Kingsley Porter, volume 1, ed. Wilhelm R. W. Koehler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), p. 82. Both Garrett and Loomis cite the fact that for the solemn institution of this Round Table, vows were sworn upon relics to maintain the Order. Loomis in particular notes that a Round Table feast was held at Windsor in 1345; this occasion marks the last festival called a Round Table in medieval England for which Loomis can find any record. There was a marked decline, Loomis observes, in the prestige of things Arthurian at the English court between 1350 and the accession of the Tudors.

developed the later, smaller, much more select, and secret Order of the Garter, whose historical connection to the poem has been lengthily examined by Henry Lyttleton Savage,²⁷ among others. Second, Garrett particularly recommends the very popular Arthurian Breton lais, considered by Gaston Paris to have circulated in both French and English forms during the fourteenth century,²⁸ as possible sources for SGGK. Garrett notes that in their treatment of material, these works emphasized a scrupulous courtliness, an atmosphere of antiquity, and a connection with the Celtic otherworld.²⁹ In her essay, "The Alliterative Revival," written in 1955, Dorothy Everett joins Garrett in noting the Old English words in SGGK's vocabulary: "etayn" from "eoten," "wormez" from "wyrmas," "wodwos" from "wudu-wasas."³⁰ Clearly, Kittredge's theory on the sources of SGGK is the weaker for not taking English events contemporaneous

²⁷ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, pp. 49-119.

²⁸ Garrett, "The Lay," 131.

²⁹ Garrett, "The Lay," 132-34.

³⁰ Dorothy Everett, "The Alliterative Revival" from Chapter 3 of Essays on Middle English Literature, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Denton Fox (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 19-20. See also Garrett, "The Lay," 127.

with or just precedent to the poem's composition, particularly the alliterative movement and its stylistic trademarks, into consideration.

The crucial steps in the literary history which Kittredge would reconstruct for SGGK are his own theoretical creations. His history has a rhetorical purpose, since he believes only "The Champion's Bargain" (and not the Uath version of the Challenge) succeeded in producing literary descendants;³¹ his schema thus argues that this version alone is directly traceable through numerous analogues down to its combination with "The Temptation" in a French Gawain and the Green Knight, which he believes supplied the plot for the English SGGK. The first step in this process is a twelfth-century Anglo-Norman version of "The Champion's Bargain," a lost work which, Kittredge suggests, followed the plot of its Irish source faithfully, but resulted in an episodical romance of Gawain.³² This work Kittredge calls "O." Very early in the thirteenth century, Païen de Maisières condensed the plot of "O" into another Gawain romance, La Mule sans Frain; an unidentified author altered the plot of "O" and transferred the adventure from Gawain to Lancelot.

³¹ Kittredge, p. 74.

³² Kittredge, p. 75.

in the prose romance, Perlesvaus; another unknown author altered the plot of "O" further by having Gawain cause the challenger's death in the Old French romance, Humbaut.³³ "O" was subsequently revised or rewritten by another French romance writer about 1200: the result was "R." This work, Kittredge believes, was more courtly and polished than "O," but still retained the plot of "The Challenge" in the form of an episodical romance of Gawain.³⁴ However, "R" omitted Cuchulinn's neck-stretching (still intact in "O") and substituted courtly interruptions by the king and queen.³⁵ Again, early in the thirteenth century, the French author of the Livre de Caradoc altered "The Challenge" taken from "R," and attributed the adventure to Caradoc. Subsequently, this adventure was inserted into the first continuation of Chretien's Perceval li Gallois.³⁶ Then, another French poet combined "The Challenge" as found in "R" with another unrelated adventure of Gawain ("The Temptation") to create the French Gawain and the Green Knight, the hypothetical immediate source of the English SGGK.³⁷

³³ Kittredge, pp. 44, 52, 61, 63, 75.

³⁴ Kittredge, pp. 38-42, 75.

³⁵ Kittredge, pp. 40, 75.

³⁶ Kittredge, pp. 26, 75.

³⁷ Kittredge, p. 75.

All of the suppositions in this projected history, and thus the history itself, can be too easily shaken by a single bit of information: as Roger Sherman Loomis has pointed out, SGGK's Bercilak corresponds, both in nature and function, in his fiery face and his provision of a guide,³⁸ quite exactly to Uath man Imomain, whose influence on SGGK Kittredge specifically denies.³⁹

The second major step in Kittredge's analysis of SGGK requires him to argue directly, *a priori*, for the existence of a story type which he calls "The Temptation." This category necessarily seems more hypothetical than his first ("The Challenge"), for here there is no one outstanding source like "The Champion's Bargain," which, by itself, even without the designation of any story-type, could still clearly be discerned as a detailed source for SGGK.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Kittredge adumbrates a series of tales which meet the following basic criteria: 1) the central incident must be a difficult

³⁸ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 69.

³⁹ Kittredge, p. 74.

⁴⁰ Kittredge, p. 9. Kittredge himself suggests this distinction between his handling of the two types when he writes, "Our study of the extraordinary tale known as The Beheading Game--or, as we have agreed to call it, for brevity, The Challenge--is much facilitated by a fortunate chance which enables us, in a measure, to begin at the beginning instead of working back to a purely hypothetical source."

test (usually posed by supernatural beings to test mortals venturing into their otherworld domain);⁴¹ 2) a loving wife tempts the hero in obedience to her husband's instructions; 3) the husband tests the hero in order to bring about the disenchantment of his person and, sometimes, his place.⁴² Furthermore, in a special group of stories within the preceding general category, a heightened effect may be accomplished by the following means: 1) the hero does not know in what the test consists; 2) the hero may also not know that there is any test at all; 3) the test is often deliberately designed so that only the best knight in the world shall ever succeed in meeting its demands;⁴³ 4) the fulfillment of the test puts an end to it forever; 5) sometimes the instigators of the test are not malevolent beings but are themselves the victims of enchantment; 6) the testers, therefore, may be constrained by the requirements for their disenchantment to behave as trappers of the hero.⁴⁴ By outlining these progressively restrictive criteria, Kittredge manages to approach the very

⁴¹ Kittredge, pp. 76, 79.

⁴² Kittredge, p. 79.

⁴³ Kittredge, p. 80.

⁴⁴ Kittredge, p. 81.

large subject underlying both his story-types, the power of the supernatural, in a highly specific way. He is focussing ever more closely, too, on SGGK. He is also arguing implicitly, once again, for a predetermined pattern which requires the outcome of each narrative. This approach allows him to subsume under a single category matters such as law, manners, and magic, matters which would not otherwise be necessarily related, although they all certainly function together in SGGK. Thus, once again, for Kittredge pattern determines meaning. The story itself is symbolic, and in its transcendent realm all successful characters slide--whether they will or no--into the parts of one whole action which they have been chosen to play.

As Kittredge compares and contrasts various existent versions of "The Temptation" story-type, it becomes apparent that the idea of a skeletal tale is also a matter of theory, a scholarly invention which aids in the analysis of a given narrative as well as providing a focus for examination of numerous stories as groups. Kittredge offers no proof that romance writers themselves consciously thought in these terms, although sometimes he strongly implies that if they did not, they should have. Speaking of Le Chevalier à L'Épée, for example, which recounts Gawain's visit to a castle

where his nearly perfect obedience to his host wins him the accolade of the "nonpareil" and his host's daughter for his "amie," Kittredge repeatedly expresses irritation with the conteur for introducing material, which, given Kittredge's categories, does not belong in this story, and for giving Gawain motivations not in accord with those Kittredge has assigned him in the heightened and thus best versions of "The Temptation." "The sword [of the "Perilous Bed"] is intrusive," he remarks.

"Gawain should refrain out of courtesy, and loyalty to his host--this being the supreme test."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Kittredge's idealized story-type of "The Temptation" gives him a standard for aesthetic judgment, a standard which furthers his search for form in matter, and he is quick to praise when he discovers the origin of the later more elaborate story-type in the Old French romance of Ider. He writes:

But it is easy to detach the incident from all accretions, and to recognize therein the resistance (for whatever reason) to the powerful charms of a lady as the test imposed--without his knowledge--on a wandering adventurer . . . Only the central incident is preserved, but that has fortunately come down to us in a marvellously primitive [that is, savage and frank] shape.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Kittredge, pp. 89-92.

⁴⁶ Kittredge, p. 85.

His theory is only fully satisfied, however, by the discovery of a work which, as a whole, sets forth the realm of the supernatural and operates according to the odd logic of magic. This he finds in his own conflated summary of The Carl of Carlisle, which he draws from both the Porkington and Percy manuscripts. As he presents it, such a tale has an integrity and a reality all its own; for at its close, the carl's magical "compulsion"⁴⁷ (to do merciless wrong until the perfect guest Gawain, decapitates him) ends almost simultaneously with the narrative, which then is left only to escort the disenchanted carl, the carl's daughter, Gawain, and the reader back to the world of King Arthur's Round Table, as if this place were the accepted, everyday residence of us all. Such a tale must be symbolic, for by an obvious reversal, the world it sets forth appears to be, but is not, this world we own. Instead, as is true of SGGK, it is specifically twice removed from the world of the reader's existence. Still, as Kittredge strongly implies,⁴⁸ this romance presents a world we know: for the world of the supernatural is also the realm of man's conscience and religious experience, and disenchantment is one way of describing the carl's wondrous release

⁴⁷ Kittredge, p. 89.

⁴⁸ Kittredge, p. 89.

from the monstrous habit of doing wrong. It is from this tale, more than any other, that Kittredge derives the abstracted "shape"⁴⁹ of his own reconstructed version of his French SGGK poet's second hypothetical French source. He acknowledges this source himself when he designates the group of tales illustrating "The Temptation" as "The Carl" group.⁵⁰ The argument that this romance, drawn from fifteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts, should supply the outline for the supposed French source of all the stories in "The Carl" group, seems tautological.

Kittredge is at his undoubted best in his analysis of what he sees as the combined plot of SGGK. His strength as a critic derives in part from his ability to perceive and explain Aristotelian aesthetic principles. His capacity, even his determination, to see the poem as a whole is completely consistent both with Aristotle's emphasis on the whole nature of dramatic action in The Poetics⁵¹ and the SGGK poet's emphasis on the interconnected nature of moral choices in his poem. The accuracy of Kittredge's vision is apparent even in what

⁴⁹ Kittredge, p. 106.

⁵⁰ Kittredge, p. 106.

⁵¹ Aristotle, On the Art of Poetry with a Supplement on Music, trans. S. H. Butcher, ed. Milton C. Nahm (New York: Bobbs Merrill Co., 1956), pp. 6, 8-10.

may appear to be off-hand remarks but are not. Defending the poet's "skilful combination" of the two plots into one, Kittredge notes, "Indeed, it would be quite as correct to say that the author takes the Challenge as a mere frame in which to put the story of the Temptation."⁵² Now, while he himself is in the process of dismissing this interpretation as a final statement on the relationship between the two plots in SGGK as a whole, still he tosses off exactly the right term for describing the structural device which binds the two plots together in Part III of the poem: "frame." Before and after every one of the three temptation scenes comes the description of the day's hunt: the result is a virtual narrative triptych. Its effect is precisely that one sought by Kittredge in the best of the romances: a heightening of dramatic tension. On those three days, round the courtly world Bercilak always seems to be hunting, hunting, until, of course, the evening's repast when the hunters and the prey are all gathered together. A similar device obviously functions for the poem as a whole. The opening and final scenes in Arthur's court frame all the scenes in Bercilak's world; the one world, in effect, telescopes

⁵² Kittredge, p. 107.

into the other. The result of such structural patterning is, indeed, as Kittredge suggests in his analysis of the poem's combined plot, to leave the reader always with a sense of combination. In SGGK, one simply is not allowed to take an overly simplified view of life: one cannot choose between beheadings and dalliances but must accept them both together.

Kittredge's emphasis, like Weston's, is fixed steadfastly on the whole poem. No critic has argued with greater determination that the poet successfully achieved a rare number of connections, "retaining the main features of both its [the plot's] component parts and bringing them all into line as consistent incidents subservient to one ruling purpose."⁵³ To the extent that he convinces his reader of the perfect fusion of SGGK's narrative elements, to the same extent he has succeeded in proving that SGGK's plot obeys the same principle of design illustrated by the Pentangle: it is interlocked. No critic has successfully challenged Kittredge's conclusion on this point. But other critics have also attempted to do what Kittredge does not do--to establish a relationship between the poem's interconnected action and events outside the poem itself. Examined from this perspective, the same unified action

⁵³ Kittredge, p. 116.

which Kittredge identifies within SGGK is typically described as symbolic. (For Nitze's treatment of SGGK's nature symbolism, see below; for Loomis's treatment of SGGK's solar symbolism, see Chapter III; on the SGGK poet's symbolic treatment of the theme of sovereignty, see Chapter IV; for Krappe's symbolic interpretation of the Green Knight as Death, see Chapter V; for Burrow's equally religious and mythological interpretation of the Green Knight, see also Chapter V.) While respecting the precision and clarity of Kittredge's work, other scholars have also explored SGGK's relationship to various Celtic sources. (For Nitze's treatment of "The Champion's Bargain," see below; for Loomis's treatment of the Uath version of "The Challenge," see Chapter III; for a suggested relationship between "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley" and SGGK, see Chapter IV.)

In 1936 William A. Nitze challenged Kittredge's reading of SGGK with his article, "Is the Green Knight Story a Vegetation Myth?"⁵⁴ While Nitze praises Kittredge, "To whom we are lastingly indebted for the most searching and erudite book on the Green Knight,"⁵⁵ still he insists that in the genesis of poems such as SGGK

⁵⁴ Nitze, "Vegetation," 351-66.

⁵⁵ Nitze, "Vegetation," 365.

popular ceremonies and rites may be sources of equal importance to those literary documents on which Kittredge relies. As Kittredge chose the larger category of the supernatural to supersede Weston's focus on fertility rites, so Nitze would reverse Kittredge's argument by deriving conceptions of the supernatural from pre-existent beliefs and practices: "What is enchantment in the latter case may have been myth, or indeed ritual, in the former" ⁵⁶ On this score, it is difficult to choose between their positions, since the earliest evidence disappears in the proverbial mists of time. It is possible to note, however, that Nitze inclines toward anthropological evidence and avoids the religious and psychological implications of the term "supernatural," which Kittredge identifies with the "enchantment" of romance. Unlike Kittredge, Nitze considers of primary importance the "nature symbolism" ⁵⁷ which he detects in, among others, SGGK, Perlesvaus, and "The Champion's Bargain."

Nitze's examination of "The Champion's Bargain" raises some worthwhile questions. First, he calls attention to that description in "The Champion's Bargain"

⁵⁶ Nitze, "Vegetation," 351.

⁵⁷ Nitze, "Vegetation," 359.

which says the carl had "upon him the bushiness of a great tree the size of a winter-fold in which thirty yearlings could find shelter."⁵⁸ Nitze cannot accept Kittredge's reading of this passage; Kittredge, in turn, had deferred to Zimmer's conclusion that the description "refers to the carl's bushy [head of] hair."⁵⁹ What is involved in this disagreement is more than picayune quibbling; referring to Zimmer's reading, Nitze is correct to ask, "But is that certain?"⁶⁰ But another question arises: to what does "that" refer in Nitze's question? Yes, Zimmer is interested in hair, Nitze in leaves; but to what exactly is Nitze objecting? Zimmer's interpretation may seem strained specifically because, according to Kittredge's note,⁶¹ Zimmer limits the

⁵⁸ Nitze, "Vegetation," 359; Kittredge, p. 11.

⁵⁹ Kittredge, p. 11.

⁶⁰ Nitze, "Vegetation," 359.

⁶¹ Kittredge, p. 11, nn. 1, 3. Kittredge does not note the precise location of Zimmer's comment on the carl's hair. Concerning "fir fer," however, Kittredge refers the reader to "Zimmer, Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie, I, 101, appropos of the Fled Bricrend." He cites Zimmer's citation, in turn, of these sources of information: "Revue Celtique, III, 184, and Windisch, Irische Texte, I, Wörterbuch, p. 550." Kittredge also credits Zimmer with demonstrating that the Uath version of the Challenge belongs to a version of the Fled Bricrend quite distinct from that which ended with "The Champion's Bargain." Concerning this point, Kittredge refers his reader to "Kuhn's Zeitschrift, 1887, XXVIII, 623 ff." See Kittredge, p. 292. In addition, see Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, pp. xiii-xiv. This scholar does not defer to Zimmer's judgment automatically,

"bushiness" to the carl's "head of hair." The context of the description in "The Champion's Bargain" does not necessarily sustain or encourage such a limitation of the carl's "bushiness." The passage begins: "Terrible and hideous was the appearance of the carl. An old hide next his skin, and a black tawny cloak about him, and upon him the bushiness . . ."⁶² Preceding the disputed passage, then, the Celtic writer's focus seems to be on the carl's general characteristics, his overall coverings, not his head. Immediately following the disputed passage, however, the Celtic writer's focus has shifted to the carl's eyes: "Fierce yellow eyes in his head, each of those two eyes standing out of his head as big as a cauldron that would hold a large ox."⁶³ Now, if each of the carl's eyes is big enough to accommodate an ox, then, perhaps, it is not absurd to think of the hair on his head alone as being spacious enough to contain thirty yearlings. In addition, since the critical passage occurs in the middle of a focal shift, it may be

but, for "extremely useful" summaries of the tales concerning Cuchulinn, she refers her reader in particular to "Keltische Studien, V.: Ueber dem compilatorischen character der irischen sagentexte im sogenannten Lebor na h-Uidre. (Zeitschrift für vgl. Sprachforschung, vol. xxviii. Heft 5-6) Gutersloh, 1887."

⁶² Kittredge, p. 11.

⁶³ Kittredge, p. 11.

difficult to ascertain whether the "bushiness" is supposed to be considered a general or particular characteristic. But one is left with the fact that the original passage compares the "bushiness" to a tree; thus, there is a conception of limitation, as well as proportion, within the image itself, and there is no reason to believe that Zimmer's interpretation of the Irish writer's hyperbole is necessarily far-fetched. Nitze, however, does not analyze the image in its context at all. He is chiefly concerned because

The metaphor, if that is what the Irishman intended, mentions vegetation (affording protection to yearlings in winter), and the more obvious inference is to regard it as akin to the other nature symbolism to which I have referred.⁶⁴

With all due respect, one must inquire: does one tree a vegetation god make? Does evidence gleaned from a variety of works automatically justify the conclusion that nature symbolism is at work in one particular work?

In Perlesvaus alone does Nitze argue directly for the survival of the fertility motif "in full measure."⁶⁵ The evidence which is crucial to his argument includes the following elements in Perlesvaus: 1) the setting of the story is a waste city which is repeopled in the

⁶⁴ Nitze, "Vegetation," 359.

⁶⁵ Nitze, "Vegetation," 362.

course of the tale; 2) before Lancelot (Gawain's parallel) fulfills the bargain of the jeu-parti (even-game), the animals have no "pasture" and the city no "inhabitants"⁶⁶; 3) again, before Lancelot fulfills the bargain, "there is a succession of kinsmen who are beheaded in turn, doubtless at yearly intervals"⁶⁷; 4) when Lancelot enters the city for the first time, he is greeted by a young and handsome knight, richly dressed, wearing a golden chaplet, and carrying a great axe in his hand⁶⁸; 5) when Lancelot enters the city a year later at midday, he is met by a tall and handsome knight, wearing a short skirt of silk and carrying a weapon which he is sharpening on a whetstone⁶⁹; 6) because Lancelot is the first knight to have kept the covenant of the jeu-parti (returning himself a year later after beheading the first knight), the city is finally repeopled.⁷⁰ Summarizing his interpretation of the story, Nitze maintains, then, that Perlesvaus

⁶⁶ Nitze, "Vegetation," 359.

⁶⁷ Nitze, "Vegetation," 352.

⁶⁸ Nitze, "Vegetation," 352; Kittredge, p. 52.

⁶⁹ Nitze, "Vegetation," 353; Kittredge, p. 53.

⁷⁰ Nitze, "Vegetation," 353; Kittredge, p. 54.

relates the story as a ritual in which several fair youths, representing the same fundamental idea, are successively killed until a hero submits to the return blow and thus liberates the restorative forces of nature.⁷¹

The key word in this summary is "as," for it reveals Nitze's primary argument: that romances in general may derive from non-literary sources, and that this romance, specifically, not only derives from ritual but embodies one.

On the basis of his analysis of Perlesvaus, as well as its similarities to seven other tales of the jeu-parti, Nitze would then extend his argument concerning nature symbolism (explicitly) and ritual (implicitly) to SGGK. At times his argument seems inconsistent, because the role he himself assigns Perlesvaus in his analysis is two-fold. On the one hand, he says,

the preponderance of a motif in all the other versions [of the jeu-parti] need have no bearing on the provenience of P[erlesvaus], which may independently go back to a popular source embodying an idea which the other versions had rejected without, however, losing all its features.⁷²

On the other hand, he sets up a "Table of Concordances," using Perlesvaus as a standard, in effect, by which the other romances are to be judged. Now, if the many

⁷¹ Nitze, "Vegetation," 364.

⁷² Nitze, "Vegetation," 364.

occurrences of a motif in all the other versions of the jeu-parti have no necessary bearing on the source of Perlesvaus, why should Perlesvaus' origins necessarily have any bearing on them? Furthermore, just because there are now no extant identified written sources for the Perlesvaus version of the jeu-parti, does this mean necessarily that there never were any? If, as Nitze insists, nobody can tell us how many versions of the Green Knight tale were once actually in circulation,⁷³ then it would seem to follow that nobody can tell us, either, that a written source for Perlesvaus never existed. Overall, Nitze is at his best when he is asking questions which do indeed need to be asked. But unless he can point to concrete evidence for those vegetation rituals which he believes inspired the plots of romance, these sources must be judged hypothetical. To be more than supposition, his analysis needs the kind of detailed information for his own position which Roger Sherman Loomis provided for "Chivalric and Dramatic Imitations of Arthurian Romance," which contains tournaments and festivals but no jeu-parti.⁷⁴ If Nitze is going to prove that the Perlesvaus contains nature symbolism and this symbolism, in turn, goes back to fertility rituals, then

⁷³ Nitze, "Vegetation," 363.

⁷⁴ R. S. Loomis, "Chivalric and Dramatic Imitations," pp. 79-97.

he needs historical evidence that such rituals existed, in the form in which he envisions them, outside the provenance of romance.

Nitze's interpretation of the challengers in Perlesvaus seems inconsistent with the facts. First, he finds it unusual that Perlesvaus refers to a whole series of challengers who have been killed.⁷⁵ But in SGGK, the guide refers to many past challengers and victims when he says of the Green Chapel: "per passes non bi þat place so proude in his armes/ þat he [the Green Knight] ne dyngez hym to deþe with dynt of his honde" (SGGK, ll. 2104-5) The guide's story is certainly consistent with the Green Knight's apparent defiance of powers beyond himself; thus, within the poem, the guide's horrid tale has dramatic credibility. In La Mule sanz Frain, too, the evidence of previous challengers is only too evident: "Beyond the river is a castle, well fortified, and surrounded with sharp stakes, on all but one of which is the severed head of a previous adventurer."⁷⁶ Humbaut makes patent one point that Nitze ignores: in this Old French romance, at least, the beheading game and enchantment function together; once the enchantment is detected and thwarted (Gawain prevents the villain

⁷⁵ Nitze, "Vegetation," 357.

⁷⁶ Kittredge, p. 42.

from going after his head), never thereafter is there any jeu-parti.⁷⁷ Nitze prefers not to emphasize enchantment in Perlesvaus; instead, he insists that this work is unique in having two distinct challengers.⁷⁸ But are there really two challengers in Perlesvaus? If there are, how is it that the first one disappears into thin air? The jeu-parti proceeds as follows:

So Lancelot cuts off his head with a blow that makes it fly seven feet from the trunk. Then he throws down the axe, returns to his horse, mounts, and looks back; but he can see nothing of the body or the head⁷⁹

Does not this first challenger's mysterious disappearance suggest that Perlesvaus' challenger(s) also harkens back to the character of the wizard in the early Celtic Uath version of "The Challenge"?

This Uath mac Imomain was a man of great strength who used to form himself into whatever shape he pleased and perform tricks of magic and arts of wizardry he was called the Wizard from the extent of his forming himself into many shapes.⁸⁰

The magical disappearance of the first challenger in Perlesvaus would indeed tend to relate him to Uath mac

⁷⁷ Kittredge, pp. 62-3.

⁷⁸ Nitze, "Vegetation," 353, 357.

⁷⁹ Kittredge, p. 53.

⁸⁰ Nitze, "Vegetation," 353.

Imomain, and his protests to Lancelot ("Then let me cut off your head . . . for I can spare myself on no other terms.")⁸¹ are reminiscent also of the Carl of Carlisle's remonstrance with Gawain ("Gawain is reluctant, but his host threatens to smite off his head if he declines, and the deed is done").⁸² Thus there seems to be no need to separate Perlesvaus out from SGGK's other analogues and to argue, on the basis of that separation, that Perlesvaus alone must necessarily derive from ritual or be an embodiment of it.

But, in all fairness to Nitze, it must be remembered that throughout his essay he is arguing only for "the possibility" that the Green Knight in SGGK represents the annual death and rebirth of the embodied vital principle.⁸³ He fully accepts Uath man Imomain as the original of both the Green Knight and Bercilak in SGGK.⁸⁴ But when the Green Knight emerges from the Green Chapel--

A balȝ berȝ bi a bonke þe brymme bysyde,
Bi a forȝ of a flode þat ferked þare;
þe borne blubred þerinne as hit boyled hade....
Hit hade a hole on þe ende and on ayþer syde,
And ouergrownen with gresse in glodes aywhere,
And al watz holȝ inwith, nobot an olde caue,
Or a creuisse of an olde cragge
(SGGK, ll. 2172-74, 2180-83)--

⁸¹ Kittredge, p. 53.

⁸² Kittredge, p. 88.

⁸³ Nitze, "Vegetation," 358.

⁸⁴ Nitze, "Vegetation," 357.

Nitze sees no explanation which fits the setting of this event so well as a symbolic interpretation of the Green Knight as the "vital principle," "spirit of vegetation," "solar divinity," or "noonday demon."⁸⁵ Nitze comes to his conclusion, then, in part because he is not undertaking a linguistic analysis which might lead him to agree with Mother Angela Carson, who derives the meaning of the Green Chapel from the twelfth-century French word "chapel," meaning the slaying ground.⁸⁶ Her reading of the poem is predominantly ironic. Neither is Nitze interested in discovering the historical location of the Green Chapel. If he were, he might have been led toward the discovery of the site of Ludchurch in Staffordshire, England. Ralph W. V. Elliott describes this location in the following terms:

truly a weird church, about 100 ft. long, with vertical walls up to over 50 ft. high, nowhere above 10 ft. wide, and with a hole at each end leading downwards into the earth tradition records it as the hiding place of Lollards and the surrounding region is rich with legends of headless riders and a tall man in Lincoln green.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Nitze, "Vegetation," 358.

⁸⁶ Mother Angela Carson, "The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and Its Function," SP, 60 (1963), 599-600.

⁸⁷ Ralph W. V. Elliott, "Sir Gawain in Staffordshire: A Detective Essay in Literary Geography," London Times, 21 May 1958, p. 12, rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations, p. 108.

In contrast to these scholars, Nitze is interested in opening a door to symbolic readings of SGGK, a door foreclosed, in effect, by the very thoroughness of George Lyman Kittredge's study of the poem's sources as well as his specific rejection of Jessie Weston's mythical interpretations of the poem. The extent to which Nitze stands with Weston in her approach to SGGK is apparent in his book, Arthurian Romance and Modern Poetry and Music, which was published in 1940. This work pays tribute to Weston, Wagner, and Tennyson alike for revitalizing those Arthurian themes that represent the great national poetic heritage of Britain.⁸⁸

In particular, in this volume's analysis of the Irish sources of Arthurian matter Nitze establishes the symbolic nature of the Celtic otherworld, a setting which numerous scholars have suggested is the homeground of both the Green Knight and his other self, Bercilak, as well as Morgan le Fay.⁸⁹ This scholar focuses on the

⁸⁸ W. A. Nitze, Arthurian Romance and Modern Poetry and Music (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1940), pp. 2-7, 81.

⁸⁹ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, pp. 40-45, 51, 102. J. R. Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyȝt," Part I, MP, 13 (1915-16), 455-62; "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyȝt," Part II, MP, 13 (1915-16), 689-93. Kane, p. 73. Helaine Newstead also suggests the identity of Bercilak's realm with "the world of Morgan le Fay." See Helaine Newstead, "Gawain," in A Manual of the Writings, p. 57. For a detailed treatment of this idea, see also

mid-twelfth-century work, The Irish Book of Leinster, whose hero is Fraech, a prototype of Arthur. He links the Celtic otherworld with Arthur's Avalon and the return motif; in making this connection, he argues that he is following in the tradition of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Layamon, and Malory alike.⁹⁰ Avalon, Nitze maintains, is of Celtic derivation; the word means "apple orchard," the equivalent of the classical "garden of Hesperides."⁹¹ This setting was steeped in meaning for the Celts, who believed that the fairy-folk enticed heroes to the "Happy Otherworld," from which at a destined moment they would return to earth to fight.⁹² But the fairy folk carried off heroes to their fairy abode for another purpose, too--to be healed of their wounds. Thus, after Fraech has been grievously wounded, one hundred fifty women with purple tunics and green headdresses carry him away into the fairy hill of Cruachan:

At the time of nones on the morrow
this is what they saw: he comes and
he is quite whole, without stain and

Mother Angela Carson, "Morgain le Fee as the Principle of Unity in Gawain and the Green Knight," MLQ, 23 (1962), 9-13.

⁹⁰ Nitze, Arthurian Romance, pp. 15-16.

⁹¹ On the history of this identification, see also E. K. Chambers, Arthur of Britain (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1927), pp. 122-23, and R. S. Loomis, "The Legend of Arthur's Survival," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, pp. 66-67.

⁹² Nitze, Arthurian Romance, p. 15.

without blemish, and fifty women around him, equal in age, in figure, in beauty, in fairness, in symmetry, in form Thereupon Fraech goes into the dun. All the folk rise to meet him and welcome him as if it were from another world he came.⁹³

Quite clearly, this passage portrays, with a stunning use of color, the Celtic otherworld as a place identified with healing and wholeness. Furthermore, it is a place where heroes go--that they might return again. Thus, Nitze suggests, in the tale of Fraech or a source very much like it, Geoffrey of Monmouth found a final symbolic setting for Arthur which exalted him, in turn, as a symbol of perfect kingship.

This passage from The Irish Book of Leinster supplies numerous parallels, too, with the events and characters of SGGK. First, if the Green Knight's (and Bercilak's) realm is indeed the Celtic otherworld, then this point must be emphasized: Gawain is healed by the time he returns to Arthur's court. "þe hurt watz hole þat he hade hent in his nek . . ." (SGGK, l. 2484). However, Gawain would also seem to have been wounded in the same realm where he was healed--unless it can be established that his wound existed, in some form, before he went on his journey. Ironically, the Green Knight suggests that anyone who accepts his challenge must be "bolde in his

⁹³ Nitze, Arthurian Romance, p. 16.

blod, brayn in hys hede . . ." (SGGK, l. 286). The Green Knight's final speech to Gawain is also curiously in accord with Nitze's excerpt from The Irish Book of Leinster. He says: "I halde þe polysed of þat plyȝt, and pured as clene/ As þou hadez neuer forfeted syþen þou watz fyrst borne . . ." (SGGK, ll. 2393-4). The emphasis in both cases is on perfect restoration. Certainly the Irish passage also seems to describe Gawain's reception at Arthur's court:

þer wakned wele in þat wone when wyst
þe grete/þat gode Gawayn watz commen;
gayne hit hym þoȝt./ þe kyng kyssez þe
knyȝt, and þe whene alce,/ And syþen
mony syker knyȝt þat soȝt hym to
haylce
(SGGK, ll. 2490-93)

Certain it is, too, that those who bid him farewell never thought he would return:

þere watz much derue doel drien in
þe sale/þat so worthé as Wawan
schulde wende on þat ernde,/ To dryȝe
a delful dynt, and dele no more/
wyth bronde. (SGGK, ll. 558-61)

And yet, just as Arthur was supposed to return hale and whole, the symbol of the closest approximation to the good king on earth,⁹⁴ so, in SGGK, does Gawain both go and return in Arthur's stead.

Furthermore, in Arthurian Romance and Modern Poetry and Music, Nitze establishes a traditional Gawain

⁹⁴ Nitze, Arthurian Romance, p. 17.

character who is ultimately known both for his acuity and his failure to achieve the grail quest. Nitze's presentation anticipates the conclusion of Larry D. Benson: that the author of SGGK was steeped in the lore of romance to a degree unusual even for a genre dependent on elaborations of and variations on written source materials.⁹⁵ One must note especially that the SGGK poet chose to be faithful to the traditional character in his creation of a Gawain who failed and who was, in spite of all the praise and adulation he received, most miserably aware of his own failure (SGGK, ll. 2505-2510). One must also note that, in drawing his traditional portrait of Gawain, Nitze relies, in spite of all his protests against Kittredge, on a French source: the Queste del

⁹⁵ Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 208. On the relationship of romance to SGGK, Benson writes, "The subject of this romance is romance itself." For other viewpoints, see the following: on SGGK as a romance which pays tribute to the exemplary character of Gawain, Alan M. Markman, "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, 72 (1957), 574-86, rpt. in Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays, ed. Robert J. Blanche (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. 159-175; on SGGK as a romance which humanizes the character of Gawain, Sacvan Bercovitch, "Romance and Anti-Romance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PQ, 44 (1965), 30-37, rpt. in Howard and Zacher, pp. 257-266. On the traditional character of Gawain, especially on his role as a lady's man, see also B. J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy, and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale," MS, 9 (1947), pp. 203, 206, 215, 225-28, rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations, pp. 73-78.

Saint Graal. In this work, Gawain is the only one of Arthur's knights to recognize that, while Arthur's court has been granted a vision of the holy grail, still its members have not seen it openly. Thus Gawain himself initiates the quest for the grail with the explicit purpose of seeing it rather than its "shell, 'clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful.'"⁹⁶ Because Gawain was known for his wrath, and especially for being a knight of the sword, his failure in this quest, Nitze insists, was for the Cistercian author of the Queste a "foregone conclusion."⁹⁷

Nitze's comments call attention to the fact that the Gawain of SGGK, in accord with his traditional representation, fails due to an inherent character flaw. If the SGGK poet is as faithful to tradition in this point as he is elsewhere, then Gawain's failure should occur just when Savage thought Gawain comes closest to waxing wroth, on the day of the boar's hunt.⁹⁸ It is certain that on the first two days of his visitations by Bercilak's lady, Gawain's emotions become ever more entangled with hers, until he does not, indeed, seem the collected character who stepped forth initially to exchange blows with her husband. On the first day's visit, his mind appears to

⁹⁶ Nitze, Arthurian Romance, p. 92.

⁹⁷ Nitze, Arthurian Romance, pp. 93-4.

⁹⁸ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, pp. 44-45.

be on his business:

*þe freke ferde with defence, and feted
ful fayre--
'þa I were burde bryȝtest', þe burde in
mynde hade.
þe lasse luf in his lode for lur þat he
soȝt boute hone,
þe dunte þat schulde hym deue,
And nedeȝ hit most be done. (SGGK, ll. 1283-7)*

After the second day's visit, however, it is clear that he is, in an apparent intensification of his traditional failing, both rattled and angry--most perplexedly, at himself.

*Such semblaunt to þat segge semly ho made
Wyth stille stollen countenance, þat
stalworth to plese,
þat al forwondered watz þe wyȝe, and wroth
with hymseluen
(SGGK, ll. 1658-60)*

His calm after her third visit becomes necessarily ironic, because he has not escaped emotionally unscathed from her supplications. All along, in fact, Gawain may both be and not be the Gawain of whom the lady has heard (SGGK, l. 1242), since he is under a virtual death sentence, which, we may safely assume, requires him to scrutinize his own conduct to an inordinate degree. If SGGK's Gawain goes on a mystical adventure, then it must be emphasized that he sees no more of sacred mystery than his traditional character as described by Nitze, neither at the beginning nor at the end of his jeu-parti. Instead, he learns only the lesson that Milton would have Adam

learn: to "be lowly wise," thinking only of what concerns him and his being (Paradise Lost, VIII, ll. 173, 4.).

Nitze's comments on the Queste del Saint Graal reveal a basic inconsistency, however, with his treatments of the Perlesvaus and SGGK. When he is challenging Kit-tredge, Nitze defends a ritualistic interpretation of both the latter works. But when he discusses the Queste, he explains in detail both the religious content of the work and the evolution of this material from scripture into romance.⁹⁹ In "Is the Green Knight Story a Vegetation Myth?" however, he dismisses Perlesvaus' scriptural content, even though he acknowledges that the author is determined to shape his material into an allegorical treatment of the death and resurrection of Christ.¹⁰⁰ What is his reason for directly addressing the religious content and the author's purpose in one context but not in the other? He does not say. But in Arthurian Romance and Modern Poetry and Music, he departs even further from his previous argument: here, he describes the Perlesvaus as

⁹⁹ Nitze, Arthurian Romance, pp. 89-93.

¹⁰⁰ Nitze, "Vegetation," 352.

an allegory of militant Christianity, [whose] author expected his reader to penetrate the shell of chivalric and folklore motifs, based largely on the work of Chretien and his continuators, to the hidden religious and theological symbolism he desired to portray The Fisher King now called Messiah is likened to Christ, and the Grail--originally a food-giving dish--is definitely identified with the recep-table of the Holy Blood and the chalice of the Eucharist.¹⁰¹

Is Nitze's reader to understand, then, that the restorative power associated with Avalon has now been directly transferred to the Grail? Does the "shell" of the Grail¹⁰² become specifically analogous to the "shell" of a symbol, radiating a thematic meaning out upon external landscapes, events, and characters? Is Christianity itself, from Nitze's viewpoint, based upon the rituals of vegetation deities, the dying and rising Osiris and Tammuz; or do its tenets, as found in medieval romances, represent a blend of pagan and Christian ideals?

These questions need to be asked in regard to both Nitze's and Kittredge's treatments of SGGK. Typically, such questions may not occur to Kittredge's reader because this scholar subsumes all potentially religious material (involving magic) under the heading of the

¹⁰¹ Nitze, Arthurian Romance, pp. 85-86.

¹⁰² See nn. 96 and 101 above.

"supernatural" elements of the story. Likewise, they do not receive direct consideration in Nitze's rejoinder to Kittredge, because their specific disagreement sets the realm of the "supernatural" over against a belief in myth and ritual. But are these scholars' positions necessarily incompatible? Saint Augustine manifests a patent belief in folklore when he cites "the well-known fact that a serpent exposes its whole body in order to protect its head from those attacking it [and in this manner] illustrates the sense of the Lord's admonition that we be wise like serpents."¹⁰³ The highly respected historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, has suggested that "there is no break in continuity between the ideology of primitive mystical experience [which annuls time and history] and Judaeo-Christian mysticism"; there is a "clear ideological continuity between the most elementary mystical experience and Christianity."¹⁰⁴ Heinrich Zimmer has also emphasized that the realms of magic, religion, and symbolism are necessarily interconnected. In The King and the Corpse, he writes:

¹⁰³ Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, trans. and intro. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1958), p. 50.

¹⁰⁴ Mircea Eliade, Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 70-71.

Therein [in indisputed sacraments] lies the great value of magic areas of life for the guidance of the soul. The spiritual powers being symbolized as gods and demons, or as images and holy places, the individual is brought into relationship with them through the procedures of the investiture, and then held to them by the new ritual routines.¹⁰⁵

Because Kittredge and Nitze both exclude religious, and especially Christian, materials from their treatments of SGGK, it is fair to conclude that their critical disagreements derive more from their own choice of categories than they do from any inherent characteristics of SGGK. In the poem, there are no schismatic tendencies. (For Weston's and Savage's use of the word "mystical" in reference to SGGK's Pentangle, see Chapter I; for Christian interpretations of the poem, see Chapter V.)

When they are considered together, Kittredge's and Nitze's comments on SGGK reinforce the conclusion that the story itself is symbolic not only because it depends, essentially, on magic, but also because it draws the reader, specifically, into the realm of magical experience. Nitze is correct when he emphasizes the poem's ritualistic elements; but his interpretation of the Green Knight as a "spirit of vegetation" makes no allowance for

¹⁰⁵ Heinrich Zimmer, The King and the Corpse: Tales of the Soul's Conquest of Evil, ed. Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series, No. 11 (1948; rpt. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 19.

the effect rituals may have on the inner man. Zimmer is a clearer guide on this aspect of ritual in general: as he observes (see above), "new ritual routines" are adopted in order to bring the individual into a new relationship with the divine order of creation (or the spiritual aspect of the hero's self) and, furthermore, to hold him to this relationship, once it has been achieved. That SGGK's Gawain enters into such a relationship, and is held to it, is apparent throughout the poem. First, he deploys the Green Knight's axe in the prescribed fashion (cutting off his head) and thereby becomes, virtually, the Green Knight's man: his fulfillment of the first action necessarily places him under a further obligation, from which there is no appeal. Second, the Green Knight's girdle also seems to have a beneficent effect on Gawain: when he dons it for the second time, he promises freely to remember its significance in the future. When he gives Arthur's court the full report of his adventure, it is clear he has kept his vow to the letter, this time. Overall, Kittredge's insistence on the story's unity implicitly extends the magical qualities of the poem's objects to the plot line as well. Through both of SGGK's fused story types, "The Challenge" and "The Temptation," the poet has threaded the green girdle; with each of the

poem's major characters, the poet has associated the green girdle. The consequence of this consistency, for the reader, is the apprehension that the girdle is definitely magical, being, simultaneously, everywhere. So, likewise, the story is magical, and in this sense symbolic, being filled with meaning at every moment and bringing all things to a beneficent end.

The extent to which SGGK may function as a symbolic tale can only become apparent, however, when Kittredge's and Nitze's studies are paired in a balanced dialectic. Likewise, the extent to which mythological, historical, structural, and ritualistic critics agree on the underlying conceptual unity of the poem cannot emerge unless they are treated in the same fashion. Only by this procedure can a median perspective on the poem be discovered and sustained. This is what this study has attempted, thus far, to achieve. (For mythological treatments of SGGK's symbols, see Chapters I and III; for an historical treatment of SGGK's heraldic symbolism, see also Chapter I; for additional information pertaining to the poem's heraldic devices, see Chapter V; for an extensive treatment of the poem's ritualistic symbolism, see the end of Chapter V.)

CHAPTER III:
THE CONCEPT OF UNITY

Scholars' studies of SGGK's sources have one ultimate goal: the location of a proper critical perspective on the poem. This goal has not been realized, for there is no learned consensus on the precise relationship between SGGK and those sources which have been identified thus far. It is the purpose of this portion of this study to examine this particular question at length; for, until this matter is resolved, all the poem's proposed sources stand outside the door of the reader's understanding, locked in the separate cubicles of an intellectual limbo--a state of mind which does not seem characteristic of the SGGK poet. This chapter will begin with an assessment of the work of J. R. Hulbert and R. S. Loomis as scholars who have attempted to determine the meaning of SGGK's symbols by means of a unity of conception to be discovered only in those sources which they have clearly identified; in addition, this chapter will emphasize the crucial contribution of the Celtic sources for the poem as these scholars do. Over against the work of these scholars,

as well as that of others, this chapter will then present those analogues for the poem which these scholars in particular neglect: some portions of the Welsh Mabinogian, selected works from classical literature, and, especially, the Old English epic Beowulf. The question to be decided is this: to what tradition does SGGK belong? Should it be approached primarily as a work of Celtic inspiration, or does it belong to the main-stream of English literature?

To read J. R. Hulbert's two part treatise, "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyȝt,"¹ which was published in 1915 and 1916, is to be reminded that the capable medieval romance writer was, of necessity, not only a combiner of story materials but also a unifier. It is this point which causes Hulbert to take issue with earlier assessments of SGGK by Sir Frederic Madden, Gaston Paris, and William Henry Schofield as an intertwined narrative of two separate tales, "The Challenge" episode or beheading game and "The Temptation" involving Bercilak's lady.² It is the same point which leads Hulbert to analyze SGGK as a "fairy mistress" story containing two actions which, originally, had one

¹J. R. Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyȝt: I. The Beheading Game," MP, 13 (1915-1916), 433-62; "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyȝt--Concluded," MP, 13 (1915-1916), 689-730.

²Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn: I," 433-34.

plot.³ It is his own emphasis on unity which encourages him, finally, to seek one source for SGGK in which the color green plays an essentially symbolic role, representing, as he believes it does, the "fairy mistress's" place of origin.⁴ In the context of his own emphasis on unity, Hulbert's comments on SGGK must be deemed both astute and ironic. While Dorothy Everett speaks for numerous scholars of the poem when she praises the coherence and controlled "patterning"⁵ of this generally recognized masterpiece, Hulbert repeatedly discovers in SGGK evidence of disjointed redactions.

It is important to note that the first part of Hulbert's treatise was published just one year before the publication of Kittredge's classic work on SGGK's sources, A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight. Hulbert's analysis, then, is not designed to contradict Kittredge's views, although it certainly disagrees with his conclusions. In truth, there is no way that these two scholars could be in accord; for, even when they cite the same sources, their versions of these sources differ. In this respect, Kittredge's work must be judged

³ Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn: I," 434, 458, 462; "Syr Gawayn--Concluded," 691.

⁴ Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn: I," 458-59.

⁵ Everett, "The Alliterative Revival," p. 21.

the more reliable of the two. Although Kittredge presents "The Champion's Bargain" almost as if it were a short story to be considered apart from the remainder of Bricriu's Feast, he informs his reader that in both the Lebor na hUidre and Edinburgh manuscripts, a separate title ("Cennach ind Ruanada inso") distinguishes the original tale.⁶ He also distinguishes between "The Champion's Bargain" and the Uath version of "The Challenge," deferring to Zimmer's judgment that the two stories belong to different versions of the Fled Bricrend.⁷ Kittredge faithfully reports that he has translated "The Champion's Bargain" in its entirety, "for it is too important to be abridged."⁸ Hulbert, on the other hand, presents both versions of the tale in a single narrative continuum, editing both tales freely.⁹ Hulbert's rendition of "The Champion's Bargain" especially suffers from much abbreviation: first, it follows the Uath version and thus becomes subordinate to it; second, its text, which fills over four pages in Kittredge's translation, is reduced to a single thirteen

⁶ Kittredge, p. 291.

⁷ Kittredge, p. 292.

⁸ Kittredge, p. 10.

⁹ Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn: I," 435, n. 3.

line paragraph.¹⁰ Hulbert's method is to condense his evidence, while Kittredge carefully focuses and elucidates his. The inevitable consequence is that Hulbert diffuses the significance of any one particular episode in his argument. The reader who compares the two versions of "The Champion's Bargain" naturally defers to Kittredge's judgment as being the more reliable because his presentation of SGGK's sources is the more precise of the two.

In presenting the two versions of "The Challenge" episode together, however, Hulbert manages to associate both tales with a character who does not appear in Kittredge's presentation of the same material. This is Blathnát, "Mind's daughter and Curoi [mac Daire] 's wife."¹¹ She appears, along with Curoi, Logaire, Conall, and Cuchulinn, in an intermediate episode between the two versions of "The Challenge." Depending on one's critical perspective, this intermediary episode can assume the proportions of either a third variant on "The Challenge" episode or a separate tale of a turning castle or even the middle portion of one long "Challenge" story, with the Uath version supplying the beginning and "The Champion's Bargain" providing the end for the same tale.

¹⁰ Compare: Hulbert, "Syr Gawyn: I," 436; Kittredge, pp. 10-14.

¹¹ Hulbert, "Syr Gawyn: I," 436.

Hulbert's view is the latter: he refers to his edited version of all three in sequence as "the story" and "this story,"¹² in spite of the fact that two manuscript writers virtually bracket "The Champion's Bargain" by awarding it a separate title (a fact which he does not note in his treatise).

The intermediary episode does contain some evidence to support Hulbert's unified treatment of all three narratives. In this adventure, the dispute over the champion's portion continues because Loigaire and Conall dispute Uath's final choice of Cuchulinn as the champion; at the same time, this adventure concludes with Curoi choosing Cuchulinn once again as the supreme hero of Ulster, although failing to award him the championship.¹³ The exact interrelationships among the various stories, or portions thereof, do not concern Hulbert; he assumes that they are unified because he believes Blathnat is the key figure who allows for the designation of all three tales in one sequence to be identified as a "fairy mistress" story.¹⁴

¹² Hulbert, "Syr Gawyn: I," 436-47.

¹³ See Hulbert, "Syr Gawyn: I," 456.

¹⁴ Hulbert acknowledges that his analysis of the "fee" and the "fairy-mistress" story owes much to A. C. L. Brown's study of Iwain. See Hulbert, "Syr Gawyn: I," 437-39.

In the context of his evidence, this category seems arbitrarily chosen: Blathnát does not appear in either the first or third portions of the narrative. She is mentioned only in the following lines given by Hulbert from the intermediary episode:

At Fort Curoi, Blathnát, Mind's daughter and Curoi's wife, welcomes them [Loigaire, Conall, and Cuchulinn]. Curoi is not at home, but knowing that they will come, he has instructed his wife regarding their entertainment. When bedtime was come, she told them that each was to take his night watching the fort until Curoi should return . . . [In succession, each hero confronts monstrous attackers, with Cuchulinn alone being victorious.] Upon his [Cuchulinn] re-entering the house he meets Blathnát, and almost at once Curoi appears.¹⁵

Hulbert's treatment of the Fled Bricrend is brief (less than two pages of plot summary) because his interest lies not in any one particular work, but, rather, in the "fairy-mistress" story type. Within this category, Blathnát functions as a fee. Each facet of her character is seen by Hulbert as depending on this identification: in one example of this story type, the Dinn-shenchas, her father (Menn, king of Falga) is treated as the king of Fairyland; in another, "The Tragic Death of Curoi Mac Dari," her "husband" (Curoi) is defined as a magician and shape-shifter. Considered as a member of

¹⁵ Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn: I," 436.

this class of stories, then, the Fled Bricrend becomes a tale in which the beheading game is connected with a "fairy-mistress" story as a test which the hero (Cuchulinn) must meet in order to win the fairy; Curoi himself is viewed as the shape-shifter who proposes the crucial test.¹⁶ The Mule sanz Frain belongs to this category, too, because "the lady's offer of her love to the hero who overcomes all difficulties [in order to win her] is obviously the real purpose of the story"; "The difficulties put in the way are intended to prevent any but the destined knight from reaching the fairy mistress."¹⁷ In another analogue to SGGK, Diu Krône, Hulbert again discerns the beheading incident being used as a test in the winning of a "fairy-mistress." In SGGK itself, the color green becomes an additional element of the story which reinforces its association with the "fairy-mistress" story type. Green is a color, Hulbert says, commonly worn by Other-World beings.¹⁸ This interpretation of the color, then, links SGGK to other stories in which Other-World characters are prominently associated with green. These stories include Cuchulinn's Sick Bed, in which Cuchulinn is induced to visit the

¹⁶ Hulbert, "Syr Gawyn: I," 437-39.

¹⁷ Hulbert, "Syr Gawyn: I," 446.

¹⁸ Hulbert, "Syr Gawyn: I," 455.

Other-World by an unearthly lady clad in green, as well as tales involving the Tuatha De Danann (Manannán, Fann, and Cuchulinn's father Lug), the "folk of the mound," which Hulbert identifies with SGGK's Green Chapel.¹⁹

Hulbert's analysis of the "fairy-mistress" story type culminates in his reconstruction of that single hypothetical "fairy-mistress" tale, from which he believes SGGK derives.²⁰ He summarizes this tale as follows:

A fee loved Gawain, and sent an emissary to lure him to her. He traveled for a long time until he came to a hospitable castle where he was entertained until the appointed day by a shape-shifter, the same [emissary] who had enticed him from the court; then he was conveyed to the entrance to the Other World. There he had to submit to the beheading test; when he succeeded in that he was admitted to the Other World, and led to the fairy. Probably he stayed with her some time, and then after having been given a magic talisman--the green lace--he was allowed to return to his own land.²¹

This story, it should be noted, simplifies that complication which appears in SGGK concerning the prime mover(s) in the plot to try Gawain. As Hulbert himself observes, while the Green Knight says, ". . . Ho wayned me þis

¹⁹ Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn: I," 455-59; "Syr Gawayn--Concluded," 706.

²⁰ Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn--Concluded," 730.

²¹ Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn: I," 459.

wonder your wyttez to reue" (l. 2459), he also tells Gawain, ". . . I wroȝt hit myseluen./ I sende hir to asay þe . . ." (ll. 2361-2).²²

What Hulbert omits from his comment on the plot's apparently contradictory motivations is the fact that the Green Knight is the only character who comments on this subject in SGGK. Thus, as Hans Schnyder points out, the Green Knight is an authority figure in the poem.²³ In fact, Bercilak places particular emphasis on his proper relationship to that character Hulbert would identify primarily as a "fee," i.e. the Blathnárt figure. Bercilak refers to her as "Myn owen wyf" (l. 2359). Consistent with his role as the lady's husband, he sees what Gawain does not see: that by accepting the green girdle (which is, among other things, a romantic token), Gawain becomes guilty of "þe wowyng of my wyf" (l. 2361). The Green Knight's meaning is explicit and ruinous to Gawain's self-concept: having been caught specifically in the role of the wife's lover (the role of Cuchulinn in "The Tragic Death of Curoi Mac Dari"), Gawain loses his temper (ll. 2369-71). This behavior hardly becomes Gawain, either as a romantic hero or as an ideal knight; but it does call attention to that irony which permeates

²² Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn: I," 454, n. 4.

²³ Schnyder, pp. 41, 58.

SGGK, an irony so delicately and yet consistently present ("'Bot þat je be Gawan, hit gotz in mynde'"--l. 1293) that the differences between the poem and its analogues may be greater, sometimes, than the similarities. The name "Bercilak" is not the least of these mysteries.

A close examination of Hulbert's treatment of SGGK's Celtic sources reveals the basic problem that all scholars labor under when they analyze these materials. This is, at heart, the age-old philosophical conundrum of definition by the parts or the whole. In his analysis of the Fled Bricrend, Hulbert focuses on the significance of Blathnát's name; he is thus practicing a form of criticism derived from the classical scholar's interest in etymology and philology. This interest is not out of place here; it belongs to a long tradition which can be seen as early as the thirteenth century in the Legenda Aurea (or Golden Legend) of Jacobus de Voragine.²⁴ In his famous hagiology, Jacobus constantly seeks a symbolic explanation for both character and events--a meaning, that is, which must be sought out because it is hidden, being the spiritual message which things convey. Names in particular fascinate Jacobus

²⁴Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger, trans. and adapt., The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine, 2 vols. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1941).

as the symbols of the persons who bear them: for him they are the indicators of what the person's life is to be, the foreshadowings of his virtues and triumphs.²⁵ Thus Jacobus, in St. Mary Magdalen, interprets the name "Mary" to mean the "bitter sea [of penance], or light-giver [of contemplation], or enlightened [with heavenly glory]."²⁶

As unscientific as they are, Jacobus' derivations are sanctioned nonetheless by two more ancient traditions. One is Biblical: after God created Adam he gave him dominion over every living thing on the earth; in accord with and as token of this power, God also gave Adam the right to name every living creature.²⁷ The second tradition is classical and philosophical, reaching back through Aristotle and Plato to Socrates, the oral fountain-head of rhetorical teaching in the West. In his dialogue the Cratylus, Plato lets his canny mentor

²⁵ Ryan and Ripperger, The Golden Legend, I, pp. xvi, xv.

²⁶ Ryan and Ripperger, The Golden Legend, II, p. 355.

²⁷ Genesis i. 28; ii. 19. The Douay-Rheims version of the Bible is used here and throughout this study. See The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate: The Old Testament (Douay: The English College, 1609) and The New Testament (Rheims: The English College, 1582), revised ed. (Baltimore: John Murphy Co., 1899); rpt. 1971 (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books and Publishers).

elucidate those problems which still haunt the scholars of names:

Socrates : Let me ask you what is the cause why anything has a name. Is not the principle which imposes the name the cause?

Hermogenes: Certainly

Socrates : And that principle we affirm to be mind?

Hermogenes: Very true

Socrates : Let me remark, Hermogenes, how right I was in saying that great changes are made in the meaning of words by putting in and pulling out letters; even a very slight permutation will sometimes give an entirely opposite sense the fine fashionable language of modern times has twisted and disguised and entirely altered the original meaning which in the old language is clearly indicated.²⁸

In essence, then, Hulbert is practicing a form of literary analysis which is age-old and reaches its zenith in the work of R. S. Loomis, for whom Blathnat or Blodeuwedd or Blathine must be, on the basis of her name, simultaneously a flower maiden and a goddess of vegetation and the moon.²⁹ These are the conceptions of her

²⁸ Benjamin Jowett, trans., "Cratylus," in The Collected Dialogues of Plato including the Letters, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series, No. 71 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 451-53. In other editions of Plato's dialogues, see Cratylus 416c,d; 418b.

²⁹ Roger Sherman Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), pp. 12, 281, 290.

which dominate Loomis's monumental study, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance, published in 1927. In this volume, he is primarily interested in demonstrating that this character functions as a central figure in a cyclical myth of the seasons. In symbolic terms, she becomes the vegetative principle. Loomis sees her primarily, however, as "the flower maiden" who is abducted and imprisoned in the Other World every winter, a native Irish Persephone.

To support this interpretation of Blathnát's character, Loomis cites a variety of evidence. First, in the "Tragic Death of Curoi mac Daire," as elsewhere, her champion is Cuchulinn, a character this scholar regards as a "solar hero." Second, in this same story, the battle for her possession lasts from the great Irish seasonal festival of November 1 to the middle of spring.³⁰ Third, on the basis of her name in particular, he considers her to be a recognizable type. Loomis develops a comparison between Blathnát, meaning "little flower," and Gawain's amie Floree, found in the Livre d'Artus. Floree, in turn, is the identification he suggests for Carrado's betrayer in the story portrayed on the Modena archivolt.³¹ Loomis sees in the relief

³⁰ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 17.

³¹ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 11.

sculptures on this cathedral, portraying Carrado's abduction of Winlogee (Artus' queen) and her imminent rescue by Galvagin (Gawain), clear evidence that Arthurian materials had already spread far from their original Celtic sources at a very early date: the cathedral is located near the Po Valley in Italy, and sculptors began work on it in 1099.³² Blathnát's central role in this material can be appreciated only when one realizes that, as a victim of abduction, she also becomes comparable to Winlogee. Loomis sees Winlogee, in turn, as being comparable to Guinivere.³³ Thus, from the very beginning of his analysis of Blathnát, this character seems to have a multiple nature, which this scholar treats, essentially, in the form of a single prototype.

Overall, Loomis's treatment of the Blathnat character seems dependent on her role in the Fled Bricrend. He translates those lines which specifically describe her behavior, following Cuchulinn's, Conall's, and Loigaire's arrival at "Fort Curoi," as follows:

That night on their arrival Curoi was not at home. But knowing they would come, he counselled his wife regarding the heroes . . . His wife acted according to his wish in the matter of bathing and of washing, providing them

³² R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, pp. 6, 11.

³³ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, pp. 6-8.

with refreshing drinks and beds most excellent When bedtime was come, she told them that each was to take his night, watching the fort until Curoi should return Cuchulinn then [following his victory] displayed his exuberance in a series of marvelous leaps. He thereupon entered the house and heaved a sigh. Then Mind's [or Midir's] daughter, Blathnat, wife of Curoi, made speech: 'Truly, not the sigh of one dishonored, but a victor's sigh of triumph.' The daughter of the king of the Isle of the Men of Falga knew full well of Cuchulinn's evil plight that night.³⁴

It is in this quoted material from the Fled Bricrend that Loomis locates "hints" of that character who later developed into the "Grail Damsel," the bearer of the "sacred vessel" containing "the choicest meats in the world."³⁵ It should be noted, however, that the preceding passage does not contain a single instance in which Blathnát is termed a "damsel." Three times she is referred to as a "wife," twice as a "daughter," and once by her given name. When she is referred to by name, "Blathnat" is bracketed by "daughter" and "wife." To these roles she is exquisitely faithful, acting according to her husband's wishes, speaking when it is appropriate, and otherwise keeping her thoughts to herself. In these respects especially, the Blathnát of the Fled Bricrend

³⁴ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, pp. 168-69.

³⁵ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, pp. 170-71.

would seem to be at the furthest remove from those characters with whom Loomis would naturally ally her.

Blathnát's character is ambiguous in the "Tragic Death of Curoi mac Daire." The version of this story discussed by Loomis may be found in a fourteenth-century manuscript of the Yellow Book of Lecan. In Loomis's summary of the tale, she is mentioned, first, as the cause of Curoi's death: "Why did the men of Ulster slay Curoi son of Dare? . . . Because of Blathnait, daughter of Mend"³⁶ But her contribution to his demise exists, in this tale, within the context of his having carried her off by force; she is part of the booty which Curoi simply grabs when his proper share of the victors' spoils, following the siege of Falga, is not awarded him. Neither character is treated with a total lack of sympathy: concerning Curoi specifically, the tale admits: "Justice was not granted him." When Blathnait eventually betrays Curoi, she is also acting in concert with Cuchulinn, who "had loved her even before she was brought over sea"³⁷ In the battle over Blathnait, Cuchulinn "shore off" Curoi's head; "nevertheless the slaughter increased on them every day from

³⁶ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 12.

³⁷ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 13.

Hallowe'en till the middle of spring."³⁸ The combatants are released from their conflict, apparently, only by the symbolic rebirth of the earth itself.

In one variant of this tale which Loomis discusses without identifying its precise source, Blathnat's name is "Blathine," and her character is developed into the type of "the treacherous wife." While she still functions as Curoi's booty in this version of the story, Blathine manages to learn from him the secret of his life. Apparently (the details of the characters' communication do not appear in Loomis's summary of the text), she delivers this information to Cuchulinn; for this character finds the precise location of Curoi's "external soul" and destroys it in the only manner possible, using Curoi's own sword.³⁹ Loomis sees in this version of the story, which combines the "treacherous wife" and the "external soul" motifs, the "Samson and Delilah" narrative pattern. But he makes no attempt to reconcile Blathine's treacherous behavior with the title of that chapter in which he begins his discussion of Blathnat's character--"The Rape of the Flower Maiden." Her behavior in this tale seems to deserve additional comment from him; for the destruction of a human soul

³⁸R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 14.

³⁹R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 14.

is a demonic act.

In his treatment of Blathnát, Loomis sustains his emphasis on her "flower nature." He analyzes "Math Son of Mathonwy," a Welsh analogue to the "Tragic Death of Curoi mac Daire," as a combination of "the Curoi story with another story containing the same Samson and Delilah pattern."⁴⁰ But he does not comment directly on the fact that, in this Welsh tale, Blodeuwedd (Blathnát's parallel; her name means "Flower Face") participates in both adultery and attempted murder, although his summary of the story makes the lovers' intentions clear:

. . . they [Blodeuwedd and Gronw] spent three nights together. Gronw on his departure urged her to find out by what means her husband Lleu might come by his death. On Lleu's return she learned through cajolery that he could be slain only by a spear which required a year to make, and only when he stood under a thatched roof with one foot on a bath-caldron and the other on a buck's back. Blodeuwedd at once informed Gronw . . .⁴¹

He does not discuss Blodeuwedd's associations with magic, although "charms and illusion" were required to create this character "out of flowers"; and her origin, taken together with her name, may suggest her kinship with the necromancer "Blodud" (in Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain)⁴² as well as Blathnát. He does

⁴⁰ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 18.

⁴¹ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 17.

⁴² See R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 17; Geoffrey of Monmouth, History of the Kings of Britain, p. 81.

not, in short, recognize that Blodeuwedd, as an adulteress and informant, is the very opposite of the Blathnat, the loyal wife and restrained speaker, to be found in the Fled Bricrend. Neither does he observe that it is precisely these polarities which are preserved in Bercilak's lady, who, in being Gawain's temptress, is also her husband's loyal accomplice. He eliminates these polarities, emphasizing instead: ". . . for us the important point is the emphasis on the flower nature of Blodeuwedd" ⁴³

An eleventh-century Welsh judgment of Blodeuwedd's character must be set beside R. S. Loomis's conception of her as a "flower-maiden." In "Math Son of Mathonwy," Gwydion pronounces this punishment on Blodeuwedd:

'And because of the dishonour thou has done to Lleu Llaw Gyffes thou art never to dare show thy face in the light of day, and that through fear of all birds; and that there be enmity between thee and all birds, and that it be their nature to mob and molest thee wherever they may find thee; and that thou shalt not lose they name, but that thou be for ever called Blodeuwedd.' ⁴⁴

In this passage, the writer emphasizes the fact that

⁴³ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, trans. and intro., "Math Son of Mathonwy," in The Mabinogian (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1949); rpt. (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 74.

Blodeuwedd's metamorphosis into the owl is a punishment for her betrayel of Lleu. In a similar manner, the author of "Culhwch and Olwen" insists that Twrch Trwyth's animal form also represents God's own judgment of his just desert.⁴⁵ Scholars who would construct a strictly favorable association between Blodeuwedd and candles should take into consideration the fact that at the conclusion of "Math Son of Mathonwy" she is restricted specifically from enjoying the natural light of day. As an owl, her domain becomes the darkness, in which she is a feared huntress, implicitly, by the light of the moon. Attacks on her by her closest new kin, other birds, thus become justified. There is possibly in this second Blodeuwedd character identified with a bird shape more of the Germanic Freyja and Valkyrie than has been recognized.⁴⁶ Certainly the associations between such supernatural female figures and birds of prey, which commonly function as symbols of death, are worthy of note.

The possibility certainly also exists that the

⁴⁵ G. Jones and T. Jones, "Culhwch and Olwen," in The Mabinogian, p. 131.

⁴⁶ On Freyja's capacity to take on "bird-form," see H. R. Ellis Davidson, Gods and Myths of Northern Europe (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 119. On Freyja's role as a receiver of those slain in battle, see Davidson, p. 115. On a possible relationship between the sign of the bird, the god of war, and female spirits in Germanic mythology, see also Davidson, pp. 62-65.

story materials of "Math Son of Mathonwy" have been developed by their author to make a moral point. Immediately following Gwydion's pronouncement on Blodeuwedd, the narrator of "Math" insists on a continued identification of this treacherous character with the owl, not flowers, when he says: "Blodeuwedd is 'owl' in the language of this present day. And for that reason birds are hostile to the owl. And the owl is still called Blodeuwedd."⁴⁷ The narrator's emphasis on Lleu's wife's punishment cannot be attributed to a shrewish, "monkish" redaction. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, the translators of the Everyman Library edition of The Mabinogian, praise the author of the "Four Branches" for his "sanity" and "spacious mind," his "clear, sincere, and noble" "vision of life."⁴⁸ It is the modern translators, however, and not the narrator of "Math," who interpret Blodeuwedd, in this later phase of her career, to mean "Flower-face" nonetheless. In contradiction to the narrator, their note on his derivation (quoted above) reads as follows: "Blodeuwedd: presumably 'Flower-face,' no bad name for the owl."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ G. Jones and T. Jones, "Math Son of Mathonwy," in The Mabinogian, p. 74.

⁴⁸ G. Jones and T. Jones, The Mabinogian, p. xix.

⁴⁹ G. Jones and T. Jones, "Math Son of Mathonwy," in The Mabinogian, p. 74, n. 1.

Just as the author completes his transformation of the meaning of Blodeuwedd's name, his translators double back to the first meaning of her name, which depends upon her having been created out of flowers.⁵⁰ Thus they undercut the process of evolution which the author develops in both her name and her character. Thus the reader, too, may be too easily distracted from realizing the author's implicit, ironic comment on Blodeuwedd: all her beauty has resulted in a tragic trap, from which Lleu is lucky to escape alive. Interestingly enough, the author of "Math" would seem to be in singular accord with the SGGK poet, as well as numerous scholars, on this point: it is not just "a woman's wiles"⁵¹ which make her dangerous but also that very beauty for which she is remembered and most prized.

It is important to recognize, however, that the treatment of Blodeuwedd to be found in "Math Son of Mathonwy" does not represent a pure, unadulterated Celtic source for SGGK. As Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones explain, the complexity of the "Fourth Branch" is extreme, and the number of previous versions of the story materials

⁵⁰ G. Jones and T. Jones, "Math Son of Mathonwy," in The Mabinogian, p. 68.

⁵¹ See G. Jones and T. Jones, "Math Son of Mathonwy," in The Mabinogian, p. 74; SGGK, l. 2415.

contained within it is probably high.⁵² In particular, Blodeuwedd's association with the owl suggests that at some point in her literary history, her character absorbed the influence of ancient Greek mythology. The stock epithet for the Greek Athena may have meant "bright-eyed" or "owl-faced." In classical Green art, she is often represented with an owl; the allegorization of Athena into wisdom had already begun in Hesiod's Theogony, c. 700 B. C.⁵³ As The Oxford Classical Dictionary also explains, Athena

has a certain tendency to become a war-goddess in general, a kind of female Ares, as in Iliad 17.398, where she is coupled with him as an expert in battles and liable to violent wrath Normally, however, she is warlike in the sense that she fights for, or leads to battle, her chosen people, or hero (as Diomedes, Il. 5.856, where she guides his spear into Ares' flank)⁵⁴

The pertinent passage from the Iliad is worth quoting, for it fully demonstrates both Athena's function as a war-goddess and her explicit guidance of her hero's weapon:

⁵² G. Jones and T. Jones, The Mabinogian, pp. xvii-xviii.

⁵³ N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard, ed., The Oxford Classical Dictionary, 2nd ed. (1970; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 138-39.

⁵⁴ Hammond and Scullard, p. 138.

After him [Ares] Diomedes of the great war cry drove forward with the bronze spear; and Pallas Athene, leaning in on it, drove it into the depth of the belly where the war belt girt him. Picking this place she stabbed and driving it deep in the fair flesh wrenched the spear out again. Then Ares the brazen bellowed with a sound as great as nine thousand men make, or ten thousand, when they cry as they carry into the fighting the fury of the war god.⁵⁵

In what appears to be a detailed adaptation of this Greek passage, the Welsh story of Lleu's entrapment by Gronw develops as follows after Blodeuwedd has carefully positioned her husband to receive Gronw's spear-thrust:

Then Gronw rose up from the hill which is called Bryn Cyferyr, and he rose up on one knee and aimed the poisoned spear at him, and smote him in the side, so that the shaft started out of him and the head stayed in him. And then he flew up in the form of an eagle and gave a horrid scream.⁵⁶

The parallel between the two passages is particularly interesting because it involves not only the woman's direction of events but ends with a similarly dramatic sound effect.

The carefully aimed spear-thrust described in the Greek material also receives added treatment at the end

⁵⁵ Richmond Lattimore, trans. and intro., The Iliad of Homer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 151.

⁵⁶ G. Jones and T. Jones, "Math Son of Mathonwy," in The Mabinogian, p. 71.

of "Math," where it appears to have been combined with the Old Testament concept of justice involving a blow for a blow.⁵⁷ Lleu states:

And this is the least I will accept of him [Gronw], that he go to the place where I was when he aimed to me with the spear, and I in the place where he was, and let me aim a spear at him.⁵⁸

When the scene is re-enacted with the roles reversed, and without the manipulation of his benefactress, of course, Gronw is killed. Nothing else on earth can protect him from the fatal spear-point. Thus in the conclusion to the "Four Branches," Blodeuwedd is implicitly awarded the old function of Athena, the war-goddess; when her chosen, not given, hero is killed, her influence is rendered extinct as well.

⁵⁷ Exodus xxi. 22-25. These Biblical verses are of particular relevance to the given passage from "Math," for they involve specifically the husband's rights in a dispute with another man which results in injury to the first man's wife. The Biblical passage includes one element which is not relevant to the Welsh material, the wife's possible miscarriage. The rest supplies the law which Lleu exacts from Gronw:

he shall be answerable for so much damage as the woman's husband shall require, and as arbiters shall award./ But if her death ensue thereupon, he shall render life for life./ Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,/ Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

⁵⁸ G. Jones and T. Jones, "Math Son of Mathonwy," in The Mabinogian, p. 74.

It is important to consider parallels which Loomis does not admit into his treatment of characters such as Blodeuwedd. Only through the introduction of this material can the nature of that Arthurian scholarship which he practices in Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance be clarified. This scholar maintains a single focus on an enormous mass of folklore, tales, and elaborate romances. This achievement is clear in the summation which he offers at the end of his volume:

Floree, Lorie de la Roche Florie,
Lore, Lunete, the guiding damsel,
Orgueilouse de Logres, Guinalorete,
Guinloie, reveal in one way or another that they are but different manifestations, different names for the same primeval divinity, whose power is felt in the mysterious influences of the moon, and whose beauty in the golden gorse and yellow fields of wheat. She has always borne many names: Isis, Europa, Artemis, Rhea, Demeter, Hecate, Persephone, Diana; One might go on indefinitely. Gawain was no light of love, for in spite of his many marriages, it was the same goddess he loved.⁵⁹

This final summary of Loomis's theory reveals one peculiar phenomenon: his scholarly investigations into the meaning of names result in the substitution of one name only--"Floree"--for all the other names considered. If one name only is to be chosen, why not choose "Isis,"

⁵⁹ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 301.

whose name means "O Thou of countless Names"?⁶⁰ As a consequence of choosing "Floree," instead of "Isis" or another name of a recognized goddess, distinctions among the deities disappear. Loomis's work admits comparisons but no real contrasts. It is this feature of his work which cannot be justified, given the role antitheses play in the most famous works of Celtic literature, classical literature, and SGGK. (For further discussion of SGGK's Celtic analogues, see Chapter IV below.)

The Welsh treatment of the themes of war and peace in "Math Son of Mathonwy," it should be noted, is in accord with the treatment awarded these same themes in one of the famous set-pieces of the ancient world, Homer's description of Achilles' shield, whereon Hephaistos

wrought in all their beauty two cities of mortal/ men. And there were marriages in one, and festivals But around the other city were lying two forces of armed men/ shining in their war gear and two herdsmen went along with them/ playing happily on pipes, and took no thought of the treachery and Hate was there with Confusion among them, and Death the destructive⁶¹

For both the Greek and Welsh authors, dramatic tension

⁶⁰ Hammond and Scullard, p. 553.

⁶¹ Lattimore, The Iliad, pp. 388-89. In other editions of the Iliad, see Book viii. 490-1, 509-10, 525-6, 535.

arises out of a highly focussed contrast: mortal beauty leads inevitably to tragic conflict; peace is precious and transient. Homer's description of Achilles' shield was, in turn, imitated and elaborated upon in "The Shield," a short narrative sixth-century Greek poem attributed to Hesiod, which lent one hundred eighty-two lines to the description of Heracles' shield.⁶² The dramatic contrast between war and peace remains a prominent feature of the derived piece:

And a wonder it [the shield] was to see; for its whole orb was a-shimmer with enamel and white ivory and electrum, and it glowed with shining gold; and there were zones [concentric bands] of cyanus [glass paste of deep blue] drawn upon it. In the centre was Fear worked in adamant, unspeakable, staring backwards with eyes that glowed with fire. His mouth was full of teeth in a white row, fearful and daunting, and upon his grim brow hovered frightful Strife who arrays the throng of men: pitiless She, for she took away the mind and senses of poor wretches who made war against the son of Zeus Also there were upon the shield droves of boars and lions who glared at each other, being furious and eager: the rows of them moved on together, and neither side trembled but both bristled up their manes Two serpents hung down at their [the Gorgons'] girdles with heads curved forward: their tongues were flickering, and their teeth gnashing with fury, and their eyes glaring fiercely. And upon the awful

⁶²Hammond and Scullard, p. 511.

heads of the Gorgons great Fear was quaking Next, there was a city of men with goodly towers; and seven gates of gold, fitted to the lintels, guarded it. The men were making merry with festivals and dances⁶³

It is a recognition of the heightened effect achieved by such antitheses that is missing from Loomis's interpretation of SGGK. He writes:

If we are right, the Uath story should mean: The hero first goes to Curoi in his solar aspect. He is then sent to Curoi to be tested by himself in his thunderous aspect. The hero is accompanied by a guide. Precisely these three points are incorporated in the story of Gawain and the Green Knight.

For the Green Knight in his capacity of host to Gawain betrays that he is the old sun god: we learn that he is "a huge warrior," "of great age," that "broad and bright was his beard and all beaver-hued," "with a face as fierce as fire." This last phrase, as Tolkien and Gordon point out, is applied in the Wars of Alexander to the sun-god. Furthermore at Gawain's request the Green Knight assigns him a servant to guide him to the Green Chapel. Finally at the end of the poem the Green Knight reveals his identity with the host with face as fierce as fire. Both in nature and in function, then, Sir Bercilak the host corresponds to Yellow Son of Fair.⁶⁴

⁶³ Hugh C. Evelyn-White, trans., Hesiod: The Homeric Hymns and Homeric (1914; rpt. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1970), pp. 229-31, 233, 237, 239.

⁶⁴ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 69.

Instead of commenting, specifically, on the poem's vividly rendered and polarized characters (the old Morgan, the young "lady," etc), Loomis brings to SGGK a single vision. His analysis offers a series of equations which depend on a single term. Curoi in his solar aspect equals Bercilak; Curoi in his thunderous aspect must equal, then, the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. Elsewhere in his commentary, Loomis establishes a third equation: Cuchulinn equals the young Curoi.⁶⁵ There is yet a fourth equation which must be added to this series: Gawain equals Cuchulinn.⁶⁶ There is also a fifth: Gawain equals Curoi.⁶⁷ To accept these equations is to transform both the poem's major male figures into different aspects of Curoi, who thus begins to assume all elements of the poem into himself. To the extent that such computations lead in a single direction, they level the poem's suspense, and they do not seem to represent a fair interpretation of SGGK.

On the other hand, Loomis's computations represent a rare achievement in the history of symbolic criticism on the poem. His equations succeed in both reflecting and extending a multiplicity which is clearly

⁶⁵ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 57.

⁶⁶ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 75.

⁶⁷ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 77.

characteristic of Bercilak. This character is, indeed, the two-in-one; Loomis would suggest, implicitly, that he is actually the five-in-one, if his solar, thunderous, competitive, romantic, and youthful aspects all may function as the externalized fractional representations of one all-encompassing character. Loomis's equations achieve something which no other critical commentary on SGGK has done with such brevity and clarity: they locate the center of the poem's action and meaning within the Green Knight, if all his essential selves may be considered, in some sense, to co-exist. If a symbol may be defined as a multiple equation (a multiplied metaphor, in effect), then Loomis's treatment of SGGK, as represented by the quoted equations, must be termed "symbolic." If the consequence of such a multiple equation is the creation of a residual core of meaning, then, with his extended virtually mathematical computations, Loomis has implicitly identified Bercilak as the symbolic center of SGGK. This conclusion seems hasty, however; for Loomis translates Bercilak's name as "bachlach," meaning "churl,"⁶⁸ and the word "churl" does not seem adequate for carrying the symbolic weight that should accrue to it, given Loomis's analysis of the poem. Indeed, this scholar never describes his interpretation of

⁶⁸ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, pp. 16, 60.

the poem's mythological content as "symbolic." It is possible, however, that this word best describes the kind of criticism he is practicing; for he appears to have inherited not only Weston's interest in SGGK's ancient Irish mythological content but also her determination to see Arthurian literature, in general, as an interconnected whole. One possibility finally escapes Loomis: that mythology and symbolism may also be but two different aspects of one and the same subject.

Loomis's solar mythical interpretation of SGGK depends upon his assumption that the SGGK poet's purpose must be identical with the apparent purpose of his story materials. He employs no critical term, such as "symbol," that would allow him to distinguish between content and technique. His interpretation of the Uath episode from the Fled Bricrend depends, in turn, on his assumption that its author has no literary purpose per se, no real interest in allegory, even though he names the second tester "Terror, son of Great Fear," and no particular interest in human character either, although he repeatedly tests the contestants' endurance and susceptibility to fear. Loomis's handling of both works rests in essence on the same assumption: that the materials before him are of a "primitive" nature and therefore not really literary in nature. But this assumption

cannot survive detailed comparisons and contrasts with Greek materials; for both passages quoted from the Greek sources above are much older than the Celtic materials Loomis examines, and the Greek materials still bear the signs of developed themes and controlled patterning. Both also undercut any attempt to label an earlier work as simpler or more "primitive" than a later work, for the grotesque beasts of the second piece ("The Shield") developed specifically from an attempt to imitate the restrained handling of the earlier work (Homer's description of Achilles' shield), as well as an attempt to meet the literary tastes of a later period.⁶⁹ These beasts, it should be noted, include three of those animals which appear with a high degree of frequency in later Arthurian materials--boars, lions, and serpents.

Loomis's highly concentrated focus on Celtic story materials also excludes from his consideration analogues from Latin literature which are of particular relevance to a consideration of SGGK. The most important of these is Virgil's Aeneid.⁷⁰ Here one finds, just as in SGGK,

⁶⁹ Hammond and Scullard, p. 511.

⁷⁰ For a numerical count of the poetic devices which the Aeneid and SGGK have in common, see Coolidge Otis Chapman, "Virgil and the Gawain-Poet," PMLA, 60 (1945), 16-23. Chapman also accepts the SGGK poet's familiarity with the following works, listed in the order of importance which Chapman would award them, given his estimate of their influence on the poet's thought and style: the

a combined treatment of hunting and seduction scenes. In Book IV of Virgil's work, the hunting and seduction scenes run sequentially; yet, as in SGGK, the heroine is already enamored of the hero before the hunt begins. In both, too, the woman seems more smitten than the man; Dido, in fact, is. More importantly, an air of intrigue permeates both episodes. Knowing Jupiter will not permit Aeneas (the future founder of Rome) to remain at Carthage, Venus (Aeneas's mother) acquiesces in Juno's plan to marry Dido and Aeneas herself, and thereby "turn Italian empire/ to Libyan shores" The two unite in a cavern to which they retreat from a divinely arranged storm.⁷¹ In addition, Virgil's poem presents Dido on the morning of the hunt in red,⁷² the same color which Bercilak's lady wears when Gawain first sees her (l. 952), the same color, too, which distinguishes Gawain's shield (l. 603) and apparel (l. 2036). Following the seduction

Vulgate, the Romance of the Rose, the French text of Mandeville, the Divine Comedy, the Vita Nuova, the Convivio, Boccaccio's Olympia, the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius, Tertullian's De Patentia and De Jona et Ninive, the Travels of Marco Polo, Peter Comestor's Historia Scholastica, the Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, the French lapidaries, and at least a few other works. To this list, Chapman would append Virgil's Aeneid without specifying its place in order of importance. One conclusion which all of this material suggests is that the SGGK poet must have had access to one or more excellent libraries.

⁷¹ Rolfe Humphries, trans., The Aeneid of Virgil: A Translation (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), pp. 90-91.

⁷² Humphries, p. 92.

in Virgil's work, Aeneas, too, is pictured in "a cloak of burning crimson," the gift of Dido.⁷³ Most interestingly, as in SGGK, deer receive a symbolic treatment in Virgil's episodes: in her infatuation with Aeneas, Dido herself is compared to a deer wounded by "a hunter's careless arrow";⁷⁴ in Virgil's hunting scene, deer are specifically equated with "cowards."⁷⁵ Caught up in the excitement of the hunt, the boy Ascanius (son of Aeneas and Creusa) also prays for the appearance of "a great boar with foaming mouth."⁷⁶

The strongest connection between the two works, however, depends on both authors' handling of parallel construction. The SGGK poet is a master of the dramatic tension which arises from ambivalence in the third section of his poem: exactly who is hunting whom or what is a question which emerges, specifically, from the hunting and bedroom scenes being paired. Virgil achieves precisely the same effect by making his cavern scene the culmination of the lovers' hunt. His description of Dido as a wounded deer also suggests, implicitly, that the hunt had climaxed before it had begun. Nevertheless,

⁷³ Humphries, p. 96.

⁷⁴ Humphries, p. 89.

⁷⁵ Humphries, p. 92.

⁷⁶ Humphries, p. 92.

the fact that both Dido and Aeneas have divine sponsors still lends the sense of a contest to their affair. The effect of both works is highly dramatic, and this drama emerges through the poems' structures as well as the characters' speeches. The number of details which the paired scenes have in common suggests that the later master poet may have learned much from his classical ancestor. The comparability of the hunting and seduction scenes from the Aeneid with their counterparts in SGGK reveals there is a great need for Edith Hamilton's reminder that Virgil was the only ancient author to make his way directly into the Christian Church; that Virgil figured, in the Middle Ages, as a perfectly respectable magician.⁷⁷ The same comparison suggests, too, that, extensive as Loomis's reading may be, the SGGK poet's was wider.

Loomis's lack of attention to Roman historical materials also leads him into interpreting SGGK's analogues in terms of myth and fantasy alone. He finds in the Jüngere Titurrel of Albrecht von Scharfenberg, for example, a parallel to both Curoi's "Irish Other-world fortress" in the Fled Bricrend and the Grail Castle

⁷⁷ Edith Hamilton, The Roman Way to Western Civilization (1932; rpt. New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1963), p. 120.

described in the Vulgate Lancelot.⁷⁸ Loomis translates from Albrecht's work as follows:

The Grail Temple was round. The dome was covered with blue sapphire, strewn with carbuncles which shone like the sun, whether the night was light, dim, or dark. The golden sun and silver moon were also set in the dome, and were moved by a hidden mechanism through their courses. The rest of the Temple seems as clearly to be a miniature replica of the earth, the whole forming a sort of microcosm. The walls were green with emerald. The arches were like green bows of gold, filled with birds. Vines intertwined through the arches and hung down over the stalls. Below sprouted all manner of flowers, white and red roses on green stems, and all manner of herbs, both stalk and foliage of gold colored with green.⁷⁹

Loomis presents this detailed description as being characteristic of Irish Otherworld architecture. This designation overlooks two important facts: the dome, upon which the entire foregoing interior depends, is a Roman invention from the second century B. C.;⁸⁰ Roman architecture is specifically credited with the creation of interiors which offer a simulacrum of the all-

⁷⁸ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, pp. 158-59.

⁷⁹ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 159.

⁸⁰ Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Roman Art and Architecture (1964; rpt. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1965), p. 106.

containing cosmos.⁸¹ The symbol of this principle, as of the Roman empire itself, is the dome.⁸² If Albrecht von Scharfenberg's Grail Temple is indeed parallel to Curoi's fortress in the Fled Bricrend and the Grail Castle found in the Vulgate Lancelot, as Loomis contends, then perhaps the "Irish Otherworld" is located in the Mediterranean.

Loomis's exclusive focus on Celtic materials also keeps him from recognizing the clear antecedents which exist in Latin literature for the Chateau Marveil episode in SGGK and its analogues. His analysis emphasizes the significance of four features of this episode: 1) it takes place at night (in Bricriu's Feast, La Mule sanz Frain, Conte del Graal, Parzival, Diu Krône); 2) it includes "wonders" or special effects (in Vulgate Lancelot, Estoire del Saint Graal, Peredur, Arthur of Little Britain); 3) it frequently involves the hero's testing on a "perilous bed" (in Vulgate Lancelot, Estoire del Saint Graal, Conte del Graael, Parzival, Arthur of Little Britain); 4) it is identified also with a revolving castle (in Bricriu's Feast, Diu Krône, La Mule sanz Frain, Arthur of Little Britain).⁸³ It could also be

⁸¹ Wheeler, pp. 104-05.

⁸² Wheeler, p. 13.

⁸³ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, pp. 158-76, 114.

argued, of course, that SGGK includes variations on the first and third of these widely used story materials. On the basis of these numerous overlapping features, Loomis concludes that "The Castle of the Grail is a composite of Celtic conceptions of the dwelling of the gods."⁸⁴ This theory must be set beside the fact that the four distinguishing features of the Chateau Marveil episode which Loomis identifies may all be found in a single Latin work: the life of Nero in Suetonius's second-century (A. D.) history, De Vita Caesarum. Loomis's disregard for such Latin materials must also be judged in light of the fact that Jerome himself made use of Suetonius's writings, relying on Suetonius's De Vita Illustribus for thirty-three poets, fifteen orators, and six historians whom he listed in his own Chronicle,⁸⁵ which supplied subsequent writers and scholars with a leading authority for the dates of ancient historical events.⁸⁶

The most important discovery which results from a comparison of Suetonius's life of Nero with Loomis's description of the Chateau Marveil episode in medieval romance is the fact that the predominant features of the

⁸⁴ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 176.

⁸⁵ Hammond and Scullard, p. 1020.

⁸⁶ Hammond and Scullard, p. 562.

latter are neither Celtic nor fanciful: they are Roman, and, to the amazement and horror of countless victims, they were fact. In Suetonius's description of the "Domus Aurea" ("The Golden House") which Nero built between the Palatine and the Esquiline at Rome in 64 (-5) A. D.,⁸⁷ two of Loomis's categories find their earthly counterparts. A construction which well deserved its name, this complex was filled with "wonders," studded with jewels, included a "revolving" roof, and even supplied adventures. Its landscape garden consisted of ploughed fields, vineyards, pastures, and woodlands where every variety of domestic and wild animal roamed about.⁸⁸ Suetonius's account of this exercise in magnificence includes the following details:

Parts of the house were overlaid with gold and studded with precious stones and mother-of-pearl. All the dining-rooms had ceilings of fretted ivory, the panels of which could slide back and let a rain of flowers, or of perfume from hidden sprinklers, shower upon his [Nero's] guests. The main dining room was circular, and its roof revolved, day and night, in time with the sky.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Hammond and Scullard, p. 729.

⁸⁸ Robert Graves, trans., The Twelve Caesars: Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, intro. Michael Grant (1957; rpt. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), p. 229.

⁸⁹ Graves, p. 229. For verification of Suetonius' description of Nero's Golden House, see Wheeler, pp. 142-43, 186-87, including illustrations 125, 167, 168. A sufficient portion of Nero's original construction exists to verify the fact that it included no natural sources

This material makes patent two points which should be obvious when one first reads Albrecht von Scharfenberg's description of the Grail Temple in Jüngere Titurel: in both cases, what is described is an engineering marvel, and the Romans in particular raised this science to an art;⁹⁰ the wealth flaunted on the walls also represents the accumulation of an empire.

In Suetonius's account of Nero's repeated attempts to murder his mother (among many others), one may locate the last two distinguishing features of the Chateau Marveil episode which Loomis identifies, the nocturnal setting and the "perilous bed." Suetonius writes:

of light, but, rather, featured painted romantic landscapes. Wheeler comments that park scenery, often with elements of fantasy, had become a normal part of the genteel environment. (p. 186) Noting that Nero's Golden House had the sort of press that the emperor himself would have appreciated, nevertheless Wheeler makes no attempt to discredit the details of Suetonius' description, especially because it is known that Raphael sent his pupils to study the stucco paintings in the Golden House's inner rooms. One of Wheeler's comments is particularly parallel to scholars' responses to the revolving castles of medieval romance: he remarks, "One dining-room is described by Suetonius as a sort of perpetually rotating globe; a somewhat alarming statement too terse for clear interpretation" (p. 143). It is clear from the comments of both Suetonius and Tacitus, however, that few machinations lay completely beyond Nero's grandiose and tortured schemes. The considerable remains of his Golden House's lower story, says Wheeler, "deserve fresh study" (p. 143).

⁹⁰ Wheeler, p. 149.

He tried to poison her three times, but she had always taken the antidote in advance; so he rigged up a machine in the ceiling of her bedroom which would dislodge the panels and drop them on her while she slept. However, one of the people involved in the plot gave the secret away. Then he had a collapsible boat designed which would either sink or have its cabin fall in on top of her.⁹¹

Commenting on such misadventures, Tacitus seems to be describing many a terror-filled night spent in the Grail Castles of medieval romance when he writes: "It will appear a fabulous tale"⁹²

It is precisely this quality of the Roman historians--this fascinating blend of facts which seem beyond comprehensive and the transparent love of a good story, no matter how gruesome its contents or consequences--which

⁹¹Graves, p. 232.

⁹²Hamilton, The Roman Way, p. 144. See also Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, trans., The Complete Works of Tacitus, ed. and intro. Moses Hadas (New York: Random House, 1942), p. 243. Nero's association with such "fabulous tales" may have begun when he was as young as sixteen and pleaded the special causes of the people of Ilium and the colony of Bononia with the purpose of procuring exemption from taxes and a financial grant, respectively, for his clients. As described by Tacitus, Nero's successful oratory made the same appeal on behalf of his clients which later turns up in many a medieval romance: he "eloquently recounted how Rome was the offspring of Troy, and Aeneas the founder of the Julian line" Even in his era, Tacitus describes this rhetorical appeal as an old tradition akin to myth. See Church and Brodribb, p. 279. For a variation on this classical appeal to authority, see SGGK, ll. 1-7.

Loomis makes no proper allowance for in his own immensely learned and elegantly written studies on Arthurian romance. This omission is not wise, for, as early as the twelfth century, Layamon called attention to this characteristic blend of "truth" and "lies" and identified it definitively with the Arthurian author's treatment of his story materials.⁹³

This same blend of "truth and lies" may be found in still other materials which scholars, in general, have not investigated in their quest for SGGK's symbolic meanings.⁹⁴ The most important and massive work which has been neglected is the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf, which dates, approximately, from the same period (eighth to tenth centuries) to which Kittredge and Loomis have already traced SGGK's basic story materials.⁹⁵ First,

⁹³ Layamon, "Layamon's Brut," in Wace and Layamon, Arthurian Chronicles, trans. Eugene Mason (1912; rpt. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1970), p. 211.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Benson, pp. 4, 118, 119. The cited pages include Benson's only references to Layamon; he does not pursue, in detail, analogues between SGGK and the Brut even though both works are Arthurian and alliterative. He believes that those few alliterative poems which have survived point more to the dissolution of the alliterative tradition than to its continuity. Benson also argues specifically against the significance of the SGGK poet's heavily Old English vocabulary. Again, see Benson, p. 129.

⁹⁵ See Kittredge, p. 20. See also L. H. Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," p. 7. Compare Klaeber, p. cvii.

Beowulf includes numerous references to heraldic devices reflecting a long standing tradition, and this content is in accord with the SGGK poet's own detailed interest in helmets, shields, and weapons carrying specialized meanings signalled by heraldic emblems. Second, Beowulf is the archetypical Old English alliterative work, and the poet's reference to "stori stif and stronge,/ With lel letteres loken,/ In londe so hatz ben longe" (ll. 34-6) clearly reveals an interest in such materials.⁹⁶

In general, an accurate historical perspective on the poem also requires that some attention be given to the relationship between Old English literary materials and SGGK. As the Irish archeologist R. A. S. Macalister has observed with singular caution:

. . . the true history of Christian art in Celtic Ireland is utterly unknown The problem is not an exclusively Irish problem. The whole early art of Great Britain and of the Germanic peoples is involved with it. The mutual influence of all these peoples has been estimated very variously⁹⁷

⁹⁶ See Tolkien and Gordon, p. 72. Tolkien treats ll. 35-36 of SGGK ambiguously. He is undecided whether the poet is referring to the technique of alliterative verse or the story itself. Given the unusual degree of literalness which this study has discovered in the poem (see Chapter V), the latter judgment seems preferable. Indeed, since the poet places a premium on truth in his poem, it would seem likely that such a reference may be both literal and precise.

⁹⁷ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 193.

From Macalister's statement, one central point emerges: the "mutual influence" of Irish, British, and Germanic peoples, at a very early date, is of an indefinite nature and degree, but there are sufficient signs of such influence to accommodate a variety of conclusions. Until a more definite conclusion than this can be reached, it would seem prudent to admit comparisons which may contribute to a more certain knowledge of this very nebulous area of ancient northern European history. One key to crossing the nebulous barriers raised by the centuries may be the Old English language, which the SGGK poet celebrates in his own chosen poetic form and diction.

Layamon's blend of "truth" and "lies" is most evident in Beowulf, which, with its monsters and myths, is still the oldest literary source of Scandinavian history.⁹⁸ Here, the boar appears exactly as Savage would have him be in SGGK: not as a real animal but as a heraldic device. Indeed, his endurance as a token figure is countenanced, in this epic, by his depiction on two entirely different styles of helmets. There is little difficulty in discerning this boar's symbolic meaning: he is identified predominantly with Beowulf and Beowulf's men as brave and loyal warriors (Beowulf, ll. 303^b-306^a, 1448^a-1454); he is described when battle is anticipated

⁹⁸ Klaeber, pp. xxx, cxv.

or reported (ll. 1282^b-1287, 1323^b-1328^a) as well as when a truce has been achieved among the Scyldings and the dead are to be honored (ll. 1108^b-1114^b). The figure of the boar becomes virtually synonymous with the virtue of the Anglo-Saxon warrior, ferocious in battle and equally stalwart in loyalty to his lord.⁹⁹ Passages describing the boar in Beowulf point indisputably to the fact that these boar helmets originally had a religious significance; the boar was sacred to the Old Norse Freyr, the Old English Frea, and Ing, whose name Tacitus lent to the Germanic North Sea tribes (Inguaeones).¹⁰⁰ Consistent with the combining tendencies of the Old English poet, then, in Beowulf one finds a rich and varied source of information on the boar as a heraldic device, indeed one source into which other sources have most probably been telescoped.

The relevance of Beowulf's heraldic content to SGGK's heraldic material is beyond question. In the first place, as Marie Borroff has emphasized, SGGK belongs to the alliterative tradition, and

The alliterative tradition in Middle English is descended with gradual modification reflecting changes in the language itself, from the

⁹⁹ On the character of the Anglo-Saxon warrior as portrayed in Beowulf, see Klaeber, pp. xxxv, lxi.

¹⁰⁰ Klaeber, pp. 140, xxiv, xxxvii.

alliterative tradition in Old English poetry, and this in turn is a Germanic heritage, going back to a very early body of heroic legends recited in verse while the people of the Germanic nation were still a single cultural entity in northwest Europe.¹⁰¹

In so far as the SGGK poet is an alliterative poet, then, his symbols should carry, to some extent at least, a traditional meaning. Consistent with the prevailing tendencies of Old English poetry, he may then combine and integrate this inherited meaning(s) with later meanings, as they assume the distinction of becoming "traditional," that is, meanings identified with whole national groups and national heroes, especially. But as an alliterative poet specifically, it would seem according to both Borroff's and Kittredge's assessments of his poem, the SGGK poet is bound to carry on a tradition which he not only respects but celebrates in his own work.

The binding motif in SGGK also constantly reinforces the poem's associations with Beowulf specifically or other poems very similar to it. The alliterative verse form itself reveals a driving determination to fasten words and phrases together by the proper manipulation of the letters contained in them; the repetition of consonantal sounds operates, in effect, like laces or

¹⁰¹ Marie Borroff, transl., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Verse Translation (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1967), p. x.

threads being skillfully turned over and over to join what would remain, without the internal echo effect, disparate aesthetic units with no necessary continuum. The degree to which such a verse form reflects an ancient attitude toward the craft of construction is apparent, of course, when one remembers that the Beowulf poet speaks of the body's joints as "ban-locan" (Beowulf, l. 818); similarly, he describes the Geats' armor as "hond-locan" (ll. 322, 551) and Hrothgar's hall as "faeste . . ./innan ond utan irenbendum/ searoboncum besmibod." (ll. 773-5) Consistent with the regularity of Beowulf's binding devices, Bercilak's lady promises Gawain, "I schal bynde yow . . ." (l. 1211) and she does. Laces, sashes, braidings, bargains, belts, and baldrics repeat the same motif round the Green Knight's waist (l. 162), through his horses's mane (ll. 188-90), even round his horse's tail and forelock (ll. 191-2), round the Green Knight's axe (l. 217), through the Green Knight's binding bargain (ll. 451-6), through Bercilak's binding bargains (ll. 1089-92), round his lady's waist (l. 1830), round Gawain's waist (ll. 2034-5), over Gawain's shoulder (ll. 2485-7), and finally round all the bodies of Round Table members (ll. 2513-17). All linked together by such continuous tracery, the poem itself becomes a schematic replica of the famous English endless

knot (l. 630). The process of binding, which originates in Old English conceptions of craft, is thus elevated in SGGK to the level of heraldry. Both thematically and stylistically, as well as structurally, the poem assumes the patterning of an heroic emblem.¹⁰²

The binding motif of SGGK then culminates in a knot. The SGGK poet emphasizes this point, revealing in the process as clear an understanding of hand-work as he does of hunting. Work which is bound or looped or laced must be knotted, finally, to remain fixed in the design its creator has chosen and worked into a whole pattern from disparate elements. In SGGK, the lacing on the Green Knight's axe leads inevitably to a knot (l. 217); the knots in his horse's mane specifically form an integral

¹⁰² This conclusion is only consistent, of course, with those theories which interpret SGGK as a Garter-poem. See in particular Savage, The Gawain-Poet, pp. 106-08, 114-15 in which Savage emphasizes the significance of the poem's concluding motto ("Hony Soyt Qui Mal Pence") and the description (in SGGK, ll. 1928-31) of the Garter costume. Schofield also links Gawain's final baldric to the establishment of the Order of the Garter about 1348; see William Henry Schofield, English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer (London: Macmillan & Co., 1921), p. 217. R. S. Loomis summarizes the critical problem of a possible relationship between the Order of the Garter and SGGK quite aptly when he says, "Attempts to prove that the 'Master Anonymous' was somehow associated with an order of chivalry, which was distinguished by a green baldric, [as the Order of the Garter was not] have been met with coldness, yet the feeling that there ought to be a link persists." See R. S. Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963), p. 153.

part of the animal's ornamentation (ll. 187-90); the binding of the horse's forelock and tail is topped with "a *p*warle knot," complicating the phenomenon even further and awarding the knot itself the key position in the animal's decoration (ll. 191-5). The lady's belt is also pointedly knotted (ll. 1830-31), as well as being elaborately enhanced with embroidery (ll. 1832-33)--a craft which involves interlocking stitches and knots. The protection which this article supposedly offers its wearer depends on its being "hemely halched," that is, being suitably fastened about his body (l. 1852). Its benefactor is thus "gorde," (l. 1851)--that is, both girt and girded--against death. When Gawain wears this girdle to his confrontation with the Green Knight, he has not only "swepled" (l. 2034) it about his body but also necessarily knotted it; for when he takes it off later, he specifically "kazt to *p*e knot" (l. 2376). Gawain's loosing of the knot is equivalent, the poet says, to the breaking of troth: "*p*enne he kazt to *p*e knot, and *p*e kest lawsez . . ." (l. 2376).

It is interesting to note that in this line (2376) the poet is interpreting Gawain's action for his reader. He might have indicated, for example, that Gawain simply let the belt fall away from his body; in any number of ways, the poet could have let the significance of the

moment pass. But he does not. Instead, he specifically resorts to an ancient word--"lawse," from O. N. "lauss," to undo--which is associated with fastenings and troth in both of its appearances in the poem. In his glossary, Tolkien acknowledges that the word means the breaking of troth in line 1784.¹⁰³ The second appearance of the word in line 2376 underscores the degree of Gawain's plight: if he is guilty of unfaithfulness to the ideals of the Pentangle when he wraps himself in the lace, so is he guilty of unfaithfulness to Bercilak's lady when he removes her token. No spider could have wrapped his prey more securely than the SGGK poet entangles Gawain in a web tied by his own hand.

To account for both the delicacy and the tautness evidenced in SGGK's construction, source studies on the poem need to be both eclectic and precise. Unless it can be proved that the poet used only Celtic sources in developing his own plot, his general reputation as an extraordinarily learned and masterful writer¹⁰⁴ argues in favor of his having interwoven a great number of established, authoritative materials into his own masterpiece. It has been the purpose of this chapter to con-

¹⁰³ Tolkien and Gordon, p. 194.

¹⁰⁴ Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 13.

sider a selection of those works which might establish a sense of the poet's range, both as a reader and a writer.

In this effort, this writer has accepted as an authoritative model the late work of the distinguished scholar, R. S. Loomis. It is only in The Development of Arthurian Romance, which was published in 1963, that this scholar emphasizes the extent to which the SGGK poet employed both Irish and non-Irish story materials for his own purposes. In particular, he calls attention to a third element in SGGK's plot, which he identifies as the "Exchange of Winnings." This is his term for that agreement whereby Gawain and Bercilak agree to give each other, at the end of each day, whatever they have acquired. Loomis says the "Exchange of Winnings" is a fabliau motif, which first appears in the twelfth century. He emphasizes the crucial contribution which this third element makes to the poem as a whole:

Its integration with the Celtic themes of the Beheading Test and the Temptation is so deft as to be little short of miraculous. Without it they would fall apart; with it they form an extraordinarily coherent, though complicated, plot.¹⁰⁵

Thus Loomis pinpoints that precise ability in the poet which implicitly justifies the description of his

¹⁰⁵ R. S. Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance, p. 156.

work overall as "symbolic": his capacity to integrate all his chosen materials, which include works with their own integrated structures, into his own scheme. This suggestion proceeds one step beyond both Weston's comments on symbolic "connections" and Kittredge's insistence on narrative "combination" as providing the essential keys to an appreciation of SGGK. The poet's emphasis on unity is clearly evident in his description of the Pentangle, whose design admits of absolutely no loose ends (l. 628). To the extent that the poet's handling of his chosen materials manifests just this perfected unity, to the same extent the Pentangle serves as the symbol of the poem itself. As a masterpiece characterized by such unity, it deserves to be considered among its closest qualitative literary kin. Among these works, which have been briefly surveyed in this chapter, it stands second to none.

CHAPTER IV:
THE THEME OF SOVEREIGNTY

Scholars have commonly treated Bercilak's lady as a *fee*, rather than a queen or a wife or even a lady. This assessment of her character has supplied, in turn, the critical basis for the identification of a great many narratives with the "fairy-mistress" story type. This critical category has far-reaching consequences for every work placed under such a heading, for it creates a critical point of view which requires emphasis on certain story elements and excludes others from analysis, even when the excluded elements keep reappearing in scholars' summaries of numerous narratives. The term "fairy-mistress" appears in the ground-breaking scholarship on SGGK, including Weston's far-ranging study of The Legend of Sir Gawain;¹ it is the general term under which Loomis's various titles for Blathnád may be subsumed; elevated to the level of a loyal wife, the same *fee* is ensconced in Kittredge's work on SGGK's sources,²

¹Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, pp. 46-47.

²Kittredge, pp. 76-79.

which is as authoritative as any scholarship on the poem. Thus this critical term supplies a juncture where the ritualistic, mythological, and traditional treatments of SGGK meet; the term carries consequences for numerous apparently divergent approaches to the poem. These consequences include the assessment of the primary female figure in these story materials as a fairy, a creature who is never fatally committed to the flesh and blood status of human character. Her realm is, in turn, treated as an Otherworld, a location only vaguely definable in relation to any concrete place. Her nature is most frequently described as "Celtic," meaning fanciful, supernatural, pagan, and primitive--belonging, that is, to a world of dreams and a past glimpsed as through a glass dimly. The ultimate consequence of this choice in critical terminology, which reflects the larger problem of critical categories, is to assume that fairies were of primary interest to the writers of these grouped story materials. This assumption needs to be examined, for, if it is true, it leads to the conclusion that these works deal primarily with the realm of the imagination, rather than a world of deadly realities.

Weston suggests the particular character of Gawain's favorite "fairy-mistress" as she is portrayed in "The Marriage of Sir Gawain" and this work's source, the

Celtic tale of the adventures of the five Lugaids.³ In both works, the lady's character is essentially dualistic and subject to radical change, although Weston does not label her a shape-shifter. Nevertheless, the character is by turn, in response to the hero's faithfulness to his quest (which requires his involvement with her), both inimitably ugly and then equally lovely. Weston does not emphasize the reciprocal nature of this relationship between hero and heroine, however; instead, she emphasizes the lady's supernatural origin, other-world domain, and association with magic.⁴ She does note, too, that this character's typically amorous behavior may mark her as the original of Bercilak's lady in SGGK's temptation scenes. This observation is worthy of attention, for it suggests in turn that those two characters who are often treated as separate types by SGGK's critics--the "Loathly Lady" and the "fairy-mistress"--formed originally two facets of one character.⁵ This

³ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 48. See also Helaine Newstead, "The Marriage of Sir Gawaine," in A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, I, p. 66. Newstead points to the "Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon" as the source of "The Marriage of Sir Gawain." "Eochaid Mugmedon," says Newstead, represents an Irish tradition in which a dualistic lady (the "Sovereignty of Erin") tests the hero for his fitness to be king of Ireland.

⁴ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 51.

⁵ See Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 51. Weston notes that "between this lady [of supernatural origin], as represented in the most consecutive accounts of Gawain's

possibility also suggests that the SGGK poet may have once again, for the sake of both unity and intensity, split a single traditionally symbolic character into its two polarities in his own poem, which contains both the aged, unattractive Morgan and Bercilak's alluring wife.

It is important to allow this lady to speak for herself, however. Weston quotes from Mr. Whitley Stokes' translation of the eleventh-century Irish tale of the adventures of the five Lugaids as follows:

Howbeit the hag went into the couch of white bronze, and Macniad followed her; and it seemed to him that the radiance of her face was the sun rising in the month of May, and her fragrance was likened by him to an odorous herb-garden, and she said to him, "Good is thy journey, for I am the Sovrancy, and thou shalt obtain the sovrancy of Erin."⁶

adventures, and the queen of the other-world, as represented in Irish tradition, there exists so close a correspondence as to leave little doubt that they were originally one and the same character." Weston, however, never treats the hag's ugliness as an essential feature of the lady's archetypical character, nor does she develop this character's dual aspects. A common tendency among scholars to confuse the "fairy-princess" type with an idealized conception of womanhood may be observed specifically in the work of Tom Peete Cross, who writes: "She is a fairy princess. Age cannot wither her nor custom stale her infinite variety; she bestows her affection according to her own choice; she forbids her mortal favorite to speak of her before the world; and when he breaks her command, she forsakes him. Young, beautiful, immortal, she is beyond the realm of moral and physical law." See Tom Peete Cross, "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of Lanval and Graelent," MP, 12 (1915), 41-2.

⁶Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, pp. 49-50.

In her brief commentary on this passage, Weston points out that the term "sovranty" was handed down from the original Irish tale to its later English derivative. In the "Marriage of Sir Gawayne," however, as in Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale," it supplies the answer to the fateful question "What do women most desire?" and, according to Weston, may be interpreted to mean "their will."⁷ In addition, Dr. J. W. Beach has emphasized that in a similar Irish tale of the twelfth century or later, "Niall of the Nine Hostages," the term means "royal rule," while in Chaucer it refers to domestic supremacy.⁸ It is important to observe that, in her own quest for symbolic meanings, Weston pays no heed to that symbolic equivalence which the eleventh-century Irish "Sovranty"

⁷ Weston, The Legend of Sir Gawain, p. 50. See also "The Wife of Bath's Tale," l. 905 in F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961), p. 85, and "The Marriage of Sir Gawaine" in W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, ed., Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Altantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1958), pp. 236, 238.

⁸ Robinson, p. 703. For additional analogues to SGGK based on the theme of "sovereignty," see "John Gower's Tale of Florent" in Bryan and Dempster, pp. 226, 229, 235; "The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell," in Bryan and Dempster, pp. 246, 252, 254, 260. If these stories are read as tales of disenchantment, and if, furthermore, SGGK's lady's claim to have "in my honde þat al desyres" (l. 1257) renders her story parallel to the preceding stories, then it is possible that these narratives illustrate the kind of "Temptation" tale which Kittredge believed had been combined with "The Champion's Bargain" in SGGK. On this type of story, see Kittredge, pp. 8, 79.

awards herself. Especially when treating the literature of a people whose kings fought bitterly among themselves and whose authors celebrated competitions among national champions in such works as the Fled Bricrend, this oversight is not wise. It is the result of an interest in mythology and folklore which seeks to dissociate these categories from the history of both peoples and literature.

Ironically, when a character such as the paradoxical "Sovranty" is treated primarily either as a "fairy princess" or a "fairy-mistress," her most obvious feature never receives serious consideration: her royal stature becomes a characteristic which applies only to fairyland, too. But if the modern reader can overlook the significance of royal claims to privilege and power, it is doubtful that the medieval reader could. Feudalism was a reality for him, and it offered a political, economic, and social system which fulfilled his urgent need for order. The same hierarchical system reflected an intellectual requirement, characteristic of the Middle Ages, that all known phenomena should somehow be made to fit and connect in one coherent whole. This same love of and need for order may be seen in both SGGK and its most widely accepted source, the Fled Bricrend, in which games figure as prominent and repeated activities giving

meaning to life itself. As E. M. W. Tillyard writes in The Elizabethan World Picture,

One is tempted to call the medieval habit of life mathematical or to compare it with a gigantic game where everything is included and every act is conducted under the most complicated system of rules.⁹

For an accurate assessment of SGGK and its analogues, it is crucial to apprehend that, in general, the authors of these works labored under demands for equivalences that would seem inordinate to the modern writer. It must be emphasized that the characters in these works reflect this same preoccupation. When Gawain asks the Green Knight who he is (ll. 400-01, 2443), he is expressing a persistent intellectual curiosity which takes a particular form; by the time the Green Knight finally tells him his name (l. 2445), Gawain has already learned for himself that his opponent is a "lorde." (l. 2440) Likewise, when the "Sovranty of Erin" states her own identity in the adventures of the five Lugaids, she reflects the fact that her author knows who she is and has created characters who know who they are as well. The very features of these works which so often puzzle critics--the assumed disguises, the elaborate quests, the repeated game-playing--may best be understood as a relentless dramatiza-

⁹ E. M. W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), pp. 6-7.

tion of the need to lend order, and thus meaning, to experience. For the man of the Middle Ages, such elements are at the furthest remove from the terms in which they are most commonly discussed by modern critics: they are neither "primitive" nor "rationalizations" but, rather, attempts to conquer life rather than be conquered by it. Even a medieval beheading game, then, is primarily a game and thus a remnant of civilization, not primarily a crude blood-letting exhibition. And even an apparently immodest woman like Bercilak's lady would not offer Gawain her "cors" (l. 1236) unless there were an underlying propriety in her action, and a good, equally concrete and symbolic, reason for her to do so.

It is necessary to call attention once again to one early Irish work in particular which offers a probable original for the Celtic "fairy-princess" of many a later medieval romance. This is "The Cattle-Raid of Cúalnge," which R. A. S. Macalister has judged to be no less important as "an authentic record of life and belief" to the early history of Ireland than the Homeric epics were to the Greeks. This is the sort of judgment, it should be noted, which is rarely brought to bear upon SGGK's recognized analogues. The oldest manuscript containing this work belongs to the beginning of the twelfth century; on philological grounds, its text can be traced back to

the sixth century; its content goes back even further, being consistent with the records of Poseidonius and Caesar, among others.¹⁰ This document supplies a critically needed perspective on several subjects which are intermingled in scholars' treatments of SGGK and its analogues. First, it supplies verified evidence of the accurate transmission of early Celtic story materials even across many centuries and even in the face of severe social disruptions which have well earned for portions of the Middle Ages the title of the "Dark Ages." Second, it portrays a society in which men and women played equally significant roles with both sexes mustering their own armed forces and fighting their own intrigue-filled campaigns. Third, it demonstrates the efficacy of Irish magic as a practice particularly associated with warfare and not just vague religious beliefs. Fourth, as in the adventures of the five lugaids and SGGK as well, it offers a regal woman character who is more than capable of speaking for herself. To readers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such a character may seem fanciful; to her authors, she was a queen.

The significance of such a regal female character for the history of SGGK and its analogues should not be

¹⁰Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 125.

underestimated, for this character has a peculiar historical resiliency. As Peter Wenham records in his history of The Noble City of York, when the Romans invaded Britain in 43 A. D., the largest of many independent kingdoms which they encountered was Brigantia. This kingdom covered the area between the river Tweed, the present boundary between England and Scotland, and the river Trent. Brigantia was ruled by Queen Cartimandua, who averted a Roman invasion of Brigantia by establishing an alliance with Rome over and against her husband's opposition to her carefully modulated policy.¹¹ This same determination to forge political policy may be discerned in Eleanor of Aquitaine, whose second marriage to Henry Plantagenet, Count of Anjou, created the Angevin Empire. Eleanor herself was the presiding genius of this courtly center of French-speaking civilization in the twelfth century,¹² which sponsored the creation of a new courtly epic derived from Anglo-Saxon romancing, Celtic inspiration, and the doctrines of love and eroticism peculiar to Provence and south-western France.¹³ Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia regum

¹¹ Peter Wenham, The Noble City of York, ed. Alberic Stacpoole et. al. (York, England: Cerialis Press, 1972), p. 8.

¹² Heer, p. 157.

¹³ Heer, pp. 166-67.

Britanniae supplied the ancestral archetype of King Arthur,¹⁴ a patriarchal figure epitomizing those Old English kings who had commanded the allegiance of the Scots, Irish, and Welsh--national groups in active conflict with the English Angevin kings in the twelfth century.¹⁵ Such nationalistic purposes reach an apex, of course, in the sixteenth-century Faerie Queene, whom Spenser described as representing glory in general and, in particular, "the most excellent and glorious person of our sovereign the Queen, and her kingdom in Faerie Land."¹⁶

The "sovereign" is not the same thing as the "Sovranty," however, and "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley" allows one to observe clearly an ancient Irish concept of the monarchy which required at least two persons to fulfill its nature and bring peace and harmony to the land. This distinction is important, for it supplies a sorely needed perspective on that brazen behavior, apparently common among fees, which numerous critics have

¹⁴ Heer, p. 167.

¹⁵ Heer, p. 169.

¹⁶ E. De Selincourt, Spenser: Poetical Works, ed. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (1912; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. li.

judged as being crude, barbaric, and immoral.¹⁷ It should be noted, however, that Lady Bercilak's amorous offer to Gawain has its symbolic Celtic antecedents, and, if she is blunt-spoken, she is only manifesting the same manner of speech which is generally characteristic of her husband. "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley" reveals a sufficient number of correlations between its heroine, Medb, and Gawain's temptress in SGGK to suggest that an archetypical female character is present in both works, and her behavior would neither have surprised nor shocked their readers.

True to the dominant Medb in spirit, it is SGGK's lady, and not the Green Knight, who, as a combatant, exposes the vulnerability in Gawain's character which earns him a nick in the neck. His blooddrops in the snow are a tribute to her dominion over his honor. The payment of such tribute is to be expected because in Bercilak's kingdom, as in Medb's realm, "*þe olde auncian wyf heȝest*

¹⁷ There is a curious ambivalence, not so much in the character of the "fairy-princess," as in critics' attitudes toward her. The archetypical character whom Cross lauds as "young, beautiful, immortal" and specifically beyond "moral and physical law" is the very same figure he refers to frequently as that "forth-putting woman." See Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 28, 34, 36, 52, 54. The same descriptive phrase for Bercilak's lady--"forth-putting"--turns up forty years later in G. J. Engelhardt's treatment of "The Predicament of Gawain," MLQ, 16 (1955), 220. Tolkien and Gordon also evidence some discomfort with Bercilak's lady's choice of words in l. 1237 as they survey every meaning for her statement except the direct one. See Tolkien and Gordon, pp. 108-09.

ho sytsez" (l. 1001). There is an aggressiveness which is proper to a queen, although it would be out of place in characters not prepared to meet a challenge. Such aggressiveness is most apparent in both Medb and Bercilak's lady, who are questors as well as combatants. Both seek out their heroes but still manage to draw the man into the woman's realm: Medb claims she "found" Ailill, and he admits he "came" to take her province as his "kingdom";¹⁸ so also, in her double aspects, the regal Morgan sends her herald to bring Arthur's champion into the nets of the Green Knight's alluring lady. Medb's aggressiveness is obvious: she is a warrior, and, like Cartimandua¹⁹ as well as Eleanor of Aquitaine,²⁰ she is supposed to have fought in battle side by side with the men. The military prowess of Gawain's temptress becomes apparent when one realizes that she manages to arouse her opponent's consternation (l. 1295), wrath (l. 1660), and doubt (ll. 1855-8), finally, in his own ability to survive the contest to which he is committed without her aid.

As regal characters, Medb and SGGK's lady expect

¹⁸ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 132.

¹⁹ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 131.

²⁰ Heer, p. 161.

nothing less than perfection from their champions. Alas, Gawain's lot is no less difficult whether he attempts to measure up to the Pentangle's abstract standard of perfect truth (ll. 623-61) or Bercilak's lady's demands for perfect courtesy (ll. 1297-1301). In a similar fashion, Medb's verbal jousts with her husband Ailill reveal extraordinary demands which are proper only for one symbolic character seeking another. Although Macalister discusses their marital feud as a debate over matriarchal versus patriarchal social systems,²¹ it is clear that Medb's own original determination was to be wedded to a man of unparalleled, sterling character. Medb explains:

For it was I who demanded an unwonted bride-price, such as woman had never demanded before of man among the men of Ireland: a husband void of greed, void of fear, void of jealousy.²²

Medb's requirement of her husband rests in turn on her high opinion of herself: it is she, in her own mind, who had everything to bestow--"the inheritance of the noblest daughter of the high king of Ireland"²³--and wanted only a mate worthy of her. As proud and willful as Medb's

²¹ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, pp. 132-33.

²² Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 131.

²³ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 131.

character obviously is, Ailill himself recognizes that there is some basis for her arrogance: "And what better wife could I have than thee," he asks, "seeing that thou art daughter of a High King of Erin?"²⁴ Medb stands at the symbolic core of "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley," since her father had given her the province of Cruachu in Connacht,²⁵ and the entire story, as summarized by Macalister, tells how "a Connacht dynasty assert [ed] its rights of domination over all the land [of Ireland]."²⁶

In total disregard for Medb's high regard for herself, the regal nature of the Celtic queen is obliterated when she is treated as a "fairy-princess" type. Consider the following judgment passed on Celtic female characters in general by Tom Peete Cross:

. . . the women of early Irish saga exhibit a freedom in sexual matters which is quite foreign to the great Aryan peoples--a situation which points to a high degree of antiquity for the traditions recorded, and may even reflect a pre-Celtic (non-Aryan) culture.²⁷

The same scholar comments on the "fairy woman" in the "Tochmarc Becfola" in these terms:

²⁴ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 132.

²⁵ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 131.

²⁶ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 152.

²⁷ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 28.

For a time the fee remains with her lover, but, like many other supernatural women who condescend to dwell for a time with mortals, she at length becomes weary of her earthly life and goes off with a fairy lover.²⁸

The notions contained in these scholarly pronouncements on Celtic fees deserve clarification. First, since she is "non-Aryan," it is assumed that she is an inferior (not "great") being. Then, when she is seen as being "like many other supernatural women," she is assigned the mortal lot of ennui. When regal characters are examined through the dark glass of prejudice, any symbolism that pertains to them cannot possibly be perceived.

There is, however, a fundamental agreement in "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley" and SGGK on the subject of the symbolic roles of man and woman in a well-ordered kingdom. It is Medb herself who emphasizes that her identity hinges on the fact that she is a king's daughter, that she represents, in effect, a kingdom; its rarest treasures accrue to the man who can win her hand.²⁹ According to Medb's testimony, Ailill's rewards included "twelve men's raiment of clothing, a chariot worth thrice seven bondmaids, the width of thy face in ruddy gold, the weight of thy left forearm in bronze."³⁰

²⁸ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 23.

²⁹ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 132.

³⁰ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 132.

There is, then, a natural sort of magic, involving both power and multiplication, which surrounds the sovereignty. It is, perhaps, this fact which explains both Medb's and Bercilak's lady's wanton behavior. If they were independent, individual characters, their seductive natures³¹ could be judged quite rightly as immoral and reprehensible; but as kingdoms, they are what kingdoms almost always are--inviting and rich in rewards for the would-be conqueror. An alliance does not change this basic reality; it only increases the need for good rule, which can only be accomplished by an alert and stalwart monarch. In want of a strong sovereign, in spite of the care with which she chose one, Medb has many complaints against Ailill; and her grievances are justified by her loss of the sacred bull "Findbennach"³² as well as Ailill's portrayal throughout the tale as a "Pantaloons."³³ By contrast, not one word against Bercilak escapes his lady, not even in the most intimate and private circumstances. Good manners aside, the reason for this omission in SGGK is not hard to discern: absolutely nothing escapes her sovereign's attention; sovereign and

³¹ Thus Medb boasts, "I never was without one leman on the heels of another." See Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 132.

³² Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 134.

³³ Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 143.

sovereignty function in perfect concert, united by a common objective. Clearly, the Bercilaks enjoy medieval marriage at its best; acting as a single entity, their political union and domestic bliss are unbreachable.³⁴

This same necessary relationship--in effect, a marriage--between a king and his kingdom appears in numerous Celtic analogues to Arthurian romance collected in 1915 by Tom Peete Cross for his study of "The Celtic Elements in the Lays of Lanval and Graelent." Particularly prominent in these Celtic works are five elements which receive elaborate treatment in SGGK. First, the principal male figure is usually a "lorde," but evenmore commonly he is specifically a prince, champion, or king of Ireland. Second, the woman in these stories is often a royal figure, too, and a character of a decidedly dualistic nature. Third, the relationship between these two characters typically involves a loyalty test. Fourth and fifth, the female character in these stories frequently puts her bounty at the hero's disposal: this includes

³⁴On the political nature of medieval marriage, see Clive Staples Lewis, The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 13. There is, admittedly, a contrast to be drawn between actual medieval practice, which frequently turned married women into expensive and shiftable baggage, and an idealized symbolic view of marriage, which is of at least equal historical significance, since it is involved in the principle of sovereignty and thus necessarily becomes involved also in both the political and theological thought and practice of the Middle Ages. It is the latter, symbolic view of marriage which is advanced in this paper.

both her body and her wealth, and the hero's good fortune typically is the result of his exclusive alliance with her. These parallels strongly suggest that both the "fairy-princess" and the "beheading game" have been over-emphasized in critical assessments of SGGK's Celtic features. These elements are only two out of a vast store of Irish material which both SGGK and its analogues may have in common.³⁵

The subject of a king's marriage receives dramatic treatment in the "Aidead Muirchertaig maic Erca" ("Death of Muirchertach mac Erca"), a story which Cross dates to the twelfth century, while including the information that Muirchertach probably died in 515 A. D.³⁶ His summary of this narrative is dependent, in part, on Whitley Stokes' translation, and proceeds as follows.

Muirchertach, king of Ireland, while out hunting one day, sits on a hill. "He had not been there long when he saw a solitary damsel beautifully

³⁵ The more scholars emphasize the SGGK poet's familiarity with Celtic story materials, the more they also need to recognize that the canon of the ancient Celtic bard included 350 stories, which were grouped into twelve categories. See Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 128. Macalister characterizes these tales and their tellers in the following manner: ". . . the sacred books of the Irish were tales of the adventures of notable people, carefully committed to memory by those whose business it was to recite them at the periodical festivals. The telling of these tales," Macalister emphasizes, was not "a mere act of amusement," but, rather, "much more like a religious ceremony."

³⁶ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," p. 11, n. 2.

formed, fair-headed, bright-skinned, with a green mantle about her, sitting near him on the turf-en mound; and it seemed to him that of womankind he had never beheld her equal in beauty or refinement." He immediately becomes enamored of her. The lady tells him that she is his darling and that she has come to seek him. She adds that her name (which is Sín, "Storm") must never be mentioned by him, and that for her he must abandon his mortal wife. Muirchertach takes her home to Tara, and, after expelling the queen, places Sín on the throne by his side. The woman claims to be a follower of God, but she gives evidence of various uncanny powers and causes her lover no end of trouble. One night she creates a great storm, during which the king accidentally mentions the word sin. Thereupon she surrounds the house with a host of spirits and sets it afire. Muirchertach, unable to escape, leaps into a vat of wine and is drowned. At the funeral of the king the woman reappears. She tells how Muirchertach had killed her father, mother, and sister in battle, and how she had attached herself to him for the purpose of revenge. She had, however, apparently fallen in love with her intended victim, for she dies of grief for his death.³⁷

Cross's analysis of this story is limited to a very brief attempt to separate the Christian and human elements from the essential narrative, which he assumes is a fairy tale involving "a beautiful and capricious woman from the Other World" who entralls her chosen lover "by the sole power of supernatural love and beauty."³⁸ At no time

³⁷ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," pp. 11-12.

³⁸ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," p. 12.

does he argue that such literary surgery would have been considered proper or even possible by the medieval reader.

Of those features which "Aidead Muirchertaig maic Erca" shares with SGGK, it is the "damsel's" dual nature which receives the fullest treatment. Consistent with the SGGK poet's development of Bercilak's lady, who professes herself to be Gawain's greatest admirer but is actually his "enmy kene" (l. 2406), Muirchertach's lady's apparent fondness for the king is also a ruse which must be explained within the context of the narrative. In both works, it must be emphasized, the lady's dual nature extends to a dual purpose and even a dual response to the successful outcome of her plot against the hero. Both works culminate in a dramatic trap followed by a denouement in which the lady's true motives are made plain. Neither author allows his story to end with enmity, however: Muirchertach's death is followed by his damsel's death out of apparent grief for him; the Green Knight offers Gawain a final opportunity to "accorde" with his wife (l. 2405). These dualities are reinforced further by both authors' overall fondness for duplications and parallels. The "damsel" requires two tests of Muirchertach's loyalty, his forfeiture of his present wife as well as silence regarding her name; she then accepts a

position in which she rules, implicitly, as one of two persons on Ireland's throne. In SGGK Gawain must also meet the two major tests of the "Crystemas gomen" and the lady's advances; the lady explicitly offers him two gifts, a ring and her belt, before he accepts the latter; the purpose of both the obvious challenges and the gifts is to test Gawain's loyalty. Such parallels suggest that there was a traditional story-type, well known to Celtic bards, which emphasized the idea that when a king accepted an alliance with this particular sort of lady, he automatically subjected himself to the most searing of human trials--an ordeal, perhaps, which the hero is bound to fail. There would seem to be no better name for such a work than "tragedy."³⁹

The extent to which both "Aidead Muirchertaig maic

³⁹ There was, in fact, a class of stories known to the Celtic bards as "aieda" or "tragedies." The other categories were as follows: "togla" (destructions), "tana" (cattle-raids), "tochmarca" (courtships), "catha" (battles), "uatha" (caves), "imrama" (navigations), "fessa" (feasts), "forbaisi" (sieges), "echtrada" (adventures), "aitheid" (elopements), "airgne" (plunders). See Macalister, Ancient Ireland, p. 128. It should be noted that "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley" clearly belongs to the "tana" category, and the Fled Bricrend, commonly translated as Bricriu's Feast, fits into the "fessa" category. It should also be noted that, although scholars have generally accepted the ancient origins of SGGK's story materials, they have not equally taken into consideration the fact that these stories existed within their own given categories. If the SGGK poet was familiar with Celtic story materials, his familiarity as well with at least some of the traditional Celtic story types is a matter which should be suspected and explored.

Erca" and SGGK may indeed be tragedies in the preceding sense of the word never receives proper critical assessment, however, because the lady's personality tends to overshadow every other element in the story, creating a context, in effect, in which all the events occur.

First, there is her beauty which distracts the hero and the work's audience alike. It is this feature of her character which immediately transforms her royal admirer into her subordinate. Cross's summary of "Aidead Muirchertaig maic Erca" offers no suggestion that the king raises any reasonable objections to the "damsel's" extreme demands. Thus the possibility arises that the Irish author is thinking of love in exactly those terms dramatized most often by Virgil and the Latin elegists--as a grand passion, indeed, which always runs contrary to the demands of duty and is most often manifested by the victim's apparent loss of his senses.⁴⁰ That Gawain has a similar Achilles' heel, which leads inevitably from distraction to humiliation, is apparent

⁴⁰ On the traditional conflict between love and war in the Roman poets, see the following: Humphries, pp. 92-101; T. E. Page, ed., The Aeneid of Virgil: Books I-VI (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), pp. xviii-xix. Virgil, in turn, had been strongly influenced by Catullus. See C. J. Fordyce, ed., Catullus (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. xxii. The elegists also paid tribute to Catullus. See Fordyce, p. xxiv. On the typical classical portrayal of "romantic love" as a "tragic madness" plunging its victims into "crime and disgrace," see also Lewis, p. 4.

throughout SGGK even though the Green Knight is generous enough to tell him that he has failed in his attempt to be perfectly brave and true only by a "lyttel" (l. 2366). In both works, it must be added, the lady's natural endowments seem perfectly enhanced by apparel (the green mantle, the green lace) which is the same color as the "turfen mound" upon which Muirchertach first discovers his new queen. In both works also, the lady's beauty cannot really be separated from her association with violence: the lady's green lace is Gawain's reminder of the nick in his neck; having lost a father, mother, and sister in battle, Muirchertach's "damsel" is also a warrior using her beauty to achieve that defeat which could not be accomplished by arms.

To consider either "Aidead Muirchertaig maic Erca" or SGGK exclusively as a "romance" does not do justice to the old epic elements of rage and revenge contained in these narratives. In both works the cult of secret erotic adulterous passion outlined by Andreas Capellanus in De Arte Honeste Amandi,⁴¹ celebrated by Guillaume de Lorris

⁴¹ Andreas Capellanus, The Art of Courtly Love, trans. John Jay Parry (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969), p. 151. Here, the author states the requirement for secrecy: "The man who wants to keep his love affair for a long time untroubled should above all things be careful not to let it be known to any outsider, but should keep it hidden from everybody."

and Jean de Meun in The Romance of the Rose,⁴² and described at length by C. S. Lewis in The Art of Courtly Love,⁴³ is soundly defeated. As a result of his infatuation, Muirchertach is forced to leap to his death. After his duplicity has been discovered, Gawain testifies before Arthur's court that, in effect, no passion nor action remains secret when honor is at stake: "For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit,/ For þer hit oneȝ is tachched twynne wil hit neuer" (ll. 2511-12).

The possibility that SGGK should be read first as a "tragedy" certainly exists, however, if by this term one means a cathartic ordeal depending wholly on the hero's character. It is the author's treatment of Gawain's third temptation by Bercilak's lady which raises this possibility. After Gawain has refused to give her any token of his professed admiration, she concludes: "þaȝ I hade noȝt of youreȝ, / ȝet schulde ȝe have of myne"

⁴² See Charles W. Dunn, "Introduction," The Romance of the Rose By Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, trans. Harry W. Robbins (New York: Dutton & Co., 1962), p. xv. Dunn summarizes these crucial characteristics of "courtly love": "The love which these writers [Chretien de Troyes, Maire de France, and Andreas the Chaplain] celebrated so gracefully was not Christian love but erotic passion Courtly love was always secretive, for its object was extramarital."

⁴³ Lewis, p. 35. Lewis reminds his reader that the requirements for secrecy and an extramarital relationship are two cardinal rules for the conduct of courtly love as an art.

(ll. 1815-16). These lines exist within the context of Gawain's agreement with the lady's husband, of course, to exchange all winnings on the three successive days of the Green Knight's hunts. These lines also point to the specific terms of their gentlemen's agreement: as Gawain reiterates after receiving the boar's head from Bercilak, "Alle my get I schal yow gif agayn, bi my trawpe" (l. 1638). Their agreement, then, contains no prohibition against Gawain's giving the lady a gift; it simply requires him to exchange his own winnings with his host: "Quat-so-euer I [Bercilak] wynne in þe wod hit worþez to yourez [Gawain's],/ And quat chek so ȝe acheue chaunge me þerorne" (ll. 1106-07). When the lady offers Gawain the choice between giving or receiving tokens, she is testing Gawain's understanding of, as well as his willingness to keep, his original bargain. She offers him two alternatives to the terms of his original oath, both of which are one-sided. Gawain's acceptance of either giving or getting by itself means that he does not understand the entire basis of medieval law, which was a contract imposing binding obligations on both partners, God and man, king and people, king and barons, king and estates.⁴⁴ It is, indeed, Gawain's lack of "fraunchyse" (l. 652) which blinds him to the fact that he was under

⁴⁴Heer, p. 30.

no contractual obligation not to give the lady a gift; and it is, indeed, his covetousness (ll. 2374, 2380, 2508) which renders him willing to get when he will not give. His final humiliation, in short, would have been completely avoidable if Gawain had been another man.

The haughty queen of Celtic romance is typically a gift-giver, and SGCK's Gawain is only one mortal to be tempted by her beneficence. In "The Cattle-Raid of Cooley," Medb emphasizes that shame is the specific result if her mate is not her equal in magnanimity:

Were he greedy, the husband whose
I should be, it were not fitting that
we should be together. For I am good
in grace and largesse, and it were
shame for my husband that I should
excel him in grace, and shame to my
husband that folk should say that I
exceed him in treasures or in wealth.
But it were no shame were we alike--
be they both good together.

Were my husband fearful, no more
would it be fitting that we live to-
gether. I break battles and fights
and combats single-handed, and it
were disgrace to my husband that his
wife should be more quick than he,
and no disgrace that they were alike--
be they both quick together.⁴⁵

It must be noted that Medb herself would have discounted Gawain as a suitor for her hand on the very same scores that he adjudges his own blame--covetousness and fear. The traditional characters of both Bercilak's lady, as

⁴⁵Macalister, Ancient Ireland, pp. 131-32.

a chastising benefactress, and Gawain, as a failing benefactor, are well established in this very early Irish work. It is also significant that that equity which is missing between Bercilak's lady and Gawain is present between Bercilak and Bercilak's lady: it is their shared capacities, in generosity, intrigue, and rhetoric as well as bargain-making, which make and keep them, together, a successful doublet figure.

An essential feature of this traditional female figure, as she is developed in SGGK, is the offer of her body which both participants in the doublet figure make to Gawain. In a precise parallel, the Green Knight first surrenders his neck (l. 420), and thus his mortality, to the man he casts in the role of his challenger (ll. 284-97); on her very first visit to Gawain's bed-chamber, the Green Knight's lady almost immediately surrenders to him her "cors" (l. 1237). These presentations, in turn, are only two in an impressive list of gifts which Bercilak and his lady bestow on Gawain: the Green Knight's axe (l. 289), lodging and entertainment for the duration of his visit, the use of his chosen robe (ll. 862-70), the dressed deer (ll. 1327, 1383), the boar's head and carcass (ll. 1613-15, 1633-35), the fox's skin (ll. 1945-47), six kisses (ll. 1306, 1505, 1555, 1758, 1796, 1869; 1389, 1639-40, 1936), a guide to the Green

Chapel (1. 1971), and the green lace (1. 1861). With similar generosity, a maiden and a young man visit King Eocho Beg in the "Tain Bo Dartada," which, says Cross, "in substance probably long antedates the twelfth century." The king is promised and receives "fifty horses, fifty bridles ornamented with gold and silver, and fifty suits of fairy garments."⁴⁶ The female figure appears alone to her chosen mortal in the "Annals of the Four Masters" in the "Flathiusa h-Erenn" and in the prose "Dindshenchas." In the latter, Crimthann, son of Lugaid, receives from her many treasures, including a gilt chariot, a draught-board of gold, and Crimthann's "cetach," a beautiful mantle.⁴⁷

Summarizing that qualified generosity which typically makes the hero's good fortune dependent on his love-affair with the lady, Cross notes that, in general, romances and their Celtic analogues have this feature in common: "Each in the spirit of its own time has made the other-world woman bestow upon the mortal the things most to be desired by warriors."⁴⁸ With its double offering of the lovely lady's body and the safety of his

⁴⁶ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 46.

⁴⁷ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 45-46.

⁴⁸ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 46.

own neck to Gawain, as well as the enumerated gifts, SGGK is no exception to this general statement. Thus Cross's summary may be fairly restated in the following terms: the supposedly unearthly lady in SGGK and its Celtic analogues typically yields unto her chosen hero precisely what he would most desire to have an earthly monarch give him. Thus, by tradition, she is related to the function of the crown, and the crown itself does not fare well without her compliance.

The hero's dependence on this regal lady, in turn, also receives special emphasis in both SGGK and numerous Celtic narratives. The hero is, indeed, typically identified by this woman; and just as Bercilak's lady comes right into Gawain's chamber, so Sin tells Muirchertach, "I am the darling of Muirchertach Son of Erc, King of Erin, and to seek him I came here."⁴⁹ The subject on her mind typically involves an exchange. In one of the episodes from the "Acallamh na Senórach," the lady Doireann states her purpose explicitly to Finn: "To sleep with thee in exchange for bride-price and gifts have I come."⁵⁰ The first in a series of exchanges which takes place between the espoused marital partners

⁴⁹ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 29.

⁵⁰ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 29.

is often a kiss. In a short version of the Fled Bricrend, the lady approaches Cuchulinn at a stream and declares her love for him. The first token of their implicit bargain is a kiss: "She rises toward him, and throws both hands about his neck and gives him a kiss."⁵¹ In a similar setting, Niall of the Nine Hostages meets a loathly lady at a fountain in the "Eachtra Mac Echach Muigmedóin." In exchange for a drink of water, the prince gives her a kiss, whereupon she becomes surpassingly beautiful and tells him she is the "Sovranty of Erin."⁵² That the hero ignores the lady's offer at his own great peril is clear in the "Tain Bó Cualnge," whose earliest redaction reverts to the eighth century A. D. or earlier.⁵³ The lady in this story meets Cuchulinn once again at a stream; she appears to him in that garb which Gawain is offered and assumes at Bercilak's castle, "a mantle of many colors" (ll. 864-70). Like Medb and Bercilak's lady, she puts her belongings at the hero's disposal: "All my valuables and my cattle I bring with me." After Cuchulinn declines her offer, he subsequently meets his death.⁵⁴ Thus it would seem, according to a

⁵¹ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 29-30.

⁵² Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 18.

⁵³ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 20.

⁵⁴ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 21.

well established narrative pattern, Gawain accomplishes his own harm when he accepts the lady's girdle but reneges on giving either a gift to her or loyalty to her "lorde" in completion of their implicit and explicit bargains. Clearly a man in Gawain's situation must either rise to the occasion or admit he is, indeed, a bound man.

The hero's achetypical identity receives further detailed development in three separate Celtic works, all containing lines parallel to the lady's tribute to Gawain in SGGK. In the "Tain Bó Cualnge," dating back at least to the eighth century, this tribute appears in its most general form. Confronting Cuchulinn at a ford, the lady confesses, "For the record of thy deeds I have loved thee" ⁵⁵ The endurance of this heroic tribute is evidenced by the "Fled Bricrend acus Longes Mac n-Duill Dermait," which, in its original form dates from the ninth century or an even earlier period, and forms part of the same cycle as the longer Fled Bricrend. ⁵⁶ Finding Cuchulinn at a stream, the beautiful daughter of King Eocho declares, "I have loved him [Cuchulinn] because of the stories about him." ⁵⁷ The same reference to

⁵⁵ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 20.

⁵⁶ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 23.

⁵⁷ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 29.

the hero as a subject of legend and story with whom the heroine is well acquainted may be found also in the "Togail Bruidne Da Derga," which belongs to the Etain cycle and is far older than the twelfth century.⁵⁸

Meeting the king Eochaid at a fountain, the lady Etain claims,

Ever since I was able to speak, I have loved thee and given thee a child's love for the high tales about thee and thy splendour. And though I had never seen thee, I knew thee at once from thy description.⁵⁹

Throughout SGGK, it must be emphasized, Bercilak's lady's demeanor is consistent with the behavior of the most famous queens from Celtic literature: she recognizes her hero (l. 1226); she finds her hero; and she clearly expects to make a bargain with him. This expectation is extremely important, for it supplies the lady with motivation for approaching Gawain in his bed, where, if he were the Celtic king described above in numerous Celtic narratives, he could be expected to seal his bargain with her. Consistent with her literary forerunners, Bercilak's lady appears to know very well what Gawain's presence at Hautdesert means for her: it means "my knyȝt . . . I kȝt haue" (l. 1225); it means "I haf hit

⁵⁸ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 16.

⁵⁹ Cross, "The Celtic Elements," 28.

holly in my honde þat al desyres" (l. 1257). If the stories about him are true, as the lady says she believes they are (l. 1274), his high repute then means quite naturally that "þer schulde no freke vpon folde before yow be chosen" as her "lorde" (ll. 1275, 1271). In her lengthy tribute to Gawain, Bercilak's lady challenges her hero specifically to prove that he is the non-pareil of knighthood by courting her. This he can only do, she claims, by taking as his own precept

. . . þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure
of armes;
For to telle of þis teuelyng of þis
trwe knyȝtez,
Hit is þe tytelet token and tyxt of
her werkkez
(ll. 1513-15)

Gawain's reluctance to tackle this subject ("to take þe toruayle to myself to trwluf expoun,/ And towche þe temez of tyxt and talez of armez"--ll. 1540-1) is completely consistent with his shrinking away also from complete faithfulness to his bargain with her "lorde."

The most important element in SGGK, then, may be most accurately described as a bargain which rules the hero's relationship with his "lorde" and "lady" alike. For Gawain there is no loyalty to one without a con-comitant fealty to the other: this feature of his "lorde's" and "lady's" relationship to each other extends to his relationship with each of them. The shame

that he experiences at the end of the poem--a shame so intense that he cannot forget it even though the poet awards his adventures a fortunate conclusion--is the specific result of his assumption that his host and hostess are ever separable in act, intention, or token thereof. The supposedly magical green cord belongs equally to both of them; their paradoxical nature extends also to it as a symbol, equally, of the power to inflict death or grant the terms for life. The terms of that bargain to which Gawain becomes a party in the poem are strict and enforceable enough to allow for the designation of this compact as a legal contract. The relationship between the parties to this agreement may be accurately termed a marriage, especially because, in the course of the poem, the "lorde" and "lady" are shown to enjoy an indissoluble union. The binding nature of this relationship is proven, on the one hand, by the "lorde's" and "lady's" demonstrated dominion and, on the other hand, by Gawain's acceptance of the green cord which binds him--and, by extension, Arthur's Round Table--forevermore to both of them.

When SGGK is placed in the context of all those Celtic narratives which have been discussed above, several conclusions must follow. First, in general, the successful competition for the Celtic "sovereignty"

certifies the Celtic "sovereign." In so far as SGGK follows this basic Celtic theme, this competition takes the particular form of faithfulness to a verbal contract. The keeping of this oath to the letter is the seal of the sacred bond between a monarch and his rightful realm. Because, in his actions, Gawain represents Arthur's court, his less-than-perfect performance at Hautdesert then places "Camylot" necessarily under the dominion of the Green Knight. The poem's "Champion's Bargain" is a "Crystemas gomen" only for kings, who cannot afford to be hot-blooded youths: Bercilak is a "lorde" and Gawain is not. Let those laugh who can afford to.

The key term for SGGK, under which all the preceding interconnected concepts may be subsumed, is "sovereignty." This term is dramatized and recurs in the oldest Celtic story materials which may be related to the doublet characters of the poem. It is the applicability of this term to the action, as well as the characters of SGGK, which suggests the need for a critical reorientation of the scholarship on the poem, shifting scholars' attention away from the "fairy-princess" and toward real monarchs capable of seeing themselves in mythological terms. It is a focus on "sovereignty" which may sustain the SGGK poet's comparison with Dante, who believed in man's "inborn and perpetual thirst for the godlike

kingdom."⁶⁰ It is the adoption of this critical term which may allow also for the alignment of SGGK with Spenser's Faerie Queene, a work which specifically treated, among other matters, the enduring problem of England's proper relationship to Ireland.⁶¹ It is the encompassing nature of this key term, specifically, which may prove the basis for the SGGK poet's affinity for Chaucer, for whom marriage was a theme unifying the seven Canterbury Tales identified collectively by G. L. Kittredge as the "Marriage Group," a theme which turned inevitably to the subject of the "souverainetee."⁶² In Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde," furthermore, one may discover the best description of Gawain's own moral downfall: Criseyde's tragedy is also her "slidynge corage."⁶³ In Troilus' laughter in the eighth sphere of the empyrean,⁶⁴ one may discover as well that laughter at "wo" which echoes throughout SGGK, balancing the human failure and elevating the entire work to the stature of a tragi-comedy. On the choice of critical

⁶⁰ John D. Sinclair, trans., The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: III Paradiso (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 33.

⁶¹ De Selincourt, p. xxxvii.

⁶² Robinson, p. 7.

⁶³ Robinson, p. 387.

⁶⁴ Robinson, p. 479; "Troilus and Criseyde," V, l. 1821.

terms, and their accompanying critical categories, the entire critical orientation of SGGK scholarship depends.

The identification of the theme of "sovereignty" in SGGK allows for a fresh perspective on the poet's symbolism. Since the Pentangle derives from Solomon (l. 625), it may function as the sign of a sovereign. Since the poet says this sign "acordez" (l. 631) to Gawain, then he may be recognized as a sovereign. Since Bercilak beats Gawain in the "Beheading Game," he may be a sovereign of sovereigns. This much is certain regarding the sovereign: the sovereignty belongs to him. But can a mortal man ever be worthy of her? This is a question to which the SGGK poet seems to have devoted considerable meditation.

CHAPTER V:
THE BERNLAK POEM

In general, source studies on SGGK's narrative materials leave one major element of the poem unaccounted for: its Christian content. The poet's closing reference to Christ, "þat bere þe croun of þorne," (l. 2529) cannot be considered nugatory; it occurs in his final "bob," and, overall, he tends to reserve such a position for summations or points he would deliver with dramatic impact.¹ Overall, too, SGGK bears the signs of devout religious thought; as Laura Hibbard Loomis emphasizes: ". . . above all else the romance has a quality of spiritual distinction comparable to that in the Pearl."² This chapter will consider those scholars who have analyzed the religious character of the poem in terms of its dominant symbols. D. W. Robertson's work will be considered first, for it offers an interpretation of the Green Knight's color which has given rise to much critical debate. The scholarship of J. A. Burrow, it will

¹On the poet's dramatic handling of his verse form, see D. Everett, "The Alliterative Revival," p. 13.

²L. H. Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," p. 22.

be suggested, provides the best resolution to this critical schism. Subsequently, Robertson's work will be evaluated once more for its insistence on the primary relevance of Patristic writings to a poem such as SGGK. Over against Robertson's emphasis on the Church Fathers, this chapter will introduce an interpretation of the poem emphasizing the influence of Biblical materials, which would have reached the SGGK poet through a variety of means--his readings in the Vulgate (a probability), his readings in the Church Fathers (a probability), his readings in Old English (a possibility), and his familiarity with the mass (a demonstrable certainty). It is in the context of these materials that that question raised by Robertson's scholarship can best be answered: does the Green Knight's color symbolically portend good or evil in his character and design?

In his 1954 article "Why the Devil Wears Green"³ Robertson touches on that question which has proved the bane of SGGK criticism: why is the Green Knight green? To his credit, Robertson observes in a note that SGGK's verdant figure "is not quite comparable to the green devil."⁴ But his insistence that the devil himself may be fairly characterized by his green apparel still

³D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Why the Devil Wears Green," MLN, 69 (1954), 470-72.

⁴Robertson, "Why the Devil," p. 472.

leaves the Green Knight's character in a disreputable green shade. The devil's green, Robertson emphasizes, is one with his falseness: it offers "protective coloration needed to attract" his fellow workers as well as his potential victims.⁵ Robertson's interpretation of the color's significance in this context depends on his identification of the devil as, in effect, the oldest hunter of them all. His distinction between the Green Knight and the green "feend" rests on two observations: first, that the former "is not a hunter"; second, that the former not only wears green but is green⁶ and thus, implicitly, seems to stand in a class by himself. The second of these observations is, of course, quite true, but the first ignores the fact that the Green Knight is one with Bercilak, and no activity is more thoroughly identified with Bercilak in Section III of the poem than hunting. While Robertson's comments in this article focus on the evil connotations of hunting and green-ness, his observations call special attention to the fact that both of these phenomena had meanings "in bono" and "in malo" in the Middle Ages. Thus his comments, however brief, have added fuel to a critical schism in which numerous critics have participated.

⁵ Robertson, "Why the Devil," pp. 472, 471.

⁶ Robertson, "Why the Devil," p. 472.

Other critics have also emphasized one point that is implicit in Robertson's brief commentary on SGGK's Green Knight: like the summoner's green-clad companion in Chaucer's "Friar's Tale," the Green Knight is most certainly a tempter. His initial challenge of Arthur's court to a "Crystemas gomen" (l. 283) lures his fellow gamesman into an activity which will clearly reveal the extent to which his neck and soul stand in jeopardy. While Robertson passes over this particular implication, which will associate the Green Knight with the underworld in general and, perhaps, with the "Celtic underworld" specifically,⁷ A. H. Krappe, in an earlier study, did not. In his article, "Who Was the Green Knight?" written in 1938, Krappe had already clearly stated the terminus of Robertson's reasoning as applied to SGGK:

. . . the Green Knight is a mediaeval precursor of maitre Samson, wielding the rude axe or (in one more aristocratic text) the long sword of the headsman, with which noble and princely personages accused of 'high treason,' from the time of the early Plantagenets to that of James II, were expeditiously dispatched into a better world he is not an ordinary executioner but a supernatural, an immortal one, in fact the only deathless executioner known, namely Death itself.⁸

⁷ Robertson, "Why the Devil," p. 471.

⁸ A. H. Krappe, "Who Was the Green Knight?" Speculum, 13 (1938), 208.

In Krappe's interpretation of SGGK, the symbolic significance awarded green-ness by both traditional Celtic and Christian sources is essentially one and the same: the typically green Celtic fairies are the dead ancestors, and "green is the color of the dead and of death."⁹

The primary difficulty with such a grim interpretation of SGGK's dominant color is that it treats the poem as if it were a passion by the sixteenth-century painter Grünewald in which green does not glitter but turns macabre and sickly, becoming the visual equivalence of agony. At a clear distance from the world of SGGK, no one laughs in Grunewald's "Crucifixion," and it would be difficult to find anyone who would be prompted to laugh at it, either. Krappe's approach to the poem ignores the fact that Death was never the only "Lord" of Hades. The Canticle of Canticles promises that "love is strong as death,"¹⁰ and millenia later, Donne could still agree: "Death," he taunted him, "though some have called thee/ Mighty and dreadful . . . thou shalt die."¹¹

Paying tribute specifically to the game element in SGGK, R. J. Blanche in 1976 attempted to counterbalance

⁹ Krappe, p. 211.

¹⁰ Canticle of Canticles viii. 6.

¹¹ Holy Sonnet 10, "Death Be Not Proud," ll. 1-2, 14.

Robertson's equation of green and evil. In "Games Poets Play: The Ambiguous Use of Color Symbolism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,"¹² Blanche argues that the poem's colors may not be treated apart from SGGK's overall patterning. Accurately enough, he notes that "As Gawain gradually repeats the color pattern of the Green Knight, he imperceptibly becomes a loser in the Christmas game."¹³ Describing the final stage of this intricate process, Blanche writes:

Significantly, then, the green girdle is projected against the red cloth of Gawain's coat-armor, the identical background to the gold pentangle painted on his shield (662-64) On his way to the Green Chapel, then, Gawain as victim must wear the livery of his hunter.¹⁴

Blanche's association of both green and red with the activity of hunting in SGGK is a more reliable treatment of this subject than Robertson's exclusive focus on the color green because it is more consistent with the interwoven intricacies of the poem.

In his analysis of SGGK Blanche seems to have discovered within the poem an association between the two

¹² R. J. Blanche, "Games Poets Play: The Ambiguous Use of Color Symbolism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Nottingham Medieval Studies, 20 (1976), 64-85.

¹³ Blanche, p. 85.

¹⁴ Blanche, p. 82.

colors which was of a long standing tradition. While Blanche himself identifies red and green primarily with the Christmas season,¹⁵ in A Complete Guide to Heraldry, written by Arthur Charles Fox-Davies in 1929, it is recorded that the livery of the only Royal pack which had recently been in existence, the Royal Buck Hounds, was scarlet and gold; the Master of the Hunt, however, wore a green coat.¹⁶ Furthermore, Fox-Davies reports the legend that the scarlet hunting coat originated in the fact that no one could participate in the Royal sport of hunting, even on his own land, without Royal permission; for this reason, the appropriate hunting garb was the English king's scarlet livery. This legend, Fox-Davies notes, may be false, since scarlet did not become the Royal livery until the accession of the Stuarts; it is by no means clear, he adds, to what date the scarlet hunting coat can be traced.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Fox-Davies also supplies information which links both green and red by tradition to the epic themes of love and war: for the medieval heraldic writer, green was the color of Venus

¹⁵ Blanche, p. 71.

¹⁶ Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, A Complete Guide to Heraldry, revised ed. (London: T. C. & E. C. Jack, Ltd., 1929), pp. 73-4.

¹⁷ Fox-Davies, pp. 73-74.

and red represented Mars.¹⁸ Thus, as Blanche implies, the critical problem in interpreting SGGK's colors is not a matter of assigning a single meaning to a single color but deciding which game, among many, is the dominant sport of the poem. If, in this context, works such as "Niall of the Nine Hostages," the "Dindshenchas," and "Eachtra Mac Echach Muigmedoin" may still be considered as providing critical keys to the meaning of SGGK, then it is possible that both the poem's colors and hunting scenes serve primarily to reinforce the poet's central interest in the age-old competition for the "sovereignty," which may be, after all, the favorite sport of kings.

The extent to which the SGGK poet needs to be treated specifically as a heraldic writer becomes apparent in the work of J. F. Eagen who catalogued the traditional symbolic meanings attributed to colors in the Middle Ages in his 1950 article, "The Import of Color Symbolism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight."¹⁹ The very prominence of colors in SGGK testifies to the poet's interest in heraldry, for, according to Eagen's research, the "immutable law" of heraldry is that

¹⁸ Fox Davies, p. 77.

¹⁹ J. F. Eagen, "The Import of Color Symbolism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Saint Louis University Studies, 1 (1950), 11-86.

"No great ideal can possibly be symbolized except by pure color."²⁰ This rule explains why only pure colors (or, argent, gules, azure, sable, vert, purpure) could be employed on flags and devices; only in the later Middle Ages was this rule relaxed sufficiently to allow for the introduction of tints. This modified practice then gave rise to the second rule of heraldry, that of the combination of colors. According to this rule, tints received their meanings from the colors which composed them: that which dominates, renders the general meaning; that which is dominated, offers the modified meaning.²¹

Eagen's work requires critics to recognize that, in so far as SGGK reflects heraldic attitudes, the poem should not be treated principally as a satire or even a mildly amusing comedy. Given its planned, consistent, and extraordinary deployment of color, it must be paying tribute to a "great ideal." In addition, Eagen's study requires that critical attention be paid to the domination of one color by another in SGGK. The Green Knight, for example, supplies a green field filagreed with gold

²⁰ Eagen, 14-15. In particular, Eagen quotes the following authorities: Faber Birren, The Story of Color (Westport, Conn.: The Crimson Press, 1941), p. 92; John E. Cussans, The Grammar of Heraldry (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1866), p. 11.

²¹ Eagen, p. 15.

and pin-pointed with red; when Gawain dons the green girdle for the poem's climax, he is reversing the relationship between the dominant green and subordinate red established initially in the Green Knight's physique: Gawain's garments supply a gold embossed red field highlighted by the green detail. Eagen attempts to reconcile such reversals by emphasizing that green is the dominant color of the poem²² and by interpreting Gawain's green girdle as "the emblem of his victory in chastity,"²³ as well as "his faithful fulfillment of the conditions of the Challenge."²⁴ Eagen's chosen focus on heraldry requires that he discover an essentially positive meaning in the SGGK poet's use of the color green--especially its traditional associations with spring, youth, hope, love, faith, and the time of the beginning²⁵--for who would choose to emblazon his follies?

The scholarship of J. A. Burrow offers a critical bridge spanning the divergent meanings of green "in malo" and "in bono" and thus, potentially at least, reconciles Robertsonian scholars with their opponents. His

²²Eagen, p. 82.

²³Eagen, p. 52.

²⁴Eagen, p. 86.

²⁵Eagen, pp. 23-24, 38.

thorough, fitt-by-fitt analysis of SGGK, entitled A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (1966), emphasizes that the poem is "beautifully inclusive and human" specifically because it is a balanced study in contraries.²⁶ This last phrase best describes Burrow's own work. With a delicate humor that enhances his scholarship, Burrow notes pointedly that while fairies, the dead, and the devil all seem to be associated with the color green in medieval literature, still "the Green Knight does not simply wear green--he wears green with gold accessories."²⁷ Thus he belongs equally to "the merry, luxurious world of courtly youth"²⁸ and the moral realm of *Everyman*,²⁹ the "fantasy-world of myth and folk-tale"³⁰ and the doctrinal territory of original sin.³¹

Burrow's treatment of SGGK's symbols seeks to establish a critical middle-earth consistent with the poem's own apparent lack of bias and schismatic tendencies. He prefers to speak of "exemplars" and "types" rather than allegorical figures.³² The poem's symbolism

²⁶ J. A. Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), pp. 29, 28.

²⁷ Burrow, p. 14.

²⁸ Burrow, p. 15.

²⁹ Burrow, pp. 33, 121-22, 185-86.

³⁰ Burrow, p. 165.

³¹ Burrow, pp. 145-47, 159, 171.

³² Burrow, pp. 35-36, 140, 144, 146-47.

is successful, as far as Burrow is concerned, because it is "elegant, unobtrusive and eminently natural."³³ Yet, for Burrow, SGGK's symbols can function on as many as three different levels. First, there is the natural level, where Gawain's scar serves as "a sign that he has survived his adventure spiritually as well as physically."³⁴ Next, there is the arbitrary level, where Gawain's girdle has no "natural title to any particular moral signification" and thus may be adopted by Gawain as a "token of vntrawþe" (l. 2509) while also being subsequently adopted by Arthur's court "as a sign of the 'renoun of þe Rounde Table'" (l. 2519).³⁵ Finally, there is the combined level: Solomon had assigned a meaning to the Pentangle which was still considered "natural," because the meaning of the sign was eternal; the five-fold inter-locking configuration was supposed to represent the nature of truth itself.³⁶ These meanings for the word "sign" Burrow has derived primarily from the Cursor Mundi, the Ancrene Riwle, Aristotle's Peri Hermeneias (De Interpretatione) and commentaries

³³ Burrow, p. 150.

³⁴ Burrow, p. 150.

³⁵ Burrow, p. 189.

³⁶ Burrow, p. 188.

upon this work by Boethius and Aquinas, as well as Isodore's Etymologiae, Langland's Piers Plowman, and Hoccleve's Minor Poems,³⁷ in an attempt to apply, in turn, Matthew of Vendome's distinction between the "outer" and "inner" man to Gawain as the hero of SGGK.³⁸ That area of art where the outer thing is in perfect "accord" with the inner man,³⁹ Burrow seems to consider the dominant realm of the poem's symbolism. Burrow's criticism supplies a significant contribution to scholarly assessments of SGGK's symbols because, as his categories make clear, he is attempting to think in the poet's own terms ("syngne," l. 625). His focus on "signs" raises the poet's credibility to a level which, given the quality of his work, should have been granted before.

At the same time, Burrow's focus on "signs" points to a new area of critical inquiry for SGGK: a possible relationship between the poem and sacred history. This is an aspect of the poet's work which has merited attention ever since Weston identified the Pentangle as a "mystic symbol," that is, a symbol with a hidden, mysterious, or, more commonly, religious meaning. The Pentangle, it must be emphasized, functions primarily

³⁷ Burrow, pp. 150-51, 187-89.

³⁸ Burrow, pp. 38-50.

³⁹ Burrow, p. 50; SGGK, l. 631.

within SGGK as a symbol of perfection. The poet very carefully delineates what the reader should expect from Gawain, as the Pentangle "accordez" (l. 631) to him:

Fyrst he watz funden fautlez in his
fyue wyttez,
And efte fayled neuer *þe* freke in his
fyue fyngres
His clannes and his cortayse croked
were neuer.

(ll. 640-1, 653)

The poet's emphasis on perfection ("fautlez," "fayled neuer," "croked . . . neuer") is in unique accord with that emphasis on perfection to be found also in medieval Biblical commentary, which, in turn, discovered this same emphasis in the Bible itself. The Douay-Rheims commentators, for example, call particular attention to the following lines from Christ's sermon on the mount:

Do not think that I am come to
destroy the law, or the prophets.
I am not come to destroy, but to
fulfil. (Matthew. v. 17.)

They gloss the words "to fulfil" as follows: "By accom-
plishing all the figures and prophecies; and perfec-
ting all that was imperfect."⁴⁰ The SGGK poet refers to
the Pentangle, specifically, as a "figure," (l. 627) and
his handling of this design in relation to Gawain's
character reveals that he is thinking in Biblical terms.
Gawain is presented initially as a figure of perfection;

⁴⁰ The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate,
revised ed., N. T., P. 7.

yet he lives up to this characterization only after he has learned his lesson in humility from the Green Knight. Thus, in SGGK, the Pentangle itself functions specifically as a Biblical "figure," as something which comes first in order that it may be fulfilled. It is a Biblical mode of thought, then, that informs the entire poem. It is this aspect of the poet's thought which has always warranted scholarly consideration; it receives it here, for the first time.

If the SGGK poet uses the word "sign" in the Biblical sense, then the Pentangle ("a syngne," "a figure," ll. 625, 627) points inevitably to the star which stood over the manger at Christ's birth (Matthew ii. 10.) in Bethlehem, the city of David (Luke ii. 11.). To interpret the Pentangle in this fashion is not to suggest that the poet confused the Pentangle with the hexagram, the symbol of Judaism. It is to approach the Pentangle as a composite symbol, similar, in its interwoven construction, to the poet's narrative method. If, as Burrows suggests, the meaning of the Pentangle was eternal, then the poet's lengthy description of its significations (ll. 625-65) may demonstrate his belief that, in the course of human history, each aspect of the design overall would gradually come to be more fully understood. The star which stood over the city of David,

it should be noted, points back through Solomon again to David, who, as Christ's direct ancestor, stood in the line of descent from Abraham (Matthew i. 1.), with whom God established His sacred covenant. The "sign" of this covenant was circumcision: "The male, whose flesh of his foreskin shall not be circumcised, that soul shall be destroyed out of his people: because he hath broken my covenant" (Genesis xvii. 14.). Paul describes this "sign," in turn, as "a seal of the justice of the faith" (Romans iv. 11.). The foremost "sign" of the New Testament, however, is associated with Christ Himself in Simeon's paradoxical prophecy: "Behold this child is set for the fall, and for the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted" (Luke ii. 34.). Implicit references to both David and Christ may reverberate, furthermore, in SGGK's numerous repetitions of the word "Lorde," since David was considered "a true pattern to all good kings" in the Middle Ages,⁴¹ and Christ enjoyed the proper title of "Lord of

⁴¹ "Historical Index," The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate, revised ed., p. 300. Here, the commentary reads specifically as follows: "David king and prophet ruled his kingdom as a true pattern to all good kings; author of the book of Psalms which are full of divine knowledge, prepared means for building the temple, ordained divers sorts of musicians, and reigned forty years. 2 Kings, tot. 2 Par. 23., &c."

lords, and King of kings" (Apocalypse xvii. 14.).

The importance of these suggested Biblical allusions to critical interpretations of SGGK's symbols is considerable, for they could clarify that concept which even Burrow finds it essential yet difficult to explain: Gawain's "trawþe."⁴² The term "covenant" could embrace the seriousness of this concept in the sense of a sacred binding contract, as the modern English "truth" does not do. The most promising aspect of approaching SGGK's symbols directly in relation to sacred Christian history, however, is that here one might find a central focus which would allow all of the poem's most puzzling elements--the violence, the contract, the penance, the confession, and even its strange joy--to be seen as functioning inevitably together. For even as Bricriu had his feast, so did Christ: it is called Christ-mass.

To pursue a critical approach to SGGK which could properly be termed Biblical, however, would require a slight modification in Burrow's definition of the word "sign." The word would have to mean not only one thing that signifies another,⁴³ but also one thing which points to or leads toward another, even as a "sign" in modern English still supplies directions to a desired destina-

⁴² Burrow, pp. 23-26.

⁴³ Burrow, p. 187.

tion. Both of these meanings are consistent with the function of the star which led the wise men to Christ's birthplace (Matthew ii. 2, 9-10.). But the word "sign" would also have to mean a token of recognition, since the shepherds were told specifically: "And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger" (Luke ii. 12.). Furthermore, it should be emphasized that what is to be recognized in the circumstances of Christ's birth includes both the emotional and historical consequences of this event: the angel who promises the shepherds a "sign" of recognition also interprets the meaning of the promised event for his listeners: "Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people: For, this day, is born to you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David" (Luke ii. 10-11.). Following the angel's appearance, a "heavenly army" then expands the meaning of Christ's birth further, proclaiming the fulfillment of all human history in the coming of the Messiah, which brings "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will" (Luke ii. 14.).

The possibility that these are precisely the terms in which the SGGK poet utilizes the word "syngne" is increased by the fact that he expects his audience to

recognize the meaning of the Pentangle, even as the saved were expected to recognize events which "signified" the second advent of Christ (Apocalypse i. 1.); and he claims that this process of recognition may be confidently extended at least as far as the boundaries of England (ll. 629-30). There is in his work, furthermore, a telescoping of meanings, as every major source study on his poem amply demonstrates; and this process of telescoping is, in itself, fundamentally consistent with the Bible's treatment of human history, in which every king of God's chosen people is tied relentlessly by genealogical records to his every ancestor and descendant in a continuum stretching, like a shining cord, from the beginning to the end of time (Matthew i. 1-7). One can touch no single point on this continuum without shaking out a multitude of resonating chords, which promise the punishment of the unjust and the eternal vindication of the faithful. The SGGK poet's use of the word "sign," then, reflects a whole view of human history: it is not sufficient to say that his understanding of history differs from modern man's; it is both necessary and accurate to acknowledge that, in so far as his poem reflects knowledge of and belief in the Bible, and the Bible itself relates a record of human affairs subject to the plan and intervention of God, then his view of

history should be termed "sacred" and his view of life "sacramental."⁴⁴ It is such a view of life and time which the Christian is required to sustain, since, as the Apocalypse promises, the saved (that is, the shriven) shall be "signed," (that is, "marked with the seal of the living God," Apocalypse vii. 3-8.)⁴⁵ and this mark shall preserve them against the coming of the Anti-Christ (Apocalypse ix. 3-4.).

Aside from the cross, perhaps, no single "sign" is more important to the structure of the New Testament than

⁴⁴ The applicability of this word to the poet's world-view is also apparent from the large number of topics which 1) are referred to automatically by the earliest usage of the word "sacred" and which 2) turn up together in SGK. In the Middle English of the fourteenth century, "sacred" refers to the "consecrated" "Eucharistic elements." "Sacred," however, is formed from the verb "sacre" plus "-ed." The verb "sacre," which is now obsolete, was used in both the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as a transitive verb meaning "To consecrate (the elements, or the body and blood of Christ) in the Mass." From the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, the word also meant "To celebrate (the Eucharist)." In the thirteenth-century Genesis & Exodus, it is used to mean "sacrifice." Gower used the word, too, to mean "worship." In the thirteenth century, the word also meant "to consecrate (a king, bishop, etc.) to office." In both the works of Wyclif and Piers Ploughman, it can mean "to hallow, bless, sanctify, make holy." In the fourteenth century, it could mean to "dedicate (a person) to a deity"; "to take a solemn oath." The word "sacramentally" also appears first in the writings of Wyclif, where it means "in a sacramental manner"; the word "sacrament" is recorded first in 1400, and, at that date, refers exclusively to that which pertains to, or is "of the nature of, a sacrament of the Church." See the OED, II, p. 2616.

⁴⁵ The Hold Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate, revised ed., N. T., p. 284.

the star of David. It appears at the birth of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew, and it reappears in the final chapter of the Apocalypse which states:

I Jesus have sent my angel, to testify to you these things in the Churches. I am the root and stock of David, the bright and morning star. (Apocalypse xxii. 16.)

Structurally, this star's placement in the New Testament reinforces God's promise to man: "I am the Alpha and Omega; the beginning and the end" (Apocalypse xxi. 6.). The older but, from the Christian perspective, variant form of this "sign" appears in the Old Testament character of Lucifer; medieval commentators identified him as "the prince of devils, who was created a bright angel, but fell by pride and rebellion against God."⁴⁶ To Lucifer were ascribed the following lines from Isaias:

I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, I will sit in the mountain of the covenant, in the sides of the north. I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the most High. (Isaias. xiv. 13-14.)

In the two testaments taken together, then, one finds both a "sign" and a false doublet of that "sign," a true redeemer who must be accepted and a false semblance who must be discerned and rejected.

⁴⁶The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate, revised ed., O. T., p. 772.

The critical problem for any Biblical interpretation of SGGK thus necessarily becomes an accurate reading of its central doublet figure. To whom does the star of truth really belong--to Bercilak the tempter (through his wife) or Gawain the liar? The problem, one suspects, is just as difficult as the SGGK poet intended it to be. It is a tribute to the work of D. W. Robertson, Jr., that anyone attempting to resolve this puzzle cannot proceed without further reference to his scholarship. Whether one agrees with his emphasis on the Church Fathers or not, his work is indispensable because he has treated the literary techniques derived by medieval authors specifically from Christian theology in more detail than any other scholar.

In his 1951 "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach Through Symbolism and Allegory,"⁴⁷ Robertson sets forth in brevo the central tenets of his longer 1962 volume, A Preface to Chaucer.⁴⁸ His highly Aristotelian tendency overall to clarify concepts by contrasting them with their opposites seems to be in general accord with the SGGK poet's

⁴⁷ D. W. Robertson, Jr., "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach Through Symbolism and Allegory," Speculum, 26 (1951), 24-49.

⁴⁸ D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962).

similar tendency to pair phenomena. The typical medieval landscape, he suggests, focuses on a garden image derived initially from Genesis and the Canticle of Canticles;⁴⁹ when fully developed, this garden image may flower into Jerusalem ("visio pacis"), which carries the tropological values of "virtue and spiritual peace," the allegorical value of "the Church of the faithful," and the anagogical value of the "Celestial City," while Babylon represents the "opposite of these things."⁵⁰ The key words for his treatment of medieval literature are "Charity" and "Cupidity," which he believes encompass the most important doctrines of medieval Christianity.⁵¹ The nature of truth, for Robertson, is a doctrinal "kernel" which must be discerned beneath the "shell" of its physical representation.⁵²

Arguing by appeal to authority, Robertson represents his own literary theory as being based especially upon the thought of St. Augustine as expressed in his De Doctrina. Such an appeal, he believes, warrants his conclusion that "the whole aim of Scripture is to promote

⁴⁹ Robertson, "Doctrine of Charity," p. 32.

⁵⁰ Robertson, "Doctrine of Charity," pp. 27-28.

⁵¹ Robertson, "Doctrine of Charity," p. 32.

⁵² Robertson, "Doctrine of Charity," p. 32.

Charity and to condemn cupidity." Furthermore, "Where this aim is not apparent in the letter of the Bible, one must seek it" ⁵³ When Robertson's close attention to paired conceptual opposites allows him to identify the literary technique of inversion, his scholarship is without peer. When he reduces all of Scripture to two words, however, he renders his work vulnerable to the old charge of reductio ad absurdum. ⁵⁴

Robertson is not a theologian, but he does point to the profound influence that theology exercised on medieval thought. Thus theological materials do serve as potential literary sources for medieval literature to a degree that is not comparable in the post-reformation, post-revolutionary, modern world. His emphasis on this point is well taken, but needs to be subordinated to the following facts. Medieval theology was developed principally within and dispensed through the auspices of the Christian Church, which was an active institution in the affairs of the world and every man's life. The significance of this point for a writer cannot properly

⁵³ Robertson, "Doctrine of Charity," p. 24.

⁵⁴ For Robertson's explanation of inversion, see "Doctrine of Charity," p. 45. For further observations on Robertson's tendency toward reductionism, see Francis Lee Utley, "Robertsonianism Redivivus," RPH, 19 (1965), 257.

be appreciated unless one realizes, for example, the enormous holdings of the Austin Friars in their library at York. Robertson describes these manuscripts in his volume, Chaucer's London, and quotes M. R. James' estimate that the libraries of "London, Bristol, Hereford, Oxford, Cambridge, Norwich, and Ipswich were at least equal in extent to that of the York friars."⁵⁵ These holdings included, first, texts of the Bible and accompanying reference works such as glosses, running commentaries, concordances, and dictionaries. Patristic authors were represented, first, by St. Augustine, but also by Chrysostomos, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory, Bede, Isidore of Seville, St. Bernard, and Hugh of St. Victor. The works of Boethius were there, as well as extensive collections of classical, astrological, astronomical, legal, and medical works.⁵⁶ A writer, it should be noted, also needs to be a reader; and one using this library would have encountered no evidence of an exclusive emphasis on Patristic authors, but, rather, very solid evidence of the Church's interest in a wide range of subjects. Thus the familiarity of every medieval author with the details of countless theological tracts

⁵⁵ D. W. Robertson, Jr., Chaucer's London (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), pp. 199-200.

⁵⁶ Robertson, Chaucer's London, p. 200.

cannot reasonably be assumed; but his familiarity with both the Bible and theology as they were brought to him especially through church services, this can be assumed and should be.

Considering the SGGK poet not as a general case, then, but as a specific individual, it may be said that he demonstrates an intimate familiarity with St. Augustine's De Doctrine. His knowledge of this work may be deduced, first, from his use of the word "knot" with reference to the Pentangle (l. 630). It is particularly significant that the poet introduces this word in the same context with the term "figure" (l. 627), just as St. Augustine employs both terms together in his description of the most difficult problems facing the interpreter of Scripture. "The knot, as it were," writes St. Augustine, "of this figurative action [Moses', Elias', and Christ's forty-day fasts] cannot be untied without a knowledge and consideration of this number."⁵⁷ The apparent puzzle of "figurative signs"--like the Pentangle itself, one might well add--are caused by ignorance, according to this Church father; when a sufficient knowledge of "languages" and "things" is brought to bear upon such problems, the result is illumination of the reader's

⁵⁷ Augustine, p. 51.

understanding.⁵⁸

The SGGK poet's respect for Augustine as a literary critic and mentor may be further substantiated by his adoption of one of this writer's own figures in his poem as well as his choice of an arcane name for one of his central characters. Christ is "our head," explains St. Augustine, and "we should offer our bodies to persecutors lest the Christian faith be in a manner killed in us, and in an effort to save our bodies we deny God."⁵⁹ That both the Green Knight and his lady are capable of confidently offering up their very selves while Gawain is not quite capable of making such an offering--this point should not be lost on SGGK's reader. Neither should the import of the following unusual correlations: 1) the Green Knight offers up his head quite literally; and 2) the faithful (that is, the Church), according to Augustine, must be willing to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of their "Head." Thus the possibility arises that, in some sense, the Green Knight himself is to be understood as a victim of persecution; that, taking these significations together, he represents the head of the Church in general in its relation to the Philistines,

⁵⁸ Augustine, pp. 50-51.

⁵⁹ Augustine, p. 51.

and the head of the English or Irish Christian Church, in particular, in relation to its earthly English lords who live, in the poem, in Camelot, which is most assuredly located in England's southerly regions.⁶⁰

Thus the Green Knight becomes associated both with the Pentangle and the poem's "knot." The poet treats this last word both as a figure (l. 630) and as an absolutely concrete thing, a rocky knoll⁶¹ (ll. 1431, 1434), which belongs to the realm of Bercilak and functions as the hiding place of the poem's "bor alþergrattest." (l. 1441) It is also this word which is applied quite literally to the heraldic device on Gawain's shield (l. 662) as well as the fastening of the green girdle (ll. 1831), 2376). That there are at least four levels of meaning in the poet's handling of the word is amply demonstrated by the care with which he has chosen to use it in reference to four different kinds of things (the figure, the knoll, the device, the fastening), all of which are key items in the poem. But the range of these levels should be equally clear: on the one hand, the "knot" refers to a scriptural puzzlement and may be considered consistent with Augustine's usage of the word;

⁶⁰ Tolkien and Gordon, pp. 72, 97.

⁶¹ Tolkien and Gordon, p. 193.

on the other hand, the word refers to a literal place given actual existence. The extent to which this location also contributes to the poem's meaning should not be underestimated, for it existed also in actuality outside the world of the poem but most assuredly within the northern regions toward which Gawain rides. This is the famous "King's Knot," a flat-topped mound enclosed by banks, located below Stirling Castle in Scotland. As R. S. Loomis records in his volume, Wales and the Arthurian Legend, this rocky formation was identified by Scots down through the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries as the "Tabyll Round."⁶² That the SGGK poet has set the second portion of his poem specifically at this location in Scotland is suggested by his unusual and precise usage of the word "knot," which, only according to Scottish beliefs, identified this sort of place as the true home of Arthur.

This point must be stressed: to the extent that the SGGK poet awards an unusual amount of attention to both the figurative and literal content of his work, to the very same extent he is most probably manifesting the combined influence of both St. Augustine and Hugh of St. Victor. Indeed, the two thinkers may supplement each

⁶² Roger Sherman Loomis, Wales and the Arthurian Legend (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1956), p. 17.

other, since, as Beryl Smalley states in her invaluable volume, The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages, Hugh resembles Augustine in the unity of his thought, and Hugh's purpose was, in part, to realign scholastic learning with the scriptural framework of the De Doctrina Christiana.⁶³ A brief excursus on this figure is necessary, therefore, to clarify in what respects his mode of thought is distinctive.

Hugh of St. Victor's thought may be of particular relevance to the work of the SGGK poet specifically because his respect for the literal meaning of Scripture is consistent with the poet's attention both to Christian ideals and concrete, geographical, and historical details. In particular, Hugh sought to contradict what he saw as St. Gregory's neglect of the literal meaning of Scripture; such neglect, Hugh thought, led inevitably to a misinterpretation of the sacred word.⁶⁴ Hugh insists that the Bible's veracity provides the basis for the sacraments' efficacy: as Christ's death was both a fact and a sign, so, too, communion both commemorates Christ's resurrection and repeats the miracle of the resurrection.

⁶³ Beryl Smalley, The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. 86.

⁶⁴ Smalley, pp. 92-93.

"What!" exclaims Hugh, "Cannot the Sacrament of the altar be a similitude and also truth?"⁶⁵ Hugh's regard for the literally reliable metaphors of the Bible, which he saw as having been inspired by the Holy Spirit, led him to view Scripture as inspired history, as, in fact, the primary source of world history. It also led him to have a special interest in the sacraments, since he considered them both historical (that is, occurring in time) and symbolic (having a significance which transcends time). Hugh's interest in history, which he learned from St. Augustine, also led him to envision Christ, "The Word Incarnate," as "our King, who came into the world to fight the devil." He thinks, primarily, in terms of human religious history, the history of salvation; thus he carefully elucidates the proprieties of sacrifice as prescribed in Leviticus. Originality and tradition are both apparent in his work: he wrote homilies on part of Ecclesiastes and devotional notes on the more popular Psalter.⁶⁶

It is just at this point that one can see the bias present in Robertson's treatment of the Church Fathers and the effect this bias can have on symbolic interpreta-

⁶⁵ Smalley, p. 93.

⁶⁶ On these characteristic features of Hugh's thought, see Smalley, pp. 89-90, 97-99.

tions of SGGK. In general, his critical methodology emphasizes abstraction of thought and it serves, in and of itself, as an austere form of discipline designed to humble the practitioner. Quoting St. Augustine, Robertson maintains that unravelling the obscurities of Scripture may be "pleasant," but this pleasure cannot derive from the linguistic "shell" in which the pure precept waits to be discovered.⁶⁷ An emotional response to "figurative language"--no matter how delightful, ingenious, or provocative--is strictly prohibited by his approach to medieval literature.⁶⁸ In A Preface to Chaucer, he summarizes his aesthetic theory in the following manner:

Figurative language, whether in the form of similitudes like those discussed by St. Augustine, or in the form of more extended allegory, creates an enigma which challenges the reason to seek an intelligible beauty beneath a surface which is not necessarily beautiful itself.⁶⁹

In contrast to Robertson's literary theory, SGGK seems to insist that the world of language is as active, beautiful, and dangerous as any other, consisting not just of empty husks, but barbs, lures, parries, and thrusts, as well as

⁶⁷ Robertson, A Preface, p. 54.

⁶⁸ See Robertson, A Preface, p. 55.

⁶⁹ Robertson, A Preface, p. 58.

pointers delivered directly by the narrator to his principal human character: "Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan" (l. 487) The world of SGGK's language is essentially dramatic,—"Why!" (l. 1528) "Lo!" (l. 1848) "Quat!" (l. 2201) "Abyde" (l. 2217)--and Robertson's theory is not in accord with the basic requirements for this world where a character's speeches reveal the character. Without the successful evocation of emotion in SGGK, and by SGGK,--a gasp when the head falls to the "erþe" (l. 427) and rolls--the poem, in its present form, could not exist. Thus a thorough-going Robertsonian approach to the work runs the very real risk of stripping away the so-called "shell" only to discover that all of the poem's meaning has been destroyed with it.

Robertson's description of medieval aesthetics creates the impression sometimes that there was one general literary theory to which all medieval writers adhered. This impression is simply not consistent with the fact that Hugh of St. Victor took exception to St. Gregory's interpretation of Scripture, accusing him implicitly of leaping "straight from the letter to its spiritual meaning" and thus, potentially, missing a passage's entire import.⁷⁰ In general, Robertson does not take into consideration the fact that the relationship

⁷⁰ Smalley, p. 93.

between the literal and symbolic levels of meaning was not just a question of aesthetics in the Middle Ages; this relationship was at the heart of a very long and heated argument over transubstantiation,⁷¹ a matter which later played a significant role in the Reformation even as it still divides various Christian denominations today. On this subject, Robertson is not really an objective commentator, but figures more as a Gregorian partisan. Hugh's warning to those following the Gregorian mode is strong and explicit, however:

The outward form of God's word seems to you, perhaps, like dirt, so you trample it underfoot, like dirt, and despise what the letter tells you was done physically and visibly. But hear! that dirt, which you trample, opened the eyes of the blind. Read Scripture then, and first learn carefully what it tells you was done in the flesh.⁷²

In this context, the SGGK poet's regard for the literal world should be particularly noted, for his lush, detailed, polished, and perfected treatment of concrete things and events also has its theological implications. He treats his very words like pearls. There are mysteries in his world, surely: the reader may have to unravel them, but there is also such a thing as revelation. As

⁷¹ See Smalley, p. 92.

⁷² Smalley, p. 94.

the Green Knight and his lady amply demonstrate, this world's mysteries sometimes also burst upon one, all apparently unbidden. And they are not to be unheeded; for they stalk the ignorant, who may turn out to be even the most renowned of men.

The SGGK poet's regard for the literal word is on a par with his regard for the literal world. His poem insists that an incredible event such as the Green Knight's beheading should remain mysterious but nonetheless absolutely real—"þe blod brayed fro þe body, þat blykked on þe grene," (l. 429)—and in this sense absolutely "true." There is no better explanation for the words "Hugo de" which appear on the SGGK manuscript⁷³ than the suggestion that they record an anonymous fifteenth-century commentator's recognition of Hugh's thought in the poem. Such a reference would in no way obliterate Augustinian influence on the poet's thought, for, as Smalley makes clear, Hugh and Augustine were, in their purposes, spiritual brothers. But it is of special importance to recognize Hugh's potential influence on the SGGK poet's construction of the Pentangle. It is typical of Hugh to create a figure to illustrate a Biblical idea: thus in his De Arca Noa Mystica, he describes himself drawing a detailed diagram of Noah's ark for his spiritu-

⁷³ See Tolkien and Gordon, p. xii.

ally restless brethren, explaining, as he draws, his complicated symbolism whereby the ark signifies the Church and the Church serves as Christ's body, all the while comforting his audience and referring to himself as "the artist."⁷⁴ His sheer delight in his figure is clear: he paints it lovingly with gold and blue and "flame colour."⁷⁵ Thus in his teaching and by his own example, Hugh lends a dignity to the artistic act which seems to escape Robertson's attention; he also encourages, as a holy act, one of the particular virtues of the SGGK poet: his ability to visualize a scene in exquisite yet selective detail. It is in an imagination such as Hugh's, Smalley states, that one may recognize a kind of symbolism which flourished in the twelfth century: for Hugh, the exegete begins with a picture, "to which the text is a commentary and illustration."⁷⁶ If the SGGK poet is proceeding according to Hugh's conception of symbolism, then his treatment of the Pentangle itself and his highly dramatic court scenes both proceed from the same source and this source gives his work patristic precedent and approval.

⁷⁴ Smalley, pp. 95-97.

⁷⁵ Smalley, p. 96.

⁷⁶ Smalley, p. 95.

To pay Robertson his just due, however, one must finally admit that if scholars had heeded his general advice and read the Church Fathers carefully, they might already have identified the Green Knight. St. Augustine says, it must be remembered, that a "knowledge of languages" may solve numerous "enigmas" in Scripture.⁷⁷ Hugh of St. Victor's respect for the literal sense of a word offers, in effect, the same advice, especially because, for Hugh, the literal sense is not the word, but what it means; it may have a figurative meaning, and this still belongs to the literal sense.⁷⁸ The different readings of the Green Knight's given name which have been advanced over the years suggest not only that the character is an enigma (or "knot") but also that his name is carefully chosen from a language with which the SGGK poet may have had a special familiarity.

The poet's interest in ancient languages in general is demonstrated by his deliberate choice and lengthy explication of the "Pentangel": the word is a hybrid form from the Greek "penta-" plus "angle."⁷⁹ The poet's "Pentangel" (or, as it is now spelled, "Pentangle") may be an accommodated form of "pentagle." This word, in

⁷⁷ Augustine, p. 50.

⁷⁸ Smalley, p. 93.

⁷⁹ OED, II, p. 2124.

turn, may be a variant of "pentacle," a word derived from the medieval Latin "pentaculum"; but the history of this word also remains obscure.⁸⁰ While Tolkien and Gordon believe that the rarity of "Pentangle" in English literary history must be accidental,⁸¹ the OED still credits the SGGK poet with the first and only use of this word in English until 1646. Thus, Tolkien and Gordon are on safe ground when they conclude that the poet's language is "to some extent eclectic," even though it also includes a traditional alliterative poetic vocabulary as well as dialectal forms unique to England's north-west midlands.⁸²

The poet's language has been the subject of some of the best criticism on SGGK. In her 1955 essay "The Alliterative Revival," Dorothy Everett suggested that "it is perhaps chiefly by the words he chooses that he [the SGGK poet] calls up the associations he wants." Everett emphasizes: "It is the words belonging to the alliterative tradition that are most effectively used in this poem [SGGK]."⁸³ These words, she notes, are typically Old

⁸⁰ Tolkien and Gordon, p. 63.

⁸¹ OED, II, p. 2123.

⁸² Tolkien and Gordon, p. xxvii.

English in origin.⁸³ The poet's discrimination in choosing his words is one of those virtues which, for Everett, sets him above all his fellow alliterative poets and marks him, finally, as a peer of Chaucer.⁸⁴ Morton Bloomfield has emphasized a similar point. "The problem," he writes in his 1961 essay "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," "is not merely to know the meaning of a large number of unusual words [in the poem] but also to understand properly their connotations." Bloomfield has carefully elucidated the numerous problems which remain for scholars of the poem to solve: not the least of these, he suggests, is the need to understand the poet's attitude toward his material.⁸⁵ The best answer that Bloomfield can provide to this question seems to lie in the poet's treatment of the past. In his authoritative summary of the numerous quandaries which still challenge

⁸³ Everett, "The Alliterative Revival," pp. 19-20. The examples which Everett offers are "half etayn" (OE. eoten), "worme" (OE. wyrmas), "wodwos," (OE. wudu-wasa), and "etayne." See SGGK, ll. 140, 720, 721, 723.

⁸⁴ Everett, "The Alliterative Revival," pp. 14, 19, 20.

⁸⁵ Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," pp. 28, 36. On the authoritativeness of this essay, see p. 24, n. 1, where Bloomfield acknowledges the other scholars who also contributed to the wide range of knowledge which is reflected in this piece. The most notable of these other scholars is F. L. Utley.

the poem's critics, it is the poet's fascination with the past which Bloomfield seems to consider the most certain point that can be made about SGGK as a whole.⁸⁶

It is, admittedly, difficult to apply this general observation to the poet's language. Bloomfield himself has summarized the pitfalls which await the critic who bases his interpretation of this poem on an identification of the poet's dialect in particular. First, the correct identification of the poem's dialect does not necessarily lead to the correct identification of the poem's setting. Second, a correct identification of the poem's dialect does not necessarily lead to the correct identification of the poet's location in his later years. In short, a correct identification of the poet's dialect offers, at best, some evidence concerning the poet's place of origin. But even this information may have been obscured by the dialect of the scribe, rather than that of the poet.⁸⁷ Tolkien and Gordon summarize the same critical problems noted by Bloomfield as follows:

1) "there was," they believe, "probably no important difference between the language of the scribe and that of

⁸⁶ Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," pp. 55.

⁸⁷ Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," p. 32.

the poet"; 2) the manuscript, however, is "plainly not the author's original"; 3) "there is no way of telling how often or at what interval it may have been copied"; 4) "internal evidence is vague."⁸⁸ Thus, interpretations of the poem based on the poet's dialect have not received encouragement in recent, authoritative treatments of SGGK. The best critical opinion seems to be that, even if the desired dialectal identifications could be established in great detail, this information would constitute an unreliable basis for interpreting the poem.

Thus critics of SGGK have repeatedly confronted the fact that the evidence which they need to interpret the poem seems to be missing or unobtainable. This same information, however, seems to have been such an intimate part of the poet's environment that he feels free to assume his audience's familiarity with it just as he assumes their familiarity with the Pentangle (ll. 629-30). If his knowledge is as obscure as it seems to a modern audience, how can the poet make it so clear to this modern audience that there is something he clearly expects them to know, which they do not know? This has been, and remains, the central question for scholarship on the poem's symbols. This is the question which any

⁸⁸ Tolkien and Gordon, pp. xiii, xxv.

symbolic interpretation of the poem must answer, in some way, or fail. This is what symbolic criticism of SGGK attempts to do: to identify the critical key to the poem's meaning; to discover a secret which was, apparently, available to, and kept by, all the members of the poet's audience.

In an attempt to solve this mystery, scholars' treatments of the Green Knight's name deserve much more critical attention than they have received. There is only one manuscript of the poem (MS. Cotton Nero A. x.), and there is only one place within the poem where this character's name is recorded (l. 2445): these are given in a subject involving unique circumstances. In 1839, Sir Frederic Madden transcribed SGGK and published it, for the first time, in Syr Gawayne: A Collection of Ancient Romance-Poems. Madden read the name as "Bernlak" and so printed it in his edition.⁸⁹ In 1864, Richard Morris paid tribute to Madden's text of SGGK as being "very accurate"; he printed the name, as Madden did, "Bernlak." In his introduction to Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight: An Alliterative Romance-Poem, Morris emphasized that the poem's manuscript was not only faded but "fading." He explained the significance of this

⁸⁹ Sir Frederic Madden, ed., Syr Gawayne: A Collection of Ancient Romance-Poems (London: Richard and John E. Taylor, 1839), p. 90.

observation as follows:

As the manuscript is fast fading, I am glad that the existence of the Early English Text Society has enabled us to secure a wider diffusion of its contents before the original shall be no longer legible.⁹⁰

In addition, in his preface to Early English Alliterative Poems, in the West-Midland Dialect of the Fourteenth Century, Morris characterized the SGGK manuscript as being "difficult to read" because of the scribe's "small, sharp, irregular" calligraphy, as well as "the paleness of the ink, and the contractions used."⁹¹ (For the page of the manuscript containing this word, see the Appendix to this study. The word begins the fourteenth line from the bottom of the page. It should be noted, too, that another "n," similar to Bernlak's disputed letter, occurs also in "Morgne," the first word in the eighth line from the bottom of the same page.)

In 1923, James R. Hulbert first suggested that the Green Knight's name is "Bercilak" or "Bertilak," rather

⁹⁰ Richard Morris, ed., Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight: An Alliterative Romance-Poem, 2nd ed., revised, EETS 4 (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1869), pp. 78, xx.

⁹¹ Richard Morris, ed., Early English Alliterative Poems, in the West-Midland Dialect of the Fourteenth Century, 2nd ed., revised, EETS 1 (London: Trubner & Co., 1869), p. xli.

than "Bernlak." In his essay, "The Name of the Green Knight: Bercilak or Bertilak," he introduces this idea without questioning, specifically, either Madden's and Morris's reliability as editors or the problems arising out of the manuscript's faded, and fading, condition. He presents his argument as fact: "A careful examination of the manuscript shows that the symbol [between r and l in "Bernlak"] is ci." He admits the difficulty scholars confront in the name "Bernlak": "The name as it appears in the published text has never been discussed in print, probably because it has not been found elsewhere."⁹² He conjectures, furthermore, that the scribe may have intended to write "Bertilak," rather than "Bercilak." In the false Guinevere episode of the Vulgate Arthurian romances there is a "Bertelak" who corresponds in function (as the protector of a deceitful lady) to SGGK's Green Knight; and Hulbert suggests the probability that SGGK's author was familiar with these romances, "or some direct descendent of them."⁹³ The majority of Hulbert's article concerns this last point

⁹² James R. Hulbert, "The Name of the Green Knight: Bercilak or Bertilak," in The Manly Anniversary Studies in Language and Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1923), p. 12.

⁹³ Hulbert, "The Name of the Green Knight," pp. 12-13, 15, 19.

even though he admits,

If there were an alternative theory of any reasonableness, this explanation of the name might seem weak. But in the absence of other possibilities the theory that Bercilak is derived from Bertelak is worth considering.⁹⁴

Hulbert's influence on later editors' readings of the Green Knight's name has been decisive. In his edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, which was published in 1940, Sir Israel Gollancz printed the name as "Bertilak"; his note on line 2445 refers the reader to Hulbert's article immediately after recording the original reading, "Bernlak."⁹⁵ The second edition of J. R. R. Tolkien's and E. V. Gordon's Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, revised by Norman Davis in 1967, accepts Gollancz's reading of "Bertilak"; but, again, the note on line 2445 follows Hulbert's argument as it explains, "This form of the name [Bertilak] fits the other occurrences of what is apparently the same name, Bertolais in the OFr. Vulgate cycle . . . and Bertelak in the ME. translation of Merlin." The editors of this edition

⁹⁴ Hulbert, "The Name of the Green Knight," p. 16.

⁹⁵ Sir Israel Gollancz, ed. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, with intro. essays by Mabel Day and Mary S. Serjeantson, EETS 210 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 91, 130.

implicitly qualify Hulbert's argument as follows, however: they believe that none of the knights bearing the name can be identified with the Green Knight; his name, they add, "is apparently of Celtic origin."⁹⁶ Charles Moorman's edition of The Works of the Gawain-Poet, published in 1977, summarizes the current critical opinion on the Green Knight's name as follows:

Bercilak de Hautdesert: Printed as Bernlak by Madden and Morris, the correct form of the name was established by Hulbert . . . who derived it from the Bertelak of the Vulgate Cycle, which Hulbert maintained the poet had read. Since Bercilak is the form used by most modern students, it seems a bit pedantic to print Bertilak . . . though the letter itself is doubtful.⁹⁷

Both Moorman and Hulbert, it must be emphasized, use the same word to describe Hulbert's treatment of the Green Knight's name: his proposed identification of "Bercilak" or "Bertilak" is "derived" [italics mine] from his source study involving "Bertelak." Both also acknowledge that the question of the Green Knight's name involves many quandaries which scholars find it difficult to address directly. Even though Hulbert's reading of "Bercilak" or "Bertilak" has been generally accepted,

⁹⁶ Tolkien and Gordon, pp. vi, 128; Gollancz, p. 130; Hulbert, "The Name of the Green Knight," p. 13.

⁹⁷ Charles Moorman, ed., The Works of the Gawain-Poet (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1977), p. 435.

Moorman still describes the fourth letter of the character's name as "doubtful." Hulbert himself acknowledged that his own suggestion was offered, principally, in the absence of other reasonable theoretical alternatives. There is no evidence in his article of any desire to suppress or ignore other alternatives, if these should become available. It is quite proper, therefore, to ask the basic question raised by later scholars' general acceptance of Hulbert's proposal: has the change in the text of the poem, inspired by Hulbert's proposal, been perfectly justified?

The paleographical evidence which is currently available clearly seems to support Hulbert's reading of the Green Knight's name. An examination of l. 2445 in the facsimile edition of SGGK reveals that the fourth letter of the word appears to be two letters, not one. The horizontal stroke, which would connect the two vertical strokes of the single letter -n-, is barely discernible: indeed, the two vertical strokes seem to incline slightly toward each other and seem to touch, just barely, at their highest points. But one is still left with the possibility that the ink of the manuscript (which is generally acknowledged to be fading⁹⁸) has disappeared specifically between the two vertical strokes

⁹⁸ Tolkien and Gordon, p. xi.
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and thus transformed what was originally one letter, apparently, into two letters. The possibility that the manuscript's ink has deteriorated in this particular place is strengthened by the fact that Hulbert discerned "a strong horizontal line" between "the two upright strokes"⁹⁹; the strength of this horizontal line is no longer apparent in the facsimile edition of SGGK. Moreover, the tendency of the ink to disappear just at the top of the scribe's -n- can be clearly seen in l. 2452 of the facsimile edition (cf. APPENDIX, eight lines from the bottom of the page). Here, the horizontal stroke of the -n- in "Morgne" also seems to have disappeared, thus, apparently, transforming one letter into two. In general, Hulbert acknowledges that the scribe's -n- is typically made with "two upright strokes and a diagonal connecting stroke often so thin as to be indiscernible."¹⁰⁰ If this is the case, then all words in the manuscript involving the letter -n- need to be approached with particular caution and, perhaps, conservatism.

Given the manuscript's deteriorated condition, the most reliable evidence concerning the Green Knight's name which scholars currently possess may be the earliest

⁹⁹ Hulbert, "The Name of the Green Knight," p. 12.

¹⁰⁰ Hulbert, "The Name of the Green Knight," p. 12.

editions of the poem; for Madden and Morris had the advantage of seeing the manuscript when it was less faded than it is today. In spite of Hulbert's change in the Green Knight's name, Madden's and Morris's reputations remain secure. Tolkien and Gordon state: "The first transcribers, Madden and Morris, deserve great credit for their care and accuracy."¹⁰¹ Even Hulbert does not say, "Madden was wrong." He discredits no earlier editor of the poem by name, for to do so would be to discredit, potentially, the reliability of the entire manuscript. It is important to recognize, then, that the subject of the Green Knight's name is a matter on which scholars may disagree. It may be crucial to recognize, furthermore, that this subject is one on which they have already disagreed. Madden's and Morris's reading of the name, however, has not received the attention it deserves. It receives attention here for the first time since 1940, when Gollancz accepted Hulbert's argument that "Bercilak" should supplant "Bernlak."

Let the following summation be reviewed in the light of one particular fact: the name of the Green Knight is a constant. Critical readings of the name have changed as the manuscript has deteriorated; they have also changed as scholarship on the poem's sources and ana-

¹⁰¹ Tolkien and Gordon, p. xi.

logues has progressed. Early editors of the poem, it should be noted, printed his name as "Bernlak." Hulbert thought it could be either "Bertilak" or "Bercilak," preferring the latter. Gollancz chose "Bertilak," and Tolkien and Gordon have chosen to agree with him.¹⁰² All of these scholars have nearly hit upon that reasonable alternative which Hulbert himself was seeking when he finally proposed a change in the original reading of the manuscript. On this matter, however, the earliest editors of SGGK should probably be considered the most reliable because they read the manuscript when it was in the best possible condition, given its late discovery. Among other scholars, R. S. Loomis provided the surest clue, determined as he was that the character had to be associated with light and fire.¹⁰³ The Green Knight's name is most probably "Bernlak," with a final "k" and a medial contraction being the only probable variants from its more common form, "bernelāc." The word is Anglo-Saxon, and it means "burnt-offering."¹⁰⁴ The authenticity of

¹⁰² See Tolkien and Gordon, p. 128, for a review of the variant readings.

¹⁰³ R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, p. 69.

¹⁰⁴ See Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse, revised by Dorothy Whitelock (1876; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 306. The earliest editors' reading of "Bernlak" should be awarded special study, given the faded condition of the manuscript (On the manuscript, see Tolkien and Gordon, p. xi.). The function

this word may be verified in another work, earlier than SGGK but in the English alliterative tradition--possibly the work that the poet refers to in lines 34-6 ("stori
stif and stronge,/ With lel letters loken,/ In londe so
hatz ben longe.").

This work has, as a result of the present investigation, finally been discovered. It is the "Kentish Psalm" to be found in MS. Cotton Vespasian D. vi in the British Museum.¹⁰⁵ It has been printed in Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse, which has been revised by Dorothy Whitelock. It is a free paraphrase of Psalms 1-11, with a prologue of thirty lines and an epilogue of

of the word "Bernlak" as a runic name may be comparable to Cynewulf's treatment of his own name as a mystic signature. In both names, it should be observed, there may be a similar variable of form depending on a medial -e- occurring at the point of a phonetic juncture. Thus there is an historical point at stake, and scholars of SGGK should examine both the poet's scholarly ability and his artistic purposes in choosing the Old English word "bernelak" to use in his own poem. Either "Bernlak" or "Bernelak" may render, in effect, the same name, since Cynewulf used both "Cynewulf" and "Cynwulf" as his own runic signature. On the other hand, in general the name "Cynewulf" was first spelled "Cyniulf," but the "i" tended to shift to an "e" about 750, and the "e" to disappear entirely toward the end of the century. Thus scholars' various renderings of the Green Knight's name may equivocate on what is essentially an historical shift in the Anglo-Saxon language. The SGGK poet's familiarity with Old Irish story materials has been thoroughly proven, but his knowledge and use of Old English deserves further study. On Cynewulf, see Charles W. Kennedy, Early English Christian Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 17-21.

¹⁰⁵ See Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader, pp. 208-14.

twelve lines framing David's dramatic monologue (ll. 31-146). What follows is the text of the poem as it is printed in Sweet's Reader, pp. 208-14. This text modifies the content of MS. Cotton Vespasian D. vi. by placing the Latin verses preceding the appropriate Old English lines at the bottom of the page in full, for the convenience of the reader.

XXXVII

KENTISH PSALM

[From Cotton MS. *Vespasian D. vi* in the British Museum,
ff. 70 ff.]

THIS free paraphrase of Psalm L[LI], with a prologue of thirty and an epilogue of twelve lines, is an interesting specimen of late Kentish (with a considerable admixture of West-Saxon forms). It is apparently of the tenth century, the only manuscript of it being written in a mid-tenth-century hand. The Latin verses, or more often only the first few words of them, are placed in the manuscript before the lines which paraphrase them. They are taken from a Roman version of the Psalter, though the poet in one place seems to render a Gallican reading. For convenience they are here printed at the foot of the page in full, with the portions in brackets which are not in the manuscript.

Dāuid wæs hāten diormōd hæleð,
Israēla bræga, æðelæ and rīce,
cyninga cȳnost, Crīste līost.
Wæs hē under hīosenum hearpera mārost
ðāra wē an folcum gefrīgen hæbben. 5
Sangere hē wæs sōðfrestest, swīðe geðancol
tō ðīngienne þīodium sinum
wið þāne mildostan manna Sceppend.
Wæs se Dryhtnes ðīowa Dāuid aet wige.
sōð sigeccempa, searocȳne man, 10
cāsere creaftig, þonne cumbulgebrec¹
on gewinndagum weorðan scoldan.
Hwæðere him geīode, swā ful oft gedēð,
þaette godferhte gylt gefrāmmað
þurh lichaman lēne geðōhtas. 15
Gelamp þæt him mon ansende sāula Neriend

¹ from r

witgan mid wordum, weorada Dryhten¹,
 and seegan hēt, selfum gecyðan
 ymb his womdēda Waldendes doom,
 þet se fruma wāre his fōres sceldig,
 for ðām þe hē Uriam hēt aldre benēman,
 fromne ferdinc fēore² beserode,
 and him Bezabē brōhte tō wife
 for gitsunga, þē hē Godes corre
 þurh his selves weorc sōna anfunde. 25

Him ðā ɔingode þioda aldon
 Dāuid georne and tō Dryhtne gebæd
 and his synna hord selfa ontēnde,
 gyltas georne Gode andhette,
 weoruda Dryhtne, and ðus wordum spæc: 30

'Miltsa ðū mē, meahtha Walden,
 nū ðū wāst [ðā manigfaldan] manna geðōhtas;
 help ðū, Hælend mīn, handgeworces
 þīnes ānes, almehtig God,
 efter þīnre ðāra miclan mildhiornesse. 35

Ond ēac efter menio miltsa³ ðinra,
 Dryhten weoruda, ādilga mīn unriht
 tō forgefenesse gāste minum.

Āðweah mē of sennum⁴, sāule fram wammum,
 gāsta Sceppend, geltas geclānsa, 40
 þā ðe ic on aldre ǣfre gefremede
 ðurh lichaman lēdre geðōhtas.

Miserere mei Deus secundum magnam misericordiam tuam. [ll. 31-35.]
 Et secundum multitudinem miserationem [sic] tuarum dele iniqui-
 tatem meam. [ll. 36-38.]
 Amplius lava me ab injustitia mea et a delicto mea [sic] munda me.
 [ll. 39-42.]

¹ dñs = dominus
interlined

² fere

³ t *interlined*

⁴ first n

For ðan ic unriht mīn eal oncwāwe¹
and ēac synna gehwār selfum æt ēagan,
firendēda geðrec beforan standeð,
scelda scīnað; forgef mē, Sceppen mīn,
lifes liohtfruma, ðīnre lusan blisse.

45

Nū ic ānum ðē oft syngode
and yfela feola ēac gefrāmede
gelta gramhēdig, ic ðē, gāsta breogo,
hēlende Crīst, helpe bidde,
ðæt mē forgefene gāstes wunde
an forðgesceaft fēran mōte,
þy ðīne wordewidas weorðan gefelde,
ðæt ðū ne wilnast weora ēniges dēað. 55
Ac ðū synfulle simle lērdes,
ðæt hīo cerrende Crīste hērdon,
and hiom līf mid ðē langsum² begāton;
swilce ðū æt dōme, Dryhten, oferswiðdest³
ealra synna cynn, sāula Neried. 60

Ic on unrihtum, ēac ðan in synnum
geēacnod wæs: ðū ðæt āna wāst,
mæhtig Dryhten, hū mē mōdor gebær
in scame and in sceldum: forgef mē, Sceppend mīn,
ðæt ic fram ðēm synnum selfa gecerre, 65
þā ðē⁴ mine ældran ær geworhtan,
and ic selfa ēac sioððan beēode.

Quoniam iniquitatem meam ego agnosco et delictum meum coram
me est semper. [ll. 43-47.]
Tibi soli peccavi et malum coram te feci ut justificeris in sermonibus
tuis et vincas dum iudicaris. [ll. 48-60.]
Ecce enim in iniquitatibus [conceptus sum et in delictis peperit me
mater mea]. [ll. 61-67.]

¹ n added above first w ² g interlined ³ ofer swiddest,
with - above the line ⁴ þy

Ac ðū selua, God, sōð ān lufast;
 þy ic ðe mid bēnum biddan wille
 līses and lisse, liohtes aldon, 70
 for ðan ðū mē uncūðe ēac ðan derne
 þīnre snetera hord selfa ontēndes.

Ðū mē, meahtig God, milde and bliðe
 þurh ȳsopon ealne āhlūttra,
 þonne ic geclēnsod Crīste hēro, 75
 and ēac ofer snāwe self scinende
 þīnre sibbe lufan sōna gemēte.

Ontyñ nū, Elmēhtig, ēarna hlēoðor,
 þæt min gehērnes heftful weorðe
 on gefēan bliðe forðweard tō ðe; 80
 ðanne bioð on wenne, Waldend, simle
 þā gebrocenan bān, bilwit Dryhten¹,
 ðā þe on hēnðum ær hwile wāron.

Ahwerf nū fram synnum, sāula Neriend,
 and fram misdēdum minra gylta 85
 þīne ansione, ælmeahtig God,
 and ȳurh miltunga meahta þīnra
 ðū unriht min eall ādilga.

Æc ðū, Dryhten Crīst, clēne hiortan
 in mē, meahtig God, mōdswiðne geðanc, 90

Ecce enim veritatem [dilexisti: incerta et occulta sapientiae tuae mani-
 festasti mihi]. [Il. 68-72.]

Asperies me ysopo et mundabor [lavabis me et super nivem deal-
 babor]. [Il. 73-77.]

Auditui meo dabis gaudium [et laetitiam et exultabunt ossa hu-
 miliata]. [Il. 78-83.]

Averte faciem tuam a peccatis meis et omnes [iniquitates meas dele].
 [Il. 84-88.]

Cor mundum crea in me, Deus, et spiritum rectum [innova in visceri-
 bus meis]. [Il. 89-94.]

¹ dñs

tō ðoliennē ðinne willan
and tō healdenne hālige dōmas;
and ðū rihtne gāst, rodera Waldend,
in ferðe mīnum festē geniowa.

Ne ƿecorp ðū mē, weoruda Dryhten, 95
fram ansīone calra þinra miltsa,
ne ðane gödan fram mē gāst hālige
āferredne, Frēa ƿelmeahtig,
þinra¹ ārna mē eal ne bescerwe.

Sæle nū bliðse mē, bilewit Dryhten², 100
þinre hālo hecht, helm alwihta,
and mē, lifgende liohtes hiorde,
gāste ðine, God, selfa getreme,
ðæt ic aldorlice ā forð sioððan
tō ðinum willan weorðan mōte. 105

Simle ic ðine weogas wanhogan lārde,
ðæt hio ƿarlēase eft gecerdan
tō hiora selfra sāula hiorde,
God, selfa tō ðē gāstes mundberd
ðurh sibbe lufan sēocan scoldan. 110

Befrēo mē an ferðe, Fæder mancynnes,
fram blōdgete and bealanīðum;
God lifigende, gylta geclānsa,
hālo and helpend, hiofenrices Weard:
ðanne tunge mīn triowfest blissāð 115
for ðines selves sōðfestnesse.

Ne proicias me a facie tuæ et spiritum sanctum tuum [ne auferas a me].
[ll. 95-99.]

Redde mihi letitiam [salutaris tui et spiritu principali confirma me].
[ll. 100-5.]

Doceam iniquos vias tuas et impii ad te [convertentur]. [ll. 106-10.]
Libera me a sanguinibus, [Deus, Deus salutis meae, et exaltabit lingua
mea justitiam tuam]. [ll. 111-16.]

¹ þinre ² dñs

Ontyn nū, waldend God, weoloras mine,
swā min mūð siððan mæhte ðine
and lof georne liodum tō bliðse,
sōð Sigedryhten, secgende¹ wæs.

120

Ic ðē onsegendesse sōna brōhte,
weoruda Dryhtne, ðer ðū wolde swā,
ðā ðū þæt ne lufedest, lifes bretta,
ðæt ic ðē bernalac brengan² mōste
dēadra nēata Dryhtne tō willan.

125

Ac ðē micle mā, mehtig Dryhten,
lisiende Crist, liicwerðe bið
se gehnysta gäst, hiorte geclānsod
and geēadmēded ingeþancum,
ðā ðū, Ælmächtig, æfre ne æwest.

130

Gedoo nū frāmsume frōfre ðine
tō ðīnum gōdan gästes willan,
ðætte Siōne dūn sigefest weorðe,
and weallas sion wynfæste getremed
Hierusolimæ, God lisiende!

135

Swā þū, Frēa meahtig, anfēhst siððan
līofwende lāc lioda þinra³,
Hālend manna! Hio ðæt hālige cealf
on wigbed þin willum āsettað,
liohtes aldon; forgef mē, lisiende

140

Domine, labia mea aperies et os meum adnuntiauit [laudem tuam].
[ll. 117-20.]

Quoniam si voluisses [sacrificium dedissem utique: holocaustis autem
non delectaberis]. [ll. 121-5.]

Sacrificium Deo spiritus contri[bulatus: cor contritum et humiliatum
Deus non spernit]. [ll. 126-30.]

Benigne fac, Domine, in bona voluntate [tua Syon, ut aedificantur
muri Hierusalem]. [ll. 131-5.]

Tunc acceptabis sacrificium [justitiae, oblationes, et holocausta: tunc
imponent super altare tuum vitulos]. [ll. 136-45.]

¹ secunde ² bregan ³ þinre, *from pine*

Meotod mancynnes, mæhtig Dryhten¹,
 ðæt ðā sorhfullan sāule wunde,
 þā ðe ic on ƿalde oððe² on giogeðe
 in flæscharaman³ gefræmed hæbbe,
 leahtra hegelēasra, mid lufan þinre⁴ 145
 gāstæ forgeofene glid[an] mote.'

Swā þingode þiode aldon
 Dāuid tō Dryhtne, dēda gemyndig,
 þæt hine mæhtig God mannum tō frōfre
 ðæs cynedōmes, Crist neriente, 150
 waldende God, weorðne munde;
 for ðon hē gebette balanīða hord
 mid ēaðmēde ingefiance,
 ðā ðe hē on ferðe gefræmed hæfde,
 gāstes wunde. Forgef ūs, God mæhtig, 155
 þæt wē synna hord simle oferwinnan,
 and ūs gecarnian ēce drēamas
 an lisiendra landes wenne. *Amen.*

¹ dñs² l (= uel)³ s *interlined*⁴ þinra

Through his spoken words in this poem, David performs verbal penance (ll. 117-20; as in SGGK, ll. 2505-12) for the explicitly named sin of "covetousness" ("gitsunga," l. 24; SGGK, "couetyse," ll. 2380, 2508) which he committed with Bathsheba (l. 23; SGGK, l. 2419) by acknowledging his sin (ll. 43-50; as in SGGK, ll. 2378, 2382) and committing his fate, henceforth, to the mercy of his Lord (ll. 101-5; SGGK, ll. 2329-30). The work is apparently from the tenth century, since the only manuscript of it is written in a mid-tenth-century hand.¹⁰⁶ In the manuscript, the first few words of the Latin verses paraphrased in the Anglo-Saxon are, as noted above, commonly placed before the appropriate lines. These verses are taken from a Roman version of the Psalter, although the poet in one place seems to render a Gallican reading.¹⁰⁷ The poem verifies the exact words of the Douay-Rheims commentators:¹⁰⁸ that David was the model for "all good kings" in the Middle Ages, "cyninga cynost, Crīste līofost" (l. 3). It thus supplies the Biblical David as the prototype for the English Arthur. If one is willing to consider the possibility

¹⁰⁶ Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader, p. 208.

¹⁰⁷ Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader, p. 208.

¹⁰⁸ See n. 38 above.

that this work is SGGK's alliterative source, its format also supplies the exact linguistic line of descent for SGGK: from the Latin to the Old English and then into the relatively archaic fourteenth-century dialect. Its existence may then suggest that the Bible supplied the ultimate source of inspiration for the SGGK poet and perhaps more than one other Arthurian writer. Its overall development suggests a devotional purpose for SGGK, for its words are famous and echo yet down through the years.

The key both to the identification of the Green Knight and the possible alliterative source of SGGK is the word "bernelāc." ("Kentish Psalm," l. 124) At first, the word would appear rare, and, in a sense, it is. In the given form, it does not appear in the text of Beowulf, whose latest possible date is 1000 A. D.¹⁰⁹ It does appear in Beowulf, however, in its root forms-- "baernan," a transitive verb meaning "to burn" and "byrnan," an intransitive verb meaning "to burn," as well as "lāc," a noun meaning "gift" or "offering."¹¹⁰ The variations in the spelling of the verb meaning "to burn," characteristic features of a common word, explain why

¹⁰⁹ Klaeber, p. cvii.

¹¹⁰ Klaeber, pp. 301, 311, 364.

editors have had difficulty tracing the word to its source. The practice of contraction, found in the SGGK manuscript, also compounded editors' and translators' difficulties in identifying the word and its meaning.¹¹¹ The word "bernelāc" is not essentially mysterious, however, since it is an adjective and noun compound, demonstrating one of the standard ways of forming new words in Old English.¹¹² It also belongs to a particular context: in the Roman liturgy, the same word is translated from the Latin of Psalm 50 into the modern English word "holocaust,"¹¹³ which carries the necessary sacramental meaning of "a sacrifice wholly consumed by fire, a whole burnt offering."¹¹⁴ As a translation, this word is uniquely consonant with the Old English word and dates from the thirteenth century.¹¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that "holocaust" appears in its Latin (and ultimately Greek)¹¹⁶ forms in the Latin verses ac-

¹¹¹ Morris, Early English Alliterative Poems, p. xli.

¹¹² On Old English compounds, see Bruce Mitchell, A Guide to Old English (1964; rpt. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), p. 53.

¹¹³ The Roman Breviary: An Approved English Translation complete in one Volume from the official Text of the Breviarium Romanum authorized by the Holy See (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1964), p. 226P.

¹¹⁴ OED, I, p. 1320.

¹¹⁵ OED, I, p. 1320.

¹¹⁶ OED, I, p. 1320.

companying lines 121-25 and 136-45 of the "Kentish Psalm."

This suggested identification of the Green Knight's name may seem, in some respects, startling. If "Bernlak" is a contracted form of "bernelāc," then it must be acknowledged that the poet borrowed the word directly from the "Kentish Psalm." The word occurs nowhere else in the corpus of Old English literature.¹¹⁷ If one bases one's reading of the word's medial letters on the strict grounds of probability, either "Bercilak" or "Bertilak" should take precedence over "Bernlak." The suggested contracted form of "bernelāc" could not have come into SGGK by regular phonological development, which to judge from the other forms in SGGK of the root meaning "burn," would be expected to show the metathesis of ber- into a form of br plus the vowel. Similarly, according to the rules of regular phonological development, the second element of "bernelāc" would normally show an -o-, following the pattern of bakbon, felefolde, liflode, and wodwos. These are just a few of the many words with an Old English origin which Tolkien and Gordon have identified in their glossary for SGGK.¹¹⁸ In each of these

¹¹⁷ For this inclusive survey of Old English materials, and for the precise application of phonological rules to the words "bernelāc" and "Bernlak," this writer is indebted to Professor John Vickrey.

¹¹⁸ Tolkien and Gordon, pp. 164, 180, 195, 229.

words, the long -a- of the second element in the original Old English word has become a long (open) -o- in the poem's manuscript. According to the rules of phonological development, then, one could expect "bernelāc" to appear in the poem in the form "bren-lok" or, perhaps, "brent-lok."¹¹⁹ As a possible form of "bernelāc," the word "Bernlak" is thus an anomaly or a special case.

As a possible contraction of "bernelāc," however, "Bernlak" still retains several arguments in its favor. First, its identification offers at least a reasonable reading of the original word: this is what numerous scholars, including Hulbert and Loomis, have sought to discover. The two words are simply too close in form for a possible relationship between them to be dismissed out of hand. Second, if the word "Bernlak" is a contracted form of "bernelāc," then its deviation from expected phonological patterns may indicate that it represents a special instance in which an attempt was made to preserve a word of unusual significance over the centuries. The poet's choice of the word for the Green Knight's name would suggest that this may indeed be the case, especially since this author is noted for choosing his words with extreme care. Third, the word "Bernlak," read as a contracted form of "bernelāc," is almost

¹¹⁹For the forms of "bren-lok" and "brent-lok," this writer is also indebted to Professor Vickrey.

miraculously in accord with what happens in SGGK: a whole series of offerings unfold; in one of these offerings, a man's conscience is seared. Fourth, the reading of "Bernlak" as a form of "bernelāc" is the only suggestion that has ever been made concerning this word which is consistent with the poet's own stated Christian interests (ll. 2529-30). As a suggested reading of "Bernlak," the word "bernelāc" thus opens a critical door to interpreting this poem's symbols in a manner which is consistent with the treatment awarded the other poems generally acknowledged to have been written by the same author, "Patience," "Purity," and "Pearl." This is a critical door which scholars need to open if the poet's works are ever to be assessed as a coherent and self-consistent whole. This is a critical door which scholars have sought to open repeatedly, since, as Tolkien and Gordon state conclusively, all the other poems ascribed to the same author reveal that his interests were Christian and his reading "especially in the Vulgate Bible."¹²⁰

The possibility that the poet borrowed his name for the Green Knight directly from the "Kentish Psalm" is not as far-fetched as it may, initially, seem. Nothing

¹²⁰ Tolkien and Gordon, p. xxv.

can be stated more conclusively about the poet than the fact that he was a borrower: every major source study on the poem reveals that his sources were typically ancient; he seems to have been intimately acquainted with such materials to a degree that modern scholars find it very difficult to explain. Where he found the word "Pentangel" still has not been discovered; but no scholar of the poem has claimed that the word was original with him. Neither has any scholar of the poem claimed that the author could not have known Old English source materials: his learning is so generally granted¹²¹ that critics of the poem, as a whole, do not risk saying absolutely what was unknown to him. To suggest that he borrowed the name of the Green Knight from the "Kentish Psalm" is only to suggest a verification of the poet's stated familiarity with old, alliterative material(s) (ll. 33-6). It is only to state also that he meant what he said when he expressed his devotion to Christ (ll. 2529-30). In these respects, especially, his purpose is consistent with that of the "Kentish Psalmist": he esteems the old way of faith and piety and, in his own work, he carries these values forward into the present.

The word "bernelāc" also deserves special con-

¹²¹Tolkien and Gordon, p. xxv.

sideration because, if this is the original form of "Bernlak," then the first element in the Green Knight's name stands in a crucial relationship to the second half, "de Hautdesert" (l. 2445). The English "Genesis & Exodus," written in 1250, applies the word "holocaust" to Abraham's offering of Isaac and requires that every good Christian should make a similar offering: "Ysaac was leid þat auter on, So men sulden holocaust don."¹²² According to the Douay-Rheims Bible, Abraham's offering of Isaac occurs upon a mountain in "the land of vision" (Genesis xxii. 2.), the place where "The Lord seeth" (Genesis xxii. 14.). In this place, Abraham's trial brings forth God's blessing (Genesis xxii. 17-18). The Douay-Rheims commentators are quick to explain that, strictly speaking, God never tempted Abraham, but, rather "by trial and experiment maketh known to the world, and to ourselves, what we are."¹²³ The same setting, high and deserted, figures prominently throughout Scriptural history. It was in the "desert of Sinai" (Exodus xix. 2.) that God gave to Moses His law and His promise:

If therefore you will hear my voice, and keep my covenant, you shall be my peculiar possession above all people: for all the earth is mine. (Exodus xix. 5.)

¹²² OED, I, p. 1320.

¹²³ The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate, revised ed., O. T., p. 25.

The same type of setting figures again in Christ's temptation by the devil and raises the same theological quandary: what has happened that God has not allowed?

Matthew ix records that "Jesus was led by the spirit into the desert, to be tempted by the devil," who "took him up into a very high mountain" (Matthew ix. 1, 8.). In the Bible, the "Hautdesert" is typically a land of vision, a place of encounter, where God's chosen initiate arrives at a permanent understanding of his destiny, power, and limitations. The place is sacred because it belongs to God, and what a man experiences there is as symbolic of the intersection between the divine and human levels of existence as the cross itself is.

The SGGK poet, it should be understood, is both a poet and a translator; and in both respects, he is uniquely exacting. But he has translated more than the words he found in his Old English source: consistent with the practice of that text, he has expanded his Old English material, adding to it the typical Biblical setting for the "bernelāc." In this process, he has chosen to concretize this typical setting by locating it specifically within the boundaries of his own national scene. When Gawain rides off through "Logres" into "Norþe Walez" and past "Wyrale," (ll. 691, 697, 701), he is literally heading into the "high desert" of the British Isles. One

of the surest determinants in Britain's history is its division into two zones: the "Lowland Zone" is relatively fertile and comparatively wealthy, consisting of plains and gentle hills; the "Highland Zone" is chiefly mountainous and includes Scotland, Wales, and the North of England, as well as South-west England.¹²⁴ The transference which the SGGK poet has accomplished, finding in England's own geography a counterpart for the Biblical setting, testifies once again to his attitude toward his probable source material. For him, the Bible is God's Word: therefore it is true and reliable, something to be known and lived as well as read.

As a probable source of the later fourteenth-century poem, the "Kentish Psalm" is unique in supplying together, in one text, models for the SGGK poet's treatment of the theme of courage, the theme of sovereignty, the temptation plot, the dramatic speeches, and the ritual of sacrifice. The Old English poet places particular emphasis on the first two of these elements, developing the first twelve lines of the prologue which he adds to his Biblical materials as an outline, in effect, of the roles of an earthly monarch. David is honored, first of all,

¹²⁴ William Ferguson, Scotland's Relations with England: A Survey to 1707 (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1977), p. 1.

as an exemplar of courage ("diormōd haeleð," l. 1), then as a potentate of his nation ("Isræla bræga, aedelae and rice," l. 2). The Old English poet has added the comment on David's bravery to the text of Psalm 50, consistent, apparently, with the dictum of Psalm 110, that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm cx. 10).

Such fear necessarily begets joy ("he shall delight exceedingly in his commandments"), power ("his seed shall be mighty upon earth"), honor ("glory and wealth shall be in his house"), justice ("his justice remaineth for ever and ever"), courage ("his heart is ready to hope in the Lord"), and benevolence ("he hath given to the poor") in its possessor, who, fearing God, is freed from all mortal terrors (Psalm cxi. 1-8.).

From the beginning, then, the two themes of courage and sovereignty are wound together in the Old English poem, but the poet places a premium on courage by naming this attribute, rather than any other, in his very first line. Thereafter, in a subtle counterpoint to his initial characterization of David, he dramatizes the enormous power that God has to make David afraid. Nathan reminds David of the "Waldendes doom" (l. 19):

þaet se [David] fruma wære his féroes sceldig,
for ðam þe hē Uriam hēt aldre benēman,
fromne ferdrinc fēore beserode,
and him Bezabē brōhte tō wife
for gītsunga, þē hē Godes eorre
þurh his selfes weorc sōna anfunde. (ll. 20-25)

David responds, implicitly, with that fear of God which will restore him to being a just man and sovereign. His

confession includes his acknowledgment of God's power over David's own life and death. He prays that

an forðgesceaft fēran mōte,
þy ðīne wordcwidas weorðan gefelde,
ðæt ðū ne wilnast weora ǣniges dēað. (ll. 53-5)

David's hope that he may still enjoy a future life rests, in part, on his knowledge that "ðū selua, God, sōðān lufast" (l. 68). The SGGK poet emphasizes the very same point, relying on Gawain's fear of death to supply much of the poem's suspense, until Gawain is brave enough to admit his former "couardise" (l. 2508) before those who think most highly of him. Then he, too, is a "true" man.

An identification of these parallels between the "Kentish Psalm" and SGGK is very important, for it allows the critic to suggest that the fourteenth-century poem is, quite properly, an initiation into fear. Consistent with the overall development of the "Kentish Psalm," it is also a masterpiece in the studied release of emotion. In both works, this process is balanced by constant reminders of the restraints which God places upon the power of even the greatest earthly potentates. This process is heightened, too, by constant reminders of man's frailty, which underscore his need for humility. The "Kentish Psalm" begins with a series of David's accolades: he was "hearpera mærost," "Sangere . . . sōðfæstest," "sigecempa, searocýne man,/ cāsere creaftig" (ll. 4, 6, 10-11). In the course of the poem all the grand epithets shift to God, and they are placed in the mouth of David himself after he is forced to realize that by wronging Uriah he has offended God Himself and, quite

properly, aroused His anger (l. 25). Thus David comes to magnify God's name quite literally, appealing to "meahta Walden," (l. 31) "Hælend mīn," (l. 33) "ælmehtig God," (l. 34) "Dryhten weoruda," (l. 37) "gāsta Sceppend," (l. 40) "Sceppen mīn,/ līfes līohtfruma," (ll. 46-7) "gāsta breogo,/ hēlende Crīst," (ll. 50-51) "Crīste hērdon," (l. 57) "sāula Neriend," (l. 60) "mæhtig Dryhten," (l. 63) etc. The poem's narrator follows this shift, awarding the poem's final epithet to "God mæahtig," (l. 155) rather than David. SGGK follows the same shifting pattern, focussing on the grandeur of Gawain in the description of the Pentangle (ll. 623-65), shifting to the power of Bernlak who is called "Lorde" more than thirty times in the poem,¹²⁵ and ending with the poet's tribute to Christ (ll. 2529-30). The structure of the whole poem, then, is characterized by a shifting process which also characterizes the "Kentish Psalm"; this shifting movement is so gradual and thorough that it might well be termed a ballet "glissade." SGGK begins with festivity and fear, and it ends with festivity and an account of fear: the intermediary process may be termed a "catharsis."

Given the poem's treatment of holy fear, how, then, does SGGK's laughter relate to its Biblical sources?

¹²⁵Tolkien and Gordon, p. 103.

How does the poet translate the fall of an exemplum like David or Gawain into a divine comedy of righteousness? There is no laughter in the "Kentish Psalm." However, as the notations in Sweet's text point out, the Old English poem draws on both Psalms 1 and 11 for its sources.¹²⁶ And the SGGK poet, it would appear, has also used the "Kentish Psalm" according to the typical reading habits of a monk--as a commentary on the Bible itself. Thus he, too, has incorporated additional materials from Psalm 11 into his own work. Psalm 11 states:

Thou hast loved all the words of ruin,
O deceitful tongue The just
shall see and fear, and shall laugh at
him and say: Behold the man that made
not God his helper. (Psalm 11. 6, 8.)

Among all the sources which have been identified for the fourteenth-century poem, this passage is unique in offering an explanation for the SGGK poet's constant coupling of laughter and fear. It is also unique in its consistency with the overall moral tone of the Middle English poem: the laughter in SGGK is not malicious--"þe kyng confortez þe knyȝt, and alle þe court als/ Lazen loude þerat" (ll. 2513-14)--and it erupts typically amidst talk of fear and a just judgment--"For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed! Wyth þis he lazes so loude þat þe lorde greued" (ll. 315-16).

¹²⁶ See Sweet's, p. 208.

The SGGK poet's handling of this thematic pair, fear and justice, is typical also in belonging to a long standing English tradition which continued into the seventeenth century when Milton could still assign the following words to Christ: "'Mighty Father, thou thy foes/ Justly hast in derision, and secure/ Laugh'st at their vain designs and tumults vain'" (Paradise Lost V. 735-7). Indeed, the continuum of this tradition is strengthened by the distinct possibility that both poets drew upon Old English materials¹²⁷ in their own treatments of what may have been for them essentially an intermingling of Biblical, Arthurian, and contemporary subject matter. For both, one key element in the design of their creations, as in the design of God's creation, was the morning star,¹²⁸ which could be associated with David, Lucifer, and Christ, respectively, as its first, false, and true referents. David's role as an exemplum for good kings in the Middle Ages supplies a crucial link between what would otherwise appear to be the disparate materials of God's Sacred Word and the popular romances of King Arthur. For even as David was considered a model king, so he was also a forerunner of

¹²⁷ See Kennedy, pp. 28-30.

¹²⁸ See, for example, Milton's Paradise Lost, V, l. 708; Paradise Regained, IV, ll. 597, 619.

Christ for Biblical commentators;¹²⁹ and even as Christ came once, so Arthur was also supposed to come again in the future. Thus in English literary history both sacred and secular, there could be both true and false Messiahs, as well as semblances of the two.

In SGGK, both the true and false Messiah figures may be judged specifically by their willingness to make of themselves a "bernelāc." The word is as crucial to an accurate interpretation of the text as a mystical rune. The word means, finally, the offering which all good Christians were supposed to present in their concrete gifts to the Church during the mass. As Theodor Klauser explains in A Short History of the Western Liturgy,

All of these gifts . . . were looked upon as being a contribution to the sacrifice; and in the offering of these gifts one could see how each member of the congregation expressed concretely his intention of taking an active part in the sacrifice, and of making an offering of his very self.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ See The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate, revised ed., O. T., p. 326, n. on 2 Kings vii. 12. The end of this verse reads as follows: " . . . I will establish his kingdom." The commentators add that "This prophecy partly relateth to Solomon; but much more to Christ, who is called the son of David in Scripture, and who is the builder of the true temple, which is the Church, his everlasting kingdom, which shall never fail."

¹³⁰ Theodor Klauser, A Short History of the Western Liturgy: An Account and Some Reflections, trans. John Halliburton (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 109.

According to the older practices in the Christian liturgy, an emphasis was placed upon each worshipper bringing forth his offerings in kind, gifts of the giver's very produce and substance, which symbolically reiterated the gift of self.¹³¹ This offering was such a crucial element in the mass that it was revived in the fourteenth century and acted out liturgically in the form of a procession which was incorporated into the coronation of bishops, abbots, kings, and emperors.¹³² Fitt III of SGGK has just this progressive sweeping majesty which culminates inevitably, in fitt IV, with the realization proper to a good Christian: that all one's gifts to the Christ child are inadequate save one--a pure heart. This offering is required of David, finally, in the "Kentish Psalm." This offering alone which atones for his sin:

Ic ðē onsegédnesse sôna brôhte,
weoruda Dryhtne, ðēr ðū wolde swā,
ðā ðū þaet ne lufedest, lîfes bretta,
ðaet ic ðē bernalāc bréngan mōste
dēadra nēata Dryhtne tō willan.

Ac ðē micle mā, mehtig Dryhten,
lifiende Crist, liicwerðe bið
se gehnysta gāst, hiorte geclānsod
and geēadmeded ingeþancum,
fā fū, Ælmæhtig, æfre ne æwest.
(11. 121-130)

It is this same offering--of a conscience "burnt" in the sense of being "purified" and therefore cleansed--

¹³¹Klauser, p. 109.

¹³²Klauser, pp. 111, 109.

which Gawain utters in his confession at the end of SGGK: no other offering could be superior to this as a proper tribute to the poem's Christmas festivities. The poem's implicit references to the liturgy need to be emphasized; as Jean Danielou writes in The Bible and the Liturgy, liturgical symbolism was already well developed in the fourth century. The Eucharist was understood to celebrate Christ's perpetual offer of Himself to the Father; the Eucharist offered the worshipper "participation in the unique heavenly sacrifice."¹³³ Both Bernlak and Gawain, it should be noted, bring their offerings before Arthur's court: the one (the physical offering) prefigures the other (the cleansed conscience). The one leads inevitably to the other, and, given the poet's treatment of his doublet figure, Bernlak and Gawain serve both as the instruments of the offering and that which is offered up. The strict mutuality of SGGK's "Beheading Game" requires that each participant take the same stance, use the same weapon (in effect), and make the same commitment to submit the head to the blade. Yet the risk each takes is not the same, for Gawain plays the game without understanding either its rules or the roles of its participants. When he beheads Bernlak, Gawain func-

¹³³ Jean Danielou, The Bible and the Liturgy, University of Notre Dame Liturgical Studies, Vol III (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), p. 131.

tions as his (potential) executioner; when Bernlak does not behead Gawain, the former becomes the latter's savior. But the strict mutuality of the game extends even this last role, by implication, to Gawain. Ironically, because Gawain falls short of perfection as he does--out of love for his own life (l. 2368)--his offering, too, becomes reminiscent of the Savior's: by virtue of his essential humanity, Gawain becomes a qualified Christ-figure.¹³⁴ But the poet's emphasis is not on his Christ-figures per se; it is on that one whole action in which they both participate. Because the Green Knight sets the pattern for this action (which is usually described as the "Beheading Game"), both the character and the action may be termed the "Bernlak."

Gawain may fall short of perfection, yet he becomes, in the course of the poem, the "Bernlak" or "burnt-offering" for the sins of Arthur's entire court. It is this role which is also specifically given David, as an exemplary king, in the "Kentish Psalm." The term for this role, which was usually fulfilled by the saints and the clergy in medieval Christianity, is "intercessor." This idea is one of the most startling additions which the Anglo-Saxon poet made to his Biblical source when

¹³⁴For an analysis of the Green Knight as both the Word of God and Christ, see Schnyder, p. 41.

he wrote,

Sangere hē [David] wæs soð fæstest, swīðe geðancol
tō ȝingienne þiódum sínū
wið þane mildostan manna Sceppend.
(ll. 6-8)

Swæ þingode þiode aldon
Dávid tō Dryhtne, dēda gemyndig,
þæt hine mæhtig God, mannum tō frōfre
ðæs cynedōmes, Crīst neriente,
waldende God, weorðne munde
(ll. 147-51)

It is in such elaborations upon their original materials that both the Kentish psalmist and the SGGK poet demonstrate their peculiar artistic excellence: they are both, essentially, dramatizers, creating characters who act out and utter forth sacred Christian history as it was amplified by the activities of the Christian Church. The Church, it should be noted, probably fostered the author of the York mystery plays¹³⁵ as well as the SGGK poet; it is also instituted the Feasts of the Saints¹³⁶ and observed the regular ceremony of the mass. No evidence can support the strength and genius of such traditions more thoroughly than the fact that that particular Psalm chosen by the Kentish poet for his own elaborations, and possibly chosen once again by the SGGK poet for his own inspiration, still serves today in the

¹³⁵ Lucy Toulmin Smith, ed., York Plays: The Plays Performed by the Crafts or Mysteries of York on the Day of Corpus Christi in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. xlvi.

¹³⁶ The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate, revised ed., N. T., pp. 305-06.

regular liturgy of the Catholic Church; in particular, it is also recited "on ferias in Christmastide and Paschaltide, [and] on the vigils of Christmas and the Ascension."¹³⁷ As a focal point of the faithful, this Psalm has survived even the Reformation and is still used in the Lutheran "Offertory," which requires every participant to repeat the Psalmist's words:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. Do good in thy pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness: with burnt offering, and whole burnt offering.¹³⁸

To state the liturgical point which is vivified by Gawain's character in particular as precisely as possible, one must note this inherent and perfectly appropriate irony in SGGK: the more Gawain regrets his prior conduct, the more his confession is the proper cause of joy for a good Christian audience. The more perfect his contrition is understood to be in the context of the poem, the more he assumes the role of the poem's "Bernlak."

¹³⁷ Roman Breviary, p. 224P.

¹³⁸ Service Book and Hymnal: Authorized by the Lutheran Churches cooperating in The Commission on the Liturgy and Hymnal, music ed. (1958; rpt. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975), "The Offertory," Setting I, p. 26.

The poet's intense interest in these fine details of the Christian experience is demonstrated by the fact that "Bernlak" functions, necessarily, on at least two different levels in SGGK. In this matter, the poet is perfectly consistent. First "Bernlak" (in the form of the Green Knight) makes his physical offering before Arthur's court. Then, "Bernlak" (in the character of Gawain) makes his spiritual offering before Arthur's court. Consistent with Hugh of St. Victor's emphasis on the significance of the literal act (particularly in the sacraments), the poet has made the physical act the dramatic prerequisite for the spiritual act. In addition, he has required Gawain to make his imperfect offering at the Green Chapel before he can make his perfect offering, finally, at Arthur's court. He has dramatized the perfect willingness to make of oneself a physical offering in the Green Knight's initial appearance before Arthur's court. He has dramatized in this character, too, the spiritual offering of forgiveness, which may be Gawain's last, and best, gift from the Green Knight.

To the extent that the name, and character, of "Bernlak" carry a double meaning in SGGK, to the same extent the poet is probably treating the word in exactly the same manner to be found in the Latin verses accompanying the "Kentish Psalm." Here, "holocaust" carries

a double sense: it means, first of all, the offering which is unacceptable ("holocaustis autem non delectaberis"--cf. Latin verses for ll. 121-5); subsequently, it means the offering which is pleasing to God ("tunc acceptabis sacrificium justitiae, oblationes, et holocausta"--cf. Latin verses for ll. 136-45). The SGGK poet's choice of the single word "Bernlak" to carry the double meaning of the Latin word suggests his intimate familiarity with, and particularly intense interest in, the Bible and religious materials. To suggest that the poet developed the character of "Bernlak" consistent with the dual meanings of the Latin word "holocaust" is not to sever the important relationship which the word "Bernlak" may have with "bernelāc." It is only to suggest that the poet may have been consistently, in his language no less than in his plot-line(s), a combiner of his written source materials. All three words--"holocaust," "bernelāc," and "Bernlak"--probably belong to the same Christian context; it is the recognition, and exploration, of this context which seems most promising for future research on SGGK's symbols.

It is, then, in its relation to the "Kentish Psalm" that SGGK's proper place in England's literary traditions needs to be assessed. Every major critic of the poem has reaffirmed that SGGK's literary materials must

be accepted as being "old," but they have not done justice to what this statement means. It means that, both in the poet's use of the "old" alliterative Anglo-Saxon verse form and his possible adaptation of the Old English "Kentish Psalm," he may still be sustaining the artistic obligations of a Caedmon, who was challenged to authenticate his poetic gift specifically by versifying passages of sacred history.¹³⁹ With every single critical reference to the poet's ancient attitudes and materials, the possibility increases that the SGGK poet was still abiding by that literary tradition which ruled English literary history from the seventh century to the Norman Conquest: according to this tradition, even vernacular poetry took its greatest single source of inspiration from the faith, ritual, and symbolism of the Christian Church.¹⁴⁰ The SGGK poet's references to the mass (ll. 932, 1036, 1135, 1414, 1558, 1690), the signing of the self (ll. 763, 1202), confessions (1876-84, 2391), and mutual commitments should not pass unheeded. Each of these liturgical acts which he incorporates into his own Arthurian tale vividly dramatizes the extent to which he believed that even Arthur's

¹³⁹ Kennedy, p. 11.

¹⁴⁰ Kennedy, p. 3.

knights ventured, inevitably, upon a symbolic pilgrimage. Both his verse form and his possible "old" source reaffirm his essential attitude: this was the English way, to follow in the steps of their monkish ancestors, fighting the demons of temptation, hoping yet to be able to accept the challenge Christ's birth offered the faithful: that they should always fail by at least "a little" and yet be granted heaven's reward.

So long as they had their "Bernlak," merry old England would endure.

On the basis of his name, "Bernlak" becomes the leading contender for SGGK's central symbol. Until research proves that "Gawain" carries a meaning of equal or greater significance,¹⁴¹ "Bernlak" deserves precedence in treatments of the poem's symbols. The lady's meaning, too, most probably derives from "Bernlak" because she has no name independent of him. If the overall action of the "Beheading Game" may also be named after the character who initiates it, then to touch the poem at a myriad of points is still to encounter "Bernlak." Given this complex of inter-relationships, the SGGK poet's symbolism would appear to be as tightly

¹⁴¹ For a discussion of the possible meanings of Gawain's name, including derivations involving the terms "hawk of May" and "Golden-Hair, Lord of Light," see R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth, pp. 62-63.

laced as his narrative technique and as intricate as the most mystical theology, demonstrating his ability to conjoin a variety of representational methods.

AFTERWORD

The versatility of the SGGK poet, as a symbolic writer, has been noted by numerous scholars. In his 1956 article, "Myth and Mediaeval Literature: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Charles Moorman suggests SGGK is

a microcosm, or better said, a semi-allegorical presentation of the whole history and meaning of the Round Table. Morgan attempts reform; Gawain fails in keeping faith with Bercilak; treacherous Guinivere remains alive the tragedy of the Round Table, and of the secular society of which it is a symbol, was inevitable and . . . the seeds of that tragedy were present even in the "first age" of the youthful and joyous court at Christmas time.¹

Moorman's comment is particularly revealing, because, as articulate and knowledgeable as he clearly is, this scholar still seems hard-pressed to choose one technical term ("semi-allegorical," "tragedy," "symbol") which encompasses both the scope and the intensity of the SGGK poet's technique. In his comments, Moorman is implicitly reaffirming the critical judgment of Robert Worth Frank, Jr., who, in 1953, suggested that ambivalence on

¹ Charles Moorman, "Myth and Medieval Literature: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MS, 18 (1956), 170-72.

technical terminology is a problem inherent in the field of medieval literature. In "The Art of Reading Medieval Personification-Allegory," Frank observes:

The medieval Church constantly stimulated his [the medieval writer's] imagination with both symbols and abstractions. In giving allegorical interpretations to the Scriptures and to beasts, flowers, jewels, etc., the Church created a mode of thought which encouraged symbol-allegory. In raising to supreme importance the soul of the true believer and in picturing the world as a place where vices and virtues struggled for that soul, the Church gave abstractions a dramatic significance which encouraged personification-allegory.²

The difficulties inherent in defending a symbolic interpretation of SGGK have been best set forth by Morton Bloomfield. In his 1958 article, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," he points to the subjectivity and unreliability which plague symbolic interpretations of medieval works in general. Bloomfield asserts:

There is no way, seeing the wide variety of symbolic interpretations of the same thing, to correct any particular interpretation. At the most, one might say a certain interpretation is not right, but of many alternate explanations there is no way of deciding which one is correct, for supporting texts from the wide variety of medieval and patristic theology can be found for each one.³

² Robert Worth Frank, Jr., "The Art of Reading Medieval Personification-Allegory," ELH, 20 (1953), 239.

³ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Symbolism in Medieval Literature," MP, 56 (1958), 81.

Those critical treatments of SGGK's symbols which have been brought forth in this study offer ample proof that Bloomfield is correct when he observes, in effect, that symbolic interpretations of a given work tend to compete with one another. When such interpretations do supplement one another, as Weston's, Nitze's, and Loomis's studies of SGGK do, they culminate in pagan readings of the poem, which are still at odds with the Christian content of SGGK, especially the poet's interpretation of the Pentangle. The only resolution Bloomfield would suggest for such contradictions is simply to admit: "All meaning at any time is multiple."⁴

But, with regard to SGGK specifically, another resolution is possible. The possible identification of the Green Knight's proper name, which this study offers, is not dependent on an arbitrarily chosen secondary source; it may be defended on the basis of Madden's and Morris's original reading of the word "Bernlak" in a progressively deteriorating manuscript. This word, in turn, may carry within it a meaning intensified both by its Biblical origins and by its liturgical applications. Because this same word also designates a character within SGGK, it satisfies Bloomfield's own requirements for personification, a literary device which this scholar

⁴Bloomfield, "Symbolism," 76.

respects and carefully elucidates in his 1980 article, "Personification-Metaphors." First, as he explains, personifications are usually indicated by capitalization. Next, they have the distinct ability to humanize pure abstractions as well as concrete phenomena. Third, what personifications can accomplish, in literary terms, may be virtually miraculous; for they bring their inanimate or conceptual subjects "alive."⁵ In accord with Bloomfield's requirements, the SGGK poet's treatment of a "burnt-offering" as a character requires the capitalization of his name. The extent to which this character succeeds as a viable human being has been noted especially by R. S. Loomis, who lauds him, specifically, for being "big-hearted, charged with energy, basically honourable and friendly."⁶

Should the Green Knight be considered a personification, then, or even an allegorical figure, rather than a symbol? There is a case which can be made for these alternative designations. This position may readily be derived from the work of R. W. Frank, who, in "The Art of Reading Medieval Personification-Allegory," clarifies his chosen terms as follows:

⁵ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Personification-Metaphors," ChauR, 14 (1980), 289.

⁶ R. S. Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance, p. 159.

Certain more specific observations may be made about reading personification-allegories. The names of the characters are all-important, for it is through them that the allegorist states a good part of his meaning It is also useful to remember that there is generally a relationship between the writer's meaning and the physical form and activity of his personifications The fact that they [characters such as "Hate, Felonye, Vilanye, Covetise, etc."] are grouped together means they are a unit The physical form or activity ascribed to the personification may shift as the allegorist endeavors to indicate what concrete realities his abstraction applies to The name remains the same, and so the reader knows that envy [for example] is the theme, for all the shifts of form and action.⁷

Certainly, there are correlations to be drawn between the characteristic features of "personification-allegory," as described by Frank, and the most surprising elements of SGGK. As the fifth chapter of this study suggests, a new dimension in the poem's meaning is apparent if the Green Knight's name is identified as "Bernlak," a contracted form of "bernelāc," meaning "burnt-offering." Frank's identification of character groups, functioning as harmonious units, is substantiated, too, on other grounds, in Chapter IV of this study. It must also be acknowledged that Frank's description of those "shifts" which typically characterize the technique he calls

⁷Frank, "The Art," 245-7.

"personification-allegory" are uniquely applicable to the Green Knight's metamorphoses.

Is the word "symbolic," then, still a defensible term to employ with reference to SGGK? The following considerations would suggest it is. First, the word "symbolic" is uniquely consistent with one of the poet's own terms, "sign," which he uses in reference to the Pentangle (l. 625). This fact was noted in Chapter I of this study, but, in this context, it deserves mention again: in 250 A. D., Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, applied the Latin "symbolum"--not "personification" or "allegory"--to the baptismal creed, this being the "mark" or "sign" of a Christian as distinguished from a heathen.⁸ That Gawain is permanently marked by his experience with "Bernlak"--this point receives dramatic emphasis in the poem. The knight shows the court the "nirt" (l. 2498) in his neck, even though the poet has previously stated, 'þe hurt watz hole þat he hade in his nek' (l. 2484) The reason for his display is clear: the "nirt," like the lace, is the outward manifestation of his inward transformation. His confession before Arthur's court also externalizes that new-found humility which marks him, specifically, as a Christian.

To speak of SGGK as being "symbolic" is to refer to

⁸ OED, II, p. 3206.

it, specifically, as a Christian poem, so long as the Christian meaning of the word "symbol" is clearly kept in mind. The poet's distinction between the outward manifestation and the inner, spiritual experience is an integral element of ancient Christian symbolism, as this phenomenon is explained by Abbot Ceolfrid in Bede's History of the English Church and People. Ceolfrid states:

If it pleases you to know the symbolic reason in this matter [the observance of the Easter Festival], we are directed to keep Easter in the first month of the year, which is also known as the Month of New Fruit, because we should celebrate the mysteries of our Lord's Resurrection and our own deliverance with our minds refreshed to love of heavenly things.⁹

Implicitly, Ceolfrid identifies at least three distinct but interrelated levels of experience which are conjoined in the Easter Festival: 1) the external practice ("we are directed to keep Easter in the first month"); 2) the mystical initiation ("because we should celebrate the mysteries of our Lord's Resurrection"); 3) the inward transformation ("our own deliverance with our minds refreshed"). In a similar fashion, Gawain's "nirt," lace, and humility all may be differentiated as distinct phenomena; since they are paralleled by the poet, however, the inward and outward levels of meaning are united in

⁹ Bede, p. 316.

SGGK, as Burrow has emphasized.¹⁰ It is this aspect of the poem, which parallels Ceolfrid's thought, that Burrow insists is distinctly symbolic.

The SGGK poet's prominent, and carefully isolated, deployment of the word "Bernlak" allows for further refinement of the sense in which his poem is to be considered symbolic in a particularly Christian sense of the word. If the word carries the meaning of "burnt-offering," then it reveals the poet's concentrated focus on the sacraments and the liturgy, as the fifth chapter of this study makes clear. This aspect of his thought demonstrates precisely that correlation noted by C. S. Lewis in his comments on symbolism. In The Allegory of Love, which was published in 1936, Lewis says "symbolism" is synonymous with "sacramentalism"; he defines this term as a mode of thought whereby men "read" this sensible world by looking through it to its sacred original.¹¹

The extent to which the SGGK poet has employed such a mode of thought in his work is not apparent unless one notes, as Charles Moorman does, that the Green Knight exceeds Gawain in those very attributes which supposedly characterize Gawain himself, courtesy and chivalry.¹²

¹⁰ Burrow, p. 50.

¹¹ Lewis, p. 45.

¹² Moorman, "Myth," pp. 167-69.

If Gawain is supposed to be perfect but is not, and if Bernlak can on no occasion be found at fault, then Bernlak functions as the man Gawain is supposed to be-- if he had not been tempted and fallen from perfection. Thus, in this sense, Bernlak functions as Gawain's "sacred original." At the same time, Bernlak's presentation of his own neck to the blade foreshadows Gawain's presentation of his "nirt" to the court, after he has accepted his own fallibility. This sequence of events dramatizes a concept of progressive perfectionism which is characteristic of Christian sacramental thought. As Theodore of Mopsuestia says,

The events of the old were the figures of the new: the Law of Moses is the shadow, grace the body Indeed, as those men, having first crossed the Red Sea, then tasted a divine nourishment and a miraculous spring, so we, after the Baptism of Salvation, participate in the divine Mysteries.¹³

This mode of thought is not limited to Theodore; it may be found also in Pseudo-Dionysius, Clement of Alexandria, St. Cyprian, St. Ambrose, indeed, in the "Fathers of the Church" in general.¹⁴ It is in such a mode of thought, perhaps, that one may discover the best explanation for SGGK's mysterious ability to present virtually all phenomena as being distinct and detailed yet simultaneously

¹³ Danielou, p. 148.

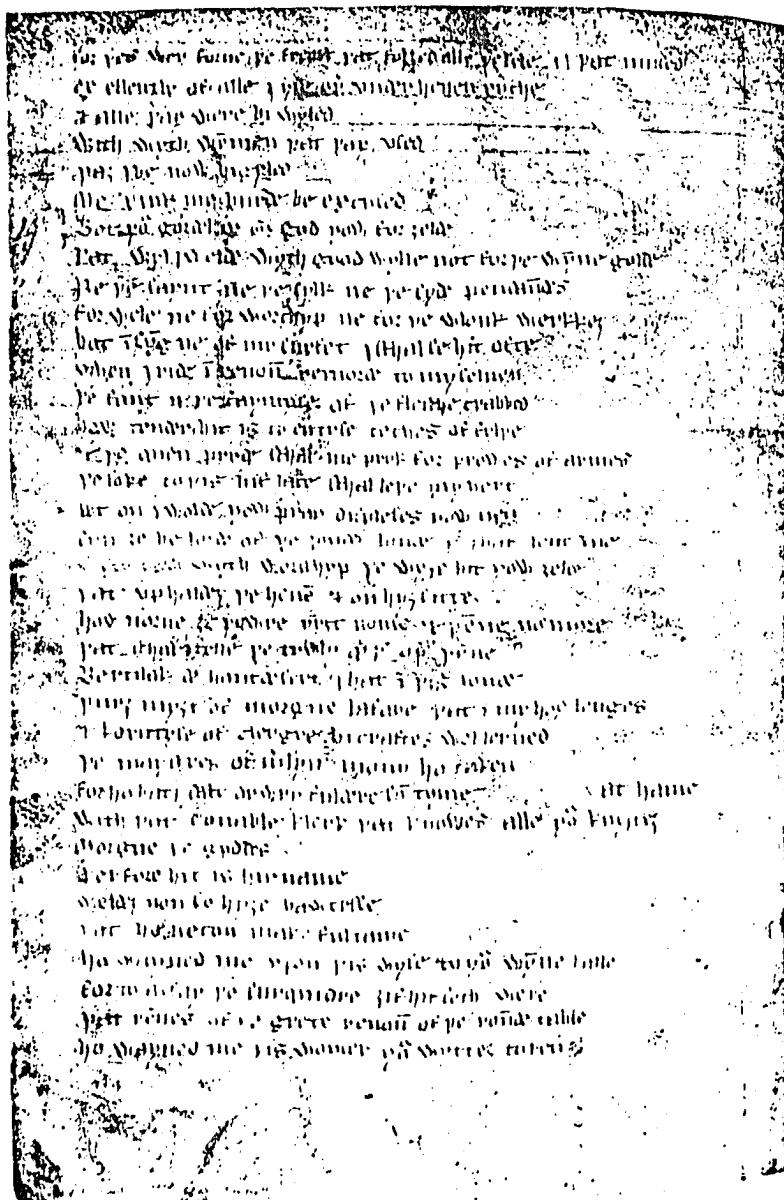
¹⁴ Danielou, pp. 138-48.

paired and connected.

It is such a mode of thought, at work in the poem, which may justify both Weston's and Savage's unique agreement on the term "mystic symbol" for SGGK's most obvious "sign" and "figure," the Pentangle. What these two scholars did not see, however, was the implication in their thought: The Pentangle is comparable to and identifiable with the Green Knight especially because both are presented as being overwhelmingly mysterious and yet clearly perceivable. This comparability, taken together with the possible liturgical import of the Green Knight's name, suggests that "Bernlak" is also a "mystic symbol." Because he receives detailed development which exceeds even that lengthy excursion devoted to the Pentangle, Bernlak himself, then, may well function as the poem's central unifying device, exhibiting, in humanized form, all those attributes associated, on an abstract level, with the Pentangle itself. To the extent that such an identification between this sign and this character is accepted, the latter may be seen as the walking embodiment of the mysteries of God's creation--blood-red within, green as grass without--a figure, it would appear, that only God could have designed. SGGK is a fit tribute to this character, in whom one may see the clearest demonstration of a mind nurtured by

systematic thought and an imagination fired by divine mysteries. It is a possibility which deserves consideration, that the poem could be aptly entitled "The Bernlak." There is no word in the piece which carries greater weight.

APPENDIX



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