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The Folk-Tale Element in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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EVER since Kittredge published his fundamental study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and its analogues in 1916, discussion of the models for this romance has been almost entirely conducted in terms of the beheading and the temptation themes, which he held to be the chief narrative components that have been brought together in it.¹ Undoubtedly the Beheading Match originates in an Irish epic pattern that passed to Arthurian romances, but for the theme of temptation no such clear descent has been shown. We shall see that the resemblance of *Sir Gawain* to a particular folk-tale type illuminates this feature of the romance.

The stay at the castle in *Sir Gawain* is related to an international popular tale that is widely distributed, particularly in Europe and Asia, and so ancient that it was adapted in the story of Jason and Medea. The earliest proper records of it are in literary collections, first in eleventh-century Sanskrit and then in the Italian Renaissance. Tales of this type tell the following:

The Tasks. The hero is at the castle of an evil being (a demon, devil, troll, giant, supernatural old man, sorcerer, etc.), who on each of three successive days imposes on him an impossible task on pain of death. The hero manages to achieve the tasks because the evil being's daughter, who has magic powers like her parent, is secretly in league with the hero and gives him aid.

¹ G. L. Kittredge, *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge, Mass., 1916), pp. 137-9, 196-7.

The Flight. She elopes with the hero, and outwits her pursuing parent in a magic (transformation or obstacle) flight.

What I have here described is the kind of tale known as Type 313 according to the classification in Aarne and Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*.²

In England there has been little report of this tale-type, but few folk-tales of the *Märchen* kind have come to light in England, although from literary references it is evident that many of the international popular tales were once known here. Type 313 is very popular in Ireland, and good illustration of it has been found in Scotland.

The pattern of *The Tasks* typically has the evil being leaving at dawn (sunrise), with the day's impossible task having to be achieved by the hero before the master's return at nightfall (sundown). He may have gone hunting, from which he comes home "as usual."³ I take the Scottish-Gaelic tale "Bodach Glas" as illustration of this. The master specifies in the morning that "I am going a-hunting to the mountain"; if the hero has not got the task ready "when I come home from the mountain on which I go to hunt," he will lose his head. The task is done "before the 'Bodach Glas' returned from the mountain on which he had been hunting on that evening." Later on in the tale his daughter reminds the hero several times of how on each day she had accomplished a task for him "before the 'Bodach Glas' came home from the mountain on which he was hunting."⁴ In *Sir Gawain*, we have the host urging an arrangement by which he himself will go hunting

² There is a general description of Type 313 in S. Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York, 1951), pp. 88–90. The analysis of Type 313 in A. Aarne and S. Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale* (FF Communications, 184, Helsinki, 1961) is an abstraction on a high level. Of analyses in closer touch with folk-tales, for my purpose the following proved to be the most useful: H. Holmström, *Studier över svanjungfrumotivet* (Lund, 1919), pp. 17–18, 133–6; the section on Type 313 in P. Delarue, *Le conte populaire français* (Paris, 1957); R. Th. Christiansen, *Studies in Irish and Scandinavian Folktales* (Copenhagen, 1959), pp. 81–108. Since the picture of any folk-tale type does not emerge properly without extensive study of actual examples, I have collected, examined, and compared a large number of published stories of Type 313 in order to be guided in my descriptions by direct knowledge.

The Greek myth of the Argonauts utilizes Type 513B (which has a wonderful ship and a band of wonderful companions) for the introduction, the fusion of the two kinds of tale resulting in the necessary modification of both. See K. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff, 1961), p. 73.

³ For example, J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (Paisley and London, 1890–3), i. 53; J. Curtin, *Myths and Folk-Lore of Ireland* (Boston, 1890), p. 32. Here and elsewhere I cite by the first page of a tale.

⁴ *The Celtic Magazine*, XII (1887), 12, 57.

while the hero remains at ease in the castle, and on the return from the hunt there is to be an exchange, the host giving whatever he has gained and Gawain providing "*quat chek so ze acheue*" (1107), i.e., whatever feat he achieves; this, in the castle life proposed for him, will obviously not be of the same nature as those in *Wars of Alexander* 3098: *And cheued him of cheualry chekis out of nombre*. On three successive days the host is out hunting in the hills from sunrise to sunset, and in the meantime at the castle, through an act performed by the host's wife, Gawain achieves a feat.

In the international popular tale, while the master is away his daughter comes and talks privily with the hero on each of the three days, and on her own initiative she enables him to get each day's task done. And since she acts against her father in helping the hero, we may find her requiring him to keep their dealings secret from her father. This, in any case, is implied. When the master returns, the hero shows him on each of the three days that the task has been accomplished; and, if it is an object that has to be obtained, he delivers it to him. Then the master of the castle makes some comment which expresses suspicion that his daughter has helped the hero, e.g., "You've not sucked this knowledge out of your own breast."⁵ The young man, however, gives nothing away. For instance:

He says, "Wha's helpin' ye, Jack?" He says, "Nobody's helpin' me." He says, "Somebody's helpin' ye, Jack." Jack says, "No!"⁶

In the romance, while the host is away his wife comes on each of the three days to Gawain's bedroom for intimate conversation, and it is by her initiative that he receives a kiss on the first day, two on the second, and three on the third; these kisses enable him to fulfill the arrangement made with his host by giving the kisses to him on his return to the castle each evening. In addition, on the third occasion the lady makes a present of a girdle to Gawain, asking him to keep it secret from her lord. On the first day his host remarks that what Gawain has given him in the exchange may be the better prize—so hinting that the kiss may have been taken from his wife, in whose care he has left Gawain—and inquires where he has managed to

⁵ In the classic example of Type 313 in P. C. Asbjørnsen and J. Moe, *Norske Folkeeventyr* (2nd ed., Christiania, 1852), p. 278, translated as "The Mastermaid" by G. Dasent, *Popular Tales from the Norse*, p. 71 (in my copy, 3rd ed., Edinburgh, 1888).

⁶ From "The Green Man of Knowledge," printed and discussed by H. Hamilton in *Scottish Studies*, II (1958), 47–85.

obtain this valuable possession. But Gawain refuses to disclose the source, saying that it was not part of the agreement to do so:

“Hit may be such hit is þe better, and 3e me breue wolde
Where 3e wan þis ilk wele bi wytte of yorseluen.”

“þat watz not forward,” quoth he, “frayst me no more.”

(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1393–5)⁷

On the second day, the host comments that Gawain will soon be rich if he does such business. And on the third day he observes that Gawain is becoming very prosperous with the profit from this merchandise, if he bought on favorable terms: “3e cach much sele In cheuisaunce of þis chaffer, 3if 3e hade goud chepez” (1938–9). Gawain brushes off the implication, quickly answering, in the same vein as his host, that the terms on which he bought do not matter, the essential being that the acquisition has been promptly handed over in discharge of his obligation:

“3e, of the chepe no charg,” quoth chefly þat oþer,

“As is pertly payed þe [porchaz]⁸ þat I a3te.”

(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1940–1)

However, as desired by the host’s wife, Gawain keeps her present of the girdle secret.

So both in Type 313 and in *Sir Gawain* we have the three successive days on which the master of the castle is out from sunrise to sunset, engaged in hunting, while the young lady comes to the hero and holds privy discourse with him. As regards the task elements, in both accounts—though there is considerable disparity between them—as a result of the young lady’s initiative the hero is provided with feats which, in discharge of the obligation that has been laid on him by the master of the castle, he renders to him on his return. Again, in both tale-type and romance she requires the hero to keep their secret from the master of the castle, and he does so. The master hints that the source of the hero’s achievement is the young lady—who is the daughter in Type 313, the wife in *Sir Gawain*—but the hero will not betray that she has provided him with it.

The resemblance between *The Tasks* and the events at the castle in

⁷ Citations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from the edition by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed., rev. N. Davis (Oxford, 1967).

⁸ For *porchaz* instead of the cited edition’s *chepez*, see the editor’s note.

Sir Gawain is not coincidental, for there is also correspondence between what leads up to them. The Green Knight makes a challenge to a game, and by saying that it is a game for the Christmas season he emphasizes the idea of play. That the Beheading Match is here termed a game has been said to be a rather bizarre notion of the poet's.⁹ For although there is a *jeu* in Arthurian analogues, it is a *jeu parti*, i.e., a choice offered between two parts in a contest, the opponent receiving whichever happens to be the other part: in the case of a beheading match the hero is given the choice of being either the first striker or the first receiver of the decapitating blow.¹⁰ And naturally he chooses to be the first striker of it. It has been suggested that this so-called *jeu parti* may be responsible for the conception of a game in the English romance, but in fact there is no *jeu parti* in the episode in *Caradoc* (part of the First Continuation of Chrestien's *Le Conte del Graal*) which is the closest analogue of all to the Beheading Match in *Sir Gawain* and apparently its main source: in both, the challenger simply proposes to have his head cut off and to return the blow a year later. Again, the Green Knight requires Gawain to discover his place and present himself there in a year and a day, whereas in all other versions of the Beheading Match the return blow is to be received by the hero at the spot at which he decapitated the challenger. On the other hand, in the features of a challenge to a game and the requirement that the hero should undertake a quest for the stranger, before whom he is to present himself in a year and a day, *Sir Gawain* corresponds to a typical introduction to *The Tasks*.

Of the regular introductions, the oldest recorded is that of the hero pursuing a bird to the demon's castle. Many a folk-tale pattern of sufficiently wide distribution to indicate great age is recorded no earlier than the nineteenth century, when the collecting of popular tales became a scholarly occupation. This is when we know of Type 313 with a Swan Maiden episode preceding *The Tasks*, a form of the story which occurs throughout Europe, and in which the hero has set out in quest of the castle because he is under an obligation to go there.¹¹

⁹ *Two Old French Gauvain Romances*, ed. R. C. Johnston and D. D. R. Owen (Edinburgh, 1972), ii.173.

¹⁰ The offer of the choice is set out most clearly in a German romance, *Diu Krône*, 13104-7, ed. G. H. F. Scholl (Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, XXVII, Stuttgart, 1852).

¹¹ On this form of Type 313, see Holmström (note 2 above).

Especially in the eastern parts of Europe and in Denmark, the hero is promised before his birth to a stranger, who is the devil, etc.¹² Typical of Western Europe is another kind of introduction to this form of Type 313, in which the hero comes into the evil being's power through getting into debt to him and having to pay it by going to his castle. It may happen in more than one way, but what Holmström specifies as the mark of this branch of Type 313 is the pattern we require: Youth plays game with stranger, loses, promises to come to his castle in a year and a day, sets out on the way there.¹³ This game-introduction is a favorite in Ireland, where it occurs, as Christiansen has shown, in half of the great number of accounts recorded there which belong to Type 313. A distinctive feature here is the laying of *geasa* on the Gaelic hero to compel him to carry out the quest.¹⁴ According to Christiansen, the occurrence of the game-introduction elsewhere may, with some reason, indicate Irish influence. Outside Ireland and Scottish-Gaelic he cited only a few examples in Europe,¹⁵ but there are many other instances on the Continent, with the distribution suggesting

¹² Holmström's motif H2.

¹³ Motif H1. Of the tales that Holmström assigns to this branch of Type 313, I find that the following have H1 or a close variant: German GT 42, Breton KB 4, 7, Irish KI 2, 4, Italian RI 15, 25, Rhaeto-Roman RL 4, Portuguese RP 1, Brazilian RP 5, Spanish RS 1, 2, 3, Welsh Gypsy ÖZ 3, Jamaican Am 2. To be distinguished, but as a closely-related group, are the versions in which the hero loses riches gambling and then meets the stranger, who imposes the condition of coming to him at his castle (in a year and a day) in return for receiving riches (Breton KB 8, French RF 5) or the means of winning (Flemish GH 1, Walloon RF 3). Further removed are the versions in which the stranger imposes the condition in return for giving the hero riches, but the gambling motif is lacking.

¹⁴ Christiansen (note 2 above), pp. 17, 101-2, (Scottish-Gaelic) 106. *Geas* (pl. *geasa*) in Gaelic folk-tales is a kind of spell, spoken to the victim in some formula of traditional pattern, that lays him under a compulsion, usually to carry out a task. Christiansen had 50 tales of Type 313 in Ireland available for his survey in 1939. Since then, the activity of the Irish Folklore Commission has brought to light a mass of folk-tales, and S. O Suilleabhain and R. Th. Christiansen, *The Types of the Irish Folktales* (FF Communications, 188, Helsinki, 1963), record for Type 313 about 450 versions (plus by-forms) which are largely in manuscript. These should provide a great abundance of tales with the game-introduction.

Some examples in English are: P. Colum, *The King of Ireland's Son* (New York, 1916), p. 5; J. Curtin, *Irish Folk-Tales* (Dublin, 1943 = supplement to *Béaloides*, 11, 12), p. 24; his *Myths and Folk-Lore of Ireland* (Boston, 1890), p. 32 (Holmström's KI 2); *Folk-Lore*, XXVI (1915), 191; *Folk-Lore Journal*, 1 (1883), 316 (Holmström's KI 4); A. P. Graves, *The Irish Fairy Book* (London, 1938), p. 182; M. F. MacGeehin, *The Long-Tailed Hen* (Dublin, 1934), p. 31; S. MacManus, *The Bold Heroes of Hungry Hill* (London, 1952), p. 15; his *In Chimney Corners* (New York, 1919), p. 259; P. Mullen, *Irish Tales* (London, 1938), p. 47.

¹⁵ On some instances of Type 313 with the game-introduction in Norway and Sweden, see Christiansen, pp. 82, 91, 96, 226-9.

that France has been another center of the game-introduction to Type 313.¹⁶ With this opening a folk-tale leads up to *The Tasks* with matter of this kind:

Introduction. The hero is offered a game by a stranger which he loses, typically winning the first two but losing the third of three games; whereupon the stranger requires him to present himself within a year and a day at his castle, but leaves the hero ignorant as to its whereabouts.

Quest. The hero sets out on a quest for the stranger's castle.

The Swan Maiden. The quest is accomplished when the hero comes upon a Swan Maiden bathing, whom he asks for aid in return for letting her have her feather-coat back, and who helps him to reach the castle of the evil being, her father.

For example, in both Ireland and Brittany we have a version in which a prince out hunting meets a stranger and plays cards with him, eventually betting head for head. He loses, and is required to pay the debt in a year and a day at the stranger's castle.¹⁷ Similarly, Gawain has to go to the Green Knight's place in a year and a day to surrender his head. The Breton hero asks "Mais, quel est votre nom et où demeurez-vous?," rather like Gawain:

"Where schulde I wale þe," quoth Gauan, "where is þy place?
I wot neuer where þou wonyes, bi hym þat me wro3t,
Ne I know not þe, kny3t, þy cort ne þi name."

(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 398-400)

In the Breton folk-tale the answer is "Mon nom est Barbauvert, et quant au château que j'habite, vous le chercherez et ferez en sorte de le trouver." Or the strange name given in the reply may be that of the place to be discovered. Thus, in an Irish version, the stranger says, "Within a year and a day from this you're to find out my castle,

¹⁶ Under Type 313 in Delarue (note 2 above) the complex of motifs A (Un jeune homme), A2 (perd tout ce qu'il a en jouant), B (le héros tombe ainsi au pouvoir du diable), C (Il doit se rendre chez lui dans un an et un jour), D (Il part) is shown as occurring in the introduction of several tales: (Nivernais) 10, 11, 13, 16, 22, (Breton) 33 (Holmström's KB 4), 49 (Holmström's KB 7), (Limousin) 66, (French Canada) 89, 92, 93, (Antilles) 106, 109. In a related group of tales, the hero loses riches gambling (A2), then meets the stranger and is given riches (7, 8, 40, 44, 46, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 57, 59, 60, 62, 64, 79) or the means of winning (83, 84), thus falling into his power (B) and having to go to him at his castle (C). In another group of tales, the stranger imposes the same condition in return for giving the hero riches, but the gambling motif is lacking. Cf. note 13 above.

¹⁷ Curtin, *Myths and Folklore*, p. 32; F. M. Luzel, *Contes populaires de Basse-Bretagne* (Paris, 1887), ii.355.

where I live when I'm at home"; and the hero asks, "And who are you?," receiving the answer "I'm the Giant of Band-Beggars' Hall."¹⁸ Similarly, the Green Knight instructs Gawain that "*þou schal seche me þiself, where-so þou hopes I may be funde vpon folde*" (395-6), and hardly throws light on his identity with the information that he is the Knight of the Green Chapel.

For our purpose, a striking feature of the game-introduction to *The Tasks* in the British Isles is the existence of a tradition in which the challenger to the game is green. The Gypsy tale from Wales, noticed by Kittredge in his study of *Sir Gawain*, belongs to Type 313. In this a gentleman comes and challenges Jack, a great gambler, to a game of cards; Jack first wins, but then he loses; and the stranger tells Jack that his name is the Green Man Who Lives in No Man's Land, and that unless Jack finds his castle in a year and a day he will be beheaded.¹⁹ To Type 313 also belongs the Irish-Gaelic tale that Kittredge referred to, *Curadh Glas an Eolais*, "The Green Knight of Knowledge" (*glas* "green; gray"). Here the King of Ireland's son is challenged to a game of cards by a stranger who arrives in a skiff. The prince wins the first two games, but loses the third, and the Green Knight of Knowledge imposes on him the obligation of discovering his abode in a year and a day, or else he will lose his head.²⁰ In 1958 the folk-tale scholar Hamish Hamilton published a Lowland Scots version of Type 313 from Aberdeen in which Jack, a proficient card-player, goes to an inn and joins in a game of cards with a man dressed in green from head to foot. Jack here wins. Before leaving, the stranger answers Jack's inquiry about him by saying that he is the Green Man of Knowledge (cf. *Curadh Glas an Eolais*), and lives East o' the Moon and West o' the stars. Jack sets out to find the place where he lives.²¹ This tale was compared by Hamilton with another Lowland Scots version which follows the familiar pattern, and where the challenger is called Green Sleeves. The King of Scotland's son delights much in gambling, chiefly skittles. A strange old man appears one day and challenges him. The old man wins, and commands the prince to discover his name and abode before that day twelve months, or to suffer death.²²

¹⁸ MacManus, *In Chimney Corners*, p. 259.

¹⁹ A more modern edition than that used by Kittredge is J. Sampson, *XXI Welsh Gipsy Folk-Tales* (Newtown, 1933), p. 17.

²⁰ J. M. O'Reilly, *Curadh Glas an Eolais* (Dublin, 1905).

²¹ See note 6 above.

²² *Transactions of the Buchan Field Club*, IX (1906-8), 170; summary in K. M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales* (London, 1970-1), A.i.296.

Hamilton further cited a Scottish-Gaelic version *Fear Uain Oraid*, where the King of Ireland's son is challenged by a strange horseman to a game of cards. The prince wins twice, but loses the third game; and the stranger, who says that his name is the Green Man of Speech, puts him under the obligation of discovering where he lives, before a year is out.²³ As also noted by Hamilton, the name of the challenger in two Irish versions is Green Leaf and Green Levery.²⁴ I may add another Scottish-Gaelic version, which has already been mentioned to illustrate the hunting activity of the imposer of the tasks. A king's son habitually goes to the top of a knoll to play shinty and one day finds an old man there who challenges him to a game. The stranger, who is called *Bodach Glas* (*bodach* "churl; old man," *glas* "green; gray"), wins all three games, and lays on the prince the obligation of seeking him throughout the world until he is found.²⁵

Hamilton showed that the nomenclature in the Welsh Romany tale betrays an English origin, and observed that the presence of a Green Man in a Lowland Scottish tale, and also in a Gaelic one, does not necessarily mean that Gaelic nomenclature has come over into Scots; it could mean the reverse. He suggested that an unrecovered English folk version of Type 313 is one of the sources of *Sir Gawain*. His view concerning the significance of the color green with the challenger in the folk-tales has much in common with the view of the Green Knight held by John Speirs, who explained him from a Vegetation myth supposed to be represented in England by Jack-in-the-Green (the walking bush of the May festival), by the foliate head of medieval church ornament, and by the folk play (belonging to Christmas), where the central episode is a mock beheading or slaying followed by a revival or restoration of life.²⁶ Hamilton's inclination was to suppose that

in certain versions of 313 the figure of the adversary has at some stage, and for some mysterious reason, become identified with the Green Man of the pub signs, the mummers' plays and the church roof bosses. One might hazard an explanation along the following lines: when the "playing episode" or "beheading game" attached itself as a lead-in to versions of the 313 tale-type, the decapitation motif, with its overtones of death and resurrection,

²³ Summaries in Henderson, p. 71, and Jackson (note 2 above), pp. 11–12.

²⁴ Listed in *Béaloides*, II (1930), 189.

²⁵ See note 4 above.

²⁶ J. Speirs, *Mediaeval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London, 1957), pp. 219–20.

may have led by association to the identification of the adversary with the Green Man of the fertility rites, who (like John Barleycorn) is killed and springs up again.

However, the mummers' plays have no Green Man, there is no evidence in England for such a figure being killed in fertility rites, and the term was not used of Jack-in-the-Green, which took part in an eighteenth-century practice of begging by chimney sweeps. Traditionally a Green Man is a figure dressed in green, whether in leaves or in a green costume, and this was reflected in inn signs. The term has been applied to the foliate head simply by modern convention; here the foliage, sprouting from mouth, etc., may be decorative rather than significant.²⁷ Hamilton's tentative theory about the Green Man in Type 313 is thus even more speculative than it sounds.

Let us look at a version of Type 313 told by a soldier in western Germany and printed in the middle of the nineteenth century. The King of Eiland's son Jacob, who plays cards day and night, comes across a man in the forest who is dressed in green and offers to play with him: if the hero loses, he will be his. When the prince asks him his name, he says that it is Grünus Kravalle. Prince Jack first wins, but then he loses, and the stranger gives the hero a year and a day to find him. With this he disappears, and the prince now realizes with whom he has been dealing. The challenger, we should note, wears the green coat of a huntsman, being described as *ein Jägersmann im grünen Rock*.²⁸ Such a figure is a commonplace of German folklore, as a phantom huntsman, the huntsman of the Wild Hunt, or the devil. Dressed in green from head to foot, the devil is said to be *ein grüner Jäger* (a green huntsman), also *ein grüner Mann* (a green man), and comes to be called *der Grüne* (the Green One), as well as being termed *Grünrock* (Greencoat).²⁹ How widespread this representation of the devil once was in western Europe may be judged from

²⁷ See J. Larwood and J. C. Hotten, *The History of Signboards* (3rd ed., London, 1866), pp. 366–8, and plates x, xiv, xv; F. W. Hackwood, *Inns, Ales, and Drinking Customs of Old England* (London, 1909), p. 296; K. Basford, *The Green Man* (Ipswich, 1978), pp. 18–21; R. Judge, *The Jack in the Green* (Cambridge, England, 1979), pp. 68–77.

²⁸ J. W. Wolf, *Deutsche Hausmärchen* (Leipzig, 1851), p. 286.

²⁹ *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, ed. H. Bächtold-Stäubli (Berlin and Leipzig, 1927–42), iii.1182; J. and W. Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, No. 43; J. Jegerlehner, *Sagen und Märchen aus dem Oberwallis* (Basel, 1913), i.45, 90, 195; C. Kohlrusch, *Schweizerisches Sagenbuch* (Leipzig, 1854–6), p. 60; R. Kühnau, *Schlesische Sagen* (Breslau, 1910–13), ii.636, 646, 665, iii.43; E. Meier, *Deutsche Sagen, Sitten und Gebräuche aus Schwaben* (Stuttgart, 1852), p. 168; E. L. Rochholz, *Schweizersagen aus dem Aargau*

Chaucer's *Friar's Tale*, in which the green dress of the huntsman is worn by the fiend who assumes the guise of a forester and finally makes off with the summoner, who has fallen into his hands, and by Pierre Bercheur's comment, in the middle of the fourteenth century, that *diabolus* habitually wears the green clothes of a huntsman in the stalking of his victims.³⁰

The devil entices a man into a contract with him in order to lead him to perdition. When the hero is playing a gambling game, the devil may come as a huntsman and challenge him, eventually proposing to play soul for soul. *Der Grüne* plays against the gambler at the inn, and identifies himself only by some odd pseudonym.³¹ If people are playing cards when they should be at church, they are joined by an unknown forester in green attire, a stranger in green hunting clothes, or wearing a long, green mantle, who is *der Teufel*.³² Identical with this gambling scene is that in the tale from Aberdeenshire, "The Green Man of Knowledge," Scottish folklore having preserved the devil's green clothes into modern times.³³ Jack hears the bells of a village, "like a church-bell ringin' awa," enters the inn there and finds a card-playing group, of whom one is dressed head to foot in green, "O a very cunnin'-lookin' man," the stranger with whom he plays in a game-introduction to *The Tasks*.

One version of Type 313 has been collected in England, from north-country gypsies, under the title of "Daughter Greengown." A young gentleman, fond of playing cards, is challenged to a game by an old gentleman. The young man first wins, but then he loses, and is required to search for the stranger for a year and a day. The adversary is defined by the variants as: definitely the devil; the devil or some other

(Aarau, 1856-7), ii.203; F. Schönwerth, *Aus der Oberpfalz: Sitten und Sagen* (Augsburg, 1857-9), i.370; I. V. Zingerle, *Sagen, Märchen und Gebräuche aus Tirol* (Innsbruck, 1859), p. 287. Cf. the devil as *l'homme vert* in E. H. Carnoy, *Littérature orale de la Picardie* (Paris, 1883), p. 48; *Méline*, II (1884-5), 321 (Rhaeto-Roman).

³⁰ Noted in Berchorius by D. W. Robertson, "Why the Devil wears Green," *MLN*, LXIX (1954), 470-2.

³¹ Zingerle, p. 269; the poem "Der Karfunkel" among the *Alemannische Gedichte* by J. P. Hebel (1760-1826).

³² N. Gredt, *Sagenschatz des Luxemburger Landes* (Luxemburg, 1885), p. 315; Kühnau, ii.609; A. Meiche, *Sagenbuch des Königreichs Sachsen* (Leipzig, 1903), p. 474.

³³ Recorded in Scottish witch-trials during the 16th and 17th centuries; see M. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1921), pp. 36, 37, 43, 113, 229. A green hunting coat is worn by the devil (under a pseudonym) in J. Hogg, *The Private Manners and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), ed. J. Carey (London, 1969), pp. 208, 223.

high mulo;³⁴ not the devil, but somebody much the same.³⁵ His devilish quality is thus sufficiently evident. And in the array of Type 313 in France the evil being is typically called *le diable*. I conclude that the greenness of the challenger to the game in the folk-tales stems from a tradition in which he is a fiend in the green dress of a huntsman. With this figure we are to compare the challenger to the game in *Sir Gawain*, in his green costume, who later is an active huntsman in his other role, as Gawain's host.

These parallels between *Sir Gawain* and the tale-type I have been considering are much more convincing than the rather general analogues for the temptation theme in the romance, and indicate that the structure of *Sir Gawain* rests on a combination of the Beheading Match with a form of Type 313. The scenes where the young wife tempts the hero, in the romance, constitute a transformation of the privy dealings between him and the daughter in the internationally popular tale. It should be observed that the situation of a young lady coming to the hero's bed is typically Arthurian and that it was variously treated, with love-making often prevented, sometimes by the hero himself.³⁶ The exchange of winnings links this new treatment in *Sir Gawain* with the hero's obligation to render an achievement to the lord on his return at nightfall.

The combination with a form of Type 313 has introduced features which contribute a good deal to the unique power of *Sir Gawain* as a Beheading Match romance. A medieval popular tale, shaped by a process akin to Darwin's "natural selection," presented a model of what had been particularly effective with a very wide range of audience over large tracts of time and space. The connection between folk-tale and *Sir Gawain*, however, does not amount to an equivalence. The romancer is neither giving a version of the international popular tale nor properly following it as a source, but exploiting it, by selection and adaptation, for his own sophisticated ends.³⁷

A Green Man occupying the role of the supernatural challenger to

³⁴ Gypsy term for a supernatural being.

³⁵ "Daughter Greengown" is in *Thompson Notebooks* at the Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies, University of Leeds. The Director, Mr. S. F. Sanderson, kindly supplied photocopies of the variants. There is a summary in Briggs, A.1.202.

³⁶ There are some instances in C. Luttrell, *The Creation of the First Arthurian Romance: A Quest* (London and Evanston, 1974), pp. 111-12, 131-2, 268.

³⁷ I have already examined such operation of an Arthurian romancer, on a form of Type 400, in "From Traditional Tale to Arthurian Romance: *Le Chevalier au Lion*," *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, XXII (1978), 36-57. There I note that variants collected in the

the beheading match raises the question of his devilish nature and suggests that the challenge is the instrument of enticement into his power. However, when the Green Knight arrives at Arthur's court, this suspicion is not brought out. We are told merely that the phenomenon of a green man is there considered to be an illusion (*fantoum and fayryze*): and that after he has gone, carrying away his decapitated head, Arthur and Gawain, although it is agreed that an extraordinary event has taken place, laugh it off. The king finds it possible to suppress his amazement and explain away to the queen what has taken place in this manner:

"Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse,
Laykyng of enterludez, to laze and to syng,
Among þise kynde caroles of kny3tez and ladyez."
(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 471-3)

This attempt at a rational explanation is connected with an English medieval custom which has points of contact with the game-introduction to Type 313. It was often banned, and so we find references to it in local records. Two of the passages in the orders of the city of London read:

(A.D. 1334) Also, we do forbid, on the same pain of imprisonment, that any man shall go about at this Feast of Christmas with companions disguised with false faces, or in any other manner, to the houses of the good folks of the City, for playing of dice there . . .

(A.D. 1418) . . . þat no manere persone, of what astate, degre, or condicioun þat euere he be, duryng þis holy tyme of Cristemes be so hardy in eny wyse to walk by nyght in eny manere mommyng, pleyes, enterludes, or eny oþer disgisynge with eny feynyd berdis, peyntid visers, diffourmyd or colourid visages in eny wyse.³⁸

This custom was raised to the splendor of a royal occasion of which we have a detailed description. Masked men, disguised and excellently arrayed and mounted on horseback, after the fashion of such figures as an emperor, a pope, cardinals, and legates, visited Richard II for his entertainment in the feast of Christmas before his accession

modern period can hardly present a true picture of a traditional tale as it was in medieval times, but that nevertheless light is thrown on its plot structure (pp. 36-7).

³⁸ H. T. Riley, *Memorials of London and London Life* (London, 1868), pp. 193, 669. E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (Oxford, 1903), p. 394, note 1, cites similar orders at Bristol and Chester. This last shows that the custom existed in the north-west midlands.

in 1377. They rode by night to Kennington, entered the hall on foot, invited the prince and his lords to dice, and discreetly lost, handing over rich presents as the stakes. To the prince they set three jewels, one after the other, which he won at three casts.³⁹

The challenger in *Sir Gawain*, whose hair and beard cover the upper part of his body like a cape, who is not only magnificently attired in green but also bright green all over, even his eyebrows shining green, who rides a green horse with a green mane, and seems to belong to the realm of art rather than nature (236: *þen grene aumayl on golde glowande bryzter*), in Arthur's pretence is only a figure of the same kind as that going with mask, colored visage, or feigned beard to people's houses at the time of Christmas festivities to offer the game of dice, and whom we have seen entering a royal hall in some fancy dress. When the interrupted banquet is resumed in *Sir Gawain*, joy fills the hall, in contrast to the corresponding point of the Beheading Match in *Caradoc*, where anxiety so weighs on the banqueters that they can hardly eat. In the English romance, the conception of a Christmas game gives some refuge from the prospect of the hero's fate, and *Gawan watz glad to begynne þose gomez in halle* (495). However, the court eventually has to face the truth. What game there has really been consists of Gawain staking head for head on the Green Knight's not being supernatural, and losing, with the payment of his head put off for a year. When the time comes for Gawain to set out in order to keep the appointment and receive the return blow, the court recognizes well enough what destiny is in store for him, to be beheaded by a supernatural man (681).

Where Gawain has to go for the return blow is a mystery, absent from other versions of the Beheading Match, which focuses attention upon the enigma of the adversary's identity. Instead of the challenger returning to the court, as in the analogous episodes in Irish epic and *Caradoc*, the hero has to set out to discover the location of a person whom no one knows. The apparently hopeless inquiry after his whereabouts is a folk-tale feature:

Day after day he wandered asking everybody he met if they had seen the man he was seeking—he described him, of course—but nobody had. No matter where he went, nor how far, he could hear nothing.

("Daughter Greengown")

³⁹ Chambers, i.394, note 4.

And ay he frayned, as he ferde, at frekez þat he met,
 If þay hade herde any karp of a knyzt grene,
 In any grounde þeraboute, of þe grene chapel;
 And al nykked hym wyth nay, þat neuer in her lyue
 þay seze neuer no segge þat watz of suche hwez
 of grene.

(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 703-8)

A quest in folk-tales is often pursued in conditions of hardship, and the Welsh Gypsy story, "The Green Man of No Man's Land," with its hero journeying in frost and deep snow, presents a parallel to Gawain travelling in sleet and ice.⁴⁰ By emphasizing in this manner Gawain's devotion to his word, the poet underlines the quality that a Beheading Match is calculated to bring out in the hero; at this point, in other versions, the prospect of the return blow is his only, though sufficient, discomfort.

There is no equivalent in the romance to the aid asked for and received by the folk-tale hero from the Swan Maiden, who conducts him to the castle, unless it is Gawain's prayer for harbor, answered by the appearance of the castle in the forest. The Swan Maiden episode, however, may be omitted in the folk-tales, as in "Grünus Kravalle," in which the hero comes upon a great castle with soaring walls made of huge stone blocks (*himmelhohe Mauern von mächtigen Steinen*), even as Gawain sees before him a splendid castle where

þe walle wod in þe water wonderly depe,
 Ande eft a ful huge hezt hit haled vpon lofte
 Of harde hewen ston vp to þe tablez. . . .

(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 787-9)

With his arrival at this castle Gawain has found the adversary, as the folk-tale hero does, but Gawain has done so unwittingly. Whereas Grünus Kravalle, for instance, is there and in his green hunting coat,

⁴⁰ This may raise the question of whether *Sir Gawain* has fed back into folk tradition. Observe, however, that this time of the year for the quest has some parallel in Irish versions of Type 313. The hero sets out after the snow comes in *Béaloides*, I (1928), 270. In *Curadh Glas an Eolais* we have a passing of the seasons to compare with that in *Sir Gawain*: spring comes, then the season passes, and the next, and we come to autumn, the hero leaving after harvest (at each season the folk-tale hero's departure has been postponed at his mother's urging). The differences between *Sir Gawain* and Type 313, although explicable in terms of the artistic use of the latter in the former, are so substantial that a very obvious common ground, apparently necessary for feedback from a literary text into the originating folk pattern, is hardly present.

not only are the inmates of the castle strangely unnamed in the romance— while, in pointed contrast, Gawain's name is made known to them—but it is not yet revealed that the host is identical with the adversary. While the mystery of identity is thus increased by the poet, at the same time the suspension of the quest for the Green Knight (when Gawain is told by the lord of the castle that the Green Chapel lies nearby and he is persuaded to stay until the day appointed for him to be there for the return blow) lets implications sink in about the host himself. He comes to Gawain's view as a huge man with a *Felle face as þe fyre* (847), like the sun-god in *Wars of Alexander* 4922, whose burning intensity seems to be a reason for Alexander's perception that he is not of human kind. This quality in the host, along with his energetic maintenance of festive mirth and hunting, makes him dominate the scene as much as the huge Green Knight does Arthur's court by his vigorous and overwhelming presence.

At the castle Gawain sees a host who is well preserved for his years (844: *of hyghe eldee*); his wife, who is young (1526: *a zonke bynk*) and more beautiful than Guenevere; and an aged, hideous lady. At the high table the old lady is seated with the master, while Gawain and the fair lady (*þe gay burde*) sit together, enjoying each other's company thoroughly (1001–15). The pairing off corresponds to that in Type 313. The master of the castle there (in French called *le diable, le Vieux*, in the Welsh Gypsy tale "The Green Man of No Man's Land" called "the old lord"), I compare to Gawain's host (called in line 1124 *þe olde lorde*); the master's daughter (*la fille du diable*), who becomes the hero's sweetheart, I compare to the young lady in the romance, who in effect tries to become Gawain's; and the master's wife (*la femme du diable, la vieille*, in "The Green Man of No Man's Land" called "the old lady"), who in this demonic family with magical powers is said to be *plus fine et plus dangereuse* than her husband,⁴¹ I compare to *þe olde auncian wyf* (1001), whom the Green Knight later makes out to be Morgan le Fay, the evil fairy with great powers of enchantment. The poet has laid the foundation of a moral test by making the young lady the host's wife instead of his daughter.

The stay at the castle shows how very significant the inspiration of

⁴¹ The devil is traditionally "old" (*antiquus hostis*). His wife is amply illustrated in Type 313 in France, as can be seen from Delarue (note 2 above). "Grey Norris from Warland," *Folk-Lore Journal*, 1 (1883), 316, habitually cited for the Irish form of Type 313,

Type 313 has been, since this section, which is unparalleled in Beheading Match accounts, in *Sir Gawain* occupies a commanding position, constituting half of its length and functionally containing its hub. The importance of the three successive days is reflected in the fullness of their scenic development. Now in the folk-tales we see the master of the castle setting out at sunrise and returning at sunset, with our entire attention fixed on the scene in between, a scene which concerns the hero and the young lady. But there is a significant balance in the romance: the course and the end of the hunt over the landscape are portrayed in fine detail, the activity and the pursuit to death outdoors forming an artistic frame, suggesting parallel and contrast, on either side of the central picture indoors at the castle. And in the romance the motif of decapitation threatened for failure in the tasks is transposed into the bond that binds the events at the castle to the Beheading Match: what happens at the return blow will turn out to depend on Gawain's performance on the three successive days. The daily obligation to the master is discharged, in the romance, as a result of what occurs in the bedroom, as the place where the young lady comes to hold privy discourse with the hero. In the folk-tales, his fate rests on the dealings with her because she saves him from the master, whereas in the romance the situation is reversed by her being secretly in league not with the hero but the host, and Gawain surviving by his own merit (and the support of Virgin Mary) in spite of her efforts to tempt him.

As we approach the climax of the three days, the host drops a hint that Gawain is engaged in a game there with life at stake. After the hero has fully discharged on the first two days the obligation placed on him, his host makes a remark which seems genial, but which hides a threat:

"For I haf fraysted þe twys, and faythful I fynde þe.
 Now 'þrid tyme þrowe best' þenk on þe morne;⁴²
 Make we mery quyl we may and mynne vpon joye,
 For þe lur may mon lach when-so mon lykez."

(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1679–82)

conveniently serves to show the evil being's wife in Ireland. "Grünus Kravalle" and Grimm, No. 113, do the same for Type 313 in Germany.

⁴² Semi-colon, as in the editions by A. C. Cawley (London, 1962) and R. A. Waldron (London, 1970).

The lord sees his daily tests of the hero as casts of dice, as if Gawain has so far won twice: "I have tested you twice, and I find you reliable. Now take heed on the morrow of the saying 'Third time, the lucky throw'; let us make merry while we can and be intent on joy, for a man may face misfortune any time he likes." That is, although Gawain should bear in mind the likelihood of his host's winning on the metaphorical third cast of the dice, he is to postpone this thought to the next day. The ominous maxim⁴³ that follows does not suggest to Gawain the death penalty which losing this game might entail, for he is unaware that the game at the castle is really where he puts his head at stake. He is distracted by the visible threat to his life, the imminent return blow of the Beheading Match, and so fails to hand over the love-gift of the lady's girdle, which she has persuaded him is a talisman with the power of saving him from death, but which (as suggested by its color combination of green and gold) turns out to be the adversary's belt. In so far as the three days consist of a single sequence of events repeated three times and leading to similar results, they correspond to those which the hero survives with success in the folk-tales: Gawain resists the temptations of illicit love and duly delivers the kisses to the lord of the castle. But inasmuch as Gawain succeeds on the first two occasions and fails on the third, through his concealment of the lady's gift, the rhythm is that of the game-introduction to *The Tasks*, with its pattern of the hero winning twice but losing the third game.

When Gawain presents himself at the Green Chapel for the return blow, it turns out to be a hollow mound covered with vegetation, and Gawain observes that the place has a desolate appearance which makes it a suitable spot for the man dressed in green to hold his devilish rites; he thinks it is the devil who, with the intention of destroying him, has imposed the obligation of meeting him there (2185-94). On the basis of this passage, D. B. J. Randall published an article in 1960 asking "Was the Green Knight a Fiend?"⁴⁴ Indeed, the Green Knight's commanding presence, fine figure, and splendid array, as depicted when he arrived to make the challenge to the game, is paralleled in legends about the devil. In Germany he often arrives on the scene as a fine, distinguished gentleman dressed in green, and his splendid green attire may also be described as adorned with the

⁴³ Cf. I Corinthians xv. 32: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

⁴⁴ *SP*, LVII (1960-1), 479-91.

combination of gold with the green which is characteristic of the Green Knight.⁴⁵ Compare the Prince of this World (John xii.31, xiv.30, xvi.11), who appears in German medieval iconography as an elegant figure behind which evil skulls.⁴⁶ Thus one can understand how Gawain could believe the knight in magnificent green clothes to be of the same nature as the challenger to the game whom we have seen in the folk-tales. This voicing of Gawain's thought invites us to have the same suspicion.

Gawain's head is apparently at stake when he lowers it to receive the blow, for it has not yet been revealed that what will happen depends on his performance on those three successive days. The Green Knight first makes two feints with the axe, and before the next and final blow (which nicks Gawain in the neck) he says:

"Halde þe now þe hyze hode þat Arþur þe raʒt,
And kepe þy kanel at þis kest, ʒif hit keuer may."

(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2297–8)

Which means: "May the exalted order of knighthood that Arthur conferred on you preserve you now, and save your neck at this throw, if it can manage to." The noun *kest* has been taken to mean "stroke" here, but there does not seem to be any instance of such an application, the other examples of "a sudden movement; a blow" in the *MED*, s.v. *cast*, sense 1 (f), occurring in a phrase of different construction, with (a) *cast of* (the eye, the hand), referring to sudden movement. What the phrase *at þis kest* resembles is *at last cast*, which is in the *MED* under sense 1 (b), "the throwing of dice." There is no dicing in the *Sir Gawain* context, but this does not present a difficulty. Compare the usage of Old Norse *kast* in *i fyrsta kasti* "the first time," *at seinustum köstum* "at the last moment." *At last cast* itself, for which the

⁴⁵ B. Baader, *Volkssagen aus dem Lande Baden* (Karlsruhe, 1851), p. 111: "ein stattlicher Mann in grünen Kleidern." Kühnau (note 29 above), ii.665: "ein Herr in einem schönen grünen Rocke mit goldenen Tressen." *Ibid.*, iii.43: "ein schöner Herr in einem grünen Rocke." H. von Pfister, *Sagen und Aberglaube aus Hessen und Nassau* (Marburg, 1885), p. 25: "in grünem Kleide ein stattlicher vornehmer Herr." F. Ranke, *Die deutschen Volkssagen* (*Deutsches Sagenbuch*, ed. F. von der Leyen, München, 1909–20, IV), p. 263: "ein stattlicher Jäger." Schönwerth (note 29 above), iii.15: "ein stattlicher Mann, ein grüner." Observe the description of what is specifically called *das stattliche Jägerhabit* of previous centuries, as worn by the phantom huntsman in R. Eisil, *Sagenbuch des Voigtlandes* (Leipzig, 1871), p. 62: "grünes, reich mit goldenen Tressen besetztes Wamms" (a green jacket richly trimmed with gold braid).

⁴⁶ J. Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien* (Paris, 1955–9), ii.2.355–7; *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. E. Kirschbaum (Freiburg, 1968–76), iv.496–8.

MED gives "at (one's) last throw, with (one's) back to the wall," was transferred from the game of dice, and used so idiomatically that among the *MED*'s citations there will be found an application to a bridge near the end of its life. Gawain's adversary has already used the language of dicing for his daily tests of the hero at the castle, and this time the metaphorical third throw of the dice in prospect is the final stroke of the axe. Once more we have the idea that Gawain has survived two gambles, and is being threatened with loss the next time. This conception in common strengthens the bond between the events at the castle and the return blow of the Beheading Match. Apt use has been found for a feature of the game-introduction to *The Tasks*—that the first two of the set go to the hero, and to his opponent the all-important third.

The poet has thus created three games. Gawain is enticed into the first game, which saddles him with what appears to be a death-contract, by a dominating green-clad figure who also deceives Gawain with the information that he will not fail to find him, because many people know him as the Knight of the Green Chapel (454–5); whereas Gawain cannot find people who know him. When at last Gawain finds someone who does know of the Green Chapel, he is a figure of burning intensity and striking energy who tricks him by concealing that he is the person Gawain seeks, and plays a second game with him, about whose nature Gawain is deceived. Now temptation—and consequently the devil—has held an important place in Christian thought on spiritual development. The more ardent the desire for perfection, the more redoubtable the temptations of the devil, who attacks by preference the most virtuous. And, indeed, the trials in *Sir Gawain* are aimed at an upright, blameless man, of whom we have been told that he is *Voyded of vche vylany* (634) and aptly bears on his shield the *endeles knot* of the pentangle, standing in sign of a righteousness seen as a complex of interrelated courtly and religious virtues. The devil usually operates covertly and deceitfully, with ruse as his main weapon, and, in seeking to trick by artifices, here is how he often seeks to catch his victim: by a weak point; at a moment of negligence or distraction; by masking vice by the appearance of virtue; through good but indiscreet intentions; and in a minor matter, if he meets with resistance in major ones.⁴⁷ In the romance, the host

⁴⁷ *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, ed. M. Viller (Paris, 1932–), iii.149, 189, 191, 237.

sets temptation through the ruse of his wife's offering her love to Gawain, with the illicit nature of the proposed relations cloaked under the seemliness of a chivalrous pastime, the courting of ladies, which he, to keep his reputation for courtesy, is urged to pursue in order to show some principles of the art. And Gawain, acting with the best of intentions, as he tries to pass between the Scylla of being discourteous by refusing the lady's love and the Charybdis of committing sin by accepting it and becoming a traitor to his host (1771-5), is drawn into the indiscretion of a covert relationship with his host's wife. A stratagem, relying on Gawain's fear of death, makes this relationship go so far as to cause him to be dishonest towards his host, even if not in a particularly serious matter. In the meantime, the attention paid to the host's activity while Gawain is being tempted suggests the significance of a metaphor which was associated with the devil, the hunting of a soul, for his tempting of a Christian.⁴⁸ Finally, the Green Knight plays a third game, with Gawain's head, and it seems that Gawain cannot be put to death by him unless he first forfeits his soul, for by his lapse at the castle he does not pass any further into his adversary's power to destroy than to suffer a nick in the neck. The sinister resonances need not be dispelled by such a feature as the piety at the castle—the devil could take on any appearance to further his deceptions. That the castle is the answer to Gawain's prayer for harbor does not stand in the way of the implications either. God put Job in Satan's power.⁴⁹

What different light is thrown upon the matter is due to the poet's having it both ways. John Burrow has remarked that what goes a long way to explain why one carries away such a favorable view of the adversary at the end of the poem is the author's tendency to block, and sometimes even falsify, our view of his feelings and thoughts during the castle scenes; the poet seems, in fact, to cheat in a similar fashion with his wife.⁵⁰ So, too, the men at the castle whisper to each other their delight that the guest who has arrived is Gawain, the *fyne fader of nurture* (915-27). On such occasions the author has joined in the game and plays with his audience.

⁴⁸ There are some instances in the *MED*, s.vv. *hunte*, (b); *hunten*, 2 (f); *hunter*, (b).

⁴⁹ In his article Randall (note 44 above) noted the tradition of God allowing Satan to pursue Christians with temptations.

⁵⁰ J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London, 1965), pp. 59, 93-4, 112.

What are we to think, then, when the Green Knight gazes upon Gawain with heartfelt approval (2335: *in hert hit hym lykez*) after the Beheading Match has been consummated, reveals all and assumes the character of judge, with a verdict on Gawain's performance at the castle that justifies the sparing of his life as well as the punishment for his fault? He expresses open admiration of Gawain, praises his conduct under trial at the castle as showing him to be so faultless as to be unparalleled among knights, and minimizes his lapse. Whether we take the Green Knight's behavior at this point at face value or not, it should be observed that his very high praise of Gawain could lead to pride, and that the hero, in response, acts as if he resists temptation again. He is not deflected from judging himself by the highest standards. When the revelation of having been caught in a trap of unrighteousness has a devastating effect on Gawain, the Green Knight makes out he gives absolution, which, because of the hero's full acknowledgment of his fault and through the penance of the cut in his neck, wipes him as clean as if he had never sinned since he was born. And he enjoins Gawain to return with him to the castle in order to make merry. Yet *contricioun moste be continueel* (*Parson's Tale* 304). Slipping into priestly robes—the devil could do this literally—the Green Knight has tried to extinguish in Gawain what in fact lends absolution lasting efficacy. He fails. Then, having previously indicated, by way of assurance as to what kind of people Gawain has been dealing with, that he himself is not supernatural or evil, his name being Bertilak de Hautdesert and the marvel at Arthur's court having been engineered by the old lady at the castle, who sent him in this fashion with malicious intent, but—being Morgan le Fay—is Gawain's aunt, the Green Knight leaves to go *Whiderwarde-so-euer he wolde* (2478) as if his castle did not exist after all, so reminding us of how it had suddenly appeared to Gawain in the forest.

The poet, in combining the evil being of Type 313 who seeks the hero's destruction through punishment for failure with the supernatural adversary of a Beheading Match who ultimately pronounces an approving judgment on the hero, gives the Green Knight an ambiguity that he exploits to create a figure, too large to be merely Morgan le Fay's agent, which fills the imagination and poses an enigma to the end. The opinion of Arthur's court that Gawain's lapse is not to be taken seriously agrees with that expressed by the Green Knight, but it stands for the worldly view, and so also begs the question. To the story of a Beheading Match the poet has added moral

dimension by using Type 313 in such a manner that the fiendish setter of tasks is given the role of tempter, and the trials result in strengthening the perfect knight's humility by the knowledge of his own weakness, even as the devil's temptations do with a religious man:⁵¹

“therefore I find fault with myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”

(Job xliii.6)

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⁵¹ *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, iii.237: Dieu permet que ses serviteurs soient violemment tentés par le démon . . . pour affermir leur vertu, et notamment leur humilité par la connaissance d'eux-mêmes et de leur faiblesse.