

THE ART OF  
*SIR GAWAIN AND THE*  
*GREEN KNIGHT*

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CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB • 1965

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## THE ART OF *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

**S**IR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT is incomparably the greatest romance of its time. Yet its author is unknown; it survives in but a single manuscript; and there is no evidence that, in its own day or in the years which followed, it had any impact on readers or on literary history, beyond the limited circle of its particular audience—if it was very influential even there. All this is in contrast to the case of Geoffrey Chaucer, whose influence is detectable and clear, whose works descend to us in a multiplicity of manuscripts, who was widely published in his own time and enjoyed a subsequent renown almost unbroken through the centuries to our own over-scholarly age.<sup>1</sup>

How did that strange neglect happen to the *Gawain*? What were the reasons? It is difficult to speculate about its fate in the later fourteenth or earlier fifteenth century, when it was written, beyond the bearings of the usual cliché—that its survival is a “historical accident.” Produced in the northwestern Midland area of England, as

<sup>1</sup> Quotations of the *Gawain* are from the edition of Sir Israel Gollancz (EETS, O.S., No. 210, 1940 and 1957). Translations are partly the present writer's and partly modifications from T. H. Banks, Jr.

its local dialect reveals, the *Gawain* may be called “provincial” in contrast to the “London” character of Chaucer, yet other provincial literature of its time had considerable circulation and that provincial locale itself supported societies of magnates in Edward III’s and Richard II’s reigns of a growing wealth, sophistication, and influence. “Provincialism” alone could not therefore be a reason for the obscurity of this literary masterpiece.

The relative ignorance of it in our own day is quite another matter. Its dialect was not destined to form what subsequently became Standard English—an English to which Chaucer and his fellows tend more closely to conform. Its alliterative metrics and verbal formulas were displaced in our main poetic traditions by other forms of verse technology. Alliteration itself, moreover, which requires a vocabulary that encourages an unusual choice of words and presses even accustomed words to their odd extremes of meaning, makes the poem rather difficult for the modern reader. Even more, the particular style and subtlety of the poet himself, his play of wit and ornament, encrust the surfaces of his lines with a richness, mingling what is often plain and vigorous with a rhetorical jewelry that requires much more attention of his audience than Geoffrey Chaucer ordinarily does. Subtlety and opulence thus become their own confining disadvantage.

Yet the poem is worth the trouble to read it. It is exciting, dramatic, swift-moving, and full of an emotional impact, alternating between gravity and humor, that must have stirred those contemporaries who heard it read, as it intrigues any of us who learn to read it. Its exquisite play with character and situation, its grace and

charm of manner, its settings in a detailed yet romantic never-never land, the gravity of the issues that it deals with, produce a valid imaginative world, a poetic complex of a particular sort, which casts its spell upon us with its magic.

What makes the fascination of fiction? Why have imaginative concoctions intrigued men from the very beginnings of literature? I do not intend to burden you this evening with the weighty opus that would give you the complex answer. But one part of that answer would be that, whatever the literal nature of the fiction, it will also embody in its treatment and by example matters which have some special interest for us, moral, psychological, social or personal. And the more poetic the treatment, the more valid. Hamlet has greater reality than Shakespeare, except for the Shakespeares of our fiction; and Alexandria moves us deeper in Durrell than in all the histories and all the dollar guidebooks.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an Arthurian romance, and anybody who knew it in the fourteenth century or shortly thereafter would have recognized it for what it was, an entertaining and traditional-seeming piece of fiction. But the romance, like its literary descendant, the novel, was often used by writers from the twelfth century on to state in various ways some of the issues that then seemed currently important. Since the actors and the dilemmas were human, their significance has not lost its general interest still. But since they were meant to appeal to a society of aristocrats, feudal or of feudal origin, they are also specialized to matters which pre-occupied that society: the nature of the chivalric personality and its deeds, chivalresque morality and courtly

love. What would happen to a knight or lady like themselves, caught in a chivalresque dilemma, and what might such involvement mean?

It is an issue of this sort, worked out with wit and skill, that our unknown writer uses the *Gawain* story for. The narrative is compounded of motifs from ancient Celtic sources, from folklore and popular mythology, from the antecedent chivalresque literature of France. What the poet produces with that narrative is contemporary social comedy.

The story is the story of a challenge and the strange adventures that follow from its acceptance. But, before our poet begins it, he gives us a formal prologue whose purpose is to announce that the romance is to be about what was technically called the *Matière de Bretagne*, the “Matter of Britain,” by summarizing British history from the Fall of Troy to the days of the great King Arthur. Let me read my translation of that prologue:

When the siege and assault of Troy had ceased  
And the keep was breached and burnt to brands and ashes,  
The lad that there the trammels of treason laid  
Was tried for his treachery, the truest charge in town.  
Aeneas it was, the noble, and his high nation  
Who afterwards conquered countries and kings became  
Of well nigh all the weal of the Western Isles,  
From the time when Romulus stretches his reach to Rome;  
With great display he first sets up that city  
And names by the name it now retains, his own;  
To Tuscany Tirus turns and towns begins;  
Langobard lifts up homes in Lombardy;  
And far over the French flood Felix Brutus  
On many banks and broad Britain he founds  
With pleasure,

Where war and wrack and wonder  
Have occupied their leisure  
And oft where bliss and blunder  
Appear in alternate measure.

And when this Britain was built by this big baron  
Bold lads bred therein that loved a brawl  
And turned up trouble in many a troubled time;  
More odd events have happened there more often  
Than anywhere else I know of since that cra.  
But of all the British kings that built in Britain  
King Arthur was ever most courtly, as I recall. . . .

Wrack and wonder, bliss and blunder, these are the ancient themes of British history. Aeneas was a traitor, and Brutus a double parricide, yet their gests were not achieved without some glory. And so, my lords and ladies, is it also to be in our present story—a story, if you like, of bliss and blunder.

The narrative proper begins at Christmas time in Camelot, where there is joy and entertainment and feasting; but King Arthur, by old custom, will not sit down to eat until he hears or sees something marvellous. Everything about this beginning is conventional, though enlivened by the poet's way with details. The audience would recognize the conventions, from a dozen other romances that they knew, and that recognition brought with it excitement; something strange was indeed about to happen. Suddenly, in the midst of the gaiety, there rides into Arthur's hall on a great horse a gigantic bearded stranger carrying an enormous axe. Let me read some of the lines describing him, first in the original, then in translation:

‘ ‘ SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT ’ ’

Ther hailes in at the halle dor an aghlich mayster,  
On the most on the molde on mesure hyghe;  
Fro the swyre to the swange so swarc and so thik,  
And his lyndes and his lymes so long and so grete,  
Half etayn in erde I hope that he were. . . .

There hailes in at the hall door a huge creature  
The most mighty of men in his measure.  
From his throat to his thighs so thick were his thews,  
His loins and his limbs so large and so long  
That I hold him half-ogre, the hugest of men,  
And handsome too in his height upon horseback . . .  
Fashioned fair he was in his form, and in features  
Cut clean.

Men wondered at the hue  
That in his face was seen  
A splendid man to view  
He came, entirely *green*.

His horse was green, his armor was green, his hair, his beard, his face, were green. And here our poet displays one of the first of those structural devices by which he constantly builds the dramatic power of his scenes, what we may compare to the camera technique of the modern movies. For three additional long stanzas he goes on to describe the giant's armor in detail, the horse and its trappings, the hollybush and the axe which the giant carries, and these with all the visual details and concentration of a moving camera giving us a close-up of the terrifying stranger as he advances into the hall. The stranger speaks no courteous word of greeting but cries out haughtily, "Wher is the gouvenour of this gyng?" ["Where is the governor of this crowd?"] Quickly the camera shifts to the company in the hall, to pick up the



effect of this strange phenomenon; it shifts to where the knights are sitting, the noble, the famous, the insuperably valiant knights of King Arthur's court. And what is the response of these bold knights? They stop, they stare, confounded, their chatter goes out like a light. And our poet, who puns, smiles, and teases throughout his poem, brings to a close his long camera's scrutiny, ending an elaborate stanza with a piece of ironic teasing:

    Their speech at once was stilled,  
        Like sleepers they were in a dream;  
    They felt not only fright  
        But *courtesy*, I deem.

Courtesy? What courtesy? This is our poet's joke. The fact is, my lords and ladies, that all these vaunted heroes were just plain scared stiff!

This moment in the poem is a model in brief of the way in which the poet throughout uses set description, a seeing eye, a shifting visual standpoint, and the very form of the stanza itself to make description yield drama, to make dramatic action yield insight into his characters' emotions, to make those emotions come home to his audience, and to make the whole suggest that humor and nuance, which are the marks of his manifold sophistication.

In all the opening scene King Arthur himself never loses face. He at once greets the giant courteously, and the giant proposes a "game": "If anyone here is brave enough," he says, "let him take this axe and have a chop at my neck with it. However, at the end of a year and a day, he must seek me out and let me take a chop at his neck in return." Since none of the other knights in the

hall shows any haste to respond to this playful invitation, Arthur himself, stung by the stranger's taunt, accepts the challenge. But at that moment, Sir Gawain, who is the flower of courtesy, sitting near to Guenevere at table, asks for permission to leave her side and furthermore to take on the challenge himself in Arthur's stead. For this is a foolish matter, he says, not meet for the king, suitable only to so insignificant a person as himself, Gawain. The boon is granted ("Do a nice clean job on the stranger's neck," jokes Arthur, "and you won't have to worry about the return engagement"). Gawain takes a good cut at the giant's nape, and the Green head rolls down, bloody, on the floor, where it is merrily kicked about by the company. But the Green Knight, with undiminished aplomb, picks it up, reminds Gawain to seek the return engagement a year hence at the Green Chapel (wherever that may be), and vanishes pell-mell out at the door.

Well, what do you do in a situation like that? It is Christmas; King Arthur is host and has a houseful of guests. Neither in speech nor in appearance can he let his worry show. He reassures Guenevere, courteously encourages Gawain, and—like Belshazzar before him—bids the show go on. And it *does*, in feasting and in minstrelsy until night must fall. Sir Gawain, however, is in deep, and we know it. The Green Knight may be able to pick up his rolling head like a ball from the floor, but Gawain has only one ordinary head, and his future depends upon it. Yet no one in that courteous court can say anything about the matter; no one, that is, except the poet, who intrudes himself, as it were, into his poem, addressing Gawain directly with sober admonition:

‘ ‘ SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT ’ ’

Now thenk wel, Sir Gawan,  
For wothe that thou ne wonde  
This auenture for to frayn  
That thou has tan on honde.

Now take heed, Sir Gawain, lest  
Fearing the Green Knight's brand,  
You shrink back from the quest  
That you have taken in hand.

Poor Sir Gawain! King Arthur may feel apprehensive for him, but, after all, it's Gawain's neck, not Arthur's, that's in jeopardy.

To make matters worse, a year has got to pass before he can even begin to know the outcome. There is an awful lot of time for thinking in a year—that axe, you know, and the nakedness of a neck. Yet there is not very much time, after all; the year runs so quickly, and suddenly here we are, actually faced with the thing. Surely this was going on in Gawain's mind, but our poet does not say so. Instead he suggests it, and he does so with a piece of indirection that constitutes a typical touch of his genius. He gives us two stanzas of nature poetry on the passage of the seasons, from Christmas to the following Michaelmas. Let us read them:

In the hall Gawain was glad those games to begin,  
But it would not seem strange if sad were the ending;  
For though men with much drink are merry in mind,  
Yare runs a year, never yielding the same,  
The start and the close very seldom according.  
So past went this Yule, and the year followed after,  
Each season in turn succeeding the other.  
There came after Christmas quickly the crabbed Lent,  
Trying the flesh with fish and with plainer food;

But then the world's weather with winter contends;  
Down to earth shrinks the cold, the clouds are uplifted;  
In showers full warm the bright rain descends,  
And falls on the fair fields. Flowers unfold;  
The ground and the groves are green in their garments;  
Birds hasten to build, blithesomely singing  
For soft summer's solace spreading on slopes.

Everywhere  
The blossoms swell and blow,  
In hedge-rows rich and rare,  
And notes most lovely flow  
From out the forest fair.

After this comes the season of summer's soft winds,  
When Zephyrus sighs on the seeds and the verdant plants.  
The herb that then grows in the ground is right happy  
When down from the leaves drops the dampening dew  
To abide the bright sun that is blissfully shining.  
But autumn comes speeding, soon grows severe,  
And warns it to wax full ripe for the winter.  
With drought then the dust is driven to rise,  
From the face of the fields to fly to the heaven.  
With the sun the wild wind of the welkin's at war;  
The leaves from the limbs drop, and light on the ground;  
And withers the grass that grew once so greenly.  
Then all that once grew richly ripens and rots;  
Thus yearns the year away in many *yesterdays*,  
And winter, old winter, in the way of the world,

Draws near,  
Till comes the Michaelmas moon  
With pledge of weather sere.  
Then thinks Sir Gawain soon  
Of his dread journey drear.

This is wonderful poetry, and you feel it much more strongly in the original. But scholars have had trouble

with it. Preoccupied with sources and analogues to everything, they have failed to make discoveries for these lines, hence tend to attribute them to the poet's "originality," even indeed to his direct knowledge and love of nature. Well, maybe. Perhaps our poet was indeed a fourteenth-century Wordsworth, with an instinct for the birds and the bees. But in a recent article on these stanzas elsewhere, I have shown that they have nothing but literary sources in profusion—provided that you know where to look for them, and that, in the end, it does not really matter, except as they lead us to the meaning and the art. For no man invents his materials, neither the substance of his poem nor the conventions of his art; he inherits them. What is original is how he uses them and gives them individual existence.

Several French romances join the parts of their narrative by verses on a season or a change of season, so that our poet is here honoring a known romance convention. Some of the English writers of our poet's milieu, in treating a single season like spring, use certain of the language and details which he employs. There is an ancient tradition from the Roman moralists, which associates the passing of the seasons with the theme of worldly mutability and peril. In that tradition the steady though troubled movement to winter is the inexorable progress—to death. To this it adds the poignant topic: how swiftly everything lovely passes away; a thought which stirred the gentle melancholy of poets and philosophers alike. Thus in a contemporary lyric another fourteenth-century Englishman reminds us that the lovely world is after all nothing but a dream:

When men are merriest at their meal  
With meat and drink to make them glad,  
With worship and with worldly weal  
They are so set they cannot be sad. . . .  
This day, as a leaf we may feel light  
With all the mirth that men devise,  
To revel with the robins bright,  
Each man gayest in his guise.  
At last it then draws on to night  
When sleep takes over, master-wise.  
And when a man has seen sleep's might  
And in the morning opens his eyes,  
Then everything vanishes, phantom-wise.  
Where it's got to, men can't say  
(And if they knew they would be wise)—  
*For all is turned to YESTERDAY.*

And so our *Gawain* poet also ends his passage on the seasons, conjuring up the note of poignancy:

Thus yearns the year away in many *yesterdays*.

All these themes and conventions our poet joins together in his beautiful stanzas on the seasons. But he does more than that. Others treat such matters separately, or if they unite some or most of them, do so in separate moralizing pieces, devoted to such concerns alone. Our poet makes these stanzas count for his story; they are not simply moralizing or contemplation. Though they do not speak of Gawain directly, they yet tell us what he is feeling and thinking; they suggest, with emotion, that trouble and death are in the offing; and they stir in us, as they take us through the necessary temporal interval of a year, a rising apprehension, as the day approaches when our hero is bound to face his peril alone. Thus a formal

piece of nature description is *energized* by its skilfully wrought significance for the plot.

But there is also a further technical point to this passage. The writers of medieval romance include among them many excellent *raconteurs*—Gottfried von Strassburg, the author of the French *Tristan*, the writer of the *Song of Roland*, and the great Chrétien de Troyes himself. But none tells a story with the same developing concentration on crucial moments as the *Gawain* poet, or builds those moments into dramatic scenes with his ordered constructive sense and power. Our romance falls essentially into three parts, each centering on a single scene or inter-related group of scenes: the first, the scene of the challenge itself in Arthur's hall at Christmas; the second, a year later during Sir Gawain's quest, in the hall of a baron and his lady, who have offered Gawain brief hospitality at this new Christmas time; the third part is the fulfilment of the quest and challenge itself shortly afterward in a hair-raising single scene at the Green Chapel. There is also a brief conclusion to the story which takes us and Gawain back to King Arthur's court. Between these scenes, to give the story continuity, there is what the medieval critics might have characterized by the term *abbreviatio*, and we may call "connective tissue." The stanzas on the seasons are a striking illustration of this device.

Well, a year has passed, and Sir Gawain must at last set out on his perilous adventure. As in all quests he goes off alone, into a strange and distant world. Danger from beasts and worms, inhospitable nature, no road at all, loneliness, and bitter cold mark the stages of his anxious and laborious journey. Nor is the journey simply the

physical adventure of a soldier and an athlete. Gawain is a Christian knight. His coat of arms contains a golden Pentacle, the Seal of Solomon, which signifies, the poet tells us, Gawain's moral character: the purity of his five senses, his fivefold knightly qualities; but, more than this, his faith in the Virgin Mary and her Five Joys, and his trust in the Five Wounds of Jesus Christ, as in a magic talisman, protecting him from the malice of his enemies. The abbreviated account of the journey itself into nowhere is another revealing piece of connective tissue. But it is also, as I have elsewhere shown, a paraphrase of the Roman moralist Seneca, who argues that virtue is its own reward, that amid the multitudinous perils of this world, only virtue and fortitude can save us:

Amid destinies dark and dangerous  
What can man do but try?

In short, it is our hero's character and faith which he throws into the balance against his more than human adversary. And it is this point which makes the significance of everything that follows.

The second Christmas Eve finds Gawain wandering in a forest. It is nowhere, his armor is steely cold, and he is far from home and friends. How different a Christmas from the last. In his loneliness Gawain turns to prayer,

To Mary made his moan,  
That she direct his ride  
To where some hearth-fire shone.

And direct him she does. For suddenly he comes to a fair field and a hill on which a castle stands. It is almost like fair weather amid winter. As for the castle, it is the most elaborate specimen Gawain has ever seen, so fancy, jests



the poet, that it looks like a paper cut-out, similar to those *sotelties* that decorated the festive tables of royalty in his day. Everything now is gaiety again, joy, sophistication, and play. And there, in that castle, Gawain spends a Christmas as strange at least as the last one; more charming, perhaps, more comfortable after his weary journey, and certainly more dangerous, though the danger is not now physical, but a peril that threatens his very character.

His host also likes Christmas games. He proposes one to Gawain that in the end will test that sensitive gentleman to the very seams and stitches of his will. The host, like many a fourteenth-century magnate, is intent at this season upon hunting; but our hero, who has ridden around enough by now, is to remain in the castle to rest, before the culminating stage of his adventure, when he must find the elusive Green Chapel and bare his neck to that sharp-edged axe. There are only a few days left. The host, however, tells Gawain not to worry; the Green Chapel is nearby, and he knows where it is. The game that is now proposed is that his host and Gawain at the end of each of three days will exchange what each has got during that day. The host's "take," of course, will be the animals he has killed in the hunt; Gawain's will be what he is able to get at home in the castle.

Therein lies our hero's danger. For his hostess is the hunting baron's wife, young, merry, beautiful, intent on love, and infinitely capable of guile. In short, my lords and ladies, a *lady*!

There ensue three days of exquisite temptation, a game of cat and mouse, in which extended formal descriptions of medieval hunts alternate with teasing scenes in Ga-

wain's bedroom. Here again our poet shows his complex powers, adapting a variety of conventions to the necessities of his plot, to the working-out of the emotional impact of his scenes, and to the suggestion of the danger that threatens. Over the whole plays the poet's sense for high comedy. The social and psychological settings which define the character of the action depend on a theory of Christian knighthood and the doctrine and history of courtly love. Host and hostess play the game that, *if* their guest is indeed from King Arthur's court, and *if* he is the great Sir Gawain himself, then he is indeed the flower of courtesy; hence they can learn from him the niceties of chivalresque behavior. The hostess in particular expects from him examples of witty entertainment, of elegant manners, and of the refinements of doctrine and talk about love. The unadmitted ingredient between hostess and Sir Gawain is that she is in fact submitting him to deliberate temptation, that they are playing together a game of surfaces, beneath which lies something deadly serious—and that all this somehow relates to Gawain's quest, a quest with probable death for him as its fulfilment.

The first day of temptation in Gawain's bedroom is a scene that once again displays the camera's eye and the poet's insinuating humor:

Gawain the good in his gay bed reposed,  
Lying snugly, till sunlight shone on the walls,  
'Neath a coverlet bright with curtains about it.  
As softly he slumbered, a slight sound he heard  
At his door, made with caution, and quickly it opened.  
The hero heaved up his head from the clothes;  
By a corner he caught up the curtain a little,  
And glanced out with heed to behold what had happened.

‘ ‘ SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT ’ ’

The lady it was, most lovely to look at,  
Who shut the door after her, stealthily, slyly,  
And turned toward the bed. Then the brave man, embarrassed,  
Lay down again subtly to seem as if sleeping;  
And stilly she stepped, and stole to his bed,  
There cast up the curtain, and creeping within it,  
Seated herself on the bedside quite softly,  
And waited a long while to watch when he woke.  
And he too, lurking, lay there a long while,  
Wondering at heart what might come of this happening,  
Or what it might mean—a marvel he thought it.  
Yet he said to himself, “ ’Twould be surely more seemly  
By speaking at once to see what she wishes.”  
Then roused he from sleep and, stretching, turned toward her,  
His eyelids unlocked, made believe that he wondered,  
And signed himself so by his prayers to be safer

From fall.  
Right sweet in chin and cheek,  
Both white and red withal,  
Full fairly did she speak  
With laughing lips and small.

Here, once more as so often throughout the story, our poet saves the climax and the witty turn to the final rhymed quatrain of his stanza, where we *see* that tempting piece of femininity, which makes the great Sir Gawain say his prayers! Cornered, naked in his bed, by lovely lips and a red-and-white complexion!

The doctrine of courtly love which is assumed as a base in the three days of love-play that here begin goes back in its formal fashion to a famous book written in the twelfth century. It is the treatise by one Andreas the Chaplain—a strange authority to be writing on love!—a treatise entitled *De arte honesti amandi*, which I like to

translate as “How To Make Love and Still Remain a Gentleman.” It defines courtly love as a passion arising inwardly in a man through his eyesight. Its source is fleshly and natural; but its outcome among gentlemen and ladies is a relationship, a psychology, and a code of manners which sublimate mere passion into something that produces refinement and virtue. It assumes that the man is caught by the passion, that he must normally take the initiative, that the lady may prudently grant her grace, or not, as she wills; that though the man may press his love-suit directly, the lady, even if she means to say “Yes,” may not do so immediately; and, if she means to say “No,” she may not simply turn her suitor down. In each case, since love’s outcome must be to increase knightly virtue, she must first test the lover she means to accept; and she must not discourage knightliness by blunt refusal in the man she intends to turn down. Every lover will think his lady lovely; but he need not be handsome or young or of high rank; he need only be virtuous, for this is the mark of true nobility. A knight can love no other than one lady, but such a love cannot exist between a husband and a wife: the serene possession of marriage is fatal to the spurring-on of that zeal which comes from unfulfilled desire and is only possible between lovers, not spouses. Love of this sort is always a free gift, not to be taken by force by the man from the lady. And one of its social requirements and results is the development of long conversations between knights and dames; indeed, many a medieval love bout is nothing more than palaver in a pavilion, where prowess resides primarily in talk!

As time went on, variations appeared on the love doctrine of Andreas the Chaplain. Its paganism raised prob-

lems in a Christian society; one of the countermovements was the modification of courtly love to something more in keeping with *Christian* knighthood. Such a knight, while following the social manners and principles of courtly love, might take the Virgin Mary, for example, as his lady. The strict Andrean doctrine, with its outcome in physical possession, would then seem pagan, the Christian modification unsensual and pure. Yet both forms might use the same manners and language and much of the same social code.

This is the moral world of Gawain's bedroom, within whose curtained confines the three days' temptation is played out.

In an earlier romance by Chrétien de Troyes, the *Conte de la Charette*, the hero is also subjected to temptation, on that occasion in a lady's bedroom. She is lovely and willing; he is a great knight; within the special world of courtly love the offer is respectable; in normal circumstances a man might most happily accept. But this, as it happens, is the famous Sir Lancelot, Guenevere's chevalier, who can have no other love though the world be lost. So it is in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gawain's lady is the Virgin Mary herself, and he can have no other. But though Lancelot may be a very great knight indeed, Gawain is the flower of courtesy. What is he to do in the face of his hostess' patent suggestions? He cannot simply say "No"; that crudeness would violate his courtliness. Nor can he say "Yes" either; for he already has a lady, even though in a more pagan moment his hostess might think the Virgin no "lady" at all!

The system, it begins to occur to you, imposes a certain delicacy of maneuver. By its means the hostess deliber-

ately seeks to ensnare her famous guest for purposes of her own, as we shall shortly see.

There is also another "switch" in the story. Though the romances themselves have ladies who pursue their loves with ardor, in *Andreas*, you remember, it is the knight who presses the suit. Here the situation is reversed. Gawain must seem to play what is normally the lady's part, the superior in love and courtliness; and the hostess must seem to be both ardent and in need of love's instruction. She plays the game against him with directness, inventiveness of argument, and a flexibility of tactics that very nearly drive him to the wall. Yet all he will permit her are kisses, which he, dutifully fulfilling the conditions of the game, bestows each evening on his host, in exchange for the "game" which the host has hunted down in the forest.

As for the hostess, who has been getting nowhere in her game, she undertakes to try one tactic more. On the third day she urges Gawain to accept a gift from her, according to the custom of knights and dames: a magic girdle which she says will protect its wearer's life. Now our hero, as it happens, has begun to think once more about his comfortably interrupted quest. Indeed, he has had a troubled dream, which brings it home to him again. In an unguarded moment, therefore, he accepts the proffered gift, in keeping with courteous convention. He knows, however, that not love or courtesy has moved him but, underneath it all, a sense of fear. It is the one gift he fails to give back to his host; and this at the end becomes, in his stricken heart, his one, unchivalric sin.

If there were world enough and time, we could spend them both tonight examining in detail how with poetry

and drama the story comes to an end. How Gawain goes to the Green Chapel and manfully stands his test; how the Green Knight teases him by raising and lowering his axe; how Gawain, as the axe swings through the air, flinches and the delighted giant taunts him, how the giant raises the axe once more and slightly nicks Sir Gawain on the neck; and how Gawain finally cries out “*Enough!*” We could spend them on the ensuing chapter of disclosures, in which the Green Knight identifies himself, beneath his strange disguise, as the hunting lord who has been our hero’s host. The whole affair has simply been a plot, got up by the famous sorceress Morgan La Faye to scare the wits out of Arthur and his court. And if Sir Gawain was supposed to be so perfect an Arthurian specimen, the love temptation was also part of the plot to do them in. Morgan La Faye has both succeeded and not succeeded. As for Gawain, he confesses to the girdle and the sins which, in his conscience, it portends—a confession which, incidentally, parallels that of the Church; the true confession, however, was not made to a priest, when there was time, but is made now to the Green Knight when the test essentially is over. Of the girdle itself, ironically as it transpires, Gawain had no need at all. His courage and his virtue and his faith would have been enough, that faith which for a tiny moment faltered.

Sir Gawain at last goes back to King Arthur’s hall, which is lively with joy and merriment at the safe return of their most beloved hero. He has weathered many dangers and come back hale and sound, except for that insignificant nick. When he confesses his fault to them, they laugh at him and think it all delightful. Poor Gawain!

For him, the model of the Christian-Senecan hero, for whom virtue is itself its own reward and fortitude an indivisible virtue, the tiny nick and the fault that it memorializes are as vast in their significance as life itself. For his friends, the knights and ladies, and even the king himself, that nick is the mark of Gawain's *humanity*.

Let us bring our essay to its conclusion by returning for a moment to the *Conte de la Charette*. It tells how Lancelot, the lover of Guenevere, for love of her once rode in a hangman's cart. Because of his love, that exploit becomes the mark both of his shame and of his unforgettable distinction. Later, in what is called the Vulgate Cycle of Arthur, various knights of the Round Table and their dames all ride in a hangman's cart for Lancelot's sake. So here, at the very end, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthur's lords and ladies, remembering that blessed girdle, agree henceforth to wear a similar token in memory of Gawain's happy misadventure. Thus the mark of disgrace is transformed to a badge of honor. It reminds us now, as indeed it did our poem's medieval scribe, of that other badge, the Garter, with its inspired and ever living motto: *Honi soit qui mal y pense*. They should be touched by no more shame than his!

The anthropological critics and the literary-cultural historians, who have long been preoccupied with the *Gawain's* sources, have traced its origins in weather myths, in philosophical archetypes, in ancient Celtic tales and sorcery. But the *Gawain's* precise and special magic does not reside in the Druidry of its ancestors; it lies in the poet's own vision—it lies in his wit and in his art.



THIS PAPER WAS WRITTEN FOR THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB AND READ BEFORE THE CLUB ON MONDAY EVENING, THE TENTH OF MAY, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FIVE. THIS EDITION OF THREE HUNDRED COPIES WAS PRINTED FOR THE CLUB IN THE MONTH OF OCTOBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FIVE.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.