THE QUEST THEME IN REPRESENTATIVE ENGLISH WORKS OF
THE THIRTEENTH AND FOURTEENTH CENTURIES

by

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ABSTRACT

It is by now a commonplace notion that the dominant theme in mediaeval romance is the quest. In the English literature of the fourteenth century the quest is represented in a large number of works whose interests range from the pseudo-historical representation of courtly and romantic life to the parody of romance conventions and satire of outmoded ideals. In addition, Langland's major work, *Piers Plowman*, written over several years towards the close of the century, incorporates the quest theme as a metaphor of the pilgrimage of life. The term "quest" and its ramifications in such a variety of offerings serves to convey an expression of action which can be either heroic or comic as well as deeply spiritual.

An examination of the romance literature immediately preceding the fourteenth century, and subsequently throughout that century, suggests that there is a twofold evolution in the artistic adaptation of the quest theme. On the one hand there is an observable shift from literature in which the quest plays an exterior and public rôle, leading to success for the hero and a movement towards equilibrium in society, to an interiorisation of the quest in which ambiguity and
fallibility are admissible and possible in the hero's conduct of the quest. At the same time the quest theme allows us to explore a process in which the literature of the period evolved from the unambiguous presentation of the ideals to which society is presumed to have subscribed, to a point, near the close of the century, at which those very ideals and beliefs are questioned. Such a process makes demands on the reader, or listener, which the earlier works did not, and forces a particularly close attention to details which frequently affect the outcome of the quest.

An examination of the quest theme itself is far more than a means of coming to a better understanding of the literature of the period, though indeed it does serve as one way of getting closer to the works. More important, its frequency in literature from the very earliest times right up to the present, suggests that the theme is seen by artists as a cogent means of expressing the varieties of human experience. In a Christian and mediaeval context one would expect quest literature to be optimistic and to mirror the possibility of heavenly rewards held out to the faithful traveller, whether knight or pilgrim. This however is not always the case. The works of the latter part of the fourteenth century, notably *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Piers Plowman*, reflect
uncertainties and doubts about the lasting values of the chivalric ethic and the efficacy of dogma which earlier generations seem to have taken for granted. Looked at in this way the quest device may be seen, not as a unifying element common to the literature of the period, but as an expression of the growth of an artistic sensibility which comprehends an active engagement between a work and its audience. Such an expression goes beyond mere entertainment to promote reflections and curiosity about humanity that outlasts the experience of reading.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALMA

Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. R.S. Loomis

EC

Essays in Criticism

EETS (OS, ES)

Publications of the Early English Text Society (Original Series, Extra Series)

ELH

English Literary History

ES

Essays and Studies

JEGP

Journal of English and Germanic Philology

MED

The Middle English Dictionary

MLN

Modern Language Notes

MLQ

Modern Language Quarterly

MLR

Modern Language Review

MP

Modern Philology

NM

Neuphilologische Mitteilungen

OED

The Oxford English Dictionary

PBA

Proceedings of the British Academy

PL


PMLA

Publications of the Modern Language Association of America

PQ

Philological Quarterly
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<tr>
<td>RES</td>
<td>Review of English Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spec.</td>
<td>Speculum: A Journal of Mediaeval Studies</td>
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<td>SP</td>
<td>Studies in Philology</td>
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<td>YSE</td>
<td>Yale Studies in English</td>
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And al was in ensample to vs synful here,
That we shulde be low and loueliche of speche,
And apparaille vs nou3te ouer proudly for pylgrymes ar we alle.

Piers Plowman,
B XI, 232-35
INTRODUCTION

Antescript

In the past there have been a number of varied approaches to quest literature. By and large these studies have concentrated on anthropological and mythical, as well as literary, problems. Since the quest in the fourteenth century has not been subjected to close examination, I propose to deal with this theme as an evolving literary device. While it would not be particularly helpful to cite all of the studies devoted to the quest, mention should be made of some of the more important contributions even though they may reflect approaches to the topic which are different from the present study.

W.P. Ker, in his influential work *Epic and Romance*, characterized romance as a "collision of blind forces."\(^1\) For Ker "the favourite adventure of mediaeval romance"\(^2\) was represented by a solitary knight meeting others of his kind and engaging in random tournaments and trials. Ker was intent on displaying what he considered to be the limitations of
romance since he believed that the epic was a more substantial and serious form of poetry

Romance by itself is a kind of literature that does not allow the full exercise of dramatic imagination; a limited and abstract form as compared with the fulness and variety of Epic. 3

But, by his own admission (Preface, p. v) Ker did not consider English metrical romances in his study. In dealing with the quest in the later Middle English period, I shall attempt to explore literature not dealt with by Ker in the hope of demonstrating that some romances do exhibit the exercise of imaginative and dramatic minds at work. 4

In 1920 Jessie Weston explored the problem of the origins of Grail quests. 5 Weston was concerned with reconciling the conflicting claims of scholars who traced the origins of the Grail to older Christian legends with those who found its sources in Celtic folk-lore. For Weston the origin of these quests was to be seen in ancient nature cults whose rituals revolved around the restoration of the land. That is, they descended from fertility and vegetation rites linked to natural, seasonal cycles. It was perhaps an attractive theory and may have led to the later interpretation that Gawain's adventure, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, represents "man's millennial quest for breath-taking answers to the abiding enigmas of his existence in this world." 6 Or, more particularly that it was a chivalric, mediaeval version "of
the mystery of dying to the transient individuality . . . and gaining resurrection in the higher life immortal."?

Along similar lines Joseph Campbell suggested that all quests in fact represent one quest which he called the "monomyth"

*The Standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth.*

Campbell devoted very little space to mediaeval quests, being more concerned with religion and mythology and with revealing "the basic truths by which man has lived throughout the millennia of his residence on the planet." For our purposes Campbell's chief contribution was his designation of the stages of the quest, from departure to return, and his useful remarks on the world-redeeming properties of the hero. The idea of redemption, of the hero conferring benefit upon his society, is a feature both of Grail quests and of some of the quests which we shall consider.

In *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye argues that the quest gives literary form to romance. He distinguishes three main stages in the successful quest: the journey, struggle and exaltation of the hero. Frye maintains that any quest involving conflict assumes two main characters, and as far as political or chivalric conflict is concerned he is
correct. But there are quests which do not enjoy a straightforward distinction between good and evil and, while there may be a journey and a recognition scene, there is not necessarily a conflict in the sense of the chief figure representing the good (protagonist) and another the evil (antagonist). Examples of mediaeval quests in which conflict plays a less "deterministic" rôle may be found in Sir Orfeo, Floriz and Blancheflur and in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale. In Piers Plowman the struggle is not one about which we can have any great certainty. Though Christ jousts with death and the Devil, illustrating one kind of conflict, the Dreamer on the other hand is consistently at odds with his personal intellectual and spiritual shortcomings. This suggests conflict of a different nature from the kind that Frye isolates as a quest element. Frye observes that in Langland's poem we are offered the first "major English contrast-epic." This term is described as the separation between "the ironic human situation" and "the origin or continuation of a divine society." Langland's poem gives us the triumph of Christ's resurrection and Piers' salvation as against "the somber vision of human life which presents at the end of the poem something very like a triumph of Antichrist."

One of the more recent works on the quest is William Calin's *The Epic Quest*. Calin confines himself to four French *chansons de geste* of the late twelfth and early
thirteenth centuries in order to show that there are works other than *Roland* which deserve more serious attention than they have been accorded in the past. With respect to the quest structure Calin follows the archetypal patterns enumerated by Frye and others.\textsuperscript{15}

This brief review of some of the more important studies of quest literature may help to demonstrate the need for a reconsideration of the theme. First, none of the foregoing studies traces the theme through fourteenth-century English literature. Secondly, the germinal works on quest patterns have favoured mythical and ritualistic elements in the literature more than narrative technique or literary qualities. Instead, therefore, of tracing mythical survivals as Weston, Zimmer and Campbell have done, I shall confine myself to a study of a number of fourteenth-century texts in which the quest plays an important thematic and structural part. In doing so I shall confront such views as those of Frye who feels that "the central form of romance is dialectical: everything is focussed on a conflict between the hero and his enemy, and all the reader's values are bound up with the hero."\textsuperscript{16} I shall approach the term "dialectical" from a point of view which suggests that subtlety and complexity can characterize romance and its dominant motif, the quest.\textsuperscript{17} An attempt will be made to show that in *Gawain* and *Piers Plowman* the quest proceeds in such a way that the reader is
led to a recognition of his freedom to choose and decide in a way that is quite different from what one might expect in a gestural or "moralistic" romance as critics concerned with myths conceive the genre. I shall propose that the reader of *Piers Plowman* becomes involved with the poem and finds himself in the rôle of the questor seeking awareness that is not easily won. A close relationship of this kind between the poem and its reader represents the point to which the quest, as process and not only as narrative device, has evolved by the end of the fourteenth century.

**The Quest as Strategy**

This study addresses itself to the notion, elaborated by Auerbach, that a changing social situation spelled the end of the feudal ethos and the end of the courtly romance. Our concern will be to explore the effect of these changes upon literature in English, between about 1250 and 1400, in order to determine the directions taken by the quest theme in a period during which absolute ideals of chivalry were replaced by bourgeois aspirations on the one hand, and religious values on the other. The thesis contends that the quest is not a static literary device. Such may be the case if one considers only those quests, such as Chrétien's romances, which are purely courtly and whose meaning resides in the portrayal of
the trial through adventure of a particular and aristocratic individual.

The English experience and expression of the quest between 1250 and 1400 suggests that the theme evolved, and was eminently suitable for evolution, in three directions. In the earlier works which we shall consider, the quest, while still remaining the metaphor for knightly proving, becomes the embodiment also of social and political values. In the exploits of Horn and Havelok are found vestiges of the courtly ideal. But there is also a preponderance of more popular notions. The quest is no longer entirely devoid of reality, no longer concerned only with demonstrating what an ideal figure the hero is, what an excellent representative of his class, though these ideas are still present. Rather, it is concerned with some versions of historical and political reality, with the succession of kings and the security of Christian worship, yet, as a device, the quest remains largely an external and public figuration of experience, having no relation to psychological changes in its heroes and participants, concerned more with the effect of action than with its cause.

In a second group of stories, notably Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Sir Thopas*, Gower's *Tale of Florent* and related Loathly Lady tales, the quest embodies private and moral considerations. With the search for knightly adventure as its starting point, the quest is given implications
which cast doubt upon the absolute qualities of courtly behaviour. It is given implications which question the chivalric notions of honour and the deference due to ladies. In Chaucer's hands the theme serves to express a psychological dilemma by giving life to the Wife of Bath's wish-fulfillment. In Chaucer's tale of Sir Thopas, in addition to illustrating the bourgeois inability to understand the spirit of knighthood, the quest or, in effect, anti-quest comically undercuts the chivalric tales of more lofty-minded pilgrims, while at the same time casting its narrator in the rôle of the burgher who would be something else. In these examples, the outcome of the quest is given a wider morality which does not owe allegiance to any particular social class. In Gower's Tale of Florent the theme serves as the basis for a lesson in obedience, but the didactic nature of the work is never pursued at the expense of the adventure.

In the last section of the thesis we shall consider later stages of evolution of the quest in the fourteenth century. It is a commonplace idea that Gawain's experiences in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight reveal something of his inner nature,¹⁹ that his adventure is yet another expression of "the great mediaeval theme of the pilgrimage of the human soul,"²⁰ or that the poem represents a "spiritual progress from pride to humility."²¹ The chapter on Gawain scrutinizes these conventional views and concludes that there are two quests occurring
in *Gawain*, sometimes simultaneously, and that the poem is not just concerned with showing "what a splendid man Gawain is," or that the whole point "is to establish the primacy of Gawain among knights." In addition, I propose that Gawain does not really learn the humility with which he is credited and that he returns to Camelot in failure and not triumph, and finally that the poem elaborates an acute assessment of the confrontation between chivalric values and spiritual aspirations.

In the last chapter I shall deal at length with *Piers Plowman*. It is indisputable that the story represents a quest for salvation. But as yet no one has examined the evolution of the mental process at work in the poem. John Lawlor points out that Langland's method is "not so much to develop an argument as to make us undergo its development," and, later, that "the mere sequence of thought is not the whole truth; the Dreamer's failures and false conclusions . . . are no less important than his true inferences and unshakeable assertions." More recently one critic has reiterated the views of Lawlor and others and related the poem's structure to a process which is not "logical," but "experiential." I have carried these ideas further in showing that experiential progress is demonstrated in *Piers Plowman* through the transmutation of images, and have used the term "self-consuming artifact," expounded by Stanley Fish, who applies it to seventeenth-century literature.
The view of images being consumed by further images in *Piers Plowman* was first put forward by John Burrow, who repeats this idea in a recent book on Ricardian poetry, in which he describes the process as one of change from an allegorical mode of expression to a literal mode. These insights invite broader application. The quest strategy in *Piers Plowman* not only informs the entire structure of the work, but also promotes a profound re-creation of the mental process. Such a process forces an inevitable exchange between the reader and the work which endorses the reader's re-enactment of the struggle to know the meaning of the Dreamer's visions. I point out that there are a number of other quests in *Piers Plowman* which, as literary devices, foreshadow the self-consuming process which pervades the entire poem.

At no point do I claim that the evolution of the quest in the fourteenth century is a conscious and deliberate process. There are numerous studies of the quest as theme, some of which trace its origin into a mythical past and others which see in it the archetypal pattern of the human journey. The concern here is not with mythology or anthropology, but with pointing out the variety of the quest experience in the fourteenth century and demonstrating, by the detailed analysis of a number of works, that in English, in this period, the quest lent itself to a range of expression as varied as "historical" realism and spiritual enlightenment, and that it did so because
it was never only the static representation of a courtly culture but an evolutionary, literary mechanism which could, and did, adapt itself to the varieties of human experience. The main contention then, is that the quest theme in the fourteenth century evolved from a public elaboration of a martial enterprise to a private search for salvation. The thematic goal of each type of quest is distinctly different. In the last section, particularly in *Piers Plowman*, the object which is sought is a model for human behaviour; the consequences of a private search for salvation paradoxically offer public examples for all of humanity. In one sense, then, the evolution of the quest in the fourteenth century is cyclical, since we are once more returned, with Langland's Dreamer, to the world of human affairs. The closing vision of *Piers Plowman* is more optimistic than the conclusion of *Gawain*. As W.P. Ker once said, "The conclusion in which nothing is concluded has always seemed to me the most admirable."\(^{32}\) In Langland's work every conclusion marks a new beginning. The direction taken by the quest in subsequent periods is outside the scope of this work, but it is hoped that this study will assist others to explore its progress as a narrative device down to the present times where it is still very much alive.

This study excludes the large body of Grail material which lies outside the period. The story of the quest for the Holy Grail, found in German and French literature, does
not appear in English until Malory's treatment of the theme in his *Tale of the Sankgreal*.33

Generally speaking, Grail literature is concerned with a single quest and one which does not evolve as a narrative device in any of the examples of this legend. However, a few features of the story, especially the characterization and choice of the hero, are worth discussing as they have some bearing on the present study. Briefly, the structure of successive Grail quests follows clearly delineated steps. The announcement of the quest, the departure by Arthur's knights and the stories of their relative success or failure are recorded in many cases. Embedded in the successful quest for the Grail is the principle of the restoration of a land or a person.34 Common to all Grail quests is the pursuit, through difficulties of varying magical or natural magnitude, of the vessel which confers healing powers on the true, chosen hero. The frame of reference for all Grail quests, no matter what their origin, is firmly Christian. Hence the values of the chivalric system are often inadequate to the demands of a search for spiritual perfection. This is particularly true of the presentation of such figures as Lancelot and Gawain both in the anonymous *Queste del Saint Graal* and in Malory.

In Chrétien's *Perceval*, which is incomplete, there is an observable evolution in the hero. Perceval begins his career as a silly, impressionable youth. Gradually he learns
spiritual values, often as a result of errors he makes, the most important of which is his failure to ask the saving questions. But most of the learning in Perceval is derived through instructions from holy men and hermits; it is not the result of a conscious, morally-informed, decision-making process. In Wolfram's Parsival on the other hand, the hero's experiences "represent successive phases of [his] inner metamorphosis." Parzival succeeds in his quest after four and a half years of knight-errantry. He is given the human potentiality for virtuous or vicious action, so his success means "the defeat of the vices which beset his path and the full use of the innate virtues with which he has been endowed by God." Evolution of this kind is not unlike what we find in Piers Plowman, though the narrative scenery is neither courtly nor magical.

In the anonymous Queste and in Malory's Tale of the Sankgreal, Perceval is replaced by a new hero, Galahad. The rejection of Perceval by the author of the Queste may reflect the view that certain aspects of Perceval's character were felt to be inconsistent with the author's conception of the Grail hero. In consequence we are given a hero who appears on the scene without flaws, hence not in need of change. He has already achieved perfection, thus his task, to find the Grail and restore the maimed king, is all that remains to be demonstrated. This is achieved by his unerring
movement through a series of adventures and dangerous encounters. But while Galahad is an imitation of Christ, perfect in virtue, his companions, Perceval and Bors, are capable of error. However, only Bors is faced with "a moral dilemma, a choice between conflicting duties." All three heroes achieve the Grail, but the highest mysteries are reserved for Galahad whose wish to die when he chooses is granted at Sarras after he has seen beyond the Grail into even deeper mysteries.

Both Lancelot and Gawain, in the Queste and in Malory, are less successful. Lancelot is portrayed as a hardened sinner. In earthly or courtly matters he is frequently referred to as the best or most able of knights. But the chivalric qualities for which he is famous count for nothing in this spiritual quest. He is allowed a glimpse of the Grail, but his attempts to enter the room at Corbenic, where he sees the mysteries, lead to his paralysis and blindness for twenty-four days, an amount of time proportional to the twenty-four years during which he lived as a sinner. Gawain plays a relatively minor rôle in these stories. He fails to find adventure, perhaps an indication of his spiritual blindness, and instead succeeds in killing some of the Grail knights. When he learns that it is useless to go on, he returns, presumably, to Camelot.

In Chrétien's Perceval Gauvain is endowed with the courtly attributes for which he is famous in Arthurian literature. However, he is easily diverted from the quest by his
"preoccupation with earthly glories and an incurable weakness for casual amours." Thus he serves "as a counterpoint to Perceval," illuminating the latter's growing spiritual awareness. In the *Queste* and in Malory, Gawain is the first to swear to ride on the quest for the Grail. But, like Lancelot, he fails miserably since his earthly endowments - tact, courtesy, physical courage - do not assist his understanding of the spiritual nature of the quest.

The evolution of the quest theme and of Gawain's character in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, while reflecting indebtedness to certain Grail motifs, takes the theme further than any of the Grail stories. With the exceptions already noted, self-conscious action is seldom a part of the hero's qualities in the Grail quests. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* on the other hand, and more especially in *Piers Plowman*, we are concerned not only with the evolution of the hero, but also with the complex quest which expresses both interior and exterior searches. Reference to Grail stories is useful for a number of reasons - knowledge of the quest pattern, the spiritual evolution of the hero, and various conventional Arthurian motifs - but the Grail is so large a topic that it deserves separate consideration and, as I have already indicated, the failure of some Grail knights often serves to illuminate the spiritual basis of the quest which is nearly always their authors' first concern. Finally, the Grail
quests represent finite and linear progress. There is no suggestion of a continuous renewal of the quest such as we find at the conclusion of *Piers Plowman*.

**Towards a Definition**

An attempt to define the term "quest" by examining a selection of mediaeval narratives may not provide any absolute answers, but does represent one way of proceeding, that of experiencing the stories for ourselves. A glance at any dictionary should suffice to remind us of the large variety of ideas which the word "quest" embraces, from legal inquiry to the pursuit of game by dogs, neither of which will help us to come any closer to the meaning of the word in connection with narrative literature. A.C. Gibbs reminds us, by way of Auerbach, that the quest is the "dominant narrative device of the mediaeval chivalric romance." Indeed we shall see that this is the case when we examine romances as different from each other as *King Horn* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Used in its romance sense the term implies the notion of a search, by a solitary knight, over a defined period of time and in a geographically determined landscape to some objective, which is generally stated at the outset. The hero's success and achievement is often followed by his safe return home, a re-union which frequently confers some benefit on his society. This familiar pattern represents fairly well the structure of such ancient stories as the epic of *Gilgamish* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Details are all that differ; Odysseus has companions and Gilgamish
loses the plant of knowledge on the way home. Such a structure
describes the events of most chivalric romances in the Middle Ages,
such as Havelok the Dane and Sir Orfeo, but what of the strange
turn of events in the Wife of Bath's Tale and its several analogues?
Certainly the process of departure, trial and return offers at
least a superficial resemblance to the cyclical pattern. The Wife's
Tale involves a solitary hero searching through an Arthurian lands­
scape for the answer to a riddle. But the hero is a rapist and
his quest a form of higher education. Here the quest is reduced to
the grotesque and absurd.

But the search may not only embrace persons, places and
things, but also ideas; in the case of the Wife's Tale, the idea
of harmonious marriage dependent upon woman's "maistrye." And if
we admit of the important search as a vital component of the quest,
then the theme of pilgrimage must be considered, as it is a theme
which informs the structure of the Canterbury Tales and of Piers
Plowman. Inevitably, then, the quest can consist also of a search
for spiritual truth and earthly perfection, as in the Grail
quests, a trial and preparation for the hereafter in which the
reward is the promise of eternal salvation. But then there is no
longer necessarily a story cast in a clearly defined geographical
space or enacted by a "noble" protagonist. In discussing the
First Crusade (1089) Norman Cohn points out that for the poor of
Europe "the Crusade was above all a collective imitatio Christi, a
mass sacrifice which was to be rewarded by a mass apotheosis at
Jerusalem." An identification is made between the course of
human life and the soul's journey to God. As we shall find later,
in discussing patristic models and their influence on the idea of the pilgrimage in literature, the metaphor of life as a pilgrimage was commonplace in the Middle Ages. In the literature, as in the many exegetical treatises, the pilgrimage to God also incorporates the theme of man's alienation and consequent earthly efforts to reunite himself with the Father. At the simplest level, in a story such as *King Horn*, the quest is the device which gives direction to the saga of Horn's banishment and his efforts to regain his kingdom. The hero remains essentially unchanged throughout, his education consisting largely in learning martial skills and then in putting those skills to work to restore order and Christian succession to the throne. At the other end of the scale, as it were, we find that the quest no longer necessarily implies success and is no longer merely the device which determines exterior events; it becomes interior, private and personal. The chaotic opening vision in *Piers* may well reflect more accurately the state of affairs in the fourteenth century than the more ordered world at the end of *Horn*, for Langland's poem admits of a certain entropy and randomness in society. The tendency to disorder and a scattering of unity which informs the vision of the field full of folk is repeated at the end of the final vision with the attack on Unity by the army of Antichrist and the subsequent departure of Conscience on another quest for Piers. The intervening search for some kind of equilibrium is undertaken by a variety of characters and in a frame of social reference which includes not only
feudal society, but the whole of mankind. Hence, traditional notions of seeing the quest in temporal and spatial terms will not suffice to re-create the literary experience which may have been felt by audiences in the fourteenth century, or by ourselves at the present time.

Our attempts at defining the quest draws the legitimate objection that we have not confined ourselves to the quest alone, but that such definitions as proposed above could apply to adventure stories in general. Thus it becomes necessary to distinguish the quest from any adventure. Quests characteristically take place over substantial periods of time whereas adventures are episodic, occurring often in moments or days and often within a larger device such as the quest. The many episodes in *Don Quixote* are but part of a larger design. Similarly in *Orfeo* or *Havelok*, many years pass in the process of the hero regaining his lost place, and many adventures take place which are not in themselves quests though they provide the material for testing the hero. Another essential ingredient of the quest concerns the consequences of its achievement. In *Horn* the resumption of power brings a restoration of equilibrium to the land and the re-introduction of Christian worship. In *Oedipus* restoration brings about a disaster. But the point in *Havelok*, as quest, is not that the hero necessarily arrives at his rightful place, but that he does so on the basis of his own volition. Quests
seem to rely on a theory of individual action in which courage and fortitude, though necessary, are not themselves sufficient for success. The emphasis falls upon an active choice rather than solely upon acts of courage. *Piers Plowman* perhaps represents the climax, in the fourteenth century, of such a voluntary process, for the "hero" of the poem is not only a given figure at a given time, such as Piers or the Dreamer, but also the reader or audience, whose active participation is sought and upon whose success in the search for truth rests consequences which reach beyond the merely social or political balance in society.

**The Reading Experience**

It is unquestionably difficult for the modern reader to locate himself with relation to the fourteenth century experience, or to see himself as part of the audience of the period. We stand aside as it were, watching events take place at a distance, presupposing that time and intellectual differences will not enable us to recover the experience necessary to read the literature directly and with the freshness of the contemporary audience. By virtue of a somewhat patronising attitude, the literature of the entire century becomes lumped into a kind of indistinguishable mass of traditions, misapprehensions and conventions borrowed from other centuries. It
is clear that no matter how thoroughly and fanatically we immerse ourselves in the writing, theology and *mores* of the period, we cannot see the work through the eyes of those living at the time. But this does not mean we cannot experience the work as it was meant to be experienced or that our understanding of it is doomed to a kind of relativism. As I hope to demonstrate, the work of this period reflects an abrupt transformation of spirit and attitude towards the world. Under these circumstances several distinctions emerge which permit us, at least partially, to join the contemporary audience and to benefit at first hand from their literature.

Our analysis of the later works of the century suggests a genuine literary sophistication which may or may not have been appreciated as such by its immediate readers. In all ages the immediate audience typically underestimates works supposedly written for them, and so our analysis cannot trust what little we do know of the audiences of the time. Nevertheless, such information as is available lends substantial support to our assumptions about the quality and complexity of the literature. It seems clear that in the second half of the fourteenth century the art of reading was becoming widespread.⁴⁵ Manuscripts formerly circulated among members of the clerical class who could read, and who were interested in their contents, became accessible to a wider public. Occurring simultaneously with the spread of literacy was a growing
complexity in the structure of English society. By the end of the century stories of chivalry no longer reflected the ideals of a limited and aristocratic audience, but were, by Chaucer's time, on the decline to the point where "their absurdity was sometimes more apparent than their idealism."46 This is certainly the case with Chaucer's satire of Sir Thopas as we shall see later. But it is possible that stories of chivalry, in English, never really reflected literary tastes, "since the audience which could appreciate [courtly romance] when it was fashionable, was French-speaking."47 Hence we may be able to account for the decline of "popular" romance during the fourteenth century and for the growth of a literary sensibility which is demonstrated in such worldly works as Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. But to account for a change in tastes is a far different matter from being able to postulate a change in perception by the audience or a growing degree of sophistication among the authors of the period. In some very illuminating comments on Langland's handling of alliterative diction compared with the poetic language normally associated with the alliterative revival, Burrow suggests that "the oblique use of the alliterative diction for an effect of literary irony is not easy to parallel elsewhere in the poems of the Revival,"48 but is an indication of a "more sophisticated and disengaged relation to the tradition,"49 which we might expect from one writing "for a heterogeneous and impersonal
Apart from Langland's economy with alliterative diction there are other techniques which suggest a complex and subtle growth of sophistication as we hope to show in the next section in which a critical theory constructed for works of the later part of the century is introduced. There would appear to be a kind of sophistication demanded by the authors of Gawain and Piers, and to a lesser extent of the Wife's Tale, which calls for a response from the audience among whom we must now count ourselves as having an integral part to play in the action.

"Self-Consuming Artifacts"

... a dialectical presentation succeeds at its own expense; for by conveying those who experience it to a point where they are beyond the aid that discursive or rational forms can offer, it becomes the vehicle of its own abandonment.51

The above quotation offers a challenging and complicated approach to literature in general, in which the work of art is no longer to be appreciated as an object with an existence independent of its readers. It is no longer a riddle or enigma requiring interpretations. Instead, it becomes an experience in itself, uniquely dependent upon the creative engagement of the reader.

A self-consuming artifact is a work in which each level of insight is consumed by the next higher or more extensive
insight. In *Gawain*, for example, the reader begins with a situation which appears entirely unexceptional in the chivalric and romantic tradition. A supernatural event occurs, posing a challenge to the court. The challenge is subsequently taken up by a solitary knight. The event is narrated, at the outset, by a sympathetic figure who subscribes to the moral superiority of his hero and to the utopian ideals of the Arthurian system itself. The reader is encouraged by tradition and conventional expectations to invest emotionally in the knight's ordeal, to give the narrator a high degree of credibility, and to assume that the Court at Camelot and the chivalric system in general represent ideals with which one ought to be sympathetic. But in the course of the story the picture of courtly excellence, so clear at the beginning, begins to dissolve into ambiguity, and disappears entirely when we find that Gawain is less than the sympathetic model of knighthood for which we mistook him. As we shall see, we are led to question all of our assumptions about knighthood, the court, and our confidence in the narrator. The work, by eventually placing the reader on his own with regard to value judgements and interpretations of the action yields its importance in favour of the reader's movement beyond it.

The quest theme uniquely lends itself to the strategy we discover in *Gawain* and in *Piers*. The reader becomes more interested in the action than in the outcome. Even among the
early works we find minor themes appearing at the beginning which later become vital to the success of the hero. Unlike adventure stories, the quest begs this attention to thematic detail, so it is not surprising that the form itself could have evolved in the span of a single century into the elaborate and complex device we find at the end of the period. Naturally it is difficult to reconstruct, in a step-by-step way, the needs of the audiences and the public events that took place in each decade and which collectively generate what we might call a "self-consuming artifact." Similarly, the insights resulting from Gawain or Piers are not to be found in either historical or patristic documents. And so the theory of literature required to account for and to understand these later pieces is not particularly mimetic, though the stories do represent certain needs, ambitions and perplexities in their society at large. Although one might say that the century experiences an aesthetic shift from symmetry and balance towards realism, this claim should not be confused with the critical presentation given for those works which may be considered as strategic rather than simply expressive. In effect, each poem will be treated as unique and demanding its own particular account; the works of the early part of the period are indeed mimetic, since they reflect the common aims of their societies, and can be handled within a mimetic theory.
By the word "dialectical" in the quotation from Fish, one refers to a polarity in literary presentation, nowhere more evident than in the works of the later part of the fourteenth century. Its opposite we can call "rhetorical"; "... it is characteristic of a rhetorical form to mirror and present for approval the opinions its readers already hold."52 The reader is not invited to question and examine his view of the world, but instead is offered the confirmation that his opinions are sound and his methods of arriving at those opinions are correct. This would appear to be the case in those romances of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries which we will examine. In Gawain, on the other hand, we find a "dialectical" presentation, "for it requires of its readers a searching and rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by."53 In Horn, Havelok and Orfeo there is an unquestioning reliance on the superior abilities of the nobility to rule and of knights to make accurate moral decisions. Each test is met with success (sometimes with imagination) a fact which reaffirms the status quo. Such a world allows no room for scepticism, fatalism or pessimism since success is assured to those who engage in difficult enterprises. It is in this ambience that the quests of the early part of the period are born. As readers we may have been confident of the result of riding forth, leaving only the process of achievement and adventure in doubt. By the end of the century however, we find
ourselves part of an audience which is invited to become critical of the earlier foregone conclusions. Not only is this an audience which is insecure in assigning values, but one which is openly pessimistic about the very possibility of social equilibrium, an audience that is concerned with the future of its soul and which is willing, as individuals, to become the heroes of the stories it hears. By the end of the period the aesthetic distance between the audience and the protagonist is sharply diminished as we may see in comparing such portraits as Chaucer's Knight in the *General Prologue* and Thopas, or figures such as *king* Horn and *ploughman* Piers. This aesthetic tide brings its own system of values, chief of which is an overwhelming concern with realism and empirical truth. The self-confident symmetry found in the early works gives way, aesthetically, to a concern for truth in later pieces. No longer is even a minimal social equilibrium or balance possible in the literary presentation, because the mode of experiencing the world has become that of divesting every assumption of its "givens", of what was taken for granted, leaving an ambiguous experience and critical introspection of the kind we find in *Piers*. 
FOOTNOTES


2 Ibid., pp. 5-6.

3 Ibid., p. 33.

4 In an intelligent refutation of Ker's notions about romance D.M. Hill, "Romance as Epic," English Studies 44 (1963), 107, concludes that "the real irony as far as mediaeval romance is concerned is that the word 'romance' with its connotations of the unreal, the farfetched, and so on, is a label for a form of writing which at its best is intensely realistic and matter of fact." A similar judgement is expressed by Pamela Gradon, Form and Style in Early English Literature (London, 1970), Ch. 5.


7 Ibid., p. 79.


9 Ibid., p. viii.

11 Ibid., p. 318.

12 Ibid., p. 317.

13 Ibid., p. 318.


15 Ibid., pp. 182-86.

16 Frye, p. 187.

17 Frye, p. 195, argues that "the characterization of romance follows its general dialectic structure, which means that subtlety and complexity are not much favoured."


23 G.V. Smithers, "What Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is About," Medium Aevum, 32 (1963), 189.

24 George Kane, Middle English Literature (London, 1951), pp. 243-44.


26 Ibid., p. 233.


31 The principle studies of this kind have already been cited; see notes 5 to 9, above.

33. The single fourteenth century narrative in English which deals with the Grail, the fragmentary, alliterative *Joseph of Arimathie*, is not a quest for the Grail, but an early history of the vessel. See J. Burke Severs, ed., *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (New Haven, 1967), p. 73. See also J. P. Oakden, *The Poetry of the Alliterative Revival* (Manchester, 1937), p. 41, who says of *Joseph* that it "is not primarily a romance, but a religious story in which certain romantic elements have been incorporated."

34. The changes, in successive Grail stories, in the hero's task are set out concisely in Chapter 2 of Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, referred to above.


41. *Ibid*.


44. See Webster, "entropy," 4.


48 John Burrow, "The Audience of *Piers Plowman,*" *Anglia*, 75 (1957), 381.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 381-382.


52 Ibid., p. 1.

53 Ibid.
PART I:

THE EXTERIOR QUEST AND THE SEARCH FOR ORDER
Chapter 1

KING HORN AND FLORIZ AND BLAUNCHEFLUR

It is perhaps appropriate to begin an examination of the mediaeval quest with two poems in which the search plays a fairly superficial and exterior rôle. Of interest to the modern reader are the means by which the hero of each of these poems accomplishes his undertaking, for in neither poem does it transcend the narrative. At best the theme in *King Horn* and *Floris and Blauncheflur* demonstrates chivalric aptitude and grande amour respectively.

Of the three surviving manuscripts of *King Horn*, one (Harl. MS, 2253) begins with the headline "Her bygynneþ be geste of kyng Horn." At an early stage the reader is prepared for a chivalric romance or poem about heroic deeds with historical, or at least legendary, overtones. And this in fact is what we find — a poem of the exile and return of a king, a theme which appears to have been quite popular in the Middle ages, as it is also common, with variations, to *Havelok* and *Sir Orfeo*.
In addition, the *Horn* poet is unashamedly patriotic. His concerns are more national than feudal or courtly, for in *Horn* as hero we see the means of ridding the country of unwelcome foreign invaders. The fact that the invaders are called Saracens simply reinforces a tradition that had, by 1300, extended the word's meaning from "Arab" or "Muslim," with their connotation of the Crusades, to one which embraced "any non-Christian, heathen or pagan... In *King Horn* the Saracens are common-or-garden Viking marauders." The story thus has some basis in history, while its central figure is cast in the rôle of a national hero and liberator who drives out the Danes. In like manner the *Havelok* poet demonstrates a large measure of national consciousness, though in this last poem there is a degree of respect for bourgeois values.

*Havelok* is placed in the position of the underdog who, by his own efforts, makes good. This type of wish-fulfillment is not found in *Horn* where the scenes are nearly always cast in courtly terms. The patriotic element is completely lacking in *Floriz and Blancheflur*, as it is in most romances derived from the East through the French traditions where *amour* transcends the sword.

The many exploits and journeys in *King Horn* have one thing in common. They are all a part of the hero's effort to come home and to restore equilibrium in a manner reminiscent of Homer's wanderer, *Odysseus*. The whole movement
of the action of *King Horn* may be considered as a centripetal cycle. All of Horn's efforts are aimed at restoring the social and chivalric order from which, as a boy, he was cast out by a conquering Saracen army. The poem begins and ends with equilibrium. There is a settled quality in the description which precedes the slaughter of King Murry:

```
Hit was vpon a someres day,
Also ihc 3ou telle may,
Murri be gode king
Rod on his pleing
Bi be se side,
Ase he was woned ride.4
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Similarly, at the conclusion of the poem we find that Horn has avenged all the wrongs perpetrated on him, restored order in several kingdoms, removed the pagan menace and settled down to live in true love with Rymenhild among "hys owe kunne." The entire intervening action is dictated by the need to return home.

It should be recognized at the outset that Horn's quest has been imposed upon him by external circumstances. One may not wish to go so far as saying that the whole poem is about the growth to maturity of a mediaeval knight, but it is nevertheless true that through a process of education in the chivalric arts, Horn gradually acquires the skill and strength to bring himself home as the rightful ruler. This evolution of the hero's history is not unlike the progress towards recognition that accompanies Havelok in his quest
for home. However, a major difference in *King Horn* is that the hero acquires military and chivalric values rather than domestic or social ability. In this sense at least *King Horn* has a more courtly, albeit rough, appeal. The poet's attitude — in support of the status quo — is abundantly clear throughout. However, Horn's quest is dictated by political circumstance (an invasion which results in his exile) and his education in chivalric arts by his social position. Even the minor quest, the search for an adventure after he has been knighted by Aylmar, is governed by custom — the need to prove his manhood as a knight before he can consent to wed Rymenhild. Of the eight journeys undertaken by Horn in the course of the poem, only one is motivated by something other than external forces. This one is of course the journey prompted by the dream that Fikenhild has abducted Rymenhild. Here the dream serves as an interesting parallel both to Rymenhild's dream of Fikenhild's first betrayal and to the way in which the entire quest motif was introduced — by Horn's exile in a boat without sail or rudder. But further, the dream complements, on the heroine's part, the sufferings endured by Horn in his attempts to return home while also drawing our attention to the love plot. In a sense the dream resolves the conflict between Horn the fighter and Horn the lover that some see as fundamental to the hero's character, for
it is by fighting that Horn is enabled to restore a situation in which loving can take place; a paradox only if one fails to comprehend the totality of the chivalric ethos.

The satisfactory conclusion of a quest frequently results in some benefit to the society or community which the hero represents. In addition to restoring the rightful rule, Horn's expulsion of the Saracens from Suddene also results in the re-establishment of Christian practices

Horn let wurche
Chapeles and chirche;
He let belles ringe,
And masses let singe. C 1481-84

An atmosphere of joy pervades Horn's restoration and reunion with his mother. However, two of the manuscripts include references to Horn wearing his crown

Croune he gan werie,
Ant make feste merye.
Murie he þer wrohte. H 1490-92

The joy attending Horn's return is attested to elsewhere, but particularly moving is the brief scene in which Athulf and Horn meet Athulf's father who has been defending the land, against his will, in case of Horn's return

Pe knyt to hem gan steppe,
And in armes cleppe.
Pe joie þat he made,
Myȝte no man rede. L 1449-52

An interesting narrative technique which occurs frequently towards the end of the poem is the poet's ability
to maintain two themes simultaneously. The first theme is that involving the episodes of fighting and the establishment of just rule. The second theme is the separation of two lovers. The poet indulges a sort of cinematic technique by cutting from one theme to another in successive scenes. For example, as soon as we are told of Horn's feast and the restoration of Christianity, the scene shifts to Fikenhild's treacherous designs on Rymenhild. The Laud MS. gives the clearest indication of this shift to the love plot. We are given no lingering description of Horn's feast, but in a single sentence our attention is moved from the feast to Rymenhild's perilous situation

Murye he þere wroute;
Reymyld hýt aboute.
Wile þat horn was oute,
Fikenylde ferde aboute.
To wiue he gan hire ȝerne;
Pe kyng ne dorst him werne. L 1491-96

What follows is the changing of the scene, in rapid succession, from Horn's dream of Rymenhild's peril and his hasty departure to rescue her, to Fikenhild's plotting to wed Rymenhild at night, to Horn's arrival in Westernesse in his disguise as a harper, and finally to the reunion of the faithful lovers after the banquet-table slaughter of Fikenhild and his men. These scenes introduce the last of a series of rapid journeys which culminate in the resolution of Horn's quest for home. Horn establishes order in Westernesse, then in the land
"Per king modi was sire," then in Ireland before finally bringing his bride home to Suddene.

The effect of these closing events is to delay the completion of the major quest by a series of minor quests which succeed in expressing the poet's attitude towards order and love. Horn is not allowed to return permanently to his kingdom until the rest of the poem's world has been put in its rightful place. When he does finally return it is to a situation in which chivalric warfare and love have been combined and justified by the results of the adventures — Horn is king, Rymenhild is his queen and:

In trewe love hue lyueden ay,
Ant wel hue loueden godes lay.  H 1641-42

We have seen that the original journey — and even subsequent journeys in the poem — was imposed upon the hero by something external. However, this is not the case when Horn, prompted by a dream, senses that Rymenhild is in danger. His dream is prophetic and implies a truth beyond reason — a superior form of knowing. It is the second prophetic dream in the story which, while satisfying the frequent doubling of plots, also functions as a foreshadowing of another journey to be taken by the hero.

It is worthwhile digressing for a moment to explore the nature of the dreams with which the Horn poet was dealing. In his Commentary on Cicero's Somnium Scipionis, Macrobius
describes five species of dream. Three of these are veridical, that is they speak the truth or correspond to events that will take place. The other two kinds are of no use to man since they offer no divination. Of the three useful kinds, two occur in King Horn. Ryemhild's dream is of the enigmatic variety, or known as a somnium in Latin

By an enigmatic dream we mean one that conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered, and requires an interpretation for its understanding.  

The symbols of the two fish and the net are ambiguous, and it is Horn's function to interpret the situation in the dream. In fact Horn's first comments on the dream are ambiguous

\[
\text{P}i \text{ sweuen schal wende}, \\
\text{O}\text{per sum M}an \text{ schal vs schende} \quad \text{C 723-24}
\]

but he only senses trouble at this point:

\[
\text{Pe fiss pat brak pe lyne}, \\
\text{Ywis he dop us pine.} \\
\text{Pat schal don vs tene} \\
\text{And wurp we}l \text{ sone isene.} \quad \text{C 725-28}
\]

After the banishment order Horn bids farewell to Ryemhild with words which confirm the intimations of danger that he had sensed earlier

\[
\text{He sede, "lemman, derling; } \\
\text{Nu hauestu pi sweuening.} \\
\text{Pe fiss pat pi net rente,} \\
\text{Fram pe he me sente.} \quad \text{C 773-76}
\]
Two points are worth noting here. First, Horn's immediate reaction upon hearing Rymenhild's dream is that he pledges undying loyalty to her in an effort to offer comfort. This pledge comes at the point in the poem that foreshadows Fikenhild's ultimate duplicity. Horn invokes St. Stephen, apparently a popular saint in the Middle Ages and the first martyr after Christ. Stephen was famous for making a declaration of faith which cost him his life. Perhaps this carries over to Horn who twice risks his life for the love he has for Rymenhild. Secondly, Horn uses the word "sweuen" for "dream" throughout. C.S. Lewis and Geoffrey Chaucer notwithstanding, the word is used in Middle English in a sense that implies both a dream of the useful or useless type.

In addition to being a dream of the enigmatic variety, Rymenhild's dream may be further categorised as to the types of enigmatic dream to which it corresponds. It is first personal in that it involves herself — she casts her net into the sea. It is alien in that it involves others. The others here are the two fish who later are seen to refer to Fikenhild and Horn. Finally, it is social in that it involves others and herself.

Now Horn's dream of Rymenhild's distress on the other hand corresponds to Macrobius' definition of visio. That is, "we call a dream a prophetic vision if it actually comes
His dream involves no veiled meaning, it is a literal vision of events that are happening now, or will happen in the immediate future. In fact Horn's *visio* occurs if not at the same moment of Rymenhild's abduction, then at least on the same night. The sequence of events described by the poet is worked out with a careful eye on time. Horn has his dream, he expounds it to Athulf, Fikenhild leads Rymenhild away "bi þe derke." All these events appear to occur on the same night, while Fikenhild begins feasting his abducted bride "Er þat ros þe sunne." There is a nice antithesis in the lines which describe Fikenhild's deeds carried out at night with a brief reference to Rymenhild

Fikenhild, or þe dai gan springe,
Al riȝt he ferde to þe kinge,
After Rymenhild þe briȝte,
To wedden hire biniȝte. C 1543-46

The first dream (Rymenhild's) was followed by Horn's banishment from Westerne. It arose gratuitously from the heroine's subconscious and suggested a foreshadowing of some danger to her love for Horn. In the second dream Horn becomes the dreamer and in turn is warned of his love's peril. Hence he is prompted to make the second rescue mission. Both dreams are prophetic and both involve betrayal by Fikenhild. Further, they both represent an interior form of motivation. Elsewhere in the poem the immediate cause for action is external. While it would be easy to agree with
McKnight that the dreams and disguises "seem to belong to the common stock of mediaeval frippery"\textsuperscript{17} some evidence in the poem suggests that \textit{King Horn} does not represent a world "bare of all but the primary qualities."\textsuperscript{18}

Before plunging into the sea of anthropology the modern reader of mediaeval literature would do well to bear in mind the caution urged upon us by C.S. Lewis.\textsuperscript{19} Mediaeval authors were possessed of their own very conscious set of symbols grounded in scriptural and exegetical tradition. They were doubtless also possessed of a knowledge of archetypal symbols growing out of certain long-forgotten rituals of both a Christian and pagan nature. But it would be most unwise for us to imagine that as we proceed, bough in hand, we will be able to disclose mysteries founded in widespread and ancient cults, or be able to "explain" a particular passage by reference to some ceremony or object which may have had absolutely no place in the mediaeval scheme of things. Apart from the distinct possibility that we will be wrong in assuming a mystical significance for something which may not be in the least mysterious, we do the poet an injustice in suggesting that his work is, at best, a watered-down redaction of some fertility rite or forgotten ceremony. Let us at least give him an artistic consciousness of his own before dismissing him as a slavish scribe. Thus warned, we may proceed to offer what should only be considered as
our interpretation of evidence and not as proof of the obvious.

First of all, Rymenhild's dream introduces the complex fish and net symbolism which foreshadows the fishing riddle that Horn recites on his first rescue journey (C 1213-1225). Then later, Horn's dream warns him of an attempt on Rymenhild's chastity and faith by Fikenhild. The connection of the symbols in the first dream with subsequent events in the story is deliberately vague. However, it is not unreasonable to propose that the symbols represent an intimation of sexual assault on Rymenhild, for to see fishing in a dream signifies betrayal, while a torn net symbolises disappointment, and Horn and Rymenhild have to endure many disappointments before their reunion. Rymenhild's dream involves two fish; one is a source of danger (which later turns out to be Fikenhild), the other the object of her love whom she is in danger of losing. There are both positive and negative portents in the fish symbol with precedents reaching back into oriental antiquity. A fish often represents generative power and abundance, but can also signify greed and stupidity, while it is possible that it became a phallic symbol "because of its extraordinary fecundity." In Sumerian mythology Dagon is a fertility god who is half man and half fish. His name is said to resemble 'dag' (fish) and 'dagan' (grain) and he was regarded by some as a fish god,
by others as a god of corn or grain. It is interesting that one of Horn's first acts after liberating Suddene is to dispense corn:

*Corn he let serie,*  
*And makede feste merie.*  

C 1489-90

At the risk of over-simplifying the conflict in the poem, we might consider that in some subconscious way the story of Horn's progress and his enmity with Fikenhild represents a microcosmic and symbolic struggle between the forces of good and evil, for Horn is always described in terms of the best or the fairest, while Fikenhild is always "bre wurste." Furthermore, neither Horn nor Fikenhild is characterized in any deeply personal or engaging manner. Apart from a short speech in which he warns Aylmar of Horn's interest in Rymenhild, we know of Fikenhild only at second hand and from the poet's point of view which is expressed in remarks about Fikenhild. In his speech of betrayal to Aylmar Fikenhild resorts to lies, but in such a way that reminds one of the rôle of the vice in morality plays. It is his job to oppose the good, in fact to be the foil by which we may judge Horn's character. Similarly Horn is very much of a wooden figure. He performs in a way that is never surprising. His expressions of love are frequently conventional and unimpassioned:

*lschall me make pinowe,*  
*To holden and to knowe*  
*For eurech opere wi3te;*  
*And þarto mi þreube iþe pli3te.*  

C 713-716

Words familiar enough to any married man since they are reminiscent of a ritual or ceremony.
His exploits on the field of battle are both exemplary and hyperbolic — everything we expect in an archetypal hero,

He słoʒ ðer on haste  
On hundred bi ðe laste.  
Ne mɪʒte noman telle  
Pat folc ðat he gan quelle.  

C 653-656

And Athulf refers to Horn in terms which imply not only that he is the best man in the world, but also that he is a sort of Adam figure

Horn is fairer and riche,  
Fairer bi one ribbe  
Pane eni Man ðat libbe.  

C 332-34

Fikenhild's betrayal of Horn, through envy, drives Horn away while leaving the scene clear later for an attempt on Rymenhild. The vague reference in Rymenhild's dream to a dangerous fish is interpreted as a betrayal, but by whom is not yet known

. . . lemmman, derling,  
Nu hauestu þi suewenig.  
Þe fiss ðat þi net rente,  
Fram þe he me sente.  

C 773-76

Here Horn drops the clue to his seven-year exile which is picked up again in his riddle to Rymenhild

Mi net lip her bi honde,  
Bi a wel fair stronde.  
Hit hæþ ileie þøre  
Fulle seue þere.  
Ihc am icome to loke  
Ef eni fiss hit foke,  
Ihc am icome to fisse.  

C 1217-25

Whereas Rymenhild had been the fisher, now Horn assumes that rôle. Previously Rymenhild had been the active lover who set
her net for Horn. Now Horn is the active lover moving at every step closer to his reunion with Rymenhild. He has become the fisher who is also a king struggling to restore his kingdom. The symbols of fish and fisher expressed here, subconsciously or not, are reminiscent of the Grail tradition and myths associated with fertility and vegetation gods; they also call up the image of Christ as the fisher of men. Horn, though not in himself maimed or injured, has nonetheless to restore himself to the crown in order to restore his land. The use of such complex symbolism and rôle-reversals argues strongly against the opinion that *King Horn* is "bare and formulaic in language and narrative technique."25

Horn's interpretation of Rymenhild's dream is perhaps ambiguous in two of the MSS, which suggests that he does not know if the dream signifies something good or bad, but his grasp of the symbolism of the torn net, in the Laud MS at least, demonstrates a knowledge of certain danger

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Py sweuene ich shal schende.} \\
\text{Pe fis that brac bi seyne,} \\
\text{Hy wis hyt was som ble[y]ne} \\
\text{Pat schal us do som tene;} \\
\text{Hy wis hyt worp hy sene.}
\end{align*}
\]

*IPy sweuene ich shal schende.*

*Pe fis that brac bi seyne,*

*Hy wis hyt was som ble[y]ne*

*Pat schal us do som tene;*

*Hy wis hyt worp hy sene.*

L 724-28

His interpretation of the second dream is not in the least ambiguous. Horn knows that Rymenhild is in trouble and that Fikenhild is the agent of her danger. His rescue mission is prompted by a source of knowledge that is not for a moment questioned.
While it is true that both Horn's banishment from Westernesse and his second rescue of Rymenhild were caused by external circumstance, the reason for each journey was known before the journeys took place. The poet may be attempting to suggest the presence of some force, emananating from within his hero and heroine, which gives them foreknowledge of disaster and which enables them to act so as to avert that disaster. At any rate, the dreams are acted upon as though they were oracular, or signified the truth, as we find is the case. The fact that they are ascribed to the protagonists reinforces the notion of the rightness of Horn's cause — he is on the side of truth. Such use of dreams, or superior knowledge, may also signify an attempt to hint at an interior landscape, or level of consciousness, which is being applied to affect external events. If not, then the complex symbols of the first dream, their recurrence in the riddle, and the link of the first dream with the second are mere accidents or figurative juggling. For while the first dream hints at an attempt on Rymenhild's chastity, the second dream spells it out. The tower that confines Rymenhild (possibly a further subconscious sexual symbol) is not a figment of Horn's imagination; it is one more obstacle in the long series of frustrations that he suffers.

Before moving on to an examination of Floriz and Blauncheflur it is worth noting the Horn poet's use of the word "ginne" in connection with Horn's entry to the tower
Most of Horn's efforts up to now have involved the direct and forceful approach of the fighting man. His entry to Aylmar's hall had been preceded by his throwing the gatekeeper over the bridge. By contrast, this second rescue is accomplished first by subtlety and then by force. While violent action is characteristic of the hero's conduct in the entire poem, we shall see that the reverse is true of Floriz.

King Horn has been described as a poem which depicts an unsophisticated and warlike society and which was basically a popular tale that "had absorbed romantic motives." It may be true that Horn's society was warlike and its values feudal, but the poet's grasp of dream logic and intertwining symbols suggest a mind more complex than has hitherto been acknowledged. The themes of exile and separation were no doubt popular ones in thirteenth and fourteenth-century romance, and it is true that the poet's handling of the many journeys and separations is at times a little too balanced and mechanical. He has, however, demonstrated his belief in order, justice and patriotism in a manner which on occasion rivals the skill with symbols and metaphor which characterises the Gawain-poet or Chaucer.
Floriz and Blaunchflur

In his introduction to Floriz and Blaunchflur, McKnight observes that while the love element plays a large part in King Horn, in Floriz and Blaunchflur it is "the all in all." Indeed, most of the surviving fragment of the poem is occupied with Floriz' efforts to find Blancheflour, his love, who has been sold to the Emir of Babylon. It is quite likely that the Babylon referred to in the poem is Cairo in Egypt, as this name appears to have been common in the Middle Ages. As for the Emir himself, we are led to believe that he is a character of almost unappeasable wrath (T 553-54, T 724), like Hades, the grim lord of the underworld, who punishes wrongdoers without pity. But the Emir, like other characters in the story, is moved by the lovers' devotion to each other.

For Floriz the achievement of his quest is a homecoming to life, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. His life is spared, as well as Blancheflour's, when our expectations were of his untimely end, while the reunion has given him cause to live. Early in the poem his love for Blancheflour is equated with his own life

Ne myȝt him glade game ne gle,
For he myȝt not his lyf see,

and on learning of Blancheflour's alleged death he attempts to commit suicide, a gesture which reminds us of the suicide-by-mistake of Pyramus

His knyf he braide out of his sheth;
Him self he wolde haue doo to deth.

Ne myȝt him glade game ne gle,
For he myȝt not his lyf see,  
T 107-8

and on learning of Blancheflour's alleged death he attempts to commit suicide, a gesture which reminds us of the suicide-by-mistake of Pyramus

His knyf he braide out of his sheth;
Him self he wolde haue doo to deth.  
T 289-90
Floriz' search, like Horn's, moves towards equilibrium. But it is an equilibrium of the heart, for the poet takes little account of political or social considerations. Here the quest confers no boon on society, nor does Floriz' absence from home affect conditions in his native land. Having found Blancheflour he is quite happy to spend his days as the Emir's guest. Only on learning of his father's death, and upon being urged by the nobles at home, does he consent to return (T 1077-83). At no point does the poet capitalise on the fact that Floriz' success in his venture represents the union, through love, of Christian and heathen: nor are we told that Blancheflour embraces Islam. Indeed, the poem is exceptional in that it portrays Saracens in a favourable light. One is commonly accustomed, in mediaeval works, to seeing them depicted as heartless villians who resort to barbarous acts of cruelty. But here we are conscious of the way in which everyonesoftens towards the young lovers and eventually assists their reunification.

Floriz and Blancheflour are little more than children, but the poet presents them as the harbingers of truth. Their love is seen to transcend the mercenary aspects of the tale which cling to the adults — unsuitability of Blancheflour as a bride for Floriz, the plot to pretend that she is dead, her sale to merchants and her subsequent sale to the Emir for "Seuen sithes of gold hur wyȝt" (T 484). There is an engaging
sweetness about the pair which makes the poem more of an idyll than a courtly romance. Deceit is practised by the older people of the poem. Floriz is never callous, and though he finds Blancheflour by means of a trick, he never becomes malicious. From the poet's point of view the protagonists demonstrate the way in which love overcomes all obstacles. But it is interesting in that he chooses the young as instruments of instruction to a society that places authority before amour.

The relative brevity of the poem's conclusion suggests that the poet's chief concern was to complete the love plot. However, the Cambridge MS ventures fleetingly into social and moral considerations. By promising Floriz a kingdom at least as large as the one he has inherited, the Emir tries, unsuccessfully, to persuade the pair to remain

\[\text{Ac floriz nolde for no winne;}
\text{Leuere him were wip his kinne.}\]  

C 805-6

Family and home, for Floriz, take precedence over gain and the life of a sinecure governorship. In a sense the poet's use of "winne" reinforces the idea of barter which pervades the poem at several critical points, not least of which are the double sale of Blancheflour and Floriz' success in winning the porter to his cause by promises of wealth. Floriz' rejection of the Emir's offer adds weight to the purity of his motivation in the quest. He has had his winning in the
reunion with Blancheflour. Now he responds to the demands of duty and society by returning to assume his throne, but with Blancheflour. One other point at which the Cambridge MS, or at least its author, deviates from the love plot is worth observing in that it illustrates the mediaeval artist's temptation to inject a moral note into his work. The scene at the poem's conclusion just as in *King Horn*, depicts a restoration of the hero to his people and his crown. But the *Floris* poet adds a note which makes the rest of the poem appear as a homily on the virtue of patience.

```
Nu ȝe habbep iherd þane ende
Of floris and his leman hende,
Hu after bale comep bote;
God leue þat vs so mote,
Pat we him mote louie so,
Pat we mote to heuene go.  C 819-24
```

The convention is a familiar one. We find almost the identical words at the end of Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman's Tale, "God sende every trewe man boote of his bale!" and a similar idea at the end of *Sir Orfeo*, "Pus com Sir Orfeo out of his care:/God graunt ous alle wele to fare!" The exhortation to the reader is to take the "fruyt and lat the chaf be stille." The poem is of course not a homily on patience, it is a story of young love. The colophon, while giving a note of comfort to those in adversity, points up the often-expressed worlds of terrestrial and heavenly love.

While it is true that religious considerations are presented as the original cause of the lovers' separation, they are not allowed to intrude seriously upon the theme. The
king, wishing at first to kill Blancheflour, is persuaded that a more honourable course is to sell her to some merchants from Babylon. In this respect, at least, the story is a romantic re-telling of a traveller's tale. Slave-markets appear to have been common enough in the Mediterranean of the later Middle Ages, while the sale of young girls, often Christian captives, is attested to by several travellers. The author of Mandeville's Travels describes the wiving and acquisition of concubines by the Sultan of Egypt in a manner that is analogous to Blancheflour's situation and to the plight of Nicolette in Aucassin and Nicolette.

Floriz' father, moved to pity at his son's distress over Blancheflour's banishment into captivity, relents completely of his former wrath (as does the Emir later on). He even equips Floriz suitably for his quest. At this point there is a fundamental difference in the portrait of Floriz as hero compared with Horn or Havelok. There is nothing of the miraculous about Floriz which compares to the ray of light emanating from Havelok's mouth. Nor may we expect to find the sort of heroic exploit on the battlefield so typical of Horn. Floriz' heroism is of a different kind and, while his action does not involve social change or the rule of law, it is nonetheless heroic. His allegiance is to an ideal that is personal and intimate, not public or social. Horn is never portrayed in other than chivalric or military terms. Though he resorts twice to disguise, it is to rescue Rymenhild
by force. For the most part he is embattled with one party or another. Floriz, on the other hand, assumes a merchant's dress at the start of his search — "As marchaundes we shull vs lede," (T 354) — and, with the exception of his attempted suicide, never draws sword in the entire story. In his quest subtlety is all.

Evidence of the hero's resort to ingenuity is found in the many occasions on which the word "ginne" or its derivative is used. Floriz' parents, "Prou3 engyne," (T 313) conceive a means of persuading him that Blancheflour is dead. On learning from an innkeeper of her whereabouts Floriz asks for advice

3if he my3t, with any gynne,  
pat feire may to him wynne.  
T 497-98

There is even a play on the word in a sexual sense when it is used to describe the men guarding the tower in which the Emir's maidens are kept

But no seriaunt may serue perynne  
Pat berep in his breche pat gynne33  
To serue hem day and ny3t,  
But he be as a Capoun dy3t.  
T 591-94

Dares' advice to Floriz, in the latter's attempt to enter the tower by befriending the porter, is that he should disguise himself as a stone-mason or builder

Wende to-morn to be toure  
As pou were a good gynoure.  
T 653-54
In this romance, as in *King Horn*, Disguise plays an important part in the hero's accomplishment of his task. The device of tricking a porter to gain entry to a place has analogues in much earlier literature, most notably in the *Aeneid* of Virgil in which the Sibyl throws a honied sop to Cerberus thus permitting Aeneas to pass by safely.\(^\text{34}\) Of even greater antiquity is the satisfactory response to a series of questions, a form of test, by the hero to gain entry to some place. An example of this is found in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* in which the soul of the deceased is questioned by the doors guarding the entrance to the Hall of double Maati, that is, the hall of Isis and Nepthys who symbolize Right and Truth.\(^\text{35}\) Of much closer date to *Floris and Blancheflur* is the disguise through which Orfeo fools the porter who guards the entrance to the underworld.\(^\text{36}\)

As in *King Horn*, so too in *Floris* the quest theme serves mainly as a device on which to hang a story. The theme of search does not transcend the narrative interest of the tale. Floriz' quest is of the simplest kind — a search for a person — and in this respect it resembles *Sir Orfeo*. We cannot say that Floriz' experience makes him a better person, nor that the passage of time affects his character. In *King Horn* the hero is given several years to grow from adolescence to maturity. In succession his tasks and accomplishments represent a growing-up. Floriz, on the other hand, remains
the same sort of person as when he began his search. Nor should we expect anything else in what is unashamedly a love story. The poet makes no claims for historical truth or political determinism. Floriz has no great wrongs to put right. His journey to the centre ends when he finds Blancheflour.
FOOTNOTES


4 *King Horn*, Cambr. Univ., MS Gg. 4. 27. 2., 1. 31-36.

5 D.M. Hill, "An Interpretation of *King Horn*," *Anglia* 75 (1957), 191.

6 *King Horn (C)*, 627-82.

7 *King Horn (C)*, 1521-36.

8 D.M. Hill, *op. cit.*, 161-162. In Hill's view the conflict between fighter and lover is an essential feature of the poem.

10 King Horn, MS. Cambr. Univ. Gg. 4. 27. 2, 1626.


12 Ibid.


15 O.E.D., "Sweven," sb. 1. See also "swevening."

16 Macrobius, p. 90.

17 George H. McKnight, "Germanic Elements in the Story of King Horn," *PMLA*, 15 (1900), 232.

18 D.M. Hill, p. 170.


23 The other two MSS offer different readings and relate to the resumption of his crown.


27 McKnight, "Germanic Elements," p. xxx.


31 Samuel C. Chew, pp. 189-90.


33 *M.E.D.*, "ginne" n., e (a). In ME the word is the aphetic form of "engin."


There is a remarkable similarity in the patterns of *Havelok the Dane* and *King Horn*. In *Havelok* the theme is the popular exile-and-return of a king as it was in *Horn*. Both poems celebrate the state of equilibrium which existed in the old days of just rule and both illustrate a restoration of order at their conclusions. In neither story does the love theme play a very important part. In *Havelok* love is largely taken for granted, but in terms of the plot, it serves to unite the parallel strands of the fate of the monarchy in Denmark and England.

By comparison to *King Horn* and *Sir Orfeo* it would be unwise to insist too strongly on the part played by the quest theme in *Havelok*. The story of Havelok's rising success is far less complicated than Horn's return to the throne. As Gibbs points out, *Havelok* does not even have any great ambitions in the direction of kingship until after his marriage to Goldeboru. Even at this point, it takes two
dreams and an angelic revelation to make him aware of his destiny, and this too is explained to him by Goldeboru. It is here that the quest, such as it is, really begins. The chief distinction to be made between Horn's quest and that of Havelok is that in the latter poem, once the decision to return to Denmark has been taken, the hero's success is largely the result of the miraculous light emanating from his mouth, for it is this and the mark of kingship on Havelok's back, that allows Ubbe and his knights to recognize him as the true heir to the Danish throne

So that he knewen at be laste, 
Pat he was birkabeynes sone, 
Pat was here king, pat was hem won 
Wel to yerne, and wel were 
Ageynes uten-laddes here. 2149-53

In Horn there is none of the miraculous element; his success is achieved by battle and with a little assistance from disguise. The part played by the miraculous light is critical to Havelok's survival and success. At its first appearance it permits Grim to understand the nature of the crime he was about to undertake, and to indulge in a piece of unexplained prescience

"Goddot!" quath grim, "pis [is] ure eir 
Pat shal [ben] louerd of denemark, 
He shal ben king strong and stark; 
He shal hauen in his hand 

The miracle saves Havelok's life and contributes to Grim's decision to flee Godard's wrath.
The second appearance of the light and the cross of kingship reveals Havelok's destiny as we have suggested above. The language used by the angelic voice to explain these miracles to Goldeboru is a strong echo of Grim's words:

"Goldeborw, lat pi sorwe be,
For havelok, pat haueb spuset be,
He kinges sone, and kinges eyr,
Pat bikeneth pat croiz so fayr.
It bikeneth more, pat he shal
Denemark hauen, and englond al;
He shal ben king strong and stark
Of engelond and denemark."

When Havelok has been apprised of his destiny to be king of Denmark and England his first act is to go to church to invoke God's aid in his attempt to redress Godard's injustice:

"He [hath] mi lond with mikel vn-Rith,
With michel wrong, with mikel plith,
For i ne misdede him neuere nouth,
And haued me to sorwe brouth . . .

And bringge me wel to be lond,
Pat godard haldes in his hond;
Pat is mi Rith, eueri del:
Ihesu crist, pou wost it wel!"

The emphasis of this prayer is on the rightness of Havelok's cause, to seek redress for his murdered sisters and usurped throne. But the impetus for his quest seems to originate with Goldeboru. There is a curious repetition of her remark, "For shal ich neuere blipe be/Til i with eyen denemark se" (1339-40), in Havelok's address to Grim's sons when he asks them to come with him to Denmark to put down Godard, "Shal i neuere hwil ich
lyue/Ben glad, til that ich denemark se" (1438-39). One is left feeling that Havelok would have been just as happy working as a scullion in blissful ignorance of his inheritance. Perhaps this is a case of one having greatness thrust upon him.

In a manner similar to Floriz, Havelok assumes a merchant's disguise on arriving in Denmark. But, after his heroic defence of Bernard's castle and after Ubbe has seen the miraculous light, Havelok's restoration in Denmark becomes largely a matter of Ubbe's support for Birkabeyn's heir. For it is Ubbe who manages the two ceremonies at which the nobility and then the constabulary swear loyalty.

The pattern of restoration in England is similar, though achieved at some cost to the Danish. The part played by the hero is conventional in the extreme. He is the best at all he does, he is taller than his fellows and we are constantly reminded of how fair he is. In one respect his behaviour towards his enemy, Godrich, in England differs from the treatment accorded Godard. Havelok is prepared to forgive Godrich, perhaps because he is conscious of being a foreigner in England

"Do nu wel without fiht,
Yeld hire be lond, for pat is rith.
Wile ich forgiiue be be lathe,
Al mi dede and al mi wrahte,
For ye se þu art so with,
And of þi bodi so god knith."

2716-2721

This also represents Havelok's one concession to chivalric conduct in the entire poem. Earlier he is depicted merely
as a strong-man in the fight at Bernard's castle where his weapon is the wooden bar of the doors, while before that his raw strength at stone-putting was demonstrated at the games in Lincoln and in carrying huge loads.

If we are to distinguish the treatment accorded the quest in *Havelok* from that in *Horn* then differences are to be found in the presence or absence of each poet's voice and in their familiarity and enthusiasm for their subject. Where the *Horn* poet lends universality to his hero by an absence of intimate domestic detail, and places himself at some distance from the people and events of the story, the *Havelok* poet, by contrast, delights in such details which flesh out Havelok's progress. Beyond this, however, in *Havelok* the poet serves as an intermediary between the events in his story and his listeners; there is a sense of contract with his audience which is practically non-existent in *Horn* and may account for the failure of *Havelok* to appear at later times as a ballad; we know too much about him that is personal and not enough that is universal.

The opening lines of *Havelok*, in the form of a direct address to "Wiues, maydnes, and alle men," while being to some degree a mediaeval convention, support the atmosphere of conviviality with which the poem begins

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{At the beginning of vre tale,} \\
\text{Fit me a cuppe of ful god ale;} \\
\text{And [y] wile drinken her y spelle,} \\
\text{Pat crist vs shilde alle fro helle!} \\
\end{align*}
\]

13-16

The tone adopted is one of familiarity with the audience, while the manner of adoption is not unlike that Chaucer's
Pardoner who needs to refresh himself before launching into his homily

"It shall be doon," quod he, "by Seint Ronyon!
But first," quod he, "heere at this ale stake
I wol bothe drynke, and eten of a cake."

VI (C) 320-22

At several points during his tale the Havelok poet shows his partiality for the protagonists by dramatic intrusions upon the action with curses directed at the traitors, Godard and Godrich, and references to them as Judas or Satan. Such incursions, together with the rôle played by Havelok as porter, scullion and stone-puter, contribute to an aura of intimacy, not found in Horn, and removes that distance between the poet and his subject which lends Horn a broader and, as it turns out, more durable appeal.

Throughout the poem the quest as a device is subordinated to the poet's interest in Havelok's skill at domestic tasks. There is none of the urgency here of the kind seen in Floriz' search for Blancheflour. The restoration of just rule at the poem's conclusion seems almost incidental to the large amount of detail about contemporary life which the poem offers us. The poet is more at home describing the games at Lincoln or Grim's fishing than he is with courtly affairs. He is at pains to describe in realistic terms the execution of the traitors or the battle with the sixty-one thieves. We are not offered an insight into Havelok's thoughts during the process
of his advance to maturity. In fact, his successive accomplishments simply reveal what the poet takes to be self-evident, that since he was born a king, kingship will reveal itself in Havelok quite naturally. Each experience unfolds more of the royal nature that was present at birth but not disclosed until called for.

We suggested above that the restoration of order seems to be incidental to the poet's attachment to his hero. In fact, Havelok is less important in himself. Rather he becomes the vehicle embodying the ideals of law and order in society to which the poet subscribes. The poem portrays a series of events which are alleged to be historical and which serve as a model for the poet's generation. The manuscript of Havelok is called a Vita, or life, either by the poet, but more likely by a later scribe. The term is an uncommon one in romance since one usually associates it with saints' lives which are the Vitae of homiletic literature. While the term Vita is not insisted upon very strongly in Havelok, his experiences are nevertheless a model for a type of human behaviour which, while being entertaining, is also instructive. One is again reminded of The Pardoner's Tale which is instructive to its hearers but which also reveals the ambiguity of the Pardoner's "entente." Havelok does not belong to the genre of escapist literature of the kind experienced in Breton laïs; instead it is the supreme example in Middle English literature
of the celebration of order. Evidence of this is offered in the extensive description of life in Athelwold's England near the beginning of the poem, and again in the lengthy commentary on the disposition of order in England and Denmark when Havelok becomes king. While a *Vita* is normally concerned with a demonstration of one or other of the cardinal virtues, and in consequence with the cardinal sins in a spiritual sense, in *Havelok* the highest good is expressed in terms of loyalty to the rightful king; the greatest sin is in the usurpation of right rule. The consequence of such sin is not eternal damnation, but humiliation and a disgraceful, public death.

*Sir Orfeo: Journey to the Other World*

The Orpheus legend has enjoyed outstanding popularity and longevity. As recently as 1959 it appeared in a film, "Black Orpheus," directed by Marcel Camus, and based on a play by the Brazilian poet Vinicius de Moraes, and a few years earlier in a poem, "Orpheus," by W.D. Snodgrass. In the Middle Ages the legend was accessible in three Latin sources, all of which were more or less alike in their details about Eurydice's death and Orpheus' search for her. The Middle English version of the legend, which dates from the second quarter of the fourteenth century, is unusual in two respects. First, it provides a happy ending in the reunion of Orfeo and Heurodis, a detail which is said to have been derived from
the Celtic penchant for satisfactory conclusions, and secondly, like its classical predecessors, it celebrates married love. This last feature it shares with Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, but not with courtly romance in general and French romance in particular where, according to Andreas Capellanus who spelled out the prescribed usages of "amour courtois," adultery is generally the rule rather than the exception. Though the heroes of *Horn*, *Havelok* and *Floriz* conclude their achievements by marriage, only Orfeo is portrayed as one already married and settled in his kingdom. In this respect at least his success is heightened by a knowledge of his loss.

Of the group of stories studied so far, only *Sir Orfeo* is deeply concerned with magical or otherworldly considerations. It is true that Horn wears a ring which inspires him to greater efforts in his battle with the pagans. There is also Rymenhild's statement that the ring possesses properties which protect its wearer. In *Havelok* we saw the appearance, on three critical occasions, of a miraculous light and the mark of kingship which identified Havelok as the true king. But in both *Horn* and *Havelok* the magical elements are not central to the entire story; they serve instead as devices which promote the well-being, or even survival, of the hero at particular moments in his quest. In *Sir Orfeo*, by contrast, the supernatural is the force against which the hero and heroine are pitted; it becomes the *raison d'être* of the tale, for without the supernatural abduction of Heurodis, there would be no story.
Orfeo's quest, like that of Horn, Havelok and Floriz, follows the familiar cyclical pattern of departure, trial and return. The safe return of Orfeo and Heurodis restores the stability of the kingdom, but in a manner quite unlike the restoration of Horn or Havelok where brutal justice imposes an aura of realism. In *Sir Orfeo* there appear to be two kingdoms which co-exist, the one of Winchester in the "real" world, and the other in a land of enchantment. The parallels between the two kingdoms are worthy of note. Heurodis describes what she has seen of the Otherworld on her first abduction. She sees a palace

```
Wele atird in ich ways,
```

while she is shown

```
... castels and tours,
Riuers, forests, frip wip flour,</p
& his riche stedes ichon.
```

The poet, after describing Orfeo's suffering at the hands of nature, juxtaposes the image of Orfeo's former life

```
He pat hadde had castels & tours,
Riuere, forest, frip wip flour.</p
```

Now Orfeo lies on the hard heath and covers himself with leaves and grass.

Winchester is briefly described as a "cité of noble defens" (4) while a much longer description is accorded the Otherworld castle and its defences
The rest of the description of the fairy palace suggests immense wealth and the semblance of Paradise.

In describing Orfeo and Heurodis the poet uses terms which are physical as well as courtly, but always connected with the living world. Orfeo is "A stalworf man & hardi bo;/Large and curtys he was al-so" (41-42), while Heurodis, described in conventional terms, is nonetheless the fairest lady "bat mi3t gon on bodi & bones" (54). In other words, a creature of flesh and blood. By contrast the fairy king and his queen have an aura of the disembodied about them. There are no words used to describe their actual, physical appearance. Instead they are perceived as a source of light, difficult to look upon.

or presence without substance.

The effect of Orfeo's harping is alluded to twice in the real world and once in the fairy world. Any living person who heard him play "schuld penche bat he were/In on of be 1oies of Paradis" (36-37). In the forest his harping charms
all the wild beasts and birds who approach to listen to him (272-78). Finally, in the Otherworld palace, his playing is so sweet

\[
\text{Pat al pat in be palays were}
\]
\[
\text{Com to him forto here,}
\]
\[
& \text{liggep adoun to his fete.} \]

His music so pleases the Otherworld king that it proves to be an enchantment more potent than the spell cast on Heurodis.

What we find in these parallels between Orfeo's kingdom and the Otherworld is that they are sufficiently alike to echo each other; yet they are distinguished in one important way. Where life at Orfeo's court is characterised by joy, movement and melody, in the Otherworld it is represented as suspended animation. Orfeo is confronted on the one hand with scenes of great beauty, both natural and unnatural, and of great horror in the tableaux of the violently dead. Only the effect of his harping is a consistent factor in both the earthly and the otherworldly Paradises. But there is also common ground in this tale which unites the two worlds, and this is the wasteland of Orfeo's self-imposed trial in the forest.

Gros Louis has argued, quite persuasively, that Orfeo's self-exile constitutes a kind of penance, which, having been patiently borne, is rewarded by a gift of grace — the recovery of Heurodis. But the notion of penance presupposes the idea of some guilt or sin which is to be atoned for. While it is true that during his stay in the wilderness Orfeo
exhibits qualities which appear to represent the Christianizing of the classical legend, namely humility, patience, loyalty and gratitude, it is also reasonable to assume that prior to his queen's abduction he possessed those qualities. Nowhere are we told that he is proud, impatient, disloyal or ungrateful. On the contrary, we are assured of his generosity and courtesy (42) and that he honoured harpers\textsuperscript{15} who came to him (27-8), hardly indications of pride or impatience. Moreover, his loyalty to Heurodis is never in question. His vow to follow wherever she goes, on learning the cause of her distress, has a truly Biblical ring and conjures up the scene between Ruth and Naomi (Ruth I: 16-17)

\textquote[129-130]{'Whider pou gost ichil wip be, 
& whider y go pou schalt wip me.'}

Gros Louis further argues that there is no search (for Heurodis) in the entire poem,\textsuperscript{16} unlike the usual Orphic legends which portray the hero on an active quest for Eurydice. However, Orfeo's lament (331-342), reminiscent of Job's lamentation at his existence and his inability to die, concludes quite emphatically with the resolution to follow, come what may

\textquote[339-42]{'Parfay!' quap he, 'Tide wat bitide, 
Whider-so pis leuedis ride, 
Pe selue way ichil streche 
—Of li if no de b me no reche.'}

Surely we are not to suppose that his resolve to follow arises from idle curiosity? The motivation to pursue the ladies must be the result of his brief glimpse of Heurodis, the great love and
sorrow each feels for the other and the last desperate hope of a devoted lover with nothing more than his life to lose. If there is no search in the entire poem, as Gros Louis would have us believe, then we must consider that Orfeo is content with his lot as a latter-day Nebuchadnezzar and that his pursuit of the ladies is inspired, not by hope, but by curiosity.

As for the notion that Orfeo "accepts the loss of his wife and does not challenge the authority of the gods" and in consequence "they are merciful to him and return Heurodis to him," it should be pointed out first, that the only mention of gods in the story, if we except the conventional concluding benediction (604), is that Orfeo's parents, Pluto and Juno, were sometimes considered gods 'For auentours pat pai dede & told' (46). Secondly, there is no divine intervention, implied or explicit, in the brief encounter in the forest. Finally, to claim that the intercession of non-existent pagan gods or forces represents a Christianizing of the legend seems to be both illogical and a contradiction of the theory that Orfeo's humility and sacrifice are rewarded in a Christian way. The Christian elements in the poem, which are undeniably present, really consist of nuances of language suggestive of Ruth and Job in addition to the portrait of Orfeo living like Nebuchadnezzar in the wilderness among the birds and beasts. It is apparent that the poet was writing for an audience sufficiently familiar with the classical traditions of the Orphic
legend and with the Bible to appreciate the changes he made. The moral of the tale, if there is one, is not that Orfeo has developed the virtues of a worthy Christian, that his humility and patience are rewarded, but that the poet has very precisely evaluated his audience. For what we are shown in *Sir Orfeo* is a very skillful blend of the Celtic resignation to fate and the power of magic — the impossibility of redress in the abduction of Heurodis combined with her miraculous recovery on the strength of a promise made — with a Christian note that would have been immediately comprehensible to a fourteenth-century audience. And all this has been enclosed in a classical legend which, if not known by all, was certainly available to many. It is making undue demands of the text to suggest that the recovery of Heurodis is the work of outside forces. This is to suggest that embedded in a fiction of magic and supernatural events there is a level of reality operating which guides the hero to recover his love, a realm whose potency exceeds that of the fairies. It seems more likely that the outcome of Orfeo's experience is explicable in terms of the same fate which led Heurodis to sleep at a particular time under a particular tree, the same fate which led to the encounter in the forest. Such an explanation satisfies the poet's wish to resolve the classical legend in an unusual way, that is with the permanent resumption of
a deep and enduring love. If we are to characterise any single element in the poem as evidence of Christian influence, it must surely be found in the quality of hope the poem offers. In most of the classical versions there is not a similar happy resolution. The mediaeval poet has resolved a brand of fatalism which is a mixture of Greek destiny guided by humourless gods and Celtic resignation to supernatural forces in a way which is both courtly and Christian.

It was suggested above that the forest in *Sir Orfeo* serves as a common ground uniting the natural world and the world of faery. In his admirable analysis of the structure of *Sir Orfeo*, Hill points out that

A major fact concerning the forest in *Sir Orfeo* is the symbolic function of the creatures in it. Orfeo's harping has power over them; the men of the other world hunt them without seizing them; and the successful hunting of them by the group which includes Heurodis signifies the beginning of Orfeo's return to life.

We have seen the forest expressed as a place of contrast with Orfeo's former life, but there is a further distinction to be drawn. Orfeo is himself one of the creatures in the forest, and the entire section of the poem dealing with his presence there juxtaposes the notions of doing and seeing. From lines A237 to A 280 there is an abundance of words connected with his survival and which involve action on his part; he covers himself with grass and leaves (A 244); he makes his bed of
moss (A 248); he digs in the ground for roots to eat (A 255-6); he takes out his harp to comfort his loneliness (a 267-71). There follows a section, from lines A 281 to A 317, in which Orfeo is a passive observer of the supernatural scenes which pass before him, as if he were in a state of hallucination, seeing but not moving, until the vision of Heurodis breaks the spell. From A 280 to A 317 there are six occasions on which the notion of passive observation is expressed. But there is a different kind of seeing also. The successful hunt by the sixty ladies not only signifies Orfeo's return to life, but also demonstrates a return to the notion of action: "He aros, & bider gan te" (A 318). Whereas the earlier actions carried out for survival were mechanical and reflexive, the present action of seeing and recognizing Heurodis is dynamic. It involves his whole being, not just his physical presence. While sights of the supernatural had left him unmoved, the present sight, too moving for words, helps him to form his resolution to follow the troop of ladies at all costs.

The forest as a place of trial in quest literature is given unique treatment in Sir Orfeo. The idea of the forest as a place of adventure and trial is common in Middle English romances, so common perhaps, that it finds a place in Chaucer's parody of chivalry, The Tale of Sir Thopas, whose hero falls into a love-longing in the forest before riding helter-skelter into more wilderness where he meets a giant, Sir Olifaunt.
But Sir Orfeo's trial goes beyond the physical requirements for survival; he has to overcome loneliness and finally the despair he feels after his all-too-short glimpse of Heurodis. Throughout the forest episode there are hints of an inner process of a kind unknown in *King Horn* or *Havelok*, whose heroes remain essentially men of the exterior. By this is meant that there is no intimation of a level beneath or behind the physical accomplishments which Horn or Havelok undertake. Even the element of love remains very much on the surface. Rymerhild and Goldeboru remain formulaic figures necessary to complement the hero. In *Sir Orfeo* however, the hero is a true solitary whose portrait is given the aspects of a pilgrim and a hermit. There is also a sense of mental reverie in his lack of participation in the changing scenes which incorporate supernatural figures. Orfeo sees, but does nothing and knows nothing

No neuer he nist whider pai bi-come 288

or,

—Ac neuer he nist whider pai wold, 296

as though the fairy images were hallucinations, or as if he were in a dream or trance. The vision of Heurodis which breaks the spell signifies Orfeo's return to the world of action or "reality," the "here and now" of his resolution to follow the sixty ladies "In at a roche" (A 347). But before this point is reached Orfeo confronts the despair which makes him want to
die. He uses words which suggest that his love for Heurodis is no mere conventional thing but a reason for wanting to end his suffering.

'Alas!' quaph he, 'Now me is wo!
Whi nil deþ now me slo?
Allas, wroche! — þat y no miþt
Dye now after þis siþt!

Similarly, Orfeo's loneliness becomes more poignant in that after he had finished his harping "No best bi him abide nold" (A 280). Together, these insights into Orfeo's solitude and despair form an emotional immediacy of a kind not found in Horn or Havelok.

Orfeo's quest may be said to begin and end with his resolution to follow Heurodis into fairyland. His success in recovering his queen and his kingdom incorporates devices already familiar in Middle English poems or in the classical Orpheus legends. Both Horn and Orfeo borrow a beggar's clothes to disguise their identity, and both assume the rôle of wandering minstrels to recover their loves. In the classical legend Orpheus' skill with the harp moves Pluto into giving Eurydice back. Similarly, Orfeo charms the otherworld king into making a promise which he must honour. We saw too that disguise played an important part in Havelok's return to Denmark and in Floriz' journey to recover Blancheflour. Disguise of this kind should be distinguished from magical transformation of a kind seen in the prose Merlin.22 In this
last work a deception is practised for the sake of an adulterous love which results in the birth of Arthur. By contrast in *Sir Orfeo*, and the other three poems so far considered, disguise is given a moral authority; its purpose is always to aid in the restoration of something already sanctioned by society, or to bring about a relationship which will be regularized in the near future. For example, both Horn and Floriz marry their heroines upon accomplishing their tasks. It is true that King Uther marries Ygerne, but not until his suit for her has resulted in the death of her husband, the Duke of Tintagel. *Sir Orfeo*, like Horn, Havelok and Floriz, is free from the shadow of an adulterous relationship and free also of moral blame which might attach to deception.

The romances looked at so far have a number of points in common. Their heroes all belong to an aristocratic or kingly caste. The satisfactory achievement of the quest in each poem promotes the basic tenets of belief in the rule of kings, proper succession to the throne, married love and, above all, harmony. In each case the movement of the quest is towards the restoration of order, whether social, political, amatory or a combination of these. This is true even of *Floriz* and *Blauncheflur* in which separation causes the dis-harmony which prompts Floriz' journey; the successful undertaking ends in feasting and marriage.
In none of the poems is the hero confronted with a moral dilemma where failure to act might result in dire consequences for others. For this we have to await the emergence of a consciousness, such as Malory's, in which the chain of causation lends darker, more prophetic tones to literature. In our present studies the line of progressive action is, with one exception, not interrupted by digressions of a contemplative nature. None of the heroes is ever seen to reflect on the possibilities of his failure to act. Indeed, none of them ever fails to act. The single exception to a clear line of vision and progress is Orfeo's lack of participation in events involving the groups of fairies through the forest. But as we have already observed, Orfeo's presence on these occasions is much like that of a dreamer whose dream is broken by the only vision that has the power to restore him to the world of action. One might speculate on the outcome in the event that any hero had failed in his quest. The Emir might have remained unmoved by the devotion of the young lovers, or Horn might have succumbed, on any number of occasions, to the sea or to a "Saracen" sword. However, such a line of thought is without profit, for fundamental to the quest motif is a belief in the success of the hero. The greater the odds, the greater his heroism and resultant success.

All of the quests so far examined are centripetal in movement; that is, they return to a point which approximates the place from which the hero started. By "place" we should
understand something more than mere geographical location. In each case, as we have seen, the successful completion of various trials, battles or tests brings about the restoration of order and of established values. The testing of the steward in *Sir Orfeo* and Ubbe's recognition of Havelok's kingship stress the idea of feudal homage. Thus "place" also takes on the meaning of hierarchical order. In addition to the centripetal, hence cyclical, movement of these quests, there is also a linear quality. While the hero is restored to his proper rank or office and is able then to restore the life of his society to its formerly accepted values, at no time in the poems studied so far is he essentially a different person from the one who launched into adventure at the beginning. It is true that Havelok evolves from potential to actual king while demonstrating his qualities in ever-increasing strength. But he does not appear to undergo spiritual or mental change. The process is rather one of a revelation of qualities already inherent in kingship. This too is a reflection of the order principle at work in these poems, for the hero is neither different socially nor psychologically. He emerges much the same man as he was before his experiences. The experiences, far from demonstrating a growing spiritual or cultural awareness, simply reaffirm what we may take to have been the poet's, and probably his audience's, beliefs as to the paramount importance of order in the universe. Not until we come to
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight do we become aware of the concepts of moral dilemma and spiritual growth in the hero acting in such a way as to determine action and consequence.

The question of character portrayal, or its absence in these romances, raises the very important issue of thematic presentation. In discussing characterisation in Malory's Morte Darthur, Pamela Gradon has written that

*The aim of the story is not the exploration of character but the presentation of a theme. And the theme is a social one; on the one hand, the tragic conflict between Lancelot's loyalty to Arthur and to Guinevere and, at the same time, the picture of an ideal past. And the way in which this is presented can be seen, in miniature, in the treatment of the love of Lancelot and Guinevere.*

Similarly, we may say of our romances that the characters are seldom delineated as individuals. They, and their behaviour, represent instead ideal types whose actions promote the underlying themes of restoration and order. Thus we should not expect, nor do we find, characters whose behaviour affords us an insight into the motivation of their unique personalities. What we find is that the hero takes on the rôle of a social redeemer whose quest, whether for monarchic stability or true love, is of greater importance than his individuality and whose experience, while generally resulting in some personal reward such as the recovery of a bride, also imparts a greater social good. In each case the successful completion of the
quest is greeted with joy and also, in Horn and Havelok by a settling of accounts.

The question of ethical justification for romantic adventure seems to be one which requires re-assessment. Auerbach expressed the notion that the great attraction of courtly romance rested in two characteristics

... it is absolute, raised above all earthly contingencies, and it gives to those who submit to its dictates the feeling that they belong to a community of the elect, a circle of solidarity... set apart from the common herd. 25

The difficulty here seems to lie in the term "courtly" as applied to romance conventions. It is true that mundane considerations are seldom a part of the scene in romance, the exception being the extensive domestic scenes in Havelok. It is also true that the heroes of romance literature are members of a feudal class of knights. But unlike Calogrenant in Yvain, both Horn and Havelok act in such a way as to affirm social and political integrity in society. Their adventures, whether of a chivalric order, as in Horn's combat with Saracens, or of a bourgeois order, as in Havelok's defeat of sixty robbers, serve a practical and ethical reality. Both Horn and Havelok and to a lesser degree Orfeo, are characters upon whose success in the quest rests the stability and tranquility of society. Even Floriz, whose journey ends in reunion with Blancheflour, is seen to assume a social rôle when called upon; he takes up the throne left vacant by his father's death. Auerbach argues
eloquently for the idea that the courtly romance represents the ideal of knighthood in the face of what he calls "the long functional crisis of the feudal class," in other words romance is an attempt to deny the onslaught of a world of burgeoning commercial affairs, a world in which knighthood is to play an increasingly less significant part. Largely this is true of French romance which moves in a world totally self-dependent, unconcerned with practical reality and in which the supernatural becomes immediate and familiar. As Frye puts it

> In every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideal in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the threats to their ascendancy.

But the Horn and Havelok poets do not seem to be men writing in vacuo. The exploits of their heroes involve the totality of all levels of society and further, represent the duties of the aristocratic class, to protect the Church and the people. Neither Horn nor Havelok fights for the preservation of a small elite. Their respective quests are the only possible vehicles which enable the only possible heroes to redress an order disturbed either by pagan elements or, worse, by greedy members of the feudal class who have overthrown the obligations of vassalage upon which a whole society rested. The quest then, in these English poems, represents more than a mediaeval escape into fairy tale, it takes on mythic qualities when one
considers that the beneficiaries are not only its heroes but society at large. In fact *Havelok* appears to have explicit connections, of a partially middle-class nature, with civic pride in the founding of a city.28

We began our study of these poems by suggesting that in them the quest, or search, played a superficial rôle, that is it did not lead to any act of self-discovery. This is still true inasmuch as the characters or heroes of these tales remain incapable of contemplating the consequences of action. But action, and not contemplation, is what is needed in the social milieu in which these stories have their being. Here the tasks of restoration and homecoming preclude moments of deep reflection. The sense of purpose with which the heroes are endowed leaves no room, nor should it, for hesitation. Furthermore, the business of restoration in these tales is not one of gratuitous adventure of the kind found in Chretien. In each tale the hero has the quest imposed upon him by an external force either of a social or supernatural order. Such an imposition renders it impossible for the hero to refuse the call to adventure without becoming a cipher, a useless element in society. Even Orfeo's self-imposed exile, while not in itself a call to adventure, is nevertheless a response to an unbearable situation which has been imposed upon him. The problem of indecision does not really arise until we come to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* where the stability of a peace through
action is finely balanced against the tranquillity of an unknown quantity, death.
FOOTNOTES

1. All references to Havelok are made to W.W. Skeat's edition for the E.E.T.S. E.S., 4 (London, 1868).


3. Ibid.


6. Ibid., p. 172.

7. Skeat notes in his Preface (p. i) that the story was discovered in a Bodleian MS which had been described in the old Catalogue merely as Vitae Sanctorum.


10. Virgil, Georgics, iv; Ovid, Metamorphoses, x-xi; Boethius, De Consolatione Philosophiae, iii, metre xii.

11. Sir Orfeo, ed. A.J. Bliss, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1966), pp. ix-x. All references to the text will be to this edition, and to the Auchinleck MS.


15 Cf. the way in which the Otherworld king in his turn honours Orfeo as a harper, lines 449-52.

16 Gros Louis, pp. 245-46.

17 The benedictions in the Harley and Ashmole MSS are somewhat more elaborate but do not impinge on the tale.

18 See also D.M. Hill, "The Structure of Sir Orfeo," *Mediaeval Studies*, 23 (1961), 140-41, where it is suggested that the tree under which Heurodis slept has connotations of the tree of good and evil in the garden of Eden.


20 D.M. Hill, p. 145.

21 A 281, 289, 297, 301, 314, 317.


28 Sands, p. 56.
Chapter 3

GOWER'S TALE OF FLORENT

So far we have considered works in which the quest device adds force to particular social and historical views without demonstrating a change in mental perception on the part of the hero. If we exclude certain aspects of Havelok's connection with Grimsby we may also say that the stories studied up to now can be considered to be amoral. We should now examine a group of romances in which there is an observable link, albeit at times a rather tenuous one, between the life of courtly romance and the objective world of affairs; in other words, a group of tales in which, with the aid of the quest motif, patterns of morality are expressed and whose morals often transcend the purely literary or narrative interests inherent in the poetry. By "morality" and "morals" it should be understood that, in addition to the public senses of these words, the treatment of distinction between right and wrong which govern society's conduct, it is also implied that
there is a personal and private level involved. Gower's *Tale of Florent*, for example, not only teaches the lover to resolve the conflict between will and reason, but, when considered in relation to the whole of the *Confessio Amantis*, also reveals an inner world where adventures, supernatural or otherwise, operate independently of objective reality without violating our belief in the concrete world.¹

We may take as our starting point some views expressed by Auerbach which are worth repeating at length since they embody the notion that courtly romance and the chivalric ideal were incapable of bridging the gap with reality.

The ethics of feudalism, the ideal conception of the perfect knight, . . . attained a very considerable and very long-lived influence. Concepts associated with it — courage, honor, loyalty, mutual respect, refined manners, service to women — continued to cast their spell on the contemporaries of completely changed cultural periods. Social strata of later urban and bourgeois provenance adopted this ideal, although it is not only class-conditioned and exclusive but also completely devoid of reality. As soon as it transcends the sphere of mere conventions of intercourse and has to do with the practical business of the world, it proves inadequate and needs to be supplemented, often in a manner most unpleasantly in contrast to it. But precisely because it is so removed from reality, it could — as an ideal — adapt itself to any and every situation, at least as long as there were ruling classes at all.²

If we were to limit ourselves solely to the internal properties of romance and the relationship of these properties to events in the outside world, then we might agree with Auerbach that
romance is "devoid of reality." But there is a dimension of consciousness with which his assessment of romance does not deal; that is, not only their embodiment of ideals which may be emulated and for which the chivalric ethos serves as a class-directed model, but also their growth of interior qualities, first in the realm of a personal ethos and later to a stage on which the hero, as vehicle for his society in the epic sense, undergoes a small yet profound evolution whose effects concern the totality of which he is a representative. While Florent and the knight in the Wife of Bath's Tale are heroes of the first sort, Gawain, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, may be considered to herald the arrival of a type of hero who becomes familiar in the novel of later ages. His experience manifestly alters his mode of behaviour and makes him question something which was once beyond doubt — that Arthur's knights are infallible beings. We should note that the Gawain-poet comments on Arthur's child-like qualities. The court is also heard to murmur against the foolish decision which permits Gawain to ride out to almost certain death.  

In literature there is seldom a one-to-one relationship between the events of a tale and events in the "real" world; the newspapers attempt to provide this. While it is quite true that "if Calogrenant had really set off on his quest as he describes it, he would . . . have encountered
things very different from those he reports, it would be naïve for us to imagine that the encounters of mediaeval romance ever had an existence outside their imaginative framework. Don Quixote's misfortunes are as much the result of Cervantes' recognition of the chasm separating faery from fact as they are the hero's recognition that he belongs to "a class that has no function."

Gower's Tale of Florent is a good place to begin an exploration of the growth of an interior landscape in quest poetry since, among what may be called Loathly Lady analogues this tale stands out in its portrayal of the hero's humanity and honesty. In relation to the whole Confessio Amantis the story serves as a microcosmic model of the larger order which the Confessio represents. The Confessio is much more than "a kind of quasi-religious treatment" of love. Rather, it presents "love as the bait for instruction in the art of living." The immediate object of the exemplum which the tale represents is instruction on obedience in love, whose opposite, disobedience, is the second point of pride, a cardinal sin in love as in theology.

Beneath the superficial pattern of departure, trial and return which distinguishes the traditional quest sequence, this story incorporates a number of interesting variations. At the beginning of the poem there is no departure on a quest for a particular object as there is in, for example, Floriz
and Blancheflur or King Horn, where proof of knighthood is given as the first reason for delaying marriage to Rymenhild. Instead, Florent is a knight errant, attached to no particular order such as the Round Table, nor riding out to avenge specific wrongs or rescue distressed maidens, but

And for the fame of worldes speche,
Strange aventures forto seche,
He rod the Marches al aboute.

I 1415-17

He is the solo hero par excellence whose story begins, as it were, by chance. He is just out "questing" and can be said to resemble a mediaeval Boy Scout for whom the motto "Be Prepared" might have been appropriate, for "He was a man that mochel myhte" (I 1412). Two points worth noting here are the use of the word "strange," which prepares the reader for magical possibilities and the use, a few lines later, of the short occupatio on Fortune. The words "Fortune" and "chance" are each used three times in the poem and contribute to the fatalistic elements of the story which does not have a specifically Christian frame of reference. They also lend a quality of the immediacy of fate. Florent just happened to be riding about when "Fortune . . . schop" (I 1419-21) that he was captured. If "non other chance" (I 1583) will save his life then he will resort to the Loathly Lady's answer. After his acquittal he returns to the old hag to take "the fortune of his chance" (I 1670), and so on. There is in this, as in the common epigram "Bot
nede he mot that nede schal" (I 1714), an element of pragmatic resignation which colours the poem as well as the whole *Confessio*. Florent's plight and the situation which motivates his subsequent quest is the working of indifferent fate and is neither presented as part of a divine plan nor as the consequence of deliberate human action. Instead he happened to kill an important person, Branchus, about whom we know very little save that he "to the Capitain/was Sone and Heir" (I 1428-29), and that he was, not surprisingly, "The worthieste of al his lond" (I 1432). The accident which caused Branchus' death is reminiscent of Lancelot's accidental slaying of Sir Gaherys and Gareth while rescuing the queen from a shameful end. However, the scale of consequences in Florent is not of the magnitude of the downfall of an entire system, rather it is singular and personal.

In terms of the trials or tasks which the hero undertakes, Florent is also unusual. Florent's testing does not involve feats of arms or the suppression of hostile knights. Instead it revolves around the concept of faith to one's word and to a chivalric ethic represented by his promise to keep two covenants that he makes, first with the "grantdame unto the dede" (I 1445), and secondly, to the Loathly Lady if her information can save his life. Aside from the covenants, there are a surprising number of legalistic terms in the tale. Florent asks that the question be "under Seales
write" (I 1474). When a document is made up "Under his seal he wrot his oth" (I 1487). The wise men at his uncle's court cannot agree on what it is that women most desire and are prepared to lose him "As in defalte of his answere" (I 1510). On two occasions the notion of posting bond is alluded to, first by the Loathly Lady

"Thou schalt me leve such a wedd,
That I wol have thi trowthe in honde," I 1558-59

and then by Florent as he promises to marry the lady if her answer is the only one which will save him

"Have heir myn hond, I schal thee wedde."
And thus his trowthe he leith to wedde. I 1587-88

The picture of a questing knight putting his hand to a bargain smacks of mercantilism and the bourgeois world, but it is evidence of a shift from the absolutism of the courtly ethic to the morality of practical decisions. Elsewhere words such as "beheste," "dom," "quit" and "warrant" testify to the legal bias of Gower's style in this tale. But Gower's terminology never intrudes seriously on the narrative. Modern readers are perhaps less aware of the anomaly of judicial terms in a tale of the miraculous because as individuals we are closer to the notion of civil law than to the aura of chivalric honour. Gower too may have sensed that analogies of courtly behaviour would have been more intelligible to a late fourteenth-century audience if they were compared
with the idea of honour with obligation rather than honour for its own sake.

Florent's quest is also unusual with respect to the hero's return which usually results in a boon to society. There is no hero's welcome waiting for him as there is for Havelok or Orfeo. Instead Florent rides to his castle as one burdened with shame, and whose shame is the result of adherence to a code which precludes any honourable alternative to keeping his oath.

And prively withoute noise
He bringth this foule grete Coise
to his Castell in such a wise
That noman myhte hire schappe avise. I 1733-37

Florent's "gentilesse" together with his belief in the duty owned to "wommanhiede," obliges him to return to keep his oath. As Silverstein points out, Florent faces two temptations. In yielding to the temptations he could have saved first his life and secondly his pride. The first temptation, not to return to keep his covenant to answer the enigmatic question, remains an eternal symbol of Florent's obligation to a public morality, for he says that if he should die "par aventure," nobody must avenge his death since it will have come about of his own choosing. In other words the first temptation is rejected publicly as a face-saving move, for

This knyht hath levere forto dye
Than breke his trowthe and forto lye
In place ther as he was swore. I 1511-13
But the second temptation is even greater in that it is private. If he does not keep his promise to wed the ugly hag nobody will know. No public or social pressure compels him to honour his promise. Consequently we may witness the beginnings of an inner conflict. Through the use of antithetical balance at crucial points in the narrative Florent is seen to waver between saving his skin or his honour.

Now goth he forth, now comth ayein,
He wot noght what is best to sein,
And thoghte, as he rod to and fro,
That chese he mot on of the tuo,
Or forto take hire to his wif
Or elles forto lese his lif.  

The construction of these lines stresses Florent's dilemma while revealing a process of internal struggle.

Essentially, there is a contradiction at work which challenges the value of courtly ethics. Where the code points the way Florent does not hesitate in acting correctly. But when the possibility of escape shows itself, and when it falls outside the clearly-defined boundaries of courtly experience, then he seems unable to decide upon the right course to follow. In addition, he is guilty of ungallant thoughts towards the old hag, since, in a series of self-justifying explanations he reasons out a solution that will save both his life and his pride at the expense of the woman — she is old and will not live long; he will hide her from view until she dies. It is interesting to note that the form taken by
his process of reasoning is not unlike that of a legal document. A series of conditions is set out in the form of adverbial clauses and then, at the end, there is a resolution

And Thanne he cast his avantage,
That sche was of so gret an age,
That sche mai liue bot a while,
And thoghte put hire in an iie,
Wher that noman hire scholde knowe,
Til sche with deth were overthrowe.
And thus this yonge lusti knyht
Unto this olde lothly wiht
Tho seide: . . ."

There is a degree of cold calculation in all this which is enhanced by use of the word "avantage." Florent is casting up the arguments for gain much as a merchant might before committing his wealth. The net result of this strange admixture of pragmatism and the abstract concept of honour is that the image of chivalry emerges somewhat tarnished but very human.

Gower has managed to combine elements which would have seemed incongruous in earlier romance. The importance of fortune or chance, the liberal resort to legal language and form and finally, glimpses of the hero's human weaknesses by revealing his thought process seem to direct the tale more closely to the problematic and practical world of decision, not take it further off from reality. Whereas Orfeo, Floriz, Horn or Havelok perform as it were automatically, Florent cannot always rely upon a superstructure of established
behaviour to solve his problems. In this respect he is the greater hero, not because he finds a solution sanctioned by custom, but because he fails at first to find the most honourable solution. Or perhaps we should say that when the courtly world is required to meet the demands of a world in which honour can be written down it fails — the problem is beyond its capacity for solution. Florent's ultimate reward, if we may call it that, is not the triumph of his natural gentility, nor is it the honour adhering to a bourgeois legal contract. Ironically, he succeeds through his human qualities — fear, vacillation and finally, ignorance. One might say that like Malvolio, he has greatness thrust upon him, for when he is securely wedded to the lady he is asked a question for which his immediate experience should have provided the answer. All his thinking about it comes to nothing since he has not taken to heart the lesson that had earlier saved his life

That alle wommen lievest wolde
Be soverein of mannes loue.

I 1608-9

His shortsightedness is completely human, for he has again allowed personal dilemma to obscure faith. The denouement, in which the lady explains her enchantment by a vindictive stepmother, only heightens the impression that Florent needed constantly to be pushed in the right direction — everything
has to be explained to him. The lady's final remarks seem ironic in the light of Florent's performance.

\[ \text{... til I hadde wonne} \]
\[ \text{The love and sovereinete} \]
\[ \text{Of what knyht that in his degre} \]
\[ \text{Alle othre passeth of good name:} \]
\[ \text{And, as men sein, ye ben the same,} \]
\[ \text{The dede proevevth it is so.} \]

In addition, his success is somewhat hollow since, "as men sein" notwithstanding, there is no standard within the story by which Florent's relative virtue can be measured.

The tale is not without its poignant moments which, in a different way from the revelation of inner conflict, serve to enhance Florent's humanity. For example, when Florent and the Loathly Lady have retired to bed on their wedding night, she urges him to turn towards her "'For now,' sche seith, 'we ben bothe on'" (I 1793). The words used to describe Florent's lack of response fall with a heavy and concise finality to reflect his utter despair while suggesting that, like Gawain,\(^{14}\) he is pretending to be asleep in order to reject the lady's advances, "And he lay stille as eny ston" (I 1794). Less emphatic, but more flattering to Florent's reputation, is an earlier scene which anticipates the conclusion of the narrative of the Confessio.\(^{15}\) Florent, resigned to his fate in having to marry the lady, sets her on his horse before him, "And forth he takth his weie softe"
(I 1725). The language foreshadows the quiet retreat made by Amans near the end of Book VIII

And whanne y sigh non othre weie
Bot only that y was refusid,
Unto the lif which y hadde usid
I thoughte neuere torne ayein:
And in this wise, soth to seyn,
Homward a softe pas y wente,
Wher that with al myn hol entente
Uppon the point that y am schryve
I thenke bidde whil y liue.

Florent resembles the Lover whose shrift is not yet complete. The confessional search has still a long road to follow before arriving at the point where philosophical resignation succeeds personal gratification. Florent's submission to his lady's choice, signifying her "sovereinete," is a parallel to the notion that the Lover needs the direction offered by Genius. Florent is not capable of achieving understanding without assistance

I not what ansuere I schal yive . . .
For I can noght miselve gesse
Which is the beste unto my chois.

But Florent's level of understanding does not attain the fullness of the Lover's, for his knowledge represents understanding through exemplum and submission to the notion of sovereignty in women rather than enlightenment through reason emanating from within. In this respect Florent is the apprentice and Amans the master. On finding himself abandoned
by Venus and her priest, the Lover's slow smile serves as the external symbol of recognition of his lost time and his resignation to a life dominated now by reason and not by passion. He has come a long way from the point in Book I where he complains

\[
\text{But now my wittes ben so blinde,} \\
\text{That I ne can miselven teche.} \\
\]

I 228-29

The guides are no longer necessary at the end of the journey for Amans has come of age psychologically and literally. C.S. Lewis has suggested that the theme of \textit{Confessio Amantis} is "Love cured by Age." There is thus another respect in which Florent's fate reflects the outcome of the Lover's confession, for just as Amans is cured of his hopeless love by realization of his age, so too, Florent learns a higher truth, the real meaning of "gentilesse," from the old hag. Gower's version of this tale lacks the lengthy \textit{exordium} on "gentilesse" which is found in Chaucer, but this defect is more than compensated for by other elements in Gower such as the horrifying itemisation of the hag's defects and by the fact that Florent is cognizant of the alternatives which face him in both of his difficult choices; he knows he will lose his life if he does not consent to wed the ugly lady; he is not asked to make a blind promise as Chaucer's knight is. Finally, he knows the reward of her beauty before he tries to decide between having her fair by day or by night. But
this last choice is essentially different from Chaucer's
treatment since, in Gower, the question of marital fidelity
is not raised. Rather, the stress is laid on the notion of
obedience to the loved one's will which is, after all, the
moral of this exemplum

And clerkes that this chance herde
Thei writen it in evidence,
To teche how that obedience
Mai wel fortune a man to love
And sette him in his lust above,
As it befell unto this knyht.                 I 1856-61
FOOTNOTES

1 C.S. Lewis, in The Allegory of Love (Oxford, 1953), p. 218, claims that "Gower is not enough of a philosopher . . . even to attempt . . . any reconciliation between the claims of the two worlds . . . ," but he quotes two lines from Book VIII which demonstrate that Gower became aware of such a reconciliation through a philosophy of resignation.

2 Auerbach, p. 137.


4 Auerbach, p. 138.

5 Ibid., p. 137.


8 Derek Pearsall, "Gower's Narrative Art," PMLA, 81 (1966), 476.


11 Antithetical constructions may also be noted on lines 1622-23, 1630, 1708-10, 1711-13.

12 MED, "avauntage," n. 2(a), 3b.

13 A word of caution needs to be sounded here. Macaulay notes that there is a fatalistic quality in Gower's mind, expressed in the ideas of Fortune, Fate and Destiny, but George T. Fox observes that in the Confessio 'fortune' "is a manner of speech with Gower, a convenient phrase for an element of human experience," The Mediaeval Sciences in the Works of John Gower (New York, 1966), pp. 14 and 15.

14 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, eds. Tolkien and Gordon, line 1190, p. 33.

15 The poem actually continues for some two hundred lines which form a sort of homiletic apologia to the work.

16 C.S. Lewis, Allegory, p. 219.

17 There are six references to her age in the Tale: lines 1548, 1576, 1582, 1673, 1683, and 1713.
Chapter 4

OTHER TALES OF TRANSFORMATION

The Wife of Bath's Tale

Possibly the most widely-known example of the Loathly Lady group of stories is Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. Its plot is essentially the same as Gower's *Florent*, and the quest, for the answer to what it is that women most desire, is identical.¹ In its details however, Chaucer's treatment is radically different from any of the other tales, either in English or another language, and has provoked a welter of critical comment on Chaucer's discussion of such things as rape, sovereignty, courtly love and wish-fulfillment. One critic sees a second quest underlying the knight's search for an answer to the riddle, and that is the Loathly Lady's "quest for love,"² which is a parallel to the Wife's own search, by way of five husbands, for sovereignty in marriage.

In comparison to Gower's Loathly Lady, and indeed to the heroines of all of the analogues including the *Border
Ballad of King Henrie, Chaucer's ugly hag is a sort of super-witch. She seems able to transform herself at will

"Now, sire," quod she, "I koude amende al this, if that me liste, er it were dayes thre." III 1106-7

Chaucer's device of the hag's self-transformation shifts our attention from the knight's attempt to achieve "gentilesse" to the lady's natural gentility. In fact one ought really to say that the knight has "gentilesse" and understanding thrust upon him by the hag's process of education and only after he has carried his churlish behaviour into the marriage-bed with him

... when the knight asks her to make the choice — when he admits from within himself the sovereignty of women — then and only then is he truly blessed — and the lady is revealed in all her charms. 3

In all the analogues the knight acts as some kind of redeemer whose behaviour can break the spell cast by a vindictive stepmother. He does this either by complying with a series of normally repugnant requests, as is the case in King Henrie, or by a truly selfless act such as Gawain's willingness to marry Dame Ragnell. In this last work, The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, there is evidence which suggests that the stepmother's bewitching of Ragnell was not all bad — that she may have acted in the best interests of her daughter
Therefore be not grevid.
For I was shapen by nigramancy,
With my stepdame, God have on her mercy,
And by enchauntment,
And should have bene oderwise understood,
Evin tille the best of England
Had weddid me verament.
And also he shold geve me the soveréinté
Of alle his body and goodes, sicurly;
Thus was I disformid.

But Chaucer's knight, far from redeeming an enchanted maiden, seems himself to have been chosen for redemption. His progress from errant rapist to docile husband is not only an education in nobility, but also a reflection of the Wife of Bath's most secret aspirations. Her tale both hides and reveals her dreams for it operates simultaneously on two levels, first in appearing to be a fiction which illustrates her uttered views on sovereignty and secondly in disclosing desires to which she does not give voice — that is, "The knight is Dame Alice's vision of masculine perfection, her Lohengrin in a swan boat." Or, to put it another way, her tale "presented an old woman who gained a young husband and magically changed herself into everything he could desire in a wife. As a story of the quest for love it was the artistic counterpart of her life."

Chaucer has managed this tale and its teller in such a way that we may imagine the pilgrim audience to have been left in the dark as to Dame Alice's most secret illusions.
How else can we explain the vehement reversion to type that is expressed by her closing remarks?

And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende
In parfit joye; and Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
And grace t'overbye hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray pestilence!

In like manner the Clerk of Oxford, after telling of the superhuman submission to suffering by Griselda, proceeds ironically to undercut his moral by praising the Wife of Bath's philosophy in what appears to be a similar shamefaced re-accommodation of inward life to outward social circumstances. The Wife's remarks, coming immediately after an idyll in which a transformed hag obeys her husband in every way, are not an oversight on Chaucer's part. Rather, they serve as a sort of confused, even blushing, obfuscation to hide more carefully what Dame Alice had inadvertently revealed, or what she was about to reveal. They point up the dilemma which faces her in the life that Chaucer has given her — gentilesse and obedience versus sovereignty in marriage. 8

The chivalric trappings in both Gower's and Chaucer's tales of transformation should be seen just for what they are — trappings. 9 The real pith of these stories lies in their application of the quest motif to other than chivalric objects or absolute ends. Neither questing knight seeks to
redeem society or rescue an individual. Each has the quest imposed upon him, one for an accident which caused a loss of life, the other for a deliberate act which caused a loss of maidenhead. In each case the story elaborates a moral; in Gower, a love-moral placed in the framework of confession with obvious overtones of the seven deadly sins of spiritual life. But Chaucer's treatment is different from every artistic point of view. First, the Wife's Tale is a skilfully wrought extension of her portrait and of her life revealed by her Prologue. At the most superficial level it is a further illustration of her expressed beliefs in sovereignty. Secondly, her Tale stands in close relationship both to her immediately preceding remarks on promiscuous friars and to the other tales of the "Marriage Group." It is a voice crying in the chauvinistic male wilderness of anti-feminist tradition. Her dig at the friar is extended by the very rapidly developed rape scene in her Tale, while the notion of gentilesse emanating from knighthood is given a severe setback by the knight's selfish behaviour. It is the Loathly Lady who teaches chivalry what chivalry seems to have forgotten. Finally, Chaucer's characterization of the Wife of Bath is infinitely complex in that her Tale is a vast, ironical monument to her own marital dilemma. As Townsend points out, she is the Loathly Lady and the knight is her concept of perfect manhood. Her failure to obtain such perfection is revealed by her need
to tell a story which comes as close to an expression of inexpressible desire as it is possible to come without resorting to a prosaic confession. Psychologically, her tale is the perfect and illusory embodiment of her imperfect life. Like the figures on Keats' Grecian Urn, the nameless knight, prominent in her dreams of ideal marriage, will always remain out of reach. Dame Alice does not herself possess the magic required for the transformation achieved by the Loathly Lady. Her "quest for love" is an endless process which has so far involved five husbands and the loss of hearing in one ear.

**Lordship: Royal and Nuptial**

There are three other stories of transformation which may be dealt with together since two of them, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* and a fragmentary ballad, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, share common features in that the riddle of what women desire is posed to King Arthur, while the third story, the *Border Ballad of King Henrie*, approximates more closely the Irish myths in that a King is the recipient of the loathly hag's attentions, and the usual pattern of requests and disenchantment is followed.

In both the *Ragnell* and *Marriage* versions of transformation the quest is imposed upon Arthur. In the *Ragnell* story Arthur is led away from his companions, while hunting,
by his pursuit of "a great hart." Unfortunately, there are lacunae in the extant texts of the ballad printed by Child and Clouston, so that the parallel hunting scenes, which one may assume to have existed, have been lost. However, the *Marriage* ballad does mention that the time of the year is Christmas. The only evidence in *Ragnell* which suggests that the poem may have been prepared for a Christmas recitation occurs near the end.

Nowe God as thou were in Bethleme boren
Suffer nevere her soules be forlorne
In the brinning fire of helle!
And, Jhesu, as thou were borne of a virgin,
Help him oute of sorrowe that this tale did devine,
And that nowe in all hast,
For he is beset with gailours many,
That kepen him fulle sewerly,
With wiles wrong and wraste. 838-46

However, a strong case for a parallel time scheme cannot be made, since concluding invocations to Christ are commonplace throughout mediaeval poetry. But the two stories do share the same location. In each case the hunting expeditions depart from and return to the Arthurian establishment at Carlisle. In addition, the real hero, in both stories, is Gawain, and not Arthur, for it is Gawain who undertakes, in what would appear to be an act of supreme selflessness, to redeem Arthur's pledge to answer the riddle or forfeit his life and lands. Gawain it is, then, who rescues the Sovereign and to whom the gift of a transformed lady is given.
In the Ragnell story Gawain volunteers his acceptance of the hag's proposal to Arthur

"Is this alle?" then said Gawen;
"I shalle wed her and wed her again,
Though she were a fende,
Though she were as foulle as Belsabub,
Her shalle I wed, by the rood,
Or elles were I not your frende. 342-47

As an illustration of the background to Gawain's enthusiastic response to the proposal which Arthur relates, we may compare Niall's reaction

Niall went in search of water, and came to the very well: 'let me have water, woman!' he cried. 'I will give it,' said she, 'and bestow on me a kiss.' He answered: 'forby giving thee a kiss, I will even hug thee!' then he bends him to embrace her, and gives her a kiss. Which operation ended, and when he looked at her, in the whole world was not a young woman of gait more graceful, in universal semblance fairer than was she: .. .14

But in the Marriage a degenerate, and one may assume desperate, Arthur, offers the hag Gawain's hand in marriage before consulting the "intended"

'Giu8e thou ease me, lady,' he said,
'Or helpe me any thing,
Thou shalt have gentle Gawaine, my cozen,
And marry him with a ring.'  stanza 21

Gawain's reception of this news is unhappily not recorded in the remaining fragments, but his reprimand to the characteristically cantankerous Sir Kay is a good indication of his natural gentility
'Peace, cozen Kay,' then said Sir Gawaine, 'Amend thee of thy life; For there is a knight amongst vs all That must marry her to his wife.' stanza 36

Arthur, the hag, and even the narrator, all refer to Gawain with the epithet "gentle." The twofold testing of Gawain in these tales, first in saving Arthur's life and secondly in yielding the sovereignty to the hag, are evidence of an expansion on the sovereignty theme encountered in Chaucer and Gower. But, more important, the tests, considered together, combine the notions of kingship and marital lordship while giving us a broader view of the more complex courtesy inherent in the figure of Gawain.

Since the answer to the riddle posed to Arthur rests in the concept of female sovereignty in each instance, we should remember that while Arthur is literally and politically the Sovereign, or King, Gawain is treated as the sole knight capable not only of rescuing the kingship, but also of redeeming the enchanted lady. In explaining her enchantment Ragnell, as we have seen, has waited for "the best of Englond" for her rescue. Earlier, in preparing Arthur for his answer to Sir Gromer Somer Joure, she tells him that

"Of the moste manliest is oure desire: To have the sovereinfé of suche a sire; Suche is oure craffe and ginne."

In other words, while kingship rests with Arthur, sovereignty rests with Gawain. Hence a distinction must be made between
the two types of sovereignty, the one political and the other marital. An understanding of the latter is fundamental to the analogues involving marriage while the former, literal or political rule, partakes of mythic or legendary kingship as well as the plain political facts of the Middle Ages.

Loomis relates a number of Irish legends of transformation in which the hero's willingness to do what a Loathly Lady asks is the method by which the true king of Ireland is chosen. As soon as the hero consents either to sleep with the Loathly Lady, or to embrace her, a marvellous transformation occurs. The hero is told that the transformed maid represents the Sovereignty of Ireland. By joining himself in love to the hag-transformed, the hero partakes of the divine power of kingship. Loomis carries the notion of transformation by the future king a step further, out of the pseudo-historic and into the archetypal, mythic past of a relationship between the Sun and the Earth.

Surely there are signs enough that the embodiment of the Sovereignty of Erin is really the embodiment of green Ireland, which renews its beauty every spring under the warm rays of the new sun.

But the solar, and even political, significance of Sovereignty seems to have been lost to the "Arthurian" redactors of transformation myths. In none of the stories we are presently dealing with does the Loathly Lady claim Sovereignty in the
sense of the abstract idea of power and kingship. In mediaeval times

A conteur casting about for some way to inject sense into his story, naturally thought of the desire of some women for 'sovereignty,' for having their own way, and refashioned the whole plot to lead up to this denouement.17

In each of the stories in Middle English, the act of yielding sovereignty to the lady is one of liberation; it brings about the transformation and, in almost sentimental fashion, the couple "live happily ever after." There is never any suggestion that the lady is the Earth and the hero the Sun. However, it is interesting to observe that the idea of strength being associated with the sun's path through the sky survives into the fifteenth century. In Gawain's unrelenting struggle with Lancelot we learn that Gawain's strength increases in the three hours before noon and rapidly returns to normal when the sun has passed its apogee.18 But Malory did not draw the same largely speculative conclusions as Dr. Loomis and Gawain's many loves are not "different manifestations, different names for the same primeval divinity, whose power is felt in the mysterious influences of the moon. . . ."19 Nevertheless, it is interesting that in the Ragnell and Marriage stories Gawain is the hero capable of transforming the hag. If solar and mythical considerations have given way before a tide of titillating courtly issues, then what has survived is the notion of Gawain's courtesy.
Descriptions of the Loathly Lady have been linked with seasonal cycles. In this connection she belongs in a relationship which associates the Hag who becomes Maiden with Winter becoming Summer. The agency of transformation is the Sun, or a solar hero of the kind that Gawain may represent. In her horrifying appearance she may be associated with winter's searing blast which can only be redeemed by the sun. But the extent of the redemption necessary is put into perspective when we catch a glimpse of this enchanted creature. No discussion of loathly ladies would be complete without a picture of one of them. For sheer loathliness among the many analogues the prize must surely go to Dame Ragnell. The anonymous, incarcerated author allowed his fancy to run riot in his description of her

Her face was red, her nose snotid withalle,
Her mouithe wide, her teethe yallowe overe alle,
Withe blerid eyen gretter then a balle;
Her mouithe was not to lak;
Her teethe hing overe her lippes;
Her cheekis side as wemans hipples;
A lute she bare upon her back.
Her neck long and therto great;
Her here cloterid on an hepe;
In the sholders she was a yard brode;
Hanging pappis to be an hors lode;
And like a barelle she was made;
And to reherse the foulnesse of that lady,
Ther is no tung may telle, securly;
Of lothinesse y-noughe she had.

And he indulges a fine sense of irony with his modest disclaimer near the end of the description.
By the time the old legends had passed through mediaeval hands they emerged as a debate on just who it is who controls a marriage. In a solar sense, the Irish quests take on the function of a search for the regenerative union as well as a search for kingship. But in the fourteenth century the mythical search is replaced by the more immediate and pragmatic issues which so preoccupied the Wife of Bath. The hag's loathliness is given a motive founded in a blend of necromancy and human frailty — the vindictiveness of a stepmother — rather than in cyclical, seasonal rejuvenation. The idea of marital sovereignty, however, still carries, albeit unconsciously, the seeds of the early myths of marriage between a Ruler and the Earth. Among the analogues of these tales from ancient Indian literature, Coomaraswamy notes that the goddess Śrī is the "personification of the right to rule . . . (the) Spirit of Sovereignty . . . and certainly so when such a relationship is a marital one." He has also shown that in modern India the "Ruling (as distinct from the Sacerdotal) function is feminine," and that as late as the seventeenth century in Europe the notion is expressed that a king is "espoused unto his kingdom." Similarly, the Church is still conceived of as the "Bride" of Christ.

The significance of these ideas for our stories is that whether or not sovereignty is explicitly expressed, it presides over each tale to demonstrate that without the hero's concessions to the Loathly Lady there can be no on-going.
The hero's quest is symbiotic, it benefits both the transformed heroine and the compliant hero and this in turn removes the stasis, or impediment, which holds both in jeopardy. In the tales involving Arthur and Gawain the hero's conceding to marry the hag has consequences grounded in both the political and marital aspects of sovereignty. In *King Henrie*, though, the kingship never appears to be threatened as it does in *Ragnell* or the *Marriage*. The transformation is effected in the King's compliance nonetheless, and is as dramatic as any in the analogues. In a sense the hag in *King Henrie* represents a version of the story that is closest to the solar and seasonal variety of the myth. The wild weather plays an important part in this ballad as well as the king's isolation in a hunting lodge "seven miles frae a toun" (8). The hag's appearance is like a great storm with apocalyptic nuances

... When loud the wind was heard to sound,
    And an earthquake rocked the floor.

And darkness covered a' the hall
    Where they sat at their meat;
The gray dogs, youling, left their food,
    And crept to Henrie's feet.

And louder houled the rising wind,
    And burst the fast'ned door;
And in there came a griesly ghost,
    Stood stamping on the floor,

While she is twice referred to as "the fiend that wons in hell." The contrast between the violence of her arrival and demands
for food with the calm following her transformation lends weight to those who see seasonal myth in the situation.

The really unusual aspect of this tale, if we are to see it as a quest, is that the ghost, somewhat in the manner of the Wife of Bath's heroine, is the one who undertakes the search for "a courteous knight" (99) who "Wad gie me a' my will" (100). Her appearance to Henrie is unsolicited; she does not serve to redeem a threatened kingdom. Instead we have a stripped-down version of earlier analogues involving the usual pursuit, into isolation, of a hunted animal (as for example in the Irish tales). In King Henrie there is not even a riddle posed to the King. He is, instead, the recipient of a perfect bride. His test has been his willingness to comply with bizarre and ghoulish requests involving the destruction and consumption of his best hunting accoutrements — his horse, his greyhounds and his goss-hawks. But the vestiges of the earlier tales are nearly all present — isolation, the hunting season, the retreat of companions (which may be seen as a parallel to the failure, for example, of Niall's brothers to comply with a repugnant request), compliance by the hero and finally transformation and gratification. The really important difference is that the quester has changed. Instead of a king in search of a kingdom we have sovereignty in search of a worthy sovereign. But is this not in fact what has been implied in all the other tales? As Coomaraswamy observed of
Dame Ragnell, Gawain's surrender of sovereignty does not signify the abandonment of power,

... but that hers is the executive power in a joint government... She is the source of his Sovereignty in that without her he would not be a Sovereign; the King without a Realm is no King in the same sense that as Meister Eckhart says, 'Before creatures were, God was not "god".'

Whether we approach these tales from the mythical, political or marital point of view, the story is still the same. Distinctions between the giver and the receiver of sovereignty fuse into a union of the two. Ruler and Earth become one, the King and his Kingdom are united, the transformed maid and the courteous hero are joined in true marriage. Disharmony, whether natural, political or marital, is laid to rest. The search for order is implicit in every instance. There is then no incongruity in a situation which breeds order out of chaos, for, as Spring is predicated upon Winter, so too the harmonies which we have been discussing are dependent upon the disorder which precedes them. In her person the Loathly Lady, whatever form she takes, embraces a unity which knows no distinctions. Her loathliness is necessary to her transformation. The truth is that we must see in her what Chaucer's ill-tutored knight has seen, the beauty that was always there.
FOOTNOTES


3 Bernard F. Huppe, "Rape and Women's Sovereignty in the Wife of Bath's Tale," MLN, 63 (1948), 381.


6 Italics mine.

7 Owen, p. 84.


In order to distinguish these tales more briefly, the abbreviations Ragnell and Marriage have been assigned to The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell and The Marriage of Sir Gawain respectively.


R.S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York, 1927), pp. 296-298.

Ibid., p. 299.

Ibid., p. 300.

Malory, ed. Vinaver, III, 1216-17. There is a similar incident much earlier in Gawain's fight with Sir Marhaus, I, 161.

Loomis, p. 301.


Ibid., note 1.

Ibid., note 2.

24 O'Grady, pp. 370-71.

PART II:

THE JOURNEY ON THE INSIDE
The deluge and variety of critical opinion surrounding *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in recent years leads one to feel that the poem is extraordinarily complex. Worse, it has been the object of what John Halverson calls "template criticism"; scholars have been at pains to use the poem to demonstrate their favourite literary theories. Consequently, there are interpretations which range from Christian allegory through myth and ritual to the psychology of the behaviour of any or all of the participants in the action. Even among the allegorists opinion is divided, since, in Halverson's words, "one finds the Green Knight a figure of God, the other a figure of Satan."

It was suggested earlier (page 93) that the treatment of the hero, Gawain, and his story was essentially anomalous in the fourteenth century and indicative of the type of thing that became a norm in modern novels. That is, in comparison to such heroes as Florent or the Wife of Bath's anonymous knight, Gawain experiences events which are shown to affect
his mode of behaviour more profoundly. But more important, we are made aware of some of the hero's interior qualities, or, in Bloomfield's words

... we have an inner or psychological time represented on occasion, when the narrator speaks of events occurring inside Gawain's head. Events are sometimes seen as subjective duration.

Our task will be to demonstrate that the quest theme is able to operate on more than one level at once. To accomplish this we must answer two questions: first, "What is the object of this particular quest?" and secondly, "Why this particular hero?" On the surface, at least, the pattern of Gawain's adventure is familiar enough. The usual elements of a call to action, a departure (here attended both by emotion and ritual), trial and test and the ultimate safe return are all present. The immediate motivation of Gawain's journey is his response to a challenge issued to Arthur's court, and to keep an agreement resulting from that challenge. Unlike say, Havelok's predicament, Gawain's acceptance of the challenge is voluntary. He chooses to intervene in Arthur's dispute with the Green Knight. Nothing is imposed on him by circumstances beyond his control as was the case, for example, with Orfeo.

Gawan þat safte bi þe quene,
To þe kyng he can enclyne:
'I beseche now with sæzez sene
Pis melly mot be myne.'
Again, unlike what one has come to expect of the fruits of romance journeys, Gawain's quest is not to restore a kingdom or to recover a person, but to retrieve something far less tangible, namely the reputation of Arthur's court for bravery and courtesy which has been "Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wy3es speche" (314).

Looked at from within, as it were, matters are quite different, for we are permitted an insight into the processes of reason and thought both in the minds of Arthur's followers and Gawain's mind. This leads, on Gawain's part at least, to a quest operating on an interior level. What appears on the outside as largely the simple business of going through the courtly and chivalric motions which will ensure success, becomes at the same time a rather humiliating process of self-discovery. To defer again to Bloomfield, "The Gawain-poet is one of the first poets in English to handle the difficult problem of simultaneity in narration." Bloomfield was largely concerned with the poet's technique of carrying the hunting scenes and the bedroom scenes simultaneously, or at least giving the appearance of simultaneity by rapid shifts from one to the other. Closer examination of the poem reveals another kind of simultaneity, one in which the surface events of the story are occasionally given interior parallels. The nature of the trials and temptations to which Gawain is exposed evoke from him thoughts and responses concerning his fate, his duty, his safety and his spiritual obligations.
We may consider as the first occasion on which an interior life is made evident the scene in which Gawain offers to accept the Green Knight's challenge in place of Arthur. Alan Markman feels that the act "demanded great courage" and arose from Gawain's strongest virtue, his sense of loyalty. Evidently he does not share the court's sentiment that Gawain may have acted out of a lack of foresight (l. 677), or that Arthur accepted foolish advice. The image, if not the ethics, of chivalry frequently demanded impetuous acceptance of fearful odds, with little thought for one's own safety. Hence it is unusual to find in romance, as one does here, members of the court, themselves knights of the Round Table, bringing moral considerations to bear on Gawain's action. Bernard Levy, on the other hand, who insists that the whole point of the tale is a spiritual re-enactment of the life of Christ, argues that the speech in which Gawain requests the honour of accepting the challenge, is no more than a demonstration of pride disguised as humility. The sequence of events leading up to this allegedly proud speech is as follows: a challenge, larded with gratuitous insults, "Hit arn aboute on his bench bot berdelz chylder" (280); the total amazement and silence of the court (301-302); further insults respecting the court's reputation, "Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes?" (311); Arthur's angry reply, which has been linked with the Green Knight's churlish
behaviour (323-27); finally, Gawain's intervention with Arthur's permission and the court's approval (339-71). Levy feels that the total structure of the poem supports his notion that Gawain's journey is initiated by his inner nature, that is, by his pride, for, "when we last see Gawain, he has acquired the virtue of humility as a result of his ordeal." But, to suggest that because a man acquires humility as the result of certain experiences means that he was necessarily proud before he had those experiences, indicates a degree of spiritual hindsight which is denied to most of us. Whether we consider pride from a social or a spiritual point of view, Gawain has little with which to reproach himself. His conduct throughout the narrative, from his modest disclaimer about his worthiness to accept the Green Knight's challenge to the moment he returns, chastened, to Camelot, seems at worst, to be a model of conventionally acceptable courtly virtues. In one weak moment, when he conceals the girdle, he is guilty of what has been termed "the pride of life" — but such pride, if this is even the most appropriate name for it, arises from his desire to save himself from a fate which the court considered foolish and wasteful of so worthy a knight as Gawain (672-83). It should be noted that the mention of "angardez pryde" (681) by the court is directed at Arthur and not at Gawain, for there follows the reproach
'Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take
As knyȝez in cavelaciounz on Crystmasse gomnez!' 682-83

One tends rather to support Benson's view of Gawain as a means of justifying this particular knight's response to Arthur's predicament

By the speeches and actions assigned to Gawain and by the characterization of him in the description of the Pentangle, the poet takes care to make the champion of Arthur's court a model knight, the representative of chivalry in general as well as of Camelot in particular.

Gawain's reputation, first as a lover and secondly as a courtier in the literature preceding the present poem is discussed at length in B.J. Whiting's comprehensive essay on Gawain.12

One might add only that it is this very reputation which gets him into trouble, for in resisting Lady Bertilak's advances he employs his courtly skill to extricate himself from his reputation as a lover. And it was his reputation as a lover which was the weakness exploited by Bertilak that leads to Gawain's acceptance and secretion of the girdle.

There is an almost inevitable and maddening logic in all this, for Gawain's reputation puts him in the only situation in which he can be assailed. If he had no reputation as a lover then he would not have been exposed to sexual temptation. Consequently, he would not have been taken in a moment of weakness when he seizes upon any straw that will relieve him
of the outcome of his appointment with the Green Knight. This
temptation is beyond his power to resist, for he is, after
all, only human. Textual evidence of his widely broadcast
reputation is offered in the expectations aroused among
Bertilak's court (916-927). His arrival at Hautdesert is
seen as a signal opportunity for learning about "talkyng noble"
and "luf-talkyng" from a master of those arts.

Gawain's name occurs only once in the poem before his
intervention in Arthur's dispute. He is mentioned among those
who sit at the high table in a place of honour, next to
Guinevere (109), as befits the king's nephew. His name does
not even occur as a title to the poem, yet his reputation
must have been secure enough in the minds of mediaeval audiences
so that the propriety of his intervention goes unquestioned.
One might even suggest that fourteenth-century listeners,
upon hearing the name Gawain, would know what sort of story
to expect — that is, one involving a well-tried reputation for
love and courtesy. Gawain's speech, far from being a veil of
hypocrisy, emerges as the most probable response from this
particular hero. It is totally characteristic of what one could
expect from Gawain. Furthermore, his speech is in direct con-
trast with the Green Knight's insulting challenge and Arthur's
enraged lapse into churlishness. Later romances, notably
The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, Sir Gawain and the
Carl of Carlyle and the ballad The Marriage of Sir Gawain,
draw heavily on Gawain's reputation for courteous behaviour. It is not until much later, in the nineteenth century, that this reputation suffers severe setbacks, especially at the hands of Tennyson and William Morris, though the rise of Lancelot, the more courteous lover in the stanzaic Morte Arthur and in Malory, may have contributed to Gawain's loss of reputation. In the stanzaic Morte Gawain's tale-bearing about Lancelot's alleged love for the Maid of Ascalot earns him a scathing rebuke from Guinevere

'I wende thou haddiste be stable and trewe
And full of all curteessye,
bot now me thynke thy maners newe,
thay bene all tournyd to vilanye.'

The spontaneity of Gawain's intervention, accompanied by his characteristically courteous manner, suggest that while he is "a member of 'hered,' a man among his 'cort-freres' (inter pares)," in the silence following the Green Knight's challenge he has been the only knight to see the impropriety of Arthur's attempt to accept that challenge, and the only one who saw his duty to take the dispute upon himself. The others only reach this conclusion after some debate (362-365). Gawain's response, while making him primus inter pares, seems to spring from a grasp of loyalty and courtly behaviour which embellish his reputation for natural gentility. These attributes, one feels, are not fastened haphazardly to his character, but result in the poet's adaptation of a figure whose total
being in the preceding fiction has been invested with a courtesy beyond that normally expected of knights. This view is confirmed in the Green Knight's speech when, after he has returned the blow, he says

... and sothly me pynkkez
On pe fautlest freke pat euer on fote zede;
As perle bi pe quite pese is of prys more,
So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oper gay kny3tez.

Gawain's speech and manner in the scene at Camelot is the result of qualities for which he has a reputation exceeding that of the other members of Arthur's court. He is invested with the "larges and lewté pat longez to kny3tez" in such a way that his request comes about as much from his nature and reputation as from the purely superficial adoption of courtly forms.

Any claim for the evolution of an interior quest must rest upon more substantial evidence than what appears so far as a conditioned response to the Green Knight's challenge. The next clues that are offered occur in remarks made by the poet. The first comes in the lines concluding the First Fitt

Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan,
For wope þat þou ne wonde
þis auenture for to frayn
þat þou hatz tan on honde.

It is impossible to overlook the sudden change of atmosphere that this remark injects into the poem. The scene immediately
before these lines is one of rejoicing, of a challenge worthily accepted and, so far, boldly accomplished. The court turns to the serious business of enjoyment, "Wyth alle maner of mete and mynstralcie bope" (484), in an effort to exclude the threatening world of marvel from the life of leisure. But the poet is determined that the door to the miraculous and ominous be left firmly open, at least in the reader's mind, if not in Sir Gawain's, for it seems obvious that one thing which is not occupying Gawain's mind at this moment is any notion of the consequence of his action in the beheading game. Gawain had not thought carefully either before or immediately after his participation in events which honour forces him to conclude.

In opening the Second Fitt the poet continues the idea of responsibility for one's actions, but with the addition of a small homily on the ineluctable and rapid passage of time and the evils of drink

Gawan watz glad to begynne þose gomnez in halle,
Bot þa þe ende be heuy haf þe no wonder;
For þa þen ben mery in mynde quen þay han mayn drynk,
A þere þernes ful þerne, and þeldez neuer lyke,
Þe forme to þe fynisment foldeþ ful selden. 495-99

The mood of joy attributed to Gawain in the word "glad" is to be as shortlived as the passing year. The seasons are then telescoped into the following thirty-five lines which conclude with yet another ominous reminder

Þen þenkkeþ Gawan ful sone
Of his anious uyage. 534-35
The effect of these separate but related remarks is twofold. First, they reinforce the idea of the inescapable. Both time and action proceed along courses which are unchanged by regret or desire. The "sisterdayez mony" (529) can never be recalled, nor can past action be altered. Secondly, and impinging more on the notion of interior processes, these remarks collectively demonstrate a shift from an interior previously only alluded to by the poet to one experienced by the hero. We have gone on a short journey from thoughts about Gawain's state of mind to thoughts emanating from his own consciousness. All this in the space of a few lines which derive their impact in part from the presentation of the rapid progression of the seasons.

The poet's handling of time is unusual. Whereas in *Horn* or *Havelok* events occur in a linear and cyclical fashion, that is, matters are arranged in a chronological and ordered sequence and given historical perspective, in *Sir Gawain* the poet manages to project an immediacy onto the narrative. He achieves this partly through the forcefulness of rhetorical descriptions, such as the axe severing the Green Knight's head, and partly by his seemingly casual remarks when he foreshadows, or hints at, events that are to take place, or events that must inevitably arise as a result of past action. Moreover, time is managed through demonstrations of Gawain's grasp of events. We travel at times, within Gawain's mind as he journeys towards his destiny, so that time is given
another dimension. In addition to the linear, cyclical and historical elements of events which occurred in a certain order, came full circle and happened long ago, there is a sense of time connected with Gawain's participation in events just past or about to take place. We are invited to experience events not just from the perspective of history but also from Gawain's point of view.\textsuperscript{19}

The journey within is not complete, however, until we hear Gawain's own rather resigned utterance on his anticipated fate

\begin{quote}
\textit{Pe kny\textsuperscript{3}t mad ay god chere,}  
\textit{And sayde, 'Quat schuld I wonde?}  
\textit{Of destin\textsuperscript{\textsc{e}s} derf and dere}  
\textit{What may mon do bot fonde?'}
\end{quote}

Surrounded by his fellow knights who offer comfort while lamenting the waste of one so worthy, Gawain puts on a bold face. But his speech is less than brave, it is the speech of a man condemned by a ruthless logic to pursue a one-way journey. The word "destin\textsuperscript{\textsc{e}s}" would lend a tragic tone to Gawain's predicament were it not for our subsequent knowledge of the comedy of the story which finally laughs at Gawain's seriousness while also laughing at the ludicrous \textit{mores} of the knightly ethos that puts him in such a predicament.

The process of insight into Gawain's mind is not one which continues unabated as he proceeds on his search for the Green Knight. It is, rather, made to emerge at times of crisis
in his progress. For example, after travelling at length, battling with all kinds of physical enemies and sleeping "Mo nyȝtez þen innoghe in naked rokkez" (730) he is at an impasse. His time is running out. It is Christmas Eve and Gawain finds himself in an inhospitable wood not knowing if he will ever find the Green Chapel. In some respects Gawain's situation is not unlike Dante's at the beginning of the *Inferno*:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura  
Ché la diritta via era smarrita,

for at this moment Gawain is lost and alone between two points of reference — Camelot and Hautdesert — which represent home and hospitality respectively, and, in either case, life and warmth. His mental state,

Carande for his costes, lest he ne keuer schulde  
To se þe seruyse of þat syre, þat on þat sell nyȝt  
Of a burde watz borne oure barete to quelle,

is reflected in his prayer to Jesus and Mary. We should note, however, that his concern is not here directed to the object of his quest, but to his devotional obligations at this time of the Christian year.

We have suggested so far that there is a gradual movement in the poem from events perceived objectively to events perceived subjectively, that the business of seeing things from Gawain's point of view evolves rather than occurs
suddenly. The moment when we may truly be said to have become one with Gawain's consciousness, and to have dispensed, for a time at least, with the narrator's view of Gawain as object, is the moment in the woods when Gawain prays

He rode in his prayere,
And cryed for his mysdede,
He sayned hym in sybes sere,
And sayde 'Cros Kryst me spede!' 759-62

This is the first time in the poem that Gawain speaks for himself, while alone. Previously he has spoken to the Green Knight, to Arthur and to those of his fellows who have comforted him. Now, for the first time, he acts out his part alone, away from court, friends and comfort. We are, as it were, drawn by the device of his prayer to be at Gawain's side. Detachment from the hero is no longer possible as it is, say, with Orfeo or Florent. In this respect the Gawain-poet's treatment of his hero and his subject matter is nothing short of revolutionary, for Gawain becomes much more than a block of wood, a type-figure going through heroic motions. He assumes, instead, a personality, a character, for whom we can feel genuine sympathy, with whom we can empathise, not just because of his plight, but because we are made to partake of his plight in a way that has not hitherto been possible. One might well admire Havelok for the virtues of kingship we see developing in him, or Orfeo for his perseverance and Florent for his single-mindedness, but we do so without really
becoming engaged in the emotions which may have enveloped these figures. With Gawain matters are different. We share his plight because we are aware of his thought processes. We share his weakness in concealing the girdle because we partake of the same humanity and desire to live. Bloomfield has indicated that the romance's densest moments are the result of a simultaneity of action in the story, specifically during the simultaneous bedroom and hunting scenes. One might enlarge upon this in saying that the story's "denseness" (by which one might imply richness, tension and immediacy) is derived from our perception of two levels operating and communicating simultaneously — of the two quests, in fact, one to a previously defined and acceptable physical goal, the other to regions not guessed at and involving events only hinted at which are going on inside Gawain's mind. The object of Gawain's interior quest is not revealed to us, nor even to Gawain, until we learn, with him, of his discovery of his own fallibility.

The final stages in that process of discovery are perhaps the poem's most intense, even dramatic, moments. Gawain's second agreement, this time to exchange winnings with his nameless host, is lightly undertaken. For him it is a game, and his acceptance

'Bi God,' quop Gawayn þe gode, 'I grant þertylle,
And þat yow lyst for to layke, lef hit me þynkes,' 1110-1111
is expressed in words which recall Arthur's remarks about
Christmas games after the beheading scene

'Wel bycomes such craft vpon Cristmasse,
Layking of entreludez, to laze and to syng,
Among þise kynde caroles of knyȝtez and ladyez.'
471-73

Gawain's expectations at this new agreement are those of the
courtier for whom games and dalliance, laughter and drink
are the necessary companions of a festive season. But, as
Kittredge pointed out when discussing temptation scenes in
several quests, the hero often does not know what a test
consists of and on occasion "he does not know there is any
test at all."24 This is apparently the case here, for both
the reader's and Gawain's knowledge consists in Gawain's
preparations for the beheading test, which has been the explicit
motive behind Gawain's journey.

During the three days of temptation which Gawain
undergoes at Hautdesert the external and physical quest is
suspended. This arrest in Gawain's progress was made plausible
by the simple expedient of Bertilak's assurances that Gawain
will be put in the right way to find the Green chapel in plenty
of time

... 'Now leng þe byhoues,
For I schal teche yow to þat terme bi þe tyme þe ende,
Þe grene chapayle vpon grounde greue yow no more.'
1068-70
But suspension of the physical journey clears the way for testing Gawain first, without his knowledge, and secondly, in matters which challenge his reputation, as well as that of the Round Table, for faithfulness, either to the chivalric ethos or to his host. As we have seen, the temptation causes Gawain to exercise his wit as a courtier to avoid offending Bertilak's hospitality while resisting Lady Bertilak's advances. Characteristically, he does not resort to Ider's coarse expedient of kicking the lady in the belly. The tests in the Third Fitt point up the interior tension of the story, for while the beheading test, or at least the willingness to attempt to keep that first agreement, with its demands for physical endurance, courage and loyalty to one's word, is the external manifestation of Gawain's reputation, the temptations of the flesh, and the ultimate temptation of life itself, become the agents with which Gawain's mental and spiritual resources are measured.

The first piece of evidence in support of our knowledge of Gawain's state of mind in Fitt Three presents a particularly difficult problem because there is some disagreement among editors as to the sense of the passage. The situation is that Gawain has successfully resisted the advances of Bertilak's wife on the first morning, but before she takes leave we read
Burrow, following Gollancz' emendations, feels that the comment, though ambiguous, is the poet's own remark on Gawain's preoccupation with his appointment three days hence. He points out further (note 17, p. 84), that we should not know at this point what the Lady is thinking. This explanation favours Gollancz's interpretation which makes the remark appear to be Gawain's thoughts. If we were told what she was thinking, a degree of suspense would be lost since we, as readers, should not be told at this moment that she is a party to the attempt by Bertilak to trick Gawain into sin. This explanation is in fact given much later (11. 2360-61). Whether we ultimately decide that the thoughts are the lady's, Gawain's, or the poet's, the point is that the passage conveys the fact that Gawain is experiencing considerable anxiety. In this, it contributes to our accumulating understanding of the events taking place in his mind.

The second occasion on which we learn of Gawain's mental state is when, after Bertilak's return from the second day's hunting, Bertilak's wife secretly makes eyes at him at the dinner table.
We must ask why the poet felt constrained to include information suggesting Gawain's astonishment and anger. Previously, we had seen that Gawain seemed completely at ease in parrying sexual advances. These had taken place in the privacy of his bedroom, now "they are taking place for the first time in the presence of Bercilak." Gawain's concern lest the mild affair should become public outweighs his anxiety about the forthcoming appointment at the Green Chapel. Bertilak's lady carries the test from the boudoir to the board in an attempt to test Gawain's courtesy by embarrassment. Gawain's "wroth" may arise from fear that he might offend his host, since he has already trespassed too far on Bertilak's hospitality, or from impatience with the teasing which could cause him public shame. But the embarrassment is possible because of his reputation as both lover and courtier. Why should Gawain be either astonished or angry since, as we learn immediately (1661-62), he is quite capable of spontaneous recovery? The whole scene is passed off as more "play" or courtly indulgence.

Quen pay hade played in halle
As longe as hor wylle hom last . . . 1664-65
Another explanation of this scene might be offered in the suggestion that the lady is simply showing her Lord that she is carrying out her part of the testing in public as well as in private. In other words, such a public test is Bertilak's means of confirming what he only knows at second-hand from his Lady — that Gawain had resisted the more acute private temptations. But this would imply that the reader has more information at his disposal, at this stage, than the text has offered. As yet we have only the very vaguest of hints that Bertilak's wife is a part of the testing scheme. These have come in casual remarks dropped by the narrator about what she may be thinking (1283, 1550).

A more convincing explanation for Gawain's reaction may be sought in the general tenor of the testing procedure. Considered from the point of view of the Bertilak household, the tests have revolved around the notion of what is expected. The Green Knight's challenge was expressed in terms of the renown of the Round Table, while the lady's advances express the synonymity of the name Gawain with the knowledge and practice of fine amour and courtesy. With the single exception of his acceptance of the girdle, all of Gawain's tests at Hautdesert have measured his "nurture" or good breeding. His anger may derive from what he considers a breech of courtly love, with its demands for secrecy, from the risk of public humiliation since he is a guest at Bertilak's house, but
mainly at the Lady's ill-breeding and insensitivity in treating her husband in so light a manner. As usual, his skill at talking rescues him from this dilemma, and he "dalt with hir al in daynte" (1662). From the reader's point of view the degree of ambiguity which such passages present is a part of the poem's charm — we cannot always be quite sure what meaning the poet is asking us to accept.

Of greater significance in exploring Gawain's mind is the dream he has before being woken by a third and final visit to his bedroom by Lady Bertilak

'A! mon, how may pou slepe,  
[Pis morning is so clere?'] 
He watz in drowping depe,  
Bot þenne he con hir here.

In dre3 droupyng of dreme draueld þat noble,  
As mon þat watz in mornyng of many þro þoȝtes,  
How þat destiné schulde þat day dele hym his wyrde  
At þe grene chapel, when he þe gome metes,  
And bɪhous his buffet abide wiþout þe debate more. 1746-54

The importance ascribed to morning-dreams in Dante's Divine Comedy and Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale has been noted. 30 Middle English examples of morning-dreams may also be found in King Horn and in Havelok the Dane. In each of these poems the dreams are prophetic and require interpretation. 31 Gawain's dream evidently belongs in that category which Petrus de Abano calls a somnium animale, that is, it "springs from the great anxiety and perturbation of the waking mind." 32 In addition, the dream is of the variety of somnium known as a personal
dream, or *proprium*. That is, a person dreams that he himself is doing or experiencing something. Gawain's dream completely accords with the preoccupations which have filled his mind from his leavetaking of Arthur to the present. The inclusion of the word "wyrde" in the dream serves to remind us of another powerful theme in the story: that of Gawain's fatalistic attitude towards his quest.

"'Qua† schuld I wonde? Of destînes derf and dere What may mon do bot fonde?'

563-65

In the Third Fitt the immediate antecedent for the dream was found in the comments on Gawain's apparent reluctance to engage sympathetically in the affair with his host's wife on the first morning of temptation (1284-87). While we are not actually shown Gawain's dream, reference to its content indicates a dramatic moment in the story, bringing together at one place his torment, which he has succeeded in concealing on the festive occasions, and his fatalistic attitude, which the poet has been careful to cultivate. More important, the dream qualifies in every respect as a kind of prophetic announcement of Gawain's "dome" (1968). For an audience to whom the beheading game is a familiar story and for whom the hero's safe return is anticipated, this must come as a disquieting omen. There is as yet no certainty as to whether the prophetic dream or the conventions of the game will prevail.
in the end. Should we put our faith in the expected outcome of the beheading game with its certain success for the stout hero, or should we believe that the dream, with its ancient weight of prophetic tradition, will accurately forecast Gawain's death? The dream is only the second step in a three-part depiction of the third day's events. Just as we are introduced to the hounds to witness a highly detailed fox-hunt, in which a harried beast barely manages to elude the mouths of the dogs, so we are introduced again to the lady who enters Gawain's bedroom with "Hir brest bare bifore, and bihinde eke" (1741), to wake Gawain from a harried sleep and to pursue him through yet another round of trials. It is only fitting for us to find Gawain "in drowping depe" (1748).

Gawain's acceptance of the girdle, after weighing the temptation in his mind (11. 1855-58), the suggestion of bad conscience when he breaks the pattern of the exchange of winnings by being the first to offer his winnings\(^34\) (11. 1932-37), and finally, the narrator's closing remarks at the end of Fitt Three on Gawain's inability to sleep soundly (1991-95), are further examples of the shift, now complete, from our being merely sympathetic with Gawain to seeing his predicament from a new perspective. The increasing frequency of evidence about his interior state has the effect of heightening the tension implicit in the chronology of the story. The focus of the Third Fitt brings into sharp relief the element of finality
which the First and Second Fitts have not insisted upon. Time, in these earlier parts, passes almost without notice. In Fitt Three we are made aware not of seasons or months, but of days and moments; Gawain's perspective has become ours as well.

Whereas events earlier in the story had an existence independent of the thoughts and reactions of the actors in the drama, now, as we may see in the parallel action of the fox-hunt, physical events become images which embody Gawain's emotional predicament. The fox-hunt itself, with its correlation to Gawain's disturbed dream, is the external symptom of his harassment and signals the final interiorization of the action of the story. As the poet includes more detail of Gawain's thoughts, the action moves from the external adventure theme to an interior trial. Our attention is not now directed to whether or not he will be beheaded, but to whether his power to resist temptation can be sustained.

We suggested at the outset that the interior object of Gawain's quest was a form of self-discovery and humiliation. We should now examine just what it was that he discovered and what remains, to him at least, obscure. It is evident in the confession scene at the Green Chapel that Gawain views his slip (to Bertilak part of a chivalric contest, 11. 2396-99) as a gross and irreconcilable lapse of knighthood. He has just been told that he is "On be fautlest freke pat euer on fote 3ede" (2363), but he blurts out "Now am I fawty and falce"
The Green Knight's response to all this is to minimize the entire "game." He even offers Gawain a token of the "chaunce" (2399), and invites him to return to Hautdesert to continue the festivities. Bertilak treats the whole adventure with a sense of humour, recognising that it was a prank and even, perhaps, that the odds were not fair. But what is Gawain's reaction to all this? Gollancz observes the "note of bitterness which is scarcely in keeping with the knight of courtesy" in this stanza. Gawain attempts to mitigate his lapse by a conventional and petulant comparison of his own small error with the downfall of such men as Adam, Solomon, Samson and David (2416-2421). Far from realising the comedy of the situation, Gawain exaggerates his fault, refuses the offer to return to Hautdesert and takes on himself the penance of wearing the girdle "in syngne of my surfet" (2433). As Benson observed, Gawain "remains an idealist, and, like all idealists, he takes himself too seriously".

As the story moves towards its conclusion Gawain's extreme reaction is balanced first by Bertilak's laughter, then by the court's. Gawain may take himself too seriously or, more probably he is very embarrassed by being found deficient by Bertilak, so he tries to compensate for what he considers his chivalric superiority with another extreme — he hides behind penance rather than pride. In his attempt to live up to his reputation, and to the "sourquydrye" of Camelot, he
positions himself for just such a fall as the one we are shown. He feels superior, as a member of the Round Table and as a knight of renown, to such a situation as the one in which he finds himself. While he may have discovered that he is fallible, he has not appreciated the faintly ridiculous posture of penitence that he has adopted, nor is there any hope, it would seem, that he will ever step back from himself to see the comedy of such posturing. It may be objected that such a reading of the conclusion of the poem exceeds the limits of internal evidence, and that Gawain has in fact shown himself to be suitably ashamed of his fallibility. This may indeed be the case, but we would do well to recall the sermon on pride in the Parson's Tale in support of the Pharisaic interpretation being offered here

Presumpcioun is whan a man undertaketh an emprise that hym oghte nat do, or elles that he may nat do; and this is called Surquidrie... Veyneglorie is for to have pompe and delit in his temporeel hynesse, and glorifie hym in this worldly estaat.37

Or, as Huizinga puts it in discussing the fantastic excesses of humility practised by various religious and secular figures, "It is but a step from luxurious piety to theatrical displays of hyperbolic humility.38

We began by formulating two questions which we proposed that this analysis would answer: "What is the object of
this particular quest?" and "Why this particular hero?" The first question has two answers, the first being the immediate fulfillment of Gawain's agreement with the Green Knight. Underlying this external framework there is yet another, and more important, structure. This poem stands alone in mediaeval quest literature in having an additional, unknown, object. That is, an object that is only realised late in the story. The beheading game yields its place in the narration to the temptation sequences. These, in turn, build an interior quest on the foundation of the exterior, chivalric adventure, and, as such, announce the development of a different mode of expressing what is perhaps an archetypal form in literature, the quest.

The second question, concerning the choice of Gawain as the hero, is easily answered and comes both from the reader's point of view and from the text itself. Bertilak carefully explains that the adventure is part of a plot conceived by Morgan to expose the "sourquydrye" or arrogance and pride of life at Camelot. Among Arthur's knights no one is better qualified than Gawain. His reputation precedes him everywhere, as the text itself insists on reminding us. Of all of Arthur's knights, Gawain may be the most idealistic and the one who most clearly conforms to that image of chivalry which the Green Knight mocks on his arrival at Camelot. And once the hook is baited it catches that knight who was most concerned
for the reputation of the king and his court and the superiority of the knighthood of the Round Table.

As readers we are treated to a series of instances which suggest that Gawain discovers that he is not the model of knighthood that he believes he ought to be. He does not, however, seem to realise the slight absurdity of his over-reaction and embarrassment at the end of the adventure. This fact signifies the accuracy of Morgan's evaluation of Arthur's court in that Gawain is embarrassed only by his loss of reputation and not by his pride, which he continues to display by wearing the girdle. Our initial evaluation of the result of Gawain's experience, that he returns with a degree of the humility that he had lacked, needs qualifying. His humility extends only as far as his awareness of his own humanity and mortality. It does not conceal the self-serving pentitential posture with which he displays the girdle to the court, forcing their consolation. The fact that we do not number ourselves among those consoling Gawain indicates that the cycle of perception has come full circle. The interior quest is no longer Gawain's, but our own, in that we are offered a superior vantage point from which to view the action. From having experienced events subjectively, we are once more removed from the close engagement which we sought in the poem's most dramatic moments.
FOOTNOTES


2 Ibid., p. 138.


5 Bloomfield, p. 53.


9 Bernard Levy, p. 76.


13 References to Hautdesert are being regarded here as the name of a place, though it is possible that it is also part of Bertilak's name.

14 See Tolkien and Gordon's introduction, p. xii, and the facsimile of the first page of the MS, facing p. 1 of the text in their edition.

15 Benson, Art and Tradition, pp. 87-88.

16 Whiting, pp. 210-215.


19 Morton Bloomfield, pp. 52-53. Bloomfield uses the terms "inner or psychological time" and "subjective duration" to describe this dimension of time in the poem. He also notes (p. 53, n. 48) that "The romance is at its densest during the temptation scenes, when action goes on in the castle and out of it, in Gawain's bedroom and elsewhere, and within Gawain's soul and without, all at the same time." See also Donald R. Howard, pp. 250-251, for a fuller discussion of time in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

20 Alan Markman sees the wood as a conventional romance boundary between the real world and the romance world, pp. 583-584 and note 10, p. 583.


22 Bloomfield, pp. 52-53.
It is acceptable in terms of the genre. The objects of romance quests are nearly always clearly enunciated at the outset of any romance, whether those objects be persons, places or situations, such as kingship.


Kittredge, p. 84, gives an account of this incident in *Ider*.

Tolkien's and Gordon's reading. See also their note to lines 1283-5, p. 110.


J.A. Burrow, *Reading*, p. 84.

Ibid., p. 95.


*King Horn in Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. D.B. Sands (New York, 1966), lines 649-688, pp. 33-34; *Havelok the Dane* ed. Sands, lines 1304-1354, pp. 91-93.


35 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Gollancz, note on l. 2409, p. 129. For the view that accepts Gawain's response as extremely penitential, see Burrow, Reading, pp. 143-144.

36 Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 239.


Chaucer's story of Thopas is all things to all men. To Harry Bailly it is a "drasty speche," in "rym dogerel," and hence, a complete waste of time. In a rather perverse misreading one scholar feels that the "essence" of the poem is that "nothing ever really does happen." One wonders how this last critic would locate the "essence" in Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, or Gray's famous *Elegy* in which things most emphatically do not "happen." However, as Magoun showed, in his attempt to locate the source of *Sir Thopas* in Lebeaus *Desconus*, things do in fact happen in Chaucer's tale. If one might be permitted to take the Devil's side for a moment, it may safely be argued that the "essence" of the Romance "genre," if such things as essence and genre exist, is that action is its chief distinguishing feature, its very foundation and furniture.

In a recent colloquium Dr. Robert Jordan pointed to the difficulties that lie in the way of classifying genres by
their subject matter. He suggested that a more fruitful avenue lay in examining narrative techniques in an attempt to isolate elements which might assist in the classification of narratives as romances. The whole of *Thopas* is larded with the conventions of the type found in romance, from abstractions to the particulars, from love-longing to catalogues of herbs, birds, armour and clothing.

The literary significance of *Thopas* is that it suggests that this type of narrative (stories of chivalry and the supernatural) had fallen into such disrepute through the abuse of inferior imitators that, in the hands of an artist such as Chaucer, it could become a vehicle for multiple levels of satire. Satire becomes a viable form of literary expression when a gulf grows between precept and practice, or between the models and ideals to which society pays lip-service while conducting itself in quite the opposite manner. Chaucer's *General Prologue* is particularly rich in satirical portraits, especially of ecclesiastical figures, so his satirical technique in *Thopas* comes as no surprise. On the one hand we carry in our minds the ideals of chivalry and the models, such as Gawain or Orfeo, who enacted those ideals. More near at hand a contrast to Thopas may be found among the portraits of pilgrims in Chaucer's *General Prologue*. The Knight is modest in his bearing and moderate in his speech
And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In al his lyf unto no maner wight. A 68-71

His horse exudes an aura of utility, not fashion (A 74), while his clothes show the marks of travel and military function (A 75-76). The Knight's son, the "lusty bacheler," is perhaps closer to Thopas in appearance with his curly hair and embroidered clothes, yet we learn that he has acquitted himself well in battles on the continent and that despite his fondness for dancing, poetry and lovemaking, he humbly fulfills a squire's function and "carf biforn his fader at the table" (A 100). Against this optimistic background Chaucer sets Thopas who goes through the motions of chivalry while failing in the spirit of knighthood. He is, at every point, a gauche distortion of the traditional image of perfection-in-action. His horse is an ambler, a tame beast of the kind we find the Wife of Bath riding, and we see that he pays a great deal of attention to his dress

His shoon of cordewane.
Of Brugges were his hosen broun,
Hi robe was of syklatoun,
That coste many a jane. 732-735

His entire facial appearance is filled with romance conventions which mock him while lending him a tone of femininity
Sire Thopas wax a doghty swayn;
Whit was his face as payndemayn,
His lippes rede as rose;
His rode is lyk scarlet in grayn.
And I yow telle in good certayn,
He hadde a semely nose.

The use here of the adjective "semely," to describe an object, echoes that same word used to describe a manner of action in the *General Prologue*. It will be recalled that the pilgrim Prioress sang the divine service "Entuned in hir nose ful semely" (A 124). The technique is one of condemnation by association, for Chaucer never explicitly says Thopas is a fainthearted and lady-like creature. In fact he even uses the word "doghty" to describe him generally, a word used elsewhere to distinguish Zenobia and her husband in the *Monk's Tale* (VII 2312). But we are left to infer, first from the words describing his face, and secondly from the use at this particular point of "semely," that our hero is indeed a vain and feminine shadow of the ideal knight.

Unlike other quest stories, that of *Thopas* brings glory to no one, not even to Thopas; it tells of no relief of distressed maidens; it rights no wrongs; it restores no order. But the presence in a satire of the quest theme does suggest the audience's familiarity with such a *motif* while at the same time implying a change in literary tastes and audience expectation. To have force, satire must be recognized and accepted as such. Chaucer's story depends for its effect on the audience's recognition and definition of those elements which,
when held up beside more refined examples of chivalric adventure, become figures of derision. In many respects this story is important in what it says about the stock-in-trade of quest and romance literature. Setting aside for a moment the obvious ridicule of the character Thopas and his dizzy ride to fairyland, it is clear that his tale embraces most of those elements which adorn more elevated tales of adventure. Thopas is a knight, the proper class of hero in romance, who knows about hunting and hawking. Ladies pine away for love of him, as they do for Lancelot or Gawain, but Thopas is chaste. While riding he falls into a love-longing in the accepted fashion. His dream of an elf-queen precipitates his quest for the love of a perfect and sufficiently worthy woman. The way to his imagined bliss is barred by a suitably fierce giant. The practically unattainable object of his quest and the supernatural resistance to his progress accord completely with tradition. Even the ritual of arming for action, together with narrative asides on the valour of the hero, is a recognizable part of chivalric adventure. So far so good. But the enormous weight of ridicule, parody, pretence and irony in this story has the effect of cancelling our sympathy with Thopas and our interest in his story for its own sake. The sum and result of the details concerning this ill-conceived knight and his useless quest is to turn him into an object of derision and his story into a vehicle for satire. The tale
never implies that there is a soul lurking inside the pathetic hero or that he is anything more than a mediaeval clothes-horse upon whom Chaucer has deliberately hung a large array of outmoded paraphernalia.

But the story's success as satire, and as an integral part of the narrative structure in the *Canterbury Tales*, is an indication of the evolution during the fourteenth century of the popular tastes of audiences for whom Havelok or Horn were important, if not historical, characters, to a stage and time in which more substantial fare was demanded. Even the Wife of Bath's little vignette, with its ever-topical debate on dominance in marriage, carries more weight than the story of Thopas, who is neither heroic nor vulnerable.

This is perhaps an appropriate moment to pause in our study of particular quest romances to examine just what it is that makes of one tale an engrossing narrative and of another a farce. In the romances discussed so far the concepts of sympathy and identification with the success of the hero have been implicit in our willingness to accept the hero's progress relatively uncritically. In other words, it seems reasonable to argue that a basic assumption made by such stories is the audience's willingness to suspend its credulity in the face of the impossible, the supernatural and the remote, for nothing in the experience of a mediaeval audience could be related directly to the experience of life depicted in the
romances which held their attention. As one critic points out,⁸ English romances never attempted to represent reality, but aimed at illustrating moral values by telling an entertaining story. Much the same procedure is adopted by Chaucer's Pardoner, whose tale so successfully leads his audience to deeply religious feelings while delighting them and enriching himself.⁹ The contents of several manuscript collections reveal that there was no apparent incongruity in gathering together romances, saints' lives or religious poems in one volume.¹⁰ The Gawain MS (Cotton Nero A X), is an example of this practice. Most of the extant romances in Middle English appear to rely heavily on a moral commitment on the part of the audience to the values and ideals expounded in the tales. Such a commitment is on occasion encouraged by the narrator who makes it clear to us how his sympathies lie, or, more dramatically, by including scenes in which the hero overcomes some trial or temptation which, in the mind of the audience, is easily recognized as a source of evil. Examples of these techniques abound in the romances, as a glance at King Horn will show. On several occasions Horn is directly praised by a line such as "Nas non his iliche" (20) and again on line 344, "Nis no whar his y-liche." Sometimes the praise appears in the form of comparison of the hero with others, as

Horn is fairer and riche,  
Fairer by one ribbe  
Thane eny man that libbe. 318-20
At any rate, we are never in doubt as to the narrator's attitude towards his protagonist. Again, in *King Horn*, a dramatic scene will help to reinforce the narrator's position unequivocally. After being knighted by king Aylmar, Horn rides out with the twofold purpose of demonstrating his love for Rymenhild by proof of his courage and demonstrating to the king the wisdom of making him a knight. He has ridden barely over a mile when he encounters a band of "hethene hunde" who have just disembarked from a ship. In the space of a few lines Horn slays "On hundred by the laste" (620) of these "hundes" before returning in triumph with their leader's head on the point of his sword. The intention of the invaders was expressed concisely

"This lond we wulles winne
And sle that ther is inne." 607-608

Crude, but unambiguous. The victorious Horn is thus cast in the rôle of the defender of Aylmar's land and of the Christian right against the "Sarazin" wrong.

*Thopas*, by contrast, is entirely lacking in the matters of engaging our sympathy with the hero or of adopting a narrative voice which transcends merely conventional and rhetorical support for the hero. While Havelok is "the wighteste man at nede" (9, 25), Thopas is "fair and gent" (715); where Orfeo is "stalworp," "hardi," "large" and "curteys," Thopas is "a doghty swayn" with "a semely nose" and "sydes smale."
Skill at arms is entirely missing from the description of Thopas' abilities. Instead we are offered a list of accomplishments, such as archery and wrestling, more appropriate to Chaucer's Yeoman and Miller.

A comparison of narrative techniques in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* may help to reveal something of the nature and versatility of the quest theme. The Wife of Bath invokes an Arthurian past in which the supernatural was commonplace, "Al was this land fulfild of fayerye" (859). By contrast, the opening of *Sir Thopas* simply declares the narrator's intention of telling a story about a certain knight. *Thopas* continues with the stock narrative procedure of describing the birthplace and lineage of the hero as well as his appearance. The similes chosen to describe Thopas partake of both the domestic and the mundane

Whit was his face as payndemayn,  
His lippes rede as rose. 725-726

Later on Thopas is compared to other famous romance heroes among whom he "bereth the flour" of chivalry (901). In the Wife's story the hero is not the focus of attention. He is passed over quickly as "a lusty bacheler" (883), a short but telling description as we quickly learn in the subsequent action. However, the Wife's opening remarks about fairies and the more honourable past leave her room for an important digression on friars, a sharp sortie which evens the score for the Friar's
remark about the length of her *Prologue*. Here, as elsewhere in the Wife's *Tale*, is an element which unites her story to the device of the pilgrimage by an explicit reference to the realities of the journey to Canterbury and its personnel. The other digressions in her *Tale*, on women and secrecy, on "gentilesse," poverty, old age and low birth, are similarly related to her own vision of wedded life and its rather bleak reality. In *Thopas* sermons give way to catalogues of a standard rhetorical kind. These devices bear no relation to the teller of the tale nor to the dramatic situation into which the story is placed. Rather, they serve to sharpen the satire of barren rhetorical technique with which the story is concerned.

Both tales employ common transitional devices to further the plot. In one case the phrase "And so bifel" is common to each story. But whereas the intervening digressions in the Wife's *Tale* bear a direct relationship to the dramatic situation, in *Thopas* they are colourless rhetoric. The second transition in *Thopas*, at the end of the first Fitt and the beginning of the second, combines a mixture of tavern oaths and minstrel clichés

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Now holde youre mouth, par charitee,
Bothe knyght and lady free,
And herkneth to my spelle;
Of bataille and of chivalry,
And of ladies love-drury
Anon I wol yow telle.     891-896
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Perhaps it is fortunate that we are spared the further ramblings of *Thopas*. 
The treatment of the supernatural in these two stories is further illustration of content with and without relevance to a larger structure. In the Wife's Tale the themes of transformation and of fairyland impinge directly on the Wife's marital predicament, as we have suggested in an earlier chapter. Her adaptation of the Loathly Lady motif is an indication of the shortcomings in her own life in which transformation is not possible. The world of magic is not present in the Wife's narrative simply for its own sake nor for the sake of a romantic tradition which deems it necessary to people the pages of adventure with fairies and monsters. In Thopas the reverse is the case. Both the setting in "The contree of Fairye" (802) and the "greet geant" (807) who looms out of the scenery are concessions to a formula which demands the magical for its own sake. Thopas' encounter with a stone-throwing giant, and his subsequent narrow escape, neither enlarges our respect for the hero nor advances the plot perceptibly. It is simply an illustration of writing, or reciting to a pattern which calls for a remote past, heroes larger than life, supernatural and apparently overwhelming enemies and the ultimate success of the hero who defends all that we hold most dear.

A comparison of stock narrative phrases in the two stories shows that in the two hundred and seven lines of Sir Thopas redundant expressions, tags and conventions outnumber those in the Wife's Tale, which comprises four hundred and seven
lines, by more than three to one. While there may be some disagreement as to what exactly constitutes a hackneyed romance tag, it is unlikely that a different method of analysis of the language of these two stories would disclose a substantial difference in the ratio of clichés. A few examples drawn from Thopas should suffice to demonstrate its vacuous expressions. The hero "wax a doghty swayn" (724). At various sports (inappropriate to knighthood) "was ther noon his peer" (740). A great many maidens "bright in bour" (742) lie awake at night thinking about him. He falls into a love-longing (772) after hearing a thrush singing. This precipitates a mad, aimless ride in which his horse "So swatte that men myght him wrynge" (776), and so on for the rest of the story. The economy of expression in the Wife's Tale is startling by comparison, though we should not lose sight of the fact that she takes every opportunity to digress, to the point of garrulousness, on the conduct of a husband towards his wife. The smoothness with which the Wife glides through her exempla may even blind us to the unlikely possibility that she was on more than nodding acquaintance with Ovid, Dante, Seneca, Boethius and Juvenal. However, we must not forget her fifth husband, the luckless Jankyn, who harangued her daily with stories about the evil doings of women, some of which, evidently, must have been remembered.

In the Wife's Tale the world of chivalry is reduced to a single situation which serves to make of her story a
domestic imbroglio related to realistic moral concerns. In
Thopas chivalry's the thing, the only thing, yet it is depicted
in such a bourgeois and mundane manner as to become ridiculous.
Thopas's quest is not related to any large issue nor to any
tangible social reality. In fact it seems to have no "purpose"
at all. Clearly, these two stories share a similar structure
with respect to the quest. Each involves departure and trial.
The outcome of the Wife's Tale even involves a return — to
court and judgement — though the result of the hag's union
with the knight gives the usual formula an unexpected twist.
One can only speculate on the outcome of Thopas, though its
similarity to other tales has been pointed out frequently.11

In a wider sense, comparison of these two stories
does suggest that as long as the quest once demonstrated what
was already confirmed by experience in the world, it satisfied
the need to reinforce cultural propositions. This is not to
imply that English romance at any time depicted things as
they really were, but that they confirmed a system of ideals
and values to which society readily subscribed. Stories of
bravery, true-love and the maintenance of the status quo were
literary expressions of what was taken for granted. In terms
of literature, of course, they were much more than the simple
dramatization of moral precepts. But in romances such as
Horn or Havelok one is never at a loss to distinguish heroes
from villains. When popular values become capable of
interpretation in a pluralistic context, then the certainty upon which the resolution of the quest was based can no longer be taken for granted. The quest then admits of the possibility of failure, of ambiguity, of irresolution and of variety in its meanings, or, as is evident in Thopas, of becoming a pointless activity. Sir Gawain, The Wife of Bath's Tale and Sir Thopas all point to a shift in the certainty of the outcome of the quest. Sir Gawain introduces us to a fallible hero, capable of an error in judgement, perhaps even blind to his own, real fault. The Wife's Tale offers us a situation in which the structure of the quest is simply a convenient vehicle upon which to superimpose comic and tragic social themes. Thopas, far from spelling the demise of the quest theme, illustrates its success as a vehicle of parody and satire.

We have alluded so far to only a few of the poetic conventions which Chaucer ridicules in his satire of Thopas. There are devices other than the hero's horse and his clothes or the literary echoes in the words "semely" and "doghty" which suffer a similar fate, not least of which is the rhyme scheme. This undergoes several changes during the course of the poem, changes, it should be noted, that do not conform to any shift in the atmosphere of the poem, but which constitute a variation of the monotonous and excessively insistent sound of the entire work. We are in fact given one monotony in exchange for another only to have the second itself
re-exchanged for the first scheme. It may even be argued that the inconsistency of the rhyme after the thirteenth stanza, with changes from six lines to seven, then to ten and back to six, represents a parody of the minstrel-in-action whose memory has failed, through this does help to relieve the monotony. At any rate, the consequences of the chosen rhyme scheme (the tail-rhyme stanza) with its variations, are to diminish the seriousness of the matter and to heighten the satirical effects inherent in the whole work. The rhythm is constantly arrested and advanced, especially from lines 795-826 where Thopas meets the giant, by the expedient of forced rhyme containing irrelevant or inappropriate remarks which themselves form part of the vocabulary of rhetorical *descriptio* under attack. Such phrases and oaths as "A perilous man of dede" (809) and "Also moote I thee" (817), the use of a French oath "par ma fay" (820) to affect the chivalric manner and a reference to the morrow, "Er it be fully pryme of day" (825), when Thopas will humble the giant, are all part of "romance" jargon and the failing minstrel's art which belong in the category of rhetoric that Chaucer is mocking. The fact that Thopas beats a hasty and undignified retreat after his empty threats merely confirms the formulaic vacuity of such language in its present, satirical context. Another convention that is ridiculed is that of the romance propensity for descriptive or merely additive catalogues. In *Thopas* the
catalogues become stereotyped lists of accomplishments (736-741), of herbs and trees in the forest (760-765), of birds (766-771), and of the arming of Thopas (857-887), lists which in themselves do nothing to advance our hero's career, but contribute instead to the feeling of impatience which Harry Bailly finds himself unable to contain. The very components of two of these lists serve the satire. We have already observed that Thopas' accomplishments seem better suited to the pilgrim Miller and the pilgrim Yeoman and so reduce the almost negligible "romance" atmosphere to the level of the mundane. In the list of herbs and trees we find those with a practical and domestic application. Indeed, in the case of the nutmeg we are even told that it is good "to putte in ale" (763) or "to leye in cofre" (765), matters which are hardly the concern of the world of chivalry, but which, in the context of romance adventure, inevitably contribute to the deliberate undercutting of both the hero and his aimless quest.

These last two stories, the Wife's Tale and Thopas, show that at least one author was alive to the varieties and possibilities of a theme which earlier had afforded a rather narrow and specialized means of reinforcing cultural values. The quest in the Wife's Tale emerges as a means of transporting her own dilemma. In this respect it is the logical literary counterpart to her Prologue of dissatisfaction, for where her life has failed to produce connubial bliss, her story succeeds.
The quest in *Thopas*, by contrast, is form without meaning. It becomes a disembodied structure with no relation to society in general or to individual accomplishment in particular. It remains one of the few pieces of literature in Middle English which parodies itself by imitation. On the other hand, the relation of *Thopas* to the *persona* of Chaucer the narrator and to Harry Bailly the literary critic is something else, for it is clear that the worn-out situations and tired expressions of romance had about run their course or been beaten to death by incompetent minstrels, a situation directly alluded to by the Host's impatient remarks. If we are to talk in terms of the success or failure of a literary piece, then *Thopas* is to be accounted a success; not because it shows a skilful technique with a previously impressive structure, but because it emphasizes the possibilities afforded by that structure.

The fact that Chaucer successfully employed the quest theme as parody is not an argument for the extinction of the *motif* or for its degeneration as a literary device. It is given fresh life in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, especially in those parts dealing with the Holy Grail, and in Spenser's vast undertaking, *The Faerie Queene*, where it serves the serious business of sustaining a series of Christian allegories, expressed in romance terms, of the soul's entrapment by the forces of evil and its ultimate rescue by various knights. In the hands of Cervantes an extended quest is again the vehicle
for a lengthy parody of romance literature. Yet though Don Quixote's quests for adventure are undertaken for no real purpose, some of the characters in the story begin to behave as though illusion were reality and they themselves the victims of enchantment. There is an irony in this shift between the real and the imagined that is beyond Chaucer's treatment of the quest in Thopas. Quixote's adventures are the direct result of a mind swayed by too much reading in books of chivalry, yet when he has to deal with matters connected with daily existence he appears to be quite sound

His courtesy is a by-word and so is his generosity. His good sense, a little higher and finer than common sense, yet wholly within reason, though less obvious, is sure in all that does not touch Knight-Errantry.14

Cervantes may be suggesting that the practice of knighthood, though not necessarily its ideals, had become old-fashioned. Don Quixote is faced with scorn and ridicule at every turn so long as he maintains the illusion of his quest, or so long as illusion and reality are inseparable. Thopas is likewise the victim of illusion, or at least of a vision, which sends him flying off to find "An elf-queene" (790). He too is Quixotic in his slavish conformity to making life repeat literature

"Do come," he seyde, "my mynstrales, And geestours for to tellen tales, Anon in myn armynge, Of romances that been roiales, Of popes and of cardinales, And eek of love-lykynge," 845-50
yet he sees no difficulty in haling together stories of religious figures and courtly love. But while we may feel uneasy in laughing at Quixote since "Cervantes realizes that laughter cannot be whole-hearted when raised at the expense of a noble character," there is no discomfort in entertaining for Thopas the ridicule which an ignoble fool deserves and which also, Chaucer implies, the teller of this tale should receive. The gulf between illusion and reality, which when bridged is to haunt Don Quixote, does not affect Thopas whose illusions remain intact.
FOOTNOTES

1 Chaucer, Works, ed. Robinson, p. 167. All references to the text of Thopas will be to Robinson's edition.

2 Jessica Reed, The Element of Satire in Sir Thopas, Diss. (University of Washington, 1931), p. 46.


4 R.M. Jordan, "Chaucerian Romance?," a paper read to a Faculty Colloquium in the English Dept., University of British Columbia, October 17, 1973.


6 Manly interprets the tale as an attack on the Flemish burghers' pretensions to aristocracy Essays and Studies, 13 (1928), 52-73, while A.K. Moore, JEGP, 53 (1954), 532-45, sees in the story an illustration of the decadence into which fourteenth-century minstrelsy had fallen.

7 See, for example, Jill Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire (Cambridge, 1973).


A.C. Gibbs, in his edition, Middle English Romances (London, 1966), p. 36, feels that Chaucer's "choice of the tail-rhyme stanza, whose limitations are so cruelly exposed, may have been determined by no particular animus against it, but by the simple fact that it was the most popular medium for romance in the England of his day."

This is not necessarily the earliest parody. A.S. Cook points out that The Land of Cokaygne is found in a MS (Brit. Mus. Harl. 913) dated c. 1305. See A.S. Cook, ed., A Literary Middle English Reader (Boston, 1915), p. 368. A case has been made for regarding Cokaygne either as a burlesque of paradise legends or as a "poor folk's utopia." See Irene T. Howard, The Land of Cokaygne, Diss. (University of British Columbia, 1964), p. iii.


Ibid., p. 6.
Chapter 7

PIERS PLOWMAN: THE QUEST AS PILGRIMAGE

So far we have examined quests which appear in some romances and ballads. In each instance the quest was primarily defined in courtly, chivalric and external terms as the search for something attainable, at least within the confines of the conventions. That is, until the advent of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the list of selected tales, the object of each quest was something which corresponded with the level of reality on which each tale was operating. In the case of *Gawain*, as we have seen, another aspect, in the form of a simultaneously occurring interior quest, was added to the possibilities afforded by this theme. We should now address ourselves to the direction taken by this second, internal dimension of the quest, most notably in a work with a decidedly spiritual bias, namely *Piers Plowman*. It immediately becomes obvious that an examination of quests with a spiritual reference requires an expansion of the term as we suggested at the outset, from the rather restricted definition it has when applied to mediaeval romance. The notion of a knight, or group of knights, riding out to achieve some
exploit is not helpful to the meaning of the search made by Langland's Piers for example, nor will it help to explain completely the quests in which Perceval or Galahad or a host of Arthurian knights set off to achieve the Grail. Once we admit of the idea of the quest as an allegorical device, then it becomes necessary to incorporate the prospect of that device also embracing the pilgrimage of life and the search for earthly perfection in the hope of heavenly reward. In the version of the Grail quest in which Galahad is the hero, we are shown an earthly order whose serenity is disturbed by the impinging of a spiritual world. Courtly values prove inadequate when the quest for adventures for their own sake is replaced by a quest whose achievement means participation in a real Eucharist. Only the purest knights can hope to achieve the Grail, so for the first time some knights fail in their quest. Young knights, such as Perceval and Galahad, succeed where older, more experienced ones, such as Lancelot, fail. The certainties of earthly life are shattered and the earthly order returns rather uneasily to its former state.

In the romances the quest was always expressed in conscious and deliberate terms. For one reason or another it was incumbent upon a knight or hero to undertake a task which was clearly discernible. Orfeo is motivated in the forest by the sight of Heurodis and the deep sense of loss that he felt; the Wife of Bath's anonymous knight is moved
by the need to preserve his life, and so on. But such a direct and obvious causal relationship between the quester and that for which he searches is not always what we find in works whose chief extra-fictional concern is the spiritual enlighten­ment of earthly souls. As one critic points out in discussing the apparent lack of purpose of Langland's Dreamer

\[ \text{The physical picture may well be an image of search, but it is also an image of aimlessness and one which becomes associated increasingly with despair.}^2 \]

This is a way of saying that in Piers Plowman at least, in which searches are carried out on a number of levels by a number of figures, that the quest admits of failures, changes of direction and uncertainties. None of the figures engaged in various quests in the poem — the Dreamer, Will, Piers and Conscience — in fact arrives at the object of his search, and at the end there is no end. There is instead a new beginning.

Some Literary and Patristic Models

Near the end of the Canterbury Tales Chaucer's Parson, disclaiming any partiality for alliterative poetry and declaring his unwillingness to 'glose' or indulge in lying and specious tales,\(^3\) says that he will tell a tale in prose
"To knytte up all this feeste, and make an ende." He then invokes Jesus' aid and likens this earthly life to a pilgrimage:

And Jhesu, for his grace, wit me sende
To shewe yow the wey, in this viage,
Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimag
That highte Jerusalem celestial.

"This viage" refers both to the immediate context of the fictional pilgrimage to Canterbury, and to life's journey, in an allegorical sense, as a pilgrim's road. In opening his Tale he quotes Jeremiah VI:16:

Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of olde pathes (that is to seyn, of olde sentences) which is the goode wey, and walketh in that wey, and ye shal fynde refresshynge for youre soules, etc.

and again talks about life as a journey to Jerusalem (X 79).

The notion of life as a pilgrimage is a commonplace in the Middle Ages, certainly in many works with avowedly didactic or religious intentions. The metaphor is extensively developed by Walter Hilton in *The Scale of Perfection*:

... I shall say thee as me thinketh by the grace of our Lord Jhesu, the shortest and the readiest help that I know in this working. And how that shall be, I shall tell thee by example of a good pilgrim, upon this wise.

There was a man that would go to Jerusalem....

For Hilton Jerusalem meant the "sight of peace, and betokeneth contemplation in perfect love of God." His pilgrim is to
ignore the temptations of the world and is to proceed by way of reformed faith, penance, and meekness. The guide to Jerusalem, he explains, is Jesus, "for He shall lead thee in the right way to Jerusalem that is the sight of peace in contemplation." 

More than a century before Hilton we find the image of the good man expressed as a pilgrim in *Ancrene Riwle*. One wonders if Langland's triad of Dowel, Dobet and Dobest may not have sprung from some modification of the active, contemplative and submissive lives which are propounded as the pilgrim, the dead and the voluntarily crucified


The author explains what he means by pilgrims. Of "true" pilgrims in life's way he says

... for oðre pilegrims gan wið muche swinc to sechen ane santæs banæs. As sein lames oðer sein Giles. Ah þæ pilegrims þ gan toward heeuene ho gan to beon isanted þ to vinden godd self. ...

The message, to stay at home rather than running off to distant shrines, is re-iterated at several points in Langland's poem by such figures as Reason (C.V. 122-3) and Anima (B.XV. 177-8). It is even dramatised in the figure of the ignorant
pilgrim, covered with the souvenirs of his visits to a multitude of shrines, yet who is unable to direct the aimless throng to St. Truth (B.V. 522-43). It would be unwise to push the analogy between Langland's triad of lives and those in the Ancrene Riwle too far. The author of the rule for anchoresses suggests that their life exceeds even that of pilgrims and contemplatives

Itus lo rihte ancres narrn nawt ane pilegrims ne set nawt ane deade. Ah arn of þose briddle for al hore blisse is for to beon honget sariliche þ scho-mfulliche wiþ iesu on his rode.

The notion of making a virtue out of suffering is not implicit in Piers Plowman; for Langland, Dobest consists in a life of episcopal duties which are better than good works or contemplation by themselves

Dobest is aboue bothe and bereth a bisschopes crosse, I hoked on that one ende to halie men from helle. B VII 94-95

For Langland, the cure for the world's ills is to be found in this world and not in retreat from it.

Two more allusions to man as pilgrim are worth noting since they occur in works which were in circulation in Langland's day, and since they also illustrate the general use made of this device. The first may be found in the homiletic poem The Pricke of Conscience, attributed to Richard Rolle of Hampole. The author discusses the transitory nature of man's
life on earth and quotes Psalm XXXIX:12 in Latin, with his gloss in English

"Be noght stille Loverd" says he,
"For I am a commelyng towards þe,
And pilgrym, als alle my faders was." 1384-86

and a few lines later

Pis world es þe way and passage,
Purgh whilk lyes our pilgrimage. 1394-95

There is a remarkable similarity between such lines and those in Ancrene Riwle. In particular, a passage in this last which quotes the Vulgate text of Hebrews xiii: 14 is preceded by a reference to the anonymous "apostle," author of Hebrews

... ho beon brin as pilegrims ðe wiþ
god liflade (gan) toward þe riche of
ehuene. And seien wiþ þe apostle. Non
habemus hic manentem ciuitatem sed
futuram inquirimus. 15

In Rolle we find the same Latin text preceded by a similar remark as to its author

For na þyker duellyng fynde we here,
Als þe apostel says on þis manere, 1368-9

followed by an English gloss which includes a reference to pilgrims

For we duelle here als aliens,
To travaile, here in þe way, our lyms,
Til our countré-warde, als pilgryms. 1377-9

A second contemporary literary example of the pilgrim motif is to be found in Alexander and Dindimus, 16 otherwise known as
"Alexander B." This work is an alliterative poem consisting largely of letters passing between the conqueror, Alexander, and Dindimus the pagan king of the Brahmans. The curious thing is that the Christian point of view is ascribed to the less "civilized" of the two kings, for in one of the letters, from Dindimus to Alexander, we find

For erpe is nouht our eritage pat euere schal laste,  
Ne we ne ben nouht ibor to abide þer-inne.  
But we ben pore pilgerfryers put in þis worde,  
For we by destene of dome schulle dep þolie;  
Þanne schulle we hie to þe hous þat hie is in bllysse,  
& karre to oure kinus nie to kenne of oure fare. 

981–86

However, as Skeat points out in his Introduction to the text, we are encountering the popular mediaeval contrast between the active life and the contemplative life.

The foregoing examples, culled from works both antecedent to and contemporary with Langland's *Piers Plowman*, are by no means exhaustive, nor do they include the numerous occasions, in patristic and contemplative writings, on which the metaphor of pilgrimage is invoked. The theme finds a place, for example, in Dame Julian's *Revelations* when she elaborates the ways in which Christ shows himself to man

And in another manner He showed Himself in earth thus as it were in pilgrimage; that is to say, He is here with us, leading us, and shall be till when He hath brought us all to His bliss in heaven.
In the twelfth century St. Bernard alluded to the theme in his "Sermo VII in Quadragesima" which provided the text for the sixth book of the *Ancrene Riwle* on penance. Earlier, in the late sixth century, Gregory the Great refers to earthly life as a form of exile to be overcome in our attempt to be re-united with God.

\[
\text{Peregrinus itaque est populus, omnium numerus electorum, qui hanc vitam quoddam sibi exsilium deputantes, ad supernam patriam tota cordis intentione suspirant.} \ldots \]

Thus Langland's adoption of the device of pilgrimage is clearly the continuation of a literary motif which owes much to patristic conventions. Yet we may also consider *Piers Plowman* as one among several works of this type which was to continue through Lydgate's translation of De Guileville's *Pelerinage de la Vie Humaine* through Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* down to the present century with C.S. Lewis' *Pilgrim's Regress* and Shaw's *The Black Girl in Search of God*.

**A Jerusalem of the Mind**

We suggested, in the chapter on *Thopas*, that a degree of sophistication had been achieved by late fourteenth-century audiences which was not easily satisfied by the re-telling of romances in the old style, and that Chaucer, perhaps sensing this, made fun of the poorer kinds of romance imitation while
showing himself quite competent at producing romances of a more traditional nature. We suggested further that the mere existence of the quest in parody did not mean the end of the usefulness of the theme, but that it was flexible enough to be made to enhance another type of literature, and, in the case of *Don Quixote*, to become the means of exploring the workings of a mind deranged by romantic saturation. In *Gawain* we were able to observe the simultaneous occurrence of an exterior and interior evolution in the hero's progress towards understanding, though the degree of illumination in Gawain's mind is debatable. His behaviour at the Green Chapel and upon returning to Camelot suggests that his lesson in humility had not been fully understood. Nevertheless, *Gawain* stands at the nexus of the process we have been discussing, that of the shift from the absolute and outward quest whose success is assumed and whose values are unambiguous, to that in which failure and irresolution are countenanced. However, it should be recalled that the failure of cherished knights such as Lancelot, Gawain and Perceval in the anonymous French *Queste* anticipates Gawain's failure in the fourteenth-century alliterative poem. Success is only gained by the unearthly figure of Galahad and his nearly perfect companions. In Chrétien's *Conte del Graal* the Grail hero, Perceval, is placed in the rôle of God's Fool, an idea which casts severe doubts upon the moral adequacy of the Arthurian chivalric system.
Perceval discovers that neither a great reputation nor reliance upon chivalric ideals is sufficient for success in the quest. As Fowler observes, the figure of Perceval as God's Fool retained its popularity in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Similarly, in *Piers Plowman* the B-poet casts the blundering Dreamer in the rôle of a fool who is rebuked and made to learn that his opinions are wrong.

*Piers Plowman* seems to imply an end to this shift, in the fourteenth century at least, for it represents a complete reversal of those tales with a public, heroic figure who stands above his fellows and who attains his goal in the quest, after suitable difficulties. The public result of the earlier quests was the attainment of social equilibrium. A private and personal illumination was not proposed. In *Horn* or *Havelok*, *Orfeo* or *Floris* we are offered public, secular success stories. In *Piers*, from a public point of view, the various quests are synonymous with failure. The hero is no longer the superior and aristocratic figure of a knight riding out to do battle, and the only really chivalric incidents in the entire poem are the scenes in which Christ jousts with the Devil at Jerusalem in Piers' armour, "*humana natura*" (B XVIII 23). Now the "hero" is mankind in search of salvation in a number of forms and at various levels of experience from aimless Will, with all that his name implies, to Piers himself, who represents a multitude of symbols from
the realistic, humble ploughman to the embodiment of Christ's virtues. Furthermore, while the equilibrium of society is still a central issue in *Piers*, it is an equilibrium threatened not by "Sarazin" marauders, external and public enemies, nor by figures from the world of magic, but by the erosion of private morality in the advancing tide of human greed.

Finally, Langland's poem offers no linear progression through time of the symmetrical kind we find in *Gawain* or *Orfeo*. There is instead an air of urgency about the whole work which implies the immediate need for reform in the here-and-now. The whole concept of time in *Piers* is distinctly blurred, partly the result of the work's consisting of a series of visions seen in dreams, and perhaps partly because the poem is not concerned with plot in the way that most narratives are. Any attempt to track the course of the narrative, or to express the passage of events through time, is doomed to frustration, since the very nature of the several quests in *Piers* is cyclical, incomplete and digressive.

But "failure" is a relative term when applied to those characters in *Piers* who search for salvation. From a private point of view the quest has become an interior affair and social failure in the poem may account for the changed protagonist. The man who will lead people to God will not necessarily be a king or a social superior. In one of the more cohesive elaborations of the pilgrimage metaphor the hero
is a ploughman. But the message he brings by way of instructions about the road to Truth is a personal one; salvation is possible, it is available now and it consists in obedience not only to the letter of the ten commandments, but to their spirit. The quest is entirely personal, though if practised by society at large it will have far-reaching and beneficial public consequences. By way of contrast, it should be observed that in Homer's *Odyssey* the hero's destiny is out of his hands. Odysseus wanders about for a number of years at the whim of the gods. He has to exercise his wit as well as his physical endurance to make his way to Ithaca. The philosophical implications of all this are that the kind of salvation proposed in Homer is one which relates to exterior issues and which reflects both the notion of destiny beyond human control and the idea of a public order dependent on the survival of a single individual. If *Piers Plowman* "means" anything, it is first and foremost that each individual in society has the means, if only he would use them, to secure his own destiny and to find his own salvation.

Though there are a number of figures engaged in various searches in *Piers*, from the aimless Dreamer to the frustrated figure of Conscience in the final lines, we shall concentrate, for the moment, on the events in the second vision (B V, VI, VII) which elaborate the theme of pilgrimage so confidently undertaken by Piers. Collectively these episodes
represent a microcosm of the structure of the entire poem, as they embody the idea of a search (for St. Truth). More important, the process in which successive images become consumed also reflects the nature of the progress of the whole work with its efforts directed towards a scattering of unity. A large number of studies of the poem have been devoted to demonstrating its "unity" by pointing to the literal versus allegorical structure, to the figure of the finite Dreamer and the infinite Piers or the balance between the secular life of the Visio and the degrees of holiness represented in the Vitae. The critical obsession with unity which has occupied so many scholars for so long is misleading. Worse, these exercises are often another kind of "template criticism" and attempt to impose order, whether structural, thematic or doctrinal, on a work which is essentially contrapuntal, with its repeated running from a truth revealed at the outset. The answers provided by Holy Church at the beginning, and frequently repeated later by other figures, are consistently ignored, a process which would indicate that Langland was trying to recreate the act of arriving at some simple understanding from a variety of directions and ways of learning. The result of this contrived and apparently chaotic process is to force the reader's engagement, to anticipate the extreme difficulty of comprehending a most basic spiritual truth, and to
re-create in a realistic manner the experience of learning and the anguish that this often entails.

John Burrow, writing about the action of these scenes in the *Visio* suggested that the process was "as if the images which carry Langland along are consumed in the process." That is, as our awareness of a more intense recognition of higher truth is advanced, the images which facilitate the process — pilgrimage, ploughing and prayers — are themselves subsumed in an ascending allegory. The reader is engaged in the very process through which he is guided to deeper understanding. The whole poem, and its parts, is a kind of strategy in which the reader becomes inextricably caught up in ambiguities and in questions about the nature of his experience. He leaves the work with an insight that is nowhere made explicit in the text itself. To read and experience *Piers* is to undergo a process of development of a kind not known to the audience of *Horn* or *Havelok*.

Progress through these *passus* (B.V, VI, VII) follows four stages in the penitential process — sermon, confession, pilgrimage and pardon. In B.V Reason preaches a sermon to explain the cause of the pestilence and storms on the land, "He preued that thise pestilences were for pure synne" (13). The sermon serves as a sort of warning of the last judgement which will overtake man unless he mends his ways, "That dedly synne at domesday shal fordon hem alle" (20). Reason singles
out particular elements in society, both secular and religious — labourers who won't work, priests who don't set good examples, monks who ride about the countryside (like Chaucer's Monk), and pilgrims who run off to shrines to "seke seynte Iames and seintes of Rome" (57) instead of seeking St. Truth at home. The sermon provokes a string of confessions, lively personification allegories of the Seven Deadly Sins. There follows the resolution by a crowd of people to go on pilgrimage after their confessions to Repentance

A thousand of men tho thrungen togyderes;  
Criede vpward to Cryst and to his clene moder  
To have grace to go with hem Treuthe to seke.  
(517-19)

The crowd mills about aimlessly like the wandering 'I,' the poet-Dreamer, of the opening vision. The grotesque figure of a pilgrim is met. Like a seasoned tourist he has been everywhere and has souvenirs to prove it. But he has travelled and seen nothing

'Knowestow ou3te a corseint that men call Treuthe?  
Coudestow au3te wissen vs the weye where that wy dwelleth?  
'Nay, so me god helpe!' seide the gome thanne,  
'I seygh neuere palmere with pike ne with scrippe  
Axen after hym er til now in this place.'  
(539-43)

Then Piers comes on the scene to explain that he will lead the crowd. He outlines the route in allegorical terms, much like the road taken by Bunyan's pilgrim. But no pilgrimage
takes place, at least not a literal one. The goal, Truth, is implicit in Piers' instructions and need not be sought elsewhere than in oneself.

And if Grace graunte the to go in this wise,
Thow shalt see in thi-selue Treuthe sitte in thine herte,
In a cheyne of charite as thow a childe wore,
To suffre hym and segge nou3te a3ein thi sires wille. (614-17)

In his first appearance Piers is already a shape-shifting figure who represents not only the ploughman, but also other members of the labouring class such as tailors, tinkers and weavers. In the C-text the specific crafts are subsumed in the phrase "alle kynne craftes" (C VIII 190) which are "profitable to the plouh" (191), a technique which raises the image of ploughing from the particular sense to a more general and allegorical one comprehending active work. Piers' rejection of payment by the crowd he is to lead is a further step up. By implication, simony is also rejected

'I nolde fange a ferthyng e for seynt Thomas shryn e!
Treuthe wolde love me the lasse a longe tyme thereafter! (B V 566-67)

In the opening vision we are warned of parsons and priests who desert their flocks and run to London to "syngen there for symonye for siluer is swete" (B Prol. 86).

In B VI we can see the enactment of doctrine outlined earlier as the way to Truth. The way consisted largely of the
practice of the ten commandments, but accompanied by Meekness, Conscience, and above all, Grace. But the pilgrimage is put off, in a literal sense, to be resumed in an allegorical sense. The allegorical quest for Truth is preceded by lesser quests of a more external and specific nature and, like the changing quest in B V-VII, they remain largely unresolved. This suggests that ambiguity is characteristic of the whole poem for the technique of an ever-renewed search is one which distinguishes the *Vita* section of the poem and is even continued in Conscience's departure to seek Piers at the end. The first example of irresolution comes when a band of rats and mice plan to bell a cat (B Prol.). None of the rats or mice is sufficiently foolhardy to perform the act. The advice of one mouse, characterized more by common sense than by rash courage, is to leave the cat alone "For better is a litel losse than a longe sorwe" (B Prol. 195). This incident follows (in the B text at least) the confused shouting of the commons against the king

And thanne gan alle the comune crye in vers of latin,
To the kynges conseille construe ho-so wolde--
'Precepta Regis sunt nobis vincula legis.'

This scene occurs in a passage that is concerned with the three estates; for Langland the third estate is "kynde wytte" or natural understanding and common sense, which arbitrates the
rule of kings and the obedience of the commons. The failure of the mice to bell the cat is an example of the triumph of common sense and not evidence of cowardice.

As a proto-quest however, this episode is informed by the same process seen in the later quest for Truth where the quest is changed and suspended successively before disappearing altogether. A similar irresolution takes place in the first Lady Meed passus (B II) where it is felt necessary to bring Meed to court so that a decision may be made regarding her projected marriage with Fals. Her arrival is preceded by the scattering of those who surround her — Falsenesse, Gyle and Lyer. In the two sections which follow (B III and IV) there is a discussion, by Conscience and Reason, on the meaning of "meed." No marriage takes place, Reason prevails over the King and Meed is seen no more as a personification of bribery. What began as a journey to judgement concludes with the flight of intransigent elements and the replacement of the quest by philosophical and pragmatic debate.

Throughout the vitae Will's repeated efforts to find Dowel, Dobet and Dobest leave him dissatisfied and promote his further enquiries. Each sortie not only ends in failure to find absolute answers, but also represents yet another attempt to come to terms with knowledge he already possesses. His repeated searches lend the poem a structure which does not proceed in a straight line from ignorance to
understanding, but climbs by sudden leaps and some slower ascents. Furthermore, the result of this type of progress is that the object sought is constantly held before the reader's eyes. Will's struggle and his continued naiveté forces us to grapple with the actual procedure of coming to an understanding with difficult moral and abstract problems in two quite distinct ways, first by the Dreamer's repeated disclaimers that he has not understood the meaning of his dreams in his guise of the frenzied searcher, and secondly by his insistent and often naïve questions about the location and nature of the vitae. But where the personifications of moral qualities in the Visio are framed in social and external terms, in the Vita these qualities emerge as aspects of Will's inner search for Truth, as personifications of his mental qualities informed by a slowly evolving spiritual awareness.

In the sixth passus the ploughing of the half-acre, by association the world, consists not so much in work itself, but in the kind of work that Piers asks the people to perform. Ladies are to sew chasubles for the clergy and to honour the Church, the allegorical significance of which may be to praise God by offering the work of one's hands to create beauty. Wives and widows are to spin wool and flax to clothe the poor. Piers himself will feed the hungry and urges everyone to help sustain those "that wynneth 3oure fode" (B VI 21). Thus the ploughing of the half-acre is itself displaced by the idea
of charitable works in the personifications of active virtue. The work is the way (but not the only way) to the truth that "sitte in thine herte." Though there is not a one-to-one relationship between the way to truth proposed earlier and the activities of the ploughing passus, there are similarities and echoes which reinforce Piers' message while transforming the images. Where Mercy had been the moat around Truth's court (B V 595), it becomes the tax assessor

'Loke 3e tene no tenaunt but Treuthe wil assent.
And though 3e mowe amercy hem late Mercy be taxoure,
And Mekenesse thi mayster maugre Medes chekes.'

(B VI 39-41)

Meekness, the first step on Piers' road to St. Truth, becomes the "mayster," so that justice is tempered with humility and mercy. Money is not permitted to subvert this end.

The work of society in the ploughing scenes represents the ordering of a formerly disorganized world, an order which embraces also the punishment by Hunger of those members of society who provoke disorder — the wasters and fake cripples who will not work. This is not a utopian tableau however, nor does Langland wish us to feel that the practice of the good life is in itself sufficient to salvation. Hence the pardon scene which occupies the next passus, and Piers' de-emphasis of the active life in favour of less worldly concerns, takes the process of deepening perception a stage further
"I shal cessen of my sowyng," quod Pieres 'and swynk nouȝt so harde, Ne about my bely-joye so bisi be namore! Of preyers and of penaunce my plow shal ben herafter, And wepen whan I shulde slepe though whete-bred me faille.'

( B VII 117-20)

This does not represent a denial of action, but a change in the mode of doing, for prayers and penance are still tied to the metaphor of the plough and the commitment to action. As R.W. Frank points out, there is no hint in Piers' speech of the contemplative's withdrawal from life and his "hope to see the face of God." It is not enough to hear the doctrine represented by Piers' "guide" to Truth nor to go through the motions of the good life which the ploughing episode represents. Something more is required, something that is anticipated by the pardon scene which precipitates this final movement of the episodic pilgrimage in the Visio.

The pardon scene is prepared for largely by Piers' bequest in the ploughing passus. His soul is disposed of to him "that best hath yserued it" (B VI 89). The C-text is more specific — to him "that alle soules made" (C IX 96). It will be defended from the fiends until the day of judgement

'Til I come to his acountes as my credo me telleth, To haue a relees and a remissioun on that rental I leue,'

(B VI 91-92)
a statement which implies the sort of pardon only God can give. The Church will have his body and his wife will have "that I wan with treuthe, and nomore" (B VI 98). Piers has quit his earthly debts and with the residue of his wealth will serve Truth to the end of his days

'And ben his pilgryme atte plow for pore mennes sake. 
My plow-fote shoal be my pyk-staf and picche atwo the rotes, 
And helpe my culter to kerue and clense the forwes.' (B VI 104-06)

But the pardon scene is prepared for in a second way. The sixth passus concludes on a note of rising invective against the disorder which comes from overpaid labourers as a result of a labour shortage after the plagues. While Hunger was in command there was no problem with recalcitrant workers. But now beggars will only accept wheat bread and

Laboreres that haue no lande to lyue on but her handes, 
Deyned nou3t to dyne a-day ny3t-olde wortes. 
May no peny-ale hem paye ne no pece of bakoun, 
But if it be fresch flesch other fische fryed other bake, 
And that chaude or plus chaud for chillyng of her mawe. 

(B VI 309-13)

At the end there are prophetic warnings, of an astrological nature, on the approaching dearth, warnings which may or may not have been meant as a parody of popular astrology, but which nevertheless pave the way for Truth's pardon. Thus the sixth passus proceeds from the exampla of work in both positive
and negative senses. On the one hand the active life deserves the reward of heavenly salvation. On the other hand there is an urgent need for absolution brought about by the denial of work. There is a parallel advancement through the juxtaposition of images of merit and images of unfruitful behaviour. The honest ploughman has nothing to fear, the wastrels, everything. The Latin text of Truth's pardon in B VII effectively summarises the dichotomy proposed in B VI

\[\text{Et qui bona egerunt; ibunt in vitam eternam;}\]
\[\text{Qui vero mala, in ignem eternum.} \quad (B \text{ VII 111})\]

Burrow describes the poem's movement as the "substitution" of one image for another as Langland advances "serpent-like, from something which is, or may be, no more than an externality towards a more inward statement of this theme." It is a process that has puzzled those critics for whom the frequent breakdown of a consistent literal allegory is a problem. Burrow notes that "this mode of movement . . . runs counter to the demands of the 'sustained literal level'; but it seems essential to the progress of Langland's poem." Perhaps we can advance the argument by recognizing that the poem is itself a process of substitution, in its parts and in its entirety. The final stage of this self-consuming process comes with the Dreamer's return to wakefulness. In terms of time it is near the end of one day of dreaming which began on a May morning and ends on the Malvern hills with "the sonne
in the south" (B VII 140). The ninety degree error need not concern us, and may even represent the waking sleeper's disorientation. The poet-dreamer recapitulates the last events of his dream — the pardon and the priest's rejection of it. This is followed by the almost casual rejection of the business of putting one's trust in "songewarie," or the interpretation of dreams

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Ac I have no sauoure in songewarie for I se it ofte faille;} \\
&\text{Catoun and canonistres conseilleth vs to leue} \\
&\text{To sette sadnesse in songewarie for, somnienia ne cures.}
\end{align*}
\]

(B VIII 148-50)

The reader is thrown back on his own resources for an explanation of the dreams. Langland somewhat modifies his rejection of dreams by pointing out two examples of Biblical dreams that did come true. But by far the larger part of what remains of the seventh passus is devoted to pardons, both papal and divine. The message of doing well through good works is reiterated, so that the reader is given some guidance as to the meaning of the vision, but in a form which depends on his having taken the same road as the Dreamer. The message is only, after all, a re-statement of Holy Church's assertion of the same thing in the first vision

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Who-so is trewe of his tonge and telleth none other,} \\
&\text{And doth the werkis ther-with and wilneth no man ille,} \\
&\text{He is a god bi the gospel agrounde and aloft,} \\
&\text{And ylike to owre lorde bi seynte Lukes wordes.}
\end{align*}
\]

(B I 88-91)
The account just offered of the process taking place in the second vision in its essentials repeats the process observed in *Gawain*. There the reader begins with a position he assumes to be irrefutable and ends with a state of opinion diametrically opposite. Along the way his progress has been gradual, moving step by step, both in terms of perspective and disposition, away from the side of the narrator towards a reliance on his own insight and evaluation of the facts. Here the reader is asked, in a single vision, to move from a chaotic, anarchic picture of society at large into a pilgrimage towards order which finds as its most meaningful expression the collective engagement in labour and production. Piers insists on ploughing the half-acre before beginning the quest for Truth.

There are several obscure properties of this episode which need exposure. The first is that Pier's quest consists in finding or locating the proper state in which to begin a quest. What was assumed in the early quest romances, that is, the beginning of the quest and how it should be undertaken, has now fallen victim to the self-consciousness of the later works. Whereas in *Gawain* we saw the debate form around the nature of the hero and the doubt of his success, we now observe the issues move backwards to the very impetus of the device itself. However, the properties of the quest as a device are still with us: the need for social equilibrium,
a commitment in human time, and the possibilities of significant human action. In *Piers Plowman* the confident quest of the earlier hero finds itself transformed into an intense search for salvation.

Additional points about this episode directly concern its place in the larger narrative and in the reader's progress through the work as a whole. Structurally speaking we cannot fail to notice that similar points are made in each of the visions. Specifically, we are given what must be considered the "answer" to the Dreamer's quandary in the very first vision, when Holy Church teaches that faith without works is dead and that the way to Heaven lies through love. In *Gawain*'s terms this insight would have been left until last, as a logical culmination of a series of steps and smaller insights. Here, however, Langland brilliantly demonstrates his protagonist's mental state, that of being temporarily lost. The Dreamer undergoes ten perplexing visions, as if lost and caught in a vicious circle. From the audience's point of view the author offers a superior perspective on the action as a result of our knowing the solution to the Dreamer's predicament from the first vision. This superior perspective came in *Gawain* only after the accumulation of material began to demonstrate the narrator's naiveté. But our easy victory is just the bait that hooks us into a deceptive progression towards exactly the same predicament experienced by the Dreamer. We realise,
only after some time, that the real issue for the Dreamer and our previously smug selves, is not what is the Truth, but by which of our faculties can this truth be genuinely known. Consequently, our early success turns into failure and we go with the Dreamer on his search through a variety of cognitive possibilities and together we understand, finally, that all of our faculties must join in the knowledge of this truth, aided by Grace.

Whereas the end of a linear progression provides an answer, in terms of knowledge, to a pre-ordained question, in *Piers* a form of answer is provided at the outset and the question becomes the motivation for the quest. Without fully experiencing the conditions that lead to the question, no appreciation of an answer is possible. Thus, having seen *Piers* in the light of this search for the question, we must re-evaluate those apparently repetitive episodes and see them in terms of the experience of being lost, of having knowledge but not wisdom. The ball is placed firmly in the reader's court where

Nothing is ever wholly resolved, for every attempt at resolution raises new conflicts and new questions. That is why critics have described the work as 'cumulative' or as being disposed in 'ever-widening' ripples.32

**Spiritual Consummation**

At the risk of a rather long analysis of the work, it seems necessary to explore that part of the poem, known as
the *Vita*, which develops, more extensively, the private and spiritual life. Our object will be to chart the Dreamer's progress in his continuing quest. As Vasta points out, the interior nature of the poem is more apparent in the *Vita* than it was in the *Visio*, though the *Visio* uses the field full of folk, the court and Piers' half-acre, as allegorical vehicles "to dramatize the condition of the soul and the changes that take place in it." It should be noted too that the personifications of moral, or immoral, qualities in the *Visio* are expressed in largely social terms. The consequences of such activities as the rat and mouse congregation, the Lady Meed episode and the whole ploughing and pilgrimage sequence, are largely public and have to do with the conduct of society at large. But the subject of the *Vita* much more closely concerns the individual soul and its personal struggle to come to an understanding of Penance, the Trinity, and the Atonement. It culminates, not surprisingly, in a vision of Christ who jousts with Satan on the day of judgement to liberate the souls of the righteous from the torments of hell. The *Vita* then is much more emphatically Christian, and far from being a haphazard and aimless search, illustrates a quite logical and deliberate progress of the soul's search for truth through a series of visions which gradually approach a deeper understanding of the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption.
For Vasta the logic of the *Vita* is determined by the character of the Dreamer

> Will's presence alone holds this poem together. The quest for salvation is his personal quest, or rather that of the individual soul, whom Will represents. The series of imaginative 'settings' serves to externalize and dramatize the interior changes in Will, and what is discussed in successive visions arises from the problems Will faces in each stage of his spiritual transmutation.34

And, as we have already seen, Langland casts his questing Dreamer in the guise of a fool.

The search for Dowel, which Will undertakes, begins with his meeting with two friars (B VIII 8 ff). Will argues that friars travel about a great deal and meet many people, so if anybody should know where to find Dowel, then they should. He beseeches them "par charitee" to direct him to Dowel. Langland here indulges one of two ironical puns in this *passus*, since charity, or Christ, eventually emerges as the object of the Dreamer's search. Will is unable to comprehend the sophistry of the friars' parable, and resolves instead to learn by living and looking. One friar bids him farewell with the conventional salute "'I bikenne the Cryst' quod he 'that on the cross deyde'" (B VIII 59). Here is the second note of irony, for, as we have suggested, Christ becomes the goal of the Dreamer's quest. When he falls asleep the Dreamer meets Thought, the first of several intellectual faculties through which he learns various interpretations of the three
vitae, none of which is particularly helpful, but all of which represent as much truth as he is capable of comprehending at that particular moment. The search for Dowel largely resolves itself into an intellectual exploration. Thought, Witte, Study, and Ymagynatyt are all personifications of Will's mental processes. They lead him to understand that some of his judgements have been hasty. More important, Will begins to see that the intellectual faculties can only provide intellectual answers to the questions he poses. One of the barriers to the Dreamer's progress is his belief that Dowel may be found in this world. Thought teaches that the three vitae are the active, contemplative and mixed lives, but this does not satisfy the Dreamer

I thonked Thou3t tho that he me thus tau3te;
'Ac 3ete sauoureth me nou3t thi segyng I coueite
to lerne
How Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest don amongst the peple.' (B VIII 107-9)

Witte, on the other hand, preaches that the three vitae are modes of human conduct (B IX 199-206) which concern our life in this world. In essence these arguments represent one of the paradoxes of the poem. Will searches for truth in the world of human affairs, yet the answer he seeks is eventually found in a spiritual framework. But those lessons have to be applied to human conduct. Hence the search for truth, which becomes a search for Piers who embodies Christ's great mercy,
has to proceed from an understanding of the here-and-now through a spiritual gateway, to lessons which can, in turn, be applied to human and earthly situations.

In the tenth *passus* Dame Study, Witte's wife, roundly attacks Witte's arguments "'noli mittere, man margerye-perlis/ Amanges hogges. . .'" (B X 9-10). She goes on to make a general excursus on the hyposcrisy of the religious who "carpen of god faste,/And haue hym moche in the mouthe ac mene men in herte" (B X 69-70). Her outburst silences the confused Witte, who is still able to indicate to the Dreamer that he should ask Dame Study what he wants to know. The Dreamer has evidently progressed, for he has acquired meekness

'For thi mekenesse, man,' quod she 'and for thi mylde speche,
I shalI kenne the to my cosyn that Clergye is hofen.' (B X 147-8)

Dame Study directs Will to Clergy along an allegorical path of sobriety and endurance. But because he searches for answers without the true spirit of charity, or without grace, the Dreamer fails to grasp the true spirit of Study and Clergy. He takes them all too literally and makes an obsession of their polemics against a corrupt clergy. As Goodridge observes, "The story of his progress is partly one of his becoming immunized against these obsessions which hinder his faith. . . "

By the time the Dreamer meets Ymagynatyf, who personifies his own power of imagination, he has been soundly berated by Reason
The dreamer awakes from a dream within a dream, thinking that he knows what Dowel is, but Ymagynatyf also rebukes him for his meddling and misunderstanding of the lessons of Reason and Clergy, a misunderstanding brought about by "Pruide now and presumcioun."

Ymagynatyf not only explains the true value of learning and wisdom but shows the Dreamer where his reasoning was at fault.

By the time Ymagynatyf has finished making the Dreamer aware of his presumption and slight understanding, the Dreamer acquires, with shame, a knowledge of his shortcomings. He is now ready to abandon the intellectual path in favour of the spiritual pilgrimage which he undertakes with Conscience (B XIII).

The next two passus (B XIII and B XIV) mark a turning point in the Dreamer's quest from his reliance on the intellect to his growing awareness of the spiritual faculties. When he next falls asleep Conscience appears to him, a figure
who has been absent from the poem since the fourth *passus* of the *Visio*. Mediaeval theologians differentiated two aspects of conscience, namely conscience (proper) and synderesis. The former term implied the sense of practical reason endowed with special principles which enabled the individual to act morally. Synderesis meant the permanent inborn disposition of the mind to think general rules of moral conduct from which the individual could reason in directing his moral activities. In the thirteenth century the term synderesis was interpreted either as a disposition of the will or of the intellect.  

Langland appears to have understood both the practical and spiritual aspects of conscience, for in his treatment of this abstraction he demonstrates a shift from the outer world to the inner spirit. This is characteristic also, as we have seen, of his treatment of the pilgrimage metaphor and in fact of the whole poem's movement towards salvation. In the narrative Conscience serves a multiple function

*He 'monitors' the action. He directs the Dreamer's (and the reader's) attention to important features of the allegory. He is a guide on the pilgrimage through time which is an implicit feature of the poem's progression.*

Conscience now invites the Dreamer to accompany him home to dine with Clergy and a learned theologian, a friar, as it happens (B XIII 23-26). Patience is also present "in pylgrimes clothes." Will is made to sit next to Patience at
a side-table, and is given the sour loaf of penitence while the learned doctor gorges himself on fine food and drink. It is a measure of Will's progress that though he becomes outraged at this hypocritical friar, he is persuaded by Patience "to be stille" (B XIII 85). He is slowly acquiring those faculties which are no longer merely projections of his own nature, but "real graces given to him by God." After some opinions on the three vitæ are exchanged, Conscience resolves to depart as a pilgrim with Patience, "til I haue proved more" (B XIII 182). We must assume that the Dreamer makes up one of the company of pilgrims who encounter Haukyn, or Activa-vita, for, as Conscience comments on the soiled state of Haukyn's clothes, the Dreamer describes what he sees (B XIII 319-20). And what he sees is the concentration of the seven deadly sins in one individual, a representative of the common people. Whereas earlier the deadly sins had been treated separately in a series of confessions, now they come together in the "amiable but fallible representative of the commons." Haukyn's importance to the Dreamer's quest resides in his representation of the need for repentance. On the level of the allegory Haukyn personifies "a whole manner of life," that of the activities of the world which occupy the Visio. The pattern of deadly sins followed by the need to repent is repeated in Haukyn's confession and the subsequent sermons he hears from Conscience and Patience. Haukyn's appearance takes place after the Dreamer has turned away from the intellectual pursuit
of truth to embrace the teachings of his spiritual mentors. Thus his confession and recognition of the inadequacy of the active life serves as an example, to the Dreamer, of the need for contrition, confession and satisfaction. It is this penitential process which will cleanse Haukyn's coat of the sins with which he is stained. And so Haukyn's story, culminating both in the need and desire for repentance, carries the Dreamer further forward on his road, since "repentance, when it is complete, involves the desire to seek for God and the things which are His."^43 Haukyn's story marks the end of the search for Dowel,^44 and it does so by indicating the changed attitude necessary to the Dreamer's continued progress in his quest, for before the Dreamer can go forward, he must have accepted his own need for reform, a process which we saw beginning in his recently acquired meekness (B X 147-48) and reliance on Conscience and Patience. And, as Miss Maguire observes,

"... for Langland repentance is not an end in itself but a beginning. It is a preliminary, a condition which must be fulfilled in order to set the soul free for its real task: the search for God."^45

The events of the fifteenth passus follow quite logically from the teachings of Patience in B XIV, with the difference that the "message" of B XV is an explanation of the nature of charity. This section, involving the appearance
of the multi-faceted figure of *Anima*, is the discursive preparation the Dreamer requires before he is admitted to the sight of Charity which "the Trinite it meneth" (B XVI 63). The Dreamer's question "What is Charite?" (B XV 145) is an echo of a similar question put earlier by Haukyn (B XIV 97). As Fowler notes,45 Haukyn's question makes way for Patience's discussion on poverty *versus* wealth. In B XV the Dreamer's question initiates a discussion, more of a sermon really, on theoretical charity and the imperfect charity of the priesthood. The importance of *Anima* and the discussion of charity to the Dreamer's progress is twofold. In the first place, one faculty of the mind which *Anima* represents is free will, an active, spiritually informed agency of the mind.

> And when ich wol do other nat do goode dedes other ille,
> Then am ich Liberum-arbitrium as lettrede men tellen. (C XVII 193-94)

The suggestion of an informed choice to do good or evil implies a knowledge which can distinguish these modes of action, and as such, represents an advance on the merely compliant state of meekness or the changed receptivity which the Dreamer has previously achieved in the Haukyn passage on repentance. Secondly, and more important, *Anima*'s discussion of charity re-introduces the name of Piers who, in B XIV, embodies Christ's charity, one of the goals of the Dreamer's search. Ultimately
too, he becomes the object of Conscience's renewed search at the end of the poem.

The Dreamer's curiosity about the nature of charity is followed by the brief explanation that charity is "a childish thinge... a fre liberal wille" (B XV 145-56), and a longer description of charity whose "pylgrymage" is among the poor and the imprisoned. The Dreamer's impassioned appeal to know more about Piers may be seen as a spontaneous demonstration, and not just a stated claim, that he has acquired a measure of free will. Later Anima identifies Piers' qualities with those of Christ (B XV 206), so that the Dreamer's reaction in his deeper sleep in B XVI (he faints with joy at the mention of Piers and is rewarded with a deeper vision) is anticipated by the fuller understanding he has reached.

The next two visions, which occupy passus XVI to XVIII, represent a change in the Dreamer's perception of Truth and the means through which that Truth is understood. The same pattern, of encounters with single figures, is maintained as before, but now the figures whom the Dreamer encounters are symbols of his spiritual faith rather than psychological personifications of his intellectual faculties. In passus XVI the doctrine of the Trinity is developed through the image of the Tree of Charity (B XVI 23-89). The Dreamer is not admitted to higher understanding on the first level of his dream, but, on a deeper level, he is rewarded with a
vision of Piers who guards the tree with the three "piles," or props, of the Trinity. This passus also introduces a reference to Christ as a knight, who, after His perfect birth, is taught the skill of healing, "Til he was parfit practisoure" (B XVI 107), by Piers the Plowman. The reference to Christ jousting against death and the Devil is repeated just before the Dreamer comes out of his deeper sleep (B XVI 160-66) to start a frantic search for Piers. It is significant that Piers and what he stands for are perceived on a deeper and more mystical level, for this prepares the Dreamer for the spiritual climax of the poem — the vision of Christ in the armour of Piers, humana natura, jousting at Jerusalem.

Both Abraham and Moses, who represent Faith and Hope in B XVI and XVII, are searching for Christ, and both of them characterize Christ in chivalric terms:

'I seke after a segge that I seigh ones,
A ful bolde bacheler I knewe hym by his blasen.'
(B XVI 178-79)

and,

'I am Spes,' quod he, 'a spye and spire after a kny3te,
That toke me a maundement vpon the mounte of Synay,
To rule all reynes with; I bere the writte here.'
(B XVII 1-3)

Neither Faith nor Hope are sufficient to bring a man to health, and in the encounter with a Samaritan, who personifies charity in action, the Dreamer learns what else is necessary to
salvation. He tells the Samaritan that Faith and Hope ran away at the sight of the injured man

'Haue hem excused,' quod he 'her help may litel auaille;
May no medcyn on molde the man to hele brynge,
Neither Feith ne fyn Hope so festred ben his woundis,
With-out the blode of a barn borne of a mayde.
(B XVII 90-93)

It is a measure of the Dreamer's progress that, on seeing the Samaritan apply salves to the wounded man and then install him at an inn, he outruns Faith and Hope and offers to serve the Samaritan "to ben his grome" (B XVII 85). The teachings of Anima on charity are personified in the figure of the Samaritan; the Dreamer reacts spontaneously to what he sees.

The threads of the allegory of Christ as knight are drawn together slowly in these two visions, but they are nowhere more explicit than in passus XVIII. The Dreamer, after wandering about "lyke a lorel" (B XVIII 3), half-crazed by his endless search, falls asleep again and has a vision of Christ's passion. The figure he sees riding into Jerusalem partakes of all of the attributes of charity previously personified, but finds its strongest expression in the fusion of these qualities in a knight

One semblable to the Samaritan and some-del to Piers the Plowman,
Barfote on an asse bakke botelees cam prykye,
Wyth-oute spores other spere spakliche he loked,
As is the kynde of a kynte that cometh to be dubbed.
(B XVIII 10-13)
Faith, as a herald, leans from a window and the Dreamer calls out to him to ask what all this means. He learns that Jesus will joust in Piers' arms, "In his helme and in his haberioun humana natura" (B XVIII 23).

The Dreamer's grasp of the meaning of charity, in its deepest sense fulfilled in Christ's sacrifice, marks the end of a long quest for knowledge that began with the confused opening vision. Will's reaction on waking from the vision of judgement is to urge his wife and daughter to accompany him to church. He has been awakened by the sound of bells on Easter morning. The sound of the Resurrection being announced in his dream merges with the bells of the waking world. His words to his family demonstrate the spiritual growth he has undergone

'Ariseth and reuerenceth goddes resurrexioun,
And crepeth to the crosse on knees and kisseth it for a luwel!' (B XVIII 427-28)

Will's participation in the communion allows us to know that he has finally identified Christ's passion and the very deepest meaning of charity with the eucharistic elements of bread and wine.

But it is characteristic of Langland's tenacity that he does not close his poem with the vision of mankind liberated from the wiles of Satan. Instead he faces yet another
Christian paradox, that of the need to know evil in order to do good.

The last two visions (B XIX and XX) are in a sense complementary. In the first of these Conscience explains the founding of the Church after first explaining the three vitae in terms of Christ's life. In the last vision we are to witness the assault of Antichrist on the Church and the undoing of Piers' laborious efforts to spread Truth. B XIX opens on a very positive note for the Dreamer. Awake, he dons his best clothes to go to hear mass, perhaps an indication of his now enlightened state. On falling asleep he has a vision of one who appears to be the Plowman yet who is "ri3te lyke in alle lymes to owre lorde Iesu" (B XIX 8). To gain an understanding of this the Dreamer summons Conscience. This is the first occasion on which the Dreamer becomes the active agent of his own enlightenment rather than the passive recipient of moral philosophy. Moreover, he achieves the vision of the crucified Christ without swooning into a deeper sleep as he had when he saw Piers and the Tree of Charity. This suggests that he has so amended his thoughts that the accession of grace is made less difficult.

By this stage of the poem, through the gradual linking of images of charity, Piers' charity has become synonymous with Christ's in his earthly sojourn. Thus the vision changes from an explanation of Christ's earthly life to one in which
the Holy Ghost descends upon Piers. The Dreamer's voice joins hundreds of others in a hymn welcoming Grace, "Crystes messager" (XIX 202-207). The Dreamer is thus included in the company of believers. There is, indeed, a strong sense of community in this passus, and it is in sharp contrast to the vision of a disorderly, self-serving rabble with which the poem opened. But the peace is short-lived, for when Piers and Grace depart, after establishing the Church, Pride is quick to attack Conscience "and al Crystene" (XIX 333). Even in adversity there is community, at least for a time. Conscience urges everyone to get inside the barn of Unity

> "For witterly I wote we be th nou3te of strengthe
to gone agayne Pryde but Grace were with vs."

(B XIX 355-56)

This allusion to Grace prepares the way for the final departure of Conscience who "gradde after Grace" at the end of the poem. The barn of Unity becomes a fortress as the Christians dig a moat around it; the process of one image subsumed by another is again in operation.

But the seeds of destruction are already at work. The vision closes with objections on the part of rich and poor alike that the doctrine of restitution, to pay what one owes, is too severe. In the last vision the aging Dreamer is directed on yet another journey, to find Unity and to learn to love. By way of Confession and Contrition he arrives at Unity only
to be in time to witness the backsliding of the penitents which leads to the admission of a friar and the collapse of Contrition. With Unity in a shambles Conscience departs on yet another quest, to find Piers.

The pilgrimage metaphor has come full circle. What began as a search for Truth in the world and passed through an understanding of charity in the spirit, has once again emerged as a return to the world. But, as Lawlor observes

*If there is in the end no room for facile hope, there is equally none for despair. The individual's duty remains, and is paramount. Until his pilgrimage is achieved, while life lasts, Conscience must walk the wide earth.*

In terms of the quest, Conscience's departure has significance on several levels. First of all, this renewed quest returns us to the world of Christian realism. The Dreamer, appalled by the corruption to which he was a witness in the early parts of the poem, now views things differently

*The Christian life, Langland says in effect, must always be a battle with Antichrist; and since Antichrist is in its midst, the Church may never cease from its pilgrimage in search of Piers.*

Langland seems to imply that the individual cannot rest on his laurels. Kynde's last message suggests the same thing

'Lerne to loue,' quod Kynde 'and leue of alle othre.'
And there, by ceseile of Kynde I comsed to rowme
Thorw Contricioun and Confessioun tyl I cam to
Vnite

(B XX 207, 211-12)

Secondly, the poem is about the experience of wisdom. The quest for wisdom is one without an end and may be begun at any time. For Dante it begins in the middle of life while for Langland's Dreamer it appears to have been a perennial occupation. Whereas those quests we have designated as "rhetorical" may be seen as having a deliberate and linear sequence, Piers Plowman has not. The experience gained by Will and by the reader of the work leads to a deeper understanding of the mysteries of Christ. This understanding is achieved by our participation in the difficulties of apprehending what there is to learn. The problem of expressing the means through which the reader shares in the Dreamer's experience is reflected by critics in their attempts to explain the poem's "apparently confused structure."

In effect, through the medium of the Dreamer "whose experience we follow," through his incessant probing, questioning and nearly despairing search, Langland leads us into the slow and painful process of shedding our illusions. The Truth so eagerly sought at the outset grows steadily into a manifestly more complex array of meanings than the Dreamer ever imagined. At each stage of the journey in the Visio the Dreamer is equipped with the knowledge, but not the experience, of wisdom. In the Vita the intellectual faculties
are discarded for the time being while the spiritual life is explored. By the process of debate between the Dreamer and his spiritual faculties, and hence between the poem and the reader, the work unfolds. But the poem is much more than a series of dry debates on Christian doctrine. It is, rather, an evolutionary process. Each quest in the poem, each step forward, is a manifestation of the single quest. Furthermore, each step is inextricably linked to the one preceding and the one following, yet they each act independently of any simply enunciated plot. They each form microcosmic stages of learning within the larger scheme of salvation. Thus the entire poem, including the apparent dead-ends and wrong conclusions, is a reflection of the learning process. And this process, this exchange between the Dreamer's experience and our own, is embodied in our recognition of the nature of intellectual and spiritual struggle. We become the Dreamer and share his experience through knowing just how hard it is to learn something

Just as Dante hoped by the Commedia to bring his readers from wretchedness to happiness, so Langland must have planned the false starts and ironic mistakes, the discoveries and wonders of his poem to bring his readers, with Will, beyond a merely logical understanding of salvation to the painfully experienced loving kynde knowynge of Truth. 57

Langland's method of abstraction from sense image to species to universal, has recently been described as
characteristic of the progress of the poem from the A- to the C-text. More contingent upon our study, Geoffrey Shepherd also observes that such *picturae*, or images, are not merely descriptive or impressionistic accounts of things seen, but "verbal schemes for conceptualization." Hence, we may be able to say that the self-consuming process in *Piers Plowman* is one which reflects a mode of advancement typical for Langland. Behind the narrative accounts there is also "a series of illuminations, arbitrary in their initial occurrence, inexplicable in their succession, but accepted by the poet as compelling and authoritative." The choice, rejection and replacement of images, acts in such a way as to fix details in our memory which, when fixed, "can generate concepts in the mind." The apparently haphazard progress of Langland's Dreamer, in effect, reflects a method of poetic and mental organization which is at once memorable and realistic. Each image is chosen for its usefulness and not for its rhetorical effect. Thus the quest frame of the entire poem, though it constantly breaks down in the immediacy of details, is constantly being renewed, in an unending cycle.
FOOTNOTES

1 *OED*, "Quest," sb., 5.


3 *MED*, "glose," 2 (a). Chaucer is evidently playing with the notion of glosing as legitimate interpretation and as an idle pastime. Cf. *MED*, "glosen," 1 (a) and (b).


12 *Ancrene Riwle*, p. 128.

14 Authorized version of the Bible.

15 *Ancrene Riwle*, p. 126.


19 *Patrologia Latina*, 76, Col. 63. For other instances of the pilgrimage metaphor in Gregory see also *PL*, 76, col. 1070 and *PL*, 77, col. 1214 (Epistola LXXV).


21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., pp. 52-53.


25 H.W. Wells, "The Construction of *Piers Plowman*," in Edward Vasta, ed., *Interpretations of Piers Plowman* (Notre Dame, 1968), pp. 7, 13, et passim. See also R.W. Frank Jr., *Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation*, YSE, 136 (New Haven, 1957), 16-17, where it is also argued that the Trinity is the organizing principle of the *Vitae*. The most recent "unity" study I have noted is that of Sister Mary Davlin for whom the phrase "kynde knowyng" is "a key" to the "basic meaning of unity" of the whole poem. See *RES*, n.s., 22, number 85 (1971), 1-19.

27 Ibid., p. 248.


29 See Skeat, II, 118, note to passus C IX 348.


31 Ibid.


36 Ibid., p. 109.


38 For example see passus C XVII, 187-192 where practical and spiritual judgement are distinguished as Racio and Conscientia.

39 David C. Fowler, Piers the Plowman: Literary Relations of the A and B Texts (Seattle, 1961), p. 82.

40 Goodridge, p. 35.

41 Fowler, p. 95.

Ibid., p. 109.

Sister Mary Davlin feels that Will's encounter with Anima in B XV is "the climax of Dowell and the turning point of the poem" because "Will, having come to a dead end in searching for wisdom through theory, recovers his initial desire to know God as love and begins to search for him through love and suffering." See "Kynde knowynge as a Major Theme in Piers Plowman," RES, n.s., 22, number 85 (1971), 2. A case can be made for Will having dispensed with theory as the path to knowledge in the Haukyn passus (B XIV) whose final note is one of repentance.

Maguire, p. 107.

Fowler, p. 97.

Skeat (II, 215) notes that these lines do not appear in the B text, but that Liberum-arbitrium becomes "the principal name of the Soul" in C.

Fowler, p. 112.

Davlin, p. 6.

In the C text it is Liberum-Arbitrium, and not Piers, who teaches Christ the art of healing. Langland was presumably more concerned, in C, to emphasize Christ's human nature.

The image of Christ as knight is found in Ancrene Riwle, where Christ jousts for the love of a besieged Lady. See Mack's ed., pp. 143-44. For sources of this image see Wilbur Gaffney, "The Allegory of the Christ-Knight in Piers Plowman," PMLA, 46 (1931), 155-168.


54 Goodridge, p. 52.

55 Davlin, p. 19.

56 Lawlor, p. 233.

57 Davlin, p. 19.


CONCLUSION

This analysis of the quest theme reveals a change in the portrayal of the hero in the fourteenth century. The heroes of the earlier works are the symbols of leadership in their societies. Their quests have public and external significance. The protagonists do not undergo psychological changes, but emerge much the same as when they began their quests. Such stories are "rhetorical" in nature. A belief in legitimate succession and sanction to rule rather than the rule by force, are mirrored in the narrative voice and in the conduct of the hero.

Quests of an external and "rhetorical" nature are characterized by a certitude of action unclouded by difficult moral decisions. Examples of exterior quests are King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Sir Orfeo and Floriz and Blancheflur. The movement of each of these stories towards equilibrium of either a political or amorous kind, and proceeding through a series of tests, is evidence of their tendency to satisfy
a somewhat logical and linear representation of experience. Other evidence of their "rhetorical" nature is found in their authors' commitment to and enthusiasm for their heroes who are usually described in unequivocal terms as the best or most worthy members of their group.

In the earlier works the quest functions as the most logical narrative motif for exploiting linear progression. The pattern of departure (initiated by any one of a number of causes), trial and testing and a final safe return, is common to "exterior" quests. The episodes of trial serve to reaffirm the qualities of the hero which distinguish him as a superior member of his society. His safe return in most cases results in some benefit to his community. The benefit may stem from the restoration of order and the hierarchical ordering of society, or it may be the result of experience gained in undertaking the quest. In Havelok the experiences portray an evolution of a domestic kind. Havelok progresses through a series of apparently inappropriate tasks which reveal that he is fit to assume the responsibility of governing from which he was forcibly excluded. Havelok's progress, however, cannot be taken as a sign of profound moral or psychological growth, nor is he troubled by incertitude, or doubt, in his movement towards kingship.

Between the two extremes of exterior and interior quests is a group of stories in which the quest theme functions
as a means of parodying romance conventions and as the framework for social and moral debate. In stories of magical transformation the quest revolves around a riddle whose solution lies outside the hero's hands. In Chaucer's tale of *Sir Thopas* the hero's conduct is a grotesque parody of chivalric behaviour. Thopas is a fool who undertakes a quest without the chivalric dedication found in earlier works. In addition the quest becomes a double-edged satire as Chaucer undermines the *persona* of the narrator, Chaucer the pilgrim, by making him a willing party to Thopas' exploits.

Evidence for interiorization in the central group of poems is slight, but is nonetheless suggested by the presence of moral dilemma involving a choice on the hero's part. In Gower's *Tale of Florent* the hero is seen struggling with a choice between saving his life or saving his self-respect. The effect of tension is created by the use of antithetical balance. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale* the hero's mental anguish is characterized by his tossing and turning in bed. The notion of true "gentilesse" is given a new perspective in the loathly hag's arguments. The result is that knighthood is shown to be subject to human limitations.

At the other end of the spectrum are quests which we may designate as "dialectical." Such tales present us with a degree of ambiguity not previously seen in the period. In addition, the quest is internalized and private in nature,
suggestive of change, if not necessarily growth, in the hero. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* external and internal quests co-exist though not always simultaneously. The poem moves from a note of certitude on the poet's part, especially when he describes Gawain, to a gradual withdrawal of the poet's presence. The withdrawal is accompanied by hints concerning fate as well as remarks which cast doubt on the wisdom of Gawain's undertaking. An internal dimension is added as we slowly learn what Gawain is thinking. Moral hesitancy is implied in the debate Gawain has with himself in accepting a talisman which he thinks will protect his life. Courtly rectitude and moral certainty clash dramatically with practical considerations. Gawain's return to Camelot is clouded by a realization of his failure though his quest is regarded as successful by his peers. There is a strong penitential mood implied in Gawain's speech, both at the green chapel and on his return to Camelot, though, as I have tried to argue, it is a demonstration of doubtful sincerity.

*Piers Plowman* is an example of a totally internalized quest. While the hero of *Gawain* is distinguished as an individual who at times makes some movement towards a subjective realization of truth, the subjectivising process in *Piers Plowman* is different. The Dreamer's quest represents the search of every intelligent believer. Thus, while the individual hero of *Piers Plowman* is the Dreamer's will, his quest, though
personal in that it relates to the experiences of this dreamer in this poem, is at the same time the larger embodiment of the universal Christian soul and its search for awareness. This element of universality is not characteristic of Gawain's quest, though, as we have seen, a number of critics, notably those with an allegorical interest, feel that Gawain's quest evokes the pattern of the pilgrimage of the soul of Everyman.

In Langland's poem the whole story takes place on a plane which, while not excluding courtly ideals, does not depend upon them. Where Langland does draw on chivalric images, it is to portray the highest good in the figure of the Christ-knight who battles with death and the Devil for possession of the souls of man. But the mediaeval fondness for disputation has left its mark on the poem. Beneath the mystical perceptions which are being sought there is a discernible process of rational enquiry being carried on. This is reflected in the progress of Langland's Dreamer whose advance, from ignorance to comprehension, is punctuated by a succession of arguments between himself and his own intellectual and spiritual faculties. The depiction of the human will in a quest for truth creates a close involvement between the poem and ourselves, during which we are enabled to apprehend the difficulty of arriving at moral conclusions. The process is one of the Dreamer's education. He sheds previously-held
beliefs in such things as the human reason as the sole means of knowing the truth. Although Langland is writing in an age of faith in which the Christian believer placed faith above reason, the Dreamer's doubting and active mind is seen to put reason first, until he learns otherwise.

Langland follows a tradition in which the path through life is seen as a pilgrimage of the soul. By the end of the journey Will is an aging but enlightened person, less dogmatic in his beliefs and more willing to follow a higher form of truth. The consequences of his search are personal and relate to a private understanding. But by implication of the allegory, the Dreamer's quest points to potential salvation for all of mankind.

Several inferences can be drawn from this study of the fourteenth-century quest. The first is that the changing portrayal of the hero suggests a movement from the epic to the self-conscious presentation of the protagonist. Gawain begins his quest as the worthiest representative of his class, but is shown to be less worthy by the end. The hero of *Piers Plowman* demonstrates the growth of conscious understanding as a very complex yet progressive movement. The second inference is that the quest, by its nature, which involves adventure and solitary undertakings, lends itself to the representation of realities which are not grounded in courtly models, but which are readily adaptable to psychological exploration. Finally,
the growing complexity of the quest suggests that audiences were capable of responding to levels of expression more subtle than the linear adventure story. The most profound applications of the quest theme are those which are most firmly Christian. In *Piers* the process of transmutation of successive images is evidence for regarding the quest as a highly sophisticated strategy and not just as a thematic device which is tied to courtly traditions. It shows itself capable of representing the process of intellectual and spiritual evolution as well as depicting the accomplishments of chivalrous adventurers.

Collectively, the poems offered for study demonstrate an evolution in the application of the quest theme from its representation of a public and socially beneficial undertaking to a personal and spiritual path to enlightenment. This evolution is accompanied by a change in the representation of the heroic adventurer. In the earlier works the hero symbolises the values of his society. His success in the quest represents the triumph of the "right" cause and the defeat of discordant elements. In *Piers Plowman* the notion of "the hero" is no longer so straightforward. Langland's Dreamer is not a kingly or knightly figure, but the exploring mind of every individual who has ever tried to grapple with complicated, spiritual conceptions. His struggle is not with overt, public enemies, but with himself. Though his quest may be seen as
the pilgrimage of the universal Christian soul, the experience it offers is intensely personal. The manner of mental travelling which Langland's Dreamer undergoes is revived in the pattern of later works such as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, C.S. Lewis' *Pilgrim's Regress* and G.B. Shaw's *The Black Girl in Search of God*. As a narrative framework for adventure the quest extends backwards to the ancient epic of *Gilgamesh* and forwards to the search by the hero of many modern novels. Mediaeval examples of the theme suggest that it is a device which is eminently suited to adaptation to stories whose appeal is either immediate and rhetorical or covert and mystical.
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