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THE TEMPTATION SCENES IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

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Ever since G. L. Kittredge demonstrated that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* consisted of two interwoven themes and that Gawain's fate at the Green Chapel depended upon his handling of the temptations of the lady in the castle,¹ critics have accepted the fact that the bedroom scenes lie at the centre of Gawain's testing. Nevertheless, in the wealth of criticism that exists on this poem there is little that focuses directly upon the lady or upon the temptation scenes.² Critics have tended either to discuss with never-ending fascination the enigmatic figure of the Green Knight or to give overall analyses of Sir Gawain as he appears throughout the whole poem. It is my purpose in this paper to come back to these central temptation scenes and by a detailed analysis of them demonstrate how Gawain is there manipulated, hoodwinked and finally defeated by a highly sophisticated opponent.

Before this can be done, however, it will be necessary to look once again at one of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* ever-recurring problems of interpretation. Just what kind of temptation is the lady subjecting Gawain to? On the face of it, it is his chastity that she tests and some critics have been willing to accept this as the main temptation. Thus Miss Everett believes that the first theme of the poem tests courage and fidelity to the pledged word while the second deals primarily with chastity.³ Eagan sees chastity as the main quality tested: "The first level of meaning is the literal meaning. It is a test of the court of Arthur, in the person of its most illustrious knight, for all its knightly qualities, but especially for its chastity."⁴ Spearing believes that "in the contest between Gawain and the Lady what is primarily at stake is his chastity,"⁵ while even more recently we find this view still strong when Pace talks of "the young woman whose *raison d'être* . . . is to tempt Gawain, primarily to tempt him sexually,"⁶ and Pierle says "within the framework of the poem Gawain faces two major tests—the test of his courage by the Green Knight . . . and the test of his chastity by the lady of the castle."⁷

The sexual test appears in a different form in L. D. Benson's *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1965). Benson believes that though the temptation is ultimately one directed against Gawain's courtesy, initially it seems to be a chastity test. According to Benson, Gawain must remain chaste not just because morality requires it but because "a sexual temptation is a clear invitation to sin, and, as Gawain realises, one who faces death must avoid sin, especially the sin of incontinence";⁸ and again: "Gawain does not know that the temptation is connected with the beheading, but he does realize that to succumb to the lady's advances will considerably lessen his chance of surviving the return-blow."⁹ Benson's evidence for this interpretation, as far as the actual text of this poem is concerned, seems essentially to be that of the one line (which he quotes on p. 42):

*And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne.*¹⁰ *Meschef* is glossed by Gollancz as "evil plight"¹¹ and by Davis as "the disaster to himself." Though not stated in these words, Benson's contention seems to be that *meschef* refers rather narrowly to Gawain's expectation of misfortune at the Green Chapel, but in the context where the word is used perhaps a much more general sense of evil fortune is intended. *Meschef* is after all only one of the things that is bothering Gawain at that moment. He is afraid that his reputation for *cortaysye* (1773) will be lost and that he will be thought *crabpayn* (1773). He is concerned also lest he betray his host (1775). This does not argue, it seems, for his rejection of the lady because he is specifically and acutely afraid of what it will do for his chances the next day but rather for his rejection of the idea of sin because of the evil it will do to his reputation in general.

Other critics have strongly rejected chastity as the quality that is tested. B. J. Whiting says: "Even in the late *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is characterized not by chastity, but by a continence induced by his sense of social and personal obligation. The test is not of Gawain's chastity, but of his honor."¹² Chastity is rejected even more firmly by G. Shedd: "Read as a chastity test, the temptation makes Gawain practically a subject for canonization; as a result, his failure of courage and honour become minimized to the point of apparent irrelevance, and the work itself becomes no more than a sermon."¹³

The rejection of chastity as the main quality that is being tested in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* must be upheld in that the whole emphasis of the poem falls elsewhere. Prior to the test, no attempt is made to specify chastity as a quality that is especially important to Gawain and thus a potentially vulnerable point at which he could be attacked. Indeed, apart from calling him Mary's knight,¹⁴ and listing *clannes* (653), which may or may not mean "chastity,"¹⁵ as one of Gawain's pentangle virtues, the poet does not even mention chastity as a quality that belongs to Sir Gawain. In any case the reaction of the retainers at Bercilak's castle to the news that Gawain is their guest and their anticipation of hearing something of *luf-talkyng* (927) hardly suggests a man in whom chastity is a renowned virtue. Further, even if Gawain's shield were to suggest chastity, we must remember that his helmet is also decorated with devices and that these (almost certainly love emblems)¹⁶ are as much his as the emblems on his shield. In this poem Gawain happens to be chaste, but his chastity is not so special a quality that the poet feels that it requires special notice. When Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel, chastity is hardly a matter for consideration. Gawain is not praised for rejecting the lady and his life is not saved because he did. The emphasis there is totally upon fidelity of a different kind. The first blows are withheld because Gawain was faithful to his bargain with the Green Knight; the last strikes his neck because he was not.

How then are the scenes between Gawain and the lady to be regarded? Are they to be considered as attempts at seduction in which the proper action for Gawain is firm resistance? Is this a real temptation that Gawain has to face? How far do the lady's obvious charms affect Gawain? Markman believes that Gawain is attracted to her in that he has "the normal sexual impulse of any man,"¹⁷ but with no indication that she has for him the kind of attraction that might lead to adultery. Gawain goes to sit with her in church (935), but he makes no objection when Bercilak *laches hym by pe lappe* (936)

and puts him elsewhere. After that, it is the lady who takes the initiative and approaches him: *Ho ches þurȝ þe chaunsel to cheryche þat hende* (946). Only when he has *leue laȝt of þe lorde* (971) does Gawain greet the lady and take her *a lyttel in armez* (973). He offers, gallantly and courteously as we would expect him to, to be her servant (976) but the same offer is made simultaneously to the old lady as well and when he leaves the chapel he walks between them both. At the feast he sits with the wife—*Gawan and þe gay burde togeder þay seten* (1003)—but this is no more than he had done with Guinevere at Camelot (109) and that carried no immoral suggestion. Finally, Gawain and the young lady clearly enjoy each other's conversation at the table but the nature of their talk is explicitly described by the poet as *clene cortays carp closed fro fylþe* (1013). On the evidence of the events of the first evening, therefore, it would seem that Gawain finds the lady an attractive and pleasant companion but there is no sign of anything more than this. Afterwards, any attraction that Gawain might have felt for her and which she might have exploited in the bedroom scenes is compromised by her early blunt announcement: *ȝe ar welcum to my cors, | Youre awen won to wale* (1237–8). Put on his guard in this way, Gawain can have no alternative but resistance.

Davis has attempted to argue that *ȝe ar welcum to my cors* does not have to bear its modern implications and that it could mean no more than "You are welcome to me" and "I am glad to have you here."¹⁸ He suggests that *my cors* has a meaning which was very common in idiomatic French use.¹⁹ Though Davis does not say that he himself finds the offer "crude" and "ill suited to this early stage of the lady's courtship of Gawain," he does say that other critics have done so and one suspects that he possibly shares their views and that it is for this reason that he has tried to explain away the supposed crudity. However, in my view, this is to misread the scene. I shall argue later that "crudity" is the very effect that the lady hopes to achieve, so that any attempt by an editor to minimize it weakens the force of the lady's plot to entrap Gawain.

The first temptation scene begins as the lady enters Gawain's bedroom. She makes very little noise as she closes the door *dernly and styll* (1188). She moves *stilly* (1191), and steals (1191) to the bed where she creeps (1192) within the curtains and sits *softly* (1193). This quiet, stealthy approach suggests that like her husband, who is at that moment in the forest, the lady too is hunting, but whereas he hunts with noisy gaiety she is stalking her prey with quiet, but equally deadly efficiency. The poet comments on her beauty briefly and conventionally. The largely empty superlative that she was the *loflyest to beholde* (1187) is added to only by short comments on her *swete face* (1204), her red and white complexion (1205) and her lips: *Ful lusty con ho lete | Wyth lyppez, smal lazande* (1206–7).

Gawain, not unnaturally, wonders what the lady intends. He cautiously lifts up the corner of the bed curtain (1185), looks *warily* (1186) and *lurked a ful longe quyle* (1195), pondering what is happening. He is cautious, prudent and a little apprehensive. In this he is totally unlike the deer with whom some have compared him, for at the first hint of danger they rush wildly off (1150–1). The other difference is that they know what danger threatens them and their reaction to it is instinctive whereas Gawain, though he might suspect, does not yet know for certain what the lady intends so that he is forced to wait upon events. Eventually, however, he decides to act. He opens his eyes,

stretches and pretends that he is just waking. He makes the sign of the cross so that he might be *þe sauer* (1202). This action should probably not be considered very significant. Very likely it is nothing more than part of his pretence of waking up.²⁰

The opening rounds of the temptation scene are fought in a light and jesting manner. The lady rebukes Gawain for sleeping without guarding himself. Beneath the surface jest, however, there is a real warning that he has been deceived by the apparent friendliness of the castle. As there are many biblical parallels in this poem, it may be possible to see an analogy between Gawain's position and that of the foolish virgins of the parable who sleep, not knowing when their moment of real testing will come.²¹ There is also an important extended metaphor of siege and battle in these early lines. Gawain has been *tan* (1210) so that a *true* (1210) must now be arranged. Laughingly, the lady says that she will *bynde* (1211) him as her prisoner but a note of ominous determination sounds through her jesting assurance, *þat be 3e trayst* (1211). It is the same grim undertone as that which appears in Bercilak's later promise to Gawain *Al þat euer I yow hyzt halde schal I redē* (1270). It is of course ironic that she does eventually "bind" him as she promised when she fastens her girdle about him!

Gawain follows her mood. He yields (1215), cries for mercy (1215) and asks her to release him from imprisonment (1219), only to be told that now she has caught him (1225) she has no intention of letting him go. All this is done apparently in the best of good humour. The lady laughs and jests (1212) as does Gawain (1217). Superficially, then, there is only good-natured, if somewhat ironic humour in that Gawain, the most renowned of Arthur's knights, has been captured by a woman. Yet the military language does change the actual bedroom situation into that of a metaphorical battlefield. There is, therefore, grim reality and threat beneath the comedy. Gawain is in a battle, though he is ignorant of the fact, and he is fighting a formidable foe who is no less dangerous for appearing in the guise of a beautiful young woman.

Bercilak's wife is relentless and pursues her attack with a direct refusal of Gawain's request that he be allowed to get up. Instead, she praises him, saying that *alle þe worlde worchipez* him (1227), that his *honour* (1228) is renowned and so is his *hendelayk* "courtliness" (1228). Her manner of proceeding here is exactly that which was followed by the Green Knight in his attack upon the court at Camelot.²² Whenever a major test is to take place in this poem the qualities that are to be tried are explicitly stated. In this way the reader knows the precise ground upon which the battle is to be fought. On this occasion the first two qualities that the lady mentions are general but the third one—*hendelayk*—is quite specific. It is the maintenance of this quality that is predominantly in Gawain's mind throughout the temptation scenes.²³

The lady continues her attack with a direct frontal assault in a speech that is blunt to the point of crudity. Her apparent hope seems to be to take Gawain by surprise before he properly gathers his wits. She takes his earlier conventional offer to yield and be her servant, an offer that was made on his part simply because it *byhouez nede* (1216), and she repeats it but in a much more intense form: *Me behouez of fyne force/Your seruaunt be, and schale* (1239-40). She is motivated, she says, by *fyne force* "absolute necessity." Furthermore, despite editorial efforts to tone down her words, her offer is unequivocally

direct and to the point: *3e ar welcum to my cors, / Youre awen won to wale* (1237-8). She is quite explicit in what she is offering. It is with her body that she tempts Gawain so that her appeal at this point is a purely physical one. Neither here nor elsewhere does she offer Gawain her love. In fact line 1281, *And ay þe lady let lyk as hym loued mych*, makes it quite clear that she has no such feelings towards him but is only acting a part.

Gawain's world is one of chivalry and courtesy. In it love is a refined emotion and its winning and granting must be done properly under the guidance of well-established rules. Decorum is everything. It is this world that the lady crudely smashes down by taking the initiative in the first place and then by offering herself to Gawain with such a lack of refinement.²⁴ To explain this tearing down of the conventional rules proper to love, the lady blames a necessity so compelling that she cannot control it. She would have Gawain construe her assault as deriving from the demands of primitive nature, which knows no rules, breaking into the courtly world of artificial manners. It parallels in a very clear way the equally rude intrusion of the Green Knight with all his nature attributes into the civilized court of King Arthur at Camelot. Looked at in this way, the lady's test of Gawain is seen to be just a different manifestation of that earlier test at Camelot, a continuation of it on different grounds rather than a separate affair unconnected with it.

The real purpose of the lady's direct and crude approach with its obvious physical appeal, however, is more subtle than that of tempting Gawain into adultery by surprise. Gawain is not likely to succumb to this temptation. In fact, except for a moment on the third morning when special circumstances prevail, the lady seems to have little of this kind of appeal for him. The lady's ultimate temptation is the apparent offer of life (i.e. by means of the magic girdle) in the face of seemingly inevitable death. However, the prospect of death by itself is not enough to make Gawain weaken. From the moment that the Green Knight picked up his head and remained alive at Camelot, Gawain must have accepted the fact that in all probability death awaited him at the Green Chapel. And yet he still pursued his quest. It is the chance of living when he has almost reconciled himself to dying that makes Gawain stumble, and it is what he will do to grasp this chance (even break his pledged word) that is his weakness. The lady's prolonged offer of herself and the steady resistance that Gawain is compelled to make to it is nothing more than a calculated stratagem on her part to throw Gawain off his guard so that the real temptation of the third day might succeed. On each of the three days, therefore, Gawain rejects her advances until finally she seems to give up. Then, as he thinks he has at last succeeded and as he relaxes in his apparent victory, the lady makes her real thrust. From her long-term point of view, the crude opening offer of her *cors* is a vital part of the lady's scheme. It functions like a dazzling spotlight that focuses so strongly on the one single idea of seduction that it not only concentrates Gawain's attention on this one idea but it also blinds him to everything else. From this point on he can see the lady only as a seductive temptress whose advances must be resisted, and this is precisely what she wants him to think.

For the remainder of this scene and over the next two days, a test of Gawain's chastity is apparently made. In so far as the test is real from Gawain's point of view it is interesting to follow its details and to see how the initiative

is constantly with the lady. Her clever switches in direction and manner continually disconcert Gawain so that he never has time for reflection as to what is really happening. This is what the lady intends and she succeeds completely. We must never forget, however, that the seduction which is real to Gawain is only a subterfuge to the lady, a clever disguising of her real intention, and her success is to be measured by the degree to which the threat of seduction seems convincing.

After the lady's offer of herself a kind of sparring match takes place between Gawain and the wife. Essentially, Gawain's defence is threefold. He attempts to divert her by praise;²⁵ he modestly denies his own worthiness for her love;²⁶ and he offers to serve her in a non-committal way as her servant and knight.²⁷ For her part, the lady tries various tricks to break his defences down. She overrules his modest denials and insists that he is worthy (1248-50); she flatters him by saying that many ladies would rather exchange words of love with him than possess large sums of gold or treasure (1251-5); she claims that he is the man above all others that she would choose as her lord (1268-75). This last idea is more tempting than just the offer of her body alone, for that appealed only to Gawain's physical lust, but this statement, by claiming that his worth is above that of her lord, appeals to his vanity and pride too and thus is more dangerous.

The lady is a clever opponent. She appears to accept Gawain's refusal and, having talked of leaving (1288), she wishes him good-day (1290). Gawain, of course, is only too happy to see her go (1289). It is just as he thinks that she is leaving that she turns and makes a surprise attack *wyth ful stor wordes* (1291). She accuses Gawain of not being himself for the real Gawain would have acted differently. In effect she claims that he shows no courtesy (he has not acted *gaynly*, 1297 and shown his reputed *co(u)rtaysye*, 1298, 1300). This is virtually a challenge to him to prove himself. Gawain is taken completely aback, *stonyed* (1291) indeed. She has returned to the attack when he thought that she was leaving, thus taking him by surprise, and her accusation hits him at his weakest spot. Courtesy is so much his concern that he thinks of this even before she says that it is the lack of it that she is challenging: '*Querfore?*' *quoþ þe freke, and freschly he askez, | Ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his castes* (1294-5). Thrown out of his stride in this way, he accepts without dispute her definition of what courteous behaviour is, namely the seeking of a kiss from a willing lady and thus he kisses her both to please her (1302) and because she demands it: *I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a knyzt fallez* (1303).

On the second day the lady presses home the advantage that she won the day before. She takes up where she left off. Can this, she asks, really be Gawain, a man who is disposed to goodness and courtesy (1481 f.)? Gawain had intended a different approach this time. He did not feign sleep as before but spoke *on fyrst* (1477). But again his reputation for courtesy is a weak spot and immediately it is challenged he rushes to defend himself, asking what his fault is and saying that he is prepared to take the blame if he is in the wrong. The lady attempts to shame him for not living up to his reputation (though what constitutes living up to it is to be determined by her standards) and she seeks also to confuse him and throw him off balance by making him wonder just what her specific charge of discourtesy is going to be. Her charge, of course, based on the standards of behaviour that she established the day before, is that Gawain has not taken the kisses that he ought to take as a proper knight.

Gawain replies in two ways. There is first an imperative rejection *Do way . . . þat speche* (1492) but then, as if wishing to recall what sounded like rudeness and thus seemingly in the process submitting to the lady's definition of courteous knightly behaviour, he seeks to excuse himself, rather weakly, by saying that if he had asked a kiss and been refused then he would have been in the wrong: *For þat durst I not do, lest I deuyed were; | If I were werned, I were wrang, iwysse, 3if I profered* (1493-4).

When the lady brushes this excuse aside and appeals to his brute strength (1496), Gawain becomes firmer in his opposition. Though he pays her an empty compliment (*good is your speche*, 1498), he does in fact totally reject her point and quickly puts her in her place. He tells her without mincing words that what is taken by force has no value in his country: *Bot þrete is vnþryuande in þede þer I lende, | And vche gift þat is geuen not with goud wyllle* (1499-1500). However, he goes on off-handedly, I am here to be kissed if that is what you want (1501-3). His offer, though, is so casual and is so clearly not given with *goud wyllle* that it becomes almost an insult.²⁸

Insults, however, do not deter Bercilak's wife. She continues to attack Gawain, first by accusing him of being a knight who is defecting from his knightly duties and secondly by appealing to him through her helpless femininity. On the first count she argues that he is highly attractive (*3ong, 3eþe*, 1510, and the *comlokest kyd of your elde*, 1520), and highly praised as a knight (*so kny3tyly, as 3e ar knowen oute*, 1511, *Your worde and your worchþ walke3 ayquere*, 1521). The chief duty of a knight, *þe chef þyng* (1512), she still insists is *þe lel layk of luf* (1513). All a knight's deeds and all his sufferings are for love (1516-8) and in this way ladies are brought to happiness (1519).²⁹ Why then, she asks, do you fail in this duty (1522-4)? Meanwhile, as a woman, she appeals to him as a *3onke* (1526), one who has come, young, innocent, naive, impressed and awed by his reputation, to learn something of love—and he has refused her! Is it possible that despite his reputation he is ignorant of love (1528)? It is much more likely, however, she cries, that he thinks she is too stupid to learn (1529). Having said this she breaks out angrily with her reproach of *For schame* (1530).

Once again Gawain is driven to evade the lady by disparaging himself as *so pouer a mon* (1538) and by professing his disability to be her instructor (1542-4). He takes refuge in a flurry of compliments. She has brought him *gode gle, gomen . . . huge* (1536) and much *ese* (1539). She is *worþy* (1537) and he will be her servant (1546-8). Towards the end of the stanza, the poet carefully reminds us of what has been going on. The lady has *frayned þat fre, and fondet hym ofte* (1549) in order to bring him to *woze* (1550);³⁰ Gawain, for his part, has *defended* (1551) himself. Thus the battle of the first day has been continued on the second with again the same apparently inconclusive results.

The events of the evening of the second day show how Gawain must be on his guard at all times. There is great festivity in the hall and the scene is described in detail by the poet (1648-56). As before, the lady sits by the side of Gawain (1657) and while she sits there she tempts him again: *Such semblaunt to þat segge semly ho made | Wyth stille stollen countenance, þat stalworth to plesse* (1658-9). Until this moment her advances had been made only in the privacy of the bedroom, but here she changes her tactics and tempts him in public at the feast. This appeal differs from that of the morning. In the hall there is an appeal to his sense of danger (her advance is before all the men

of the court and before her husband too). Furthermore, if Gawain had suffered from a feeling of taking unfair advantage of her husband's being away, this temptation offered at the feast overcomes that feeling. Finally, there is a return to her earlier flattery of Gawain in that she apparently singles him out for her attentions from amongst all the other men who are there. By her actions in the hall, therefore, the lady seems to confirm the opinion that Gawain must by now have formed about her, namely that her intention is to seduce him by any means at her command.

The motivation of the lady on the third morning has troubled some commentators. The poet tells us: *Bot þe lady for luf let not to slepe, | Ne þe purpose to payre þat pyzt in hir hert* (1733-4). The purpose that she has in her heart can only be the one thing that has been consistently there from the start, namely the eventual overcoming of Gawain's resistance. There is no reason to assume any essential change in her attitude towards Gawain on the third day, and she continues to pursue with undiminished skill her plans to entrap him. What then is the *luf* that will not let her sleep? That she does not love Gawain in the normal sense of the word is perfectly clear. For this reason Gollancz glosses *luf* as "pleasure in his company" but there is not much evidence that the lady genuinely feels this either. Her presence in the bedroom is for one end only—the testing of Gawain—and her own thoughts and feelings (like those of her husband) are largely irrelevant to the needs of the poem. In fact, in the course of the poem we are hardly ever aware of what either the husband or his wife thinks or feels. Burrow and Davis offer a different solution to the problem by suggesting that the poet is cheating and deliberately misleading his hearers.³¹ But to suggest that the poet would sacrifice the poem's integrity like this and for no apparent reason (the poem is not a detective novel with a trail of false clues) is hardly credible. Further, if the audience believed that the lady was genuinely in love with Gawain, the relationship between the two of them would be significantly altered. The woman would deservedly attract some sympathy from the poem's readers, so that although Gawain's rejection of her would still be morally correct, it would be much harder for the readers to approve of it emotionally. A situation not unlike that between Sir Launcelot and the Fair Maid of Astolat would result and in that episode it is the Maid who wins everyone's sympathy.

The problem in this line may lie in the fact that not enough attention has been paid to the exact language of the statement. *Luf* is not the subject of *let*, so that a translation "love would not let her sleep" is not possible. Nor can we change the meaning of *let* and translate the line "the lady for love could not sleep." Since *let* means "allow, permit," the translation must be "the lady for love did not allow herself to sleep."³² Thus whatever *luf* refers to, we see that the lady still has control over herself. It is will and intellect that rule her, not emotions.³³ The lady from the beginning has acted a part, that of an infatuated woman who has no choice but to give herself to Gawain. She acts this part consistently. How would she have behaved if she had really felt such love? She would not have been able to keep away from her lover but would have come to him early in the morning as soon as it was safe for her to do so. To act the part of a love-sick woman convincingly, this is exactly what she has to do. The *luf* which here supposedly brings her to Gawain can be nothing more than the pretended love that she has simulated from the beginning and which her role as temptress requires that she sustain.

The lady's approach on the third morning is brisk and purposeful. She *ros hir vp radly* (1735), *Wayuez vp a wyndow* (1743), *callez . . . radly* (1743-4) and asks Gawain *how may þou slepe?* (1746). Without hesitating and without asking, she steps right up and kisses him (1758) and in this way wakens him. Gawain is sleeping badly. His *softe* (1687) sleep of the night before has given way to *drowping* (1748, 1750). He mutters (1750), afflicted by heavy thoughts (1751). This detail effectively humanizes Gawain who has to this point been perhaps too coldly perfect in the matter of the quest.

The lady catches Gawain at a favourable moment for advancing her real design. Gawain has just woken from a bad dream in which he saw himself in deadly danger to find himself instead safe in bed in the castle. Instead of an axe striking his neck as in his dream, the lady is kissing him. His relieved reaction comes as no surprise and he *welcumez* (1759) her with more warmth than hitherto. It is thus not just that she is beautiful: *so glorious and gayly atyred*, | *So faultles of hir fetures and of so fyne hewes* (1760-1)—she has always been this—that makes him embrace her with *wallande joye* (1762) but that she is such a contrast to the terrifying Green Knight of his dream.³⁴ The poet hints that for the first time Gawain is in danger of succumbing to the lady (1768-9). It is necessary, therefore, that Mary intervene on the part of Gawain.

Knott rejected the reading *Maré* in favour of *mare* "more."³⁵ He argued that "the interference of the Virgin would spoil the whole crucial part of the test" and so he tried to make the line say that Gawain rejects the lady because of Bercilak. Davis rejects this suggestion as straining the language too far. Knott, however, seemed to misunderstand the nature of Mary's interference. It is not direct and external to Gawain. She does not intervene on his behalf as an actual literal opponent of the lady, for this would certainly have spoiled the contest in that no opponent could have prevailed against her. Her intervention can only be via Gawain's mind. Her help is to prod his resolution so that he comes to face the situation squarely and sees clearly the decision that he has to make, namely: *Ofer lach þer hir luf, ofer lodly refuse* (1772). It is by bringing him to this point that Mary successfully intervenes on behalf of *hir knyzt* and thus keeps him safe. The irony of the matter, however, is that Gawain does not see the total situation. While he accepts the fact that he has now to make the crucial decision, he does not realize Mary's part in bringing him to it. His main concern is still for his public reputation, and in blindness and pride he still sees himself at the centre of the situation. Self-sufficient and lacking humility, he cannot see himself as an insignificant part of a larger whole in the hands of God (or Mary).

The lady *depresed hym . . . þikke* (1770) and uses many *spechez of specialté* (1778) but her arguments are not reported at length. This is ground that the reader has travelled before and the poet wisely does not bore him with repetition. The lady plays only one new gambit and this is not intended to win Gawain's love. As we have seen, Gawain is clearly in a dilemma as to how he should behave. The lady offers him a graceful way out when she suggests that he may already love another and this is why he cannot give his love to her. Now, if he wishes, Gawain can lie and thus deny the lady's advances without appearing discourteous. Yet, to do so would mark a falling off on his part from the highest ideals. Gawain, in putting truth above his own convenience, passes what is in effect another test by saying truthfully that he has no lover.

At this the lady seems finally to lose hope and accepts Gawain's refusal: *Kysse me now comly, and I schal cach heþen, | I may bot mourne upon molde, as may þat much louyes* (1794-5). She pretends self-pity and sorrow and in this way plays out her role properly to the end. Reluctantly, she takes what seems to be a farewell kiss and then asks for a gift to ease her mourning. Gawain, politely but quite firmly, refuses. It is then her turn to offer a gift to him. First she offers him her ring, a gift of great value (*riche*, 1817; *of red golde*, 1817; *Wyth a starande ston*, 1818; of great brightness and worth, 1819-20). Gawain refuses the ring, a refusal that the lady insists is made because the ring is too valuable. She offers, therefore, in its place her girdle³⁶ which by contrast is worth very little. She herself points out this difference in value: *If 3e renay my rynk, to ryche for hit semez, | 3e wolde not so hy3ly halden be to me, | I schal gif yow my girdel, þat gaynes yow lasse* (1827-9).

It is progressively more and more difficult for Gawain to refuse the lady. He had acted rather churlishly in the first place when he refused to give her a gift. Then he refused her ring and finally her girdle. His awareness of the poor light in which he is appearing is perhaps reflected in his speeches which are blunter and less evasive than anything that he has so far said. He even brings in his quest as a reason for rejecting the lady's gifts. While this seems a desperate excuse for him to use, since Gawain has no idea of the connection between the quest and the temptations, the very irrelevance of the excuse may show how heavily the adventure of the next day is weighing on his mind. The mention of the quest of the Green Chapel opens the way for the lady's final temptation—the suggestion that the girdle, which Gawain has already refused, has magic life-saving properties.

The climax of the action has now arrived. The lady has carefully built up to this moment for almost three days; the narrative has extended over 668 lines. The offer of the "magic" girdle itself takes no more than one stanza (24 lines) and occupies in time a few minutes at most. The very speed and seeming triviality of the offer, along with the lack of opportunity for reflection before the bargain is sealed by Gawain's promise of secrecy, all contribute to Gawain's lapse. Nevertheless, the major reason for his acceptance lies in the apparent hope of life that the girdle raises for Gawain. Its appeal is immediate and fundamental. Its desirability is so great that *hit come to his hert* (1855), something that the lady for all her wiles and attractions never succeeded in doing.

Gawain's acceptance of the girdle brings with it a compromising of his values and an inclination towards the false. He calls the girdle *a juel* (1856), though he has just refused a real jewel in the ring. He then associates his trick (*slezt*, 1858) with nobility. As one of the central concerns of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the nature of the noble life and its manifestation in action, Gawain's linking of nobility here with trickery, guile and the breaking of a pledge is significant. At this point, perhaps, Gawain comes nearest to sharing the views of the court at Camelot for there, we recall, nobility was held rather lightly, being equated by Arthur with a Christmas game.

The actual taking of the girdle is well handled. For three days Gawain has opposed the lady but now he *þulged with hir þrepe* (1859). We thus see even more strongly than in line 1855 how the appeal is to the basic man and we see also Gawain's desperate "clutching at straws" to avoid his well-nigh hopeless position. Although he *þoled hir to speke* (1859), she does not argue and

persuade further. She acts *swyþe* (1860) "quickly,"³⁷ fastens the belt on him and just as rapidly attaches the condition of secrecy. She allows him no time to think. She sees her chance and seizes it, just as she has planned from the first, and Gawain is lost in that moment. A carefully laid deception, well-acted out by the lady, has thus played its part in bringing about Gawain's downfall, for this one lapse is sufficient to destroy the perfection demanded of the wearer of the *endeles knot*.

NOTES

- ¹ *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight* (Harvard University Press, 1916).
- ² This is not to say that these subjects have not been discussed. Many critics have made valuable comments (often in passing) and some of these will be referred to later; but the recent article by D. Mills, "An Analysis of the Temptation Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *JEGP*, LXVII (1968), 612-630 is the only study I know of that looks directly at the temptation scenes as temptation scenes. Mills argues that the events of the first day are predominantly comic in that conventional words and themes from social and chivalric contexts are given double (sexual) meaning by their transference to the bedroom. The second day deals with the social issue of conflict between how a knight should act and how Gawain actually acts. The third pits the personal response that Gawain is invited to make to the lady against the chivalric and spiritual duties of a Christian knight. Much more than I do, Mills sees the lady as a person with emotions of her own (he talks of her "growing despair," 620, "growing impatience," 621 etc.). Where my interpretation totally departs from his, however, is in the assessment of the girdle episode. Mills considers it an "anti-climax, an unworthy surrender of the ideals just vindicated" (628), whereas I see it as the crucial moment (and therefore moral climax) of the whole poem.
- ³ D. Everett, *Essays on Middle English Literature* (Oxford, 1955), p. 76.
- ⁴ J. F. Eagan, "The Import of Color Symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *St. Louis University Studies*, series A, vol. i (1949), p. 47.
- ⁵ A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (London, 1964), p. 33.
- ⁶ G. B. Pace, "Physiognomy and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *ELN*, IV (1967), 165.
- ⁷ R. C. Pierle, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: A Study in Moral Complexity," *The Southern Quarterly*, VI (1968), 207.
- ⁸ Benson, p. 42.
- ⁹ Benson, p. 44.
- ¹⁰ All quotations from the poem come from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. N. Davis, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1968).
- ¹¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. I. Gollancz, *EETS* 210 (Oxford, 1940).
- ¹² B. J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," *MS*, IX (1947), 203, n. 49.
- ¹³ G. M. Shedd, "Knight in Tarnished Armour: The Meaning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *MLR*, LXII (1967), 5. See also T. A. Knott, "The Text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *MLN*, XXX (1915), 107, n. 1.
- ¹⁴ Both Gollancz and Davis in their notes say that this detail is transferred from Arthur, who traditionally bore the Virgin's image. Even so Arthur was never noted for chastity.
- ¹⁵ Gollancz translates *clannes* as "chastity" but Davis claims that it means "sinlessness, innocence" (p. 95), a translation that weakens our expectation of a chastity test. The *MED* (s.v. *clennesse*, 2) records both senses of the word but does not cite this example of the word's use.
- ¹⁶ J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London, 1965), pp. 40-41.
- ¹⁷ A. M. Markman, "The Meaning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *PMLA*, LXXII (1957), 584.
- ¹⁸ Davis, pp. 108-109.
- ¹⁹ Though this sense is recorded by the *MED* (s.v. *cors*, 3a), this citation from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not given. Burrow (p. 81) accepts this explanation so that there is a "saving ambiguity" to what the lady says.

- ²⁰ Mills (p. 613) calls it "a gesture of comic surprise" but if so it is an odd time for Gawain to jest.
- ²¹ Matthew, XXV, 1-13.
- ²² See lines 309-312.
- ²³ Mills sees the lady's use of this word as an attempt to turn an abstract quality (honour) into a form of activity (*layk*) with strong overtones of *amorous play* (p. 615 and n. 6), but does it not stand in clear opposition to *gryndel-layk*? The one is tested by the Green Knight, the other by his wife.
- ²⁴ Burrow cites examples from *Perlesvaus* in an attempt to show that "ladies can press a suit without ceasing to be ladylike" (p. 81) but in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where propriety of all kinds is so important, the lady cannot be so free and still remain within the bounds of courtesy. Mills (p. 613) argues that this inversion of roles is "in the manner of the fabliau" and thus tends in the direction of comedy. To me the direction is rather towards anarchy.
- ²⁵ See ll. 1264, 1267, 1277.
- ²⁶ See ll. 1244, 1266.
- ²⁷ See ll. 1245-7, 1278-9. Burrow notes that "when such an offer is made by a man, it may mean almost nothing" (p. 82).
- ²⁸ It is ironic that the gift of the girdle which Gawain later accepts and which is certainly not given with good will by the lady turns out to be distinctly *unbryuande* for its recipient.
- ²⁹ Eagan (53-63) says that here the lady shows what she thinks chivalry is all about and thus satirizes romances where this view is seriously held. Eagan's mistake is to consider the lady as a human character who really, but wrongly, holds these mistaken views rather than as an actress acting a part with her husband's approval.
- ³⁰ I follow the usual reading here of assuming *woge* to be a noun descended from OE *wōh* "wrong." Davis (p. 116) makes out a good case for considering it to be the verb *woo*. In either case there is no radical change in the overall sense of the passage.
- ³¹ Burrow, p. 94; Davis, p. 120.
- ³² This is the translation given in *Pearl and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. A. C. Cawley (London, 1962), p. 116. Professor Cawley has suggested privately to me that the meaning might be ironically "the lady for love did not forbear / omit to sleep" (*OED*, s.v. *Let* v¹, 2b) but I prefer to take the verb in its transitive sense, s.v. *Let* v¹, 12.
- ³³ The next line in which the poet says that the lady's purpose *pyzt in hir hert* (1734) may seem to detract from the idea that the lady's rational powers are in control at this instant. There is, however, sufficient evidence that *heart* can refer to the mind or intellect (*OED*, s.v. *Heart*, 5 and 7) as well as to the seat of the emotions.
- ³⁴ Burrows suggests that she appears as "Dame Life" (p. 99).
- ³⁵ Knott, 107.
- ³⁶ Its colours of green and gold at once remind us of the Green Knight and help to prepare us for the eventual coming together of the two strands of the story.
- ³⁷ Rather than Davis's gloss "earnestly."