11

The Supernatural

HELEN COOPER

The supernatural, a crucial element in all the works of the *Gawain*-poet, takes the form of the divine order beyond nature in the three religious poems, and of secular magic and marvel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (henceforward *Sir Gawain*). Both forms are marked by their otherness, their resistance to any kind of rational analysis: the green man who can pick up his head after it has been cut off, the talismanic girdle, the bejewelled land of the dead, the helpful whale, the bodiless hand that appears in the middle of a feast to inscribe on the wall words all the more threatening for being incomprehensible. Yet the poet insists that the supernatural is not finally 'other', alien or exotic, but rather stands for something within the protagonist of each poem, and therefore, given the poet's insistent moral concern, within the reader too.

It might sound as if reading the poems in this way would take all the fun out of them. The Green Knight is, after all, gripping in a way that no amount of psychological analysis, let alone moral homily, could ever be. In fact, the doubling of effect – narrative excitement, inward thoughtfulness – enables the poet to get the best of both worlds. It is a frequent complaint about the supernatural in medieval romances that it is boring. Chaucer introduces a giant into his own parody of such works, *Sir Thopas*, and has to give him three heads a couple of stanzas later in an attempt to stop the level of excitement from collapsing. A ring or a sword that confers invincibility on a hero has the effect of making him unheroic: *anybody* could win a battle if they had such a weapon. So in the Arthurian stories, the young King Arthur himself has to fight an opponent who is armed with the stolen Excalibur, which draws blood at every stroke, and its scabbard, which prevents its wearer from losing blood – and yet Arthur still wins.[1] The supernatural powers of the sword and scabbard become most telling when the hero is pitted against them: Arthur's achievement here is all the more significant, and exciting, because it is not supernatural, and the magic serves to highlight his courage and prowess. *Sir*

[1] The episode occurs in the French prose *Suite du Merlin*, and appears in Malory's translation of the *Morte Darthur* as Book IV chapters 8–11 (in Caxton's numbering, Vinaver 1971, 84–8).

Gawain would be much less exciting if the girdle were indeed what the lady says it is, a talisman of invulnerability. It is true that Gawain is not killed while he is wearing it; but if he, and we, really believed in its magical powers, his bravery in finally facing the Green Knight would dissolve, and the episode would lose both its suspense and its significance.

This kind of argument, that the most heroic hero is the one who pits his own human resources against supernatural odds, might seem much harder to make for the three religious poems. It is foolish, not heroic, to challenge God, and Jonah and the dreamer of *Pearl* emerge from their confrontation with the divine appearing belittled, fallible – human with all its connotations of weakness rather than potential. God, moreover, is always beyond human apprehension. Not only is He not bound by the natural world; He is also ineffable, beyond language, for language, as medieval religious writers well knew, is a bodily activity, spoken with the tongue, and designed to describe the physical world. Writers about God therefore face a particular problem. The poet has nothing but the earthly tools of language with which to speak about an order beyond nature, just as his protagonists encounter the divine equipped with nothing but their imperfect mortal understanding. It is none the less possible to speak about God through metaphor and symbol. The world of nature itself is God's creation and can be read as a book to reveal something of God's own supra-nature. The word *lamb* is a phonetic signifier for a young sheep; the animal *lamb* can in turn be read as signifying the meekness of Christ in the Passion, His sacrifice for mankind. How far one has travelled from the original concept in such a symbolic reading is shown up by the use in both Revelation and *Pearl* of the term *lamb* to describe the weird creature with seven horns of red gold sitting upon a throne in the midst of the New Jerusalem. By this stage, the natural world has given way to something very un-natural indeed.

It is thus possible to work outwards from something within the natural order towards an understanding of the supernatural, whether of secular marvel or of the divine. The trouble comes in that symbolic significance is not inherent in the physical object. Pearls or girdles may be just that (even Freud was prepared to admit that a cigar need not always be a phallic symbol); or even if one is prepared to 'read' them, to interpret them as signs of something beyond themselves, there are generous possibilities for misinterpretation. The men of Sodom take the beautiful figures who appear in their streets as belonging to the natural order – to be men, not angels. The revellers in the hall at Camelot have no way of knowing whether the Green Knight is man, giant, fairy, phantasm or devil. Gawain is persuaded that the girdle is not as simple as it looks (*Sir Gawain* 1846–50), and, as the criticism on the poem shows (Hanna 1983), it is not as simple as it looks, but probably not for the reasons the lady claims. The *Gawain*-poet repeatedly shows the protagonists of his poems getting things wrong, having to be trained to read the world they inhabit; and in that process, the central character also serves as a

surrogate for the reader of the poem. Gawain's or Jonah's or the *Pearl*-dreamer's making sense of his world charts a parallel process in which the reader learns to 'read' the text properly.

In this process, however, the supernatural of the divine and the supernatural of magic work in somewhat different ways. In the religious poems, the reader may well have a head start over the characters in interpretation (we know what is happening to Jonah or Belshazzar long before they themselves do); but self-discovery for both readers and characters comes as a consequence of symbolic understanding, of apprehending more about the nature of God. The difference between God and humanity, the supra-natural of the divine order and the natural order of the created world, defines what it means to be human. With the secular magic and marvellous in *Sir Gawain*, the reader is likely to share Gawain's bewilderment, but for both a precise understanding of the supernatural nature of the sign matters much less than its human import. It is crucially important that the figures in Sodom are angels; it is hard to be entirely sure what the Green Knight is, and there is a sense in which it ultimately does not matter. That the Trinity appears to Abraham in the form of three persons is significant in itself as the three heads of the giant in *Sir Thopas* signally fail to be; and the Green Knight's ability to pick up his decapitated head would be as little gripping as Sir Olifaunt's multiple heads if his action did not threaten such nasty consequences for Gawain. The pentangle is not an apotropaic symbol to ward off evil:[2] it does nothing within the poem that Gawain himself does not do in his own person.

Part of the *Gawain*-poet's skill lies in the psychological accuracy with which he charts his protagonists' journey towards understanding: the dreamer's reorientation towards his place in God's order in *Pearl*, Jonah's acceptance of his dependence on God, Gawain's discovery that what he is up against is in the final analysis himself, the reader's own training in moral apprehension in *Cleanness*. In this process, the supernatural can appear at first as a distraction from psychological depth, which substitutes narrative excitement for moral alertness and invites the protagonist to focus on something exotic and alien to himself. Brought into closer focus, however, it changes what one thought one knew about one's own nature. The natural, the known, is itself defamiliarised and made strange, so that it can be seen as if for the first time.

Patience

Of the four poems in the manuscript, *Patience* has the least supernatural material in it. This might seem surprising, when the story tells of a man pursued by a vengeful God and swallowed and regurgitated by a whale; but

[2] The primary medieval associations of the number five, and with that the pentangle, are overwhelmingly rational and mathematical rather than magical: see Davis 1993.

here the stress is very much on God's control over the natural world through natural processes, not on His intervention to overturn them. Jonah's first error is simply to underestimate God as a force within this world; given his unpalatable errand, to warn the Ninevites of impending doom, he believes he can escape God's notice just by moving away –

> I wyl me sum oþer waye þat He ne wayte after. (86)[3]

In fact, of course, God is omnipresent in His created world, and Jonah's belief is naive in the extreme:

> He wende wel þat þat Wy3 þat al þe world planted
> Hade no ma3t in þat mere no man for to greue. (111–12)

The resulting storm is not the sort found in *Cleanness*, that floods the world or accompanies the destruction of sinful cities: it is a storm such as regularly overwhelmed the tiny wooden ships that sailed Jonah's Eastern seas or the English Channel. The sailors' initial response is strictly practical, to throw out everything they can spare to lighten the ship. Only when that fails to offer any hope of preservation do they cast lots and throw out their passenger as well.

That the whale is swimming past at the crucial moment is an act of Providence, 'as Wyrde þen schaped' (247), but a Providence that uses natural means: the creature has been disturbed from its normal habitat in the depths, 'þe abyme', by the storm. It is, all the same, a 'wonder' that Jonah is saved, and still more so that he does not die in the whale's stomach:

> What lede mo3t leue bi lawe of any kynde
> Þat any lyf my3t be lent so longe hym withinne? (259–60)

This, the whale's failure to digest Jonah, is the one thing in the poem that is signalled as being against the 'law of kind', the laws of nature, but it is a suspension of a natural process rather than a shift to a different order of experience. If the whale's belly signifies 'hellen wombe' (306), the poet does not elaborate on the idea (in contrast to Biblical exegesis, which gave a standard interpretation of the episode as a type of Christ's descent into Hell); and the depths from which Jonah cries (308) are literal and psychological (the sea, his near-despair) rather than eschatological, a figure of the next world. Nineveh is not destroyed by the supernatural intervention of an avenging God. The woodbine that grows up to provide Jonah with shade both grows and dies by natural processes.

The setting of *Patience* is the ordinary world, which is itself the scene of God's actions within the normal bounds of nature. It is, perhaps, easy to be

[3] All quotations from Andrew and Waldron 1987.

patient when one is faced with something that transgresses the limits of earthly experience; Jonah has to learn patience under rather extraordinary circumstances, but not ones that take him beyond this world.

Cleanness

Cleanness shows with particular clarity the principle of moral enlightenment through encounters with an order beyond the natural. The poem demonstrates repeatedly that outward appearance alone is inadequate as a means to understanding: correct interpretation has to look beyond the physical to find a trans-natural meaning, in a process analogous to the exegetical insistence that the literal level of the Biblical text was not enough. The idea is established in the opening lines, with their reminder that priests can be spiritually filthy beneath their fine vestments. Such a moral and theological commonplace hardly counts as a supernatural element in the poem; but the kind of gap that is opened here between outward form and inward significance repeatedly, as the poem progresses, allows space for the divine to enter. *Things*, in this poem as in *Sir Gawain*, are very often not what they seem.

The lack of necessary connection between outward physical appearance and inner meaning requires constant attentiveness from the audience. The ark is constructed without sails, rudder or oars (417–20), for God alone is its guide and pilot: its outward form appears to invite disaster, its divine control ensures salvation. Such connections between outer and inner can result in something akin to shape-shifting, where physical form is itself transmuted by a process that has its origins beyond the natural world. Nebuchadnezzar undergoes a transformation from man to the form of a beast, so that his outward shape becomes a true signifier of his inward state; not until he understands God's grace is he metamorphosed back from beastlikeness to humanity. Lot's wife, transformed into a pillar of salt, is the victim of metamorphosis as punishment, the fixedness of the pillar signifying her looking back, the salt as a terrible revenge for her salting the angels' food (999). The point of these episodes is a moral one, but the poet is fully alert to the narrative attractiveness of making theologically correct miracle look like seductive marvel: the outward form of the punishments is much more what one expects to find in Ovid's tales of the interventions in the natural world by the pagan gods, or in stories of enchantresses or fairies, than in Biblical homily. In this poem, the boundary between the human and divine worlds is very permeable indeed. God Himself comes walking down the road to Abraham's dwelling as he lies in the shade under a tree; the fallen angels engender giants on the daughters of men; a disembodied hand appears in the course of Belshazzar's feast to write inscrutable words on the wall. The natural and supra-natural interpenetrate as freely, and with much the same sense of wonder, as happens with the passage between this world and the

Otherworld of fairy in near-contemporary romances such as *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Launfal* or *Thomas of Erceldoune*.

This drawing of analogies between God's world and the Otherworld, between miracle and magic, serves as a good rhetorical and narrative strategy – the poet can draw on his listeners' predisposition to find magic more attractive and exciting than theology; but it can also serve to define a misreading, to show a sign being taken in the wrong way. The process is most explicit in the episode of the writing on the wall, which is described both within the narrative and by Baltazar himself as a 'ferly', a marvel with strong connotations of other-worldliness about it (1529, 1629).

> In þe palays principale, vpon þe playn wowe,
> In contrary of þe candlestik, þer clerest hit schyned,
> Þer apered a paume, with poyntel in fyngres,
> Þat watȝ grysly and gret, and grymly he wrytes;
> Non oþer forme bot a fust faylande þe wryste
> Pared on the parget, purtrayed lettres. (1531–6)

The poem's readers know the origin of the terrifying hand and its enigmatic writing to be divine; the pagan Baltazar takes them as supernatural in a more black magic sense, calling on sorcerers, raisers of spirits, and 'wychez and walkyries' to come to read them (1576–9). No such 'clerkes' can understand them, however, for they have no true spiritual insight. It needs Daniel, prophet of the true God, to interpret the signs correctly.

As this episode demonstrates, the poet is thoroughly alert to the possibilities of borrowing elements from the secular supernatural to make a spiritual point, and there are a number of other passages where he exploits marvels or magic in a similar fashion. The fearful storms in his accounts of Noah and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah overgo those raised by enchanters as widely separated in time as Medea and Prospero, or, to take examples closer to the poet, by the fairy king Oberon in the French romance *Huon of Bordeaux*, and by the action of pouring water onto a stone in the *Yvain* of Chrétien de Troyes and its Middle English translation.[4] These enchantments, however, show only a partial and temporary control of the natural order; God's control is absolute, and He can intervene in it whenever and however He wishes. The natural world is His creation; He establishes its order in the Garden of Eden, and confirms it in His promise to Noah that seed-time and harvest shall not fail (523–39). It is a world of generation and regeneration; the animals are sent out from the ark to multiply, each to its own particular habitat, and God's great speech to Abraham on the joys of 'þe play of paramorez' (700) confirms its place in the human as well as the animal order. This is why the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is so intolerable, because it breaks

4 See the Tudor translation by Lord Berners (Lee 1882), chs. xxi, xxiii, xliv (pp. 64, 67, 156); *Yvain and Gawain* (Friedman and Harrington 1964), 319–84, 621–4.

God's order for His own creation. The site of the destroyed cities, around the Dead Sea, is accordingly represented as a rupture in the fabric of nature. The poet's account is largely borrowed from Sir John Mandeville's highly-coloured description of the marvels of the East, but he stresses further how contrary to the natural order the place is, sometimes by contrasting it with the ordinary world familiar to the reader, sometimes by frightening details of further unnaturalness. The pillar formed by Lot's petrified wife was, supposedly, such a marked topographical feature that it appears on the Mappa Mundi, the great thirteenth-century map of the world preserved at Hereford Cathedral; the poet calls attention to its strangeness by noting the paradoxically mundane detail that cattle use it as a salt-lick. Mandeville reports that the waters of the Dead Sea cause barrenness rather than fertility; iron floats in it, while a feather will sink; and it will not swallow any living thing. The poet startlingly enhances this last property by claiming that any creature thrown into it will survive until the Last Judgement (1029–32). The point of all this is precisely that it is counter-natural, *contra naturam* as the Latin text of Sir John Mandeville's *Travels* puts it; 'alle þe costes of kynde it combrez vchone' (1024), for it figures the unnaturalness of the sin that called down God's anger.[5] The fruit that grows beside the Dead Sea similarly breaks right order by being beautiful in appearance but containing foul-tasting ashes within the rind, so recalling the inwardly defiled priests of the opening lines. Once again, the outward appearance is inadequate as a sign of what lies within; physical form belies the symbolic order of divine meaning.

Pearl

The sign system that represents the supra-natural in *Pearl* is not misleading in the way it can be in *Cleanness*; it is rather that the dreamer cannot understand it, that he takes it literally, reads the thing for the symbol, and has to be educated by the maiden to interpret in a supra-natural sense what appears to him to be physical. Much of this happens within their debate, at a conceptual level; he has to learn new and transcendent meanings for ideas and images such as pearls, courtesy, Jerusalem – even for words such as 'more', which in this disorienting world of God's infinite abundance stands for an absolute that allows of no comparison; there can be no corresponding 'less'. The intellectual qualities of the debate distance such transcendent meanings from most narrative supernatural: instead of participating in exciting events,

5 Seymour 1963, 60, 61. The surviving Middle English translations postdate the *Gawain*-poet, and he is likely to have been working from the French; some of the details of his account, however (survival until the Last Judgement, the pillar of salt that was Lot's wife being licked by cows), do not seem to be from any known version of Mandeville, though the salt-lick does figure in the *Cursor Mundi* (Morris 1874–93, 2855–6).

the dreamer has to learn to translate one sign system (words describing the physical world) into another (this-worldly concepts standing for spiritual or divine ones) in a strenuous mental process. Even here, however, the otherness of the supra-natural order is stressed by the distance, even the contradictions, between the physical sign system and its heavenly signified. The objections of the workers in the vineyard to the unfair system of payment are, in earthly terms, unanswerable, but earthly unfairness can point beyond itself to divine justice. Blood in this world stains indelibly; in heaven, it washes into spotless whiteness (766; Revelation 7.14).

The supernatural in the narrative outside the debate takes a more physical outward form than this intellectual variety, being based on things rather than concepts. The opening section portrays this world only, with its processes of seedtime and harvest such as define the natural order in *Cleanness*; the pearl at this point remains a physical object, and the narrator is completely bound up in earthly grief. It is not until the second section, when the dreamer-narrator announces a shift to a world that resembles one of romance adventure and marvel, that the supra-natural order of the divine takes over, and even then he does not recognise it for what it is. In contrast to the landscapes of most dream visions, which portray the natural world raised to an ideal level, this landscape is anti-natural, inorganic; its blue-trunked trees bear silver leaves that one cannot imagine withering or fading, the intensity of light is beyond the power of any sun. His suggestion that it is a world of 'mervaylez' (64) is inadequate, but he also has to learn that it is not exactly a world of anything else either. The maiden indicates to him that the landscape does not have any real existence at all (295–6), that his encounter with her is not happening in the spatial and visual form that is all his understanding can comprehend. The full supra-natural quality of his experience has to be translated back into terms that carry some physical properties with them if he is to apprehend anything whatsoever.

If the dreamer's understanding is relentlessly this-worldly, the content of his vision is as relentlessly 'other'. The sources for the poet's description of the New Jerusalem lie in the Book of Revelation, but the inspiration for the dream landscapes seems to have as much to do with fairy worlds as with the Bible. The jewelled land in which those who have been lost from the mortal world are preserved brings reminiscences of romances such as *Sir Orfeo*, with its crystal-walled castle and dwellings of precious stones; that such kingdoms are often entered through a hill or a rock means that they too get their light from some source other than the sun or moon.[6] The maiden herself, of beauty beyond the natural (as the dreamer himself notes, 749), recalls fairy mistresses such as that in *Sir Launfal*, though her role in the poem – as an instructress

6 *Sir Orfeo* (Bliss 1966), 347–72, 387–401 (Auchinleck version); see also Patch 1950, 232. The comparison works in both directions: the *Orfeo* poet compares his fairy world to Paradise (376).

who will turn the dreamer's love away from her and towards Christ – is the opposite of theirs. The city that can only be entered by those of complete purity (971–2) is also reminiscent of supernatural tests in the Arthurian legends, such as the drinking-horn devised by Morgan le Fay that spills wine on a woman of less than perfect chastity, or the ship that can only be entered by those of perfect faith.[7] Such associations are not developed by the poet, however; they remain almost at the subliminal level, to give the reader something of the same sense of disorientation and suspense that the dreamer experiences.

The supra-natural in *Pearl* requires not a mere adjustment to the rules of a fairy culture, but an entire reorientation of the mind, a rethinking of what constitutes the rational. This is a world in which everyone is queen or king, where the highest form of deserving is to have done nothing, and where a Lamb with seven horns of red gold practises polygamy on a telephone-number scale. It is no wonder that the dreamer has trouble adjusting. Yet the culmination of the vision is not any of these: it is the moment when the dreamer sees the Lamb's wound, and feels the quintessentially human emotion of pity, compassion. The order of God may be alien to the mortal order, the 'worlde wete' of nature (761), but in the Incarnation and the Passion He stepped across the divide between the two to identify with suffering humanity. What the dreamer finally has to learn is that Christ suffered as man; the marvellous vision gives way in the final stanza to the everyday miracle of transubstantiation, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist,

> Þat in þe forme of bred and wyn
> Þe preste vus schewez vch a daye. (1209–10)

It is immensely important that the poem should not leave the dreamer in his otherworld country, or end at the moment of his waking. It takes him back from the 'so strange a place' of his dream (175) to the vale of tears, the 'doel-dongeon', of the mortal world, but with a new understanding of the order of nature in which he lives. The poem is about what it means to be mortal; ultimately that meaning will embrace the New Jerusalem, but for the narrator, and for all readers of the poem, the lessons of the work have to be put into practice in this world.

Sir Gawain

Sir Gawain is a Christian poem, but it is not a religious one. Its affiliations lie with romances rather than with theological or homiletic literature. Its hero has to confront, not the disorienting and absolute Other of God, but a series

7 These occur in the French prose *Tristan* and the *Grail*; for Malory's versions, see VIII.34, XVII.2 (Vinaver 1971, 270–1, 579–80).

of adventures that are never quite what they seem, and in which neither he nor the reader is quite sure what elements belong to the natural world and what to the worlds of magic and the supernatural. As in *Cleanness*, there are plenty of signs, and very little certainty as to how they might mean; but at least in *Cleanness* there is finally an unequivocal moral import behind them all. It is far from clear in *Sir Gawain* when something stands merely for itself and when it might be a sign for something else, nor whether that something else might be good or bad.[8]

A good deal of earlier criticism on the poem was devoted to uncovering the distant pagan origins and antecedents of those elements in it that do appear to be supernatural – green men who renew their lives at the New Year, Morgan le Fay's reputed origins in the Irish pantheon,[9] Gawain's own possible origins in a Celtic sun-god. Such sources can never be more than hypothetical, not only because it is highly unlikely that the *Gawain*-poet could have known them, but because they were almost entirely reconstructed, or invented, on the basis of scraps of evidence that are mostly widely separated from the poem temporally and geographically. They have none the less been taken as providing the meaning of the poem: what other medieval green men might be hypothesised to have been, the Green Knight must also be. The results, unsurprisingly, fail to illuminate the poem much, and recent scholarship has tended to move away from seeking out pagan parallels to reading the poem rather as if it were another moral homily like *Patience*, a cautionary tale about a man who failed to trust the Virgin and instead placed his faith in a supposedly magic girdle that had no power to protect him. This is, however, still not how the poem is written, and it leaves large areas of it unexplained. The Virgin specialises more in the salvation of souls than in the life-saving that Gawain so desperately wants. She is particularly powerful in protecting humankind from the assaults of the devil; but although Gawain does begin to wonder at one stage whether the Green Knight might be the devil, he is wrong. The poem is not pagan, whatever elements of fertility figures the Green Knight may retain; but its Christianity does not bring with it a defined theological meaning. As a romance, its connotations and range of reference belong with other romances, Arthurian in particular, where challengers arrive at the great feasts of the annual cycle, where Morgan le Fay is the implacable enemy of the renown of Arthur's court, and where magic objects may not be commonplace but are not impossible either.

The work portrays a clash between the ordinary human and knightly world of Arthur's court, and something that presents itself as profoundly other. The Christmas festivities at the start show the court enjoying a very good party, but not an implausibly exotic one; similar events would take place

8 Arthur 1987, 3 discusses how the poem both invites and resists decoding.

9 Attempts to link Morgan with the Irish Morrìgan, goddesses of war, are misguided, as the words are not cognate: see *Contributions* 1973–6, s.v. Morrìgan.

at Christmas in the contemporary royal court. The appearance of the Green Knight is all the more shocking by the contrast; this has not seemed to be a world where such things could happen. Even the adventures that Arthur is waiting for before he starts to eat, a traditional motif in Arthurian romances, are of the commonplace and possible variety: stories of combats, requests for jousts and so on. Coloured knights in other romances take their names from the colours of their armour and trappings alone: the Red Knight who is the novice Perceval's first opponent, for instance, or the various knights, including a Green Knight named Sir Pertholepe, whose defeat establishes the chivalric reputation of Gawain's young brother Gareth.[10] No one in *Sir Gawain* is prepared for a man and horse whose greenness extends to flesh and hair. Still more disturbing are the contradictory signs as to what he might be, and his refusal to fit into any possible categories (Spearing 1970, 179–80, 223; Arthur 1987, 3–4). The poet indicates that he is not a giant, but a man (141); but men do not have green skin and beards. He is not a wild man, a *wodwos*; those are savage creatures, unclothed and covered with hair, who live in the deep woods (Bernheimer 1952), where Gawain will encounter them later. Nor, despite his beard as big as a bush (182), is he a 'green man' of the kind it was currently fashionable to portray in church carvings, their heads emerging from and merging into foliage or with tendrils twisting out of their mouths (Basford 1978, esp. plates 48–80). Devils sometimes wear green, as the devil does in Chaucer's *Friar's Tale* (*Canterbury Tales*, Benson 1987, III. 1382; Robertson 1954; and see Brewer in this volume); but such an idea does not seem to occur at this point to the onlookers, though they do wonder whether he might be 'fantoume and fayryȝe' (240). One of the most disturbing things about the Green Knight, however, is the fact that he cannot easily be classed even as 'other'. His clothes are fine and of rich materials, such as any knight might value. He carries an axe, an obvious metonymy for destruction, in one hand, and in the other a holly bob, 'þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare' (207). As it stands, that line is a mere statement of fact; it may invite interpretation of the holly as a token of continuing life or a fertility symbol, but it falls well short of committing the poet to authorising such a meaning, and announces nothing about the Green Knight's nature or intentions. It does not suggest hostility, especially as messengers often carried branches to indicate their good intentions; but neither does the axe suggest peace. He asks for a Christmas game, which is to consist of having himself beheaded in exchange for a return blow – if it could ever happen – in a year's time. Malory's Gareth too has to face what seems to be a knight armed with an axe, who can also be dismembered and reconstituted; but he is a creation of 'subtyle craufftes' (Vinaver 1971, 205), and we are given a privileged view

10 Chrétien de Troyes, *Le conte du Graal* (Lecoy 1975), 869–70, 948 etc. (Kibler 1991, 392–3), and its free Middle English adaptation, *Sir Percevall of Galles* (French and Hale 1964, 531–603), 603, 665 etc.; Vinaver 1971, 184–207, esp. 192 (VII.7–23, esp. 12).

of both his creation and his resuscitation. That the Green Knight's decapitation makes no difference to his behaviour, speech or control of his own actions makes him much more terrifying.

That irreconcilable variety of the signs concerning the Green Knight, and their contradictory meanings, continues throughout the work. His assurance to Gawain that he cannot help but find him sounds very like a periphrasis for death; the Old Man in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* gives a similar assurance to the rioters who are seeking Death to kill him – 'Noght for youre boost he wole him no thyng hyde' (*Canterbury Tales*, Benson 1987, VI. 764). The guide's words to Gawain about the denizen of the Green Chapel, that he kills everyone who comes by, whether knight, priest or churl (the three estates that composed medieval society), similarly suggest that Gawain is on his way to meet a personified Death, with whom no one can survive an encounter. The Green Chapel itself, which sounds godly though odd (chapels are not normally green), turns out to be a barrow, a mound of no great distinctiveness; but the threat it contains enlarges any superstitious associations it might carry to make it diabolical in Gawain's eyes, to the point where he wonders if he might be about to encounter the devil. That cannot be right, given that the figure he is about to meet is his host in a different shape, and he has celebrated Mass in his household every morning (one of the standard tests for devils being whether they can endure the presence of the Eucharist);[11] but neither Gawain nor the reader as yet knows that the two are identical. Other suggestions as to interpretation, less explicit in the poem and therefore less likely though not necessarily impossible, have also been made: that the Green Knight is associated with Christ, for instance, through his appearances at Advent and the Judgement of his second coming; or that he represents the Old Law, an argument related to the fact that New Year's Day, the cusp of the year when Gawain has to go to meet what he expects to be certain death, is also the Feast of the Circumcision (Shoaf 1984, 49–54).

The possibilities are too many, and too contradictory: death and life, God and the devil. What they all have in common – and what Gawain himself never seems to doubt – is that the Green Knight must mean something beyond himself: he cannot simply be a knight who is green. Yet when he gives his own summary explanation of who he is – that he is called Bertilak de Hautdesert, and that he had been sent in such fashion to Arthur's court by Morgan le Fay in order to scare Guinevere to death – that is just what he asks Gawain to believe. The poet does not necessarily endorse Bertilak's statement: the last view he allows us of him is in his shape as Green Knight, not as Bertilak, riding off to an unknown destination, 'whither-so-euer he wolde' (2478). The poet never commits himself in his own voice as to whether the

11 There is an example of such a test for theological acceptability in one of the lais of Marie de France, *Yonec*, in which a lady has the Eucharist administered to a suitor who shape-shifts between man and bird.

Green Knight 'really' is Sir Bertilak under enchantment, or whether he really is primarily the Green Knight (as the guide suggests, with his account of the grisly inhabitant of the Green Chapel) who is merely playing the host as a means of waylaying Gawain. Since the poet is creating a fiction, he has no need to explain or define. He need not worry about the 'reality' behind the story, because it is story, not fact. The very lack of explanation, much of the time, is what makes for most of the suspense, and for the final moral force of the poem.

The role that the Green Knight assigns to Morgan le Fay would on first reading seem to militate against such mysteriousness. Her habits, familiar from other romances, define her as a specialist in magic and the supernatural, so she should be ideally cast to be the motive force of the action; but neither in narrative detail nor in import does his explanation fit with the rest of the poem. She may have intended to test the reputation of Arthur's court, but Bertilak is very clear that it was he himself who put his wife up to wooing Gawain, and there is no suggestion that Morgan even knows about his testing. It can hardly be her skills in necromancy that have created the girdle, since its magic properties turn out to be non-existent. The most shocking of all the Green Knight's revelations to Gawain, however, has nothing to do with Morgan's supernatural powers, but everything to do with Gawain's own nature: that she is his aunt. His prime antagonist has been, not a strange green challenger who has seemed to represent everything that Arthur's court is not, but one of his own kin.[12] In the meticulous mirror-symmetry of the poem's structure – the Troy references at the beginning and end framing the scenes at Camelot, the arming and the blows inside those, the three hunts and bedroom scenes at the centre – this revelation is reflected exactly by Gawain's claim at the start that the only good thing about him is Arthur's, his uncle's, blood in his body (357). It may indeed have been Gawain's position between the two, equal kin both to his mother's chivalric brother and to her necromantic sister, that suggested to the poet Gawain's peculiar potential as the central character. The Gawain of the Arthurian romances is always associated with Arthurian knightliness; but this Gawain also has, quite literally in his blood, the strains of his subversive and imperfect kinswoman. Here, it is not her supernatural powers that matter so much as their kinship, their shared nature.

None of this amounts to a denial that there is a supernatural element in the poem: it is undeniably there in the Green Knight, whether he is Bertilak turned green or the Green Knight turned human. Such shape-shifting, and his survival of decapitation, lie decisively outside the normal limits of the physical world. There are plenty of other places in the romance, however,

12 For an interpretation of Morgan as a character in the hero's family romance in a more psychoanalytical sense, see Brewer 1988c.

where one cannot tell whether something is supernatural. Gawain comes upon the castle, for instance, when he has been praying for somewhere to take shelter and hear Mass (736–9, 754–6). The rhetorical construction of the scene allows for three explanations of its sudden appearance: the natural one, that when riding through a forest it is impossible to see more than a few yards ahead; the miraculous one, that the castle appears as an answer to Gawain's prayer; or the supernatural one, that it is in some sense an other-worldly castle that can materialise when required. The first of these does not necessarily exclude either of the other two, and so leaves the question of what the castle is, how Gawain or the reader should interpret it, or indeed whether it requires any interpretation at all, completely unresolved. That it turns out to be the site of Gawain's temptation suggests retrospectively that the second explanation must be wrong, unless the Virgin is given to answering prayers in very backhanded ways; Gawain would have been better off without any answer at all. The third possibility, that it is in some sense a supernatural manifestation, does not occur to Gawain, but it is a meaning made available to the reader by other romances. The Grail castle appears to Perceval in Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte del Graal* when there similarly seems to be no shelter to be seen, and he is told later that there is none for miles around (Lecoy 1975, 3029–45, 3452–9; Kibler 1991, 418, 423); and in *Huon of Bordeaux*, Oberon creates a fairy castle with an abundance of towers, and later a palace too, for the sake of the hero (Lee 1882, chs. xxii, xxv (pp. 64, 67)).

The same question as to whether or not something is supernatural arises, much more crucially for the meaning of the poem, in relation to the girdle. The lady assures Gawain that he will not be killed while he is wearing it, and he does indeed survive; and again romance expectations are on the lady's side, since it is common for heroes to have some kind of magic assistance, and not infrequent for them to complete apparently impossible tasks through the help of women (Jason's achievement of the Golden Fleece with the aid of Medea was one example widely known in the Middle Ages; and in one of the Charlemagne romances, the *Sowdone of Babylone* (Hausknecht 1881), the heroine's magic girdle keeps the Peers from starvation (2299–318). Finally, however, the girdle too works in a way that says more about the human than the supernatural. It raises the problems associated with any talisman of invulnerability: there is nothing heroic about being incapable of injury, no courage where there is no reason for fear. Gawain, indeed, never quite seems to trust the girdle despite the lady's assurances as to its magical powers: he spends a grim night after he has taken it, thinking on what is going to happen to him the next day, rather than sleeping the sleep of security. The poet's solution to the problem of reconciling magic with heroism is peculiarly radical. For long, in the more thoughtful romances, writers had used magic in surprising ways – used it, in particular, non-magically, or against the hero, or as a way of bringing out something in himself. So Arthur fights against Excalibur; Horn, hero of one of the earliest English romances, can only

activate the 'magic' in his ring that will enable him to win battles against fearsome odds if he also thinks of his beloved who gave it to him; the lovers Floris and Blaunchefloure, condemned to be burned after being found in bed together, each refuse to take the ring that will give its bearer magic protection, and are saved instead by the pity engendered in their judge by such strength of love (Cooper 1976). In none of these cases is the magic seen to work magically, yet the audience is never invited to be sceptical, to doubt its capacity. In one instance, when it does visibly work, it is immediately put out of action as unwanted: the Isolde of Gottfried von Strassburg's version of the Tristan story is sent by her lover a magic dog with a bell round its neck, the sound of which makes it impossible to feel unhappy. Isolde's reaction is to keep the dog for the sake of the giver, but she removes the bell so that she will not be happy while Tristan grieves over their separation.

The green girdle is the precise opposite of those. Horn's and Floris's rings, Isolde's bell, Arthur's sword, all show up something beyond the commonplace in their owners: supra-human love in Isolde and Floris and Blaunchefloure, extraordinary courage in Arthur, something of both in Horn. The poet never excludes the possibility that the girdle should be taken as magic, though there must be few readers who would finally accept the lady's statement, that the girdle will protect Gawain from death, rather than Bertilak's, that it alone is the reason for his injury. The girdle's lack of supernatural qualities finally serves to measure, not how far Gawain has progressed beyond what any mortal could manage, but his failure to advance, to become supra-human. The pentangle in its entirety was a 'bitoknyng of trawþe' (626), *trouthe* being a quality that, as both Chaucer and Langland note, humankind can share with God, and that Langland further insists belongs particularly to knights.[13] The girdle, by contrast is a 'token of vntrawþe' (2509), of a failure on Gawain's part to live up to the highest chivalric standard that also has the potential to reflect God's image in man. Gawain may, as the Green Knight tells him, be like a pearl among white peas, but in his own eyes and so far as his own standards proclaimed in the pentangle are concerned, he is a failure. What catches him out is not even the striking sins he accuses himself of and from which the poet is so careful to exonerate him – covetousness, cowardice – but sheer love of life, instinct for survival: an instinct he shares with the animals on the hunt, and which is the lowest common denominator of being alive, of belonging to the order of *kynde*. Even in *Sir Gawain*, it is in the natural order, not the supernatural, that the most important things happen.

[13] See e.g. Chaucer's *Balade de Bon Conseyl* ('Trouthe'), and Schmidt 1978, I. 85–104.

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Derek Brewer and
Jonathan Gibson

D. S. BREWER

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