

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

R. E. Kaske
Cornell University

For Norman E. Eliason

It is startling to recall that when I first began lecturing on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I could find only one article on it that could be called closely interpretative. A famous remark in a well-known literary history added helpfully that the poem contained "no end of things to exclaim over"—an evaluation that inspired an almost equally famous question on oral examinations: "Exclaim over a few things in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." Today, after brilliant books by Larry Benson and John Burrow and a deluge of useful critical articles, we are likely to find ourselves in the opposite predicament of not being able to cover them all. Even so, I think most scholars would agree that interpretation of the poem has not yet reached a point of diminishing returns; and I would like to outline still another possible interpretation, whose main features, incidentally, took form well before the recent avalanche of critical studies.

Let me begin by suggesting that the governing theme of *Sir Gawain* is a concept that can appear in Middle English either as *lewté* or as its virtual equivalent *trawþe*. One acceptable translation of these terms would be "loyalty" or "faithfulness";¹ and in the context of medieval chivalry this meaning itself inevitably takes on larger implications—something like "faithfulness to all the claims that justly pertain to a Christian knight." (One is perhaps reminded of Vergil's *pietas*.) So considered, the ideal would include for example the knight's obligations to God and Christian morality, to the chivalric code, to his king and his immediate liege-lord, and to mankind at large in their various relations to him.

This ideal of *lewté* or *trawþe* is emphasized unmistakably at a number of key points in the poem. In the description of the pentangle on Gawain's shield, the pentangle itself is said to signify *trawþe*: "Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle / In bytoknyng of *trawþe*, bi tyle þat hit habbez. . . ." (625–26)² And in the latter part of the poem, *lewté* or *trawþe* is stressed repeatedly, apparently as the generic virtue that Gawain has been tested for. Shortly after the conclusion of the beheading game at the Green Chapel, the Green Knight sums up the whole adventure by saying that Gawain has been just a bit lacking in *lewté*: "Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and *lewté* yow wonted." (2366) Gawain replies that he has indeed failed in ". . . larges and *lewté* þat longez to knyȝtez." (2381) His next sentence includes a further reference to *vntrawþe*: "Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer / Of trecherye and *vntrawþe*. . . ." (2382–83) The Green Knight's final summarizing praise of Gawain emphasizes his *trauþe*: "And I wol þe as wel, wyȝe, bi my faythe, / As any gome vnder God for þy grete *trauþe*." (2469–70) And finally, after Gawain's return to Arthur's court, he accuses himself of *vnleuté* and *vntrawþe*, again with what sounds like an air of final summarizing judgment: "Þe nirt in þe nek he naked hem schewed / Þat he laȝt for his *vnleuté* at þe leudes hondes. . . ." (2498–99) And again, "Þis is þe token of *vntrawþe* þat I am tan inne. . . ." (2509)

This emphasis on *lewté* or *trawþe* is obviously supported by Gawain's actions in the two large tests by which he is confronted. In the beheading game, it of course takes the form of *lewté* to his plighted word in the face of what appears to be certain death. In the temptation scenes, the situation is much more complex—involving *lewté* to a number of different obligations, not all of them easily compatible. There is, to begin with, his obligation to the Christian virtue of chastity itself. Then there is at least a twofold obligation to the lord of the castle: first, the simple relation between a guest and his host; and second, the much more complex set of rules brought into being by the game of the exchange of winnings. Finally, there is his obligation to knightly *courtoisie*; hence, I take it, the emphasis on him as a paragon of it, both in the lady's speeches to him in the bedchamber (1226ff., 1248ff.) and

in the earlier comments of Bertilak's men when he first arrives at the castle:

Now schal we semlych se sleȝtez of þewez
 And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble,
 Wich spede is in speche vnspurð may we lerne,
 Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture.

[916–19]

Now the combination of these various claims presents Gawain with an extremely delicate problem in behavior; in particular, how say a distinct “no” to the lady—thus fulfilling his obligations to chastity and to the lord of the castle—and yet not violate courtesy?³ The dilemma is hit off perfectly by a description of his state of mind on the third day:

For þat prynces of pris depresed hym so þikke,
 Nurned hym so neȝe þe þred, þat nede hym bihoued
 Oþer lach þer hir luf, oþer lodly refuse.
 He cared for his cortaysye, lest crapayn he were,
 And more for his meschef ȝif he schulde make synne,
 And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde aȝt.

[1770–75]

The situation may be further complicated by Gawain's reputation in various other romances as something between a lady's man and a lecher, a trait apparently alluded to here in a number of remarks by the lady (1293ff., 1481ff.) as well as by Gawain's own carefully qualified disclaimer: “. . . I be not *now* he þat ȝe of speken.” (1242) In any case, I would propose that what we have in the temptation scenes is not simply the basic Christian drama of whether Gawain will yield to illicit passion but also a complex social situation calling for an unusual degree of tact and wisdom.

If all this is so, what we seem to have arrived at is a pattern in which *lewté* or *trawþe* is to be manifested in the beheading game through courage and in the temptation episodes through wisdom—or, if I can make the suggestion without running a good thing into the ground, in the beheading game by *fortitudo* and in the temptation episodes by *sapientia*. This formula *sapientia et fortitudo*

[26]

(that is, wisdom and courage) is of course a commonplace in medieval thought, as a summary of the heroic ideal; as such, it seems to me to play an important part not only in *Beowulf* but in a number of other Old English heroic poems.⁴ In *Sir Gawain*, the Green Knight's initial challenge to Arthur's court includes what sounds like an explicit reference to this heroic ideal: “If any so hardy in þis hous holdeȝ hymself, / Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede. . . .” (285–86) That is, if any be so courageous but so lacking in wisdom. Gawain's acceptance of the challenge contains an equally pointed denial of the two heroic virtues in himself: “I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest. . . .” (354) And in the latter part of the poem, Gawain refers three times to the curious pair “cowardice and covetousness”—all in contexts that seem to imply a summarizing judgment on his own failing, and two of them in striking juxtaposition with references to *lewté* and *vntrawþe*:

Corsed worth *cowarddyse* and *couetyse* boþe!

[2374]

For care of þy knokke *cowardyse* me taȝt
 To acorde me with *couetyse*, my kynde to forsake,
 Þat is larges and *lewté* þat longez to knyȝtez.

[2379–81]

Þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laȝt haue
 Of *cowardise* and *couetyse* þat I haf caȝt þare;
 Þis is þe token of *vntrawþe* þat I am tan inne. . . .

[2507–9]

Cowardice, I suppose, is obvious enough as the opposite of *fortitudo*; the question is, how about covetousness as a possible opposite of *sapientia*?

Very briefly, in Augustine as well as in later medieval theologians, the term *cupiditas*, or “covetousness,” has two distinct meanings: the narrow meaning of “desire for wealth,” and the larger meaning of “desire for more than is necessary in any good of this life.”⁵ In the latter sense, it is by implication a turning from the love of God to a love of transitory things, and the basic self-love that is inherent in all sin; and it is in this sense, of course,

[27]

that *cupiditas* is the wrongly directed love opposed to *charitas* or rightly directed love.⁶ Again, in medieval thought generally, *sapientia* is the direct antithesis not only of folly or stupidity but also of evil itself, since the rejection of evil is for the Christian the highest wisdom and can be accomplished only with the help of divinely inspired wisdom.⁷ Now if, as I have said, "covetousness" is a familiar generic term for evil, and if in Christian terms evil is directly opposed to wisdom, there seems at least some reason for suspecting that Gawain's "covetousness" may be intended as the antithesis of *sapientia* and that the whole expression "cowardice and covetousness" may be a deliberate denial of the heroic ideal from a pointedly Christian perspective.

With this thematic structure in mind, let us now turn to the famous hunting scenes, which alternate with the scenes in Gawain's bedroom. As Henry Savage suggested long ago,⁸ Gawain is clearly the "game" being stalked by the lady inside the castle while the beasts are being hunted outside; and it seems equally clear that on the first day the correspondence is enlivened by a reversal of sexes, with the female deer being hunted outside and the male Gawain inside. We may notice in passing that this whole motif of the reversal of sexes is further enriched by an elaborate burlesque of Courtly Love etiquette in the temptation scenes; for example, the highly conventionalized *congié* or formal permission to depart, normally granted by the lady to her lover, here becomes "De lady þenn spek of leue, / He granted hir ful sone." (1288-89) With regard to the overall pattern of the hunting scenes, Savage proposed that the character and behavior of the three beasts hunted on the successive days—deer, boar, and fox—are meant to parallel the changing tactics of Gawain on the three days. I would suggest instead that the animals represent emblematically the dangers latent in his situation and that their fates represent the fate which awaits him if he fails. The thirteenth-century encyclopedist Thomas of Cantimpré, for example, moralizes the doe as those who are too slack and cowardly of mind to resist temptation: "[Dammule] illos signant, qui animo segnes et ignavi resistere nolunt dyabolo temptatori; et ideo variis morsibus vitiorum horis omnibus demones in eos debachantur. . . ."⁹ The usual character-

istics of the boar in medieval encyclopedias are ferocity and what might be called boorishness: "Aper, id est porcus, vel sus silvester a feritate vocatur, ablata scilicet littera quasi asper, ut vult Varro. Unde apud Græcos, agrios, ἄγριος, id est agrestis, ferus dicitur et ferox, omne enim quod ferum est et immite abusive agreste vocamus."¹⁰ We have already noticed that Gawain's test in the bedroom scenes involves the extremely complex feat of not sleeping with the lady, while at the same time not slipping into ungraciousness in his refusal. If this is so, might the slack and cowardly doe stand for those qualities that would make him not resist directly enough, that is, preserve courtesy but fail in chastity? And might the fierce and boorish boar stand for those qualities that would make him resist too directly, that is, preserve chastity but fail in courtesy? And would the fox, with his common reputation for trickery and baseness,¹¹ then stand for the slight contamination of both wisdom and fortitude (the first by wiliness, the second by a touch of fear) that makes him finally accept the girdle?

Such an interpretation would be supported also by the obvious correspondence between the fate that awaits Gawain under the ax of the green man and the detailed descriptions of the cutting up of the deer and the boar, both of which make prominent mention of the cutting off of the head (1353, 1607). This observation, in turn, leads us to look more closely at the image of *brittning*, that is, "breaking up" or "cutting up," a word frequently used for the dismembering of game animals.¹² The verb *britten* appears four times in the poem, including one occurrence in the cutting up of the deer (1339) and one in the cutting up of the boar (1611). Of the two other occurrences, one is in the lament by the people of Arthur's court when Gawain rides off to keep his appointment with the Green Knight:

A lowande leder of ledez in londe hym wel semez,
And so had better haf ben þen *britned* to noȝt,
Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde.

[679-81]

I take this as a hint of what the result will be if Gawain, as the "game" to be hunted inside the castle, is, so to speak, "taken";

presumably his fate would then approximate that of the game animals. The other use of the word *britten* is in the opening lines of the poem: "Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye, / þe borȝ *brittened* and brent to brondez and askez. . . ." (1-2) Now Troy is a spectacular example of a city that fell victim not merely to force but to a combination of force and cunning (the wooden horse and all that), as is immediately alluded to in the lines that follow (3-4). Are we to understand, then, that Troy fell through a failure of *sapientia et fortitudo*, and was accordingly *brittened* like the beasts representing Gawain's possible fate?

The thematic importance of Troy in the poem is emphasized by its reoccurrence in the closing lines (2525), as well as by a comparison in which Bertilak's servant tells Gawain that the Green Knight is bigger than either the best four of Arthur's knights or Hector (2100-2). The most prominent connection of Troy with Arthur's court, of course, is the fact that the Britons were held to be descendants of the Trojans by way of Brutus, a legendary descendant of Aeneas, who like him undertook a long, eventful voyage to found a new nation. What emerges, I think, is a pattern in which Arthur's young court, the descendants of the Trojans, are tested in the person of Gawain and, for the time being, survive—as Troy in the end did not. Surely, however, it is also significant that Troy fell because of a woman; that one means of tempting Gawain is a woman; and that at some time in the future, Arthur's court is itself destined to fall through the unfaithfulness of Guinivere.

One common medieval significance of Troy is as an example of pride that was humbled; this tradition, apparently based on the words "Postquam . . . ceciditque superbum Ilium" in the *Aeneid* (III, 1-3), is for example dramatized on the ledge of the proud in Dante's *Purgatorio*.¹³ In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the testing of Arthur's court in the person of Gawain, along with his small partial failure, seems clearly bound up with a potential vulnerability to pride. The Green Knight first challenges the court by asking, "Where is now your *sourquydrye* and your conquestes . . . ?" (311) After the completion of the beheading game, he reveals that Morgain la Fée sent him "For to assay þe *surquidré*, ȝif hit soth were / þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table." (2457-58) Fi-

nally, Gawain remarks ruefully that in future he will look at the green girdle ". . . quen *pryde* schal me pryk for prowes of armes." (2437) Pride—as inordinate love of self, the preference for one's own desires over one's obligations to God and man—would in Augustinian terms be identical with the cupidity, or desire for more than is necessary in earthly goods, that I suggested earlier as the meaning of Gawain's *couetyse*;¹⁴ and both would form a natural antithesis to the *lewte* or *trawþe* that I have proposed as the governing theme of the poem.¹⁵

So far, I have tried to show that the controlling ideal in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is this virtue of *lewte* or *trawþe*, closely supported by the heroic ideal *sapientia et fortitudo*; and that this pattern of values informs not only the two main actions of the poem but also the hunting scenes, the theme of *brittening*, and the allusions to Troy. Gawain's slight failure in accepting the girdle seems nicely calculated as a minor defect in both of the heroic virtues—a small mistake in judgment as well as a small departure from courage. In a larger way, it is a semicomical acknowledgment of the inevitable imperfection of even this paragon of knighthood, aided and abetted by the tolerant laughter of Arthur's court, with God knows what sly comment on the "Arthur's Court" of the poet's own time and place. With regard to the vexed question of Gawain's two "confessions"—the first to the priest at Bertilak's castle (1876-84), the second to the Green Knight himself after the final confrontation (2369-94)—I suspect that the emphasis often placed on the question about the validity of the first confession is somewhat beside the point.¹⁶ That it is to be regarded as valid seems almost inescapable, in view of the poet's description of the effects of the absolution: "And he asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene / As domezday schulde haf ben diȝt on þe morn." (1883-84) However that may be, I would suggest that these two passages are employed mainly as a pair of related devices to illuminate Gawain's psychological state before and after the final showdown with the Green Knight. His confession to the priest, while sincere and presumably valid in ordinary Christian terms, does reveal by implication a possibly unconscious chink in his spiritual armor: a basic, almost unavoidable attachment to life it-

self. His later "confession" to the Green Knight is a rueful lament over this hitherto unsuspected imperfection. The fact that the first confession is to a representative of established Christianity who absolves and the second to a mysterious green apparition who on the whole condones (and who, I will suggest presently, is to be thought of from one perspective as nature itself) would provide its own wry comment on the never quite eradicable presence of natural man, even in so Christian a knight as Gawain. A word should be said also about the obvious fact that both of Gawain's major tests turn out in the end to be games, artificially contrived; the closer one looks, the more the poem is in fact saturated with this "game" atmosphere.¹⁷ The essence of a game is that it exists in a vacuum of sorts, testing highly specific skills by means of its own rules, which have no necessary connection with real life. Just so, I take it, the point of the "game" situation in *Sir Gawain* is to throw the emphasis onto the tests of Gawain *as tests* and so onto his virtue *as virtue*, apart from complicating realities.

Time forbids an inclusive analysis of the many other difficulties that would of course have to be accounted for in an interpretation of this kind. By way of example, however, let us consider two of the most formidable, beginning with the notorious puzzle of the pentangle painted on Gawain's shield (623-65), which is explained by the poet as embracing five groups of five: the five *wyttez* or five senses (640); the five fingers (641); *afyaunce* (trust or faith) in the five wounds of Christ (642); *forsnes* (fortitude) inspired by the five joys of Mary (646); and an apparently miscellaneous group of five virtues:

Pe fyft fyue þat I finde þat þe frek vsed
 Watz *fraunchyse* and *felaʒschyp* forbe al þyng,
 His *clannes* and his *cortaysye* croked were neuer,
 And *pité*, þat passez alle poyntez, þyse pure fyue
 Were harder happed on þat hæpel þen on any oþer.

[651-55]

Though incidental light has been thrown on this curious device in a number of studies,¹⁸ what seem to me its central questions remain unanswered: first, what is the significance of the fifth

group of five virtues, for which no exact parallel has ever been found? second and more important, why *these* five fives brought together in one figure? In the wilderness of medieval number symbolism, one thing that stands out consistently about the number five is its connection with the five senses and the material realm in which they operate. Dante, in the *Convivio*, compares the pentangle itself to man completed by reason.¹⁹ Some such meaning seems at least plausible for its use in *Sir Gawain*, with perhaps a hint of its status as a "spherical" number (one that reproduces itself endlessly when squared and so signifies perfection) in the five groups of five that make up the pentangle as a whole. Again, it seems fairly clear that the pentangle somehow gets replaced by the green girdle as Gawain's talisman of protection in the latter part of the poem. But when a poet as good as this one stops his story so abruptly and for so long to introduce a static device (even calling attention to the fact, as he does in line 624 with the remark "þof tary hyt me schulde"), and when the device itself is so complicated and so carefully worked out, I think we are justified in looking for something more.

My own attack on the problem is outlined in Diagram 1. The first two groups of five I take to pertain to natural man, that is, to man simply as man, without the redeeming grace of Christianity. The first group—the five *wyttez* or senses—represent a natural means to knowledge and thus relate to *sapientia*; the second group—the five fingers—represent a natural means to deeds and relate to *fortitudo*. I then consider the third and fourth groups of five as pertaining to specifically Christian man. The third group—*afyaunce*, trust or faith in the five wounds of Christ—I take to relate to Christian *sapientia*, by way of the profound connection between faith and wisdom;²⁰ the fourth group—*forsnes* or fortitude inspired by the five joys of Mary—seems related obviously enough to Christian *fortitudo*. (In these last two groups, the important concepts for this scheme would of course be not the five wounds and five joys themselves but the faith and fortitude they inspire.) If we understand these first four groups of five as defining Gawain's character and career in a general way, I wonder whether it is not possible to see in the mysterious fifth group an anticipation of the

Diagram 1

	Related to <i>sapientia</i>	Related to <i>fortitudo</i>
Natural man	5 <i>wyttez</i> (senses): means to knowledge	5 <i>fynGRES</i> : means to deeds
Christian man	<i>afyaunce</i> (trust, faith) in 5 wounds of Christ	<i>forsnes</i> (fortitude) inspired by 5 joys of Mary

With reference to host:
fraunchyse and *felaʒschyp*

With reference to lady:
clannes and *cortaysye*

pité

virtues he is expected to demonstrate at the castle of Bertilak, with the first two—*fraunchyse* and *felaʒschyp*—relating to Bertilak himself, and the next two—*clannes* and *cortaysye*—relating to the lady. Both *fraunchyse* (liberality) and *felaʒschyp* (which I take to mean a spirit of brotherhood with one's fellow man) seem integral components of the game of the exchange of winnings; and we have already noticed the prominent role of *clannes* and *cortaysye* (chastity and courtesy) in Gawain's dealings with the lady. The final virtue of the five, *pité*, can be understood either as "piety" or as "pity"; I would read it primarily as "piety" and interpret it as an epitome not only of the preceding four virtues but also of the other groups of five and of everything Gawain is expected to be—that is, as a virtual equivalent of the pervasive *lewte* and *trawpe*.

If this suggestion can be entertained without hilarity, there may just possibly be a further pattern based on it. In the account of the pentangle, the reference to the five joys of Mary is followed by a description of the picture of Mary also painted on Gawain's shield:

At þis cause þe knyzt comlyche hade
In þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,
Pat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer payred.

[648–50]

The detail itself is of course a commonplace in Arthurian literature; but as far as I know, the closest parallel to this description in *Sir Gawain* occurs in Robert Holkot's tremendously popular commentary on the Book of Wisdom, written during the 1330s:

Scutum nostrum est fides nostra, ad Ephes. 6[:16], "In omnibus sumentes scutum fidei in quo possitis omnia tela nequissimi ignea extinguere." In historia Britonum scribitur de Archturo rege, quod in interiori parte scuti sui imaginem Virginis gloriosæ depictam habuit, quam quotiens in bello fatigatus aspexit, spem recuperavit & uires. Isto modo nos si in bello uitæ præsentis triumphare uelimus, infra scutum fidei nostræ imaginem uirginis cum filio deportemus. . . .²¹

Let us notice particularly here the emphasis on the virtues faith and hope, both connected with Mary; in *Sir Gawain*, what seem to be the same ideas are associated with the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of Mary. Gawain's *afyaunce* in the five wounds (642) can easily be understood as an allusion to faith. His *forsnes* and *belde* inspired by the five joys and the picture of Mary (646, 650) can be connected, though perhaps less obviously, with hope, the militant virtue; to say that whenever he gazed on the Virgin's picture *his belde neuer payred* ("his boldness never faltered") is, after all, quite close to saying that his hope never faltered. If this equation still seems suspect, we may note the explicit connection between hope and strength, both inspired by Mary, in our passage from Holkot: ". . . so often as he looked at her . . . he recovered *hope and strength*."

Now faith and hope, which I have just suggested are related to the five wounds and five joys within Gawain's pentangle, are of course the first two of the Theological Virtues—Faith, Hope, and Charity—and since the Theological Virtues are the virtues that perfect man specifically as a Christian, they would fall in the right place in my earlier scheme, presented in the diagram. The virtues that perfect man simply as man are the four Cardinal Virtues,

Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude. I wonder, then, whether the poet may not be using the first two fives—the five senses and five fingers, symbolizing *sapientia et fortitudo* in terms of natural man—as a kind of summarizing allusion to the Cardinal Virtues, or, let us say, as covering the same general ground as the Cardinal Virtues.²² If so, he would then seem to be using *afyaunce* in the five wounds of Christ as a synecdoche for Faith (the first of the Theological Virtues) and relating both of them to Christian wisdom; and in the same way he would seem to be associating *forsnes* and *belde* inspired by the five joys and the picture of Mary with Hope (the second of the Theological Virtues) and relating both of them to Christian fortitude. If this pattern should be at all plausible, the meaning of the mysterious final group of five virtues—liberality, fellowship, chastity, courtesy, and piety or pity—would become obvious: Charity, the last of the three Theological Virtues, seen in those aspects that have a particular relation to the chivalric life, to Gawain's present situation, and to the pentangle as I have interpreted it. On the face of it such an explanation seems possible enough, and it is not difficult to find traditional connections between each of the five individual virtues and charity;²³ the only catch is that I have not yet found them related to charity as a well-defined group (imagine, if you will, the chore of reading through the corpus of medieval pronouncements on charity). I should add, incidentally, that one of my undergraduates a few years ago greeted this whole proposal about the pentangle, complete with diagram, with the brief but heartfelt comment, "What a hell of a way to have to read a poem!" Further questioning made it clear that what he was objecting to was a certain exacting mechanical quality, which may not have escaped the present audience. Whatever one may think about that problem—and there are many attitudes possible—it is at least worth recalling that the present passage seems unabashedly to invite this sort of regimented interpretation through its own preoccupation with a pattern of five carefully explicated fives.

Finally, let us turn to the enigmatic figures of the Green Knight and the two ladies, all of whom would seem to be outstanding

candidates for some sort of extraliteral interpretation. To begin with, how about the Green Knight as a figure of Nature? His greenness would be obviously appropriate; his carrying a bob of holly in one hand and an ax in the other (206–8) would hit off nicely the benevolent and the hostile aspects of nature; and there is even a certain aptness in the game he proposes, a demonstration of the proposition "You can't damage me permanently, but I can easily kill you," which, however inadequate it might be as a speech of nature to modern man, must surely have been an accurate summary of the medieval situation. At several points in the hunting scenes, the Green Knight (alias lord of the castle) seems in his joyous frenzy almost to become one with nature (1174–77, 1590–91); and the speech of the servant, warning Gawain not to seek out the Green Knight, describes him in terms that would apply perfectly to nature itself:

Per passes non bi þat place so proude in his armes
 Pat he ne dynges hym to deþe with dynt of his honde;
 For he is a mon methles, and mercy non vses,
 For be hit chorle oþer chaplayn þat bi þe chapel rydes,
 Monk oþer masseprest, oþer any mon elles,
 Hym þynk as queme hym to quelle as quyk go hymselfen.

[2104–9]

With regard to the traditions probably underlying the portrayal of the Green Knight, I agree with Professor Benson that the image itself seems derived primarily from the "green man" and the "wild man" so familiar in medieval folklore, literature, and art.²⁴ The "green man" is of course intimately connected with nature, through the theme of fertility; he is also closely associated with decapitation and with the cycle of the seasons, both prominent themes in *Sir Gawain*. I would also suggest, however, that the poet has adapted these popular images into a vehicle for a sophisticated and highly philosophical conception of nature—that of Nature as one of the two regents through whom God runs the material universe, somewhat like, say, the Nature who appears in Alain de Lille's *Anticlaudianus* and *De planctu Naturae* or for that

matter in Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*. It is in this way, I take it, that the Green Knight can be apparent enemy, deceptive tester, and benign yet righteous judge, all in one.

We come at last to the two ladies, the old one and the young one. Literally, of course, the old one is identified as Morgain la Fée; and at least a plausible motive for her enmity toward Guinivere and Arthur's court (2456ff.) can be found in certain romances of the Vulgate Cycle, where she is forced to leave the court because of a love affair that has been discovered and exposed by Guinivere. But if the Green Knight can be suspected of somehow suggesting Nature, one may reasonably ask whether there may not also be something more to the ladies. Hans Schnyder, in a book in which I can find little to agree with, proposes for them an interpretation I had often wondered about: that together they function as a symbol of Fortune, who is often presented as having two faces, one pleasant, the other unpleasant.²⁵ Sometimes, indeed, the pleasant face or pleasant side of Fortune is white, while her unpleasant face or side is black²⁶—a detail that corresponds rather well to part of the poet's introductory description of the two ladies:

Bot vnlyke on to loke þo ladyes were,
 For if þe ʒonge watz ʒep, ʒolʒe watz þat oþer;
 Riche red on þat on rayled ayquere,
 Rugh ronkled chekez þat oþer on rolled;
 Kerhofes of þat on, wyth mony cler perlez,
 Hir brest and hir bryʒt þrote bare displayed,
 Schon schyrer þen snawe þat schedez on hillez;
 Þat oþer wyth a gorger watz gered ouer þe swyre,
 Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn with chalkquyte vayles,
 Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled ayquere,
 Toreted and treleted with tryflez aboute,
 Þat noʒt watz bare of þat burde bot þe blake broʒes,
 Þe tweyne yʒen and þe nase, þe naked lyppez,
 And þose were soure to se and sellyly blered. . . .

[950-63]

In the German romance *Diu Krône*, written in the early thirteenth century by Heinrich von dem Türlin, Sir Gawain himself encounters a Lady Fortune who on the right side is "adorned with great richness, both body and clothing," and on the left side appears "old, blind, black, and faded":

Vrou Sælde und ir kint, daz Heil,
 Die wâren an dem rehten teil
 Geziert von grôzer rîcheit
 Beidiu lîp unde kleit,
 Und was nâch vrôuden gar gestalt;
 Zer andern site schinen sie alt,
 Blint, swarz unde bleich. . . .²⁷

It may also be worth noticing that Morgain la Fée and Lady Fortune are both goddesses and that at least one part of the Green Knight's later description of Morgain would apply about equally well to Fortune:

Morgne þe goddes
 Perfore hit is hir name:
 Weldez non so hyʒe hawtesse
 Pat ho ne con make ful tame.

[2452-55]

In the poem, the old woman does indeed send Gawain harsh fortune by way of the Green Knight, while the younger one offers him pleasant fortune. An association of the young woman with the pleasant aspect of Fortune might be favored also by the evident connection between Gawain's "three temptations" at her hand and the famous trinity of evils in I John 2:16, "concupiscentia carnis . . . et concupiscentia oculorum et superbia vitae";²⁸ in the roughly contemporary poem *Piers Plowman* (B, XI, 12-15) the dreamer is tempted by Fortune herself, who is attended by "Concupiscencia carnis," "Coueitise of eizes," and "Pride of parfit lyunge." If this whole identification of the Green Knight and the two ladies in *Sir Gawain* is convincing, Gawain's testers take on overtones of *Natura* and *Fortuna*, the two great regents by whom God

rules the material universe; the test of the Round Table through Gawain takes on cosmic proportions, surpassing even those it acquires by the comparison with Troy; and the result is to show man his limitations as man in the presence of these two great controlling forces.

NOTES

1. MED, L.2, p. 734, "leautē n.," especially (b); NED, "Lewty," "Lealty¹," "Troth, sb. arch., I.1," and "Truth, sb., I.1"; and J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: R. & K. Paul, 1965), pp. 42-44, who also emphasizes the thematic importance of *trawpe* in the poem.

2. Quotations throughout are from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, edited by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, and revised by Norman Davis, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967).

3. This conflict is discussed at length by A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 198-212.

4. See my articles "*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*," *Studies in Philology* 55 (1958): 423-56; "*Beowulf*," in *Critical Approaches to Six Major English Works: Beowulf through Paradise Lost*, edited by R. M. Lumiansky and Herschel Baker (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), pp. 3-40; and "*Sapientia et Fortitudo* in the Old English *Judith*," in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, edited by Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1982), pp. 13-29 and 264-68. This heroic ideal has recently been applied to *Sir Gawain* by Louis Blenkner, O.S.B., "Sin, Psychology, and the Structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Studies in Philology* 74 (1977): 354-87.

5. For example Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, III, xvii, 48, edited by William M. Green (CCL, 29; Turnhout, 1970), pp. 303-4; and *De Genesi ad litteram*, XI, xv, edited by Joseph Zycha (CSEL, 28, 1; Vienna, 1894), 1:347.

6. My argument thus far is paralleled, with further references, by David Farley Hills, "Gawain's Fault in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Review of English Studies* 14 (1963): 124-31. An attractive explanation of *cowardise* and *couetyse* by Theodore Silverstein, "Sir Gawain in a Dilemma, or Keeping Faith with Marcus Tullius Cicero," *Modern Philology* 75 (1977): 11-14, came to my attention after the present study was essentially completed.

7. Jerome, *Epistola C*, 3 (PL 22, col. 815); and especially Guilielmus

Peraldus, *Summae virtutum ac vitiorum*, I, III, ii, 6 (Cologne, 1629), 1: 176-77: "Et notandum quod secundum communem modum loquendi, & secundum modum etiam loquendi quem habet sacra scriptura, insipientia, vel imprudentia, vel stultitia non solum pertinent ad intellectum, sed etiam ad voluntatem & operationem. Vnde stultus est omnis peccator: & maxima stultitia est peccare, & maxima sapientia recte viuere. . . . Et notandum quod qui mortaliter peccat, multum stulte agit. . . . Sic nullus sapiens reputandus est qui in mortali peccato est. . . . Hic discernit vere inter sapientes & stultos, quod sapientes vadunt ad vitam æternam: Stulti vero ad mortem æternam." Note also the connections between *avaritia* and *stultitia*, *ibid.*, II, iv, i, 7 (II, 51, 53, 58, 60-61).

8. "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 27 (1928): 1-15. For subsequent interpretations, see Avril Henry, "Temptation and Hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medium Ævum* 45 (1976): 187-88 and 198, nn. 1-10, with Henry's own interpretation on pp. 188ff.; and more recently Blenkner, "Sin, Psychology, and Structure," pp. 361-65 *et passim*, and "The Three Hunts and Sir Gawain's Triple Fault," *American Benedictine Review* 29 (1978): 227-46, and Margaret Charlotte Ward, "French Ovidian Beasts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 79 (1978): 152-61.

9. Thomas Cantimpratensis, *Liber de natura rerum*, IV, 30, edited by H. Boese (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973), I, 125. A couplet of Martial, quoted by Thomas (*ibid.*) from Isidore, contrasts the defenselessness of the doe with the fierceness of the boar: "Dente timetur aper, defendunt cornua cervum: / Imbelles damme quid nisi preda sumus?"

10. Ps.-Hugh of St. Victor, *De bestiis et aliis rebus*, III, 17 (PL 177, col. 89). See also Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XII, i, 22, edited by W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911).

11. Rabanus Maurus, *De universo*, VIII, 1 (PL 111, col. 225): "Vulpes dicta, quasi volupes. Est enim volubilibus pedibus, et nunquam rectis itineribus, sed tortuosis anfractibus currit: fraudulentum animal insidiisque decipiens. . . . Vulpes enim mystice . . . peccatorem hominem significat."

12. MED, B.5, pp. 1184-85, "britnen v.," especially 1 (c); and "britten v."

13. *Purgatorio*, XII, 61-63, edited by Giorgio Petrocchi, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata* (Le opere di Dante Alighieri, Edizione Nazionale a cura della Società Dantesca Italiana, 7; Milan, 1966-67), III, 199: "Vedeua Troia in cenere e in caverne; / o Ilión, come te basso e vile / mostrava il segno che li si discerne!"

14. See particularly *De Genes. ad litt.*, XI, xv (above, n. 5), discussing the relation between Ecclesiasticus 10:15, "Initium omnis peccati super-

bia," and I Timothy 6:10, "Radix omnium malorum est avaritia [*Vulgate cupiditas*]."

15. *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, edited by W. Nelson Francis (EETS, 217; London, 1942), p. 13, offers a connection between pride and *vn-trewþe*: "þe first braunche of pride, þat is vntrewþe. . . ."

16. For example by Burrow, *A Reading*, pp. 104–10, who maintains that the confession must be invalid; his analysis of the "confession" to the Green Knight is on pp. 127–33.

17. For a convenient survey, see Robert G. Cook, "The Play-Element in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Tulane Studies in English* 13 (1963): 5–31.

18. See especially Robert W. Ackerman, "Gawain's Shield: Penitential Doctrine in *Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Anglia* 76 (1958): 254–65; Richard H. Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History* 29 (1962): 121–39; and Silverstein, "Sir Gawain in a Dilemma," pp. 1–8.

19. IV, vii, 14–15, edited by G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli (2nd ed.; Florence: Le Monnier, 1964), II, 79–80. For a full discussion of the number five, see Petrus Bungus (Pietro Bongo), *Numerorum mysteria* (Paris, 1618), pp. 249–64, and Appendix, pp. 24–25; and Green, "Gawain's Shield," pp. 129–35.

20. See for example Gregory, *Moralia in Iob*, II, xlvi, 71, on Job 1:13–15 (*PL* 75, col. 588): "Quæ profecto sapientia, nostra fides est. . . ."

21. *M. Roberti Holkoth . . . in Librum Sapientia . . . prælectiones CCXIII*, lect. 36, edited by Jacob Ryter ([Basel], 1586), p. 127; his reference is to the early ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* attributed to Nennius. Holkot's passage is paraphrased in an English sermon of the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, edited by Woodburn O. Ross, *Middle English Sermons Edited from British Museum MS. Royal 18 B.xxiii*, sermon 49 (EETS, 209; London, 1940), pp. 325–26: "I rede in Gestis Britonum, et recitat doctor Holcote super librum Sapientie, þat Kyng Artoure had in þe innare parte of ys shelde and ymage of Oure Lady Mary deprented, beryng a child in her armes, þe wiche ymage he wold behold when þat he was werry in batell and feynte; and anon for conforte and hope þat he had in hure he waxed freshe and herty azeyn and in als good poynte for to fey3the as he was at þe begynnyng. Ryght so in þe same wyze þou þat arte in batell here on erthe and fy3thyng not only azeyns bodely enmyes but also azeyns goostely, þat is þe world, þe feend, and þin own fleshe, þer-for loke þat þou haue Marye, Goddis modur, in þe innare parte of þi sheld, þat is þi fey3th and þin beleue." I am indebted for this reference to Edward C. Schweitzer of Louisiana State University.

22. Man's five fingers are allegorized by the fourteenth-century encyclopedist John of San Gimignano, *Summa de exemplis et rerum similitudini-*

bus, VI, xlvi (Venice, 1577), fol. 245^{r-v}, as the four Cardinal Virtues plus obedience (noted by Green, "Gawain's Shield," p. 134).

23. Note for example the inclusion of *charitas*, *mansuetudo*, and *castitas* among the "fruits of the spirit" in Galatians 5:22–23; and the progression from *pietas* to *fraternitatis amor* to *charitas* in II Peter 1:7. Peraldus, in the *Summa virtutum*, I, II, iv, "De charitate," offers possible connections between charity and each of our five virtues (italics mine): *Fraunchyse*: "Benigna etiam debet esse charitas, id est *egenis larga*. . . . Duobus primis facit Charitas, vt bene nos habeamus in his, quæ nostra sunt, mala propria patienter portando, & *bona propria liberaliter largiendo* [ch. 2; I, 124]." *Felazschyp*: "Tertio [potest incitare ad amorem proximi] *fraternitas naturalis* quæ est inter omnes homines. . . . Quarto *fraternitas spiritualis*. . . . [ch. 8; I, 139]." *Clannes*: "Tria hic tanguntur quæ ad charitatem disponunt: [Fides, spes, et] *puritas cordis* [ch. 1; I, 119]. . . . Antiquus inimicus *castitatem* in nobis si sine charitate viderit, non timet: quia ipse carne non premitur, vt luxuria dissoluatur [ch. 2; I, 124]." *Cortaysye*: "Charitas enim . . . pretiositas est hominis & operum ipsius. . . . Primum [quod valere potest ad hoc vt aliquis ametur a proximo] est *modestia in sermone* [ch. 9; I, 140]." *Pité*: "Charitas Dei & proximi propria & specialis virtus est *piorum* atque sanctorum, quum cæteræ virtutes bonis & malis possint esse communes [ch. 2; I, 123]."

24. Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1965), pp. 58–95. For the "green man," see now Kathleen Basford, *The Green Man* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1978); and for a recent study of the "wild man," Timothy Husband and Gloria Gilmore-House, *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980). A medieval stone sculpture of a bearded man holding an ax is preserved in the south transept of the Priory Church of St. Seiriol at Penmon on the Isle of Anglesey; Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales and Monmouthshire, *An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments in Anglesey* (London, 1937), pl. 79, upper right, and p. 121.

25. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Essay in Interpretation*, Cooper Monographs on English and American Language and Literature, 6 (Bern, 1961), pp. 59–60.

26. Howard R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), p. 43 and n. 4.

27. Lines 15853–59, edited by Gottlob Heinrich Friedrich Scholl, *Diu Crône von Heinrich von dem Türlin* (Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, 27; Stuttgart, 1852), pp. 194–95.

28. First proposed in a paper read at meetings in 1957 and 1958 by Alfred L. Kellogg and summarized by Donald R. Howard, *The Three Temp-*

tations: *Medieval Man in Search of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 232–34. I would suggest, however, that the three Biblical evils are reflected in the poem not by Gawain's temptations on the three successive days but by the three different temptations offered him—with *concupiscentia carnis* dramatized by the lady's offer of her body, *concupiscentia oculorum* (which is traditionally interpreted as avarice) by her offer of the gold ring (1813–20), and *superbia vitae* by her offer of the supposedly life-protecting girdle.

Forms and Functions of Latin Speech, 400–800

George A. Kennedy
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Although people have been known to paint pictures, mold figures, or create a variety of sound with strings or pipes or drums, or upon occasion to jump up and down and beat their breasts, the characteristic form of human communication is intelligible speech. A certain philosopher once observed that man is a political animal, and political institutions give form to the development of conventions in speech. Speech is sometimes expressive, sometimes informative, sometimes impressive; it has some purpose, whether to express how happy or unhappy the speaker is or to convey information or to impress another with the need to believe something or to do something. The technique by which a speaker seeks to accomplish his purpose is rhetoric, in the primary sense of that word. Since the word "rhetoric" is variously used or misused, it is important to stress that the term will here be used in its original, primary, and broadest sense. Techniques of written composition or devices of style are a branch of rhetoric, but only one of several branches.

In most societies, throughout most of history, effective rhetoric has been learned by observation, imitation, and experimentation. This is as true in Rome or in Paris as in Bali or Madagascar. Such techniques can be described and analyzed as a system of rhetoric, but conceptualization, and thus the systematic teaching of rhetorical theory, is characteristic only of the most advanced societies, and not all of them. Even in China and India the conceptualization of rhetoric was rather limited. Only in Greece in the fifth century before Christ was there a full attempt to make rhetoric