VILAIN, AUCTOR:

THE UPWARD FLOW OF WISDOM IN

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by

Gail Althea Bell

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APPROVAL

NAME: Gail Althea BELL

DEGREE: Master of Arts


EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Chairman: Dr. Michael Steig

Dr. Joseph Gallagher, Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor of English

Dr. Mary-Ann Stouck,
Assistant Professor of English

Dr. Harvey De Roo,
Assistant Professor of English

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VILAIN, AVCTOR: THE UPWARD FLOW OF WISDOM IN

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Author:

(signature)

CAIL ALTHEA BELL

(name)

23 NOV. 1981

(date)
ABSTRACT

Critics of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have noted in the Green Knight (in both his Bertilak and his Grene Gome forms) a mixture of churlishness and magisterial power, and have found it difficult to account for these contrasting features. The first quality is especially difficult to account for if one assumes that medieval people saw society in strict hierarchical terms, and if one recalls that the Green Knight is a source of wisdom—an *auctor*—to a peerless romance knight, Sir Gawain. This critical difficulty may be resolved by recognizing that the fourteenth century had several images of the knight and that the Green Knight fits the least exalted of them. Analysis of the text shows that while Gawain is a romance knight, the Green Knight is a realistic 'knight', a rich merchant trained in law, who seeks to nurture in himself the manners and material culture of the romance knight, but who understands the impossibility of the romance ideal of perfection attained by knights without effort as a gift of nature. The poem mediates between the values of romance knights and those of the real world, showing without rancour that both value sets are flawed or incomplete.
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I. The Auctor In Medieval Literature

When Gawain arrives home at Camelot with a scar on his shoulder and another on his soul, the folk of Camelot laugh lightly and assume with limited romance vision that Gawain will rejoin his society and again be a spotless knight of Camelot. To them, the virtue of a knight comes from ascription, rather than from a judgment based on action; the adventure of a Round Table knight is by definition perfect. As a result, every lord and lady will wear a lase

...for sake of that segge, in swete...
For that watz acorded the renoun of the rounde table. 1

The adventure commemorated by the girdle is to be washed in the general approbation granted the Round Table. For Gawain, however, the virtue he has lost is gone forever ("Ther hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer"(2512)). Gawain's refusal to be comforted and re-integrated into this society is a measure of the fact it is no longer his society. He has learned to separate image from actuality and idea from realisation and can no longer

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1 Norman Davis (ed.) Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Second Edition. (original editors J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon) . Oxford, Clarendon, 1967, lines 2518-2519. All quotations from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight will be from this edition, with spellings slightly altered as the print device being used for this paper cannot reproduce yogh or thorn. Line numbers will be given in the text directly after the quotation.
accept that he is by definition good Gawain. Neither his role as Camelot knight nor his device of the pentangle of interlocked virtues can protect him from the knowledge of his human frailties. Though "al watz this fayre folk in her first age(54)", the most suitable time for the seeking of learning, only Gawain will, through his experiences, find it.

As a result of the teachings of his green auctor Gawain now has an understanding of the real nature and impossibility of perfection, and will not be comforted by the Round Table. His self-condemnation is based on a more complex moral vision than

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\[This\ word\ will\ be\ used\ to\ refer\ not\ to\ an\ author\ but\ to\ an\ authority\ figure,\ a\ teacher\ or\ a\ judge.\ The\ definition\ is\ one\ considered\ by\ the\ Middle\ English\ Dictionary,\ Hans\ Kurath\ and\ Sherman\ M.\ Kuhn\ (eds.),\ Ann\ Arbor,\ University\ of\ Michigan\ Press,\ 1956---.\ This\ dictionary\ is\ the\ source\ of\ all\ definitions\ used\ in\ this\ paper\ unless\ there\ is\ an\ indication\ to\ the\ contrary\ in\ the\ text.\]

The word auctor has, according to the MED, several meanings. First listed is the creator, ancestor or perpetrator of a person or institution. Second is the source of authoritative information or opinion: a teacher. The commonly-recognised meaning, author or source of a story, is considered to be a sub-definition of this one; the editors point out that it is often very difficult to tell whether a citation is referring to an author or to an authoritative source of information. Chaucer in the Hcus of Fame says "No other auctour alegge I." The MED concludes that he means source of authoritative information, not merely author. The "C" version of Piers Plowman says "Ho was hus autor and him of gode taughte." Other definitions are offered: guardian, and in law, the accuser or plaintiff. An auctrice is defined as a woman whose opinion is accepted as authoritative. The use of the word auctor to mean source of wisdom seems therefore appropriate. Although Marie Borroff, working from the Oxford English Dictionary, concludes that mayster has many of the same meanings, the poet's use of this word in the epithet "aghlich mayster"(l.136) seems to colour the term in this poem too strongly.[Borroff, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Survey, p172.]
is found in most romances. Gawain has seen that abstract or
definitional perfection does not long survive the complexities
of the real world. The Green Knight has given him what amounts
to a counsel of imperfection. Gawain should measure himself, he
says, not against the pentangle virtues nor against an ideal for
the good knight of Camelot, but against pedestrian humans:

....sothly me thynkkez
On the fautlest freke that ever on fote yede,
As perle be the quite pese is of prys more,
So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi other gay knygtez.
(2362ff)

Since the Green Knight set Gawain's test one would expect Gawain
to permit him to say whether the pupil had passed. But Gawain
cannot accept the Green Knight's assessment any more than he
will later be able to accept the assessment of the Round Table.
Further, he cannot accept anything the Gome, now revealed as
Bertilak, offers. Though he takes the green girdle, he does not
do so in the spirit in which it is offered ("a pure token/ of
the chaunce of the Grene Chapel(2398-2399)"). He utterly refuses
the more important offers of absolution from his fault and
continued hospitality and friendship (2425-2429). It is with
something resembling repugnance that he seizes his helmet, sends
sarcastic greetings to his "honoured ladyes" and pointedly says
the adventure has been an evil one for him ("I haf soiorned
sadly"). During the bedroom scenes and the three blows at the
Green Chapel, Gawain has been slowly stripped of his perception
of himself as pentangle knight and source of nurture. He has
been led through a set of teaching exercises by an individual who, besides being his social inferior, is unaware that in destroying Gawain's ideal of innate perfection, he has made meaningless to Gawain his manners and luxury, which the Green Knight himself aspires to.

One of the themes of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the lack of juncture between the two worlds it describes. Gawain is a romance knight who adventures in the real Ricardian world represented by Hautdesert, bringing with him inadequate romance values. Bertilak is a 'knight' of the real fourteenth century, which means that he has some romance pretentions, but that his essential values are realistic ones of status and economics. In Bertilak's world, Gawain tries to apply his own values, but they fail him. This produces a comedy of transplanted values and psychological displacement, which sometimes takes the form of anachronism. Although it may be that in most medieval poetry displacement and anachronism are accidental, the modern reader should not thoughtlessly assume this is the case when the opposite assumption would be made about modern writing. In John Steinbeck's retelling of Malory, where knights swill whisky and gaze with dull wonder at the longbowmen who will later prove to

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3J.A. Burrow uses this term in *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the 'Gawain' Poet* to mean the poetry of the late fourteenth century in England. He does not argue strongly that this poetry was all written within the actual reign of Richard II.
be the death of the knightly warrior class, we give Steinbeck credit for intentional dramatic irony through anachronism. We do this even though there is no apparent thematic purpose in the whisky-swilling. The Gawain poet appears to have known the uses of both anachronism and displacement, and used them consciously for thematic purposes. This conscious juxtaposition of two worlds and two value sets may be called *mediated romance*. In the Camelot scenes, the description of court and hero is dominated by elements of romance tradition while the Hautdesert scenes are a parody of fourteenth-century upper-class reality. The antagonist to Gawain, in Camelot a green man and in Hautdesert Bertilak, appears in both worlds. As green man, he may be seen as a type of inferior creation: monster, vegetable, wild man. As Bertilak, he occupies a social status much lower than that of a Camelot knight. His fascination for the reader comes from the fact that he combines these features with benevolence toward Gawain in his frailty and a final control of events such as to mark an *auctor*.

According to the official mythology of the medieval period the secular social order consisted of nobles and commons; there was no middle class and no mobility. Within the class of nobles there was endless subdivision and precedence. Placement in the

social order was divinely ordained rather than achieved, and was a manifestation of a hierarchy of value and goodness which was necessary rather than merely contingent. This literary and social presumption had its intellectual parallel in Neoplatonism, according to which God was the ultimate source of all creation, having created templates for each concept. The templates, called universals during the middle ages, were the originals from which a series of copies were made. Each successive copy was less faithful to the original universal than was its predecessor. If this metaphor were used to explain human societies, the superiority of nobles would be seen to be in their being the most faithful copies of the universal for the human species. With high place in the hierarchy went refinement not only of body but also of mind, morality, and sensibility. While all humans had discursive reason of a kind, some humans, such as women and those of low degree, were activated primarily by their animal natures. The elusive quality of wisdom is generally the domain of the noble, the male and the elderly.

5 The metaphor is that of A.O. Lovejoy in The Great Chain of Being, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1966. This is the modern locus classicus for the medieval and renaissance theory of hierarchies.

6 Chaucer’s Wife of Bath makes this comment: And sith a man is moore resonable Than womman is, ye moste been suffrable. (1.441-442)

Thus in romances such as *Lanzelet* a female who is an *auctor* is also a *fay*. The same is true of the loathly lady *auctor* to the knight in the *Wife of Bath's Breton Lay*. If wise, a young man is presented as *puer senex*, a young old man.7 The rhetoricians do not appear to have proposed a theory of literature showing approved characteristics for the bringer of wisdom, the *auctor*, in general terms. However, one literary form, the dream vision, does have its own prescription for a guide figure or *auctor*. By the late fourteenth century, the dream vision appears to have been a recognised genre, and its decorum to have been the same as the decorum of the dream itself.8 *Piers Plowman* is a series of dream visions. *Pearl, Mumm and the Sothsegger*, and *Winner and Wastoure* are all true single dream visions. All of Chaucer's long poems except *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus* are dream visions. The dream vision requires the narrator—the dreamer—to fall asleep, experience an enigmatic vision that requires interpretation, and reawaken.9 Commonly, the dreamer is an innocent, puzzled by an unfamiliar moral and physical landscape. Thus the dream guide who interprets is of supreme importance.


9 Spearing, p8.
both to the dreamer and to the reader of the poem.

Introductions to Chaucer's poems show that he assumes dreams and dream visions share a decorum. He lists in two of his own dream visions, the House of Fame and the Parliament of Foulys, the kinds of dreams recognised by medieval science. He appears to follow the categories noted by Macrobius, whose Commentary on the Dream of Scipio is recognised as a source of medieval dream theory. In the House of Fame Chaucer's narrator begins by expressing "wonder/Be the roode/To my wyt/What causeth swevenes". Swevene is here, it would seem, a general word for dreams. The narrator then lists the various kinds or features of dreams: avisoun, revelatioun, dreme, swevene, fantome, oracle. This listing uses most of Macrobius' terms. Macrobius says that his model, Scipio's dream, is at once visio, somnium and oraculum. A visio is for both authors a prophetic vision which actually comes true. Macrobius' somnium seems to be the same as Chaucer's revelatioun, an enigmatic dream that conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered and requires an interpretation for its understanding. Most important for present purposes, both authors use the term oraculum, a dream with an authority figure. In

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11 Baugh, p28.
Macrobius the oracular auctor is very clearly described, and he is a personage entirely predictable in hierarchical terms:

We call a dream oracular in which a parent or a pious or revered man, or a priest, or even a god, clearly reveals what will or will not transpire and what action to take or to avoid."\textsuperscript{12}

This list of acceptable dream guides, and by inference acceptable dream vision guides, is clearly a list of people occupying traditional positions of respect and hierarchical authority. They each have such characteristics as old age, learning, personal power and maleness. Some have the ear of the gods or are themselves supernaturally powerful. Macrobius' examples of oracular figures are Amelius Paulus and Scipio the Elder, who are pious, reverent, ancestral and priestly. The paradigmatic, or hierarchy-making, imagination will value such figures more highly than it does the naive dreamer. Since the same social outlook shaped and limited the imaginations that created dreams and dream visions, the decrum of the dream vision can be expected to follow that of the dream. As Spearing points out in Medieval Dream Poetry, our own society could not make use of Macrobius' classification because we lack the hierarchical outlook that would make the oracular dream with its auctor common enough to require a separate category.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Macrobius, p90.

\textsuperscript{13} Spearing, p11, quoting E.R. Dodds.
The decorum for the auctor that is thus clear in the case of the dream vision is implicit in the frequency with which other literary forms, especially romance and fabliau, assume wisdom flows from above, and refuse to have a noble personage learn anything from a lower being. Romances offer no discoverable abstract statement of what the auctor's characteristics are supposed to be. However, teachers to Arthurian heroes can fairly be assumed to be representative. Madeleine Pelner Cosman's The Education of the Hero in Arthurian Romance points out that while in the more primitive romances the teacher is simply described as master and has an influence of limited duration, in the more sophisticated romances the situation is otherwise. There, the tutor's influence is lasting, and he is "an important character whose qualities of spirit, methods of teaching, and prolonged influence as mentor are carefully delineated". In Chretien's Perceval, the education of the hero comes from the mother, the auctor, and in late life the hermit. The mother's advice, having largely to do

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15 Cosman, pxv. Cosman does not deal with Gawain's education, which she says occurs only in minor romances or minor references. She lists Les Enfances Gauvain: fragments d'un poème perdu, P. Mayer (ed.) Romania xxxix (1910) 1-32; "De Ortu Walwani", J.D. Bruce (ed.) Hesperia (Gottingen, Baltimore, 1913); Wace's Brut, I. Arnold (ed.) (Paris, 1938-1940) II 518f; Perlevalus, W.A. Nitze (ed.) Chicago, 1932-1937.
with relationships with women, is immediately unsuitable to a warrior-knight. The tutor, Gornemant, is suited because of his background as knight and hospitable host to teach Perceval martial skills and gentle arts. He is initially presented as the master of a rich fortified castle, "un chastel riche et forte" which has "une barbicane molt fort", "quatre basses torneles/Qui molt estoient fors et beles" (1336 f) and other physical evidence of the economic and martial power of its owner. Gornemans is richly clothed, "vestu d'une robe porprine". His schoolmasterly quality is emphasized by the "bastonet" (1357)--a long slender rod--he holds in his hand, and by the young men ("vallets"--the same word is later applied to Perceval) who trail behind him. He is a "preudem, qui molt fu cortois" (1571) and has known horse and lance "des enfance" (1448).

Although Chretien is here writing very funny material indeed, Gornemans is a serious character, neither the butt of humour nor one who makes fun of Perceval. Perceval is an incapable horseman and is wearing fool's garb, his mother's coat of "cerf mal faite and mal taillie" (1425). Gornemans is able to see the noble bones beneath this improbable cover. He gravely commends Perceval's mother on hearing the superficial advice she

16 Cosman, p73.

has given and offers the benefit of his own advice as an adjunct. He refuses to take umbrage when ill-nurtured Perceval accepts the advice only as though his acceptance were payment for lodgings. Gornemans' obvious economic and social adequacy show his suitability as *auctor* by traditional oracular standards.

Cosman notes Gornemans' pedagogical methods. He first questions the lad to learn the extent of his ignorance, then teaches by example. Finally, he guides the lad through an exercise of imitation, putting the epee in his hand and saying, in effect, my friend, this is how you defend yourself if you are assaulted (1524ff). At the end, Perceval has been polished of his *dummling* manners and his woeful knightsmanship. Gornemans in his teaching has been controlled, *frez*, assertive of his position and renown, serious in the face of a hilarious situation. He has provided a clearly-stated code concerning the role of the knight.

The *auctor* in Wolfram's *Parzival*, a romance of about the year 1200, is called Gurnemanz. He gives fond fatherly attention to Parzival's physical and educational needs. Parzival initially seeks Gurnemanz because of an oracular feature; he has grey hair. "He is a chief of men, well-bred" (162, 23) and

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18 Cosman, p64.

worthily "from falseness always fled" (162,27). His method of teaching skills of arms is a combination of instruction and practice. The poet praises this technique as more effective than beatings would be (174,7). Gurnemanz also gives heed to Parzival's social behavoiur (170, 15ff). His advice emphasizes kindness, generosity, humility, compassion, a sense of shame, and a proper use of wealth; one should neither hoard nor squander. So too he discusses pure love, not asking too many questions, cheerfulness, and avoiding lies. He is a fully oracular figure.

Various versions of the Perceval story use a character of the Gurnemant type to train for knighthood an ungently reared but nobly born youth. Wolfram remarks that Parzival has no Curneval, companion to the hero in the Tristan romances. In Gottfried's early thirteenth-century Tristan, Curneval is described as "einem wisen man", and is according to Cosman "a cultured squire who is Tristan's faithful companion in happiness and in adversity".20 He is given credit for Tristan's musical virtucity.21 In the French Prose Tristan the Curneal character, here called Gouvernal, is from "haut parage" in Gaul and was chosen by Merlin as tutor for the newborn Tristan. He

20 Cosman, p31.

21 Cosman, p33.
"en effet garde Tristan fidelement toute sa vie." At one point, he bursts into tears when Tristan is captured, infuriating the captors. This feature, and the fact he looks after Tristan from infancy, makes it appear that Gouvenal is meant to be not so much a maker of a knight, a teacher, as he is a companion, and suggests that his characteristics are not necessarily to be considered those suitable to an auctor.

Cosman points out that the Prose Lancelot has a uniquely inadequate knight teacher. Prior to the hero's being taken in hand by the fay Lady of the Lake, who teaches by challenge and love, and shifts the responsibility for learning to the pupil, the hero has a nameless tutor. This tutor spitefully asserts his authority by knocking Lancelot off his horse. He is incapable of teaching by example. He is not free; he lacks the judgment to distinguish between foolish abandon and Lancelot's generosity. This tutor, who is not a gentil homme, is eventually dismissed because he shows insufficient character under stress.

Thus the romances appear to solidly approve the oracular model for the auctor to young knights. The mother is fit only to nurture an infant, and even so may do damage. Women other than mothers must have supernatural powers. A non-noble man must not


23 Cosman, p123-124.

24 Cosman, p121.
teach a noble. While a young man may have usefulness as a companion, for real teaching with superiocr wisdom and the best methods, a greybeard, rich and the head of a noble household, is to be preferred. Romance is hierarchy-supporting in this respect.

Gawain's teacher, despite first impressions, is not a fay, and does not therefore become a suitable auctor by right of supernatural characteristics. He makes this sufficiently clear in the denouement of the Green Chapel after he has revealed himself. The text makes no suggestion that he has shifted shape before Gawain's eyes, so physically he is still the green sely. However, he identifies himself as Bertilak ("Bertilak de Hautdesert I hat in this londe"(2245)), and his origin is the white castle, not the Green Chapel. Thus he makes it clear that he does not think of himself as the Green Knight. In this paper, as in the poem itself, the green creature and Bertilak will often be treated as a single character. Physically, there is transformation, but psychologically, the changes are more like those of a single individual reacting to a variety of roles and circumstances. Although he is responsible in his own person for the wooing game ("I wroght hit myseluen"(2361)) and the assaying of Gawain's fibre, his shape-shifting attribute is the gift, apparently given for this one joint venture, "thurgh myght of Morgne la Faye, that in my hous lenges"(2246). If Morgan's purpose is simply "your wittes to reue/ For to haf greued
gaynour..."(2459-2460), she has chosen an unnecessarily complex and indirect method. The Green Knight's explanation of Gawain's experience does not make it utterly clear that Morgan's influence ends here. He uses the term "ho wayned me" twice, in one circumstance where she was clearly the instigator (2459), and in one where syntactically she might have instigated the test of the court's surquidre or might have instigated only "this wyze", the disguise (2454). However, there is a strong suggestion that she provided the disguise and the plan to frighten Guenevere only. Her supernatural power has just been stressed. ("Weldez non so hyghe hawtesse/ That ho ne con make ful tame" (2454-2455).) Immediately, the language shows that the disguise is meant as a means of discovery and test ("For to assay the surquidre, yif hit soth were/ That rennes of the grete renoun of the Rounde Table (2457-2458)"). It would seem unlikely that Morgan, possessing as she does "myght" (2446) and "kcyntyse of clergye" (2447) would need to make a fresh discovery of any such characteristic. I conclude that Morgan controls only the supernatural elements. She is given control of these elements because the sentence of the poem requires that Bertilak be essentially human. The bringing of wisdom, the psychological insight, and the methods of the lesson are all Bertilak's.
Further, despite the assumption of critics such as John Burrow\textsuperscript{25} that the Green Knight is simply a contrivance for the testing of Gawain's fibre, he is in fact a character with goals, emotions, and inadequacies of his own. The result is that Bertilak is an anti-oracular \textit{auctor}, a teacher who does not fit either Macrobius' prescription or the images of teachers seen in other Arthurian romances.

The particular attitudes shown towards \textit{auctors} parallels general attitudes towards a stable hierarchy in medieval romance and fabliau. Fabliau generally treats failure of the socially well-placed to display wisdom as alarming. Muscatine's "The Social Background of the Old French Fabliaux" shows that although social reality in the middle ages was complex and ambiguous, most people tacitly accepted the myth of a clear caste division. Many fabliaux josh at the villain or show hostility to his social mobility; even those which are pro-vilain, such as \textit{La Vieille qui Oint la Paume}, are not anti-hierarchical.\textsuperscript{26} In fabliaux, the usual \textit{auctor} is a judge rather than a teacher. Per Nykrog considers that court and judge figure in at least ten percent of Old French fabliaux.\textsuperscript{27} Many of

\textsuperscript{25}A \textit{Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight}, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1966, p119.

\textsuperscript{26} Charles Muscatine, "The Social Background of the Old French Fabliaux", Genre IX (1976) no. 1, p1-19.

his examples are of theological tribunals, where by definition
the judge is priestly and therefore oracular. However, several
secular tribunals appear, and show judges with high status
relative to that of the litigants. The judge does not seem to be
related by experience or status to the lawyer, a socially
suspect figure. 28

An informal judge is seen in Le Jugement des Cons. Each of
three sisters claims to be the beloved of the same bachelor.
Their father asks his brother ("frere germain" v.5 p.111 l.11)
to judge their claims. In doing so, he poses a riddle ("Qui est
ainsnez, vors ou vos cons?" (v.5. p. 113 l.9) When he chooses
the best answer, the narrator asserts that "li jugemenz est bien
fez" (v.5.p.114 l.23) thus validating the uncle's authority.

Formal tribunals are found in several fabliaux. In "La
vieille qui Cint la Palme au Chevalier", an old woman has had
her cows stolen by a miller and wants justice. The local
chevalier will be judge in the affair. The old woman is advised
by a neighbour how best to present her case to him. She is to
speak elegantly, behave well and in subtle fashion, and grease
the judge's palm (v.5 p.157). The old woman greases the palm--
with pig's fat. The judge takes the mistake in good grace and
the cows are restored to their rightful owner. The story ends,

28 References to Old French fabliaux are to Anatole de
Montaiglon, Recueil General et Complet des Fabliaux des XIIIe et
XIVe Siecles, Paris, Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1852. 6
volumes.
however, with a proverb that makes it clear that this knight’s honest justice is exceptional, and the mistake about anointing the palm understandable. It is common for upper class judges ("riches hommes hautz" v. 5, p. 158 l. 29) to sell their justice and their word. ("Povres n’a droït, se il ne done" v.5 p. 159 l.4) The knight is entitled to the role of judge as a matter of status whether or not he is recognised as wise or even honest.

However, in a tribunal scene in "Du Preudome qui Rescolt son Compere de Noier" (v. 1 p. 300) the judge is unquestionably wise. A fisherman in rescuing a colleague from drowning accidently puts out his eye, and the injured man sues. The judge, the mayor of the town, pronounces that the injured man may pursue his suit only if he is willing to be put back in the sea to drown; he is not willing and abandons the suit. ("Le preudome a quite clame/ Et si fu de plusors blasme"(v.1 p.303 l.15-16)).

A final judge in a secular issue is found in "Le meunier D’Arleux" (v.2 p.31-45), a bedroom farce. The miller, Jakemars, has tricked a girl loved by his assistant Mouses into sleeping in his bed. Mouses offers Jakemars a piglet if he will trade places. Jakemars accepts, intending to trick Mouses out of his bargain, but the girl has confided in Jakemars’ wife and traded beds with her. The complicated result is that the wife gets an excellent night of bed sport, and the miller is anguished to discover he has been cuckolded as a result of his own scheme.
further, Mouses demands the piglet back, pointing out that he bargained to sleep with the girl, not the wife. When he takes his case to the bailiff for hearing, the bailiff laughs mightily at the litigants' story. He orders the piglet returned to Mouses, and says Jakemars can get his side of the bargain back too (p43 l.26-27). Then the bailiff buys the piglet from Mouses to roast at a feast for the litigants and the whole neighbourhood as compagnons del pais (p44 l.7), friends of the peace. This judge has a formalized position and holds court at a fixed place and sets dates for trial. His verdict is accepted in advance of its being handed down (p.43 l.7). He uses the plural pronoun to refer to himself("par jugement nous disons...." p.43 l.21) in a fashion known in English as the editorial or royal we. Finally, the story marks his fraunchise in paying for the feast, and his caste by the alacrity with which the neighbourhood "chevaliers" and "dames bieles" do his bidding and attend the feast (p44 l.20).

In short, then, the judges in fabliaux, much like the teachers in romance, draw their condition of auctorite from hierarchically approved sources of respect. Thus Bertilak, who is in practical terms both a teacher and a judge, should, if he is to be a conventional source of wisdom, be of a status above.

There is a resemblance in the source of humour seen here to that in the exchange of winnings game in SGGK, where Gawain purports to turn over the kisses he has won, as though they were capable of being passed on intact to a third person.
that of Gawain. J.A. Burrow in *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* says that Gawain learns the impossibility of maintaining all of his pentangle virtues, his *trauthe*, because they are internally inconsistent. It is not possible to be *courtois* in the Christian sense and in the *fin'amour* sense. Larry Benson calls Gawain's loss his *los*, his reputation and virtue. The Green Knight leads Gawain to an understanding that these values require inhuman perfection. Because the main lesson he provides Gawain with and the main theme of the poem concern the possibility of being admirable without being perfect, it is thematically suitable for the *auctor* himself to be imperfect. The oracular model for the teacher and the judge is suitable where a poet does not question the hierarchical mythology. The Gawain poet, however, does question, does appear to see the failure of this mythology to explain Ricardian reality. In presenting Bertilak (and his green *gome* disguise) as the agent of courtly Gawain's fall into wisdom, the poem provides an emblem for his counsel of imperfection.

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30 Benson, p61.
II. The Mediated Romance and the Multiple Image of the Knight

In parallel moments of the final fitt of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Gawain rejects the hospitality of Hautdesert and the comforting of Camelot. These moments show that Gawain has recognised the brittleness of his own former image of knightly perfection but has not found Hautdesert's sumptuousness and avidity for social and material advantage an acceptable replacement. He is no longer a knight of Camelot; he is not willing to be the knight Hautdesert understands. Much of the comedy of the poem arises from his over-concern for his concept of knightly kynde. Yet to an original audience, both the rejected images of the knight would have seemed to be normal realisations of the concept of knighthood. Gawain of Camelot, the Gawain of the early part of the poem, is an image of the most exalted and idealized of romance knights, while Bertilak of Hautdesert is a knight in the least exalted sense, the arriviste-knight.

By the Gawain poet's period, the concept of knighthood was broad. Ideals of knighthood could be drawn from the Ricardian political scene, or the historical or literary role of knights as warriors, or from the knight's treatment in literature as artists of or debasers of fin'amour. Romances and books of chivalry provide conflicting information concerning the proper
role of the knight. Sermons and homilies make clear that whatever the ideal, the practice rarely matched it. A simple example of this compound image is clearly seen in the attitude of the period toward knightly prudence. Charles Ferguson shows that in chivalric handbooks of all periods prudence in battle and other fields of endeavour was a cardinal virtue. There was a "healthy distaste for foolhardiness". 

Fifteenth-century Norfolk knight Sir John Fastolf distinguished between the "manly man" and the "hardy man":

...the manly man ys more to be commended, more than the hardy man; for the hardy man that sodenly without discrecion of gode auysement, auauncyth hym in the felde to be halde courageouse...he leueth his felyshyp destreussed. And the manly man...wille so discretely auauence hym that he wille entend to hafe the ouyr hand of hys adversarye, and safe hymself and hys felyshyp.²

Charles Barber points out that in romance, by contrast, a knight's word of honour, no matter how extravagant the exploits it leads him to, cannot be retracted.³

A similar divided image marks the courtly love aspect of knighthood. This ethic, whereby the knight sought the love of a lady, through unfulfilled years during which he expended

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strength in seeking exploits to complete in her name and honour, developing through this process a certain refinement of spirit, is most familiar to students of literature as described by C.S. Lewis in The Allegory of Love. This formulation has been the subject of extended disagreement. It is unclear whether, if such an ethic existed at all, it existed in the world or simply in literature. At a 1968 conference the classic definition was paraphrased to assert that courtly love, which had the knight as its central figure, was necessarily secret, sacrificial, and adulterous. Other judgments at that conference were that courtly love was merely a literary convention, a social reality, a game, a code, an intellectual exercise, and an impediment to the understanding of texts. Ferguson says that courtly love was "largely irrelevant, if not repugnant, to those of the provincial aristocracy who still held the basic principles of chivalry as guides to the actual business of living." In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the two impugned values, stalwart adherence to one's rash word, and courtly love, are equivocally treated, Gawain trying to give acceptable service to the lady and to stand by his word, but being forced into circumstances where these values oppose all human instinct. Although most romance indicates the characteristics of the perfect knight by

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*Ferguson, p48.
dramatic action, in the Prose Lancelot the ideal qualities are actually listed. The Lady of the Lake, Lancelot's fay auctio, rimes off her list as Lancelot is leaving her to join Arthur's court. She expects a knight to be "the tallest, strongest, fairest and most nimble, the most loyal and the bravest, full of goodness of heart and body." He must prefer death to shame. He must be "merciful without being uncouth, affable without being treacherous, kind to the suffering, generous, ready to succour the needy and confound robbers and murderers, a just judge without favour or hate." There is no mention of service to ladies. Chivalry manuals, unlike books of nurture, are meant to describe rather than prescribe, and show the ideal knight as one whose characteristics are inborn, not learned. The fashion in knights during the Ricardian period emphasized worldly graces, so that manners, hospitality, and generosity seemed as vital as compassion, and openheartedness and gaiety as essential as loyalty.  As a result, Geoffroi de Charny's mid-fourteenth-century Livre de Chivalrie shows the young knight as gay, handsome, versed in the social graces, avoiding drunkenness and vanity, being neither a miser nor a spendthrift.

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6 Barber, p116. Raimon Lull's supremely popular late thirteenth-century Libre del Orde de Cavelleria, later to be translated by Caxton as the Boke of the Orde of Chyvalry or Rhyghthode, has a section apparently copied from the Lady's list of characteristics.

7 Barber, p148.
keeping clear of brothels, shunning solitude and melancholy, and honouring his word.

Two fifteenth-century knighthood books add interesting formulations of the knight question. Christine de Pisan's *Epistle of Othea* shows that justice is to be done by knights not because of legal rights, obligations and duties, but because of "voluntary noblesse oblige of knights and ladies." The pursuit of riches is to be shunned as involving "much busines and travayle" which "may torne a man fro the geting of worship."*8 However, G.A. Holmes's study of land tenure by members of the upper nobility in the fourteenth century traces the purchase of new estates by the very great. It links upsurges in land hunger to periods when land could be profitably rented out. Thus when events such as the black death of 1349 dramatically curtailed the available tenant class, they curtailed also the rate of land acquisition. *9 This provides an ironic footnote to the notion that knights should avoid "busynes". Alain Chartier's *Le Breviare des Nobles* lists twelve virtues of knighthood, and produces through a melding of the courtly and warriorly ideals what Barber calls the closest thing we have to an all-embracing definition of knighthood. These virtues are nobility, loyalty,

*8*Bornstein, p51.

righteousness, prowess, love, courtesy, diligence, cleanliness, generosity, sobriety, and perseverance.¹⁰

Barber suggests that a new ideal of knighthood, abstention from cultivation of the land or trade in commodities made its appearance as the result of a mistranslation in Honore Bonet's late fourteenth-century Tree of Battles, but it is clear that in England at least this negative ideal had existed throughout the century. The debate poem Winner and Wastcure makes the knight a wastrel, unwilling to work his land or otherwise to turn his hand to productive work.¹¹ Running through all of these portraits is, to the modern eye, one persistent theme: knightliness is natural, not cultivated or sought after. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is rare in showing both physical and mental torment in the hero.

Sylvia Thrupp's analysis of the middle classes mentions that the actual office of knighthood, as contrasted with its social status, was not always prized. Indeed, those who should by right of ancestry have been knights sometimes avoided the office by paying fines, because formal knighthood involved onerous duties of military service.¹²

A further source of information about the image of the

¹⁰ Barber, p. 147.
¹¹ Quoted in the chapter "The Self Made Knight".
¹² Thrupp, p. 275.
sociologists, the pulpiteers and homilists. Rypon, a monastic commentator of about 1330, complains that in his day many knights dice and go fowling, are wanton and easeful and squander time and attention on clothes, not exercise of arms. 13 Bromyard objects to tournaments and jousts, pageantry, the bright eyes of ladies, laughter and excitement.14 A homilist at the end of the reign of Richard II complains that knights have better clothes than their ancestors, who could better afford clothes. They also have well-dressed retainers, and good horses even for their squires. Further offences of knights include these:

There-as hir auncetres weren wond to be servid in hir houses at mete in pewtre vessel, but if there weren any peeris of the reem, now it is noght worthe but if a mene bacherel, yea, and dyuerse squyers also whiche ben come up of non olde auncetrie, but bi extorcions crepen so highe, musten be served with sylveren vessel....

The unknightly origins of the knights' companions is the basis of this excoriation as much as the luxuria of the knights themselves. A final illustration of the image of the Ricardian knight comes from the homilist who acidly defines a knight as a "gentilmen that rennyth aboute and ravissith and ioyeth."15.

It is reasonable then to conclude that if the original

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14 Oust, p334.

15 Oust, p337.
audience saw *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* through a filter of contemporary views of the knight, they would have seen as ironic the stylized innocence of Camelot and the impossible perfection of Gawain. Some readers have seen in the initial Camelot scene evidence that the Court is to be condemned for lack of sobriety. Hughes suggests that the poet's use of terms appropriate to acts of martial prowess for mere social activities—a 'stif king' talking of trifles, 'kene men' serving a banquet, is condemnatory. 16 Diamond points out that in other alliterative romances, games and laughter are not major parts of life, but "brief respites from action...the very brilliance of the images is disturbing because the words describe a response far too strong for such a trivial matter". 17 Hughes believes he sees an "imagery of artifice " based in parodies of Christianity, life seen as fiction or theatre, game and ritual, and characters described by ornament and clothing.18. Against this, other readers see a proper youthful joy. Burrow, pointing to the narrator's judgment that this is "rych reuel oryght"19, considers that decorum requires that this company on this

16 Derek W. Hughes, "The Problem of Reality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, UTQ 40, p219.
18 Hughes, p217.
occasion be mirthful, avoiding, as medieval opinion approved, the unbendingly grave demeanour associated with hypocrisy. It would seem that, as John Ganin says, in Camelot every day is a holiday.

However, this fact does not force the conclusion that the narrator intends to condemn Camelot. Rather, he wants the reader to see that all of this Camelot is emphatically unreal. If he had intended to show Camelot as effete or decadent, it is unlikely he would have mentioned at all those martial occasions when "tournayed tulkes by tyme ful mony" (41). In the same vein, it is unlikely he would have said of Gawain on his sojourn to Hautdesert that:

Somewhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolves als,
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, that woned in the knarrez,
Bothe wyth bulleze and berez, and borez otherquyle,
And etaynez....

(720ff)

Further, the mention of Arthur's childgered quality, even if intended as a criticism, is an unlikely concomitant of decadence. The conclusion should be that Camelot is delightfully unreal, divorced from practical considerations, and except when invaded by the green gome, divorced from the late fourteenth-century day.

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20 Burrow, A Reading of SGGK, p5.

The perfection in Camelot comes from stylization and the fact that the folk act in concert. The New Year's scene in Camelot shows rich and proper revelry. All motion is exquisitely patterned and beautifully integrated. Ceremoniousness is emphasized by the description of the members of the court in the plural; tulkes tourney; all the knights "justed ful jolily". All take part in the "daunsyng on nyghtes". The pace is leisurely. Only one activity is described as taking place at a time.22 There is little sense of transaction or caring about winning or losing even in the kissing game. The joust is described as though it involves a single sweeping action. The poet's insistence on the singleness of the court extends to universal accolades. The ladies are all "lovvlokkest", the knights all "kyd". The members are alike even in being all "in her first age"; other Arthurian romances do not make this point. In a court in which all are young, the members must not yet be creased and particularized by unique experience. It is reasonable then to describe them all in the same terms.

At the Camelot feast there is no want but the description is not particularly luxurious. Emphasis is on the style of presentation, with the food coming in like an army on the battlefield:

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22 Although the poet shows himself perfectly capable of simultaneous description where, in the hunting and bedroom scene alternations, it fits his purposes.
Then the first cors come with crakkyng of trumpes, 
Wyth mony baner ful bryght that therbi henged; 
Nwe nakryn noyse with the noble pipes, 
Wylde werbles and wyght wakned lote, 
That mony hert ful highe hef at her towches. 

(116ff)

This detail is capable of being read as an indication that the court trivializes battle, an event central to a true warrior court, but it is even more capable of being read as an indication of youthful optimism and idealism consistent with inexperience.

Even though Arthur is supposed to have wild blood and a young brain, it is very tame adventure he is led to demand before he will eat. Perhaps it will be by way of fiction—"of some mayne marvel, that he might trowe/of alderes, of armes, of other auenturus"(94ff). The range of possible stories is narrow. The story cannot be unexpected: no monsters, no miracles, no lives of saints. An alternate marvel might be that someone ask Arthur for a jousting partner:

...sum segg hym besought of sum siker knyght. 
To joyne wyth hym in iustyng, in joparde to lay, 
Lede, lif for lyf, leuevchon other, 
As fortune wolde fulsun hom, the fayrer to haue. 

(96ff)

The jousts are bloodless and painless. They are not to take place necessarily in Camelot nor in front of Arthur. Rather, Arthur will listen to the story, if that is the mayne meruayle that offers itself, or be boongiver to the man who seeks a jousting partner if that is the form the excitement takes. In
neither case is he to participate. The court is, in sum, one in which no visible effort is expended. Difficulties are non-existent; everything is accomplished naturally. The characters are even without personal antagonisms: there is no carping from Agravaine. The entire court strikes the reader as a single choreographed creation, the creative impulse being the code of knighthood--ease and assurance combined with accomplishment.

The sense of idealisation, ease, assurance and unquestioning, unemphatic self-approval seen in the court extends also to Gawain, as the arming scene shows. Although Gawain's red and gold gear is elaborate, there is no sense that the knight inside is proud of it or even aware of it, so the final effect is to suggest that good gear is a natural outflow from knightly status, rather than a particular achievement. The energy of the passage goes mainly into the description of the parts of the gear which are necessary excellence rather than luxury. Where as in the case of the vryscum there is undeniable sumptuousness, the narrator expresses wonder, but the wearer is seemingly unconscious of the sumptuousness. Further, the vryscum's luxury is described not in terms of price or excellence, but in terms of the personal pains taken:

...tortors and truloze entayled so thyk
As mony burde theraboute had been seuen wynter
(612ff)
Another indication of the innocence of the society and its freedom from reality lies in Gawain's pentangle. A great deal has been written on its meaning. The device was not in the middle ages ordinarily thought of as knightly or Christian. Richard Hamilton Green points out that while the device is old and ubiquitous, it seems to have been rare in the middle ages. He points out that in the Bible and everywhere in the exegetical tradition, Solomon is associated with the symbol, and he is, despite his famous wisdom and kingship, ultimately a failure because of his weakness for women. A thirteenth-century bishop, William of Auvergne, considered the pentangle to be a form of idolatry associated with "detestable invocations and images". There is some reason to think it was considered as witch furnishings. Green concludes that in the Ricardian period, the pentangle was associated with magic and was part of a church-condemned popular tradition, so that the Gawain poet's use of it as an image of fully-integrated perfect knighthood is wholly original.

It does not seem likely that to a fourteenth-century reader the device could be swept clean of its old connotation. It would seem rather that the poet intended to comment on the knight who

23"Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection", ELH 29 (1962) p.130.

24 Green, p131.

would make the pentangle his emblem, ignoring the malign associations. Doing so seems evidence of the kind of blindness to human experience that is common in the very young. Modern children are often fascinated with the pentangle form, drawing and redrawing it and correcting proportions. It is aesthetically pleasing in its symmetry, and has no more meaning for the children than would a pinwheel. In the same spirit they draw a swastika, to them a morally neutral form because it lacks history. The narrator of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is insistent on his explanation of what the pentangle means. His voice seems intrusive and defensive, as though he were aware he was insisting on a meaning at odds with what the reader would expect. ("I am in tent yow to telle, thof tary hyt me schulde/ Hit is a syngne.... (624-625)") The choice of the pentangle as Gawain's emblem stresses that he has no chastening experience outside the stylized world of romance, and that his *kynde, "larges and lewte that longez to knyghtez (2381)"*, is not necessarily realisable when he does get such experience. In spirit, Gawain of Camelot is an absolutist, a paradigmatic thinker whose paper virtues are entirely in line with the idea that there is an absolute hierarchy of virtue and social authority. The resulting double reading of Gawain's character produces dramatic irony. An original audience, accustomed to hearing how rarely contemporary knights matched any ideal, may have greeted Gawain's image with sympathetic laughter.
III. Is the Green Knight a Knight?

When, interrupting the joy of the Camelot feast, there "hales in at the halle dor an aghlich mayster (136)"; the poet's stylisation suddenly ends, and for the five long stanzas of the effictio there is minute attention to the amazing and alarming detail, far from oryght, of the green intruder's person. The wealth of detail does not produce a coherent picture and would not have permitted an original audience to fit him into a convenient category. Though it will later become clear he is not a fay, for the moment, he might be one. He might also be read as an embodiment of the nature-nurture debate the period was interested in. Finally, he might be a knight, except that he presents conflicting features of the villain, some boorish, some those of the rich villain with social aspirations. His general ill-assortedness prevents settling on a significance. An excellent discussion of his ill-assortedness is Larry Benson's Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.¹ From the moment he enters Camelot the creature bristles, as John Burrow says, with conflicting significances.²

The difficulty in understanding lies not merely in ambiguous detail, but also in the level of word connotation.

² Burrow, A Reading of SGGK, p4.
Marie Borroff analyses two terms from the *effictio*:

> Ther hales in at the halle dor an aghliche mayster,
> On the most on the molde on mesure hyghe;
> Fro the *swyre* to the *swange* so sware and so thik...  
(136ff)

The first term may have elevated connotations, she says. However, the inelegant word *swange* "groin" would undercut these connotations. The use of the fantastic is restrained, only two elements, the green complexion and the detachable head being demonstrably magic. Of these two elements, the first has drawn more critical attention, since several possible explanations for the gome's greenness exist in the popular culture, and several suggestions are offered in the poem itself.

Larry Benson reviews admirably the possible implications of the creature's complexion. Green is, he says, by convention the colour of "fantoum and fayrye". Thus the green creature suggests immediately his power, and especially his power to do inhuman deeds. Benson also quotes a lyric of the period in which "his rode was worthen grene" is a locution for death. Paradoxically "enker grene" is also a colour of life. In certain literature, the devil clothes himself in green. A nature figure sometimes seen under the ceilings of churches who sprouts leaves instead of hair is referred to as a green man. Benson believes the point

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4 Benson, p90-92.
of Gawain's will-be auctor 's being green of person and of dress is not to identify him exclusively with any of these contemporary reasons for greenness, but to cultivate mystery, so that it is not even clear until the last lines of the poem that the creature is benign. 5

To Benson's analysis may be added others based on medieval physiognomies, economics, and heraldic law. In physiognomies, complexions generally show character. Elsewhere in this poem they are expressly read as indications of age and health. The "auld auncien wif" of the second fitt has a yellow complexion, evidently the sallowness of old age. The young lady's cheeks are red and white. Bertilak, whose age is "highe eldee" has a "felle face as the fire(847)". George Pace, referring to such physiognomies as that of John Metham, points to an association of a yellow complexion with malevolence. 6 Flushed or greyish complexions are understood to have been read respectively as indications of sanguine and bilious dispositions. A greenish complexion is one of the few that does not appear to have had

5Some critics never conclude that he is benign. One is Krappe, who in "Who Was the Green Knight?", suggests the creature is the Lord of Hades who can only be braved by a knight sans puer et sans reproche (Spec XIII(1938) p215). Mysteriousness is then most successfully created.

6"Physiognomy and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight ", ELN 4(1965), p162.
physiological significance. In a sense, then, the green complexion is a mask, preventing the observer from reading character from face tone. The green skin creates ambiguity not only by what it suggests, but also by the suggestions it blocks. Seeing the green skin, the characters in Camelot each have

"...meruaylequat hitemene myght
That a hathel and ahorse myght such a hwe lach
(233-234)

The poet is concerned to have the creature an unclassifiable, undisable hybrid. Besides its other associations, green was also, at least in the thirteenth century, an extremely fashionable colour precisely because it was the most expensive colour to make. Thus the colour matching of the creature's clothes and physique suggests there is luxury not only in the excellence of his garments as described in the effictio, but also in his being virtually all of a colour associated with sumptuousness. Associations of green with expense may have made the colour desirable to persons concerned to display wealth, but the colour had at one time an unfortunate heraldic connotation. Christine de Pisan, writing slightly after the Gawain Poet's time, describes several colours, including green, according to associations with the elements, and the proper social level of

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7 Contrast our own culture, which associates greenishness with ill-health or faint heartedness.
the wearer. 9

...I shall telle the of thoo colours that men reputen
and taken for the most highe moost riche and most
noble...[scripture says] the wis and holy persone is
like the gold and the sonne... the auncient lawes dyde
ordeyne that no man shulde were gold but that he were a
prince....the seconde colour is purpre that we calle
red which representeth the fire...after the sunne...the
most noble...for the which noblenes semblably did
ordayne the lawes that noone shuld were red... but only
the princes....

These are, of course, the colours chosen by Camelot for Gawain.
Azure and white are next in ncbility; they represent water and
air. Black is a sorrowful and humble colour, associated with
earth, and properly worn by the religious orders. Finally,
Christine discusses green:

...grene that men call sinople or verte which betokneth
wodes feldes and medowes and because it is not
represented to noon of the four elements it shuld be
taken for the lasse noble.

Christine is talking about the use of colours in banners and
devices. This, and the apparently conflicting fact that she
allots the colour black to the second estate, makes it unclear
who precisely are the "lasse noble" to whom green is suitable.
She is not limiting comment to the warriorly first estate; at
the same time it is unlikely she would be suggesting banners for
woodsmen or similar vilains. It is an interesting speculation
that she intends to allot green to those who, though villain in.

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9 Faytes of Armes and of Chyvalrye, William Caxton (trans.),
A.P.T. Byles (ed.), London, Oxford University Press, 1932,
p289-290.
the formal sense, nonetheless can afford the outlay for banners or similar display—as may be the case of the green creature.

Benson suggests that the green creature also has some of the characteristics of another literary figure, the wild man, which was separate and not by convention green. This part of Benson's analysis is based equally on the tester's appearance and on his manners. 10 The wild man of the medieval period, called a wodwose, is unlike the green man apparently born human, rather than being a sort of man-shaped vegetable. The wodwose has either been ferally raised or has abandoned society. There is a wodwose identified as such in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (721) who is an opponent in Gawain's journey to Hautdesert. There, he is simply a natural hazard like bulls and boars and dragons, but Benson points out that in other art of the period the wodwose had gained a role as a "natural philosopher chastising the artificiality and pride of the courtier". 11 His appearance and behaviour have a massive overlap with the medieval literary madman. The similar first morpheme suggests why the figures may have come to overlap.

Penelope Doob's study of the literary madman shows that the concept of madness had broadened beyond its origins as a disease based in sin, and by the time of the Gawain poet encompassed any

10 Benson, p75.
11 Benson, p180.
eccentric behaviour, and thus included "holy fools and desert saints". 12 Nebuchadnessar is the medieval prime type for madness. Clanness(l.1684-1700) describes him as thinking of himself as an animal and emphasizes the growing of his hair and beard. He has hair in mats in his groin and toes. He is knotted with burrs. His beard reaches over his breast to the earth and he has bristly brows and hair. 13 Benson argues that the wild man, similarly hairy, was sufficiently familiar that a mere allusion would be enough to establish the resemblance. 14

While the green creature's behaviour may fairly be described as mad or wild, his appearance is less so than Benson thinks. In the formal portrait he certainly has a beard like a bush, but this metaphor may have been not much more motivated than it is today. Thus the audience may not have been particularly aware that a bushy beard is being compared to a plant in the wild landscape, as Benson's analysis suggests. Further, though his hair is eccentrically long and green, the creature is meticulously groomed:

A much berd as a busk over his brest henges,
That with his highlich here that of his hede reches,
Watz euesed al vmbetorne abof his elbowes.

(182ff)

12 Penelope Doob, Nebuchadnessar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1974, p50.

13 Doob, p85.

14 Benson, p64.
His hair is, then, naturally luxuriant, but it has been clipped, not just so that it is controlled but so that it resembles a "kingez capados", a king's cloak.

To a modern audience, the behaviour of the green man seems its maddest not in the portrait, but after he has proposed his gomen:

...runischly his rede yghen he reled aboute,
Bende his bresed broghez, blycande grene,
Wayued his berde for to wayte quo-so wolde ryse.
(304ff)

The word runischly connotes the ill-understood. Robert B. White has argued that the red eyes, a dissonant feature in this otherwise colourmatched creature, were, in physiognomies such as Secreta Secretorum, an indication that the possessor is "coraiuos, stalwart and myghty" but also "disposyd to woodnesse", "y-likened to bestes whych may not be daunted." 15

The reeling eyes apparently do not express mental confusion and giddiness, as a modern reader might assume, as the Oxford English Dictionary does not report this use before 1796. Fourteenth-century entries have glosses such as "wheel suddenly"; the creature may only be casting his eyes over potential accepters of the beheading challenge. Thus against the impression created by the creature's expensive clothes and his flowing hair subjected to topiary barbering, we have his

bristling brow, waving beard, and overt verbal rudeness. While the green creature appears for isolated moments to be a wild or mad man, at others he appears to be looking and acting knightly. As in a good mystery where each clue points to a different suspect, the effect on the hearer is cumulative befuddlement.

Benson suggests that the creature's bristling beard and beetling brows would have marked him, not only as mad, but also as uncourtly. These features could mark the figure most opposed to the courtly, the villain. The villain, the plowman, was ordinarily considered, despite Langland and Chaucer, vile. Benson points to the example of Dangiers li Vilains in the Roman de la Rose and Alagolofur in the Sowdone of Babylone. Besides their frowns, literary villains also conventionally use insultingly familiar and otherwise rude language. While the green creature is certainly as rude as any villain might be, his rudeness does not all appear to be of a piece. In some of his remarks he may be more of a social blunderer than one who offers insult on purpose. He may be unaware of the implications of what he is saying. Such a blunder is his request to 'speke raysoun' with the 'gouernour of this gyng.' (225) It is insufferable to have a person one has not found rational invite one to be reasonable. However, it may be seen as the unmalicious social bungling of an individual eager to display a newly-learned
vocabulary who gets it wrong. In the same way, the green creature is as easily seen as unaware that politeness requires that he say you, not thee, to Arthur. In the fourteenth century, thou was the normal pronoun, used for the deity, servants, in soliloquies and in addressing the dead. In private conversations, even with people of high rank, and in all other situations where the speaker did not want to stress politeness it was also the idiom. You was reserved for social superiors, particularly those with high rank when spoken to in public. It was used to stress respect and veneration, as a courtly lover would wish to do to his lady.

However, not all of the behaviour that eventually riles Arthur into personally accepting the challenge seems so innocent. The creature's assuming, uninvited and without credentials of name or manners, the role of tester, may be ignorance, but it may well be arrogance. It seems for some moments that the green creature may contemplate joining Arthur's knights since he begins, much as any seeking knight would, by asking, not for a challenger, but for the leader. He casts an appraising eye to discover "quo walt ther most renoun" (231).

As for example the stranger who says he admires the listener and his ilk. Modern British society is generally considered to show how difficult it is to adopt the class dialect of the upper classes, and how lack of this dialect may stigmatize the individual.

Allan A. Metcalfe, "Sir Gawain and You", Chaur 5, p165.
Invited to "light luflych adoun and lenge" (254) he declines with asperity ("To wone any guyle in this won, hit watz not myn ernde"(257)). He has, he suggests, a more purposeful life than the members of this court. The invitation was a display of forbearance on Arthur's part; a knight is not required to fight with an individual whose credentials are suspect, much less to permit his sitting with him at table. The green man spurns this gracious invitation and will, a few lines later, be consciously insulting when he responds to Arthur's offer to fight with his patronising rejection "here is no mon me to mach...hit arn aboute on this bench bot berdelez chylder" (282,280). The reference to beardlessness may have had a particular smart in Arthurian literature. In the Alliterative Morte, the shame and loss of power associated with beardlessness are twice marked. On one occasion, a giant who has the habit of shaving the beards of vanquished kings and weaving them into capes threatens Arthur, telling him to deliver up his beard. Arthur asserts his power by saying that he will present the beard in person and on its customary place on his chin (l.1000ff). Elsewhere in the Morte Arthur himself insults captive princes by shaving off their beards (l.2330ff). The green man's arrogant provocation of Arthur seems to be climaxed

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16 Barber points out that lack of a demonstrably noble background prevented some knights from entering tournaments. Barber, p31.
by his reference to the high king and his peerless knights as beardless. The audience's uncertainty as to whether the green man should be considered to be a churl in a state of lese majeste or the awesome representative of some nether world is complicated by these remarks, as the arrogance of power and the apparent arrogance of the literary churl are similar.

The hybrid qualities noted by Benson may be a metaphoric expression of the qualities of an important social hybrid of the Ricardian period, the 'knight' who would prove, if his background were searched, to be a merchant or a lawyer. The mixture in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight of realistic and romance elements suggests, to the reader who takes the mixture as purposeful, that he is supposed to suspend disbelief selectively. When Arthurian knights wear fashionable fourteenth-century clothing it should not be assumed that the poet knew no better but that the Arthurian knights were meant to be seen through the screen of and juxtaposed with the knights of Ricardian society. When a physical and social enigma such as a green knight hales on the scene the audience is reminded that in Ricardian society, too, elegant clothes sometimes cover an ungenteel nature.

Several of the green creature's ignoble traits are exactly those the Nurture Books of the period showed how to avoid. The miroirs of noblesse in the late middle ages described the kynde of knights, that is, what a noble is, rather than how he should act. There appears to have been no perception of need for such
people to learn their behaviour. The books of nurture were by contrast overtly didactic. It is clear they were intended, not to describe and glorify an extant nobility, but to show others how to behave, how to be nurtured, in order to gain status. An example of the nurture book is Russell's *Boke of Nurture.* Status is drawn, sources such as this one say, from ancestry or nature, not from property and lifestyle. ("The substaunce of lyfelode is not so digne/ As is blode royalle...."1093) Despite the book's clear statement that status is innate, the usefulness of the book to the people it intends to serve depends on its underlying assumption that such "comenynge and the connynge" as is expressed in it is teachable; this is no mere celebration from afar of noble manners, but a hornbock for emulating them. Elegance is assumed not to be a matter of *kynde* but of nurture. This attitude, not consistent with the idea that nobility is inherent, is very consistent with the essentially upstart idea that rank is a marker of wealth and power rather than the reverse. Nobility is treated as merely a code of behaviour

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19 Found in *The Babees Boke.* Since this mid-fifteenth-century author claims (in lines 1243-46 of the *Babees Boke* XVII) that he is working from ancient authors possibly the book had a fourteenth-century analogue. Even if this is not so, it is improbable that a writer of nurture books is writing a new code and therefore would produce a view not applicable to the fourteenth century.

20 Holmes notes that in fact status was handled in practical fashion in the fourteenth century. It corresponded to wealth and power. "A magnate was not elevated to an earldom unless he had built up...an inheritance sufficient...."p.4.
which, once learned, acts not as a disguise but as a genuine index.

Other nurture books work from the same assumption. The *Lyttyle Childrens Lytil Boke* adjures its young hearer to "bare the so thow haue no blame/Than men wylle say thereafter/ that a gentyleman was here(94/96)". Others are more concrete. The *Young Children's Book* counsels a boy to "...iagylle nether with iak ne iylle ", and further to "...haue few wordes, and wysly sette,/For so thou may thi worschyppe gete." 21 The *Babees Boke* 22 suggests that the young "haue wordes lovly,swete, bleste, and benygne" when people "lyste yow rehete". 23 It elaborates on this scheme:

> Whenne yee answere or speke, yee shulle be purveyde  
> What yee shalle say speke eke thing fructuous;  
> On esy wyse latte thy resone be sayde  
> In wordes gentylle and slc sompendedius,  
> For many wordes een rihte tedious  
> To ylke wysemann that shalle yeve audience,  
> Thaym to eschewe therfore doo diligence.

Finally, *Stans Puer ad Mensam*, ascribed to Lydgate, describes proper personal manners suited to a young man who would "youre youth lede" ...al into vertuues"(96). *Stans Puer* counsels the boy against loud speech and fidgeting: ("While thou spekist, be not richeles; /kepe bothe fyngir and hond stille in

21 p21.

22 p3. Oddly, this book is said to be for "yonge babees" of "bloode rcyalle"(p1).

23 p2.
pees...."6-7). He should walk "demurely bi streetis in the
toun(18)" and not by indulging in "wantoune laughinge" ...thou
do noon offence/To-fore thi souereyne...." (20/21) or not
generally to be "copiose of langage". The green creature, quite
addicted to broad motions and copious language, would seem to
have use for these nurture books. The green creature's physical
energy and garrulousness are in marked contrast to the restraint
and decorum noted in Camelot, and suggest lack of nobility and
assurance.

There are other reasons to think that social mobility was a
recognised and worrisome social phenomenon of such dimensions
that the Ricardian audience would have quickly placed the hybrid
green creature as a merchant-knight, or a lawyer-knight: in
other words, a rich non-noble trying to pass for a noble and a
knight. One reason is that literature shows other upstarts than
him, though it generally shows them in a less sympathetic light.
Pearsall says the late fourteenth-century partly alliterative
Sir Degrawaunt merges the romance knight with the real by making
the hero not only a Round Table knight but also a Yorkshire
landowner with estates, gamekeepers, letters demanding
compensation, and other prosaic responsibilities. 2* Chaucer's
Franklin, a country landowner and a vavasor, is the best known
literary upstart of the period. There has been substantial

2* Derek Pearsall, "The Development of the Middle English
Romance", MS (Toronto) 27:1965, p. 115.
agreement among critics since the early years of this century that the Franklin's fondness for the idea of gentillessse, his deference to the squire, and his sorrow at his son's atavistic vulgarity all show that he has come to his position of power and influence through his own efforts, and that he is not by birth gentle. Even a critic who sets out to prove that the franklin is a gentleman finally aids the thesis that he is not, distinguishing not between the noble and the *arriviste* but merely between the noble and the lower classes, or between bondsman and freeman. 

Chaucer's General Prologue lavishes "every kind of verbal extravagance... upon this man whose primary concern is the "splendid display of unsurpassed wealth and taste". Though aware discretion and gentility are not qualities that can be bought, the Franklin naturally thinks in terms of buying what he wants, and measures these qualities in terms such as twenty pounds' worth of land. The green creature's discomfitting habit of measuring, weighing, and valuing as applied to the *fre* Arthurian court may be seen as drawn from the same ethic. Certain of his habits in his Bertilak form will be seen as mercantile or lawyerly, or otherwise middle

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27 Burlin, p57.
class and lacking in fraunchise.

Alan T. Gaylord points out that all the promises in the Franklin's tale are somehow flawed as illustrations of gentillesse. Dorigen's promise is made only to be immediately invalidated by her remark that she knows the rocks can never be removed. Aurelius, with "fanatical literalism", rationalises this promise in a way "useful to himself, but false to its original expression". The removal of the rocks is in any case only an illusion. Aurelius in enforcing Dorigen's promise "insists that he is not being pettily legalistic. She is a gentle lady and...will act accordingly. He would much prefer...to receive her love through "grace" and not "right". ...He uses language, however, ordinarily used to describe transactions of solemn covenant." The knight's concern for his own good name causes him to make a harsh decision which ignores Dorigen's welfare. The magician's self-denial consists only in giving up an "exhorbitant fee for shady dealing". Looked at from the Franklin's uncritical viewpoint, the story shows satisfying gentillesse on the part of all characters. Boccaccio's analogous Il Filocolo judges the knight to be most

29 Gaylord, p335.
30 Gaylord, p349.
31 Gaylord, p350.
fre, but the Franklin leaves this question open. His Orliens clerk, a mere student of law, makes an equally generous sacrifice, showing gentillessse and fredom are not the "exclusive prerogatives of knighthood". 32 Thus Chaucer's Franklin's unsubtle understanding of gentillessse and his aristocratic display of generosity and magnificence combined with a legalistic and mercantile turn of mind mark a contrast between origin and aspiration which has a significant resemblance to Bertilak and the creature of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Chaucer's Franklin is also, it will be recalled, a vavasor. This rare word is used in Chaucer's General Prologue as though it were a simple synonym needing no explanation. This difficulty has partly been overcome by Roy Pearcy's study of the vavasor in French romance and fabliaux. The vavasor is often, he says, a rustic seen in encounter with the knight errant. The role of the vavasor is to challenge the knight's more rarified values with values either more earthy or more mean, depending on whether the story approaches romance or approaches fabliau. 33

Some students of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, fascinated by the greenness of the creature, have developed theories in which the gome is a sort of spirit of nature meaning

32Burlin, p68.

33Roy Pearcy, "Chaucer's Franklin and the Literary Vavvasour", ChR 8 (1973) p33-59. Detailed analysis of Bertilak as vavasor will be done in the chapter "Some Literary Antecedents and Affinities".
the botanical world, or at least the world outside civilisation. Perhaps if the game is to be identified with kynde, he should merely be thought of as a sort of visual pun. Besides meaning nature in the botanical sense, the MED shows that kynde had a complex of meanings in the human context. It included qualities such as character, the physical nature of man, natural instincts and desires, action customary or proper to a man, a tribe, family, race or kindred, and the opposite of nurture or manners. In short, Gawain’s meaning for the word kynde (l. 2380) is not the most common. It was less commonly associated outside of Camelot with perfection than with the rough material of the untutored or unnurtured bulk of humanity. There was considerable debate during the late middle ages concerning whether nurture or kynde was more powerful. The existence of the nurture books shows a practical reliance on nurture. Diane Cosman notes that the proverb “nature surpasses nurture” was one of the more oft-cited of the middle ages. In the thirteenth-century Roman de la Rose, the duenna in teaching manners is teaching artifice. She recognises, however, that all her efforts may come to nothing against the greater power of nature:

Trop est fort chose que nature,

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34 For example, C. S. Lewis in "The Anthropological Approach" in Howard and Zacher at p59-71.

35 Cosman, p119. She also points out that the Prose Lancelot displays the controversy in the scenes concerning Lancelot’s education.
Nurture as the Duenna teaches it is a sort of breath mint for the soul, cosmesis rather than an actual taming of the beast within. However, in the theory of courtly love that holds that a knight's unfulfilled love for a lady might elevate his spirit and buff off his coarser edges, there is a partial elevation of the role of nurture. Here not mere manners, nurture nonetheless must have good material, a noble nature, on which to work its changes. In Chaucer's Franklin's Tale, any answer given to the question "who was most free?" would support one side or the other of the nature-nurture debate. The knight has largesse as a matter of nature, while the Orliens clerk has what he has of gentility by nurture. In the fifteenth century, a poem appeared called "The Debat betweene Nurture and Kinde". The poem includes a fable in which a cat trained to hold a candle abandons its training when a mouse goes by. The poem concludes that "nedis thei must go togedr in fay/ Be closed yn on...." In the debate section of the poem, Nurture argues that if he took nature in the form of a two year old child he could make it "grant as a swine...and nother to know thy sire ne dame." Nature retorts that no matter:

...if thou were bred in halle or boure

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36 Scattergood, p244.

Among ladies and lords that are sure,[yet]
...by word, by countenance, or other by cher
For all thy helpe and socoure
Yet thou will show sum touch from whence thou come....

This recognises that nature cannot be expunged, but equally that
nurture is able to effect fairly far-reaching controls over
behaviour. Words, countenance and cher are the ways in which
Bertilak shows his origins. This debate poem lacks thematic
subtlety or nuance of character and plot, suggesting a popular
audience. In the normal course of events, a new idea goes
through a period when it is the property of sophisticates before
it becomes a cliche. Possibly this idea was the property of
sophisticates at the time of the making of Sir Gawain and the
Green Knight. In this poem, the implied debate between nurture
and kynde is much more subtle than in the fifteenth-century
poem, and more nuanced than in Roman de la Rose.

Widespread upward mobility during the Ricardian period
shows that nurture was, in practical terms, triumphant. Sylvia
Thrupp's The Merchant Class of Medieval London shows that the
great London merchants were chief among the mobile. They could
build noble stature for themselves or their children by the
careful cultivation of the marks of nobility. These included the
predictable physical marks—great houses in the country,
extensive lands, marriage and friendships with the nobles, and
rich clothing. Slightly more difficult to nurture were the
manners and pastimes of the noble. A final and most difficult
method of being assimilated into the nobility was to imitate the supposedly-innate characteristics of noblesse.

Though in the final vital scene of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the green creature displays more larges and leute and pite that longez to knyghtez than courtly Gawain does, for the greater part of the poem he shows gauche goodwill and a lack of urbanity. This is the mark of the would-be aristocrat who has learnt the appearance of noblesse up to a point, but cannot always hide his villain origins. The doubleness of his nature begins to impress itself on the audience from the first scene. When the audience is still stunned by the matter of fact revelation that the creature is "overal enkere grene" the poet gives a full stanza on his elegant but unmilitary garb:

Ande al graythed in grene this gome and his wedes:
A strayte cote ful streght, that stek on his sides,
A mere mantile abof, mensked withinne,
With pelure pered apert, the pane ful clene
With blythe blauuner ful bryght, and his hod bothe,
That watz laught fro his lokkez and layde on his shulderes;
Heme wel-haled hose of that same,
That spenet on his sparlyr, and clene spures vnder
Of bryght golde, vpon silk bordes barred ful ryche,
And scholes vnder schankes there the schalk rides,
And alle his vesture uerayly watz clene verdure,
Bothe the barres of his belt and other blythe stones,
That were richely rayled in his aray clene
Aboutte hymself and his sadel, vpon silk werkez.
That were to tor for to telle of tryfles the halue ...
(150 ff)

Though he has come through strange territory and into a strange court where armour might be expected he is not so encumbered:

I haue a hauberghe at home and a helme bothe,
A schelde and a scharp spere, schinande bryght,  
And other weppenes to welde, I wene wel, als;  
Bot for I wolde no were, my wedez ar softer.  

(268ff)

He assures his audience that he has all the gear suited to a knight, that it is in good order, and that he has weapons to spare. That is, he asserts forcefully that he is a bona fide knight. He does not have a device, either. In the Alliterative Morte, Sir Clegis' qualifications as a knight are challenged by a challenge to his coat of arms.

...thou beest noghte delyverede,  
Bot thow sekerly ensure with certeyne knyghtez,  
That thi cote and thi breste be knawene with lordes,  
Of armes of ancestre, entyrde with londes.  

(1687ff)

The impugned knight replies indignantly that his ancestry can be traced to the time of Brutus. Thus weapons and coats of arms are not merely an accessory of knighthood, but the badge of that status.

The green creature also brings attention to his clothes of the moment("my wedez ar softer"(271)). He considers good clothes not to be simply a part of the background, but a matter of conscious attention and care, and perhaps pride. The creature seems to look down at himself complacently as he speaks. The need to explain oneself is a mark of insecurity. The green

38 In Chretien's Perceval Gawain's possession of such weapons, if he does not have them by fraud, proves he is a knight(1.5200ff).
The poet has not seen it as necessary to describe the garb of the members of Camelot; presumably the garb, like all else, is "oryght". Even Guenevere is simply described as a pair of grey eyes surrounded by the impersonal richness of the hall's draperies. Gawain's dressing is described by the poet in detail, but without any indication the knight is proud of his garb. Obliviousness to material things is a mark of nobility. In the Alliterative Morte Arthur is said approvingly to be:

...despysere of sylvere,
That no more of golde gyffes thame of grette stones,
No more of wyne thame of watyre....

(539ff)

Arthur's response to the creature's request that he grant "The gomen that I ask/bi ryght (274-275)" has been much misunderstood. The clue is in the last phrase. The creature has of course no such right as to claim a Christmas game. The decorum which does not require a knight to fight with someone his social inferior certainly will not insist on his playing with such a person. It is an anthropological truism that the people we eat with and play with are of our own sort. Arthur's response suggests that his patience is being stretched. He says, "Sir cortays knyght,/If thou craue batayl bare,/Here faylez thou not to fyght (276ff)".

A Ricardian audience would have been aware that if the
creature is not a knight he is behaving not only unacceptably in terms of romance convention, but illegally in terms of English sumptuary law, which limited sumptuous clothing to the nobility. Thrupp says, however, that the dress of choice for the magnates or rich merchants was indeed much like his: tunics of samite and velvet, silk lined hoods trimmed with fur or embroidery, and outer robes in brilliant colours, furred with beaver, marten or ermine. They enjoyed jewelled rings and silk girdles and on state occasions "following French fashions, they moved to the music of little gold and silver bells sewed about their hoods and sleeves." 39 The information accords with the picture in Sir Gawain of the creature's "strayte cote ful streght, that stek on his sides (152) ", his "mere mantile (153) " mensked withinne/ With pelure puered apert (154) ", the "blythe stones/ That were richely rayled in his aray clene (163) " and the "blythe blaunner (155) " which graces his hood. Amusingly, the most extravagant of the fashions, the little bells, is transferred to the tail of the green horse, where their effect of display is further heightened.

Several sets of sumptuary laws were passed during the last decades of the fourteenth century, all designed to keep rich clothing, furs, and cloth of gold and silver out of the closets of the rich merchants and professionals. The fact that the

39 Thrupp, p149.
restrictures were loosened and tightened in succeeding enactments apparently reflects the unenforcability of the legislation. Thrupp feels the laws were counterproductive; if the wealthy middle classes associated rich fabrics with the nobility they yearned to join, their covetousness would have been increased. Sheen and softness of fabric then became emblems not just of wealth but also of nobility. *0

In the alliterative poem Richard the Redeless, written in the last years of the century, this association of clothes with power is looked on with righteous horror. The king Richard II is excoriated because of his bad choice of confidantes. The first reason is that they are concerned with clothes to the exclusion of concern with giving good counsel:

For ben they rayed arith they recchith no forther
But studieth all in stroutynge and stireth amys
  evere,
For I say for my-selfe and schewe, as me thynchith,
That ho is rial of his ray that light reede
  him folweth....
(120-123) *1

The second reason is that they are arrivistes:

ther gromes and the godeman beth all eliche
  grette,
Woll wo beth the wones and all that woneth
  ther-in.
(66-67)

*0Thrupp, p147-148.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the self-consciousness of the creature shows that rich array is a matter of uncasual self-approval, even a mark of achievement. The getup is grotesque, a caricature of what the nobility would really wear. In the poem and in the real fourteenth-century world, this is a mark of the arriviste; he cannot be expected to know when to stop.

Thus the green creature who confronts Gawain in the first fitt may be seen as a marvel, but one whose ill-assortedness gives hints as to how to read him. A creature gorgeously dressed and self-conscious about that dress, having the manners of the ignoble, but the pretense of outdoing Arthur's court in a significant fashion, could be seen as an image of the socially mobile merchant of the Ricardian period. The green man and wild man dimensions become, under this view of things, more understandable. The poet caricatures the background of his character. The upstart is a feral human, a subhuman, and a mind-ravaged human, not merely a commoner. In the later fitts, the Bertilak transformation will be treated only as a rich commoner, these dimensions being, for the time, forgotten. The mediation done in the story between his parvenu-knight values and Gawain's romance knight values has barely begun. However, his incursion into Camelot makes it clear he is in some ways a hostile challenger; it remains for his other self to show the nature of the challenge.
IV. Bertilak de Hautdesert I Hat: The Self-Made Knight

In the beheading scene in Camelot, the green creature displayed mannerisms and tastes in personal adornment which suggested that, far from being a perfect romance warrior-knight, he was, if a knight at all, one come up from non high parage. As Bertilak, he will confirm that he has what he has as a result of careful nurture, and not as a free gift of kynde. His castle, his hunting park, his household, and his relationship with his lady all show the gaucheness and misinterpretation common to the person doing everything for the first time, and to impress others. The details which to a twentieth century reader hint at this situation may well have shouted it to an original audience because the newly-rich man whose goal was to be accepted for a knight appears to have been a social fact of the Ricardian period. Ferguson’s Indian Summer of English Chivalry gives much attention to the existence of the middle classes. It notes in Cursor Mundi a hesitant reworking of the traditional idea of the two secular classes, the nobles and the commons. The reference is to the three sons of Noah as the origins of "knight and chorle and fre-man". Ferguson shows that official civic documents through the later middle ages ranked the middle classes among themselves, equating greater wealth with greater

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1Ferguson, p130.
honesty, wisdom and prudence, and calling their possessors plius sufficeauntz and potentiores. Holmes shows that there was a natural pattern of families growing in wealth, dying out, and losing their titles and estates to newcomers, more often than not creatures of the court. Occasionally new families crept up by their own efforts outside the court. Movement up to the nobility in two generations was not uncommon. In one tested group of twenty-six sons of high merchants, five became knighted and two known as gentlemen.

It would seem, however, that living like a knight was more universally desired than actual knighthood. The great symbol of family status was the landed country house, sometimes together with inland fisheries, mills and wheat producing lands. Buying old castles and having private parks might attract favourable attention from the local gentry. John Peche, a vintner with a trade monopoly, was seen in about 1374 buying a landed estate, marrying a rich young ward to his daughter, and bringing up his son to be a knight.

Whether they lived like knights or were actually knighted,

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2 Thrupp, p15.
3 Holmes, p40.
4 Thrupp, p205.
5 Thrupp, p120ff.
6 Thrupp, p146.
it would seem acceptance of these newcomers was not complete. A merchant retired to the country would always seem nouveau riche.7 Aristocrats were critical when, for example, Richard II knighted five aldermen.8 Owst quotes Bromyard on the subject of social relations of apparent friendship between merchant and gentry in which hunting and banqueting together were involved. He says the friendships will end when the merchants try to call in the loans they have made the gentry. 9

This anecdote underlines an apparent tension between the noble ethic of larges and the mercantile ethic of careful husbandry. By convention, chivalric literature made the merchant "the type of avarice and ambition, narrowly absorbed in the pursuit of money and power, in contrast to the noble, who, in the romantic world, made life an art".10 Owst quotes the Gesta Romana11.

[a merchant] he suffreth him nought to haue slepe, ne reste, by nighte ne by day; bot maketh him travayle in water and in londe, in cheie and in hete, in fayntyse and in werynesse...right as a spythur destroyeth here-self in makynge a webbe for to take a flye, ryght so the coveytous man destroyeth his owene body for to gete thys worldes goed.

7 Thrupp p279.
8 Thrupp, p277-278.
9 Owst, p352.
10 Owst, p315.
11 Owst, p352.
Thrupp points out the anomaly of the fifteenth-century moneyed draper who made his betrothed elegant presents including "ypocras, deytees as figges and reisin, figne laune, a popingeay, a great ring of fyne gold uit a grete poynted diamant...."and kept careful account of the costs.\textsuperscript{12}

The two opposed attitudes of mercantilism and nobility are laid out in the debate poem \textit{Wynnere and Wastoure}. \textsuperscript{13} Despite the title, the poem is not particularly partisan. It talks about modern wonders a western boy sent south will see, such as "boyes of no blode, with boste and pride/schall wedde ladyes in londe...." (15-16) Winner is characterized as a worker who excoriates the knightly class to which Waster belongs:

\begin{verbatim}
Alle that I wynn thurgh witt he wastes thurgh pryde;
I gedi, I glene, and he lattys goo sone;
I pryke and I pryne, and he the purse opynes.
Why hase this cayteffe no care how men corn sellen?
His londes liggen alle ley, his lomes aren solde,
Downn bene his dowfehouses, drye ben his poles;
The deuyll wounder the wele he weldys at home,
Bot hungere and heghe horses and howndes ful kene
Safe a sparthe and a spere sparrrede in ane hyrne,
A bronde ar his bede-hede, biddes he no nother
Bot a cuttede capill to cayre with to his frendes.
\end{verbatim}

This class wastes the land it monopolizes. The knightly apparatus of sword and spear lie idle in corners. This knight's lack of potency is marked by his riding a castrated horse. The poem does not entirely side with Winner, though, pointing out

\textsuperscript{12} Thrupp, p107.

\textsuperscript{13}Sir Israel Gollancz (ed.), Cambridge, D.S.Brewer, 1974 (1921).
instead that he and Waster are social complements:

When thou haste waltered and went and waklede alle the nyghte,
And iche a wy in this werlde that wonnes the abouthe,
And hase werpede thy wyde howses fulle of wolle sakkes,
The bemes benden at the rofe, siche bakone there hynges,
Stuffed are sterlynges vndere stelen bowndes,
What sholde worthe of that wele, if no waste come?
Some scholde rote, some ruste, some ratones fed.
(248-254)

Winner's winnings are gross and pointless excess. While he painted himself as a farmer, Waster thinks of him as an entrepreneur, as much involved with money as with the matter that earns it.

As has been mentioned, chivalric literature excoriates the merchant and his ethic. One romance treats in especially partisan fashion the relative value of knights and entrepreneurs. In Chretien's Perceval, Gawain is the hero of the episode called "La Pucele As Mances Petites". A tourment is held in which Gawain, a stranger in the area, is forced merely to watch; he cannot joust because he has not yet avenged an outstanding insult. An argument breaks out among three sisters as to which of the knights is best. The youngest sister champions Gawain. The oldest, "enflamme et chaude"(l.5201), disagrees. This man, she says (in loose translation of l.5070ff) is not even a knight, but a merchant imposter who lives by the contents of his trunk ("par vostre male aventure") and who cannot fight. He is a merchant, she says; do not say he dares hear talk of the tourney. He has all those horses for sale. The
second sister agrees: he is a moneychanger— it's cash and dishes he's got in those sacks and trunks. The youngest sister defends Gawain: you evil-tongued creatures, she says, do you think a merchant would carry a great lance like his? He's a knight, I know it. Later, the oldest sister appears and accuses Gawain of trumpery because of his horse, lance and destrier and the knight's device on his armour. He is, she says, making free with this guise when in fact he smells of trade, he is a traveller in merchandise (1.5210ff). The merchant is, by contrast with the knight, a wretch.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the hero refuses the lady a gift on parting. His refusal is graceful, but central to it is the notion that Gawain is a knight, and travels light, so cannot be expected to cart around sacks of pretties like a merchant:

Ye haf deserved... more rewarde... then I reche myght [Bot]... I am here an erande in erdez vncoethe And have no men wyth no malez with menskful thingez.  

(1803-1809)

There is reproof here against the suggestion that a knight should come bearing anything but his noble self. The lady, like her husband and all he is lord of, appears to Gawain to have the mercantile outlook.

The reader has first encountered Bertilak's gorgeous domain as a response to the prayer of Gawain, exhausted by his search for the Green Chapel. This travel-travail passage shows that the
poet intends our having no doubt that Gawain is capable as a warrior-knight, moving from the choreographed gaiety of the court to the choreographed perils of the wild. If gorgeousness is not a matter of moment with him, neither, when that is suitable to the situation, is asceticism. Having Gawain sleep in his irons "mo nyghtez then innoghe" (730), the poet speaks with noble understatement. Gawain's battles with etains, wodwoses and dragons, those fiercest of romance monsters, are "to tore for to telle of the terthe dole". (719) These encounters, understood and manageable but still "peryl and payne and plytes ful harde" (733) blind Gawain's judgment. His relief at escaping weather and monsters incapacitates him much as the energy he will be forced to put into escaping the lady's wiles will blind him to the dangers of accepting the green girdle. Gawain's urgency to end his travails--to find somewhere to hear mass--cause him to be bedazzled at the spectacle of Bertilak's luxurious new castle. This bedazzlement runs very deep. Trees from the same stand of oaks that moments before appeared of a piece with the menacing forest (743-745) are now "boghez/Of mony borelych bole(766)" and even "schyre okez(772)". The exhaustion and thankfulness for any "herber" that can produce this actual change in perception can also produce an unreliable judgment of the castle itself. 14

14Pearssall's comment that the poet is concerned not to tell what the castle oaks really looked like but to use a descriptive detail to amplify Gawain's feelings suggests the idea of a reading of this kind. "Rhetorical Descriptio in Sir Gawain and
Gawain's first glimpse of the castle is startling not only because it comes as the immediate response to prayer, but also because it is overdone. The description of the castle begins with several lines that emphasize details less than overall emotional reactions. It is done "in the best lawe (790)". The knight has never seen "a better barbicant" (793). As his eye moves inward, Gawain remarks with approval details the hearer understands as an architectural overdrawing, a mixture of too many and too flashy features. Just as Chaucer shows the Franklin as open to criticism for luxuria simply by drawing him as unparalleled in wealth and taste, so the Gawain poet has produced a castle that, because it is lavish in every detail, some of them quite unnecessary, is disturbing.

Towres telded bytwe, trochet ful thik,
Fayre fylyolez that fyghed, and ferlyly long,
With coruon coprounes craftyly sleye.
Chalkwhyt chymnees ther ches he innoghe
Vpon bastel rouez, that blenked ful quyte;
Sco mony pynakle payntet watz poudred ayquere,
That pared out of papure purely hit semed.

(795ff)

Several verbal features contribute to the impression of extravagance. No feature is so unique as to be individually described; nothing is used in such niggardly fashion as to be counted. There are a large number of details which seem to be purely decorative, with no function, filioles, corven coprounes and mony pinacle pentet among them. This is in itself suitable

1*(cont'd) the Green Knight, MLR 50 (1955) p133.
for the construction of elegant fourteenth-century houses, as Margaret Wood's *The English Mediaeval House* shows. A picturesque element in roofs was considered desirable. Fileals had at one time been functional, though decorative, smoke vents. They had by now become ventless. The description of Bertilak's house uses more verbal energy than is necessary for a descriptive process. Word origins frequently suggest the newness or impermanence, or the process of construction, or the over-luxuriance of the castle. "Telded" means pitched, as of tents, suggesting impermanence. "Trochet ful thicke" is a metaphoric term based on the points of antlers. Wildness is suggested. Construction, the work of hands, is suggested in "craftyly sleghe". Several descriptions which could have been presented as verbless and static are gratuitously energetic; "fylyolez that fyghed"; "chymeees ther ches he". There are "somy pynakle" that they are "poudred" with a liberal hand. The word "clambred" appears to have had two separate meanings from two etymologies, giving a punning result. The possible Old Norse form *klambra* gives the middle English meaning cluster or squeeze together. The second meaning is the familiar "climb in an energetic ungainly fashion". The word so considered summarizes the rough vitality associated, through his castle, with

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16 Etymologies are from Archibald A. Hill, "The Green Knight's Castle and the Translators", CJL 17(1972), p140-158.
Bertilak.

Thrupp suggests that most elegant construction in the late fourteenth century was of manor houses, rather than castles. A new magnate wanting a castle would usually buy an old one. 17 Robert Cockcraft's "Castle Hautdesert: Portrait or Patchwork?" suggests that some castles were in fact still built in the Gawain poet's period, but that they were built for defensive purposes by nobles with declining fortunes seeking to fend off unpaid servants and other commercial enemies. 18 If either is right, Bertilak's castle, brand new and yet offering a welcome to a strange knight, is anachronistic. The roofs gleam white. The chimneys, improbably if they function to vent smoke, are also white. The whole is the fresh costly white of a castle "pared out of papure". The word paper occurs here in one of its first recorded uses in the language. It probably connoted rarity, exoticness and novelty.

Metaphor and actual description are therefore at odds; a new and welcoming castle is as strange as a pocket-watch with a digital readout. Other details may be disjointed as well. Wood says chalk-white chimneys were built of plaster of Paris, especially in the reign of Edward I, but they would certainly not remain white with use. Wood suggest the possibility that

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17Thrupp, p146.
such chimneys might not have been functional. Bertilak's high hall and fire "on flet" suggests that his hall was of the sort built tall in order that smoke from the open fire in the centre of the floor circulate up high, not at a level to choke the family. This was still the norm until the fifteenth century. A wall fireplace, unusual but not unheard of in the fourteenth century, vented by means of a chimney. If Bertilak's chimneys are only shams, they may be chalk-white through lack of use.

Cockcraft finds the house strange in many ways. While at first impression it is fortified, his analysis suggests the fortification does not extend through the construction, so that it appears to be stouter and more impregnable than it is. He is unhappy at length about the difficulty of visualizing the castle in all its details; he has trouble thinking of an angle from which one ought to be able to see all the details that Gawain is described as seeing as he pauses at the entrance to the clearing. He is unhappy at the poet's statement that while Gawain has to look up at the castle, suggesting that it is on a mound or the side of a mountain, its earthen moat would seem to require that it contain water at the top of a promontory. This suspends the laws of physics. Cockcraft eventually satisfies himself that a location on a hillock at the base of a mountain

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19 Wood, p258.

20 Note, however, that Gawain's room has a chimney which is definitely functional; see 1.875.
might explain the moat, and he is able to envision one angle from which Gawain might be able to see the details he is described as seeing. However, there is a great deal of anxious strain for Cockcraft in so concluding, and the analysis is as a result not altogether convincing. Rather, the analysis adds weight to my own belief that the castle is indeed meant to be a patchwork of incoherent features.

Inside, Gawain has his own room. Until the fifteenth century generally only the owner of the house had his own room.  

Gawain's room is elegant:

[Burnez]broght hym to a bryght boure, ther beddyng watz noble,
Of cortynes of clene sylk wyth cler golde hemmez,
And couertorez ful curious with comlych panez
Of bryght blaunner aboue, embrauded bisydez,
Rudelez rennande on ropez, red golde ryngez,
Tapitez tyght to the woghe of tuly and tars,
And under fete, on the flet, of folyande sute.

(853ff)

Gawain's bedchamber is decorated as well as was a bedstead which appears in Sir Richard Scrope's will.  

This was embroidered velvet, with four sides of arras with four matching tapestries. Gawain's bed has also various touches of the newfangled. His bedcurtains are caught in gold rings and run along ropes; his embroideries are interesting and novel. His floor, unusual for

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21 Wood, xxix.

22 Wood, p403. Scrope was a well-known arriviste knight of the Ricardian period.
the period, is carpeted. Finally, Gawain has a window capable of being opened (1734). Possibly it is made of glass since the lady remarks on how clear the day is, and Gawain "lurkkez quyyl the daylyght lemed on the wowes(1180)". Neither of these features was unheard of, but both were still very luxurious.

By common consent of the critics, the third fitt of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* belongs to the bedroom. This is understandable; the delicate venery of the lady is more obviously vital in plot terms and more obviously delicious than the other sort of venery practised during this fitt by Bertilak. Commentators on the hunting scenes sometimes hope to find thematic parallels with the bedroom scenes; others are satisfied to note that an original audience might well enjoy the hunting scenes with or without thematic relevance. However, the poet seems also to have been using this arch-aristocratic sport to undercut Bertilak's appearance of savoir-vivre. The first hunting manual was not translated into English from French until the early fifteenth century. This in itself is, of course, a clear indication that the hunting manuals were meant for an aristocratic, not a bourgeois, audience. This first translated

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23 Wood, p404.
25 The thirteenth-century hunting manual *La Chace dou Cerf* says that the sport is so princely that king, count or even Gawain would be honoured for practising it. Marcelle Thiebaux, "The Medieval Chase", Spec 42(1967), p265.
manual was Gaston Comte de Foix's late fourteenth-century *Livre de Chasse*, the origin of all later English hunting manuals and reasonably likely to have been available in the Gawain poet's time. Failing evidence to the contrary, it can be assumed the *Livre de Chasse* is a valid point of comparison for Bertilak's hunting scenes. 26 The translation was done in 1406 by Edward Duke of York, who called his work *Master of Game*. 27 Its prologue shows that high claims were made for hunting. This sport is "to every gentle heart most disportful of all games." 28 It keeps a man from idleness preventing him from "abid[ing] in his bed or in his chamber, a thing which draweth men to imaginations of fleshly lust and pleasure." 29 The fact that Gawain's passive morning had more dangers than had a brisk gallop was not, then, unique to the poet's perception.

For an arriviste working hard at playing the lord of the manor, the chase offers opportunities for unfortunate social blunder. Gawain, left behind in his bed, does not see these; the reader alone has this insight into Bertilak's character. Bertilak is master in what appears to be a private game park. This is indicated by the fact he is the one with the right to

26 As Norman Davis suggests at p106.
27 Thiebaux, pxxiv.
28 *Master of Game*, p1.
29 Thiebaux, p5.
decree management techniques:

...the fere lorde hade defende in fermsoun tyme
That ther schulde no mon meue to the male dere.
(1157-1158)

This is, according to Master of Game, appropriate; male deer are shot in summer only. However, Bertilak may be a little lacking in permitting the hunting of the boar at this season; Master of Game says the season is only Holy Cross day in September to the Feast of St. Andrew, November 30. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the deer is broken, but it is questionable whether the elaborate ceremony of the breaking of the deer was meant to apply to female deer, and whether in fact the hunting of female deer is an aristocratic exploit of the same calibre as stag hunting. The manuals all describe the hunting and breaking of the stag.

The extent to which Bertilak's hunt is out of tune with prescribed aristocratic notions of proper ceremony is shown, more than by actual behaviour, by narrative method. Hunting is supposed to be an art ceremonial in every step. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the breaking of the deer is fully described, and the poet gives great attention to technical terminology.

30 Master of Game, p49.

31 Davis, p111.

32 l.1334-1349.
Use of such precise vocabulary gave Tristan a great deal of prestige in a foreign court where he was unknown, so that he was marked as coming from gentle blood. The French Tresor de Venerie quotes this episode to show the importance of being able to name parts. 33

In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight one sees an undercutting of the aristocratic ceremony and mesure through the noise, row and confusion of the hunt:

The hindez were halden in with hay! and war!
The does dryuen wyth gret dyn to the depe sladez;
Ther myght mon se, as thay slypte, slentyng of arwes-
At uche wende vnder wande wapped a flone-
That bigly bote on the broun with ful brode hede.
What! they brayen, and bleden, bi bonkkez thay deyen....

(1158ff)

The scene gives more the impression of a melee than it should.
The noise of the horns and the din of the men create the atmosphere of a slaughterhouse. 34 Master of Game shows ten steps in the hunt only the last of which is the breaking of the deer and the feeding of the hounds. Several steps have in Sir Gawain

32(cont'd)
33Thiebaux, p261; Davis, p111. However, in Chretien's Tristan, the episode is essentially a funny one, as Cosman points out. Tristan's tutor has trained the hero rigorously in the naming of parts, but when he comes to do the actual breaking of the carcass, he is too young and small to budge the deer.

34 There is in the language a slight foretaste of the rolled-up sleeves atmosphere with which the green creature will later sharpen his axe for Gawain:

What! hit wharred and whette, as water at a mulne; What! hit rusched and ronce, rawthe to here.

(2203-2204)
and the Green Knight been omitted or used in parodic form only. For example, in Master of Game the stag is unharboured at dawn with a dog; there is no sign of this ceremony in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Instead, this poet casts the entire pack loose pell-mell without apparent ceremony or, indeed, strategy. Instead of a ceremonial gathering of the hunting party in the forest for an elegant meal at which the master huntsman must describe exactly the quarry, we see Bertilak "ete a sop hastily(1135)". In Master of Game one sees the ruses of a stag escaping his hunter, and the strategy by which the hunter finally outwits this worthy opponent. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight there is merely a slaughter. The animals are not presented as valiant opponents but as victims:

At the fyrst quethe of the quest quaked the wylde;
Der drof in the dale, doted for drede... (1150-1151)

The hunt is so particularly described that the reader is invited to look for flaws and lack of mesure. In general terms, the energy with which both the green creature and Bertilak attack every problem and every game is duplicated in the hunting scenes.

Improbably, given that the scene takes place in midwinter, six months from grease-time, the deer all have least two fingers

35 Thiebaux, p265.
36 Thiebaux p268; Master of Game 1. 190/198.
of grease. The emphasis in the poem on this abundance suggests that the larder is the primary reason for the hunt, and not true sport. The abundance might have struck the original audience as gross and pointless excess, like Winner's house beams bending at the roof from the weight of the meat hanging there. Further, there is no sense of priority among the hunters. Bertilak is not singled out as being the best of them; the chase is peculiarly democratic. His hunters, like his servants, appear to have many privileges, as though Bertilak were unable to establish proper control and social distance. Thus to a fourteenth-century audience it may well have appeared that Bertilak practices the hunt as one who has learned a few of its more obvious features, without really absorbing the substance of its gentility.

A further clue to Bertilak's lack of high parentage is that he has a mental set, and sometimes a vocabulary, suitable to a lawyer or an entrepreneur. The first is at its clearest while he still appears as the green creature, in the beheading scene, when the rules for the gomen are being hammered out. He needs to be assured that nothing has been left out, nothing left to chance. He asserts that the partner in the game, whoever it may be, may keep the giserne: "I quit-claime hit for euer(193)". Gawain having accepted the challenge, the creature elaborately reviews the terms of the agreement:

'Refourme we oure forwardes, er we ferre passe. Fyrst I ethe the, hathel, how that thou hattes That thou me telle truly, as I tryst may.'
Further, he says:

...thou hast redily rehearsed, bi resoun ful trwe,
Clanly all the couenaut that I the kynge asked,
Saf that thou schal siker me, segge, bi thi trawthe,
That thou schal seche me thiself, where-so thou hopes
I may be funde vpon folde, and foch the such wages
As thou deles me to-day bifiore this doute the ryche.'

(392ff)

The mercantile metaphor of wages is noted. However, several of these terms are the argot of law: couenaunt, siker, forwardes, quit-claime. More important is the lawyerly attitude suggested by the repetition and formal pledge. To the lawyer, every eventuality must be predicted and formally planned for. He has no faith that the kynde of a knight guarantees his truth to the spirit of the challenge without such formal assurances.

The prevailing attitude toward the practice of law, like the image of the knight, changed during the late middle ages. By the fifteenth century law, at least land law, was considered a useful study for the sons of the nobility. In the late fourteenth century this perception had apparently not yet developed. Thrupp reports that from the point of view of the nobility, a lawyer was automatically a commoner. No man of really good birth would become a man of law, she says, citing a Ricardian court of chivalry in which Sir Richard Scrope was disparaged; he was said to be "no gentleman, because he was a

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37 Ferguson, p196.
justice of the king". The merchants had realized from a much earlier date the value of knowing at least the law that pertained to their profession, as a thirteenth-century advice to a young merchant shows. The merchant is advised to study the law so that in his mercantile dealings he will be able to plead according to law when he has a suit against another man of his own class. 39

Bertilak’s mercantile mental set shows again in his proposal for and execution of the exchange of winnings game. Once it is agreed that Gawain will be a guest at the castle for three days, he properly puts himself at his host’s disposal, asserting that he will "at your wylle/Dowelle, and ellez do quat ye demen(1082)". Bertilak shows more exultation than is justified by a simple game:

'Ye han demed to do the dede that I bidde;
Wyl ye halde this hes here at thys onez?'

(1089-1090)

Like the Green Knight in Camelot Bertilak is insensitive to that natural knowing which permits understandings among knights without the need for verbal emphasis. The rules of the exchange of winnings game are laid down unilaterally by Bertilak. As in the beheading game, the proposal seems to the unsuspicuous eye all in Gawain’s favour. It will only be in actual execution.

38Thrupp, p301.
39The King’s Mirror, in The Medieval Reader, p146.
clear what the conditions and costs are:

Ye schal lenge in your lofte, and lyghe in your ese  
To-morn quyyle the messeguyle, and to mete wende  
When ye wyl, wyth my wyf, that wyth yow schal sitte  
And comfort yow with compayny, til I to cort torne....  
(1096ff)

Two readings of the syntax seem possible, one of them perilous. Is Gawain simply to eat his meal with the wife, or to go in to breakfast with her? If the latter, it would seem Gawain might have known she would be comforting him with company in his own loft while he lay at his ease. Bertilak cannot be accused of having not met a merchant's minimum ethical standards; the fine print is there to read, if Gawain will.

For the purposes of plot and sentence it is clear why Bertilak is made to go hunting, conveniently leaving his adultery-minded wife the freedom of his recuperating guest's bedroom. The demands of plot account too for the fact that Gawain is described as physically depleted from his journey, so that his lying in bed while the host hunts is accepted as credible. But if Bertilak is intended by the poet to be a genuine character, and not simply an overly well-realised contrivance for the testing of Gawain's fibre, it is less apparent what Bertilak's own purposes in the exchange of winnings game are. This is the second of three occasions on which Gawain is a victim because his code of honour is inadequate to deal with a situation characterized by a commonplace of the merchant's world, the seductive sell. In the
First Stroke To You beheading game, as in the Exchange of Unequal Winnings game and the If You Won't Love Me at Least Take This Token interchange, the bargains should have looked too good for Gawain. If he had a merchant's sharpness, he should eventually have recognised the pattern and been warned. Living by the pentangle virtues, he has no such self-preserving ability to learn by experience. He appears, like angels, to have no need for or capacity for learning.

It is possible to read the exchange game (along with the beheading bargain and the love token bargain) as part and parcel of Gawain's lesson. Briefly stated, that lesson, devastating to the paradigmatic imagination, is that in human virtues and human experience, nothing is absolutely good. A goal or attribute must be valued in relative terms, and judged desirable or undesirable according to what must be sacrificed to achieve it. *Courteys* in the sense of an avid weighing and measuring is vital. The game is offered, played and analyzed three times; Gawain has a chance to learn that to accept a proffered bargain without understanding what the trading partner hopes to gain is to make a blind promise. The skill of choosing among competing values may begin with making and paying for a physical bargain, yet eventually extend into the philosophical and ethical arenas.

If Bertilak's games are seen as having a teaching dimension, the reader may recognise that his insistence on weighing relative values, though having an element of
self-seeking, is not simple meanness. As a teaching method, the
game is subtle, and in the jargon of twentieth century
education, it will have a long closure time. Gawain does not
understand even that he is taking a lesson at the time of the
game, and if he ever understands its full implications, it is
only in the final moments of the poem. It is clear, however,
that the Green's Knight's lesson could not have succeeded
without the exchange of winnings game, and thus Bertilak and the
game participate in the teaching. In the exchange scenes,
Bertilak does not pull himself out of his role as gamesplayer to
assume a posture as teacher or commentator. As a result, it is
less apparent that the exchange game has a teaching function
than that it is a way for Bertilak to demonstrate his knightly
largesse, or at least his perception of what largesse is. When
the Green Knight challenges Gawain's execution of the bargain,
he does so not on the basis that Gawain flirted with his wife,
but that he kept the green girdle, which he should have turned
over to Bertilak as a winning. Since Gawain is to remain in bed
in the castle, it is hard to imagine, with or without the
attentions of the lady, what winnings he might expect to make
that are capable of being passed along to Bertilak. Good
company, with or without kisses, or the like, are not
transferable in their essence. If they were transferable, they
are Bertilak's own goods, as he points out in the Green Chapel
scene (2358ff). Bertilak's expected winnings, by contrast, are
transferable and are in his gift.

A private deer park such as Bertilak's was the supreme status symbol of the fourteenth century. Game hunting was preserved as the sport of landed gentry by such mechanisms as the law of 1390 which made illegal the running of hunting packs by any layman who did not have a good-sized holding of land. Thus in promising Gawain the take from a day's hunting in return, it would seem, for nothing, Bertilak is making a free gift that is particularly well-conceived from the point of view of aristocratic display. The giver shows that he is irreproachably free. To be effective this requires that the receiver accept the gift and afford the giver the status of benefactor. When Gawain treats the lady's kiss as a winning, the passing on of which completes an exchange, there is a sense in which he gets the better of Bertilak. Bertilak is robbed of his intent of being munificent, and gets instead a rather bad bargain. At this point, Bertilak's behaviour approaches that of a trader very interested, though uncomfortable about admitting it, in whether his bargain is good.

When on the first of the three days Bertilak passes over to Gawain his innumerable deer, his vocabulary of payment and price, accord and covenant, is overridden by his rhetorical questions:

*Thrupp, p145.
'How payez yow this play? Haf I prys wonnen? How I thryuandely thonk thurgh my craft serued?'

(1379-1380)

There is smug self-approval in the tone, but if Bertilak is satisfied with his own largess, he rather undercuts it in the next interchange. Gawain's kiss, as comely as he can manage, is no equal bargain, the two agree. Gawain refers to the kiss as a "chevisaunce". The word means 'trade' and euphemistically 'usury'. The kiss is not worth all those fine fat deer, and Bertilak rather ignobly tries to improve his bargain by discovering pruriently whether the kiss is from a particularly meritorious source:

Hit may be such hit is the better, and ye me breue wolde
Where ye wan this ilk wele bi witte of yor seluen.

(1393-1394)

Gawain ends by standing on his rights as a trader; no such bonus was contracted for, he asserts. Before bed, a similar exchange of winnings is arranged for the next day, again in the language of the marketplace:

And efte in her bourdyng thay baythen in the morn
To fylle the same forwardez tha they byfore maden:
Wat chaunce so bytydez hor cheuysaunce to chaunge,
What nwez so thay nome, at naght ghen thay metten.
Thay acorded of the couenauntez byfore the

court alle....

(1404ff)

The second day, Bertilak's kill, one wild boar, is still excellent but less extravagant than the unnumbered deer of the first day. Since Gawain is able to turn over two kisses, the bargain has considerably more equity than the first day's.
Bertilak nevertheless comments that as a trader Gawain has great promise:

The lorde sayde,'Bi saynt Gile,
Ye ar the best that I knowe!
Ye ben ryche in a whyle,
Such chaffer and ye drowe.'

(1644ff)

This conveys, not frank admiration at Gawain's bland insistence that he has met his terms, but, in laughing fashion, an assertion of the superiority of Bertilak's own largesse.

However, by giving such prominence to the exchange, the poet emphasizes that it is natural for one such as Bertilak to have a deep anxiety over the transaction even of a game.

On the third night, when Gawain conceals from Bertilak the fact that he has earned the green girdle, his take has improved to three kisses, while Bertilak has caught nothing but a fox:

...I haf hunted al this day, and noght haf I geten
Bot this foule fox felle--the fende haf the godez!-
And that is ful pore for to pay for suche prys things
As ye haf thryght me here thro, suche thre cosses
so gode.'

(1943ff)

Unlike the previous days' game animals the fox is accounted foul. It appears to shame Bertilak even to present it to Gawain; the poet has him behave as though even the trivial features of a bargain must be kept. If Gawain adhered to this ethic, he would not think there was any possible excuse for not presenting the 'symple in hitself' green girdle. The host remarks that unless Gawain has paid too much for his kisses, he must have enjoyed
consummating the deal. ("Ye cach much sele/ In chevisaunce of
dthis chaffer, yif ye had good chepez" 1938-1939). He is using
the word chepez in an ambiguous fashion. Gawain knows this, but
is unaware that Bertilak also knows. The price Gawain has paid
for escaping the lady merely with kisses, which are to him more
a danger than a joy, is having accepted, in a manner he will
later call covetous, a green girdle which will not prove fit for
the advertised purpose of saving life. Bertilak wants to hear
every word about the negotiations for the kisses. Gawain
declines, saying "of the chepe no charg(1940)." The practical
outcome must be that there is no exchange. Gawain does not pack
his winnings with him on the way to the Green Chapel; the
animals presumably go in his name to the castle kitchens. But
the emphasis on the transactions of the game, for which Bertilak
must take credit as leader and host, shows in him the commercial
spirit that he, as lord of the manor, is trying to suppress. The
jest of the last three days has displayed in Bertilak a keen
professional interest in the mechanics of mercantilism, combined
with an ambition to be magnanimous and oblivious to self
interest. Charles Muscatine says that one of the great sources
of comic irony in our literature has been:

...the long competition between gentility and
materialism in our breast, or rather the long masquerade
in which we have tended to pass off the ethics of trade,
of opportunism...as Christian charity, or courtly

* The pun is merely modern.
noblesse, or as restrained and refined feeling. *\textsuperscript{2}

In reducing to implication the teaching function of the exchange scenes while bringing into prominence the meaner social striving of Bertilak, the poet allows his character what Muscatine might describe as a failed masquerade, and which may also be described as that mixture of motives, imperfectly understood even by the individual actor, which marks psychological realism.

Bertilak may not expect Gawain to treat his lady's kisses as winnings to be presented in the exchange game. His amusement when Gawain does is not explained. He must, however, in setting up the seduction scene in which his wife figures as seducer, know there will be kisses. It is not until the final fitt that the audience is told that the lady has enticed Gawain on the instructions of her husband. However, at the time the hunting party is arranged, with all Bertilak's men accompanying him, a certain obviousness of opportunity exists, which the audience might well conclude was in Bertilak's mind. In many fabliaux, the husband's indication that he is about to undertake a journey is a signal to the wife to bring on her lover. *\textsuperscript{3} In \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight} it is difficult not to believe that the opportunity for seduction was specifically in Bertilak's mind.

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*\textsuperscript{2}"The Social Background of the Old French Fabliaux", p18.

*\textsuperscript{3}\textit{Le Chevalier, sa Dame et un Clerc} is an example. It is drawn from the set of fabliaux Per Nykrog calls \textit{Le cocu battu et content} where the motif of the husband's trip is a constant.
In romance a lady's coming to a knight's chamber has a routinely sexual meaning.

A person hoping to join a social group is necessarily less aware than the group's members of whatever evasions and hypocrisies may exist. Unless Bertilak is prescient—and he is not presented as such—he cannot know that Gawain will pass the chastity portion of his test. Therefore Bertilak must be assumed to have taken the risk of being cuckolded, or even to have invited this outcome.

The role of the cuckold is not one that characters in either romance or fabliau can be said to accept lightly. The shame of being cuckolded is so powerful that situations only faintly similar to that of having an adulterous wife bear much the same stigma. In Chretien's Lancelot a damsel is about to be raped, and Lancelot is ashamed and angered to see the beginning of this assault though "it is not jealousy he feels, nor will he be made a cuckold by him". Since it is clear that this is an unknown damsel, not a wife, it seems an overstatement of the obvious to mention cuckoldry unless it can occur when a woman related to the threatened man in ways other than marriage is involved. In Chretien's Perceval Gawain is left by Guigambresils at a castle with his sister, and they make love. The brother is dishonoured despite the fact the sister is no pucelle; it

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** Comfort translation, p285.
becomes necessary for a wise vavasor to deflect the brother's wrath by sending Gawain off on a quest perilous. The brother's anguish is not called a cuckold's but it is treated as coming from the same emotional source. It would appear that a man may be shamed by another man's sexual success with women not the victim's wife who are within his ken or supposed control. In the Alliterative Morte, Gawain calls the Roman emperor "cukewalde withe croune" as part of a general curse in which he is said to be choosing the worst epithets he knows of. In Malory, Arthur is only able to avoid punishing the queen and Lancelot as long as he is able not to know for sure about their adultery. This is a rare and late case of a husband's closing eyes to or otherwise accepting his role as cuckold. Arthur is there aware that much more than his marriage or his self-respect will founder if he is forced to act. In the fabliaux, there is one theme which appears to present an accepting cuckold but actually does not. This is the theme Per Nykrog calls 'the cuckold beaten and content'. Here, the cuckold is content only because, having been beaten by his wife while disguised as a would-be lover, he becomes convinced of the unassailable virtue of the wife.

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*5 1.5832-6209.
*6 1.1212.
*7 Nykrog, p67.
It is virtually universal in the literature of the period that the cuckold is a figure of shame and loses self-respect; no husband would use his wife's sex willingly as part of a test or game. If the Gawain poet is not to be seen as having simply not worked out this part of the plot, some explanation must be sought. One possibility is that Bertilak has taken his ideas about relations between married ladies and knights from romance, or from Andreas Capellanus, as Kiteley says his lady has done.

Husbands in these sources are meant for cuckolding; their lot is never presented as undeservedly painful. Per Nykrog points out that while in fabliaux, a knightly love triangle focuses realistically on the relations between husband and wife, in romance, the focus is on the courtly lovers. The husband is always a vague figure, absent or otherwise not dramatically menacing. If Bertilak has, along with his lady, studied romances or Andreas as social history, he may be convinced that the role of cuckold is normal for the husband. This possibility is enhanced by the suggestions in the poem that the lady has a prefabricated concept of Gawain learned from romances. She matches the Gawain she has pinned into his bed against the Gawain of reputation and, defining courtoisie narrowly as

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(Cont'd)


*Nykrog, p69.
fin'amour, finds the present Gawain lacking (l. 1292-1301). Kiteley suggests that the lady is trying to pattern herself after the lover in Andreas, but makes some mistakes, such as baldly offering her body, offering a ring as love token, and asking that Gawain act as her auctor in matters of love. 50 These are errors of literal-mindedness or over-earnestness in which the learner is too goal-oriented and does not seem to understand that anticipation and ceremony are supposed to be a major part of the pleasure. If such literal-mindedness is less clearly present in Bertilak than in his lady, it is still reasonable to assume that he has his concept of Gawain from the same sources that she does. If there is to be fin'amour, there must also be a deceived husband, and Bertilak absents himself the better to play this role, as well as, more obviously, to show his prowess as a hunter while Gawain lounges unknighthly in bed.

In most pictures of the knight seeking herber in a castle, the hospitality does not appear to have strings attached. In some tales, the knight's simple presence is an honour to be sought after, with the knight irritably refusing to take harbour longer at the petitioner's castle. In Chretien's Perceval the dumpling-knight violates custom by acting as though he will have to pay for his lodging in a vavasor's house by listening to the vavasor's counsel, which he does not expect to be to his profit.

50 Kiteley, p 10.
The Gawain poet makes clear that there is transaction involved in the lodging granted; the knight-errant pays for his lodging with entertainment through instruction or tales of his adventures. He may be simply making overt a feature that is generally implicit—in itself, a rather ill-bred action.

While the lady's desire to have Gawain as mentor is emphasized, it is less remembered that the entire court has a similar hope. On arrival at Hautdesert, as soon as the guest is warmed and fed, he identifies himself to Bertilak and his men. The reaction is instructive:

When the lorde hade lerned that he the leude hade, 
Loude laghed he therat, so lef hit hym thoght, 
And alle the men an that mote maden much joye
To apere in his presense prestly that tyme, 
That alle prys and prowes and pured thewes 
Apendes to hys persoun, and prayed is euer; 
Byfore alle men vpon molde his mensk is the most. 
(908ff)

Gawain is welcomed not out of simple hospitality or largesse, as a knight among knights to whom the acts of fellowship are due, but as a superior, indeed a unique being. In a normal guest-host relationship, the flow of benefit should be from host to guest. Here, however, there is the clear sense that Gawain will pay, and pay well, for his shelter. The members of the household speak their pleasure not to Gawain, but quietly to each other. The sentiment that Gawain's visit is a prize is therefore genuine, not mere graceful compliment:

Vch segge ful softly sayde to his fere:
'Now schal we semlych se sleghtez of thewez
And the teccheles termes of talkyng noble, 
Wich spede is in speche unspurd may we lerne, 
Syn we haf fonged that fyne fader of nurture.  
(315ff)

The word fonged had in the fourteenth century a much broader meaning than the basic "seized" used in a context of battle, but the lady's use appears to revive the original sense. Pinning the hapless Gawain in his bed and saying she has taken him prisoner, the lady shows a sense that an unusual advantage has been gained and must be exploited; a similar sense is found in the men's language. The implications of the term 'fadir of nurture' may be that Gawain is what he is, not by nurture but kynde; he is the pattern from which nurture is drawn, the origin of patterns of behaviour which are cultivated by others as nurture. In any case, Bertilak and his men behave as one in thinking of Gawain's stay as an opportunity for gaining nurture, the fine points of manners. This is a court which fancies it knows the basics of nurture but is ambitious to improve. The passage as a whole stresses the social striving in Bertilak's court and its sense of opportunism.

The courtliness of Gawain and the coarseness of Bertilak are perhaps nowhere clearer than in their speech and motion. Gawain's speech is marked by measure and understatement, while Bertilak is extravagant of expression, much given to expletives and superlatives. Bertilak is the energetic newcomer still too close to the reasons for his financial success to be blase and
languid and this shows in his enthusiastic speech and physical forcefulness. Gawain's report to Bertilak on the nature of his errand is a model of measured speech (l. 1050-1067). There is no boasting of the marvels he has seen or the privations the poet has so graphically shown him to have undergone. He tells only as much as he must for courtesy and to get the information he himself needs. His one expletive ("By goddes son") is not gratuitous but a proper oath of assurance. Gawain's syntax is simple and clear. In this speech he is reviewing a travail and must use action verbs, but they tend to blandness. Of about twenty-five verbs in the passage, most are very common. Only wot and wende negh (1054) and behoves (1065) are rare or non-existent in modern English. Bertilak's speech of response is only half the length of Gawain's:

Thenne laghande quoth the lorde. 'Now lenge the byhoues, For I schal teche yow to that terme bi the tymez ende, The grene chapayle vpon grounde greue yow no more; Bot ye schal be in yowre bed, burne, at thyn ese, Quyle forth dayez, and ferk on thy fyrst of the yere, And cum to that merke at mydmorn, to make quat yow likez in spenne.
Dowellez whyle New Yeres daye, And rys, and raykez thenne, Mon schal yow sette in waye, Hit is not two myle henne.'

(1068ff)

It uses, however, three such verbs, behoves (1068) ferk (1072) and raikes (1076). The purpose of the speech is to persuade Gawain to remain, or to insist: the syntax veers, some verb forms being apparent subjunctives, some simple futures, some
imperatives. The series dowellez-rys-raykez is particularly ragged. It is understood that Middle English is often syntactically looser than modern. But Gawain's syntax is not loose. In this poem it would seem that syntactic looseness is purposeful. Cecily Clark asserts that Bertilak's speech is "less archaic and conventional, more racy, colloquial and vigorous, than that of the other characters". She considers words which do not appear elsewhere in the literature, and which can only be glossed from dialect dictionaries, to have been colloquial, and she notes colloquialisms and northernisms in the speech of Bertilak.

Bertilak also lacks physical grace. Both Benson and Marie Borroff remark on what the former calls his frenzied energy. Examples include "lufly aloft lepes ful oft" (981) and "hent highly of his hode and on a spere henged" (983). Gawain glides except under the worst of moral and physical stress. The ideal is elegant action unmarked by urgency or ungainliness. Bornstein describes one of the ideals of knighthood as an anti-work ethic. The stylisation of Gawain's actions, even the spare treatment of the bulls and boars and stans of the journey, would seem in tone with this. The opposed mercantile ethic of working and winning shows in Bertilak's casual actions no less than in his major.

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51 Baugh, pxxxi.
52 Clark, p11.
encounters with hinds, boars and foxes. To the original audience of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Bertilak would not have seemed born to his role.

While it is apparent that Gawain at first takes Bertilak at face value, there seems some evidence of impatience with the growing importunities of the lady, the entusiasms of the lord, and the effrontery of the servant. However, he does not connect Hautdesert with the green creature. This helps to explain his extraordinary shame when recognition comes. He has behaved to Bertilak without a knight's code of honour because he does not consider Bertilak a knight. He would not have been so dismissive of the green creature, and had he known the two were one, might have preserved his honour. One of the sins he taxes himself with is "couetyse...that vertue disstryez. (2374-2375)". This is puzzling if covetousness is thought of in the narrow sense of having longed for a specific material good, as it is said that Gawain's taking of the green girdle related not to its value, but to its power as a charm to preserve his life. However, the word Gawain uses to chastise himself is not so puzzling if it is remembered that the MED shows it has a broad meaning of craving, an urge to change a situation, and that grasping acquisitiveness and avidity is the particular sin of the merchant, the particular sin of Wynnere. This characteristic is closely linked with a routine assessment of relative worth. The knightly ethic should have saved Gawain from such mean weightings of values as
that involved in saving his life though it cost him his honour; it has not, and Gawain's occupation's gone.
V. Some Literary Antecedents and Affinities

For an original audience, the major novelty of the poem may well have been that Gawain is allowed to learn, and that the source of his new wisdom is an upstart whom the poet does not disparage. However, such an audience might well have been prepared for some such character to provide a more limited sort of advice to a knight. Bertilak's character as *arriviste* has been compared earlier to that of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* character the Franklin. It will be remembered that Chaucer's creation is so concerned with the nature and practice of *gentillesse* that it is concluded he is not himself of gentle birth, but is trying to create himself and his son in the image of the gentry. His essential identity is that of the successful bourgeois. Chaucer calls his creation a 'worthy vavasor.' Roy Pearcy in "Chaucer's Franklin and the Literary Vavasour" \(^1\) shows that it is fairly common in romance and fabliau to find a significant interchange between a knight errant and a vavasor. The literary vavasor as described by Pearcy not only resembles Bertilak in style and person, but also fills a role of remarkable similarity. The interchange often involves the vavasor in giving the knight advice. Pearcy sees in Chaucer's

\(^{1}\) Chaur 8(1973), p33-59.
Franklin the gentle irony of an individual with practical roots in a "fourteenth-century civil-servant's world" who "wistfully assert[s] spiritual allegiance with an antique chivalric world whose values are rapidly becoming anachronistic". Though he thinks instinctively in legalistic and materialistic terms and suffers "unrealized yearnings for a transfigured life", he is not a hypocrite, but the "stolid representative of an increasingly urbane and mercantile society who reaches after the shade of an exquisite courtly sensibility lost with Guenevere in the ruins of Camelot". Bertilak, no wistful caricature of the nobility, is presented as aware of the impossibility of knightly trauthe, and yet not at all immune to the appeal of the more comfortable aspects of gentility, such as service to ladies and material splendor. Pearcy has examined a large number of French romances and fabliaux and some Middle English translations of them, and has concluded that the vavasor is by convention used as a device for examining the code by which the knight errant lives. While the knight errant lives a medieval aristocratic life only thematically, pursuing courtesy, the vavasor by contrast lives the literal aspects of medieval aristocratic life in terms of physical style.

2Pearcy, p53.
3Pearcy, p54.
*Pearcy, p37.
By contrast with the romance vavasor, the vavasor in fabliau and related forms clashes with the knight. What is in romance dignified old age, an attachment to the land and family, and a reverence for old-fashioned virtues including those of the knight, becomes in fabliau the shrewd opportunism of age, hard-headed practicality, and an attachment to material possessions. In fabliau, the self-interest of vavasors opposes the values of knights. Pearcy considers typical the clash in "Le Chevalier a la Robe Vermeille", where knight and vavasor are lover and husband respectively of the same lady. The knight, he quotes, "rode all over the world to win honour and fame, so that everybody held him in esteem". The jurisprudent vavasor is criticized because he "took care of his affairs in a different way, for he had a tongue trained to speak well and wisely, and he really knew how to deliver an argument". The lady's noble brother, impetuously generous, gives his red cloak to the vavasor, but the "mean-spirited vavasor engages in a legalistic quibbling as to the exact point where good manners end and covetousness begins." In general in the world of fabliau chivalric ideals have "regrettably lost their relevance, either disappearing through default or being impatiently rejected in

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5Pearcy, p58.
6Pearcy, p46.
favour of a bourgeois materialism". 7

Pearcy does not describe any vavasor who is auctor to a knight for a philosophical or otherwise complex learning. He describes none who, like Bertilak, both contributes to the breakdown of the chivalric ideal and recognises its beauty. He does not appear to recognise that Bertilak is a vavasor, but since his paper is limited to French literature, perhaps would not mention the fact if he had made this finding. If he were to do so, he might be hard put to decide whether Bertilak is a romance vavasor or a fabliau vavasor. Critics have discussed the affinities of Sir Gawain with romance, and in any case the poet himself claims his source is the "beste boke of romanuce (2521)". 8 Larry Sklute considers Sir Gawain a romance in ironic mode, where every choice Gawain might have made is wrong, and the author is examining "a world of ethically ambiguous and to him irresolvably conflicting norms." 9

8J. Finlayson, "The Expectations of Romance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", Genre XII (1979) no. 1, p2. Finlayson points out that most critics have assumed SGGK is a romance, and have looked for fulfillment, modification or rejection of romance values. Everett and Markman say it is a romance of testing; Benson says it is a romance critical of the values of effete chivalry; Bercovitch says it is an anti-romance which vitalizes or affirms romance values. Schnyder says it exploits romance as a vehicle for religious allegory.

However, much of the poem appears to be better accounted for not by romance tradition per se but by the interaction between romance and fabliau. Nykrog points out that it is not possible for a true romance to be hostile to women. 10 In the final scenes the hero, if not so surely the poem, shows such hostility. Declining hastily to again visit the young and old ladies,

...That on and that other, myn honoured ladys,
That thus hor knyght wyth hor kest han
koyntly bigyled....
(2409-2410)

he asserts that it is a law of nature that women make fools of men. Nykrog's major thesis is that fabliau is a burlesque of courtly literature and is intended for the same audience. Mark E. Amsler reminds us that genres are mutually influential. Chaucer's "Miller's Tale", for example, examines the "parodic relationship between romance and fabliau, a relationship which reminds us ...that genres exist not in isolation but within the system of already realised or possibly realisable forms."11 Vital tension between romance and fabliau may produce a literature on a continuum between two poles, rather than two isolated bodies. Plot items from one form may be transformed in the other, as happens in the "Miller's Tale". Other elements may

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10 Nykrog, p200.

11 Literary Theory and the Genres of Middle English Literature", Genre XIII(Fall 1980), p395.
be differently used in each form. Sklute spoke of ethical ambiguity in romance; Pearcy argues that in fabliau a basic structural feature is ambiguity of message and manipulation of logical fallacy. For example, a minstrel who has been promised an object that "cost" a hundred sous is duped by being given a mere rabbit skin that "cost" the loss of a hundred-sou horse in the hunting. 12

Nykrog makes detailed reference to an Anglo-Norman tale which he considers a fabliau, though the author uses the word romanç in which the tension between the two forms is very clear. This tale is Le Chevalier, Sa Dame et un Clerc, 13 This tale begins in an exalted milieu. A virtuous and noble lady agrees to a single tryst with a clerk because the reason he is pining and dying is his unfulfilled longing for her. At this point the husband, as is common in adulterous courtly romance, is nowhere in evidence. After the agreement between the clerk and the lady, milieu and focus shift. The husband, now at the centre of consciousness, is alerted and appears disguised, not too effectively, as the clerk. The wife locks him in a room, completes the tryst with the clerk, and has the disguised husband beaten as a bothersome lecher. The clerk leaves the country and the lady resumes her virtue. This is the material of


13 Montaignon, v.2 p215ff.
the fabliau theme "Le Cocu Battu et Content" discussed earlier.

Nykrog is irritated by the juncture between fabliau and romance conventions, which he considers a characteristic of Anglo-Norman writers. We noted earlier that in *Sir Gawain* the 'seduction' scene requires that the husband know of and connive in the lady's possible adultery—a situation provoked by the focus on the husband only fabliau normally provides, while the actual participants speak more or less the language of courtly romance. This appears to be a more subtle overlay of romance and fabliau than is seen in the Anglo-Norman tale. Teaching Gawain the impracticality of knightly *trauthe* while showing appreciation of related features of the knightly world, Bertilak behaves predictably for a vavasor in a tale neither totally romance nor totally fabliau.

Romance vavasors in Pearcy's corpus are identified by their hospitality to knights. The most important meaning of hospitality in these tales is magnificent food. Gawain arrives at Hautdesert during the pre-Christmas fast, apparently, since he is fed alone, after mealtime. For this solitary bite he is provided with "a clene cloth that clere quy t schewed,/ Sanap, and salure, and sylverin sponez" (885/6), several "hatheles" to serve him, and a dinner that, far from looking like hastily assembled leftovers, includes "fele kyn fischez,/ Summe baken in bred, summe brad on the gledez...." (890/893). Gawain calls it a feast; the retainers brag that they will do better later: "This
penance now ye take, And eft it schal amende. (857-898)". One is reminded of the scene in the Alliterative Morte where Arthur awes the Roman ambassador by apologizing for a feast which requires pages to describe; it is winter, he says, and his is a poor country. In the Morte, the purpose of the scene is to show Arthur's acumen as a psychological warrior; in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the simpler purpose is to stress the material fraunchise of the householder. It will be remembered that in Arthur's court in this poem, this kind of freehandedness is taken for granted and scantly described ("no want that ther were" (131)) while a different sort of bounty is shown by a long, but still partial, list of noble guests (l. 109-115).

Pearcy's researches also suggest that Bertilak's dwelling in the middle of the forest is a mark of the vavasor who, by contrast with the knight errant, is rooted in a remote locale and experiences a social isolation enforced by (or perhaps derived from) his physical isolation. Pearcy generalises that vavasors "often live in a clearing in the forest, in a house surrounded by a high, thick hedge." He quotes as prototype for all such isolated and enclosed dwellings the house of the vavasor Mynor as in an episode of the Middle English translation

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14 Davis Points out that a similar fish feast is described in John Russell's Boke of Nurture (Davis, p101) The use of nurture books as an aid to social mobility has been elsewhere described.

15 Pearcy, p35.
This foresters place was stronge and well closed with depe ditches full of water, and was environed with grete okes, and ther-to to it was so thikke of bushes and of thornes and breres that noon wolde haue wende that ther hadde be eny habitacion. In Pearcy's examples, the good welcome of the house can only be achieved after penetration of the forest and the outer defences of the house. The journey is not generally realistic and does not mark or affect the knight. As a result Pearcy's comment that "the dwellings of vavasors create pockets of reality in the fairy forest" describes the physical aspects of forest and dwelling.

However, in the section of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* marking the passage of the hero from the forest to the house of Bertilak, realism is praiseworthy. Minute observation is the first of its beauties. ("hore okez ful hoge a hundreth togeder; the hasel and the haughthorne were harled al samen, With roghe raged mosse... (743/45)". The poet's omniscient eye notes the chilling effect of the raw landscape on the "mony bryydez unblythe upon bare twygges/ that pitosly ther piped for pyne of the colde" (746/47) Then, by shifting point of view slightly, the poet allows Gawain to admit one kind of distress ("Carande for his costes, lest he ne keuer schulde/ To se the seruyse of..."

16 Pearcy, p40.
17 Pearcy, p37.
that syre). The poet does not force Gawain to advert to his physical misery, but has him continue to glide along on Gringolet, and the effect of this juxtaposition is to emphasize Gawain's refusal to give recognition to it.

By contrast with the miserably realistic forest, Hautdesert is obviously, because of its appearance and the manner of its evocation, magic. This is the reverse of the situation in romances Pearcy studies, where the movement is from unreal forest to real vavasor's house. The knight errant has completed a prayer for a refuge where he can, as he puts it, "here masse" (754). He crosses himself:

Nade he seyned hymself, segge, bot thrye,  
Er he watz war in the wod of a won in a mote.

(763-64)

There occurs at this moment either a marvel of changed perception or a marvel of provenance. The castle simply appears, without the knight's changing viewpoint, and without continued effort. The effect of enchantment is strengthened by the overall description of the castle that "shemered and schon thurgh the [now] schyre okez" (772) The details of the castle are referable, as has been discussed earlier, to a reality of a kind, but the general impression is of enchantment. The magical dwelling set in a traditional, though unusually well-etched vavasor's forest might alert the audience that this will not be an ordinary fairy castle nor yet an ordinary vavasor's house.
Pearcy's research into the vavasor shows that if he has grown daughters, as is frequently the case, the knight to whom hospitality has been offered becomes the object of their flirtations and sometimes their love. In the King Lot episode of Merlin, "the Vavasours two daughtres be-hilde sir Gawein tenderly". In Yvain, the daughter skilfully disarms and robes the knight, and, alone, takes him to sit in a field where he "found her so elegant, so fair of speech, and so well informed, of such pleasing manners and character, that it was a delight...." The flirtations are generally but not always innocent. In an episode of Merlin, Merlin riding errant in a forest is made to fall in love with a vavasor's daughter Numiane and to teach her "the moste parte of his witte and connynge by force of nygrauncye." Wives of vavasors are generally circumspect. In an episode of Merlin involving King Ban, the wife is "a noble woman and a feire and goode to god and to the world". While on the face of things there is thus no parallel to be drawn between vavasor's daughter conventions and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Bertilak's wife is in enough respects like a daughter in the household that she may be seen as filling this role. The most important indication of this is the relative ages

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\[19\text{Comfort, p183.}\]
\[20\text{Merlin, p307.}\]
and the roles played by the members of Bertilak's household. Bertilak himself is of "hyghe eldee"—"in the prime of life" (Norman Davis) or "of advanced age" (W. J. R. Barron) or "of mature age" (R. T. Jones). The wife by contrast is much the same age as her young maids in waiting:

Thenne come ho of hir closet with mony cler burdez. Ho watz the fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre.

(942-943)

In the lady's flirtation with Gawain, she fantasizes the role not only of a courtois wife considering a possible lover, but also a maid involved in the commerce of picking a spouse ("And I schulde chepen and chose to cheue me a lorde(1271)").

The "auncien" with the black brows, a "mensk lady", fills a role in the household that is never clarified. However, she commands respect and appears in some ways to be the chatelaine. She leads "bi the lyft honde" (947) the young lady, as a mother might a shy daughter meeting guests, and at mealtime, the young one cedes pride of place to the other: "the olde auncien wyf heghest ho syttez" (1001). As a result, the young lady assumes a position vis-a-vis Gawain that much resembles that of the vavasor's daughter in other romances, strengthening the supposition that Bertilak should be read as a vavasor.

Pearcy has discovered that the role of vavasor as a limited

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21Eicki Suzuki notes in "A Note on the Age of the Green Knight", NM 78, p. 30, that in Clanness (1.656-7) a similar locution clearly refers to old age.
sort of teacher to the knight errant is common in romance, though not in fabliau. Pearcy says that in Arthurian romances, vavasors have "something of a pastoral pundit quality, simplicity and clear-sightedness combining with long years of varied experience to make them trustworthy and wise." In Perceval, Gawain and a lady had purposely misunderstood her brother Guigambresil's instructions to honour each other for his sake, and make love instead. The brother is affronted. "Unsages vavasors" suggests that instead of killing Gawain, the brother repair his honour by sending Gawain on a quest for a lance "d'ont la pointe lerme/ Le sanc tot cler ..." (6166/67).

A final feature of the romance vavasor which may be seen as enriched in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the role of the sons. Pearcy notes the frequency with which vavasors have grown sons, often new knights or squires, who are "excited at the presence of a knight-errant in their house, listen avidly to any account he may furnish of his escapades, and sometimes accompany him" in his current venture.²² Further, the vavasor's sons frequently do personal service to the knight errant. In the King Lot episode of Merlin, the vavasor's sons welcome the travellers and see personally to the horses and serve the travellers their wine. Bertilak has no sons identified as such, but because of ambiguities in the role of some members of his court who might

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²²Pearcy, p36.
be servants, and the service role noted above of vavasors' sons, it may solve some puzzles in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to assume the role of son is being occupied by unranked renkkes. First noted is the guide provided by Bertilak for Gawain's trip to the Green Chapel. The guide provides a test of Gawain's good faith by offering information on the fierce nature of the keeper of the Chapel, and offering to keep mum if Gawain shirks. Paul Delaney notes Mabel Day's assertion that since the guide clearly knows of the Green knight's plot, he ought not to be thought a churl, as it would be indecorous to put a churl in such a position of moral superiority towards Gawain. 23 Delaney assumes the guide, whose behaviour toward Gawain is unarguably insolent for a churl, is aware of the details of Gawain's situation, including the fact that Gawain is wearing the protective girdle, and so is properly contemptuous of Gawain's patronizing emphasis on his own moral imperatives and the guide's lack of them. Both the guide's presumption and his apparent awareness of Bertilak's plot are easily explained if the guide is seen as occupying a role like that of vavasor's son. Reinforcement for this reading occurs in the behaviour of the never-named "hatheles" and others who clean up Gringolet and his muddy master. The "porter pure plesaunt" who is Gawain's first human contact at Hautdesert,

instead of going "myn ernde...herber to crave" to the master as Gawain asks (811/812) welcomes Gawain on his own initiative. The knights and squires take his armour from him, and "renkkez" bring him fresh clothing (863). With the caste divisions now confused, the inclusive words men, uch segge are used to describe these individuals who are delighted with Gawain's presence:

Uch segge ful softly syde to his fere,
'Now shal we semlych se sleytez of thewaz
And the teccheles termes of talking noble.'

(917/919)

It is not only the lady who hopes to make Gawain her tutor; the entire household thinks the same. The household seems less likely to be composed either of churls who presume in this way or honoured knights than to be the rich provincial household of a vavasor peopled by the vavasor's knight-worshipping sons. 24

Bertilak's teaching of Gawain is certainly not the relatively simple matter of solving an ethical dilemma or setting a quest. In fact Bertilak's teaching is thematic in a way neither Pearcy's research nor my own has shown it to be in any other vavasor character. Clearly, if this character has its roots in the vavasor tradition, the Gawain poet has not merely embellished, but transmuted, his material. In sum, Pearcy's work

24 If this is not the true explanation, and the apparent servants are truly servants, Bertilak is not apparently in control of his household. Those who offer the meal, and especially the guide, otherwise behave in a manner not properly subservient. This accords with the too-great democracy noted in the hunt scenes.
suggests that to an audience versed in French literature, a mediated romance in which a vavasor-Bertilak upheld the humanly possible features of romance values while testing to destruction their impracticalities, may not have been totally without precedent. Whether Bertilak is seen as inside or outside the vavascr model, Gawain has a chance to take seriously, as potential earnest, the offerings of Bertilak that come in the form of game.
VI. Conclusion: The Counsel of Imperfection

Lacking that certain authority which being *mon most* and having a green complexion and a self-healing neckbone give the green gome, Bertilak sees his lesson about the need to give wholehearted attention to choosing one's values go largely unnoticed by Gawain. The lesson will be given again by the Green Knight. Nearing the Green Chapel, the poet presents a Gawain whose perceptions are very much distorted by his fears. The landscape appears through imagery as menacing as it was in his earlier search, when in his exhaustion he prayed for *herber*, and found Hautdesert. Now, he sees 'rughe knokled knarrez with knorned stone/The skwez of the scowtes skayneyd hym thoght "(2166-2167). Despite the fact the poet says more objectively that the Green Chapel is too featureless to describe, "ncbot an olde caue,/ Or a creuisse of an olde cragge"(2184), Gawain sees it as a fit place for "the wyghe wruxled in grene" to deal "his deuocioun on the deuelez wyse" (2191-2192). Much the same distorted perception marks Gawain's actual meeting with the *wyghe*. First, the enemy is a noise "as one upon a gryndelston hade grounden a sythe" (2202), a noise suitable for churl's work. He is "on on the banke" (2217) rather than a concrete being. He has the superior location ("abouen ouer his hede"(2217)), a violent action ("whyrlande out of a wro"(2222)), and a cutting
edge, ("a felle weppen,/A denez ax nwe dyght"(2223)). Despite the protective girdle, what Gawain focuses on is the length of the "borelych bytte" --improbably, it is "fowre fote large--Hit watz no lasse bi that lace that lemed ful bryght"(2226). Gawain's altered perceptions are clearly responsible for its size. The creature is physically described only very briefly. He is "gered as fyrist,/ Bothe the lyre and the leggez, lokkez and berde"(2227-2228). Beyond that, he is derisive laughter, accusation and judgment. The poet has made no special mention of those qualities which in the first fitt made the green creature an enigma composed of churlish behaviour and clothing that might almost have been princely.

Oral poetry is more intensely linear than that which is written and studied on the page at leisure: the picture of the green creature in the first fitt was possibly, to the hearer as to Gawain, well blurred by the fourth fitt. Thus, the Green Knight is, at the point of the judgment and absolution, almost pure *churl*, noisy, undisciplined and unKnightly. --making noise, carrying the wrong weapon, undisciplined, and unKnightly. His is the battle weapon of the ancients, the Danes, before the high polish of fourteenth century modernity took place. Gawain's imagination has developed considerably since the Camelot

Stoddard Malarkey and J. Barre Tolken suggest the line be read in this way in "Gawain and the Green Girdle", Howard and Zacher, *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p239.
section. He promised without dread to accept an axe-stroke from this creature because he expected the creature to be killed before that event. He evidently failed to note that a creature who is green may be peculiar in other respects also.

At the Green Chapel, the green creature is even less courtly than before. In discarding his horse, he has discarded his most visible claim to being called a knight. He turns himself into a comedy figure with the abrupt practicality with which, reaching the creek, "he wade nolde, /He hipped over on his axe..." (2231). The ungainly action and the unexpected use as vaulting pole of the "felle tole" he is expected to use presently for beheading is dismissive both of the ceremonial character expected in knightly battle, and of Gawain's feelings. Bad enough to be "hadded with an alvish mon"; worse to have used on him an axe so recently used for an unfit purpose. Soon after, the character traits of the churl begin to appear in Gawain, while in the green creature they undergo a strange amelioration. The knight begins typically enough, with a methodical calculating review of what has been promised and what is owed.

And thou hatz tymed thy trauayl as truee mon schulde,  
And thou knowez the couenauntez kest vus bytwene...  
(2241-2242)

Humiliatingly, Gawain then hears his opponent's performance reviewed:

I hyght the a strok and thou hit hatz, halde the wel payed;  
I relece the of the remnaunt of ryghtes alle other.
If I deliver had bene, a boffet paraunter,  
I couthe wrotheloker haf waret, to the haf wroght anger.  
(2341 ff)

It is further infuriating and humiliating to hear the green creature patronisingly approve Gawain's own fidelity:

Fyrst I mansed the muryly with a mint one,  
And roue the wyth no rof-sore, with ryght I the profered  
For the forwarde that we fest in the fyrst nyght,  
And thou trystyly the trawthe and trwly me haldez,  
Al the gayne thow me gef, as god mon schulde.  
(2345ff)

The point-counting, lawyer-talking green creature in this passage simultaneously shows that what he lacks in style of gentillessse, he makes up for in being genuinely pitous. ²

Further, it is in this passage that Gawain becomes aware, as the audience has been for perhaps two fitts, that the game-playing Bertilak whom Gawain has cavalierly defrauded is the same as the green gorne whose game has been for Gawain no game, but a matter of life and death. The point of the gliding down of the green creature's stroke "schranke a lytel with the shuldres for the scharp yrne(2268)" is the most dramatic moment in Gawain's metamorphosis from one-dimensional romance knight to whom all virtues are equal and inviolable, to human being whose concern to preserve his life is the beginning of his ability to assess and to weigh relative values, his fall into the real world:

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²Burrow says it is important to think the Green Knight would have killed Gawain if things had gone worse in the castle, (p137) but if the winning and not the adultery is his interest, how could things have gone worse?
'Thou art not Gawain,' quoth the gome, 'that is so goode halden, That neuer arghed for no here by hylle ne be vale, And now thou fles for ferde er thou fele harmez! Such cowardise of that knyght cowthe I neuer here. (2270ff)

This is the second occasion on which the Gawain of reputation has been distinguished from the Gawain of the poem. Earlier the lady has argued that the Gawain she knows of would never have let a lady languish un kissed; Gawain has said that, indeed, he is not that Gawain. Here, the green knight is merely goading; later, he will make it clear that caring for one's life is not inappropriate, that the manly man seems to him blameless, the hardy man somehow inhuman. ³ But now, the creature flaunts his own bravery, though it must be the product of Morgan's gift of recovery:

Nawther fyked I ne flaghe, freke, guen thou myntest, Ne kest no kauelacion in kyngez hous Arthur. (2274-2275)

Gawain can hardly see, as the audience must, that this is hollow coming from a creature with a snap-on head. In having Gawain gird his courage for the next stroke which will prove to be nothing more than a feint, the poet gives us a Gawain somewhat redeemed, as he was when, after accepting the green girdle in a

³An identity challenge appears to be common in Gawain stories. A dramatic example is found in the Pucelle as Mances Petites episode of Chretien's Perceval where a vavasor's eldest daughter accuses Gawain of not being a knight, of having a lance, horse and destrier to which he, assumed by her to be a merchant, is not entitled.
guilty attempt to save his life, he refuses the guide's offer of a safe escape. Here is Gawain with the rush of the axe in his ears 'stille as a stone, or a shrube other' (2293). The difficulty with which he summons his courage is obvious. "Why thresh on, thou thro man, thee thretes tc long" (2300). It is ignoble to threaten without action; it is ignoble to "thresh". Here the word seems to mean a graceless, ungainly beating, unknightly and without art. This is Gawain at his worst in romance terms, harsh-spoken, impatient, sunk to insulting his inferiors. It is also Gawain at his most recognisably human.

When Gawain has stood his blow and seen his own blood in the snow, and then "braydez out a bryght sworde" (2319), the creature merely leans on his axe, assesses his pupil benignly, and suggests he be less "gryndel" and, since no one has so far behaved "unmanerly", restrain his own ungentle manners. In short, the creature has succeeded in reversing the roles Gawain expected they would each play; Gawain is the chorl, the ill-nurtured child, the uncivilized pupil forced to civil action by the benign superiority of the creature he thought of, only instants before, as utterly lacking in civility.

Although the language the Green Knight uses in explaining Gawain's limits and strengths is obviously the language of the confessional, the teaching is not essentially religious. The function of metaphor is to explain the unfamiliar by seeing it
through a screen formed by the familiar. * In this situation, faith is the familiar universe. In religion it was well understood that "seven times daily the good man sinneth" In romance, however, it is rarely recognised that there could be a limited perfection worth seeking. It is for this reason, and not because of religious intent, that the green *auctor* chooses the language of the confessional to make his assessment of Gawain's progress:

*I halde hit hardly hole, the harme that I hade. Thou art confessed so clene, beknown of thy mysses, And hatz the penaunce apert of the poyn of myn egge, I halde the polyded of that plyght, and pured as clene As thou hadez neuer forfezed sythen thou watz fyrst borne.*

(2390ff)

The Green Knight makes the preamble to the third blow the moment for a remark that may express the poem's *sentence*. John Burrow has shown that Gawain's pentangle represented an inconsistent set of values which put into simultaneous action would each test the other to destruction. He points out that it is impossible for Gawain to maintain his *trauthe* in action. Benson makes a similar point though he calls Gawain's lost virtue his *los*. When the green knight points to the lace that Gawain has kept for himself, he accuses Gawain of lacking a little *leauthe*. Gawain's self-accusation is inclusive:

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*Max Black, Models and Metaphors, New York, 1962, p9.*
*Benson, p217ff.*
The fact is that Gawain, in this state of emotional deshabille, tells more about his inner life and his code of knightliness than his formal pentangle did. He considers his very being destroyed, that largess and loyalty that belong to knights. What distinguishes knights from lesser creatures is not simply a code of behaviour, a superior sort of nurture. It is actual inherent fibre which appears to involve one's character and all those features of the individual which are not generally subject to debasement through circumstances. Thus many desirable qualities are not a matter of a conscious search for virtue. Though the act that marks Gawain's sin is the concealment of the green girdle, it is not clear what Gawain thinks the sin is. As a personal garment, it may mark the fact he was tempted to be the lover of the knight's lady. As a winning, it may seem a species of theft, though Gawain does not seem to have physical possession of his own winnings, the game and fur. As a charm against death, it may have made him aware of the fear of death he calls cowardice.

As for the Green Knight, he thinks the sin was a little matter, a small lack of fidelity to a bargain made and sealed. His role is to shatter Gawain's unrealistic expectations about
his own virtue and in addition his inflated opinion of the importance of his own sin. He intends him to understand something new about the kynde of knights:

'So, now thou hatz thi hert holle, hitte me bihous. Halde the now the hyghe hode that Arthur the raght, And kepe the kanel at this kest, yif hit keuer may.'

(2296ff)

Gawain has his heart whole. The word heart was for the fourteenth century as for the twentieth broad in meaning, the MED shows. The range included the conscious self, the true self as opposed to the outward persona; it included character and purpose or will. The heart was the centre of life or vitality or energy. It was equated with the soul, the centre of spiritual life and moral virtues. It meant mind or imagination, and several of the inward wits: conscience, memory, and instinct.

Since wholeness meant health or perfection, the whole heart is a clearly positive locution. In Clannes mad Nebuchadnessar is said to have an unwhole heart:

His hert holdet unhole, he hoped non other Bot a best that he be, a bol other an oxe.

(1681-2)

Elsewhere in Clannes, the transcendent value of a whole heart is emphasized: God knows one's wishes even before they are framed as thoughts, and reacts to finding an individual with a will to goodness:

There He fyndez al fayre a freke wythionne, Wyth hert honest and hol, that hathel he honoure.

(594-595)
The meaning in Clanne suggests an integrity and a mental health based not on a stylized set of virtues suited only to the world of romance, but on a will to behave as well as one can at the moment. The "gropanede god", the supreme tester, values the urge to be perfect and the labour of trying to achieve perfection; nature and nurture are therefore united. Neither God nor the more mundane tester in SGGK expects one to achieve perfection in action.

While it cannot be said the green knight's lesson about the need for weighing the relative worth of virtues is well-taken by Gawain, his care for his life in standing still only for the one true blow required by the covenant is evidence he is acting on it. But he cannot be comfortable with the lesson, and he cannot accept the tone of the Green Knight who presumes to tell him he is almost up to the mark.

But here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wanted, Bot that watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowyng nauther, Bot for ye lufed your lyf; the lasse I yow blame.'

(3266ff)

The small sin concerning the green girdle is a sin against the Green Knight, and it is in his gift to forgive. The judgment of the green creature is genuinely magnanimous, unlike that of Chaucer's Franklin's literary creations. However, it asserts the right of the green creature to act the role of judge. Gawain, trained to feel the rightness of the hierarchical society without question, assumes that all gifts are the nobility's to
give and all judgments flow downward. Thus his mere superficial grace in refusing the Green Knight's offer of the further hospitality of Hautdesert and the two ladies there. What Gawain should have learned, of course, is that there is no such thing as the kynde that longeth to knights, no such thing as virtue that does not have to be learned, fought for and worked at. Virtue is a matter of conscious effort and it is not to be expected that even the best of the knights of Camelot be exempt from the aphorism that seven times each day the good man sinneth. Burrow points out that the doctrine of the inherent sinfulness of man is one of the chief sources of medieval literary realism. 6 Donald Howard in The Three Temptations shows that the pull of temptation was considered the inevitable consequence of original sin, but that there was an "essential dignity in man's striving for...limited, earthly goals", an "irreducible worth in man's efforts on his own behalf". 7 The result was the notion of the limited perfection, achieved in grades, attainment of which did not prevent venial sin.

A great part of the subtlety and pleasure of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight lies in the deftness with which the poet has handled the matter of sympathies. The presentation of the Green Knight varies greatly according to the needs of the scene of the

6Burrow, A Reading of SGGK, p171.
moment. The reader sees in him the grotesque of the Camelot scene, the genial but rather coarse castelan of the second and third fitt, and finally the benign but irritating auctor of the final fitt. Gawain's idealism and his fall into wisdom are treated not as objectionably pompous nor as a standard fully worth emulating. The reader is likely to finish the poem feeling rueful but enlightened; the Gawain who could not quite learn the lesson the reader saw clearly is still a sympathetic character. The ethos of the poem seems finally to be neither exactly that of the Green Knight nor precisely that of Gawain. Gawain's ethic has led him to feel fear over trivia such as failing to speak well, and a too-great sense of loss over small things. The Green Knight, by contrast, leads a material life which imitates the least useful and most extravagant features of knighthood. Further, his account-keeping is hardly largesse. However, it is in some ways useful, as for distinguishing between important values and minor values violated in minor ways. Further, it does not override some real generosity, nor the usefulness of bourgeois practicality in the world of the poem, where the weather can be a more dreadful enemy than beasts and wodwoses. If Gawain will never again live in comfort in Camelot, he is much better fitted for the world of the English upper class fourteenth century.

Many commentators on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight assume that the author himself was an aristocrat A.C. Spearing in The
Gawain Poet: A Critical Study says the poet knows courtly life through and through and is offering "no debased view of aristocratic life". Derek Pearsall in Old English and Middle English Poetry suggests that the purpose of alliterative poems which, like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, are not overt social criticism, is to display a "kind of ostentatious knowledgeableness... which suggests social aspiration: there is nothing in metropolitan court poetry to correspond with the elaborately self-conscious correctness of the hunting and feasting scenes in Gawain". However, both these observers base their comments on the assumption that the descriptions would have been seen by the original audience as descriptions of perfection, described with approval. This assumption is questionable. Thus the idea that the poet was "a 'jantylman' writing for 'jantylmen' --fully identified with the aristocratic society for which he wrote" is a suspect conclusion. Against this conclusion can be set Auerbach's comment on Chaucer that since he uses language which is "vibrant with reality and reacts with precision to innumerable shadings of experience and feeling" he is writing for an audience which is not "humanistic and cultured but...socially heterogeneous, sharp-witted and

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10Spearing, p10.
intelligent." "Chaucer's public, he thinks, parallels the author, or at least the authorial stance in the poems.

The basis on which an author displays a society to an audience of his own society is somewhat like the process of moulding a sculpture: The mould is exactly the opposite of what appears in the final sculpture. That which is utterly familiar and uncontroversial is not a matter of interest to the serious artist, and that which is inaccessibly strange will not find an audience. What poet and audience alike will be excited by is the incompletely understood, or the imperfectly realised ideal, or the perfection no longer available. Therefore genuine luxury is of interest mainly to those who aspire to it or are insecure in their possession of it. Burlesque luxury, on the other hand, would be of interest to those whose secure possession of it enabled them to see that there are other values worth aspiring to. If the audience were the nobility, they could not be those under financial threat; if from the upper merchant class, they would have to be of a generation without memories of privation. The Gawain poet's audience was necessarily an educated one, interested in the subtle examination of moral conundra. It was an audience capable of seeing that a pentangle of virtues represents genuine nobility of aspiration, but is inhumanly difficult to achieve. It could hear a parody of gorgeousness

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with a smile for the worldly values of wealth and status. The poem prescribes the replacement of both the romance values of 
franchise and the realistic values of chevisaunce with a secular equivalent of the religious concept of the limited perfection, neither neurotically distant nor narrowly grasping. The poem is remarkably healthy by twentieth century standards; it has its heart whole.
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