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Trewest Tricherie and the Corsedest Kyrk: Dichotomy in the Fallen World of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Aaron Thurow

The poet of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight uses a series of dichotomies—treachery and truth, victory and defeat, peace and war, spiritual and material, nature and artifice—to both understand and analyze the chivalric code as a guide to virtue in a fallen world. He uses Sir Gawain, a seeming paragon of virtue devoted to perfect obedience, to show the limits of this code, in both its moral perfectionism and enforcement by honor, when facing certain death. He concludes with the possibility of a more perfect but also more difficult code informed by a conscientious awareness of one's own past failures; past defeat becomes a new strength. Ultimately, he leads the reader to examine the moral life considering a distinctly Christian view of a cosmos not divided between material good and evil, but providentially united by the Augustinian mystery of the incarnation in which what is unlike God's perfection becomes like it: a certain kind of lowness, failure, suffering, and even death. Through the rejection of fundamentally Manichaean false dichotomies, the poet argues for a faith that finds nothing that is true to be anathema.

Through a series of apparent dichotomies, the anonymous poet of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight examines the chivalric code as a guide to virtuous action within a fallen world. He reveals both the strengths and the weaknesses of this code in the success and failure of its highest follower, who is devoted to perfect obedience to its law and admiration of its highest possible object. At the end, the poet proposes a means by which the faults that he finds might, in part, be rectified, while acknowledging the difficulty of such an attempt. We are left uncertain as to whether the false dichotomies portrayed as leading the knight into danger might, in fact, be inextricable from a life dedicated to such a human-defined code of conduct. The poet sees this entire examination as existing in the light of Christmas and the blend of seemingly dichotomous aspects it represents. I have appended Tolkien's modernization of the original middle English in this essay for the convenience of anyone unfamiliar with the Gawain poet's dialect but also to occasion a few comments where it is interesting to note Tolkien's potential biases in his modernization.

The tale's use of dichotomy begins in the very first line, subtly setting out some of the issues to be addressed:

> Siþen þe sege and assaut watz sesed at Troye,
> Þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondez and askez
> Þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresous þer wroȝt
> Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe. (lines 1–4)
>
> [When the siege and the assault had ceased at Troy
> and the fortress fell in flame to firebrands and ashes,
> the traitor who the contrivance of treason there fashioned
> was tried for his treachery, the most true upon earth.]

Obviously, treachery and truth are at odds and yet joined in some way, whether we take "trewest" as referring to the "tricherie" or the "tulk." We are also beginning with an ending, as it were, in the fiery end of Troy being seen here as the beginning of the history of Britain and of the action of this poem. Foreshadowing what I will argue is a felix culpa at the end of the story, even victory and defeat are here simultaneously contrasted and confused: we go straight from a first sentence about the fall of Aeneas's city to a second describing how in consequence he and his kin "patrounes bicome / Welneȝe of al þe wele in þe west iles" ["lords became / of well-nigh all the wealth in the Western Isles"] (6–7). Finally, we may note briefly, in the ambiguity of the first four lines, that the "tulk" might be a number of different people. Is it Antenor or Aeneas, as critics have most often suggested, or might it be someone else? That is, in the context of the story to come, might the author not be referring to Paris, whose utter failure in a test externally very similar to Gawain's (as guest to a noble host and his beautiful but willing wife) causes the fall of Troy here described and the birth of the world in which the poem's action is set? Certainly, if we are to ascribe to this "tulk" a treason worthy of being called "þe trewest on erthe" (in competition, of course, with such figures as Judas) the betrayal must be heinous indeed. Paris may also be said to have been both true and false: being true to his lady while being false to his host, both at great cost. Perhaps erotic love, by its nature, always inclines one to a certain betrayal of other obligations, a problem with the human condition. Whatever the intended implication, however, it suffices to note the dichotomous nature of this ending-beginning of the poem with the destruction-creation of a nation from the truest falsehood on earth.

The break from the savage history of Britain to the courtly festivities of Camelot (stanza 2 to stanza 3) represents another set of important dichotomies. In the wheel of the first stanza and the body of the second, Britain is presented as a place where "were and wrake and

wonder / Bi syþez hatz wont þerinne" ["where strange things, strife and sadness / at whiles in the land did fare"] (16–17), inhabited by "Bolde bredden þerinne, baret þat lofden, / In mony turned tyme tene þat wroȝten" ["bold men ... who in battle rejoiced, / and many a time that betid troubles aroused"] (21–22). By the time we have reached the end of the first sentence of the third stanza, however, we are amidst "rych reuel oruȝt and rechles merþes" ["merriment unmatched and mirth without care"] (40). War has given way to game, and it is hard to take the poet's assertion at the end of the stanza describing the festivities as being intended without a hint of irony: "Hit were now grete mye to neuen / So hardy a here on hille" ["it would now be hard to name / a troop in war so tried"] (58–59). The greatest struggle one may engage in at this court is to try to find a braver warrior-band of dancers at affray with such fearsome ladies? Manly martial warfare becomes "joust" ["just"] (42) and then degrades further to even less martial games of mixed men and women without concern for victory: "Ladies laȝed ful loude þoȝ þay lost haden / And he þat wan watz not wrothe" ["ladies laughed loudly, though they lost the game, / and he that won was not woeful, as may well be believed"], wink wink nudge nudge! (69–70). But what is a warrior at peace or a romance without marvel?

Arthur, be it foolishly or wisely, is not content with this state of affairs in his court, set seemingly in opposition to the outside world as established by the first two stanzas of the poem. He demands a marvel, and into the court rides what seems to be the ultimate symbol of dichotomy: the Green Knight. It should not surprise us that even the literal description of the knight has evoked such varying interpretations. Morgan is quite right to point out the wealth of descriptive language that ties the Green Knight to proper knightly appearance and demeanor: "the dominant idea here is not the churlish but the noble," "the elegance of the Green Knight's dress is such that it can only be the product of a courtly environment," and "the conduct of the Green Knight, indeed, answers the decorum of the hostile challenger. He offers no greeting (line 223) and addresses Arthur in the familiar singular form (lines 258–74)." Morgan goes too far, however, in asserting that "what distinguishes the Green Knight from Gareth is not monstrosity, but simply greenness." The Knight enters on a horse, he is larger than life, he carries strange "unmete" objects (208), he proposes an incredible game, he survives decapitation, and no one knows who he is or from whence he comes! Setting aside the oddities and extremities in his appearance, however, it is from the reaction

of the observers that we most clearly see the overwhelming otherness of this figure. They know him at once for a marvel of some significance, like readers looking upon what they recognize to be a sign, but without understanding its signification:

> "Ther watz lokyng on lenþe þe lude to beholde, /
> For uch mon had meruayle quat hit mene myȝt /
> Þat a haþel and a horse myȝt such a hwe lach"
>
> ["Then they looked for a long while, on that lord gazing; /
> for every man marvelled what it could mean indeed /
> that horseman and horse such a hue should come by"] (232–34).

He is not, to the courtiers, merely a knight who is marvelously green, but they take him at once for something other than human: "Forþi for fantoum and fairyȝe þe folk þere hit demed" ["wherefore a phantom and fay-magic folk there thought it"] (240). Even if Lewis and Tolkien are right that such inquiry distracts from, rather than adding to, the value of the piece, we cannot disregard those who seek the roots of the Green Knight in pagan superstition because the poet, himself, presents Arthur's court as doing exactly this. What is significant here, I take it, is that the court sees this intruder as something so wholly foreign: "al stouned at his steuen and ston-sil seten" ["astounded at his stern voice stone-still they sat there"] (242). But the poet provides details that do, indeed, make us wonder if his opinion matches that of the court.

Interestingly, in addition to providing the familiar, even courtly description of some aspects of the Green Knight, the poet himself observes precisely this dichotomous nature in the Knight: "Half-etayn in erde I hope þat he were / Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene, / And þat þe myriest in his muckel þat myȝt ride" ["half a troll upon earth I trow that he was / but the largest man alive at least I declare him / and yet the seemliest for his size that could sit upon a horse"] (140–42). He is either the ultimate man writ large, "mon most," or not a man at all. The Green Knight is man and not-man, he is wild and courtly, and he carries symbols of still further dichotomies:

> Bot in his on hande he hade a holyn bobbe
> (Þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare)
> And an ax in his oþer, a hoge and unmete
> A spetos sparþe to expound in spelle quoso myȝt. (lines 206–209)

[But in his one hand he held a holly-bundle,
that is greatest in greenery when groves are leafless,
and an axe in the other, ugly and monstrous,
a ruthless weapon aright for one in rhyme to describe.]

In the holly and axe may be seen life and death, an implement of peace and of war, beauty and cruelty, and the green spring glimpsed amidst the barren winter like the strange feasting of Christmastide amidst winter's deprivation (or perhaps the cross, itself). There is also a tradition of linking holly with the immortal soul for precisely the reason given here by the poet (who reminds us that this is poetry, "spelle," along the way), for the holly is invisible amidst the greenery of summer, but enduring and even seeming to grow greener amidst the death of the world's glory in winter, enduring the axe, as it were. Indeed, the poet's repeated emphasis upon this being "ȝol and new ȝer" ["yule and new year"] (284) (linked by more meaning than mere chronology) and the root of this tale being specifically a "Crystemas gomen" ["Christmas game"] (283) may point us, through the dichotomies of the Green Knight, to the dichotomy of the season. The secular aspect of seasonal dichotomy is reasonably clearly demonstrable in the beginning of the second fitt:

For þaȝ men ben mery in mynde quen þay han mayn drink,
A ȝere ȝernes ful ȝerne and ȝeldez neuer lyke;
Þe forme to þe fynisment foldez ful selden ... (497–99)
After Crystenmasse com þe crabbed Lentoun,
Þat fraystez flesch with þe fysche and fode more simple. (502–503)

[For though men be merry of mood when they have mightily drunk,
a year slips by swiftly, never the same returning;
the outset to the ending is equal but seldom ...
after Christmas there came the crabbed Lenten
that with fish tries the flesh and with food more meagre.]

We move from Arthur's call to return to feasting in stanza 21 to a brief reminder of the feasting in lines 497–99 and then into the ensuing dearth of Lent (note that there is no mention of Easter feasting, as with Christmas, thus heightening the contrast between Christmas and Lent).

It is possible that this is as far as the seasonal dichotomy is intended to go, but it may not be too much of a stretch to suggest that the dichotomous nature of the liturgical occasion is

also meant to be evoked. God become man, spirit in flesh, defeated to triumph, born blameless to die for sin: "Þat Dryȝtyn for oure destine to deȝe watz borne / Wele waxez in uche a won in worlde for His sake" ["that our dear Lord for our doom to die was born / in every home wakes happiness on earth for his sake"] (996–97). It should be noted, however, that there is a sort of explicitly Pagan resurrection in the purely secular description of Spring (504–15). This beautifully descriptive rebirth is brought about not by God's grace, but by "Þe weder of þe worlde with winter hit þrepez" ["the weather of the world mak[ing] war on winter"] (504). This is neither the first nor the last time a scheme of pagan immortality will be hinted at (the Green Knight surviving the axe earlier and the promise of the girdle later), but this will be discussed further below. Here it suffices to note that the poet has created the image, like the court's perhaps false impression of the Green Knight, of a world of radical dichotomy both within itself and between its physical and spiritual truth. In the thriving seasons we are given "Quen Zeferus" ["Zephyr"] (517) and "Heruest" ["Harvest"] (521) both anthropomorphized and active. There is no mention of Christian forces or the liturgical calendar, however, until linked closely with the returning winter: "Meȝelmas mone / Watz cumen with winter wage" ["Michaelmass moon / has winter's boding brought"] (532–33). Secular and holy seem to dwell in opposite worlds, one thriving only when the other fades, and it is nature's power that can be seen overcoming death, not Christ's (remember, no Easter is mentioned). The pagan world seems to be filled with over-abundant life while the Christian promises only a difficult journey ending in inevitable death: "Þen þenkkez Gawan ful sone / Of his anious uyage" ["Gawain then full soon / of his grievous journey thought"] (534–35). Unlike the Green Knight or the season, we know that Gawain cannot survive his own death ... or do we?

Between the court and the wilderness we are given the much-examined description of Gawain's panoply and, especially, his shield. Shoaf argues that the pentangle on the shield is a "natural sign." He means it in a slightly different sense, but I would disagree strongly with the impression such an appellation might give. That is, a truly "natural" sign would be, for instance, a lion (not an uncommon heraldic symbol). If it symbolizes bravery and strength, it also represents a creature that, possessing an independent existence in the real world, exemplifies both these virtues. The pentangle, by contrast, is the ultimate artificial symbol. Neither does it occur in the natural observable world, nor does a mathematical geometric

shape have anything inherently to do with the concept of "trawþe" ["honor"], much less the five-by-five virtues. It is only through human artifice—human intellect and interpretation—that the symbol becomes, as it is, a perfect symbol for truth and chivalric virtue. This artificiality may be intentionally highlighted by the poet in the framing of his interpretation of the pentangle: "I am in tent yow to telle, þof tary hyt me schulde" ["I intend now to tell you, though it may tarry my story"] (624).

The poet intentionally breaks the flow of the action and addresses his audience as a teacher or divine who will interpret this "syngne" ["sign"] used originally by Solomon (625). In such close proximity to the description of the endlessly cycling seasons, it is also interesting to note that the pentangle is similarly endless, in the poet's opinion: "Withouten ende at any noke I oquere fynde, / Whereeuer þe gomen bygan or glod to an ende" ["not ending in any angle anywhere, as I discover, / wherever the process was put in play or passed to an end"] (660–61, emphasis added). Is this yet another stab at immortality? If so, it is closer to being Christian, but falls short because the true symbol of Christian immortality would surely be the cross, which, hinging upon Christ's mortality, is defined by the two things the pentangle does not possess: an ending and a beginning (Alpha and Omega).

With regard to the pentangle there are three points that are, perhaps, most important to note. The first point is that the pentangle contains the quintessence of the chivalric code Gawain claims and is claimed to represent and follow:

> ForÞy hit acordez to þis knyȝt and to his cler armes,
> For ay faithful in fyue and sere fyue syþez,
> Gawan watz for gode knawen and, as golde pured,
> Voyded of uche vylany, with vertuez ennoured
> In mote.
> Forþy þe pentangle new
> He ber in schelde and cote,
> As tulk of tale most trwe
> And gentylest knyȝt of lote. (631–39, emphasis added)
>
> [So it suits well this knight and his unsullied arms;
> for ever faithful in five points, and five times under each,
> Gawain as good was acknowledged and as gold refined,
> devoid of every vice with virtues adorned.

So there
the pentangle painted new
he on shield and coat did wear,
as one of word most true
and knight of bearing fair.]

The second point is that, if one notes the particular language of this passage, some of which is lost in Tolkien's modernization, there is a real emphasis on honor. That is, this is the right symbol for Gawain because everyone knows it is, and his truth is that of speech, which is inherently social (perhaps even of tales told about him). Just as the pentangle is what the world sees of him, since it is upon the outside of his shield, these virtues are defined and tested by external social measures. This leads to the third point: the pentangle is not, in fact, perfect and all-containing. The "fyue joyez" ["five joys"] of "Heuen Quene" ["heaven's courteous Queen"] (646–47) may be contained, intellectually, within the pentangle, but the image of the queen itself must be appended to the inside of Gawain's shield: "In þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted, / Þat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer payred" ["on the inner side of his shield her image depainted, / that when he cast his eye thither his courage never failed"] (649–50). The poet highlights the fact that the pentangle faces away from Gawain and outward to the world, while behind the symbol of the pentangle, what is most present to Gawain and most inspires his knightly courage is the image of the "Heuen Quene." This image, nested in his interpretation of the pentangle, is a symbol of a very different kind, one that the poet would not have to interpret for his reader. The "Heuen Quene," like the example of the lion above, is a symbol that functions much more directly and naturally. More than that, however, it engages the observer not intellectually, as the geometric form of the pentangle, but emotionally and intuitively. We will later learn that Gawain is her knight.

In Gawain's shield taken in its entirety, therefore, we are perhaps given a beautifully rendered image of the chivalric code at its best. That is, in the outward-facing pentangle we see the ordered perfection of a life lived by the exacting and interconnecting standards of a code of conduct enforced by a society which, aware of those standards, constantly judges the knight and, by its reactions, allows him to judge himself. In the inward-facing image of the "Heuen Quene" we are given the highest possible object of the undeniable chivalric emphasis upon the female as the means to the perfection and virtue of the male. As with the

pentangle, however, this focus upon the female also emphasizes the judgment of others (though striving to earn the approval of the Blessed Virgin could hardly be considered a shallow enterprise). The pentangle is endless, overcoming the mortal world, perhaps, in the same way as wisdom and honor: perfectly formed ideas outlast their creators and followers, and the honor of a man lives after him according to how close he has come to that theoretical perfection of virtue.

Thus armed, Gawain sets out from the civilized court into the wild wastes where he is beset by war and winter, fights bulls and bears, and amidst a land where "Wonde þer bot lyte / Þat auþer God oþer gome with goud hert louied" ["there wandered but few / who with good will regarded either God or mortal"] (701–702), he prays for the seemingly impossible, and, at the opposite end of the world, he discovers nothing less than a second court. This is the beginning of the demolishment of the false dichotomies: the flip side of the coin is also a coin. Indeed, Hautdesert is not only not a wild overgrown place, but it is the court in the superlative (writ large, if you will): "Þe comlikest þat ever knyȝt aȝte" ["the most comely that ever a king possessed"] (767), "in Þe best lawe" ["in the best fashion"] (790), indeed--complement of all complements: "A better barbican þat burne bluschet vpon neuer" ["the knight a better barbican had never seen built"] (793). Indeed, after all the descriptive and superlative detail, the castle is described as a thing of such artifice that it is almost a toy or decoration: "Þat pared out of papure purely hit semed" ["all pared out of paper it appeared to have been"] (801–802). We are supposed to be, I think, astonished to find not merely some shelter for our hero to hear Mass in, but such perfection of artifice so far from Arthur's court amidst the wild wood. And the castle is far from deserted. In contrast to the striking "Alone" (735) of the 31st stanza (lost by Tolkien's typical alteration of the bob), Gawain is nearly swamped with crowds of attendants (815–25) who observe proper etiquette (826–51) and guide him inside to sumptuous quarters (852–70). And the court is equally impressed with him, so that in the wheel of stanza 36 the poet can assert that the courtiers thought:

> Wheþen in worlde he were,
> Hit semed as he moȝt
> Be prynce withouten pere
> In felde þer felle men foȝt. (871–74)

> [He came none knew from where,
> but it seemed to them he ought
> to be a prince beyond compare
> in the field where fell men fought.]

Gawain has become the Green Knight, in a sense and to an extent. The court of Bercilak sees Gawain as a marvel, intruding from the inhospitable wilds into their court, in something like the chivalric but superlative light in which Arthur's court saw the Green Knight. The analogy only goes so far, but it is interesting to note that not only does Gawain not find some wild anti-court at the other end of the world, but he finds a place every bit as civilized as Arthur's court to which he, coming in from the wilds, seems a most impressive figure (though without quite the otherness with which Arthur's court saw Bercilak when he made the reverse journey a year previously). The apparent dichotomy of Gawain versus the Green Knight is, perhaps, also here questioned. The suggestion may also be present, however, that the honor with which Gawain is greeted runs the risk of blasphemy, since he is seen as a "prynce withouten pere"—slightly softened by Tolkien's "prince beyond compare"—but, nonetheless, language that could easily be used of Christ in either case, but which could also have easily been made safe by substituting "knyȝt" ["knight"] for "prynce." Regardless of whether this moral danger is hinted at here, however, the sheer sumptuous detail and the length of the poet's description of Bercilak's court cannot help but be intended to contrast with the preceding description of the wilds and highlight the incongruity of finding such a perfectly civilized place so far from Arthur's court and amidst such apparently godless savagery (Gawain cannot even find a chapel at which to hear mass, after all). Even this will be challenged, however, when we discover that this savage wild from which Gawain escapes is actually Bercilak's hunting preserve! The irony is that, though Gawain's body was at jeopardy in the wilds, his chivalric honor and Christian soul were both far safer amongst the beasts than in the court.

As Savage was, perhaps, one of the first to argue, it seems clear that the hunting and bedroom scenes are thematically linked, and subsequent scholarship has almost unanimously accepted this assertion. I would argue that these scenes, in part, examine and explode the primary false dichotomies set up by the Green Knight's appearance at the beginning of the poem. That is, their enterprises are clearly linked, but seem to stand in

perfect dichotomy: Gawain spends his days so wholly immersed in the courtly world of artificial peace and tranquility that he hardly leaves his bed for half the day while Bercilak rides from dawn to dusk in the wilds, doing violent deeds of martial skill (even if directed towards animals). The game helps highlight this comparison, especially since Bercilak seems to consider it a competition, and compares their performance each day, each time with more advantage going to Gawain in the exchange: "Hit is god" ["That is a good one] (1392), "Bi Saynt Gile, / ȝe ar þe best þat I knowe!" ["By Saint Gile, / your match I never knew!"] (1644–45), and "'Mary,' quoþ þat oþer mon, 'myn is bihynde'" ["'Marry!' said the other man, 'mine is not up to't'"] (1942). The exchanges are rather orange-and-apple affairs and bring to the fore the difficulty of comparing the fruit of these two apparently dichotomous worlds. In the wild, noise is repeatedly emphasized: how the dogs "bayed þayr rachchez" ["amid the barking of dogs"] (1362), and the hunters "Strakande ful stoutly mony stif motez" ["Striking up stongly many a stout horn call"] (1364). By contrast the court is implied to be quiet, as in the lady's stealthy entrance (1182–90), and it is private, shown in how the lady carefully closes the door (1188, 1742). One of the most striking contrasts, however, is the overwhelming energy of Bercilak, rising at or before dawn, and the increasing sloth of Gawain lingering in bed and ever less watchful. Bercilak and his hunters "lepen vp lyȝtly" [leap up lightly] on the first day, "lopen of his bedde" ["leap from his bed"] (1413) on the second (interestingly breaking a stanza prematurely just as he breaks his rest), and they are most directly compared in the broken wheel of the third awakening in stanza 67:

> Sir Gawayn lis and slepes Ful stille and softe al niȝt;
> Þe lorde, þat his craftez kepes, Ful erly he watz diȝt. (1686–89)
>
> [Sir Gawain lies and sleeps soft and sound all night;
> his host to his hunting keeps, and is early arrayed aright.]

Even the preceding bob, "With liȝt" ["With light"] (1685), emphasizes this comparison. Gawain, for his part, goes from lying tensely in bed, debating what to do, but aware of the lady from her first touching the latch of the door (1182–83), to seeming not to be aware of her until she peeps through the bed curtains (1476), until, on the third morning, when surely we have wised up to the certainty that the lady will come again, he is so soundly asleep that the lady "Wayuez vp a window and on þe wyȝe callez ... /... / 'A! mon, how may þou slepe?

/ Þis morning is so clere'" ["wide set a window, and to wake him she called … 'Ah! man how can't thou sleep, / the morning is so clear!'"] (1743, 1746–47). Interestingly, at the beginning of the next stanza, we are told he has been dreaming of "dreȝ droupyng of dreme draueled Þat noble /… / How þat Destine schuld þat day dele hym his wyrde" ["in heavy darkness drowsing he dream-words muttered … how destiny should his doom on that day bring him"] (1750–52). This is the reason that he is caught unawares on the third morning, foreshadowing the reason he will take the girdle: fear of his own death. If this is, indeed, a foreshadowing, then the fact that this dream causes his moment of greatest sloth (while he is also caught in bed the other days, he is at least watchful) then it is not unreasonable to see a potential link between the requirement that he stay in bed until Mass and an increased danger that he will fail in the test, just as his very presence at court, rather than hunting with Bercilak, increases his peril. It is not in war and suffering that we most fear death, but in peace and pleasure.

But the apparent dichotomy of the two knights' adventures is gradually revealed to be false. Bercilak, in the wilds, appears to be in danger, but Gawain is in more danger. The hunt appears at first glance to be chaotic and savage, but it has been amply demonstrated by critics that the language of the hunt is that of a complex art done with perfect form: this is the best season for hunting due to the lack of foliage, it is proper to hunt only the females in winter (1156–57), and even the bloody slaughter is done according to precise and proper form. I would add, however, that the first, and most extended, scene of slaughter is intentionally graphic and carnal (it couldn't help but be carnal, but it doesn't have to be included). Before the first bedroom scene, the hunt lacks any significant bloody details; afterwards it is nothing but bloody sensual details. Perhaps what we have here is Hollywood: titillation and dismemberment. The danger we are meant to see in the bedroom is that it will end like the hunt, a danger that would not exist if the dichotomy of court and wild was true. Critics have noted that one may compare Gawain's performance day-by-day to that of the prey in the hunt, but if such an analogy is to be made, it cannot merely be brushed aside that the quarry is not caught only on the third day. The long slaughter description of the first day can leave us no doubt concerning this fact. Just as the exhilarating chase becomes an image for the couple's verbal sparring, its carnal conclusion becomes an image for where that sparring, if the prey is caught, might end. Indeed, the lady's increasingly immodest offers make Gawain squirm (and us moderns laugh) because they hint at a world of sexuality and carnality that

both parties know to exist under the thin but precious veneer of courtesy. It is not that the hunt is seeping into the court, but that it has always been there, and the dichotomy that places the court in opposition to the wilds is illusory. Man's actions in nature are guided by the court, and in the court they are guided by his nature.

But what of the analogy of the two hunts: in the forest and in the bedroom? Can it be carried through further? For instance, might there be some way in which Gawain, like the prey, is indeed caught every day? Perhaps it is not so much a matter of being caught, but in what nature he is caught. As Savage points out, the prey of the first two days is noble and proper prey, while that of the third, the fox, is vermin. Indeed, we see that Bercilak is proud of his catch on the first two days, but on the third he is not: "I haf hunted al þis day and noȝt haf I geten / Bot þis foule fox felle—þe Fende haf þe godez!" ["I have hunted all this day, and naught else have I got / but this foul fox-fell—the Fiend have the goods!"] (1943–44). Perhaps in accepting the kisses each day, but passing them on to his host, Gawain is caught, but proves himself worthy prey. On the third day he does, indeed, give the best chase, almost escaping, but when he is caught, he proves an unworthy catch. Does this suggest that the kisses are in some way not entirely blameless? Morgan, for his part, reverses his own sharply-observed analogy concerning who is the hunter, arguing instead: "To win kisses so entirely pure and passionate from a lady so beautiful, determined, and clever in the circumstances that Gawain finds himself involves moral action of quite exceptional courtesy and chastity ... in no respect worthy of laughter but only of the highest admiration." It is interesting how wholly supporters of Gawain's virtue accept the Green Knight's judgment when Gawain himself does not. Not only do we have the testament of the poem's end, but even while at Hautdesert, Gawain's demeanor is not that of a triumphant man aloof from sin. On the second night we are told:

> Such semblaunt to þat segge semly ho made,
> Wyth stille stolen countenaunce, þat stalworth to plese,
> Þat al forwondered watz þe wyȝt and wroth with hymseluen,
> Bot he nold not for his nurture nurne hir aȝaynez. (1658–61, emphasis added)
>
> [Such glances she gave him of her gracious favour,
> secretly stealing sweet looks that strong man to charm,
> that he was passing perplexed, and ill-pleased at heart.
> Yet he would fain not of his courtesy coldly refuse her.]

Tolkien reveals his own interpretation here, a bit, with the modesty of his language by comparison to the original text. Gawain, for his part, tries his best in the next stanza to escape what he is now recognizing as a dangerous trap before the third day: "Þe knyȝt craued leue to kayre on Þe morn" ["But said Gawain: 'Grant me leave to go on the morrow!'"] (1670). These are not the actions of a man who has won himself nothing but renown so far, and it is precisely his chivalry that constrains him from flight or reproach. When we are told that their play is blameless, the poet is very careful in how he phrases it: "Bot he defended hym so fayr that no faut semed, / No non euel on nawþer halue, nawþer þay wysten / Bot blysse" ["his defense was so fair that no fault could be seen, / nor any evil upon either side, nor aught but joy / they wist"] (1552–53 emphasis added). Tolkien mistranslates seemed ("semed") to make the lovers' judgment seem to be that of the poet. However, what the poet actually asserts is that their actions seemed not to be evil, and they did not know them to be, but they only knew bliss.

What, then, are we to make of this possibly willful ignorance in light of Gawain's chivalric code? The pentangle both succeeds and fails for deeply examined reasons. That is, the reason Gawain is caught on the first two days, to the extent that he is, is because of the very code that saves him from falling further into sin on those days. The Lady wins the first kiss by questioning Gawain's identity:

> So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
> And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen,
> Couth not lyȝtly haf lenged so long wyth a lady
> Bot he had craued a cosse bi his courtaysye
> Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at sum talez ende. (1297–1301, emphasis added)
>
> [One so good as Gawain the gracious is held,
> who all the compass of courtesy includes in his person,
> so long with a lady could hardly have lingered
> without craving a kiss, as a courteous knight
> By some tactful turn that their talk led to.]

That is, the chivalric ideal, upheld by honor—the opinions of others and especially that of the female—is open to a sort of literary assault. Who writes the fiction defines the righteous knight. At the end of a proper knightly tale there is always that little trifle ... a kiss. She tells Gawain what his own identity demands of him, and he complies. Thereafter, she may kiss

him when she likes: "I am at you comaundement, to kysse quen yow lykkez" ["I am at your call and command to kiss when you please"] (1501). But we cannot ignore the fact that she does not simply kiss him that first time but wins him over to accept her kiss; he is not a purely passive victim. On the second day, however, despite her continued efforts to define him by her own texts, Gawain's chivalry serves him well enough to prevent the greater crime of kissing her himself, which he equates with an act of force. It is his dependence upon the social judgment or "favor" or "folk where I dwell" ("Þede þer I lende," line 1499) that protects him this day, just as his dependence upon the individual judgment of the lady and the books of chivalry she interprets weakened him on the first. The weakness revealed by the first day, it seems, had something to do with the apparent passivity of the crime. That is, unable to judge the individual woman, he must allow her to do what she pleases, but in defining himself according to the judgment of a broader community, he is able to avoid doing evil in the overt actions of his own will. The second day is his most triumphant, though she still leaves with a kiss, and his conscience moves him to shame at dinner and the attempt to leave in the morning. Bercilak, however, quite correctly and ominously assesses the trends of the last two encounters after the exchange in the wheel of stanza 65: "Þe ben ryche in a whyle / Such chaffer and ȝe drowe" ["You'll be wealthy in a while, / such trade if you pursue"] (1646–47). This is not a richness Gawain should desire to be moving towards.

But whence comes the critical fall on the third day? Even if we mistrust the Green Knight's assessment, it is the third day that garners Gawain the mark he will carry with him and thus, seems to represent the greatest sin. It seems reasonably clear that Gawain's fear of his own death motivates the taking of the girdle. The lady catches him strikingly unaware on the third morning because he is dreaming of the axe's "buffet" (1754). His chivalry turns aside all her tactics, even refusing the ring (1822) and, at first, the girdle (1836–38), but when he learns that the girdle will save his life he sees it immediately as a "juel for þe joparde" (1856) and accepts it (Tolkien translates this as "prize for the peril", but this is based on the same Biblical imagery he misses in his translation of Pearl). This description of the girdle is especially interesting in light of where jewels are properly supposed to go in Pearl, where all "juels" that are lost in the "joparde" proceed to the celestial city. This is both an old Christian dilemma and an interesting comment on the chivalric code we have seen, for the most part, defending Gawain so well. That is, what fear need a Christian have of death if Christ is alive?

And yet the fear remains. But what can an idealized system of virtue so mathematically precise that it forms an endless knot, enforced by the judgment of all civilized humanity, do to help a man with that moment when he must, being mortal (unlike the knot), leave the world and its honors entirely behind? Gawain thinks, "Myȝt he haf slypped to be unslayn þe sleȝt were noble" ["if by some slight he were not slain, 'twould be a sovereign device"] (1858, emphasis added). "Noble" is perhaps skillfully and carefully used here, implying both that Gawain thinks such an escape would be good in itself and that it would be in some way proper for a knight (perhaps this notion disturbed Tolkien, resulting in his modification). As can be seen in all three of the other texts of the Pearl Manuscript, the poet seems to see one of the central aspects of Christian living as being the task of making one's soul worthy for what will come after the time of death (clean and like a perfect pearl, not a complexly interwoven pentangle). The chivalric code, as endless knot, is focused upon this world and the judgment one receives within it, not upon the world to come. This is why Gawain, for courtesy, cannot chastise the lady and remove himself from temptation to sin. The pentangle (with the perfection of womanhood on the reverse) is his shield, his defender, but simultaneously his Achilles' heel.

We should note, in passing, an interesting juxtaposition that might bear upon this encounter and the chivalric code being tested here. During the third encounter the poet comments: "Gret perile bitwene hem stod, / Nif Mare of hir knyȝt mynne" ["great peril between them stood, / unless Mary for her knight should pray"] (1768–69). As suggested by her image on his shield, Gawain is Mary's knight. She stands in the place usually occupied in romance by the beloved and, as such, may be seen as the highest possible object of the chivalric focus upon the female. Interestingly, after this assertion by the poet—that his lady, Mary, is his only hope—the very next thing the lady does is ask if Gawain already has a "lemmen" [beloved lady] and Gawain answers: "In faith I welde riȝt non, / Ne non wil welde þe quile" ["Nay! lover have I none, / and none will have meanwhile]" (1790–91). This is sufficient to defeat the lady's assault (or so it seems), but it is passive chastity not active devotion that he exhibits. If Mary is Gawain's lady, upon whom his defense depends, why can he not say so? Because it would be an absurd answer and out of context? The discovery of the Green Chapel is, in part, that such an answer would have been neither absurd nor out

of place in a contest where not only Gawain's chivalric virtue but his Christian virtue was being tested.

Before we move on to that final encounter, it occurs to me that the evolving description of the slaughter of Bercilak's prey may lend still-further insight into Gawain's greatest failure. That is, the slaughter scenes are each noticeably different and occur only after we know the outcome of the bedroom encounter, but the last, occupying only two lines after we have seen Gawain's slip, stands in striking contrast to the extended sensual gore of the first: "and syþen þay tan Reynarde / And tyuen of his cote" ["and Reynard then they sieze, / and off with his cloak"] (1920–21). Just as the court is not as far from the carnal world as we might initially assume, so the most dangerous carnality, to one of Gawain's code, is the least overt. It is not coveting lady's flesh that will cause his fall, but coveting his own flesh. As Reynard's coat is removed, so Gawain is metaphorically stripped of the raiment of the pentangle, in accepting the girdle to wear in clear contravention of his code. That is, in choosing the "noble" sin, Gawain proves himself not a noble beast but a wily vermin.

In Gawain's assessment of the Green Chapel we see that he is still working under at least some of the false dichotomies examined throughout the text. Indeed, the Green Chapel seems, at first, to be much more what we might have expected to find at the other end of the world from Arthur's court:

> "Now iwysse," quoþ Wowayn, "wysty is here;
> Þis oritore is ugly, with erbez ouergrowen.
> Wel bisemez þe wyȝe wruxled in grene
> Dele here his deuocioun on Þe Deuelez wyse;
> Now I fele hit is þe Fende, in my fyue wyttez,
> Þat hatz stoken me þis steuen to strye me here." (2189–93)
>
> ["On my word," quoth Wawain, "'tis a wilderness here!
> This oratory looks evil. With herbs overgrown
> it fits well that fellow transformed into green
> to follow here his devotions in the Devil's fashion.
> Now I feel in my five wits the Fiend 'tis himself
> that has trapped me with the tryst to destroy me here."]

But why is this the "corsedest kyrk" ["church most accursed"] (2196), as he puts it? There are no satanic symbols, no bloody sacrifices, not even a Celtic knot or image of the Green

Man carved on the wall. That the answer has something to do with Gawain's chivalric code is implied in the reference to his five wits (the first and lowest of the five-fives of the pentangle). It belongs to the devil, Gawain seems to suggest, because it is "with erbez ouergrowen" (it is of the wilds and of the physical world, not the court, the spirit, or of proper social order) and because he will be "stryed" ["destroyed"] here. That is, death, like nature and flesh, is seen as a thing of inherent evil because the lens of his code requires this appearance of dichotomy between life and death in order to facilitate the clear judgment of the observer necessary to enforce the code's virtues by honor. Gawain is, of course, forgetting "Þat Dryȝtyn for oure destine to deȝe watz borne" ["that our dear Lord for our doom to die was born"] (996): the Christmas mystery of God becoming flesh and entering nature in order to triumphantly die and make of death a blessing of eternal life. As it turns out, the Green Chapel will be the place of his spiritual rebirth and awakening, not a place of devilry at all. One may even ask whether, had Gawain not seen nature as antithetical to divinity rather than Its creation, on Christmas Eve of all days, he might have found the Green Chapel and celebrated Mass there safe from the temptations that led to his sin?

Indeed, more explicit biblical allusions may be intended in the imagery of the chapel. The opening in the mound from which the spring flows, for instance, may allude to the open tomb of Christ from which the spring of life flows eternally (John 4:13–16). Ezekiel 47 places the stream of life in a wilderness not unlike that surrounding the Green Chapel. John 4:13–16 is particularly apt because it links the image of the stream of life with Christ's encounter with the woman at the well who is, apparently, guilty of adultery. Gawain's contemplation of what might happen at the Green Chapel around midnight further emphasizes this possible allusion to Christ's tomb, especially given the theme of dichotomy throughout the text, in that he assumes that the darkness of "mydnyȝt" belongs only to the devil even while acknowledging it is the proper time for even the devil to be saying "matynnes" (2188–89). The reader may be meant to recall that it was in the darkest night that Christ left the tomb and precisely at matins that Easter is celebrated in the monastic tradition, contrasting the darkness with the coming of the Light.

In his judgment of Gawain, then, the Green Knight merely reiterates Gawain's implicit judgment of his own actions when he accepted the girdle. The Green Knight suggests that it is but little shame to love one's own life more than virtue: "But for ȝe lufed your lyf—þe lasse

I yow blame" ["because you loved your own life; the less do I blame you"] (2368). At the chapel, however, the remaining false dichotomies are dissolved. When Gawain understandably flinches at the gigantic axe about to hit his neck, the Green Knight says "Þou art not Gawayn" ["Thou'rt not Gawain"] (2270), mirroring the language and tactics of the lady, but also causing us to realize that her manipulation of identity in turn mirrored that of the Green Knight when he first persuaded Arthur to enter into his shameful game: "What, is þis Arþures hous?" ["What! Is this Arthur's house?"] (309). The weakness of an identity defined by external human judgment is revealed, as is Arthur's own analogous failure at the beginning of the poem. Indeed, the implicit failure in accepting the game in the first place is highlighted by the brief explanation that so many critics have brushed past as irrelevant or a "degraded myth." Morgan le Fay (who turns out to be as closely related to Gawain as the court is to the wilds) intended "for to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe / With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked / With his hede in his honed" ["Guinevere to hurt, that she in horror might die / aghast at that glamoury that gruesomely spake / with its head in its hand before the high table"] (2460–62). That is, once the head was cut, half Morgan's intention (the other half being to test the court's chivalry) was already achieved. Indeed, we may now remember that Arthur noticed Guenevere's distress at the sight of the marvel, saying, "Dere Dame, today demay yow neuer. / Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse" ["Dear lady, today be not downcast at all! / Such cunning play well becomes the Christmas tide"] (470–71). Just as the outcome of the Green Chapel is already decided by the time Gawain gets there, so the game was one that could only truly be won before it ever began. In another sense, Gawain thinks he is playing the beheading game, which was actually over when Guenevere had to be exposed to the speaking head, when he is, in fact, still playing the game begun in Hautdesert and awaiting the even exchange. Death, the end, does not stand in dichotomy to life, the author suggests, but the nature of one is defined by the nature of the other. The chapel is no more evil than Hautdesert, since their masters are the same. Just as in the Christian cosmos, life and death have but one Lord and Master, from Whose cave-like tomb flows life eternal.

Gawain, in refusing the Green Knight's judgment and retaining the girdle, gains a tool by which his chivalry might be brought to an even greater perfection as a guide to a Christian life. Like the fall of Troy with which the poem begins, his defeat makes possible even greater

perfection. The girdle, as he retains it after the test, is no longer emblematic of a false form of pagan immortality by which to escape death. Instead, it promises to become a tool by which, through knowledge of, rather than imagined escape from, the fleshly, Gawain may perfect his spirit:

> When I ride in renoun remorde to myselven
> Þe faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed,
> How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylþe.
> And þus, quen pryde schal me pryk for prowes of armes,
> Þe loke to þis luf-lace schal leþe my hert. (2434–38)

> [When I ride in renown, ruefully recalling
> the failure and the frailty of the flesh so perverse,
> so tender, so ready to take the taints of defilement.
> And thus, when pride my heart pricks for prowess in arms,
> one look at this love-lace shall lowlier make it.]

The girdle will guard him internally against the pride that sought an immortality without the death which even Christ endured. He will no longer overvalue his own flesh, however noble.

The irony of the end is that, while Gawain may have found what is, in effect, a deeply Christian means to further perfect his chivalric code through the honest recollection of his own imperfection actions, Arthur's court takes the same external sign—the girdle—for a badge of honor: "For þat watz accorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table / And he honoured þat hit hade" ["For that was reckoned the distinction of the Round Table, / and honour was his that had it evermore after"] (2519–20). If it is possible to introduce self-assessment (conscience) into a chivalric code based upon external judgment (honor), it will not be an easy task and will always be in peril of falling from humility into pride, since the girdle, like humility, is a sign the honesty of which cannot be judged by anyone but the bearer.

In conclusion we may say that the poet's assessment of chivalry as a guide to the Christian life is cautious, but far from entirely pessimistic. Indeed, it is a far-cry from the grim conclusions intimated in Chaucer's assessments of chivalry in the "Knight's Tale" and elsewhere. Gawain's perfect chivalry defends him from the worst sins of the world, and provides for his cleansing confessions, but the poet reveals not only that there are limitations to any such worldly law, but that such a law actually creates new weaknesses. Through the testing of false dichotomies and true ones, the poet examines the perfection of an earthly

code as a guide to the Christian life and presents the complexity of a world created, in a sense, by the joining of dichotomies that was the incarnation of Christ.