Gawain's "Anti-Feminism" Reconsidered

by

S. L. Clark and Julian N. Wasserman
Rice University and Loyola University

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the protagonist survives the return blow for which he had contracted with the Green Knight but finds to his dismay that he has unwittingly failed a more significant test. As the awareness comes to Gawain that the Green Knight and his Yuletide host share one identity, that it was upon Bercilak's instructions that his wife attempted to seduce him, and that Morgan la Fée had, in effect, master-minded the whole plan, Gawain reacts with bursts of anger which, when analyzed, speak not only to the *Pearl*-Poet's skill at characterization but also to the manner in which the poet feels revelation is given to man. The see-saw dialogue in which the Green Knight and Gawain engage, much like the original agreement for the exchange of blows and the subsequent commerce of hunting covenants, places emphasis on sequentiality, on one thing or event being countered by another, as well as on the more overt theme of testing, and what has been often overlooked is the fact that Gawain himself consistently reacts sequentially, throughout the tale and particularly in the final confrontation with the Green Knight, that is, according to the amount of knowledge he possesses, which is, of course, precious little at the outset of the challenge and not all that much more by the time he submits to the return blow. Bercilak, of course, responds to Gawain's statements and actions, but his reactions are tempered by his greater knowledge and, as such, do not exhibit the rashness of Gawain's responses. The result is that one sees Bercilak making the initial offers, with Gawain either eagerly, thoughtlessly seconding them because he does not know that they entail, or, having fulfilled his obligations as far as he can see them, reacting irately to his sudden awareness of failings which he did not anticipate. And yet the Gawain at the end of the poem is a visibly chastened man, stripped of his anger and fully aware not only of his own inadequacies but also of the nature of his test, despite the fact that his own court cannot comprehend the significance of the visible sign of his spiritual journey. It is precisely that process from ignorance

to knowledge, from wrath to sorrow, and from Gawain's awareness of the part to his cognizance of the whole, that takes place in the Green Chapel, but it is by no means an immediate process, as Gawain's successive reactions demonstrate.

Throughout the romance Gawain consistently makes statements based on his own limited knowledge, to which others more knowledgeable make corrections, and the Green Chapel scene hardly differs in this respect from the scenes which have preceded it. Gawain erupts in a series of tirades at learning of the test and of his failure, and the Green Knight proceeds to correct him. Each emendation leads the Arthurian knight a little closer to the real significance of the test which he, as a representative of perfect knighthood, undertook, a test upon which the very fate of Arthur's court hangs and a test particularly engineered to that end. The Green Chapel tirades themselves reveal an interesting pattern, as Gawain comes progressively closer to an awareness that is the source of his failure. Thus, before the Green Knight goes into the explanation of the intermingled covenants, Gawain is merely outraged at his opponent, who has nicked him, in effect, in the seat of pride, the neck. After the Green Knight's explanation, Gawain transfers his anger to the green girdle, using it as a focus for his rage, so that it is said to be "þe falssyng" (1.2378)[1] even before the wearer is pronounced "falce" (1.2382). Finally, when the Green Knight mildly points out that Gawain has indeed "confessed so clene, beknowen of þy mysses" (1.2391), Gawain directly contradicts the idea that he has spent his sin, by expending his venom, by flying into an even greater rage, at which point he delivers what has been called a "stock anti-feminist tirade."[2]

This last outburst dissipates into a request for the Green Knight's identity, and it is at this point in the narrative, when Bercilak reveals his name and Morgan's machinations, that many readers have balked, either branding the motivation for Gawain's testing as lame and contrived, or feeling inadequately prepared for the unexpected and rapid *dénoument*. The fact that Morgan la Fée is suddenly introduced as controlling events, with the poem's other characters reduced to the role of pawns, appears to disconcert critics, who contend either that this aspect of the poem is not well-made[3] or that Morgan's role has not been fully understood.[4] While we heartily agree with the opinion that Morgan's importance has not been adequately fathomed, it would appear that the abrupt revelation of Morgan's "myȝt" (1.2446) is hardly unsatisfying, but rather represents a technique characteristic of the *Pearl*-Poet, whereby the controlling deity—and recall that Morgan is "þe goddes" (1.2542)—is rarely the focus of the poet but rather directs events from a distance. The question is, after all, one of dominance, and Morgan dominates the poem[5] in that she controls the action, in much the same manner as God exercises power over the characters in the *Pearl*-Poet's other poems: *Purity, Patience,* and *Pearl.* In fact, one should note that, for example, in *Pearl* the jeweler spends as much time dealing with Christ's intermediary, the Pearl-Maiden, as Gawain does in

dealing with Morgan's intermediaries. Yet, despite the mediation, there is never any question in all four poems as to the controlling deity.

In *Purity* there is no doubt whatsoever as to the author of the destruction of the many sinful and the salvation of the few pure men, although God intervenes directly in the narrative only once in each biblical *exemplum*. Similarly, *Pearl*'s Lamb is only viewed directly at that poem's closing, at the point at which the Pearl-Maiden's efforts to acquaint the jeweler with her celestial existence reach a standstill, because he continues to view heavenly reality in terms of earthly appearance. Only then is the jeweler accorded the actual vision of Christ in the New Jerusalem, the intent of which is to enlighten him. Even then he still clings to worldly preconceptions to the degree that his revelation is necessarily sequential and not simultaneous, proceeding by fits and starts, so that at the end of the poem he is, on the one hand, barred from Heaven but, on the other hand, given the message of Christ's consolation. *Patience*'s process of revelation and the recognition of Divine manipulation is perhaps most like that of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, in that it is by no means an instance of simultaneous enlightenment, whereby Jonah suddenly fathoms God's analogy of his withered "wodbynde" and the spared city of Nineveh. Rather, Jonah's instruction carries him from the ship to the whale to the bower, as he is shown first that he must trust in Divine mercy as much as he relies upon Divine vengeance. In each case Jonah acts unwittingly and is subsequently corrected and chastized by God, whom he is bound to represent but whose nature he does not fathom, much as Sir Gawain is repeatedly corrected and bettered by Morgan's minions as he attempts to play a game whose rules he does not understand. Thus, Gawain's wrathful outbursts against women—among others—may be seen to be analogous to the angry tirade that serves as Jonah's reaction to God's correction, for, as Jay Schleusener points out:

> The point [of 11. 78–80, 93–96] is not that Jonah has accidentally fallen into profound irreverence, but simply that he does not know what he is saying. We know the meaning of these lines because we have a history that encompasses the figure and its fulfillment; God knows because the plan is His; yet Jonah, who knows almost nothing at all, is the man who must act. There is nothing shocking here, only the irony of human ignorance bent to the shape of history.[6]

In fact, the *Pearl*-Poet consistently describes situations in which humans are either enlightened by the Divine prior to the events that will test them (Noah before his protection in the ark, Lot before the destruction of Sodom) or left in the dark throughout the test, like *Pearl*'s jeweler, Jonah, and Gawain, by the

deities which assay their worth before they tell them how they have been tested. In *Pearl* and *Patience,* as well as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* the heroes are lead by trial and error to a clearer understanding of their mortal situations, and it is by no means a painless process, since each protagonist reacts with anger or incredulity at comprehending the separate parts of the totality of the Divine message. *Pearl*'s jeweler verbally spars with a representative of a deity he cannot understand and eventually attempts to bolt across the stream to join the *Pearl*-Maiden, at which point God, who has accorded him his vision, cuts that vision short. Jonah, on his part, sulks and reproaches the Being "þat eres all made" (1.123)[7] and "þat bigged vche yȝe" (1.124) before he is given the consoling message of "pacience" which the audience received at the outset of the poem. In Gawain's case one can see the same principle at work: as Gawain is gradually given the bits and pieces of the puzzle that explains the power that motivates his trials, he rages—in stages—at the fact that he can control neither his situation nor himself. The sequential revelation process calls forth reactions which, in turn, elicit the next step in Gawain's progress toward understanding his test.

Thus, while one clearly sees the sequentiality of the process whereby the Green Knight gradually enlightens Gawain concerning the test and his own shared identity, to which Gawain reacts with anger, it would appear that Gawain's wrathful "anti-feminist" tirade is just as integrally linked to Bercilak's sudden and subsequent revelation concerning Morgan's controlling hand in the affair.[8] An understanding of the role of Morgan might indeed illuminate the purpose of the "anti-feminist" tirade, which has been viewed either as an off-track diatribe that has nothing to do with the tale or a valid emotional outburst that in some way reflects Gawain's state of mind.[9] Gawain, then, is held to be "driven off course by the prevailing winds of anti-feminism"[10] or to have committed a lapse of courtesy.[11] However, the outburst bears closer examination, for it would appear that critics have fundamentally misunderstood the function of the tirade.

The "anti-feminist" tirade that precedes the revelation of Morgan's role contains four *exempla* and is centered around a series of men that moves from Paradise into the Old Testament time period:

> I haf soiorned sadly; sele yow bytyde,
> And he ȝelde hit yow ȝare þat ȝarkkez al menskes!
> And comaundez me to þat cortays, your comlych
> fere,
> Boþe þat on and þat oþer, myn honoured ladyez,
> at þus hor knyȝt wyth hor kest han koyntly
> bigyled.
> Bot hit is no ferly þaȝ a fole madde,
> And þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe,

For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled,
And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson
eftsones—
Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde—and Dauyth þerafter
Watz blended with Barsabe, þat much bale poled.
Now þese were wrathed wyth her wyles, hit were
a wynne huge
To luf hom wel, and leue hem not, a leude þat
couþe.
For þes were forne þe freest, þat folȝed alle þe
sele
Excellently of alle þyse oþer, vnder heunenryche
at mused;
And alle þay were biwyled
With wymmen þat þay vsed.
þaȝ I be now bigyled,
Me þink me burde be excused.'
(2409–2428)

Like the poem's opening stanzas, which take the reader from the ashes of Troy through a series of secular *exempla* to the founding of Britain, and subsequently to the flourishing of the Arthurian court, the "anti-feminist" *exempla* share several characteristics which serve not only to unify them but also to suggest a negative appraisal not of the women cited but, instead, those males listed by Gawain as being undone "þurȝ wyles of wymmen" (1.2145). One should first note the type of attitude toward women which is implied when both the secular historical *exempla* and the biblical *exempla* are considered together, since in the latter case one is presented with series of males who wield considerable power, due either to apt management or physical strength, while in the former instance one is shown a group of men who become rich in power and land. The biblical exemplary heroes' falls are explicit, and Gawain pinpoints what he feels to be the agents of these falls, whereas the secular heroes of the poem's opening stanza are shown, it would first appear, as they rise to power. Yet the secular *exempla* show only the rise on the Wheel of Fortune and conceal the implicit falls of those same heroes, many of whose affairs are besmirched by activities not unrelated to those for which Gawain calls the biblical worthies to task. As medieval audiences well knew, Aeneas dallied with Dido, Romulus engineered the rape of the Sabine women, and, most important of all, the conflict at Troy was touched off by the theft of Helen.[12] However, the *Pearl*-Poet's point would not seem to be that many regrettable events in biblical or secular history were touched off by a fateful association with a woman—or with "fele sere" (1.2417) for that matter—but rather something else entirely. First of all, the generally negative tone of the "anti-feminist"

passage, as well as the implicit falls of the cities and countries of the poem's first stanza, speak directly to Gawain's fall and, most importantly, to the implicit, subsequent fall of that society which Gawain represents. Camelot, too, will fall, and it will fall as a result of treachery and a chain of events that cannot help but hearken back to the prophetic lines detailing the destruction of a mighty city:

> Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,
> þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondez and askez,
> þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt
> Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe.
> (1–4)

Camelot, like Troy, will fall, and it will fall, moreover, for the same reason that all the other exemplary men and cities fall and are succeeded by other men and cities, and just as Gawain is brought low by his very pride and reputation.

In likening himself to four men undone by women, Gawain effects a significant linkage that has not been fully explored. In so doing, he characteristically blames the object for the pain caused to the subject, rather than seeing guilt not in the perceived but rather in the perceiver. An act of displacement occurs, and Gawain sets the blame on someone or something else. One is, however, prepared for just such an action, for Gawain has acted in such a manner previous to this point in the narrative. In this light, one might briefly consider the Green Knight's celebrated feigned blows and Gawain's reaction to them, for this will tell considerable about Gawain's technique of displacing anger. Gawain's anger as the Green Knight goes through his feint is necessary not only to build up the tension so essential to the dramatic import of the scene, but also to establish a contrast to the Green Knight's calm willingness to "bide þe . . . bur" (1.290), a willingness which looks back to the poet's advice to his audience in Patience, when he states:

> þen is better to abyde þe bur vmbe—stoundes,
> þen ay þrow forth my þro, þaȝ me þynk ylle.
> (*Patience,* 11. 7–8)

Gawain, however, not only is unable to "abyde þe bur" but also proceeds to vent his "þro" at the slightest provocation. The very source of Gawain's anger proves telling in this respect and helps explain his reaction in the scene with the Green Knight, during the delivery of the blow, as well as during the subsequent revelation of Morgan's role. As Gawain awaits the Green Knight's blow he is intent on controlling himself, and his flinching and subsequent anger at that action speak to the fact that he is actually angry at himself, due to his very failure to control his own situation. In fact, it seems not at all unreasonable to

suggest that Gawain is probably angrier at himself than he is at the Green Knight at the moment, and this paves the way for a similar act of displaced anger when it comes to the subsequent "anti-feminist" tirade. Gawain is actually angry at himself, but he places the blame on women, despite the fact that it is no more a woman's—or women's—fault that he succumbs to temptation than it is the Green Knight's fault that Gawain flinched.

> 'And alle ay were biwyled
> With wymmen þat þay vsed.
> þaȝ I be now bigyled,
> Me þink me burde be excused.'
>
> (2425–2428)

In the play on "vse,"[14] which can connote "use," "having dealings with," or "practicing a virtue," the *Pearl*-Poet subtly reveals Gawain to be a man who abuses, rather than uses, beauty—in the Augustinian sense. St. Augustine is quick to point out that a beautiful object is neither good nor evil in itself but is perceived as good or evil by man and is, accordingly, either used as a conduit to Divine love or abused.[15] Thus, enjoyment of a woman's beauty can be understood in the *in bono* or *in malo* sense.[16] What Gawain fails to see but what the audience cannot help but recognize is that Gawain places guilt on women for a fault that lies in himself.[17] Since medieval writers readily conceived of females—and males—not necessarily as actualities but rather as representatives of attitudes or embodiments of temptations or virtues, it would appear that the *Pearl*-Poet chooses a list of so-called evil women not because he hates women, but because he recognizes that he can juxtapose symbolically *in malo* women to the women in the poem who are to be seen in *in bono* terms. For this reason, the subsequent revelation of Morgan's controlling hand gains added significance, since it in a very real sense balances the examples of women who, through treachery, worked to destroy illustrious men. While Morgan can be said to practice deceit, it is important to remember that Morgan's elaborate ruse is designed not to undermine Arthur's court, but rather

> . . . to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were
> þat rennes of grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;
> Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue,
> For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe
> With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych
>   speked
> With his hede in his honde bifore þe hyȝe table.
>
> (2457–2462)

When one recalls the narrator's earlier statement that Gawain "watz funden faultlez in his fyue wyttez" (1.2193) that his opponent was the Devil, it would

appear not only that Gawain's "wyttez" are directly responsible for his misperceptions concerning the nature of his test, but also that Morgan's intent to take away the court's "wyttez" is not at all to be viewed negatively, since the court's perceptions are similarly flawed, as is clearly demonstrated by the laughing reaction to the "token" (1.2509) brought back by Gawain after his encounter with the man who tests Camelot's "surquidré" (1.24570 and who earlier mockingly inquired: "Where is now your sourquydrye?" (1.311). Camelot, through Gawain, has been tested, and the court has been found wanting for reason of that very debilitating pride and reputation. As to the desire to drive Guenevire to her death through fear of "þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked" (1.2461), one is tempted to reason that the queen's death would indeed spare the Arthurian court the type of fall suffered by the four biblical heroes whom Gawain had previously cited, since Guenevire's traditional deception of Arthur is much more in keeping with the likes of Delilah, etc., than with Morgan's ruse concerning Arthur's nephew. In fact, although the outcome of the deception is similar in the cases of Gawain and the biblical heroes, the motivation behind the deception is different in Gawain's case. Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David have all been deceived by evil women who hope to bring about their downfall, while Gawain has been traduced for his own good and has actually been tested by someone who hopes he'll pass the test.[18]

What one sees then, is Gawain making a tirade at the point at which he realizes that he is wrong in his assessment of the situation, a tirade in which he places the blame on someone else, and critics have traditionally focused on the so-called "anti-feminist" elements of the outburst, without looking at the sudden revelation of Morgan's name, which comes immediately afterwards and functions as a type of corrective to Gawain's misconceptions. Moreover, Morgan's juxtaposition to Guenevire in Bercilak's revealing speech suggests that Guenevire—and not Bercilak's wife—is in a very real sense the fifth evil woman in the series listed by Gawain, linked by her actions (known to the poet and the audience) to Eve, Delilah, Bathsheba, and Solomon's many queens, and that, if there is a fifth example of a man deceived by an evil woman, that man must clearly be Arthur. Morgan's traditional association with chastity tests[19] bears out this assumption, for the chastity test devised by Morgan for Gawain will be replicated in the case of Lancelot and Guenevire, and Lancelot will not fare nearly as well as did Gawain. That Guenevire is to be seen as the implicit fifth woman in the series is supported, in addition, by the poet's evident fondness for series of five,[20] and it should be noted that to medieval poets implicit quantification is equally as important as explicit numbering. If Gawain—and by extension the Arthurian court and its king—is fifth in the series of deceived heroes, then the agent of that deception is the evil which woman in the *in malo* sense represents, and the woman who brings men to harm is not Morgan, who after all torturously brings Gawain to good, but rather Guenevire, for with her comes the downfall of Camelot.

Moreover, this juxtaposition between Morgan, the woman *in bono* who tests in her attempt to avert danger, and Guenevire, who "tests" a man's abilities in love-making, to the doom of the court of which she is queen, is borne out by other image complexes in the poem, one of the most important of which is established in the arming of Sir Gawain, where the Virgin Mary's image is depicted on the inside of Gawain's shield, while Solomon's emblem, the pentangle, adorns the exterior (1.625). When one recalls Solomon's ominous presence in the list of men undone by women *in malo,* one sees, first of all, that in choosing the pentangle Gawain has opted to present a face to the world that hardly bodes good. Moreover, the pentangle's linkage to Solomon may be seen as a reflection of Gawain's own faith in tokens, in magic, and in the literal charm which guarantees safety and success. Throughout the poem Gawain reveals a consistent trust in literalness and a related lack of faith in things he cannot see. Faced with something which everyone in the court senses is supernatural, that is, the Green Knight, Gawain opts for the magical to sustain him, as he dons a shield boasting Solomon's emblem. It is not merely that Gawain does not recognize that his test is more than a physical trial, but also that he essentially lacks faith. His own faith, symbolized by the Virgin, should in fact sustain him in the face of this test, but he is unsure and therefore gilds the lily, in effect, by hiding behind the seal of Solomon. The poet, of course, attempts to imbue the pagan symbol with Christian significance, in his enumeration of the beneficial significance of the five-pointed "endeles knot" (1.630), but the fact remains that – to Gawain – it is as much a "token" as is the green girdle, that bit of lace that Gawain lets take over where his own faith leaves off. Gawain simply does not recognize that his faith in the Virgin is indeed enough; if he trusts in her, she can effect his deliverance. To support this interpretation, it should be noted that Gawain rides through the forest, miserable and without succour, only until he casts his mind back to the Virgin, at which point his prayer for a place to hear mass is immediately granted (11. 753ff.). Moreover, as if to show that the Virgin is indeed the operational force for good, one notes that while Solomon's sign does not save Gawain, the Virgin in fact does:

> Gret perile bitwene hem stod,
> Nif Maré of hir knyȝt mynne.
> (1768–1769)

Thus, *in bono* woman, in her avatars of the Virgin and Morgan, effect Gawain's protection and eventually his enlightenment, while *in malo* women tempt him.

That there are certainly two aspects of the feminine at work in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has long been recognized, but these aspects have traditionally been seen to be centered in the obvious juxtaposition between Morgan and Bercilak's wife in terms of age and appearance.[21] What critics have failed

to recognize is the possibility that the whole poem may revolve around a basic contrast between women, but rather in terms of good and evil, and that this contrast between women, and that this contrast may be couched in varying terms and situations, all of which bear upon the judgment of Gawain, not only in the sense that he is judged, but also in the manner in which he makes judgments. Throughout the poem Gawain is consistently confronted with choices to be made along the same lines as a decision is to be made between woman *in bono* and woman *in malo,* and even between the options of using or abusing a given object,[22] and his choices invariably reflect a lack of restraint, a potentially debilitating predilection for danger, and the literal. The most obvious of these choices is made, of course, when the Arthurian knight meets Bercilak's wife and the wizened beldame, and seeing surface beauty, elects to follow the former, rather than cleaving to the latter, which sets the stage for his subsequent failure. But even earlier in the narrative one sees the protagonist faced with a choice of behavior as he confronts a man, a virtual enigma, who enters a hostile court, bearing an axe in one hand and a holly bough in the other. Gawain, as inclined to strife as is his ruler,[23] and equally quick to anger,[24] responds to the offer of the exchange of blows with a characteristic and literal choice of the obvious weapon, the axe, but is unaware that there is, in fact, an implicit choice, in that the Green Knight comes in peace and only desires "a strok for an oþer" (1.287) and offers him as a "gyft" (1.288) "þis ax" (1.288). The Green Knight makes the point that he only bears with him the holly ("þis braunch"—1.265) and the axe ("þys giserne rych"—1.288), having left his hauberk, helmet, shield and speer at home, and yet Gawain chooses the most warlike alternative—even though his opponent is not fully armed—as is to be expected, since the *Pearl*-Poet's intent is to show how the nature of the subject necessarily clouds the perception of the object. And yet, such mistakes appear to be a necessary part of the evolution of Gawain, since it seems that he, like the jeweler in *Pearl* and Jonah in *Patience,* is only able to learn by trial and error and only then in stages. Revelation does not come to him as to Saul on the road to Damascus, but rather in sequential steps that allow him opportunity to react and a time for his reactions to be emended. He learns in the process that he has been guilty of confusing one aspect of woman for the other and that pride inevitably catches one short. Yet, in the standard Campbellian twist,[25] Gawain returns to a court that is as hotblooded and prideful as was he on his departure, and that has no comprehension that it is to be brought down, just as the proud row of kingdoms and men in the poem's secular and biblical *exempla* were toppled.

Camelot at the end of the poem is still a court preoccupied with its fame, peopled by knights and ladies who work hard to maintain their reputation of being

> þe most kyd knyȝte vnder krystes seluen,
> And þe lovelokkest ladies þat euer lif haden.
> (51–52)

Similarly, Arthur strives to maintain the honor of being "þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes" (1.53). And it is indeed this concern with fame or reputation which bears upon Gawain's inability to pass Morgan's test. In this light, it proves useful to recall some salient features of the *Pearl*-Poet's characterizations of the protagonists of his poems. Jonah in particular is a prideful, willful man, not unlike Gawain. It is not merely that both Jonah and Gawain laugh unwittingly at times when events are impendingly grave,[26] but also that both are led into the sin of pride out of a concern for "professional" reputation. In the episode of the "wod-bynde" in *Patience*, Jonah fears that the Ninevites' repentance will necessarily void the doom which he has spelled out for them and will, hence, damage his reputation as a prophet. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the concern for "professional" reputation runs high, with the result that the Green Knight's first challenge ("'wher is . . . þe gouernour of þis gyng?'" – 11.224–25) calls into question the matter of professional competency in terms of Arthur and his kingship, as well as the chivalric capabilities of the "berdlez chylder" (1.280) assembled at Camelot. Subsequently, during the temptation scenes, Bercilak's lady will likewise prey upon Gawain's ego, taking him to task for his courtliness and his attitude toward ladies. The irony is that Jonah is not a very good prophet, Arthur is not a very good king, and Gawain, whose reputation is based on his attitude toward ladies, does not in fact understand women: he fails to recognize that woman can lead astray but can also lead to wisdom. The romance thus becomes a tale about choosing the proper woman, and the four men in Gawain's "anti-feminist" tirade, as well as Gawain and his liege, did not choose the correct woman.

Since *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins and ends with an historical overview, one must assume that the poem exhibits an essential concern with man's on-going actions on earth and specifically with the fate of Arthur's court and its representatives. In order to render any final judgment concerning the fate of the society at Camelot and its relationship to the history which frames it, one must of necessity come to a judgment concerning Morgan and her co-conspirators. Morgan's design is, as the Green Knight states, primarily directed in terms of striking out at Camelot's pride and at its queen. Since the first quality is obviously a flaw, the person with whom it is linked, that is, Guenevire, must also be viewed negatively, and in fact Guenevire is traditionally associated with the fall of Camelot, a fall which places Camelot directly in line as the next fallen city in the series of cities which opens and closes the poem. In essence, then, the fate of Camelot actually rests not on Guenevire, but rather by the end of the poem on the court's reaction to the enlightenment which Gawain has brought back to the court, a message which is clearly ignored and made light of, since the courtiers laugh at Gawain and turn his sign of "schame" (1.2504) into one of "renoun" (1.2519). The incomprehension signals that the inevitable fall must take place. Yet, the *Pearl*-Poet prepares his audience for the fall from the poem's outset, since the tale is cast in the past tense,

and from the very introduction to the story one is never allowed to forget that the choice of Guenevire and worldliness prevailed, and that Camelot has indeed fallen.

NOTES

1. We cite from the following edition: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed. rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).
2. See *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* trans. Brian Stone (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), p. 120.
3. Critics go to extremes to rationalize Morgan's presence. See John Edie, "Morgan la Fée and the conclusion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*" *Neophilologus,* 52 (1968), 299, who suggests that Morgan's motives are introduced to remind Gawain of the pettiness of the real world.
4. Mother Angela Carson, "Morgan la Fée as the Principle of Unity in *Gawain and the Green Knight,*" *Modern Language Quarterly,* 23 (1962), 3, points out that most critics tend to ignore Morgan's role. One eminent scholar who devoted considerable study to the figure of Morgan is Roger Sherman Loomis. See "Morgan la Fée in the Oral Tradition," in *Studies in Medieval Literature: A Memorial Collection of Essays* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), pp. 3–33. See also pp. 189–92 (a section of the larger essay, "More Celtic Elements in *Gawain and the Green Knight*") in the same volume, where he devotes space to Morgan's appearance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*
5. *ibid.,* p. 6. Carson points out that Morgan dominates the poem more than the Green Knight does.
6. Jay Schleusener, "History and Action in *Patience,*" *PMLA,* 86 (1971), 960.
7. We quote from the following edition: *Patience,* ed. J. J. Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969).
8. David Mills, "The Rhetorical Function of Gawain's Anti-feminism," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen,* 71 (1970), 635–640, suggests that the tirade is to show Gawain's intellectual fumbling and act as a bridge from anger to self-knowledge, with which we would agree, but we hope in addition to demonstrate that the tirade bears wide-reaching implications for the interpretation of the poem.
9. Mills, p. 640, finds the four examples "hardly appropriate to Gawain's situation." P. J. Lucas, "Gawain's Antifeminism," *Notes and Queries,* 15 (1969), 324, holds Gawain's outburst to be valid and divides critics' reactions to that outburst into the two categories cited in the body of this article.
10. J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 147.
11. Mills, p. 636.
12. One notes in passing that the poem begins with an implicit example of a woman, Helen, who is clung to, to the destruction of a city, which is followed by an example of a woman, Dido, who is abandoned, for the founding of a city.
13. One should note that the first eight lines of *Patience,* which form a type of "introduction" to the poem's prologue, move from a consideration of the heart from within to an exhortation to "suffer" rather than throwing forth "þro."
14. The *Pearl*-Poet's predilection for puns has been noted by William Michael Grant, *Purity and Patience: A History of Scholarship and a Critical Analysis,* diss. Brown, 1968, p. 109; David Mills, "An Analysis of the Temptation Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight," *JEGP,* 67 (1968), 616; P. B. Taylor, "Commerce and Comedy in *Sir Gawain*," *Philological Quarterly,* 50 (1971), 8; and Henry R. Rupp, "Word-Play in *Pearl* 277-278," *MLN,* 70 (1955), 558-559.

15. *On Christian Doctrine,* 1. 33. 337.

16. See D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 297.

17. Mary Dove, "Gawain and the *Blasmes des Femmes* Tradition," *Medium Aevum,* 41 (1972), 20-26, by placing Gawain in a long tradition of victimization by women, fails to recognize that the tirade in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* need not reflect this tradition and may indeed be interpreted otherwise entirely.

18. Denver Ewing Baughan, "The Role of Morgan Le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *ELH,* 17 (1950), 251, notes: "With the exception of the enmity toward Guenevire, Morgan is acting in the best tradition of an enchantress."

19. See Carson, p. 14.

20. See Robert W. Ackerman, "Gawain's Shield: Pentential Doctrine in *Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Anglia,* 76 (1958), 254-265.

21. Carson, pp. 5-6, and Douglas M. Moon, "The Role of Morgain la Fée in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen,* 6 (1968), 46, suggest that Bercilak's wife and Morgan may be one and the same.

22. One sees, in effect, a single symbol being used *in malo* and *in bono* and a confusion in Gawain's mind as to which is which. One should also note that the poem's beautiful and ugly women are not at all unrelated to the theme of the Loathly Lady. It is no coincidence that the *Wife of Bath's Tale,* the ballad "The Marriage of Sir Gawaine," and the romance *The Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell,* which treat the theme of the Loathly Lady, appear to have been based on a common source. See *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,* ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), pp. 702-702; and *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales,* ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), p. 224. Also useful in this respect is Sigmund Eisner, *A Tale of Wonder: A Source Study of 'The Wife of Bath's Tale'* (Wexford, Ireland: John English, 1957), pp. 31ff., where he discusses the tradition of the Irish Loathly Lady.

23. Arthur's predilection for strife is not only reflected in his heritage (11. 20-26) but also in his day-to-day actions, since he later is said to thrive on tales of knightly exploits (11. 491-492) and even welcomes the Green Knight for that reason (11. 250-251), but also, at the outset of the tale, refuses to dine until he has either heard a tale that will hark back in theme to the turbulence of the past or seen a battle engaged in his very court (11. 90-106).

24. The formula "wex as wroth as wynde" (1. 319) is employed to allude to Arthur in this poem, and when one considers this in light of Jonah's reaction in *Patience* ("He wex as wroth as the wynde towarde oure Lorde" – 1. 410), it would appear that Arthur's quick rising anger is ominous.

25. A close examination of the Green Knight's challenge is important because Gawain's failure to comprehend the choices offered to him provides an important clue to his character. Gawain, like many of the poem's critics, fails to understand that the challenge is one to exchange blows, and that the "ax" is merely a reward or token given to the man who deals it and is not necessarily the instrument through which it is delivered. The challenge, stated for the first time in 11. 285-290, indicates that the axe, the gift for striking the blow, is to behandled "as hym lykes," which implies choice or volition. The Green Knight promises only "to dele him an oþer," presumably in kind. When Gawain accepts the challenge, the Green Knight specifically insists upon restating the terms of the agreement, which points out its nature as a test or riddle to be solved (11.

378–385). The choice of weapon is no longer implicit but is clearly explicit ("wyth what weppen so þou wilt" – l. 384). In other words, Gawain could have chosen the holly bob, symbol of peace, and struck the blow, but he did not.

25. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces,* Bollingen Series, 17 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 36, notes: "The return and reintegration with society, which is indispensable to the continuous circulation of spiritual energy into the world, and which, from the standpoint of the community, is the justification of the long retreat, the hero may find the most difficult requirement of all."

26. Jonah laughed as he lay in his bower, totally unaware that the "wod-bynde" would be withered on the morrow (*Patience,* l. 461). Similarly, Gawain laughs nervously through the poem, but only when others have laughed their knowing laughs first; he clearly wishes to be in on the joke, as it were. The result is that Gawain, as though infected by the barrage of mirth at Bercilak's castle – which is often at his own expense, although he does not realize it – laughs gleefully (l. 1079) when he learns that he is only two miles from the site of his expected doom.