

THE CLARITY OF ELUSION:
RHETORICAL PROCESS IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by

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THE CLARITY OF ELUSION: RHETORICAL PROCESS IN

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

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Abstract

Despite universal critical acclaim for its complex structural coherence and symmetry, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* continues to generate a diverse and often conflicting range of interpretation. The poem's paradoxical strategies invite us to engage the text, to interpret, resolve, and impose meaning, and yet, simultaneously, it challenges and subverts those very processes.

This thesis undertakes a critical examination of the poem, not to seek out or impose yet another fixed meaning, but rather to explore the dynamics of that rhetorical process--between the work, the poet and his audience--that has given rise to such critical diversity.

More specifically, the thesis explores the means by which the poet forces his audience to a salutary recognition. He uses Gawain, a familiar Arthurian protagonist, and various aspects of the audience's own world, to blur the distinction between the "real" and the "fictional". By making us see ambiguities within that "merged" fiction, the degree to which its meaning is constructed and imposed, he brings us to comprehend that the same is true in the "real world". But at the same time as he brings us to that understanding, he exposes and undermines the process at every turn.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL ii

ABSTRACT iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS v

CHAPTER ONE: THE NEVER ENDING POEM 1

CHAPTER TWO: THE BEGINNING OF THE END 11

CHAPTER THREE: STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND 36

CHAPTER FOUR: THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED 55

CHAPTER FIVE: UNDERSTANDING AND ABSOLUTION 85

Chapter 1: The Never Ending Poem

Where indeed but to rhetoric should the
theoretical examination of interpretation turn?

-Hans-Georg Gadamer, *On the Scope
and Function of Hermeneutical
Reflection*

Critical commentary on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents a conundrum: despite the poem's formal coherence and symmetry, there is agreement only on its excellence, not on the interpretation of its meaning. It has been extolled as a "formally perfect narrative" (Ganim 55), exquisite enough in the symmetry of its shape and structure to make "nearly every other medieval narrative look like a careless and sprawling work" (Scholes, Kellogg 249). And yet, this enormous body of critical interpretation is remarkable less for its volume and its praise than for its surprising range of diversity and outright disagreement.¹ It is difficult to fault the critic, however, since the poem's complex but artfully balanced structure seems to challenge the reader to seek out a resolution or meaning for the poem which is as coherent as its formal symmetry. But, as Ross G. Arthur ruefully laments, "when the critic has completed his work, the poem often seems diminished or even trivialized, as the

shimmering complexity of the surface of the text is replaced by schematic patterns that are not only less complex but also far less interesting" (3-4). More a diminution than an illumination of the poem's wonders, such interpretive endeavours often leave one with an inescapable sense that, while you may know more, somehow you understand less. Little wonder then that a number of critics have suggested that, in spite of their value, interpretive studies have reached the point of exhaustion.²

Given the Gawain poet's eager exploitation of the polysemy of his language and his rhetorical strategies to make the interactive relation between text and audience as complex as the poem's structure, the traditional Medievalist approaches of Philology and New Criticism, with their assumption that literature is an autonomous activity, self-contained and distinct from the real world, are no longer adequate. Methodologically and institutionally committed to an exegetical quest for a stable meaning embedded within the text-as-artifact, their adherence to the classical *res-verba* covenant yields endless "valid" interpretations, but they are particularly ill-suited to the examination of a virtuosic game of disruption of signification which deliberately blurs the distinction between the worlds of fiction and reality.

Indeed, despite their best efforts, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* remains a paradox. On the one hand it seems to

beckon to its readers, enticing them into an engaging literary process or experience from which the derivation of some understanding or meaning seems unavoidable. And yet, on the other hand, the poem utilizes a style which "in both its largest and minutest aspects, contributes to a process of disorientation" (Ganim 56). The reader is invited to participate in the apperception of meaning but that invitation is itself challenged by the poem's subversive strategy of an almost relentless elusion of clarity.³ Further attempts to reconcile diverse and opposing interpretive points of view will only continue the imposition of limits upon the work of a poet who seems to revel in a pattern of possibilities rather than to confine himself within a set of certainties. The poem's resistance to such interpretive reduction and its deliberate use of contingency, multiplicity and ambiguity suggest that perhaps the search for meaning should give way to analysis of how the poem means.

A Structuralist approach to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* might seem appropriate since its concern is purely analytical; interpretation and meaning are considered mere by-products of the shared systems of signification under scrutiny. Certainly, the complex structure of the poem and the poet's conscious shifting of signification seem especially suited to an analytical approach which views the poem as "a construct whose mechanisms could be classified

and analysed like the objects of any other science" (Eagleton 106). Unfortunately, this pseudo-scientific approach is even more reductive than New Criticism in its exclusion not only of audience, but also of authorial presence or intention. Though not without practical value, this Formalist approach absolutely diminishes the poem's power. It is a process of distillation which Eagleton aptly likens to "killing a person to examine more conveniently the circulation of the blood" (109). In short it cannot begin to contemplate, let alone embrace either the elusive intent of the poet, or the poem's capacity to engage, hold and affect its audiences.

Affective Criticism or Reception Theory on the other hand seems more suitable to address the poem's response-inviting structures. Its premise that literature is not an object but an experience in which readers are active participants seems borne out by the plethora and diversity of interpretations spawned by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This awareness of the text/audience interaction and a willingness to consider form as an integral component of content seems useful. Indeed the acknowledgment of the open-ended indeterminacies of literary texts seems consistent with the deconstructionist view that "literature is open-ended and that meaning is never ultimately determined by the constraints of the text" (Travis 211).

Unlike the deconstructionist's belief that literary

texts have no stable or ultimate meaning, however, Reception Theory keeps the interpretive enterprise paramount. While it attempts to relocate meaning in the reader or in the interpretive strategies that constitute the reader, Reception Theory nevertheless focuses upon the reproductive process by which the reader fixes meaning through interaction with the text. Although the reader has been added to the equation, interpretation of meaning continues to reign supreme and, as a result, "the text remains an object rather than an instrument, an occasion for the elaboration of meaning rather than a force exerted upon the world" (Tompkins 225). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, challenging and resisting such reductive treatment, places an affective critic in the untenable position of having to choose what his reality is while it simultaneously undermines or removes the very basis upon which any such choice can be made.

In short, Formalism urges a focus upon the text, New Criticism argues authorial intention and Reception Theory proclaims the reading "experience as the guarantee to the production of the correct interpretation" (Mailloux 5). However, so long as critical consideration of the poem shows a compulsive need to interpret, to render the glittering verbal surface transparent in the search for a fixed and reified meaning, then so long will *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* continue to elude, to leave a sense that something

remains untouched, unexplained. It is necessary to shift away from positivist perception of the text as static and interpretation as the quest for an objective and verifiable meaning.

There is one method of analysis which seems capable of embracing without restricting, examining without reifying and understanding without reducing. Rhetorical analysis, like Formalism and its variants, Structuralism and Semiotics, is interested in the formal devices of the text and, like Reception Theory, it is concerned with how these devices work to affect their audience. Rhetorical analysis' preoccupation with discourse as a form of power and desire shares much with Deconstruction and Psychoanalytic Theory, and its belief in the humanly transformative power of discourse shares a great deal with liberal humanism (Eagleton 206). Rather than simply a cataloguing of formal devices,

it is a mode of internal criticism which considers the interactions between the work, the author, and the audience. As such, it is interested in product, the process and the effect of linguistic activity . . . it regards the work not so much as an object of aesthetic contemplation but as an artistically structured instrument for communication. It is more interested in a literary work for what it does than for what it is. (Corbett xxii)

What makes a rhetorical approach to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* so appropriate is the fact that the Gawain-poet is himself the consummate rhetor. Instead of striving for a "transparent" narrative which is indistinguishable from the "reality" it portrays, he unabashedly revels in a narrative which renders its literary devices visible, draws attention to its own artifice and highlights its ambivalence toward the relation of language to meaning. It is a prime example of those rhetorical texts which Richard Lanham has described as

the ones everyone has trouble classifying. They seem to war on the stable orientations literary genres enshrine. They think narrative coherence a sham, not because it is unreal but because we impose it on the world without acknowledgement. They seek to make us self-conscious about the imposition, about literary form at all points. Their narratives are always posing; their style aims always for effect. They keep faith with their own pleasure, not with a reality somewhere 'out there'. They play games with literary form. Literary form in fact, constitutes both their subject and object, theme and reality.

(16-17)

Because rhetorical analysis is interested in poetic text as utterance rather than as artifact it is most suited to forms

of literature which, like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with its paradoxical complexity within coherence, "have designs on an audience" (Corbett xxii).

An even more compelling reason to consider *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from a rhetorical perspective, however, is the way it enshrines and acts out the polemic which Lanham describes as "that fruitful clash between rhetorical and serious reality the complex Western self requires for sustenance; . . . a stylistic pattern [which] seems to antedate all other critical categories, generic or whatever" (9). A vision of self which has, from the beginning been composed of a "shifting and perpetually uneasy combination of homo rhetoricus and homo seriusus, of a social self and a central self" (Lanham 6), which are in a constant state of contention for supremacy. Rhetorical man unable to be "serious", challenges the serious view at every turn. Rhetoric's real crime, according to Lanham, "is its candid acknowledgement of the rhetorical aspects of 'serious' life. The concept of a central self, true or not, flatters man immensely. It gives him an identity outside time and change that he sees nowhere else in the sublunary universe" (7).⁴ Just as this misguided and idealized sense of self is challenged by the disruptive force of rhetoric, so also is Gawain, that paragon of "serious" idealism, challenged by the ultimate rhetorical man, the disruptive Green Knight/Bertilak.

Indeed, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* appears to be the literary equivalent of rhetorical man: "open, obliging, for the occasion, it neither begins nor ends. It plays games with both beginning and ending, with narrative expectation" (Lanham 16). This is not to suggest that it is without its "serious" dimension, but it is the rhetorical aspect which has caused such continuing difficulty for the literary critics. It would seem, as Lanham suggests, that "the poets have been the rhetoricians and the critics the serious philosophers" (8), and the clash of realities has continued. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is

a comprehensive poetic, . . . as complex as the Western self, and in the same way. It [is] . . . equipped to deal with these two fundamentally different realities, and to deal with them as they really occur, in a bewildering pattern of alternation which invites inappropriate coordinates. Often the misapplication seems wilful, even ludic. But once we get the coordinates straight, a great many critical confusions come clear.

(Lanham 19)

The apparent mutual exclusivity of these aspects of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seem less at odds with one another when the poem is viewed as a maze "endless and contradictory, a prison built of choices, an emblem both of constraint and of free will working within the limits

imposed by the maze" (Doob 207). Its apparent pattern invites us to search and single out a fixed path, but its myriad involutions continually challenge the complacent notion that diversity and diffusion must necessarily yield to coherence and unity. Every reader enters and every reader who finishes the poem reaches the exit, but it seems that no two journeys are ever precisely the same. Between the first "Sithen the sege . . ." ⁵ and the one 2,525 lines later, each reader faces innumerable choices and possible meanings, any one of which can send his or her understanding off in entirely new and sometimes more confusing directions. So, the wealth of critical praise for its symmetry embodies the delight of successfully negotiating its labyrinthine complexity, while the intense critical diversity reflects individual critics' unfortunate insistence that their "path" through the poem represents the singular, definitive understanding or interpretation.

The maze is a helpful metaphor for understanding how this poem continues to excite the imaginations of critical readers and yet elude their search for consensus as to its meaning. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a maze with not one, but a number and variety of possible paths. It is made for "those who value the process of treading the labyrinth as much as they do finding the meaning contained at the centre, those who find form as important as content" (Doob 217). When we stop trying to fix a single, central meaning

to a work which resists with an "excess" of meaning, we enter into its maze-like complexity not simply to find a way out but to experience and understand the diverse multiplicity and transformative powers of its many contending realities.

Chapter 2: The Beginning of the End

The world does not always coincide with our images of it. This discontinuity presents problems--the area of serious poetic. But it also presents opportunities to become rich and to rejoice--the area of rhetorical poetic.

- Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence*

The narrator of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not announce his intentions until the second stanza, but he begins immediately to indulge in a calculated, though surreptitious, use of established and familiar paradigms for purposes which reflect a larger, more subversive function. On the surface this prologue, "a conventional appeal to authority of a kind very common in Middle English" (notes 72), affords the narrator an opportunity to establish the bona fides of his tale by linking it to an historical record extending back to the destruction of Troy. Simultaneously, however, he engages in paratactic juxtapositions which subtly challenge the stability of the historical paradigm and begin the process of confronting the audience with competing possibilities which elude easy resolution.

Troubled by these ambiguous syntactical connections, critics have worked hard to clarify whether "The tulk" (4) was Antenor rather than "Ennias the athel" (6) or whether the paratactic "trewest on erthe" (4) referred to the treachery or the man who committed it.⁶ In their quest to determine "why was not our poet more explicit than he is?" (Silverstein 193), they seem unwilling to accept a chronicle

characterized by deliberate uncertainty. However, the poet's seemingly casual indifference to clarity, exhibited by the ambiguously connected opposites of treachery and truth, serves as a disruptive preparation for the stanza's wheel. "Werre and wrake and wonder" (16) and "both blysse and blunder" (18), echoing earlier opposites, are here deftly brought together not as discrete, either/or aspects of Britain's past, but rather as co-existent contraries. Co-existent contraries, moreover, which at various times "Ful skete hatz skyfted synne" (19).

This is a vision of the real world surprisingly similar to that of the particle physicist's problematic world of wave and particle; an oscillating realm of contrary but co-existent states which resist fixed certainty in favour of alternating possibilities (Capra 70). Before the narrator begins his tale, his prologue has subtly and elegantly revealed a paradigm which will permeate the structure and characterize the entire poem; its shimmering surface will invite the complacent acceptance of appearances, but it will also reveal and call attention to less stable and more challenging realities beneath.

From chronicle to characterization, the prologue portrays Britain as a nation of bold young men, difficult deeds and "ferlyes" (23). Indeed, it is in professing these marvels that the narrator presents himself and the terminus ad quem of his trip through time. Having heard that Arthur

was the "noblest" or most "courteous" of British kings, the narrator expresses his intention to show such an "aunter" (27) that it might seem a "selly" (28) to many. Moving from the absolute of history to the relative of fiction (Ganim 62), he proposes a simple offer: "If ye wyl lysten . . . /I schal telle hit" (30-31). This quasi-contractual relationship, so blithely entered into by the audience, will be echoed by the duplicity of those other contracts soon to be entered into, as it is the narrator who establishes the "frame in which either the story informs, entertains, teaches, challenges, or asserts" (McLean 72). The narrator may have agreed to unfold a linear chronology of events but he retains complete control over how his "play" is presented. As if to ease any audience uncertainties, he proffers the reassurances of a tale told

. . . as I in toune herde,
with tonge,
As hit is stad and stoken
In stori stif and stronge,
With lel letteres loken,
In londe so hatz ben longe.

(31-36)

This is a narrator, however, who will soon proceed to illustrate the folly of assuming that anything "stad", "stoken" (33), "stif", "stronge" (34) or "loken" (35), is necessarily what it purports to be.

Like so many of Chaucer's pilgrim narrators, the persona of this nameless storyteller rapidly loses much of its limited individuality and quickly becomes absorbed into the basic voice of the text. As Jordan has observed:

the distinction between persona and voice is important. While a persona is a fixed entity that generates a priori interpretative expectations, voice is a flexible instrument--infinitely flexible in the hands of a skilled writer--that forms and transforms itself in the ongoing movement of the text. (122)

The narrator, is a dynamic shifting presence; "as the mediator between the poet and his audience, the narrator partakes of both the particularity of the poet and the universality of his audience" (Astell 189).

Initially speaking as though a member of Arthur's court, inviting his audience to assume the same vantage point, and then stepping away to offer a lavish and strangely ambiguous portrait of both the Green Knight and the court's reaction, the narrator's stance remains both elusive and in a state of constant motion. His game is to serve as the Gawain-poet's means of luring his audience into the poem not merely as detached spectators, but as vicarious participants. Through the mediation of both the narrator's "eye" and his "I", the audience gradually finds itself "pulled in imagination into the world of the poem and

experiences it as a reality" (Borroff 142).⁷

Having set the scene and persuaded the audience to join him as observer and eavesdropper, the narrator begins his actual performance with an inviting elaboration of a portion of the historical pattern--Arthur's court, "Camylot upon Krystmasse" (37). Suffused with a roseate glow, it is a portrait in superlatives which suggest a time and place which is not merely idyllic but ideal:

The most kyd knyghtez vnder Krystes seluen,
And the louelokkest ladies that euer lif haden,
And he the comlokest kyng that the court haldes.

(51-53)

This assemblage, radiant with the splendour of wealth, happiness and honour, appears to be offered up as the epitome of temporal perfection. Its consciously "soft-focus" attention to surface detail, ritual and youthful pleasure, seems an open invitation for the audience to "recreate Camelot in what may be an idealized image of the court of Richard II, at the period when the king was not only 'somewhat childgered', but actually little more than a child in years" (Bishop 612).⁸

While purporting to unfold a fabula about a time, a place and a people safely distanced from his audience by both time and text, the narrator dwells upon the liminal, knowing full well that his courtly audience will be drawn into an "imaginative engagement" (Astell 195) which compels

them to fill in details and bestow ideals from their own time and place. Speaking asynchronously, almost as though he was himself a guest at the court's festivities, the narrator gradually secures mastery of his audience by offering them a virtual mirror, their own vision of themselves. It is a position of strength and control which will enable him not only to indulge in what appears to be a wide-eyed, albeit largely unfocused, depiction of this "fayre folk" (54), but also to gradually blur the distinction between fiction and reality so that the safely distanced challenges of the fabula gradually become an invitation to audience self-examination (Astell 193). Rather than present an immediate and direct challenge to the idealized reality he has helped his audience construct for themselves, his game is simply to offer up a growing matrix of alternating possibilities which increase in complexity as the poem unfolds.

He begins by insinuating into his dazzling backdrop some tantalizingly ambiguous focal scenes. He shows us the kissing game with ladies who "laghed ful loude thogh thay lost haden" (69).⁹ He portrays the "best burn ay above" (73), the "hendest" (26) of British kings as "sumwhat childgered" (86), stirred in "his yong blod and in his brayn wylde" (89), not mounted upon his throne at high table but "talkande before the high table of trifles ful hende" (108). He also reminds us that "all was this fayr folk in her first

age" (54). Some critics have seized upon these and other equivocal elements of the narrator's apparent glorification as evidence of the poet's ironic intent to portray Camelot as "artificial, imitative and ritualized" (Hughes 219).¹⁰ Certainly, the references to the court's innocent first age, on the surface a confirmation of the youthful perfection pervading Camelot in its primacy, are both a caution and a reminder, on the one hand, that, perfection notwithstanding, youth is a time of life noted for its naive lack of the wisdom which comes only from the trials of age and experience, and, on the other hand, of the eventual fate that awaits this court. But this imputation of ironic or critical intent represents an attempt to settle the uncertainties, clarify the ambiguities and otherwise narrow the pattern of possibilities in the name of interpretation. "Perhaps it is safer to say that certain images comment ironically on the ways in which the characters and the reader make sense of the events that occur in the story" (Ganim 70). The narrator, savouring his omniscience without revealing it, systematically and intricately weaves into his text moments, scenes, words, phrases and plot complexities which not only resist the imposition of certainty but which will later re-appear, resonate and form those recurring parallels that persistently challenge his audience, compelling them continually to re-evaluate and re-orient their "reality". The narrator's devious multiplicities

"keep faith with their own pleasure, not with a reality somewhere 'out there'" (Lanham 17).

At this stage, the narrator has not yet delivered on his promised adventure and what he has presented so far could as easily begin either a chronicle or courtly romance (Finlayson 6). As if to mirror the anticipation of the audience he has kept in suspense, he reveals Arthur's own restless need to hear a tale of adventure or witness some chivalric encounter. Just as Arthur has bound himself by custom to be open to what may come, be it "vncouthe tale" (93), "mayn meruayle" (94) or "other auenturus" (95), the audience finds itself in an analogous position. With the visual savvy of a cinematographer, the narrator provides one final scene-setting sweep of the court.¹¹ His panoramic gaze gives us "the stif kyng hisseluen" (107), the "gode Gawayn" (109), "Gwenore bisyde" (109) and the rest of "the hygh table" (108) as the hall is overwhelmed by a symphony of sights, sounds and scents.

As if to re-affirm both the credibility of his tale and its analogous relationship to his audience, the narrator, turning from the splendour he has orchestrated, addresses them directly, "now wyl I of hor seruise say yow no more,/For uch we may wel wit no wont that there were" (130-131). They are, he suggests, perhaps with a wink and a nod, familiar enough with this setting to imagine the rest. Imaginatively, the court and the audience have now become as

one, an identification which enables the Gawain-poet to initiate a series of incidents in which the narrator thrusts upon his audience the same moral choices with which Gawain himself will be faced (Piehler 248). Although the narrator's tale is a fiction, its challenges will assume ramifications for the audience perhaps no less significant than those about to confront the fictional court.

The most immediate challenge, of course, is that discordant "Other noyse" (132), the Green Knight, who bursts in on the celebrations of this congenial company as an "aghlich mayster" (136). Rising to the occasion, the Gawain-poet's narrator deftly freezes the moment and, "limiting his omniscience for the sake of rhetorical identification" (Astell 195) with his audience, offers an eyewitness description of this mysterious intruder. In this moment of suspended action he gives us the perspective of the awe-struck court; it is a descriptive *tour de force* no longer "soft-focused" but sharply defined in its effusion of detail.

The portrait exemplifies the problems of focalization, because the focalizers of narrated portraits also portray themselves. Indeed the metaphor chosen by narratologists, *focalizer*, reminiscent of theatrical lighting is particularly apt because it reminds us that the light focused goes back to a source as well as illuminating a

chosen object or scene. Thus the portrait is in itself a double revelation.

(McLean 129)

What stands revealed here is just how much is being held back. The narrator knows the whole story but refrains from giving his audience anything more than their fictional counterparts are getting. It is a strategy which ensures that the audience will identify with the response of the court and especially its exemplar, Gawain, when he rises to confront this disruptive presence.

As suggested earlier, the Green Knight here presents as a kind of *homo rhetoricus*, "an actor: his reality public, dramatic . . . , his motivations characteristically ludic, agonistic. He thinks first of winning, of mastery of the rules the current game enforces" (Lanham 4).¹² Unlike the knights arrayed before him, a closed society with "a conception of human character as single, solid, substantial and important, . . . he is not pledged to a single set of values and the cosmic orchestration they adumbrate" (Lanham 81, 4). Because "the rhetorical view of life is satirical, radically reductive of human motive and human striving" (Lanham 7), it is, therefore, threatening to the serious view of life at every turn.

While this seems to be true of the Green Knight, I do not mean to fix or reduce either his role or its function thereby. I don't believe that the *homo rhetoricus* which

Lanham postulates can, by definition, be "defined" or reduced by fixed interpretation. Hence the appeal of such an approach to so dynamic and multifarious a figure as the Green Knight. The poet reveals in him a physical or human manifestation of the paradigm he introduced at the outset, an embodiment of contraries which are in a constant state of alternating or oscillating motion. "The Green Knight accommodates a cluster of antithetical attributes--ferocity and restraint, courtesy and natural wildness --that are in constant dynamic play" (Besserman 227-228). Like the other double-image elements which abound in the poem, the Green Knight resists any attempt to be read as a fixed entity. In the deft hands of the Gawain-poet, the Green Knight becomes more a rhetorical strategy than a mere character, or, what Jordan aptly describes as, a "fluctuating textual process" rather than a "fixed illusionary reality" (122).

What he does give lies as much in the manner of his portrait as it does in the detail. His physical description begins not from the head but from "the swyre" (138), so soon to be bared beneath the blade, and reveals a threatening, thickset "half etayn" (140) of "body sturn" (143). Yet this forbidding figure is nevertheless graced with "fetures . . . /ful clene" (145-146). This now familiar juxtaposing of contraries is made more remarkable by the last physical feature listed--this "freke" (149) is "enker-grene" (150). The narrator's outline of the Green Knight's garments and

gear also begins at the shoulders and moves downward with an increasingly sharp focus upon the rich finery. His self-reflexive protestation that the embroidered detail work on the silk bands are "to tor for to telle of tryfles the halue" (165) becomes instead an occupatio which calls attention to itself. It not only offers a sense that he was himself present to see these vivid details, but also foregrounds the disjunctive image of an "aghlich mayster" (136) adorned not with armour but silken finery. Silken finery, moreover, which may eventually register as a curious blend of both Lady Bertilak's "girdel" (1829), "gered hit watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped" (1832) and Gawain's "uryoun" (608), embroidered with "papiayez" (611), "tortors and trulofez"(612); a surreptitious foretelling of the role that such finery will play in Gawain's own disjunction.

The narrator finally "tops" off his portrait of the Green Knight with a comparison of beautiful green manes: man and horse together create a spectacle the likes of which, even in a hall noted for both marvels and splendour, no man has ever seen. Alternating between terms of wonder and terms of dread, the narrator offers the court's dire assessment that "no mon myght/Vnder his dynttez drye" (201-202) but then quickly counters with his own observation that this knight is not dressed for battle. He comes bearing only the emblematic "holyn bobbe" (206) and an axe which,

though he professes it too wicked to bear describing, is, nevertheless, the final focus of his profusion of detailed description. Without a word yet about the Green Knight's actions, the narrator, with his lavish portrait, has confronted both of his audiences, court and reader alike, with what C.S. Lewis called "a living *coincidentia oppositorum*; half giant, yet wholly a 'lovely knight'" (63). He is an incomprehensible amalgam of the familiar and the unfamiliar whose impending actions will only exacerbate his inherent inconsistencies.

Like the prologue with its co-existent contraries, the narrator's lengthy close-up look at the Green Knight has instilled a profound sense of suspense and uncertainty in both court and audience which will heighten the instant that the narrator ends his freeze-frame and returns to "real" time.

When the action begins, our minds have thus been encouraged to think in terms of uncertainty and threat, and we have been given a rich enough range of possibilities in the Green Knight to feel an ambiguous resonance in all his sayings and doings, and a sense of power, with-held and disguised for a purpose, lying beneath his action.

(Davenport 155)

As if to affirm the worst, the Green Knight hurtles into the hall, looks over the onlookers and bellows out: "Wher is . . ./The gouernour of this gyng?" (224-225).

The narrator, until now a detail-conscious spectator viewing the marvellous intruder from alongside his fictional audience, separates himself slightly from the scene. He takes a more objective stance, turning his gaze upon both the intruder and the court to give his real audience their counterpart's response to the Green Knight's thunderous arrival. He reveals a court slack-jawed with wonder and dread, able to account for what they see only in terms of "fantoum and fayrye" (240). The manifestation of that "other noyse" (132) has suddenly transformed the "crakkyng of trumpes" (116) and the "Wylde werbles" (119) into a "swoghe sylence" (243). The courtly world of glittering action has itself been reduced to a mere "stonstil" (242) tableau. It is as though the narrator's resumption of "real" time has left his fictional audience behind.

The contrast between the court's reaction of stunned silence and the narrator's exuberant rendering of the Green Knight serves once more to draw attention to the equivocal nature of his story-telling. The narrator who offered up a court of flourishing perfection as a mirror image of his real audience now holds up a potentially unflattering image. Refraining from direct criticism, he addresses us as a virtual apologist and thereby draws attention to the court's conduct by assuring us that there were perhaps "sum" who sat in silence "for cortaysye" (247) rather than "doute" (246).

The fictional mirror-image of the narrator's audience

is about to have its identity challenged by a Green Knight, both threatening and playful, who will force the court to choose between incompatible alternatives. It is a challenge which is paralleled by the narrator's own toying with the audience's sense of reality. Trustworthy collaborator and playful manipulator, the narrator forces his audience also to entertain seemingly incompatible alternatives. Though it appears threateningly real, the Green Knight's interlude at court is actually threateningly playful.

[The] foregrounding [of] play is to stress its opposition to the unplayful, the "serious", and the "realistic". According to Erving Goffman, realistic appearances demand "absolute continuity of resources and infinitely confirmed connectedness." Realistic literature is therefore as far as possible consistent with other modes of evidence, remaining within epistemological and even documentary style of history and science for the sake of "continuity of resources". Finite and unconfirmable details are made less dubious by the way realism exploits perspective and invites omissions that appeal to the reader's own inexhaustible store of sensations and memories. In contrast, literary games exhibit their discontinuities and unstabalize the vantage points on which realistic perspective depends

Hallucinatory imagery and sly allusions to mirage

and magic poison one's trust in appearances; inconsistencies accumulate "so that the image is jeopardized as it is created". Or illusions suddenly collapse after one has already grown to trust their reliability and autonomy.

(Bruss 157)

Having carefully constructed a comfortable and familiar reality with which, for his audience, identification is irresistible, the Gawain-poet is not about to let the illusion of Arthurian idealism collapse into complete unreliability just yet. But the narrator does offer a play-by-play account of the challenge of the court's reality by one fundamentally and threateningly different. And he does so in that "bewildering pattern of alternation which invites inappropriate coordinates" (Lanham 19).

The Green Knight's initial spell is broken by Arthur's welcome, delivered with the reassuring and courteous aplomb which befits a king renowned for his fearlessness. His invitation to the Green Knight to join them first and reveal his purpose later is dismissed out of hand with a pointedly ironic comment upon Arthur's absence from his proper place "on hyghe" (256) and a bluntly direct statement of purpose. The Green Knight's deferential acknowledgement of his host's renown is not an expression of his own regard, but a recitation of the puffed-up hearsay that he has "herd carp" (263). And, disclaimers about peaceful intent

notwithstanding, that "los" (258) is the target of his challenge:

But if thou be so bold as alle burnez tellen,
 [then] Thou wyl grant me godly the gomen that I
 ask

By ryght.

(272-274 emphasis added)

Once more the idealized image of perfection is imperiled and once more Arthur responds. His response, however, seems increasingly inappropriate as he reveals his apparent inability to apprehend this challenge. Despite the court's current preoccupation with seasonal games and his own high holiday compulsion for pre-feast entertainment, he reacts not to the "game" but to the more serious--though, ironically, perhaps less threatening--mis-apprehended challenge of "batayl bare" (277).

Arthur's growing lack of success in maintaining control and equilibrium is matched by the Green Knight's growing impatience and incivility. Free of puffery, his cutting dismissal of Arthur's counter-offer reveals his true disregard for those about him as warriors-at-arms; they are "bot berdlez chylde" (280). As if to call attention to Arthur's lack of comprehension he asks once again for a "Crystmas gomen" (283), the terms of which are spelled out succinctly:

If any so hardy in this house holdez hymseluen,

Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
 That dar stifly strike a strok for an other
 [then] I schal gif him of my gift this giserne
 ryche,

.

And I schal stonde hym a strok stif on this flet
 Ellez thou wyl dight me the dom to dele him an other

Barlay

And yet gif hym respite,

A twelmonyth and a day.

(285-298 emphasis added)

It is an offer, the content of which is made all the more remarkable by its form; this shocking proposal is framed in the contractual language of offer and acceptance. And, while it is a challenge aimed at any who deem themselves to be what their fame professes, it has been subtly worded to include a descriptive phrase remarkably similar to one given by the narrator in his earlier idealization of the high king himself, so stirred in "his yong blod and his brayn wylde" (89). It is challenge aimed directly at the very values which the audience has hitherto been encouraged to identify as their own.

The narrator's candid observation that the stupefaction which now pervades the court, both "the hyghe and the lowe" (302), is even more profound than their earlier stunned silence, underscores both the gravity of the Green Knight's

challenge and the narrator's stance as detached eyewitness. Having twice framed his challenge as a game suitable only for men equal to their reputations, and having been met first with misapprehension and then with another abject silence, the Green Knight bellows in animated disbelief: "What, is this Arthures hous?" (309). The court fails to respond to his derisively articulated litany questioning the connection between their lustrous reputation and the tableau before him. This verbal axe blow, aimed at the very identity of the court, finally stirs the high king to action. The narrator's image of the so recently gracious Arthur is now reduced to an impetuous axe-swinging bravado that may have more to do with a shame-faced loss of composure than with taking up the game offered.

The oneupmanship of his repeated offer of a game is itself a disruptive challenge to the self-flattering concept of central self which, for these serious knights, is inextricably intertwined with reputation and self-image. The mere presentation of the game seems to have loosed Arthur from his earlier courtly composure. Indeed, with the irate axe-wielding Arthur assuming the threatening stance and with the Green Knight standing above all with "countenance drye" (335), the narrator, by an artfully graduated suspense, has brought about an awkward inversion. The idealized image of Camelot, so alluringly offered up by the narrator, now seems poised upon the verge of a collapse

into unreliability.

And it is there that the audience, like their fictional counterparts, find themselves at a point of suspense-filled uncertainty. Each one is seemingly at the mercy of destabilizing challenges from both Green Knight and poet alike. Indeed, the Green Knight's crescendo of challenges to the court has threatened its "fixed illusionary reality" (Jordan 122). And with Arthur's shame-faced, axe-swinging response to the third and final challenge to his court's identity, the poet reveals what amounts to a preview or microcosm of the game itself, to be played out, not at court with the irate Arthur, but at the Green Chapel with the genteel Gawain.

Before the outcome can unfold, therefore, the tension and suspense is disrupted by yet another "intrusion" as Gawain, standing forth from the tableau around him, interjects. Unlike the brash contempt of the Green Knight, however, Gawain's elegant entrance is an example of tact and courtly decorum. With language as deferential as the Green Knight's was disdainful, Gawain beseeches his king to call him forth so that he might leave the table "withoutte vilany" (345). As circumspect in choosing his phrases as the Green Knight was bluff and abrupt, Gawain's "character is declared as soon as he appears in the poem, partly by what he says, but still more by the way in which he says it" (Spearing 179).¹³ A master of "courtaisye," Gawain's performance is a

tour de force which suggests that he is equal to the complex task not only of deflating the sudden magnitude the game has assumed, but also of wresting it from his king without the least offence to Arthur, Guinevere or the other knights at table.

In Gawain's successful attainment of consensus from the court and the axe from Arthur, the poet provides his audience with a restoration of equilibrium through reassuringly familiar knightly virtues. This is the first of many instances where the poet appears to be enticing or, as Piehler suggests, "guiding and corralling" (245) the audience into a complete participation with the actions of Gawain as heroic knight. His *loyalty* to liege lord, his *courtesy* to queen and court and the *humility* of his *diminutio* inspire the admiration and identification which set the audience down the same path as Gawain: into that maze of complex choices and contradictory possibilities where these self-same steadfast virtues will, under more direct challenge, prove far less tenable.

The Green Knight immediately asks for and is blithely given his opponent's name: "Gawayn I hat" (381). His identity and reputation are one. Although the poet has presented his audience with an heroic figure of self-assured calm and courtesy to counter both Arthur's rage and the Green Knight's rant, he also initiates the subtly subversive process of destabilizing the security of the image. The

Green Knight is not only unperturbed, he expresses unrestrained delight. His eagerness is all business as he resumes his legal phrasing to extract Gawain's pledge of "trauthe" (394). Zeal instead of trepidation and the unspoken echo of "trauthe's" paratactic partner "trecherye", permeate the scene as unsettling suggestions of sinister possibilities.

With alacrity the Green Knight carries out his end of the arrangement as he bends his bare neck for the blade. The narrator's angle of vision seems almost to be that of Gawain as he lets the axe do its work, setting the head rolling about the feet of the court while blood spurts from the severed neck. Having been stunned into frozen silence twice by the Green Knight's words with his head on, little wonder that many of the court experience outright fear as he disjunctively reveals his identity while separated from his body! His departure is as thunderous, as sudden, as his entrance, but far more dramatic. The narrator, hiding his omniscience once again, offers us only the court's sense of mystery about whence he came and whither he has gone. And by posing the rhetorical question, "What then?" (462), he turns his audience's attention away from the spectacle and back to the court and its post-beheading reaction.

Arthur and Gawain, the only two to deal directly with the Green Knight, laugh and grin. But lest the audience be lulled by the sudden sense of easy resolution conveyed by

the juxtaposition of "that grene" and their "grenne" (464), the narrator cautions that what has happened is freely accounted "a mervayl among tho men" (466). The narrator's omniscient disclosure that even Arthur "at hert had wonder" (467), suggests that the laughter may cover a sense of unease. It remains unarticulated, however, as Arthur's powers of calm and reassurance allow the court to close quickly back in upon themselves and resume their festivities.

As the first fitt ends, the narrator's gaze pans away from the court. We see the king, "the good knight" (482) and the rest of the court as they resume their light-hearted ingestion of "dayntyes double" (483) and "all maner of mete" (484). On the wall above them, the Green Knight's formidable weapon of destruction seems reduced to a mere ornamental trophy, and one questions by just whose version of the "true tyle therof" (480) its wonder will be told. Indeed, as the eye takes in both the revelry and the great axe, it seems to hang more like the sword of Damocles than a marvellous memento. Lest the audience see only the court's version of this once again glorious scene, the narrator, addressing his own protagonist, seems to step suddenly into the poem to interject his solemn reminder:

Now thenk wel, Sir Gawayn
 For wrothe that thou ne wonde
 This aventure for to frayn

That thou has tan on honde. (487-490)

His words, though addressed to his fictional hero, are meant for his listening audience. It is a self-reflexive intrusion which re-affirms the verbal autonomy of the text and its "contingent character as a product of its composer" (Jordan 16), but also "unites the reader and writer in this conscious awareness of both the rhetorical reality and the illusionary magic of the narrative text" (Jordan 17).

Referring to the fictional game, his address serves as a timely reminder to his audience of the game of fiction; that they too must not shrink from that implied contract so blithely undertaken at the outset. Like the Green Knight's challenge to the notion of the knight-reputation equivalency held by the court, the poet's determination seems directed at the res-verba covenant. He is engaged in an unrelenting attempt to show that language is conventional, therefore arbitrary and inevitably ambiguous; "it is a system devised and managed by man, rather than a univocal emanation from God and the created world" (Jordan 10 emphasis added).

In the first fitt, the poet has revealed his commitment to the demonstration of both a "consciousness of formalistic virtuosity and a disruptiveness of form that occurs as a kind of slippage or drifting in signification devolving from the irreducible difference from signans and signatum" (Vance 133). In a delightful blend of play and purpose he has already begun to reveal the degree to which ambiguity may

pervade apparent clarity. Text for the Gawain-poet is a dynamic process which sustains both coherence and chaos, both "blysse" and "blunder". His address to Gawain, then, serves as a fitting restatement of the rules of his own game before Gawain and audience alike leave the stable world of the court and set forth into the maze-like "real" world of slippery signs and uncertain significance.

Chapter 3: Stranger in a Strange Land

Games, again like poetry, can compel the most intense concentration, can be as serious as anything which serious life affords They offer to the spectator a distinctive combination of delight in the process, in following out the pattern . . . , with strong anxiety about the outcome.

- Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence*

The narrator begins the second fitt by reminding his audience just how it came to be that Gawain is now at this point of uncertainty and suspense.¹⁴ His echoing use of the words "hanselle" and "aenturus" (491) invite resonances with earlier reference to both "hanselle" (66) and the ubiquitous "aenture". Such connections, however, seem to compound rather than resolve their ambiguity. To drive home his point, the narrator reminds us that

Thagh hym wordez were wane thay to sete wenten,
Now are they stoken of sturne werk, stafful her hond.

Gawan watz glad to begynne those gomez in halle,
Bot thagh the ende be heuy haf ye no wonder;
For thagh men ben mery in mynde quen thay han mayne drynk,

A yere yirnes ful yerne and yeldes neuer lyke;
The forme to the fynisment foldez ful selden.

(493-499)

Rendering his summary in the form of aphorisms, the narrator invites his audience to recognize that what may begin as

play may end as serious, and that appearance and reality may begin as one but seldom remain thus. In dismissing the second fitt as "something of a piecemeal Balkan affair--just a string of scenes, lacking any unity of place, time or action" (71), J.A. Burrow seems to fall victim to the desire for a univocal interpretation of a text which resists such restraint. Indeed, in anticipation of Gawain's venturing into a world far removed from the familiar comfort of Camelot, the narrator seems to be deliberately "stimulating the reader's scrutiny of the events he narrates . . . , [their] querying [of] the relationship between appearance and reality" (Barron 38).

The Narrator's opening reminder that things are seldom what they seem is offered in anticipation of his lengthy description of the young Gawain whose timely intervention restored a semblance of equilibrium to Arthur's court. As a counterpoint to the lavish portrait of the charged figure of the Green Knight, this fitt presents an equally rich portrait of the single-minded ideal knight who is one with his reputation. The narrator may provide us with a Gawain that is as "fixed" a figure of ideal knighthood as the Green Knight is a fluid figure of mystery, but he persists in his subversion of this illusion of fixed reality even as he presents it to us by offering what may be described as an "excess" of meaning. He goes on to suggest, moreover, that disjunction between appearance and reality pervades not only

the world outside of Arthur's court, but also the real world of his audience. As if to underscore such a notion, the narrator slips smoothly from an aphorism, which juxtaposes the merry mirthmaking of the court with the relentless mutability of the natural world, into a startling description of the seasons which characterize that natural world.

While those seasons may have a familiar surface structure or symmetry, they remain, nonetheless, a cyclical process of alternation and change. Timelessness is anathema; the natural order of things cannot be retarded, fixed or reordered in any way. The narrator's rich description of the natural world emphasizes its mutability in familiar terms, but consistent with his pattern of fundamental contraries and uncertainties, the description is pervaded with images of confrontation and challenge. Each succeeding season alternately challenges the duration of its predecessor in an aggressive and usurping manner, ensuring that even the most pleasant time is warned off and then driven out with dust and drought; even the expected can quickly become the unexpected. Indeed, this passage, which anticipates Gawain's ejection from a world of comfort and warmth into one of cold uncertainty, is framed by references to his lot which have been transformed from New Year's gift to "anious vyage" (535). Using his *descriptio* to compress time, the narrator returns us to the court almost a year later; the transition smoothly closes his description of the

seasons and echoes his earlier aphorism:

Then all rypez and rotez that ros upon first.
 And thus yirnes the yere in yisterdayez mony,
 And wynter wyndes ayayn, as the worlde askez.

(528-530)

The court to which the narrator returns his audience, however, is not the court of the first fitt. "Much reuel and ryche of the Rounde Table" (538) notwithstanding, appearance now belies reality. The sentiments of grief and mourning which swell beneath glad countenances suggest a dawning awareness of the magnitude of the consequences of Gawain's acceptance of the game. Gawain himself seems to be fully aware of the "cost" (546), the "tenez" (547) and the fact that he is contractually "boun to the bur" (548). The knights offering condolences to Gawain each seem keenly aware that their confrere has agreed "To drye a dolful dynt and dele no more/Wyth bronde" (560-561). The narrator does not relieve the audience's anxiety about Gawain's fate, choosing instead to portray the court's sense that the "All Hal Day" (536) feast is, in fact, a last supper. How much more worthy Gawain becomes thereby, receiving homage from king and court alike and then, faced with the prospect of an unknighly acquiescence to the axe, asking with utter equanimity, "What may mon do bot fonde?" (565). As Gawain begins his separation from the court, the narrator seems to be eliciting from his audience continued empathetic

identification with the knight and his desperate fate.

Giving Gawain centre stage, the narrator continues to build upon his sympathetic presentation with an elaborately detailed description of his adornment in state-of-the-art 14th century armour.¹⁵ What presents as a straightforward layer-by-layer armed build-up of the ideal Arthurian knight, however, also reveals the profusion of descriptive detail to be laced with phrases and fragments which occur in the earlier lengthy descriptio of the Green Knight. The narrator opened his detailing of the Green Knight at his "swyre" (138) and closed with his long hair flowing like "a kynges capados that closes at his swyre" (186). Describing Gawain, he begins with a "crafty capados" (572) also closed at the throat. While the narrator's gaze played from the neck down in his delineation of both the Green Knight's body and attire, Gawain is described from the feet up. Mention of their heads, however, is severed from the body of their respective descriptions by virtually interchangeable depictions of their horses' gear. The Green Knight's silken bands "enbrauded abof wyth bryddes and flyes" (166) which were singled out by the narrator for special attention resonate with those "papiayez" (611) and "tortors" (612) embroidered on the silk adorning Gawain's headgear.

In this compilation of discrete visual images of the ideal knight, some resonate with his counterpart in fitt one, and some, such as the disarming association of silk

embroidered with courtly love emblems tied to Gawain's battle helm, will not resonate until later in the poem. While this wealth of images is infused with possibilities of import beyond the surface, there is no narratorial indication of what in this surfeit of detail is unsettlingly significant and what is gratuitous. And while it may be replete with disjunctive potential, it nevertheless admirably fulfils its immediate function as an idealized portrait of the physical presence of the ideal Round Table knight. Indeed, with the crowning touch of the diamond circlet atop his helm, Gawain is endowed with an aura of brilliance.

The image of Gawain's martial resplendence seems to reflect an appeal to an audience that believes the fourteenth-century equivalent of "the clothes make the man". Fittingly then, when the narrator speaks of the man, he does so in terms of the pentangle shield, yet another external device through which Gawain is defined. When the protective "schelde, . . ./Wyth the pentangel depaynt of pure golde hwez," (619-620) is introduced, the narrator, with an apologetic interjection, offers a lengthy explication of why this "bytoknyng of trauthe" (626) "apendes to that prynce noble" (623). "The heraldic charge which appears on the outside of the shield literally identifies the knight who bears it but it is also, as the poet elaborately makes clear, the symbolic means of identifying his characteristic

virtues and aspirations" (Green 127).

The pentangle's perfection lies in its seamless configuration:

For hit is a figure that haldez fyue poyntez,
And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in other,
And ayquere hit is endelez, and Englych hit callen
Oueral, as I here, the endeles knot.

(627-630)

And it "bisemed" (622) Gawain as an heraldic device, the narrator assures us, because

. . . ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue sythes
Gawan was for gode knawen, and as golde pured,
Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertuez, ennourned
In mote.

(632-635)

The elaboration of those five fives which the narrator feels compelled to offer, reveals a blend of religious, martial and secular virtues.¹⁶ Virtues, he alleges, which are as seamlessly interconnected in the man as in the geometric figure on the shield. The pentangle device also serves the narrator as a "device" which allows him to playfully present his audience with a "fixed" ideal. Together with the armour, the shield seems to complete the vision of Gawain as "the very mirror of Christian chivalry, a flawless reflector of the ideals of Camelot. The 'accord' between the man and the ideal is so perfect that both can be

symbolized in the one geometrical figure, the pure pentangle" (Burrow 50). The narrator, through an *expositio* which allows him to "seem to be saying a number of things whereas [he is] actually dwelling on one thing" (de Vinsauf 61), "places more weight on the fact of 'endlessness' than on any of the separate virtues" (Spearing, Gawain 198). The "blysse" of so effusive an encomium offers the audience yet another affirmation of Gawain as a paragon of their ideals of knighthood. Beneath the shimmering surface, however, the narrator simultaneously plants potential seeds of "blunder".

Despite the apparent intimacy of a digressive turning aside to share with his audience, the narrator retains his distance from this ideal in three ways. First, as the basis for the merging of man and symbol, he offers us only the reputation by which Gawain is "knawen" (633). Second, the source of the pentangle is Solomon, "a figure of perfection; there was no man like him and his reputation reached the corners of the world (1 Kings 4.29-34). He was for the Middle Ages a figure of Christ, the exemplar of wisdom and kingship, of power over demons" (Green 130). But Solomon was also a figure capable of standing for a weakness, a vulnerability, particularly to the wiles of women, a reading not lost on Gawain later in the poem. Third, even the use of a two-dimensional figure presents other possibilities.

Geometry is an ideal science: it occurs in the

mind, and its constructions cannot have physical reality because they are not three-dimensional It might be wondered whether Gawain's code of behaviour is not similarly unrelated to the exigencies of living in three dimensional space.

(Farrell 23)

Indeed, when the narrator concludes,

Forthy the pentangel nwe
 He ber in schelde and cote,
 As tulk of tale most trwe
 And gentylest knyght of lote

(636-639)

is it another step in the argument affirming Gawain's stature or is it a subtle highlighting of the horns of what will prove to be Gawain's dilemma of incompatibilities: to remain true to his "tale" (638) given to Bertilak or true to the courtesy of his "lote" (639) given to lady Bertilak?

In addition, while the pentangle itself may be an "endelez knot" (630), its accordance with Gawain is attenuated by the narrator's insistence upon using terms of binding such as "ennournd" (634), "happed" (655) and "fetled" (656) which also imply that the pentangle virtues are no more permanent nor fixed to Gawain than the armour in which he was just "dubbed" (571) and "hasped" (590), and of which he will be so deftly divested at Bertilak's court. With artful equivocation, the narrator playfully concludes

that the five fives were, like the pentangle, "vchone halched in other . . ./Withouten ende at any noke I oquere fynde,/Whereeuer the gomen bygan or glod to an ende." (657-661 emphasis added).

Just as the Green Knight's "fyre of the flynt" (459) marked a narratorial shift to the court's bewildered view of his departure, so does Gawain's "ston-fyr" (671) mark a momentary shift to the court's perspective of his departure. Sorrowfully lamenting what they see as an impending execution, they are hard-pressed to reckon the cost of their loss against a Christmas game that they now see in terms of "angardez pryde" (681) and "cauelaciounz" (683). Their view that "Warloker to haf wroght had more wyt bene" (677) and their apparent willingness to countenance self-preservation over blind adherence to chivalric ideals, stand in stark and prophetic contrast to the idealized portrait just presented. While the audience is now being offered what appears to be a choice between the court's sympathetically human perspective and the highly idealized vision of Gawain as the embodiment of chivalric ideals, it is a Hobson's choice. The narrator may be offering a pair of possible paths but there can be little doubt that an audience already caught up in chivalric ideals will, like Alice after the white rabbit, choose to plunge headlong into the Wyrle after their illustrious Gawain.

The narrator's self-reflexive assurance that Gawain's

strange wanderings will be recounted in accordance with "the bok as I herde say" (690), implies a familiar reliance upon the conventions of romance, but such expectations are quickly denied. Rather than a familiar depiction of the unfamiliar, Gawain's ride is not into the strange unreal world of romance, but steadily northward into the familiar "real" world of the audience.¹⁷ It is not until he reaches the Wyrle that he enters the realm of the otherworldly wilderness, where all paths are fraught with a bewildering complexity which causes "his chere ful oft . . . [to] chaunge/That chapel ere he myght sene" (711-12). This is the world where finding a foe at every ford is the rule rather than the exception. But once again, barely has the expectation of the unexpected begun before the narrator intrudes to disrupt it. So many are the conventional marvels encountered that "hit were to tor for to telle of the tenthe dole" (719). But the occupatio description that follows is little more than a perfunctory inventory of inevitable romance wonders ranging from "berez" (722) to "wodwos" (721). Notwithstanding the lengthy description of Gawain's martial preparations, it is apparent that it is not Gawain's "werres" that will be the narrator's focus. Although the narrator wryly concedes that had Gawain not been a "doghty and drye" (724) servant of God, he would have been "ded and dreped ful ofte" (725), winter seems a far more formidable foe.

Having denied us anything more than a brief recapitulation of Gawain's battles, the narrator seems to have begun a complex and persistent process by which he "repeatedly reduces Gawain's heroic quality in a variety of related ways while maintaining in the reader's mind the elevated sense of his nature and behaviour" (Davenport 183). He highlights instead Gawain's human dimension as he reveals, through Gawain's eyes, a frigid portrait of his environment. Indeed, his description of the natural elements is an evocation of Gawain's hypothermic "peryl and payne and plytes ful harde" (733) in this winter wasteland. Hemmed in by the desolate mazework of the landscape, high hills, ancient oaks, tangled undergrowth and painful cold all conspiring to challenge his path, it is little wonder that Gawain turns to the inner side of his shield, seeking succour and guidance from Mary.

The narrator's description suggests a state of lonely despair which is more than just physical; Gawain's distress is compounded by his separation from the spiritual comforts of Christmas mass. Suffering from a kind of *poena damni*, Gawain seeks release from this condition of near extremis through prayers to his personal intercessor, Mary. It was strength of arms that resolved his "werres," but he seems helpless against the elements without aid from above. After crossing himself but thrice, it is the "wonder" not of a modest chapel or hermitage in the woods, but of "a won in a

mote" (764) which saves him from this "wrake".

This sudden alternation from "werres" and "wrake" to the seemingly misplaced "wonder" of this fortress in the wasteland is yet another means of unsettling the audience's expectations. After mediating the description of Gawain's passage through the Wyrle, the narrator, again through Gawain's eyes, offers up a detailed portrait of the castle, replete with internal contraries which we can't yet grasp. The flow of superlatives suggests an awe which alternates between its sturdy craftsmanship and its ornately decorative beauty. So finely constructed is it, that it seems "pared out of papure" (802). It is a description, moreover, which reflects the real world of the audience's own late fourteenth century architecture.¹⁸ While the sudden appearance of this superlative structure in a desolate forest may evoke conventional expectations of something magic or perilous, the descriptive terms themselves also exude a solidity and permanence that counter insubstantiality. The certainty of whether this castle wondrous is an innocent refuge from the vicissitudes of the Wyrle or whether it is a perilous home to yet more "werres" and "wrake" for Gawain and audience alike remains, at this point, tantalizingly suspended.

Once again restraining his omniscience, the narrator nevertheless manages to imbue his account of Gawain's welcome with a kind of simultaneity of alternating

possibilities. The warmth and alacrity of this court's gracious welcome, reflecting as they do the best of the audience's own customs, belie any notions of threat or magic. At the same time, however, the rush to bring Gawain "wyth blys into halle" (825), and to separate him from his helm, blade and pentangle shield, hints at vulnerability and the alternate prospect of "blunder." The host's magnanimous assurance that "al is yowre awen, to haue at yowre wylle/And welde" (836) is an act of open generosity consistent with the "blysse" of this hall, but it is also an anticipation of Lady Bertilak's seductive reiteration which will later assume a more threatening dimension. Amidst an opulence that rivals Camelot, Gawain finds himself adroitly "dispoyled wyth spechez of mirthe,/ . . . of his bruny and of his bryght wedes" (860-61), and "happed" (864) instead in silken finery.

Physically disarmed and reduced to a purely passive role, he is plied with a penitential repast that makes a feast out of a fast and invokes the narratorial echo of an earlier aphorism, "that mon much mirthe con make/For wyn in his hed that wende" (899-900). From the outset, there is an underlying uncertainty about Hautdesert which the narrator exploits to the full. Playing on its "doubleness", he offers no indication as to whether the warmth of the welcome is threatening dissemblance or genuine hospitality or some elusive conflation of both. His depiction of this refuge

remains throughout a narrative maze of alternating possibilities that resist resolution.

Gawain's admission of identity in response to the courtiers' polite inquiries prompts an eager delight in this court. On the one hand, this response simply reflects the delight in a visitor of renown "comen to that Krystmasse as case hym then lymped" (907), and on the other, it echoes the last enthusiastic reaction to Gawain's disclosure of his identity. It also allows the narrator to adopt, as a kind of counterpoint to Gawain's departure from Camelot, Hautdesert's perspective as they welcome him:

That alle prys and prowes and pured thewes
 Apendes to hys persoun and praysed is euer;
 Byfore alle men vpon molde his mensk is the most.

(912-14 emphasis added)

This view offers faint echoes of the earlier pentangle *descriptio* (623,633) but is curiously focused. Gawain is in his "first Age" (54), yet his fame has not only extended to Hautdesert, but is that of "fyne fader of nurture" (919).

Furthermore, rather than the balanced ideal of the pentangle, the Gawain revered by this court seems a more limited version; the established reputation for the social virtues of "felawschip" and "cortaysye" which "apendes" (913) to him is prized above all. Through the eyes of the courtiers, the narrator introduces the disjunctive possibility of a Gawain other than the one thus far

presented. It is, moreover, a Gawain with which his audience would be equally familiar. Indeed the narrator seems to be endowing Hautdesert with a fourteenth century knowledge and reverence for Gawain's reputation for "luf-talkyng" (926). "He is the legend they have been living by, the pattern for their deportment, and they hope to learn from his example" (Astell 199).

With the familiar place names, the architecture and the courtiers' version of Gawain, the narrator has again offered up, in Bertilak's court, a mirror image for his own audience. Gawain is welcomed as they would welcome him in their own world. Aligning the benignity of this court with that of his audience allows the narrator to maintain suspense by keeping them as unsuspecting as their hero. He seems willing to suggest to his audience that there is more to Bertilak's court than meets the eye, but by portraying the world of Hautdesert so like their own and looking at it primarily through Gawain's eyes, the narrator ensures a constant tension between appearance and reality.

The narrator as trustworthy collaborator gives way to the playful manipulator, more interested in sustaining a diffuse suspense than a transparent clarity; "[he] reserves for himself the possibility of other meanings and gives us hints to that end. We are not encouraged to attempt to resolve the complexity but merely to recognize that it is there; the juxtaposition is [his] intent and pleasure"

(Davenport 160). This pattern of contending possibilities, alternately surfacing and then receding, manifests itself in Gawain's initial meeting with his unidentified hosts.

In the chapel, Gawain is called by name and praised yet again as "the welcomest wye of the worlde" (938). While the host's delight at Gawain's presence may seem to suggest a connection between Bertilak and the Green Knight, it has been carefully modulated by suggesting that, rather than when he first embraced him, Bertilak did not know his guest until after he "had lerned that he the leude hade" (908). Similarly, there are some arresting possibilities in the narrator's comically intertwined description of the ladies of the court. There is a humorous tone to his "split-screen" *effictio* as he contrasts the broad buttocks of the "auncian" (947) with the surpassing beauty of the "yong" (951). And we are given the unmistakable sense that it "mirrors the mental processes of the beholder, as Gawain's eyes travel back and forth between the contrasted ladies" (Bishop 616). Indeed, the young Gawain, gulled by the surface appearance, bows to the elder, secures a kiss from the "more lykerwys" (968) and unhesitatingly and courteously offers to be their servant. For an audience familiar with the many Gawains of legend and romance, however, this simultaneous intrusion of loathly lady and young beauty offers other, unstated but unsettling possibilities.

After the hardship of the Wyrle, Gawain fits

comfortably into this familiar milieu which the narrator, as he did with Camelot, declines to detail beyond the surfeit of "mete," "mirthe" and "joy" (1007). Although this shimmering portrait of the festive season in Bertilak's court reveals it to be every bit as generous and fun-loving as Camelot, and the host himself seems to be chief purveyor of mirth and entertainment, amidst this depiction of merriment is the evocative image of Bertilak holding his hood aloft as he issues the terms of a challenge "to glade Sir Gawayn with gomez in halle/That nyght" (989-90). Having already put himself at Bertilak's disposal once (1039), Gawain willingly agrees to a proposal which seems attractive but potentially perilous as Bertilak bids him stay behind to linger "wyth my wyf, that wyth yow schal sitte/ And comfort yow with compayny" (1098-99). Pressing further, Bertilak proposes the all-important third "forward" to Gawain:

Quat-so-euer I wyne in the wod hit worthes to
 yourez,
 And quat chek so ye acheue chaunge me therefore.
 Swete, swap we so, sware with trawthe,
 Quether leude so lympe here auther better.

(1105-09 emphasis added)

Perhaps caught up in both the excitement of discovering his goal nearby and the warmth of his gratitude, Gawain assents with an unquestioning enthusiasm. This will not be

the first time that Gawain, lulled into what later proves to be a false sense of security, falls blithe and unwitting victim to an unapparent threat. While another Christmas game, fraught with strict legal injunction and sealed with an invitation to "sware with trawthe" (1105), might cause the audience to wonder if they haven't heard this before somewhere, not even this unsettles Gawain's sweet dreams. Though not readily apparent to him, beneath the "blysse" of this disarming surface of comfort and security run those subversive currents of "blunder" which the narrator brings to the fore to tantalize and disorient his audience. His alternating patterns of apparent comfort and underlying threat flourish in the third fitt, where the welcome at Hautdesert gradually becomes a kind of inversion of the fall of Troy with the enclosed court mounting a "sege and assaut" upon the unsuspecting knight brought into their midst rather than the other way around.

Chapter 4: The Hunter and the Hunted

We are the unseen, unsuspected, audience peeping through the lighted window at the private lives of others, peering through the keyhole at the doings in their bedrooms Of course, those who peer through keyholes and listen behind doors get some nasty shocks too.

- Marie Maclean, Narrative as Performance

In bringing Gawain north to Hautdesert, the Gawain-poet also seems to have brought him through time; the castle, the court's customs and the perception of Gawain as a master of "luf-talkying" (927) all reflect the fourteenth century milieu of his audience. Having given his audience a "fixed" ideal in the Arthurian Gawain and then the suggestion of a more contemporary "romance" Gawain with which they are equally familiar, he has introduced a subtle undercurrent of tension between a set of potentially conflicting expectations. Whether they will prove to be identical or mutually exclusive is an uncertainty which the narrator exploits with an understated but relentless suspense in this fitt.

This disconcerting process gradually resolves itself into an unmistakable sense that, appearances notwithstanding, Gawain is at serious risk from a direct but ill-defined threat which emanates not from outside, but from within the comforting security of the court itself! Enriching his narrative with internal allusions to earlier similarities and differences in phrases or incidents, the

narrator not only increases the audience's apprehension for Gawain's safety but also begins to subvert its sense of his true nature and identity. The apprehension, generated by the bedroom interludes, is compounded by the vivid power of the hunting scenes, an added dimension of knowledge and detail shared between narrator and audience but denied the protagonist.

The structure of the hunting/wooing scenes which frame this fitt presents an alluring surface symmetry which has seduced some critics into fixing the interpretation of the actions it contains with an equal rigidity.¹⁹ Such reductive thinking runs counter to the dynamic of diffusion which pervades the whole poem. The temptation scenes, each framed by a hunt, seem to be held up as a lens through which we are invited to examine Sir Gawain more closely. Instead of bringing competing details and expectations into a narrow, transparent focus of coherent meaning, however, the symmetry of these scenes functions more like a prism, sending any notion of narrow focus into a cascade of diffracted profusion.

The audience, like Gawain, is placed into a situation where the setting and the "text" seem familiar, but the maze-like abundance of detail, replete with significances both resonant and discordant, is, at the same time, also defamiliarizing. Our attention "must choose between stirring panorama and significant clue; it must get lost in

the manic proliferation of things that makes up the body of the narrative and be caught, as Gawain is, between the significant and the insignificant, the necessary and the contingent" (Ganim 77). The narrative's demand for a heightened intensity of awareness implies a subtle warning to both Gawain and audience alike: to yield to the comfort and complacency of appearances is to court peril.

Marked by an appropriate three blasts of the bugles, the first exchange game opens with an assault of sensory images. (The hunt is such a frenzy of riotous clamour, headlong pursuit, wild vistas, thrashing vitality and bloody death, that one can imagine the audience being taken as unawares by this narrative shift as are the deer) by the sudden onslaught it depicts. (Beneath the turbulent surface of images highlighting chaos, panic and slaughter, however, there is an underlying order; the hunt is conducted in accordance with precise rules by men "lernered" (1170) in their craft.²⁰ Not only is this an activity familiar to the audience, it is undertaken with such exuberance that Bertilak is "for blyse abloy" (1174). (But the juxtaposition of the wild-eyed terror of the prey with the sheer joy of the predator,) a variation on the now familiar interweaving of both "blyse" and "blunder," invites a divided response to the hunt which undermines its otherwise reassuring familiarity and makes it an apt prelude for what follows.

The sense that the outdoor hunt is only one of the

fields of play in this game of exchange is artfully conveyed by the narrator's deft transition to the indoor setting. With his cinematographer's touch, the narrator effects yet another "split screen" perspective as he cuts from one chase to the other. Leaving off with "thus laykez this lorde" (1178), the narrator invites his audience to attend to that other lord who "in gay bed lyges" (1179) to see how his "game" will unfold. (The contrast between the warmth and security of the bedroom and the pandemonium which precedes it is as sharp as it is sudden.) While the narrator develops the contrast with the sounds of stealth and caution at Gawain's door, his description of Gawain's apprehension seems nonetheless to echo that of Bertilak's startled prey. The audience, peering in like voyeurs while Gawain peeps out, is presented with the hero taken by surprise. Indeed, his wary uncertainty suggests that, marked contrast notwithstanding, (the sheltering confine of the bedroom is no less a hunting ground than the cliffs and valleys outside.)

(The suggestive implications of Lady Bertilak's surreptitious entry are compounded by the indecisive response of this same knight that beheld the Green Knight with resolve and aplomb.) While (Gawain's circumspection and Lady Bertilak's resoluteness make it clear who is huntress and who is prey) whether the threat is real or imagined remains elusive. It is the narrator's game after all to play with "the congruity of pattern" and "the incongruity of

detail" (Barron 26) at the audience's expense. "The rhetorical implications are ominous, but the inversions of detail do not allow the outcome of the bedroom scene to be clearly foreseen in the fate of the deer. This uncertainty must itself be a source of tension underlying the episode, compounded by our ambivalent emotional attitude to both hunter and hunted in each case" (Barron 27). Faced with a bewildering uncertainty generated by the narrator's subtle play of alternating parallels and contrasts, and his willingness to let the characters speak for themselves, the audience finds itself in a state of watchful suspense not unlike that of their abashed hero, Gawain.

While Lady Bertilak's bright smile and jesting manner belie the faint hints of peril suggested by Gawain's crossing himself, there is, beneath her banter, an underlying fixity of purpose. Her seemingly harmless desire to "carp with my knight that I caght have" (1225) gradually begins to take the shape of a direct challenge to a Gawain whose identity derives not from her direct experience, but which appends as a result of yet more hearsay:

For I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wowen ye are,
 That alle the worlde worchipez quere-so ye ride;
 Your honour, your hendelayk is hendly prayed
 With lordez, with ladyes, with alle that lyf bere.

(1226-29)

While her focus upon reputation for both "honour" and

"hendelayk" seems an innocent echo of fixed virtues earlier highlighted by the narrator, it quickly becomes apparent that there is a disconcerting "doubleness" about her language over and above its detached tone.

Indeed, although her "welcum to my cors" (1237) has plagued critics who wish to resolve it into either an idiomatic "speech of friendly welcome," or "a blunt proposal of adultery" (notes 109), I believe it reflects the Gawain-poet's strategy of a deliberate use of ambiguous double meanings to increasingly foreground the potential discontinuity between the Arthurian Gawain of pentangle perfection and the accomplished courtly lover of chivalric romances. It is a strategy which allows "the literary knowledge and expectations of the audience [to] here become a direct part of the dramatic situation" (Finlayson 16).

*Proffering herself as "servaunt", Lady Bertilak's tactic of inverting courtly love convention to her advantage seems, moreover, a clear invitation to Gawain to seize the initiative and manifest the more amorous of these competing versions of himself. Confronted by his own mythos, which Lady Bertilak wields like a weapon against his initial diffidence, Gawain deftly parries her opening thrust through *diminutio*. Respectfully declining the identity which she is advancing by professing to "be not now he that ye of speken"²¹ (1242), and placing himself once again in her "seruyce" (1249), Gawain manages to restore the equilibrium

of courtly convention and shift the onus for initiating action back to Lady Bertilak.

Undeterred by his polite modesty, Lady Bertilak continues to press for advantage in this suggestive repartee by appealing to "the prys and the prowes that plesez al other" (1249) "to daly with derely" (1253), that "definition of knighthood wherein sensual imperatives supersede pentangle ideals" (Clein 105). Equally determined, Gawain, invoking Mary, fends off the barely concealed sexual overtones with "speches skere" (1261) and protestations that the Gawain she seeks is but a construct that others have imposed upon him undeservedly. Countering with his own oath, Lady Bertilak strives even harder to align the knight she has in mind with the one she has "holly in [her] honde" (1257) as she claims that what she has heard before she now knows to be true. Adept at wordplay, Gawain cleverly seizes upon Lady Bertilak's reference to a husband as a means to re-assert his loyalty to his host without bluntly disavowing the unspoken but pervasive issue of adultery, and to re-instate his courtly role as "servaunt" to her "souerayn" (1278).

Although the narrator, for the most part, allows the audience an unmediated keyhole view of this unfolding private drama, his own brief observation, that "ay the lady let lyke as hym loved mych./The freke ferde with defence and feted ful fayr" (1281-82) affirms both the subtle

adversarial aspect of this bedroom badinage, and the possibility that there is a gap between Lady Bertilak's words and her intent. Though Gawain successfully thwarts the three "assaults" of Lady Bertilak's first bedroom "sege," audience expectations cannot help but be confounded by his unexpected use of "luf-talkyng" and "cortayse" not to exploit amorous overtures, but to evade them. At the same time, however, any apparent inconsistency in this behaviour is moderated by the unmistakable sense that uneventful resolution of this interlude has, in some way, hinged precisely upon Gawain's refusal to play the game being offered. Whether the audience is able to evade the issue of discontinuity by giving Gawain the benefit of the less threatening of Lady Bertilak's "double" meanings, or whether Gawain's punctilious courtesy seems to have won out over Lady Bertilak's seductive advances, a nagging sense remains that the threat is less the lady herself than it is the reputation which she has playfully brandished before him throughout.

That vague sense is brought into sharp definition by the narrator's timely, albeit brief, glimpse into Lady Bertilak's state of mind which culminates with her startling challenge to Gawain's identity. While there is much uncertainty about where her thoughts leave off and the narrator's resume, particularly in light of the telling reminder of Gawain's other, more fateful game, she seems to

be assessing her situation with the detached pragmatism of a tactician.²² In craving Gawain's leave to depart, she appears to be conceding defeat and relinquishing the field of play to an uninterested opponent. But it is when Gawain and audience alike have been lulled by this false "fynisment" that she unleashes her sharpest riposte: "Bot that ye be Gawan hit gotz in mynde" (1293). Gawain's dismayed response, coupled with the narrator's admission that he is "Ferde lest he had fayled in fourme of his castes" (1295), reveals that, earlier disavowals notwithstanding, his reputation, in general, and maintenance of the rigid continuity of his pentangle virtues, in particular, are of paramount importance to him. It is also apparent that this rigidly defined notion of pentangle chivalry to which Gawain has thus far successfully adhered, is what Lady Bertilak is seeking to subvert with her own interpretation of the "cortaysye [which] is closed so clene in hymself" (1298).

The final outcome of this first interlude is a stalemate. "In the lady's perception a knight should attempt to kiss a beautiful woman; Gawain accepts a kiss because his idea of courtesy includes the negative injunction not to offend women" (Clein 106). But while Gawain is soon absorbed back into the mirth and merriment of Hautdesert between "the alder and the yonge" (1317), the narratorial shift back from the "solace" (1318) of the court

to the game of the hunt reveals for the audience the stark difference in outcome for Bertilak's quarry; the deer are carved in accordance with an established procedure which is articulated by the narrator in relentlessly prolix detail. The grand scale of this ritual butchery which might otherwise be a source of familiar pleasure to the fourteenth century audience, is undermined by the narrator's juxtaposition of its contrast with the outcome of Gawain's game. It is a contrast of details and perspectives, moreover, which "gives the reader a sense of fragmentation, a slight dreamlike lag between stimulus and response" (Ganim 71). This bewildering discontinuity of the familiar and the unfamiliar does nothing to ease the lingering tension of undefined threat lurking beneath Gawain's light-hearted episode and the concomitant notion that had he been less adamant in his resistance to Lady Bertilak's challenges, the respective outcomes might have had more in common than in contrast.

Though the frivolous context of "this play" (1379) is restored by the narrator's depiction of courtly conviviality, audience uncertainty is eased only slightly. While Gawain is depicted completely at ease in these surroundings of seasonal mirth and merriment, the narrator's game has undermined such a response in his audience. Having exploited the growing division between Lady Bertilak's and Gawain's respective visions and having divulged more detail

to his audience than to his protagonist, the narrator has utilized the resulting tension to add an element of anxiety and discontinuity to their identification with Gawain.

The narrator encourages his audience to recognize that there is more going on at Hautdesert than the glitter and mirth suggest and that Gawain may be in jeopardy as a result, but he also "seems deliberately to complicate the reader's understanding by making the literal level of the narrative more vivid and persuasive, as if he wanted the tension between literal and allegorical meanings to be extreme" (Davenport 199). Unable to apprehend the exact nature of the threat, unable to anticipate its motive, and unable to "warn" their fictional hero, the audience is compelled to watch in helpless suspense as Gawain not only happily settles up "by acorde of couenaunt" (1384) and then blithely agrees yet again "To fylle the same forwardez that they byfore maden" (1405), but also chooses not to disclose, upon Bertilak's request, the source of his winnings.

Playing once more with "the congruity of pattern" and "the incongruity of detail" (Barron 26), the narrator opens the second hunt not with three blasts of the horn, but with the thrice crowing cock. Against the backdrop of inhospitable terrain, the hunters pursue not timorous deer but a nearly indomitable boar capable of wreaking death and mayhem of its own. With the fearless Bertilak in headlong pursuit of this fierce beast, the narrator suddenly cuts

away to "oure luflych lede" (1469 emphasis added). His use of the possessive adjective serves to focus the interrupted tension of the suspended boar hunt directly upon Gawain, but it also serves to reveal his continuing narrative control. Inviting his audience to once again eavesdrop on the cloistered intimacy of Gawain and the lady, his stance forces the audience to confront the growing discontinuity between the Gawain before them and that Gawain whose reputation is as familiar to them as it is to Lady Bertilak.

* For no longer content with courtly double entendre, the lady has adopted the directness of frontal assault.

* While the terrain is far more hospitable, the hunt is perhaps no less aggressive: "Ful erly ho was hym at/His mode for to remwe" (1474-75). Cloaking the directness of her challenge in sweetness, "with a luflych loke ho layde hym thyse wordez:/'Sir, if ye be Wawen, wonder me thynkez'" (1481-82). * Picking up exactly where she left off, Lady Bertilak not only aggressively challenges his identity in light of his failure to conform to his renown, but she also questions his very comprehension of the "costes" of the society for which he has, after all, become the "fyne fader of nurture" (919). Gawain's response reveals yet again that while he may demur when it comes to this romance reputation, he remains sensitive to any challenge which questions his very identity--an identity which is inextricably intertwined with his pentangle virtues.

Apparently^{*} frustrated by his passivity and lack of initiative, Lady Bertilak pedantically spells out for him the preferred course of action concerning kisses. Gawain's polite attempt to respond to this lesson at the level of "dalyaunce" is, however, abruptly dismissed with an unambiguous invitation to "constrayne with strenkthe if yow lykez" (1496). Impatient with courtly repartee, Lady Bertilak wants deeds to be cousin to all the words that she has heard about Gawain. His refuge, however, remains the courtly conventions of wordplay as he reestablishes himself as obedient servant to her "comaundement to kysse when yow lykez" (1501 emphasis added).

In a sudden reversal of strategy, Lady Bertilak assumes the stance of willing and ardent pupil, thrusting Gawain into the role of exemplar of love. Affirming his qualifications for this task as one "That so yong and so yep as ye at this tyme,/So cortayse, so knyghtly, as ye ar knowen oute (1510-11 emphasis added), she then draws upon "the lettrure of armes" (1513) as authoritative text for the lessons she hopes to learn from him. As Christopher Wrigley has observed, "here she has, so to speak, slipped out of the frame of the story and become a fourteenth-century lady who reads romances and knows that Gawain is a great lover. She is, however, supposed to be a character in his biography and one whose part is played before the beginning of his amorous career" (125). It is easy to imagine Lady Bertilak, perhaps

even with romance text in hand, outlining the integral role of physical love in an ideal knight's behaviour, and then enumerating the points of connection between the "tyxt" (1515) and reality as she reasons: "And ye are the knyght comlokest kyd of your elde,/Your worde and your worchip walkez ayquere" (1520-21). Turning hesitantly from the textual authority to knightly figure before her, she seems, as Burrow suggests, "a little tentative: almost--'you should be making love to me shouldn't you? I have read . . . ' (92). She is unable to comprehend why it does not follow, therefore, that Gawain should be making love to her.

In a narrative moment worthy of the best postmodern fiction, Lady Bertilak here functions as a kind of representational figure of the audience within the text itself; her apparent bewilderment with the undeniable disjunction between the "fiction" of the fourteenth-century Gawain and the "reality" of the fifth century Gawain parallels the realization which the narrator is forcing upon his audience.

The notion of the use of a representation, the embedded performance to comment on the narrative performance itself, and hence to speak the truth about it, seems valuable. It is a way of driving home the impact and the implications of the rigorous parallels imposed between the two textual situations, the framing story and the framed

story. These parallels are part of the enunciation and demand a special audience, alive to the strategies of the text.

(Maclean 102)

Confronted with seemingly incompatible alternatives, they are invited to recognize that, like Lady Bertilak, their expectations of ideal knightly action and behaviour accord with certain conventions which, in turn, are reflections not of reality, but of literary illusion.

The Gawain-poet's game of turning intertextuality into a kind of intratextuality heightens his audience's awareness of the constructed nature of both their vision of Gawain, and by extension, themselves. By now, even the most obtuse member of the audience must recognize the inconsistency which has rent their self-flattering, conventional fourteenth-century image of Gawain. Lady Bertilak, in using that image to challenge Gawain, functions very like the *homo rhetoricus* that was the Green Knight; by reflecting the values of the audience, she exposes and undermines their desire to construct a flattering, fixed central self, their "temptation to romanticize wrongdoing, to live according to standards derived from their own fictions about themselves" (Astell 201).

Though he is bluntly challenged to give a "hands-on" private demonstration of his "game" (1532) and "wyt" (1533), Gawain, however, again declines action in favour of words.

Refusing to become an interpreter of her texts, his response hints at a measure of self-consciousness; his playful turning of the tables suggests, with an almost postmodern logic, that, as a mere character in knightly lore, it would be presumptuous for him to lecture to a reader

That, I wot wel, weldez more slyght
 Of that art, bi the half, or a hundredth of seche
 As I am, auther euer schal, in erde there I leve.

(1542-44)

Although he once again laughingly restores himself as "servaunt" (1548) and "Ne none euel on nawther halue, nawther that wysten/Bot blysse" (1552-53), the narrator lets his audience know that, appearances notwithstanding, this is no innocent "yong thing" (1526) that "Thus hym frayned . . . and fondet him ofte/For to have wonnen him to woghe, what-so scho thoght ellez" (1549). Equilibrium may be restored, "blysse" may prevail and, to this point, the Arthurian Gawain may remain, chivalric ideals intact, but for the audience there can be little doubt that the threat of incompatible alternatives is now levelled directly at that self-flattering concept of central pentangle self upon which Gawain prides himself.

While Gawain "with the ladyez layked alle day" (1560), the audience is once again whisked, mid-sentence, back into the headlong frenzy of the boar hunt. Though Gawain enjoys a respite, not so the audience; the narrator now begins to

accentuate suggestively the congruity of detail within his congruity of pattern. Detailing Bertilak's dispatch of the boar with a single blow at the neck and noting that "the bores hed watz born bifore the burnes seluen" (1616), the narrator uses these images that hint of that earlier, more threatening interlude at Camelot, to heighten suspense. Indeed, while Gawain's response to the boar's head and Bertilak's reminder that "this gomen is your awen/Bi fyne forwarde and faste, faythely ye knowe" (1635-36) may be to "let lodly therat" (1634) out of polite respect, the audience's response may be the more genuine. This grizzly echo of the "forward" made at Camelot may be lost on Gawain, but, with a greater sense of the disruptive impetus of Hautdesert, it is not lost on the audience. Playing upon audience apprehension, the narrator not only engages in a crescendo of allusions which resonate with Gawain's exchange with the Green Knight, but he also highlights the intensification of Lady Bertilak's siege of Gawain's chivalric virtues.

In marked contrast to the brief reference to their earlier dinner conversation, "closed fro fylthe" (1013), the narrator embarks upon a detailed digression which, against the backdrop of "all the manerly mirthe" (1656), focuses audience attention upon "oure luflych knyght the lady bisyde" (1657 emphasis added). Displaying disregard for both public setting and courteous discourse, Lady Bertilak

turns up the heat with her more physical discourse of body language:

Such semblaunt to that segge semely ho made
 With stille stollen countenance that stalworth to
 please,
 That all forwondered watz the wye and wroth with
 hymseluen,
 Bot he nolde not for his nurture nurne hir ayanez,
 Bot dalt with hir all in daynty, how-so-euer the
 dede turned

Towrast.

(1658-1663)

As A.C. Spéaring observes, "we are not left merely as observers of the behaviour of the lady and Gawain, but are taken into Gawain's consciousness and given a most detailed and subtle account of the eddying conflict in his feelings" (174).

Sensing the looming peril of incompatible alternatives, Gawain too is now both "forwondered" and "wroth with hymseluen" (1660). For though he is determined to continue to meet "dede" with "daynty" and to remain true to his chivalric "nurture" at any cost, Gawain is visibly shaken by the potential for loss of control; the mastery of courtly discourse which, at Camelot, was a manifestation of equilibrium and control over his world is, in Hautdesert, a mastery which seems now to limit and bind him "howsoeuer the

dede turned/Towrast" (1652-63). The narrator offers this brief insight into "oure" knight's consternation not merely to heighten suspense, but also to remind his audience that "the knight's sense of contradiction, of self-division, potentially poses grave problems to the culture whose idealized self-image he represents" (Aers 164).

Although the narrator appears to retain a detached and uncritical stance by primarily relying upon the direct speech of his characters, he manages, nevertheless, also to overwhelm his audience with an abundance of challenging and disorientingly unresolved ambiguities. Through the richness of his allusions, suggestive parallels and recurring motifs, his strategy is to reveal the discomfiting uncertainties of Gawain's predicament and invite the audience to try to anticipate and understand the outcome. To that end, he offers, without comment, details and fragments which arouse and play upon audience expectations, compel critical concern for their hero's actions and generate new levels of suspense. Any sense of relief engendered by Gawain's desire to leave for the Green Chapel rather than spend another night at Hautdesert, for example, evaporates when Bertilak restrains him and says, "For I have fraysted the twys and faythful I find the./Now 'thrid tyme throwe best' thenk on the morne" (1679-80).

Bertilak's words suggest that he knows more about Gawain's behaviour than his daily absence

warrants. Furthermore, the lines carry a powerful resonance of the memento mori topos, suggesting Gawain's upcoming encounter with the Green Knight and subtly linking the host with Gawain's opponent. (Clein 111)

It is easy to imagine the audience's response to Gawain's prompt and gracious acceptance as similar to the response of a present day horror film audience to those ubiquitous babysitters who insist upon checking out strange noises emanating from behind the doors of darkened basements.

Barely has that phrase "third time pays all" stopped echoing before the final hunt begins. Not surprisingly, the narrator's account is a profusion of detail rich in possible significance for an apprehensive audience. In a setting of wondrous natural beauty, the hounds roust an ignoble, albeit "wyly" (1728), fox. Elusive, devious and adept at eluding its pursuit, it nevertheless nearly outsmarts itself, evading the visible threat of chasing hounds only to be set upon by a trio of hidden hounds. Setting up a clattering hue and cry, Reynard the "thef" (1725), for the time being at least, avoids capture. Though the narrator's transition reveals Gawain to be "holsumly" (1731) sleeping, it belies his vulnerability as "the lady for luf let not to slepe,/Ne the purpose to payre that pyght in hir hert" (1733-34). The narrator refrains from divulging the purpose fixed in her heart, choosing instead to let the audience use his

descriptio to find their way to her intent. The discontinuity between appearance and reality is playfully suggested in Gawain's awakening from dreams of death by axe blow to a vision of loveliness that the audience is now beginning to see as no less threatening and perhaps even connected in some way to his impending fate.

*Working her own wiles, she arouses his manly vigour with the warmth of her presence. By now, the audience has come to recognize that though "blis" and "bonchef" (1764) prevail in their "wordes gode" (1765), all that glitters in Hautdesert may not be gold. Lest any fail to see for himself, the narrator interjects to alert us that "Grete perile bitwene hem stod" (1768). So great is the threat of the "blunder" of deeds within the "blysse" of words, that it warrants the intercession of Mary, last invoked when Gawain was in extremis outdoors. But while the narrator's conspiratorially shared warning invites the audience to focus its attention upon this scene expecting the worst, he continues to disclose only an artful fraction of the true nature and direction of the peril which now faces Gawain.

Importuned to the breaking point by Lady Bertilak's pressing and persistent overtures, Gawain is confronted by the incompatible alternatives of his own vision of himself; the seamless continuity of his chivalric virtues is suddenly forced into a mutually exclusive either/or proposition:

Other lach there hir luf other lodly refuse.

He cared for his cortaysye, lest crathayn he were,
 And more for his meschef if he schulde make synne,
 And be traytor to that tolke that that telde aght.

(1772-75)

Consciously choosing to maintain his loyalty to his host at the expense of his "cortaysye" to Lady Bertilak, Gawain finds the resolve to parry her final thrust with one of his own. Beseeching him to "layne not the soth/For gile" (1786-87), a plea which will soon be inverted for another purpose, * Lady Bertilak forces Gawain to dismiss her invitation to adultery with a discourteously blunt refusal. The game truly seems to have come to an end as the woman who consistently pressed for deeds now acknowledges dejectedly, "That is a worde, . . . that worst is of alle,/Bot I am swared for sothe, that sore me thinkkez" (1792-93). But for Gawain and audience it is also a moment of unwelcome insight as the seamless continuity of Gawain's pentangle self-image has been severed.

In that confused moment of relief and disappointment at seeing their hero both falter and elude some greater threat, the narrator presses his audience with renewed suspense. There is something uncomfortably familiar about Lady Bertilak's apparent surrender and sudden afterthought about parting gifts;

the lady starts the crucial discussion about
 giving love-tokens only when she appears to have

given up her attempt to make Gawain act as her lover. Such strategy contributes to an over-all sense of deliberate displacement in the poem, whereby not only is the hero continually caught off-guard, but also the reader is cleverly confused and challenged to read the situation truly.

(Davenport 188)

While they are trying to apprehend the full significance of what has just happened or just not happened, the narrator treats his audience to another, final "game of exchange" over love-tokens between the still persistent lady and her reluctant knight.

Initially deflected by Gawain's argument based upon value, Lady Bertilak adroitly shifts her stance from offeree to offeror by proffering "a riche rynk of red golde werkez" (1817). The same colours as his pentangle, it is a token, the narrator pointedly assures us, as brilliant as the sun and "worth wele ful hoge" (1820), but one that Gawain firmly forswears nonetheless. Accepting this refusal as a reluctance by Gawain to be "so highly halden" (1828) to her, she offers her girdle: "Gered hit watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped,/Noght bot arounde brayden, beten with fyngerez" (1832-33). Seemingly oblivious to its ominous association with the "gay gaudi of grene, the gold ay inmyddes" (167) of the Green Knight, Gawain sternly refuses

for a third time and resorts to what has come to seem an unimaginative and one-dimensional reliance upon convention as he promises, nevertheless, to remain her "true servaunt" (1845).

* Lady Bertilak seizes upon what she professes to be a disjunction between surface appearances and the unique hidden significance of the girdle as a means to challenge Gawain's notion of value. The narrator lets us share his reaction to her perfectly timed claim:

Then kest the knyght, and hit come to his hert
 Hit were a juel for the jopardy that him jugged
 were
 When he acheued to the chapel his chek for to
 fech;
 Myght he have slypped to be vnslayn the slyght
 were noble.

(1855-58)

While his discourtesy to Lady Bertilak exposed the internal inconsistency of the ideals he holds, his response to the girdle suggests a far more profound unravelling. Instead of a one-dimensional adherence to convention, the narrator reveals thoughts which "seem entirely human and natural, based on the instinct for self-preservation, . . . the thoughts of the man beneath the armour rather than the Pentangle Knight" (Barron 71). Placing self-preservation ahead of blind adherence to chivalric ideals is an echo of

that earlier view that "Warloker to haf wroght had more wyt bene" (677), but it also reveals to us the disjunction in Gawain himself. The slippage between the surface image of pentangle perfection and the inner uncertainty of "his hert" (1855) is reflected in the narrator's attribution of oxymoronic language for his rationalization of the "juel for the jopardy" (1856) and his "slyght . . . noble" (1858). "Upon Gawain's acceptance of the girdle, a gulf opens up between his private and public selves, for his actions no longer conform to the identity defined in the pentangle" (Clein 114).

*The unravelling of the Pentangle Knight is completed when Gawain graciously acquiesces to the lady's request that he "for hir sake disceuer hit neuer,/Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde" (1862-63). His courteous accord in turn breaches his oath of "trauthe" and loyalty to Bertilak. Gawain is being doubly undone; the inconsistency inherent in the conventional virtues of the pentangle already lies exposed, and now the connection between the reputation for those conventional virtues and the inner self is revealed to be as inherently inconsistent. His self-adornment with Lady Bertilak's "drury" seems to affirm that Gawain, unwittingly perhaps, has surrendered to her romance version of a chivalry where "ledes for her lele luf hor lyuez han auntered,/Endured for her drury dulful stoundez" (1516-17).

Hardly is the audience given an opportunity to grasp

the significance of what has happened than Gawain, after carefully hiding the girdle, is rushing off to confess in apparent anticipation of his untimely end. This abrupt juxtaposition of deception and a confession which "asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene/As domezday schulde haf ben dight on the morn" (1883-84) has baffled critics who have struggled either to redeem or condemn it in order to make it fit within some vision of consistency based upon the events which both precede and follow it. With an ingenuous candour, the narrator adds to the confusion and suspense by offering the audience this brief, precise and conventionally familiar scene with no indication of suspicion or inconsistency whatsoever. The audience, "in reading the blandly impenetrable account . . . would . . . recognize not one clear-cut implication, but a maze of interpretive possibilities . . . [and thereby] be stimulated to a critical examination of the context by just those enigmatic elements which have led to such divergent modern interpretations" (Barron 90, 88). Indeed, the only guidance the narrator offers is a picture of reassuring continuity as Gawain dallies in a "blysse" which even the courtiers are compelled to remark upon in superlatives.

Perhaps it is the narrator's pleasure to keep the audience in a state of disorientation. Certainly his invitation to "Now let hym lenge in that lee, there luf him bityde" (1893) suggests that they leave off dwelling on the

lord indoors in favour of "the lorde on the launde ledande his gomnes" (1894). In a state of uncertainty, it is inevitable that the audience will be highly sensitive to the familiar but increasingly suggestive motifs, hints and allusions with which the final hunting scene abounds.²³ It is also important to note that the narrator has, in addition to cutting away in space, also turned back in time. As A.C. Spearing points out, the narrator's use of the perfect tense in "hatz forfaren" (1894) suggests that what he now describes might even have taken place as Gawain was agreeing to deceive Bertilak (217).

There are discomfiting resonances between the "wyles" (1711) of this "thef" (1725) and Gawain's own "slyght" (1858) and promise to "lelly layne" (1863). The narrator's description of Reynard's end is both echo and ominous foreshadow as Bertilak, "ware of the wylde" (1900), bides his time, blade in hand. When he hurls it, the fox "schunt for the scharp and schulde haf arered" (1902) only to thrust himself into a worse, more ignominious end. It is here that the narrator utilizes the first of several instances of the enigmatic ethic dative which Waldron describes as a construction that "conveys a colloquial or ironic tone, suggesting involvement of the narrator" (notes 111). It serves to draw attention to the fox's dishonourable and messy end as a result of its attempt to evade Bertilak's blade. The narrator seems to want his audience, in modern

parlance, "to hold that thought," an invitation which encourages the audience to seek out the connections between events which on the surface seem discrete and unrelated. Bringing the audience up to date on the hunt, however, does more to generate audience anxiety than to relieve it.

Indeed, with Bertilak's return, there is a deviation from familiar patterns of conduct; instead of summoning Gawain forth, Bertilak finds his guest waiting by the fire for him. The narrator gives us a brief descriptio of "Sir Gawayn the gode, . . ./Among the ladies" (1926-27), clad in blue and white, a portrait of fidelity and chastity.²⁴ However, the audience's knowledge of Gawain's potential duplicity belies this image of "blysse" viewed through Bertilak's eyes. That something is not quite right in the hitherto predictable sequence of events comes clear in the narrator's ethic dative observation that "He metes me this goodmon inmyddes the flore" (1932). Seizing the initiative for the first time, Gawain rushes forward to fulfil his end of the game with three kisses. "It is for the reader to interpret his haste: the readiness of an easy conscience; the embarrassed empressement of one conscious of cheating in a game, but nothing more; the boldness of a shameless hypocrite?" (Barron 104). Bertilak's oaths by Christ and Mary and his bluff banter about the relative values of their respective "winnings" assume an ironic and somewhat sinister tone for an audience that realizes Gawain is going to break

his oath and withhold Lady Bertilak's girdle.

Any anxieties the audience may have about what exactly Gawain has done and what consequences will flow from it remain unresolved by the narrator. Though he implies unrest when he declines to say "If he ne slepe soundly" (1991), and he understates the obvious when he says that Gawain "had much on the morn to mynne, if he wolde,/In thoght" (1992-93), the narrator invites us, nevertheless, to "Let hym lye there stille,/He hatz nere that he soght" (1994-95). While it is easy for the narrator to urge his audience to leave their concerns aside for the moment, the suspense must be agonizing. Ushered into the familiar and comforting world of Hautdesert anticipating a mirth-filled courtly interlude before Gawain's trial, they have instead been forced not only to witness the apparent disjunction of the very paragon they emulate, but also to confront the challenge to the complacency of their own way of viewing the world.

Overwhelmed by the labyrinthine complexity of the contending possibilities with which the narrator has inundated them, their lofty perspective of disengaged audience has been subsumed by the disoriented perspective of one, like Gawain, who, enmeshed in its profuse inscrutability, is unable to discern the labyrinth's pattern or logic. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine the audience grown restive and uncomfortable, clamouring for resolution and relief from suspense. The narrator ends the fitt with

an attempt at reassurance by restating the terms of their own contract: "And ye wyl a whyle be styлле/I schal telle yow how thay wroght" (2001-02), but any promise of clarification must come as cold comfort to an audience no longer able to take any "forwarde" at face value.

Chapter 5: Understanding and Absolution

In one sense, then, the labyrinth is a nearly perfect symbol for complex poetry, poetry that challenges the reader to work at it and in it until perception of the ground design allows the reader to share the elevated perspective of the winged Daedalus or even God.

- Penelope B. R. Doob, "The Labyrinth in Medieval Culture: Explorations of an Image"

Although the narrator invites his audience to place their faith in him, their hope of apprehending a single pattern of meaning out of the diverse and indeterminate possibilities before them will prove illusory. While they struggle to impose an elusive "gestalt" sense upon his persistently shifting patterns of resonance and dissonance, their path toward resolution remains fraught with that richness of detail and image which both stimulates and frustrates efforts to orient and establish the larger pattern. Each narrative invitation to make sense of or resolve apparent inconsistencies is followed by a vertiginous yank of the rug upon which they have just been invited to step; they are continually thwarted by the re-emergence of allusions, patterns and images which disrupt impositions of fixed meaning and premature closure. Relentlessly deferring his audience's sense of coherence and understanding, the narrator keeps them in a continuing state of disorientation and suspense; the sustained suspense which allows him to retain control over the timing and unexpected impact of final disclosure.

Just as the transition from the charmed confines of Camelot to Gawain's impending fate was marked by calling the audience's attention to the relentless progression of time and the intrusive realities of the outside world, the final fitt begins with a resonating parallel. The timeless feel of the brief interlude at Hautdesert, drawn out through the narrator's protracted and effusive description, is brought to an abrupt but similar close by the reminder that "Now neghes the Nw Yere and the nyght passez,/The day dryues to the derk" (1998-99). Echoing his earlier description of the seasons, the narrator's description of a single winter's night re-invokes the patterns of the outside world, ordered, but relentlessly shifting "as Dryghtyn biddez" (1999). By reestablishing the central framework of Gawain's "anious vyage" (535) in this way, the narrator is reminding us that just as "The forme to the fynisment foldez ful selden" (493) after the passage of a year, the same may well be true after a few nights at Hautdesert. And it is against this backdrop of cold uncertainty that we are invited to look in on our sleepless knight.

That things are no longer quite the same is suggested by the narrator's self-reflexive use of the ethic dative: "And graythes mé Sir Gawayn vpon a grett wyse" (2014). Not only does it call upon the audience to attend to its apparent contrast with the preparation for Gawain's Camelot departure, conveyed by a lengthy descriptio and narratorial

digression which seemed to suggest the oneness of Gawain and his appearance, but it also subtly undermines that earlier description by initiating the process of retrospective re-ordering which will come to dominate the final fitt.

Endowed with a greater knowledge of Gawain's actions, we are arrested as much by the implications of what the narrator leaves unsaid as by what he does say. Suspended in judgment between then and now, we recognize that though "al watz fresch as vpon first" (2019), superlatives such as "The gayest into Grece" (2023) affirm surface beauty but little else.

While the narrator describes Gawain's self-adornment in that "wlonkest wedes, . . . /with the conysaunce of the clere werkez" (2025-26), the pentangle is no longer referred to directly; the "ryol red clothe that ryche watz to schewe" (2036) is overlaid by "the gordel of grene silke" (2035). And, with the narrator's approval of this juxtaposition as "wel bisemed" (2035)--a rhetorical stance reminiscent of that adopted by Chaucer's pilgrim narrator in describing the Prioress--the audience is placed in the unsettling position of having to come to terms with a blithe praise of the surface which both draws attention to and belies a more profound set of underlying negative implications.

Compounding the problem, the narrator limits the possibilities for a rationalization of Gawain's actions with a bluntly offered insight into his motivation for this

deviation from earlier form. It is neither for the worth of its wealth, nor for the glittering gold of its pendants, "Bot for to sauen hymself when suffer hym byhoued,/To byde bale withoute debate, of bronde hym to were/Othur knyve" (2040-42). Even Gawain's departure speech, an encomium in praise of a court that "on menske thenkez" (2053) and "for charyty cherysen a gest" (2055), invites the audience to question both his own capacity to keep honour with Bertilak and his ability to penetrate the surface appearances of his treatment as a "guest."

With Gawain's departure from Hautdesert, the narrator must re-set the scene for his audience in terms of Gawain's New Year appointment with the Green Knight. Though familiar images of the maze-like desolation of the Wyrle quickly put distance between the interlude at Hautdesert and the task at hand, the figure of the guide serves both to reestablish the threatening spectre of the Green Knight and to prolong the nagging uncertainties about the role of Bertilak and his wife in this matter. Like the other figures from Hautdesert, the guide is not what he appears to be; he is one of the "meyny" (2052), a professed admirer of Gawain, and yet he seems a little too well informed as he assumes an easy and excessive familiarity with Gawain.²⁵ Although he claims that he will speak the truth, it soon becomes apparent that even if the Green Knight remains an enigma to us, we do know that he is neither the devouring ogre nor

half the giant that this fellow claims. His ghastly hyperbole, however, does force the audience to bring to the fore all that they can recall about the Green Knight. And his protestations of certain death also serve to foreground for the audience both Gawain's promise to submit to that "dynt of his hande" (2105) and his magic love-token which purports to be powerful enough to ward off such an end.

The suspense generated by the highlighting of these contending possibilities at the heart of Gawain's fate is augmented by the guide's resurrection of ambiguities associated with Hautdesert. For though he is a guide, he seeks to deter, to guide Gawain away from his purpose. In his flurry of pressing and persistent oaths of honour and secrecy, he promises to "lelly yow layne and lance neuer tale" (2124). Before the audience can dwell upon the unsettling echoes raised by this choice of words, however, Gawain responds with an indignant rebuff of fierce determination and willingness to face "wele auther wo" (2134) as God wills it. However, this bold reassertion of knightly character and identity now rings a little hollow.

The audience's knowledge of the girdle, together with the guide's imprecation "Mary! . . . now thou so much spellez/That thou wylt thyn awen nye nyme to thyseluen" (2140-41), call our attention once more to the gap between appearances and reality in Gawain's self-image. As he surrenders himself "To Goddez wylle" (2158) and ventures

down the narrow track alone, it seems that Gawain remains "the hero of his own romance" (Astell 201). For the audience, however, the comfort of such delusion may have been irretrievably disrupted; as we follow Gawain down into the valley, nothing is certain, everything remains possible and suspense prevails.

To magnify that suspense, the narrator gives us the final stage of the journey through Gawain's eyes as "he wayted him aboute, . . . /And ofte chaunged his cher the chapel to seche" (2163, 69). Letting the audience share Gawain's perspective also invites a re-identification with him despite unresolved questions about his actions at Hautdesert. And putting Gawain and audience back into the setting where, in a sense, they were before the shimmering presence of Hautdesert came into view, reawakens conventional romance expectations for another strange and more perilous sight. Anticipation of something forbidding is thwarted, however, as the audience is given nothing but a large mound. Utterly outside of his ken in every sense, Gawain's perplexity about this place becomes ours as we await understanding or explanation. And his anxiety becomes our anxiety as the grim surroundings convince him of the worst: "Here myght aboute mydnight/The devel his matynnes telle" (2187-88). Believing what his "fyue wyttes" (2193) tell him, Gawain accepts this vale of death as the domain of that hunter of souls, the Fiend himself.

The narrator, artfully layering his levels of suspense, injects into this moment of eerie anticipation "a wonder breme noyse" (2200), which recalls to mind that "other noyse" (132) which heralded the Green Knight's entrance at Camelot. It is a noise, moreover, which "clatered in the clyff as hit cleue schulde" (2201), an horrific echoing of the earlier hunts conducted outdoors "wyth such a crakkande cry as klyffes haden brusten" (1666). No longer secure in the warmth of a distant bed, Gawain is alone in the wilderness with his own fears. While he could be held blameless for trembling with fear like the deer upon first hearing that noise so "rawthe to here" (2204), he responds instead with the steadfastness of the boar that refused to back away from the threat of death as he echoes the Green Knight's challenge at Camelot: "Who stightlez in this stedde me steuen to holde?" (2213). The onomatopoeic description of the blade being readied for use, the echoes of the hunts, concern for Gawain and the Green Knight's refusal to be rushed, all conspire to keep the audience in a state of disoriented anxiety and dependence upon the narrator.

While the Green Knight's entrance at the chapel is no less dramatic than his sudden appearance at Camelot, the narrator, taking Gawain's line of sight, focuses not on the man, but upon his "felle weppen" (2222). Indeed, the Green Knight seems to be simply "the gome in the grene gered as fyrst" (2227), who is accompanying this monstrous axe toward

the waiting Gawain!²⁶ Having made their way through a maze of contending outcomes, both Gawain and audience alike find themselves at the zenith of their suspense; this surely is the centre of the maze, the moment of resolution. For the narrator who knows otherwise, however, it is yet another opportunity to let his eye for detail mercilessly draw the moment out. He continues to exploit those complexities which subvert resolution by increasing uncertainty and suspense for them both. The beheading at Camelot, which was conducted with an alacritous and businesslike efficiency, becomes at the Green Chapel a complex and protracted affair. Standing back from the unfolding drama, the narrator allows his audience the same unmediated access here that he offered in the bedroom at Hautdesert. But with the spectator's privileged perspective comes the possibility that insight and understanding may not be merely unmediated, but also unwelcome.

Putting the lie to both the guide's hyperbole and the reliability of Gawain's "fyue wyttes" (2193), the Green Knight presents himself neither as ogre nor as devil, but rather as a knight coolly respectful, direct and, above all, punctilious to a fault. If there is any irony in his greeting "God the mot loke!" (2239) or in his calling Gawain "truee mon" (2241), it is quickly swept aside by his almost anti-climactic haste to bring the matter to a swift end. While Gawain's bravura vow to "stonde styлле/And warp the no

wernyng to worch as the lykez" (2252-53) mirrors the Green Knight's compliance at Camelot, as he bares his neck for the blade, the narrator allows only that "[he] let as he nocht dutte;/For drede he wolde not dare" (2257-58). Whether the outer demeanour is truly a reflection of the inner is for us alone to determine as we are called upon to judge what unfolds before us. Masterfully controlling the suspense, the narrator details the gathering blow with an excruciatingly patient precision. Little wonder that the doughty Gawain flinches "a lytel with the schulderes for the scharp yrne" (2267) and even less if the audience itself winces at the mere depiction of the intended blow.

Confronted with a sudden surfeit of conflicting impressions ranging from unwelcome echoes of the fox that "schunt for the scharp" (1902) to a shared recognition of a genuine human response to impending death, the audience is given little or no opportunity to sort out or digest their significances before the Green Knight promptly bellows "Thou art not Gawayn, . . . that is so gode halden" (2270) and proceeds to berate once more the discrepancy between deed and words, self and reputation. This challenge, so similar to Lady Bertilak's, is fraught with implications for the audience, not simply in terms of the growing possibility of an association between the Green Knight and Hautdesert, but also in terms of its indirect comment upon their own reactions, the discrepancy between themselves and "their own

fictions about themselves" (Astell 201). Audience resistance to such an implied challenge stimulates an increasing identification with Gawain, particularly in light of his renewed determination to "start no more" (2286) in the face of what now seems unavoidable death.

Deferral of yet another blow by the Green Knight understandably tries Gawain's patience. His anger with the Green Knight for this insensitive oscillation between the horror of descending blade and the relief of diverted blow may mirror the audience's own feelings toward the narrator. Though only a matter of unrelieved tension and suspense, they too are justified in crying out "thou thretes to longe" (2300), and in demanding immediate resolution. Indeed, the Green Knight's response, "I wil no lenger on lyte lette thyne ernde/Right nowe" (2303-04), could as easily be that of the narrator to his audience. Once again distancing himself from Gawain's inner thoughts, the narrator concentrates on the details of the axe's swift but altered arc.

But for Gawain and audience both, expectations and outcome are widely divergent and full of surprises. Gawain, caught up in the ecstasy of unexpected escape cannot see the hidden irony in either his demand against further blows or his invocation of the covenant made at Camelot. The "blows" he should fear are verbal, not physical, they arise not from the covenant at Camelot, but at Hautdesert and they will

sever more deeply than the surface just cut by the blade.

As if this sudden alteration in expected outcome is not confusing enough, the narrator, shifting to the Green Knight's perspective, shows us Gawain through his eyes and reveals that "in hert hit hym lykez" (2335). Letting the Green Knight's articulation of the rationale for his feints and his "tappe" (2357) reveal his "true" identity, the narrator "makes a brilliant switch from one characterization to the other; the Green Knight with his floating, undefined suggestions of Hazard, Fortune and Death, is converted into the lord at Hautdesert, bluff, cheerful commander and commender" (Davenport 172).

Forced into a fundamental re-ordering of perspective with each new disclosure, the audience and Gawain together undergo a re-shaping of reality in reverse--a "gestalt" shift of the first order; what was solid and certain transforms retrospectively into a wavery insubstantiality, while what was suspected or nebulous coalesces into shocking reality. With the Green Knight's revelation that "Now know I wel thy cosses and thy costes als,/And the wowyng of my wyf, I wroght hit myseluen" (2360-61) it suddenly becomes apparent that what the audience knows, he knows. Not only has the Green Knight/Bertilak shared their lofty perspective on the drama at Hautdesert, but he also seems to have been both an actor and its director.

While this sudden re-emergence of Bertilak, the hale

exemplar of the audience's own values in a courtly host, retroactively familiarizes the Green Knight for the audience, the Green Knight proves their ideal host a gamewright bent upon challenging the self-flattering concept of central identity so dear to Gawain. The audience is again face to face with homo rhetoricus; he is "an actor and insincerity is the actor's mode of being. The wider his range of impersonations, the fuller his self" (Lanham 27). Invited at Camelot to identify with Gawain as quintessential homo seriosus, "pledged to a single set of values and the cosmic orchestration they adumbrate" (Lanham 4), the audience perceived the challenging Green Knight as enigmatic threat. At the Green Chapel, however, the audience has had its frame of reference upended. Hautdesert has retrospectively revealed both the good-natured benignity of the imagined threat and the possibility that adoption of a flattering concept of central identity is itself not only an impersonation, but also an act of self-deception.

The audience is suddenly confronted, in the "new" Green Knight and Gawain, with two views of life: from a rhetorical point of view, ascribing to oneself a flattering, preexistent concept of a central self seems dishonest, false to the world; from the serious perspective, the ludic, agonistic challenge of the concept of human identity as single, solid, substantial and important is both threatening and suspect (Lanham 28, 81). As a result of its sudden

discombobulation, the audience is momentarily thrust into the ambivalent position of identification with both the challenger and the challenged. Their own apprehension and judgement, however, remain poised, held in suspense as the narrative presents them with alternating manifestations of the divergent perspectives of the two knights before them.

With the detached objectivity of a performance adjudicator, the Green Knight allows that in his estimation, Gawain is "One the fautlest freke that euer on fote yede./As perle bi the quite pese is of prys more" (2363-64). And with bluff candour, he lightly dismisses Gawain's lapse as merely a little lack in loyalty. Gawain's reaction to these revelations, however, is no less than if it was another "tappe" (2357): "That all he schrank for schome that the shalk talked" (2372). For him, that little lack in loyalty is, once exposed, a severance of self from cherished self-image. The narrator draws our attention to his first words, but there is an uncertainty whether in cursing "cowarddyse" and "couetyse" (2374) he is cursing those "sins" in the abstract, himself in the second person (2375) or the now transformed girdle itself in a misguided attempt to distance himself from his own perceived weakness. In his act of untying the knot and casting off, in the girdle, his "falssyng" (2378), Gawain presents the audience with a suggestive inversion of that other, endless knot by which virtues rather than vices "acorde" (2380) to him.

But while the audience may now begin to question the perdurability of any self-image, Gawain bitterly attempts to re-ascribe one in terms of his mortification: "Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer/Of trecherye and vntrawthe--both bityde sorwe/And care" (2382-84). Although it echoes the pure rhetoric of his earlier *diminutio*, this self-recrimination, a direct contradiction of the Green Knight's view, borders on the excess of hyperbole. Gawain is the too serious ideal hero who

lives under the obligation of upholding an ideal self image in accordance with the particular dominant religious and ethical concepts. He . . . is motivated by a search for glory and acclaim resulting in a feeling of grandiose pride, which can quickly shift to a crushing sense of shame when there is an affront to or rupture in the appearance of perfection.

(Carmichael 29)

So complete is Gawain's abnegation of former self, that he seems, in confessing his "trecherye and vntrawthe" (2383) to the Green Knight, to be seeking rebirth of a chastened and revised self-image. While this "confession" does raise the memory of the issue of the earlier confession and the breach of loyalty which immediately preceded it, it seems "impossible from this shifting, dramatic succession of plausible reactions and postures to justify a reading of the

poem which places strong emphasis upon moral lessons, or on Christian doctrines" (Davenport 174).²⁷ What it does do, is highlight for the audience both the profound depth of Gawain's sense of disavowance and the continuing degree of separation between the way Gawain sees himself and the Green Knight's vision of him. Indeed, his protestations of penitential remorse are laughed off by the Green Knight, who holds him "polyshed of that plyght and pured as clene/As thou hades never forfeited sithen thou watz first born" (2393-94). Still the consummate host, he even offers Gawain the Green girdle as a memento, "a pure token" (2398) between "chevalrous knightes (2399), and once again offers his hospitality at Hautdesert.

Faced with a continuing narrative oscillation between the Green Knight's ingenuous admiration and affection and Gawain's recriminatory self-absorption, the audience remains suspended by the indeterminacy of the shifting alternatives. While Gawain musters a measure of his former self to politely decline his host's offer, the courtesy he extends to "myne honoured ladyez" (2412) catches in his throat. The strain of his present disjunctive state on the chivalric code proves too much; lamenting "That thus [Lady Bertilak and the old woman] her knyght wyth her kest han koyntly bigyled" (2413), his tone shifts in mid-sentence from conventional form to genuine feeling, from courtly praise to clerical diatribe.²⁸ Exhibiting a despair and rage at

others "entirely out of proportion to the actual importance of the occasion" (Carmichael 29), Gawain reveals the degree of "unconscious dishonesty necessarily involved in the protection of the ideal self image" (Carmichael 29).

For the audience, this is an indication of the high price adherence to an ideal self-image may exact when it is disrupted. This uncharitable displacement of his own guilt poses a double challenge for an audience that holds him an exemplar of chivalric conduct. On the one hand, his selection of fallible, old testament patriarchs works ironically to undermine the basis of his own paradigm as Pentangle Knight and, by extension, the audience's construction of their own self-flattering images based upon exemplars like Gawain; "the exemplary types he cites were frequently used to illustrate both the possibilities and the limitations of human virtue, as warnings 'that no man truste in his owene perfeccioun, but he be stronger than Sampson, and hoolier than David, and wiser than Salomon' (Chaucer, *Parson's Tale*, X, 1955)" (Barron 130). And, on the other hand, the disquieting speed and ease of his mercurial transformation from faithful servant to slanderous reviler of women as cause of his own fault, presents a discomfiting reflection of the audience's own ready willingness to displace their weakness onto women.

Unwilling to accept absolution from the one he has "wronged", Gawain has, nonetheless, made an effort to

absolve himself. Convinced that "though I be now bigyled,/Me think me burde be excused" (2427-28), Gawain proceeds to retrieve the girdle and use it to reconstruct his self-image. In an eerie echo of the narrator's earlier elucidation of Gawain's motivation for keeping the girdle, he himself spells out the basis upon which he now accepts and incorporates it into his identity. No longer a magic love-token, nor mere souvenir of his chivalrous adventure, it becomes a "syngne of [his] surfet" (2433); Gawain perceives it as "a visible representation of the particular sin that . . . [he] has committed, appropriate to the referrent because it is the object wrongfully taken, which he will keep in order to remind himself of the frailty of the flesh and the ease with which it is corrupted" (Arthur 110). Though he intends it to serve as an antidote to "pryde" (2437), in replacing the "endelez knot" (630) with this "luf-lace" (2438), Gawain has, in effect, simply accorded himself a new self-image: the Pentangle Knight has become Knight Penitent.

As Gawain, firm in his resolve, turns to go, the audience seems at last to have been given, in the wake of all these challenging disclosures, a moment of narrative space in which to reach their own resolve: whether they favour the Green Knight's open, obliging vision of a Gawain absolved, or Gawain's closed, serious and self-condemnatory vision of himself as a fallen knight. Such moments of

narrative quietude, however, have often yielded the biggest surprises and as Gawain, almost as an afterthought, inquires after his host's name, this one proves no exception.

Anticipating the final piece of the puzzle, Gawain and the audience both receive yet another disorienting revelation:

"Morgne la Faye. . . ./Ho wayned me this wonder your wyttez to reue" (2459).²⁹ The disclosure is Bertilak's, but with the ethic dative it also seems to be the narrator's as it has implications for the audience as well as Gawain.

Despite its casual, almost offhand delivery, this last minute plot detail, "foregrounded by its very blatancy, expects a substantial rethinking of the poem" (Waterhouse, Stevens 362). Indeed, this transformation of the unidentified "aunçian" (948) triggers yet another sweeping retrospective re-ordering of all that has gone before.

Any sense of complacency or self-congratulation which the audience may have allowed itself, believing it had apprehended an organic unity or resolved indeterminacies, is utterly disrupted. The narrative equilibrium that seemed to have established itself is instantaneously suffused "with an ambiguity and indefiniteness because of the wide gap between her sudden crucial importance and our scant knowledge of her nature, her motives, and her relationship to the other characters" (Moore 226). We are not given any indication of Gawain's reaction; the challenge of her abrupt invasion of the text is the audience's to resolve. This invitation to

connect her test of "surquidry" (2457) with their own historical knowledge of Camelot's clouded fate--itself an implied reminder that Guinevere and Arthur may well be added to Gawain's list of self-deceivers--marks the beginning of the gradual process of leading the audience out of the fictional world of the text and back to their "reality".

The Gawain-poet seems to appreciate that "of all Arthurian characters she is the one who conspires most consistently and most effectively against our preconceived notions of literary form" (Vinaver 90). Prime mover of the challenge to Camelot's closed society and its excessive preoccupation with self and self-image, her presence serves an analogous narrative role for the Gawain-poet; it triggers a sweeping retrospective transformation which disrupts our complacent notion that fixed meaning is an emanation from the text, rather than an imposition which may be disrupted by that same text. It also forms an integral part of what has become a narratorial assault "which militates against unity and reconciliation of opposites and encourages a final awareness of the illusion that it is literature, since here we perceive as in a glass darkly and cannot expect to see clearly, even retrospectively, in this imperfect, sublunary world" (Waterhouse, Stephens 372). A final reminder that in the fictive or the real world, "the attempt to fix meaning is always in part doomed to failure, for it is the nature of meaning to be always already elsewhere" (Moi 160).

Seemingly done with Gawain, the narrator swiftly returns him to the world and time from which, it now may seem, he was so rudely drawn. His return is compressed into the narrator's brief assurance that it contained the conventional "mony aventure" (2482), but what the audience may, at one point, have longed to hear has now dwindled to mere mention in passing. He does, however, describe for the audience Gawain's new emblem: "Loken vnder his lyfte arme, the lace, with a knot" (2487), it has become a sign of his fault.

In Gawain's return to Arthur's court, the narrator provides his audience with a then and now contrast as Gawain presents himself before his peers. Part confession and part "show and tell", Gawain taking centre stage, recounts how his "los" (258) has become "losse" (2507), his "trawthe" (403) "untrawthe" (2509):

This is the token of vntrawthe that I am tan inne,
 And I mot nede hit were wyle I may last;
 For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may
 hit,
 For there hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit
 neuer.

(2509-2512)

But Gawain's self-absorbed aphorizing is a reiteration of the notion that self-image, whether "trawthe" (403) or "untrawthe" (2509), once "tachched" (2512) may never "unhap"

(2511). What the audience accepted at face value when told that the pentangle virtues "Were harder happed on that hathel than on any other" (655), they are now challenged to recognize, in Gawain's re-imposition of a fixed, albeit altered, central self, as the folly of a misguided preoccupation with paradigmatic self-images. Like Chaucer, the Gawain-poet seems to have recognized that the

human personality was the very opposite of single, solid or substantial. It emerged from the social situation as a fragile growth which, like . . . [Gawain], withered as soon as the supporting social context was removed. Once a poet has become acutely aware of the poseur in all of us, indeed that often we are little else, it is difficult for him to be other than a rhetorical poet. For a medieval poet blessed with such awareness high seriousness was not difficult: it was impossible.

(Lanham 81)

Appropriately, though perhaps unintentionally, the final view the narrator offers is the laughter of the court as it reacts to Gawain's dejected seriousness. Whether the court's embrace is an echo of Bertilak's understanding of Gawain's misguided seriousness or whether their absorption of the green girdle into their mythos is a reductive trivialization has become a moot point. Whatever one

decides, with it comes the realization that it cannot alter Camelot's outcome. Seduced throughout by their recognition of themselves and the world around them brought to life within the poem, the audience has been experiencing fiction as reality. They succumbed at the outset to the narrator's soft focus treatment of Camelot and they succumbed to both the evocations of familiar detail at Hautdesert and the sustained suspense at the Green Chapel, but with the return to Gawain's time and place they suddenly regain the lofty perspective of disengaged audience. With that perspective comes the realization that this is not their world but another world and another time: that was then and this is now.

As if apprehending their final moment of disequilibrium, the narrator steps in to gently ease the audience, one step at a time, out of the world of fiction and back into their own "reality." Reminding them first that this was, after all, just "the best boke of romaunce" (2521), the narrator then pulls them away from the scene at Camelot which was, of course, long ago in "Arthurus day" (2522). Distancing them even further, he invokes the even larger framework of the Brutus chronicles. And, with his repetition of the poem's first line, he brings us back to the starting point. Lest we draw any false comfort or security from the restoration of this new perspective on that world we have just left, we are offered an implied

reminder that that world is also this world: "Mony aunteres her biforne/Have fallen such ere this" (2527-28). We remain within the labyrinthine complexity of the sublunary world

Where werre and wrake and wonder
 Bi sythes has woned therinne
 And oft both blysse and blunder
 Ful skete has skyfted synne.

(16-19)

With his final lines of the poem, the narrator seems to invite the audience to accept that the one truly lofty perspective that can discern all patterns, the one world of transcendental purity where "blysse" is not inevitably interconnected with "blunder" is not of this realm.

Having brought us full circle, the narrator's contract seems to have been fulfilled and the game ended. We have, in effect, been ushered out of a fictional maze in which we have laboured under the illusion of a lofty pattern-discerning perspective while the narrator delighted in continually revealing it to be instead the disorienting perspective of one confounded by the bewildering involutions of the maze. The Gawain-poet's success in making the interaction between text and audience as complex as the poem's structure is reflected in its ending; its circular symmetry suggests closure, but what was true within the poem is also true outside of it: "the forme to the fynisment foldez ful selden" (499).

Indeed, depositing the audience at their point of entry seems an open invitation to re-enter, to recognize that, even endowed with foreknowledge, the poem will continue to resist interpretive closure while persistently stimulating re-vision. Its relentless and self-conscious attention to its own artifice continues to challenge audience understanding of the relationship between fiction and reality. The Gawain-poet's appreciation of both the conventional and arbitrary nature of language and that seemingly irrepressible human compulsion for signification and imposition of stable meaning is reflected in his use of this style which aims not so much to reflect or represent the "real" world, as to challenge that human compulsion for rendering it transparent in the search for fixed, transcendent clarity. The Gawain-poet well understood that "clarity needs the opaque styles to be itself. Without them, we may mistake clarity for reality. When we do this, we cease to see, and so to understand clarity at all" (Lanham 24).

The Gawain poet recognized centuries ago that our interconnectedness with the real world, with our very selves, is mediated through language. And he understood its implications in terms of the construction of "reality" itself. For him,

literature both is and is not autonomous vis-a-vis "real" life. It all depends on which reality is

consulted. If we posit a serious reality as referential, then literature is clearly autonomous. Its identities are all roles, its realities all dramas. Its relation to life is by way of pseudostatements. But if reality is rhetorical? Is not literature here truly isomorphic, real in exactly the same way as life? Same self and same society? Not mimesis but enactment?

(Lanham 19)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is indeed an "enactment" rather than a conventional mimetic literary artifact. It is at one and the same time playful, parodic, purposive, excessive, naive, serious, forthright, deceptive, a maelstrom, in short, of all the dynamics at play in the process of both fiction and reality. It seeks to engage its audience in a celebration of rhetorical process rather than depict a fixed preexistent reality.

It is a poem which demands implicitly what Robbe-Grillet today calls the

absolute need of the reader's cooperation, an active, conscious, creative assistance. What [it] asks of him is no longer to receive ready-made a world completed, full, closed upon itself, but on the contrary to participate in a creation, to invent in his turn a work--and the world--and thus to learn to invent his own life. (156)

It is a poem which, in the end, does invite us to interpret, to orientate, to establish and to impose ourselves upon the text, but its rhetorical dimensions assiduously compel us to remain aware of the "constructedness" of the process, both within the text and the "real" world.

Confronting the rhetorical question "Can we allow a poem such as *Gawain*--so artfully balanced and structured--to reveal that finally the poet does not share our theory of unity?" (Waterhouse, Stephens 362), most critics seem to have preferred to deny the wonders of the text rather than confront the deficiency of their theory. Indeed, most twentieth century criticism has approached *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with the very kinds of ill-conceived assumptions about organic unity, mimesis and stable meaning that the poem delights in challenging throughout just as the Green Knight does Gawain. "Too much influenced by the concept of the detective story with its correct solution to be determined by the discovery of a number of clues carefully planted by the author" (Barron 86), conventional critics seem condemned, like Gawain, to repeat their errors. Eschewing the manifold delights of the labyrinth in favour of the self-deception of an exclusionary path, dismissing the unexpected wonders of the medium in favour of a single meaning, they sacrifice the poem for an imposition in the same way that Gawain sacrificed self for self-image.

Indeed, I have come, after many years of struggling with Sir Gawain, to think of that Christmas Eve fish as, finally, an emblem of all the red herrings the Gawain poet places athwart our trail through his imagined world, thereby guaranteeing that, by its ending, we will be thoroughly chastened exegetes and will recognize in Gawain's fall and failings as a knight, a Christian, and a human being an instructive analogue to our own imperfections as critics.

-Robert W. Hanning, "Sir Gawain and the Red Herring: The Perils of Interpretation"

NOTES

¹ A poem full of paradoxical dualities, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has given rise to inevitable disagreement over such basic issues as whether it is comic or serious, religious or secular etc. Some of these differences are reviewed by Morton W. Bloomfield, "'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight': An Appraisal," *Essays and Explorations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 131-157. See also *The Gawain-Poet: An Annotated Bibliography, 1839-1977* (New York: Garland, 1978 compiled by Malcolm Andrew).

² In particular, Hans Robert Jauss observed in "The Alterity and modernity of Medieval Literature," *New Literary History*, 10.2 (1979): 181-230, that "the present dilemma of research into the Middle Ages may be sketched as follows: the classical paradigms of the positivistic tradition of research as well as the idealistic interpretation of works or styles have exhausted themselves . . ." (182). This view is echoed by Robert M. Jordan in *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 3: "After a period of vital activity conducted largely under the aegis of the New Criticism, interpretive studies appear to be reaching the point of exhaustion."

³ This term was coined by E. Talbot Donaldson in his article, "Chaucer and the Elusion of Clarity" in *Essays and Studies* 1972, Ed. T. S. Dorch (London: John Murray, 1972), 23-44. It was applied again by Lois Bragg in "'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' and the Elusion of Clarity," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 4 (1985): 482-488.

⁴ Lanham's articulation of the polemic of the western self as an uneasy combination of a serious central self constantly confronted by a challenge to its stable orientation echoes what Eugene Vance, in "Pas de Trois: Narrative, Hermeneutics, and Structure in Medieval Poetics," *Interpretation of Narrative*, Eds. Mario J. Valdez and Owen J. Milker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 118-134 sees as "the growing interest among late medieval philosophers such as Scotus and Ockham in the discrepancy between words, concepts, and things as they relate to individual experience" (130). An interest which "gave an ample rational basis (if one was necessary) for semiological strategies among poets that would subject the reader's relationship to the written text to a rigorously controlled ambiguity" (130).

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, eds, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2nd ed., Norman Davis ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 129. All subsequent references to this text will appear in the body of the thesis. Textual

spelling for words containing "thorne" and "yogh", however, will follow that of J. A. Burrow's edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

⁶ See in particular, Theodore Silverstein, "'Sir Gawain', Dear Brutus, and Britain's Fortunate Founding: A Study in Comedy and Convention," *Modern Philology*, 62.3 (1965): 189-206, and for a more recent treatment, Victor Y. Haines "Allusions to the Felix Culpa in the Prologue of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'," *University of Ottawa Quarterly*, 44.2 (1974): 158-177 and his book, *The Fortunate Fall of Sir Gawain* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982). In fairness, although Haine's focus is the Felix Culpa, he does acknowledge in "Allusions" that "what may have been discounted as a ritual preliminary before getting down to the real story is seen as an important source for impressions as to what the story is about" (158).

⁷ Marie Borroff, in her book *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: a Stylistic and Metrical Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), devotes a chapter, "Criticism of Style: the Narrator in the Challenge Episode" (115-129), to the role of the narrator in ensuring the engagement of the reader in the game which is afoot in the poem proper.

⁸ Bishop's acknowledgment of the uncertainty surrounding the date of the poem accounts for the speculative nature of his assertion, but additional basis for this view may be found in Wendy Clein's, *Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Norman OK: Pilgrim Books, 1987), 76. Bloomfield suggests in his "Appraisal," that "there is evidence that Edward III deliberately strove to rehabilitate chivalry and knighthood. The Arthurian legend provided England with a ready-made aristocratic myth of its past glories" (139). Gervase Mathew, in *The Court of Richard II* (London: John Murray, 1968), 166, advances the theory that the poem was composed for Sir John Stanley, Richard II's Controller of the Wardrobe, responsible for the military organization of the Chamber Knights, who later forsook his loyalty to Richard in favour of extensive service to Henry Bolingbroke. Arthur's day was, in any event, a history sufficiently misty and ambiguous to allow for the Gawain poet's "updating".

⁹ Although there is still some uncertainty about the exact nature of the gifts for which the lords and ladies contended, there is general consensus that as Tolkien-Gordon suggest, "with great probability...the gift about which ladies laughed though they had lost, while 'he that won was not wroth', was a kiss" (74).

¹⁰ While most critics, with the obvious benefit of subsequent readings, agree that there is something equivocal

¹⁵ As Tolkien-Gordon notes, "Gawain's gear, especially in the elaboration of the 'payttrure' and the 'covertour', suggests the latter part of the fourteenth century" (90). Clein (see note 7 above) also suggests that Gawain's gear is "a costly version of the type fashionable in the late fourteenth century" (91).

¹⁶ The numerical relationship between Gawain's five fives and the numerical structure of the poem as whole is thoroughly explored by Allan Metcalf in "Gawain's Number," *Essays in the Numerical Criticism of Medieval Literature*. Ed. Caroline D. Eckhardt (London: Assoc. Univ. Presses, 1980), 141-155.

¹⁷ Although some of the place names can no longer be identified, as Tolkien-Gordon suggests, it is generally conceded that Gawain's trail leads to north Wales, not far from the northwest midlands where the poet and his audience are thought to have dwelt (xxvii). Michael J. Bennett goes so far as to suggest in his article "Courtly Literature and Northwest England in the Later Middle Ages," *Court and Poet* (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1981), 69-77, that the route outlined is "the very path followed by [Richard II] and his Cheshire retainers on their return from Ireland in July 1399" (76).

¹⁸ Tolkien-Gordon points out, as have so many others, that "the poet is evidently describing the architectural fashion of his own time" (99).

¹⁹ For animal imagery parallels, see in particular, Savage, H. L. "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Journal of English and German Philology* 27 (1928): 1-15 and Spiers, John. *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (Faber and Faber: London, 1957).

²⁰ As Tolkien-Gordon indicates, the hunting scenes and the almost ritual procedure for dressing venison are an accurately detailed depiction of fourteenth century hunting customs as set out in contemporary books and manuals of the hunt (105ff).

²¹ Like W.R.J. Barron, in *Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), I am intrigued by the reading which emphasizes the ambiguity of the word "now": "implying 'I am not the amorous knight under these circumstances, with my host's wife', or 'while on such a fatal mission'" (35). To these I would add "I am not yet the amorous knight of which you speak", a reading consistent with the notion that the Gawain-poet has brought a youthful fifth century Gawain into the fourteenth century world of his audience in order to

better illustrate for that audience the discontinuity inherent in their misguided notions of fixed ideals from the misty past.

²² There is divided opinion on precisely where Lady Bertilak's thoughts leave off and the narrator's resumes. Editions vary, and while some have followed Morris's emendation of "Thagh I were burde bryghtest, the burde in mynde had" (1284) to "Thagh ho were burde bryghtest, the burn in mynde had" (1284), all have used a variety of punctuation to draw their respective lines. The great concern is, as Tolkien-Gordon suggests, that if 1284ff is taken as part of the lady's thought, "it would imply that she knew that Gawain was obliged to face the blow from the Green Knight . . . a serious flaw in the handling of the plot" (110). In what is one of the first instances of free indirect discourse, it may be that the Gawain-poet was intentionally ambiguous--striving to achieve a nexus point where Gawain's New Year game, Lady Bertilak's motives and the narrator's strategy come together just before the lady's riposte to confront the audience with a bewildering complexity of possible connections and directions for the narrative to take in their minds.

²³ Even those critics (Barron, Burrows, Spearing, Burnley et al.) that eschew any notion of exact correspondences between the hunting and wooing scenes, all acknowledge that in the final episode the audience's familiarity with motifs and techniques employed there make such correspondences more plausible and compelling.

²⁴ The significance of the colours blue and white to the medieval audience is covered at length by Robert J. Blanch, in "Games Poets Play: The Ambiguous Use of Color Symbolism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 20 (1976): 64-85.

²⁵ The subtlety of the discourse between Gawain and the guide is dealt with by Paul Delany in "The Role of the Guide in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Neophilologus*, 49 (1965): 250-55. Allan Metcalf, dealing with the use of you/thou throughout the poem, also addresses the verbal byplay between Gawain and the guide in his article "Sir Gawain and You," *The Chaucer Review*, 5.3 (1971): 165-78.

²⁶ The narrative focus on the blade, guaranteed to heighten suspense, seems to support Waldron's contention that "'by that lace that lemed ful bright' [2226] is an oath on the green girdle (cf. the description at 2038f), spoken in petto by Gawain; at the moment when he sees the axe, with its huge blade, it is understandable that his thoughts should fly to his magic charm" (125).

²⁷ Numerous critics have wrestled with the confessions at both Haudesert and the Green Chapel in what has generally proved to be a vain and contradictory attempt to beat brief, tantalizing hints into solid underpinnings for decidedly serious moral or Christian interpretations of the poem as a whole. Robert Goltra's article, "The Confession in the Green Chapel: Gawain's True Absolution," *Emporia State Research Studies*, 32.4 (1984): 5-14 is of this same ilk, but it offers a review of some of the old warhorses like Burrow, Mills and, of course, St. Thomas Aquinas.

²⁸ The antifeminist outburst, like so many other disruptive textual moments which have the effrontery to challenge our sense of continuity and organic consistency, has been variously interpreted. Barron reviews the range of some of those interpretations and concludes correctly, I believe, that "the variety of interpretations suggests that, as so often when the poet is working by indirection, it is misleading to read one level of an ambivalent passage to the exclusion of others" (129). A less reductive treatment can be found in S.L. Clark and Julian N. Wasserman's article, "Gawain's 'Anti-feminism' Reconsidered," *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association*, 6 (1985): 57-70.

²⁹ Perhaps no other feature of the poem has so forcefully resisted attempts by critics to bend it to their interpretative will. The twentieth century consensus seems to be one of authorial incompetence; such a petulant and unimaginative response, however, reveals more about the inadequacies of the critics than those of the text. A delightful review of these antic interpretations may be found together with an intelligent re-examination of the poet's strategy in Dennis Moore's article, "Making Sense of an Ending: Morgan Le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Mediaevalia*, 10 (1988): 213-33. Morgan is also considered in the context of retrospectivity in medieval literature in general, in Ruth Waterhouse and John Stephens's article, "The Backward Look: Retrospectivity in Medieval Literature," *Southern Review*, 16.3 (1983): 356-73.

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