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GAWAIN: TRANSFORMATIONS OF AN ARCHETYPE

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Abstract. *The origin of the Grail legend, as first suggested by Jessie Weston and confirmed by the majority of anthropologists, is probably one of the numerous mystery cults coexisting with early Christianity, but condemned as heresies and driven underground when the Christian myth was established as a state religion. The complete version of this cult is lost to us but its fragments, scattered in various European and Oriental tales, point to a common source in the Bronze Age mythic complex involving the immortal Goddess and her consort, the ever-dying, ever-reborn god of vegetation. It is this ancient vegetative deity, concealed beneath a thin disguise of a Christian knight, that is incarnated in Gawain, the oldest, most primitive figure in the Arthurian romances, whose reputation as a ladies' man is a survival of his original role of the Champion of the Goddess. His numerous transformations - from the lover of the Goddess of the archaic fertility rituals, through the maidens' knight or alternately the Maiden's knight of medieval romance - include also the archetypal woman destroyer of Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" and thus anticipate Shakespeare's tragic heroes. Shakespeare's centrality to the western canon, it might be argued then, resides not in the thematic originality, but in a new, and still unsurpassed way, in which his plays re-articulate and transmit to us the forgotten wisdom of the earliest pagan myths.*

In a crucial episode from *Parzival,* an early thirteenth century romance by Wolfram von Achenbach, Gawain, one of the two protagonists engaged in the quest for the Holy Grail, comes to a spring that wells from a rock, where he sees a lady whose beauty brings him to a stop. Defenceless against women, the middle-aged Gawain has already behind him a youth filled with casual amours; but in this otherworldly dangerous female he beholds in an instant and unquestionably the woman of his life. In Jung's terminology such women are "*anima* figures, the *anima* being for male the *archetype of life itself*, life's promise and allure."[1] They are for man, he states elsewhere, an image of "My Lady

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[1] C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious,* Pantheon Books, 1959, p. 32.

Soul."[2] Unlike Langland's Soul, safely subordinated to Common Sense, Wolfram's anima is a perilous female, "a seductress, drawing man into life - and not only into life's reasonable and useful aspects but into its frightful paradoxes and ambivalences, where good and evil, success and ruin, hope and despair counterbalance one another."[3] The success of Gawain's undertaking, as we shall see later, is indeed bound up with his readiness to let go of himself and follow, with love and loyalty, the moving principle of his life, his destiny, mirrored as if by magic in the form of this woman sitting by a spring.[4]

In the background of this scene, as of all Arthurian romances, is the pagan mythology of Celtic Britain. The English texts containing the first literary reference to Arthur were intended as chronicles, but are more than that, for they also represent a rich compendium of Celtic myth. In those patriotic epics the factual truth concerning the historical Arthur had already grown into a legend wherein the historical Arthur merged with divine kings of Celtic lore: his death, it was believed, was a temporary sojourn in Avalon - the Celtic otherworld - whence he would return to life again and recover their ancestral land from the Saxons. Yet, although it is here that we first learn of Arthur's favourite knights - Gawain among them - and Goddess Igrante (a version of Morgan or Morrigan), dwelling in the Land Bellow Waves and nursing the mortally wounded king, it is not the amorous adventures of the individual knights or any female figure, earthly or otherworldly, but Arthur himself that holds the centre of the stage: the heroic warrior whose military campaigns echo the harsh battle sounds of clashing swords from Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry and whose awaited return from the otherworldly land of the Goddess does not

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[2] C. G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, Pantheon Books, 1959, p. 13.

[3] Ibid.

[4] One of the famous counterparts in modern literature of this archetypal encounter is the episode on the beach in the fourth chapter of James Joyce's' novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* In this epiphanic moment, Stephen's wounded soul, hanging back for years from her destiny - that of artist and lover - to brood alone on the shame and fear the Jesuit priests implanted in her, is finally awakened to her true call by the sight of a strange, bird-like girl wading in the water of a rivulet where it flowed into the sea. The scene is worth quoting at some length:

"A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea. She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips, where the white fringes of her drawers were like feathering of soft white down. Her slate-blue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. Her bosom was as a bird's, soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face.

She was alone and still, gazing out to sea; and when she felt his presence and the worship of his eyes her eyes turned to him in quiet sufferance of his gaze, without shame or wantonness. Long, long she suffered his gaze and then quietly withdrew her eyes from his and bent them towards the stream, gently stirring the water with her foot hither and thither. The first faint noise of gently moving water broke the silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep; hither and thither, hither and thither; and a faint flame trembled on her cheek.

- Heavenly God! Cried Stephen's soul, in an outburst of profane joy.

He turned away from her suddenly and set off across the strand. His cheeks were aflame; his body aglow; his limbs were trembling. On and on and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him.

Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. On and on and on and on!"

have the significance of psychological rebirth that it was to acquire in later romances, such as *Parzival*, but represents merely the political "hope of Britons".

Meanwhile, and independently from these epic-historical texts, the Arthurian stories on the Continent were developing in a very different direction. Oral versions of these tales had been transmitted across the Channel by the Celtic bards during the exodus that followed the Anglo-Saxon invasion to become the so-called 'matter of Britain' - the raw oral material that proved an inexhaustible source of inspiration to the sophisticated, self-conscious artists of French and German courts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In French and German literary reworkings of the matter of Britain, King Arthur faded more or less into a symbolic figure in the background and the interest shifted to his knights, their seemingly various adventures focusing on two central themes of mediaeval romances - passionate love for woman and the quest for the Holy Grail.

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The notion of heterosexual love as the only truly ennobling experience found its first expression in the lyrics of the Provencal poets of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and soon swept like fire over the Christian world, undermining the very foundation on which the power of the Catholic Church rested. As Joseph Campbell says, "of all the modes of experience by which the individual may be carried away from the safety of well trodden grounds to the danger of the unknown, the mode of feeling, the erotic, was the first to waken Gothic man from his slumber in authority."[5] Indeed, each of the four characteristics of courtly love that C. S. Lewis lists and examines in his *Allegory of Love* [6] - Humility, Courtesy, Adultery and Religion of Love - implies a repudiation of some aspect of Catholic dogma and a challenge of patriarchy itself.

Humility expected from the lover reverses the traditional hierarchy of loyalties, replacing the hitherto supreme bonds between men - the allegiance of the pagan warrior to his chieftain, of the vassal to his feudal lord - by the lover's pledge to a lifelong service of his lady. Courtesy, a complex concept of which more will be said later, refers to a secular, aristocratic ideal of polite, noble conduct that is both a condition of love and its reward: only those who possess the noble heart, who are courteous, can love; but, conversely, it is the discipline of love to which the mistress subjects the lover that renders his heart gentle and teaches virtue. Courts in other words were dissociated from the Church and it was in this secular realm that moral perfection or state of Grace was sought and achieved. The only sacredness admitted in this secular form of worship was, quite contrary to the Augustinian doctrine of the inherent corruption of human nature, the sacredness of the natural urges of the uncorrupted heart which Pelagius once believed possessed greater redemptive power than any sacraments and which now lead one to seek refuge from the hypocrisy of sacramental marriage in adultery. This was going beyond even the most heretical of Pelagius' ideas and certainly outraged the Victorian sense of decency. Hence the term *sinful love*, first used in the nineteenth century to describe medieval erotic convention. But, as C. S. Lewis concludes after his discussion of medieval marriage, which had nothing to do either theoretically or practically with love

[5] Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*, Penguin Books, 1967, p. 42.
[6] See C. S. Lewis, "Courtly Love", *The Allegory of Love: A Study in* Medieval *Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 1951, pp. 1-43.

but was governed by the concerns only of economics, politics and reputation, and in which the sexual act ceased to be a deadly sin only if it was undertaken as a duty and without any pleasure - "Any idealisation of sexual love in a society where marriage is purely utilitarian, must begin as an idealisation of adultery."[7] And inevitably, what began as a defiance of the official religious norm grew into a rival religion itself - Religion of Love, from whose spiritual fire the lover received the same nourishment as the lover of God received from the bread and wine of the sacrament. In addition, this new kind of worship brought about the rehabilitation of the sight, traditionally the most undervalued of all the senses - Langland's Lust-of-the Eye - binding one to transient and therefore, in Christian view, illusory beauties of life on earth. But in the new love religion it was through the eyes that the image of the beloved's mortal beauty entered and was stamped on the heart of the lover, turning it into an altar on which he readily sacrificed all that was held dear by the conventionally religious, practical mind.

A sonnet by Philip Sidney, a Renaissance poet writing in the tradition of courtly poetry, is a good illustration of the way the rival love religion appropriates the ecclesiastical language and iconography only to reverse their meaning. The poem's calm power resides in the contrast between the last simple line and the elaborate development of the preceding verses: the poet rehearses all the familiar traditional warnings against the danger of erotic passion, conceding their truth and reasonableness, until in the unexpected conclusion of the last line he sweeps them all aside by the irresistible, unarguable truth of the heart:

It is most true that eyes are formed to serve
The inward light, and that the heavenly part
Ought to be king, from whose rules who do swerve,
Rebels to nature, strive for their own smart.
It is most true, what we call Cupid's dart
An image is, which for ourselves we carve
And, fools, adore in temple of our heart,
Till that good god make church and churchmen starve.
True, that true beauty virtue is indeed,
Whereof this beauty can be but a shade,
Which elements with mortal mixture breed.
True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made,
And should in soul up to our country move.
True, and yet true that I must Stella love.

The cruelty of Sidney's love god is part, too, of the courtly notion of love as a bitter-sweet amalgam of misery and bliss. The poet's exhilarating discovery that "Here is my Heaven" was as a rule accompanied by agonised realisation that *here* - in the love of this woman and this world - is his hell too. Here is Sidney again:

Not at the first sight, nor with a dribbled shot,
Love gave the wound which, while I breathe, will bleed;
But known worth did in mine of time proceed,

[7] Ibid., p. 13.

Till, by degrees, it had full conquest got.
I saw, and liked: I liked, but loved not;
I loved, but straight did not what Love decreed:
At length to Love's decrees I, forced, agreed,
Yet with repining at so partial lot.
Now even that footstep of lost liberty
Is gone, and now, like slave-born Muscovite,
I call it praise to suffer tyranny;
And now employ the remnant of my wit
To make myself believe all is well,
While, with a feeling skill, I paint my hell.

That suffering is inseparable from joy, that bondage imposed by love is the only true freedom, that hell is heaven - are some of the recurring paradoxes of courtly love poetry. Behind the layer of courtly polish, they indicate a re-emergence in the western man's psyche of a long suppressed image of the Goddess of Complete Being and a world-view associated with her, wherein good and evil, life and death, time and eternity, Christ and Satan, separated in Christianity, and inhabiting two irreconcilable realms, partook equally of one and the same, non-dual mystery - of the inescapably mixed condition of life on earth.

Latent in the convention of courtly love which demanded unswerving devotion to the lady, the voluntary submission to her will, however whimsical, the abject acceptance of her reproach, however unjust, all in the hope of gaining her, this Bronze Age reverence for the female is even more apparent in Arthurian romances. For in contrast to courtly love where she is an idealised and passive object of man's desire, in the romances woman herself becomes a wooer, whose offer of love is difficult and dangerous to reject, but often equally dangerous to accept. This sense of a compelling, primitive force of the female is inherent in the very plots of Arthurian stories where, thinly disguised as Christian knights and ladies, their protagonists, like the heroes and heroines of much older Irish epics and legends - Cuchullin and Morgan, Diarmud and Greinne - enact the fragments of still older scenarios of fertility cults and rituals. When these ancient plots were used as moulds into which the contemporary interest in courtly love was poured, the new wine did not burst the old bottles but, in the best of the romances, fermented into a strange potent mixture of erotic fashion, pagan lore and those essentially Pelagian Christian ideals that were compatible with them.

This at least is true, as Campbell argues, of the German biographical romances, especially Wolfram' s *Parzival*. It would be worthwhile therefore, for the sake of comparison and contrast, to dwell a moment longer on the adventures of Wolfram's Gawain before approaching the fourteenth-century English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The comparative approach, according to John Speirs, is the only clue to the meaning of the romances: since their subject matter is not the invention of particular authors, but something given, "each separate piece loses by being read apart from the others". To regard, on the other hand, the medieval romances "as composing one larger poem is... the most satisfying way of regarding them,"[8] because it enables the reader to distinguish between those in which the pattern pre-existing in the subject matter emerges

[8] John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition*, Faber and Faber, 1957, p. 99.

more clearly from those in which the fragments of pagan material have been either translated into Christian symbols or, if untransmuted, re-produced, but no longer understood. A comparison between the two poems will show *Parzival* to belong to the first group, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to those far more numerous romances whose latent meaning is incompatible with their overt Christian message.

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The German *Parzival* is one of several continuations of the French court poet Chretien de Troyes's unfinished *Perceval,* or, as it is also called, *Li Contes del Graal*. Chretien's work is the oldest extant text dealing with the theme of the Holy Grail, but without relating it to what was the author's second major interest - the psychology of courtly love - and treating it on the whole from the Christian point of view. By contrast, in Wolfram's *Parzival* the quest for the Grail is an external counterpart, taking place in the objective word of action, of the subjective inner quest for a kind of love that includes, but also goes beyond, Christian compassion.

Briefly summarised, the Grail legend tells of a sacred king, known also as the Fisher King, who has inherited the role of the Keeper of the Holy Grail, a symbol of supreme spiritual value. He is suffering from a terrible wound that causes his impotence and the barrenness of the land. The wound will not heal, but the King cannot die either and is condemned to a Death in Life, until a knight arrives and, by passing a series of ritual tests, heals the King, enables him to die and restores fertility to the land, after which he himself can inherit the role of the Grail Keeper. The origin of the legend, as first suggested by Jessie Weston in her epochal *From Ritual to Romance* and confirmed by the majority of anthropologists, is probably one of the numerous mystery cults coexisting with early Christianity, but condemned as heresies and driven underground when the Christian myth was established as a state religion. The complete version of this cult is lost to us but its fragments, scattered in various European and Oriental tales, point to a common source in the Bronze Age mythic complex involving the immortal Goddess and her consort, the ever-dying, ever-reborn god of vegetation. In Ireland, which was the farthest Northwest expansion of this complex and where it survived longer than anywhere else in Europe, the Goddess in her most universal aspect was the Earth-Goddess and it was the act of mating with her that granted Celtic tribal kings the mastery of their land. According to T. G. E. Powels, "The Goddess handed them the goblet, the symbolical act of marriage in Celtic society, and in other mythological stories, the young king meets her at a well or spring where she awaits him in the guise of a beautiful maiden."[9]

The goblet is a cup or a bowl and clearly links back to the cauldron of plenty that was originally the attribute of the pre-Celtic Goddess, but was handed over to her spouses, the Celtic gods. Thus, not only Dagda, but Manannan, the Irish sea-god, had a vessel of inexhaustible ambrosia, and so did his Welsh counterpart, Bran, who lived in the Land Under Waves, or alternately in the Whirling Castle, surrounded by ocean streams. At his festive board the meat was served of immortal swine killed every day, but which came alive the next, and this delicious fare gives immortality to all guests. Moreover there is in that land an abundant well: hazel tress of knowledge drop their crimson nuts into its

[9] T. G. E. Powels, *The Celts*, Thames and Hudson, 1958, 1987, p. 150.

waters, which are eaten by the salmon there; and the flesh of those fish gives omniscience.[10]

Now the Holy Grail, too, is usually a vessel, or a large dish containing abundant food and drink, imparting wisdom and having the magical power of both bringing death and granting everlasting life. In Wolfram's *Parzival* the Grail takes the form of the precious stone, but its effect is the same: "By the power of that stone," says Wolfram, "the phoenix burns and becomes ashes, but the ashes restore it speedily to life.(...) Moreover, there never was a man so ill that, if he saw that stone, would not live. (...) Such virtue does it communicate to man that flesh and bones grow young at once."[11]

In a group of monastic reworkings of the Grail legend roughly contemporary with Wolfram's *Parzival*, such as *Joseph of Arimathia* or the collection of stories known as the *Vulgate*, the Grail was identified with the Chalice of the Last Supper, or the cup in which Joseph of Arimathia received Christ's blood from the Cross. These religious legends reduced the Grail quest even more radically than Chretien's *Parceval* to Christian terms: its object became the symbol of ascetic spirituality attainable only by an absolutely chaste hero, one who has successfully avoided the lure of women and preserved his sexual purity to the end.

Yet, obviously, the Grail descends from a tradition much older than the Christian and, especially as a vessel, looks back ultimately to the archetypal symbol of the source of all life - the womb. But whether it is represented as a dish, a goblet, or a stone, its life-renewing properties are always suggestive of abundant natural creativity that the archaic imagination correctly identified with femaleness. Quite appropriately, therefore, in both Irish pagan ceremonies and Wolfram's *Parzival,* it is a woman who confers this token of spiritual authority upon the hero, after he has proved himself eligible, not by avoiding, but by submitting himself to ritual ordeals devised and administered by her.

The maimed Fisher King is another familiar figure from ancient myths and can be found in Irish mythology, too. In fact, the two motifs - of the Grail and the wound - are brought together in the figure of the Celtic god Nodens, who appears in Irish legends as king Nuadu. Having lost an arm in battle, he replaced it with a silver arm, and thus was a maimed king. Now, as Campbell argues, the silver is the metal of the Grail, but also the metal of the moon, and the moon, the controller of the tides, is "the celestial cup of the liquor of immortality, ever emptied and refilled." Moreover, since in its waning phase the moon is lopsided, lame, it came to symbolise the painful, wounding contradictions inherent in man's soul and its destiny: "This celestial orb, like the soul and destiny of man, is both light and dark, of both the spirit and the flesh, bound to the orbit of this earth and ever circling from the light of the empyrean to the dark of the abyss."[12] Just as the Grail was Christianised, the maimed Grail King, too, was later identified with the wounded Christ on the Cross, and his original meaning thereby distorted. For, in contrast to Christianity, whose hope was for the soul's final release from the endless round of pain involved in earthly life, in the earliest philosophies associated with these symbols no detachment from nature was sought, the only cure for suffering consisting, paradoxically, in its acceptance as the inescapable condition of life.

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[10] See Campbell, *Creative Mythology*, op. cit., pp. 418-419.
[11] Wolfram von Achenbach, *Parzival*, as quoted in *Creative Mythology*, Part III, Chapter 8: "The Paraclete", p. 430. The entire chapter is devoted to *Parzival*: it contains the translation of the major episodes from Wolfram's text linked by paraphrase and interspersed with extremely useful comments by the author.
[12] Campbell, op. cit., 409.

This paradox is central to Wolfram's interpretation of the Grail legend. In his *Parzival* the Grail king Anfortas received his wound in the service of his beloved, Lady Orgeleuse, whom we have already met at the beginning of this chapter and identified as the anima, an archetypal image of life. The Lady's husband had been killed by a powerful king Gramoflanz and she herself put under a spell and condemned to a Death-in-Life in the enchanted Castle of Marvels by Gramoflanz's ally Clinchor, a sexually impotent man in possession of dangerous magic powers. Anfortas could not help her, for although his battle cry was Amor, his attitude to love, lacking in humility and gentleness, was unworthy of the keeper of the Grail - that pre-eminently female spiritual symbol. And thus when, urged by a yearning for love, he rode out one morning, he encountered a pagan youth and in the combat that issued immediately killed his opponent, but only after he had himself been pierced by his javelin through a thigh and both testicles. The manner in which he received this dolorous stroke is just another way of describing, or externalising, the inner deficiency already suggested in King's name: *anfortas* means weak, or infirm. His wound, therefore, is not, as in earlier myths, an emblem of the necessarily painful yet joyful experience of life's wholeness; on the contrary, resulting, as it does, from a clash of the Christian and pagan knights, it is the visible sign of the inner discord between the realms of spirit and nature, which cannot touch each other but destructively.

The motif of the maimed king is thus applied to local circumstances and becomes the image of the spiritually wounded medieval man. Anfortas, suffering in the Grail Castle, suspended between the equally impossible recovery and death, Lady Orgeleuse, his own estranged soul, confined in another enchanted castle, barred from love and joy by the grief for her murdered husband, the ensuing wasteland - all convey a sense of the arrest of the spontaneous flow of life, caused by the sin against what Jung called the female principle of completeness.[13] And the blame is put in the right quarter: for there is no doubt that in making this life-denying enchantment the work of Clingsor, a dangerous magician, usurper and eunuch, Wolfram had in mind the Catholic priests, whose dogma, cast like a spell over the soul of Europe, was nothing else but a *castrato*'s revenge against the life inaccessible to himself. To undo the spell and release new life it is necessary to atone for the crime against the Goddess. And it is consequently the loathsome hag Cundrie, one of the several aspects in which the Goddess reappears in Wolfram's romance, that initiates the quest for the Grail Castle.

In the earliest Grail romances this task was achieved by Gawain. He is the oldest, most primitive figure among Arthur's knights, whose reputation as a ladies' man is a survival of his original role of the Champion of the Goddess. His defencelessness against women is, in fact, the reason why in later Christianised versions of the Grail quest he is represented as a totally debased figure, unworthy of the task, and replaced by the sexually pure Galahad. In Wolfram, however, and precisely for the same reason, Gawain is essential. It is true that Parzival heals Anfortas and achieves the Grail, but Gawain, who finally manages to lift the spell from the Castle of Marvels and set Lady Orgeleuse and her damsels free, is working on the female side of the same problem. The fact, too, that Parzival's first visit to the Grail Castle was unsuccessful is of utmost importance. His crucial test there, one which successfully passed would have immediately relieved Anfortas of his pain, was to ask the ritual question: "What ails thee?" Although secretly

[13] C. G. Jung, "Answer to Job", *The Portable Jung,* Penguin Books, 1971, 1984, p. 566.

sympathising with the suffering King, Parzival nevertheless chose to disregard the prompting of his inner heart and to follow instead the injunction, enforced by the dogma of the Church and upheld by conventions of polite conduct, against asking too many questions. His silence in the Grail Castle is a failure in compassion but, significantly, he is reproached for it not by any figure of Christian authority but by Cundrie, the messenger of the Goddess of Complete Being. She curses him, upon which Parzival renounces his God, and spends five years wandering through a wasteland of his disbelief. His last words, before he disappears from the story not to return for many pages, are addressed to his friend Gawain: "Alas, what is God?...I was in His service expecting His grace. But now I renounce Him and His service. Good friend, when your time comes for battle, let a woman be your shield. May a woman's love be your guard!"[14]

That what he has to learn goes beyond Christian charity is also indicated by a sudden shift of interest away from Parzival and the Grail Castle to Gawain and his love adventure in the Castle of Marvels. It is as if Parzival - an inexperienced youth, disillusioned with the simple conventional religion of his childhood - has to internalise what the older, mature Gawain stands for before he can develop the only kind of faith, not in any god but in life itself, that will enable him to inherit the Grail without inheriting the wound. His marriage to Conduiramours earlier in the story was an important stage in his growth, as his final remark about the need to trust women shows. His wife's name comes from the Old French words *conduire* - to guide, conduct, and *amours* - love. Yet Conduiramours was apparently too gentle, reliable and altogether supportive a guide to take him far enough into the darker, more problematical and unsettling secrets of love and life. Unlike this beautiful but reassuringly familiar daylight figure, the dangerously fascinating Lady Orgeleuse that Gawain first sees sitting at a well is an otherworldly woman. "For psychologically, as well as mythologically," Campbell's comment runs, "the sense of such a female by a spring is of an apparition of the abyss: psychologically, the unconscious; mythologically, the Land Below Waves, Hell, Purgatory, or Heaven..."[15] Like the Earth Goddesses of Celtic fertility cults, presiding over sacrificial deaths in her honour, Lady Orgeleuse, too, is a summoner to a realm requiring a transformation that in the world outside it is known as death, but is in fact a passage leading beyond the bounds of common-sense knowledge and accepted moral and social norms into a new life. Of such women Jung wrote: "Because she is his greatest danger, she requires from man his greatest, and if he has it in him she will receive it."[16] Gawain was equal to the challenge: and when she warned him about the sacrifices her service would demand - "If honour is what you want, you had better give this up!"[17] - he was prepared, as Parzival in the Grail Castle was not, to give up his honour and reputation, and bear with humility the undeserved scorn she poured on him all along. He crossed the river, therefore, that surrounded the Castle of Marvels and let himself be bound to the Perilous Bed where, he had been admonished, "his end is going to be death." Darts and arrows flew at him from all sides, but the fifty wounds he received that night soon healed for, unlike Anfortas' wound, they were proof of his readiness to embrace the whole of life. In fact, they earned him the right to perform the ritual act of plucking a branch from the tree of life which,

[14] *Parzival*, as quoted in Campbell, op. cit., p. 452.
[15] Campbell, op. cit., p. 489.
[16] *Aion*, op. cit., p. 13.
[17] *Parzival*, as quoted in Campbell, op. cit., 471.

according to J. G. Frazer,[18] was once a condition the new sacred king had to fulfil before he could slay his predecessor and become the consort of the Goddess.

By passing successfully through this final stage of his initiation, Gawain has not only released Lady Orgeleuse from her enchantment and won her love, but also, since he is an aspect of Parzival, enabled him this time to approach the Grail with a proper attitude. Parzival does so, in fact, only after the point has been reached where the two plots finally intersect: the arrival of Gawain, Lady Orgeleuse and the damsels of the Castle of Marvels at the Grail Castle has brought together the Grail and the branch of life, the symbols respectively of spirit and nature, after which Parzival can ask the long-awaited question, heal Anfortas and inherit his role without inheriting the wound. He receives the Grail, the token of his spiritual authority, from one of Anfortas' maidens and the loathsome Cundrie, who first cursed him for his failure, now reappears to bless him. The story ends in a celebration of several marriages at the Grail Castle; besides Gawain's own to Lady Orgeleuse, there is the wedding of a white Christian lady to a heathen prince, himself an offspring of an interracial marriage that gave him his black and white striped complexion, like a magpie's plumage. These finishing touches are an apt conclusion to a tale that displayed such fidelity to the pagan "pattern pre-existent in the subject matter" and such consistent understanding of its psychological significance: once a gift of the goddess to her faithful consort, granting him the mastery of the land, the Grail is now a token of the loving relationship that the archetypal western man has re-established with his anima, a symbolic re-marriage that entitles him to sovereignty within the inner kingdom of his soul.

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The English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a work of a highly accomplished author who must have been familiar with the German and French romances of his time. His poem, however, is not modelled on them but grows out of his own native tradition. It does not deal with the Holy Grail; instead it represents an independent and unique combination of motifs, such as the Beheading Game and the Temptation by an Enchantress, that occur frequently, but separately, in Welsh and Irish epics and legends.[19] Yet, beneath superficial differences, *Sir Gawain* shares with *Parzival* the same underlying pattern and the same theme. It sets its hero upon a quest that is initiated by the Goddess and that takes him beyond the familiar everyday sphere into otherworldly places comparable to the Castle of Marvels and the Grail Castle, involves him with a mysterious temptress from whom he receives a magic gift and culminates in the mock-beheading reminiscent of the Celtic fertility rituals. The purpose these incidents are made to serve is, as in *Parzival*, to examine and redefine the values of a Christian culture against the background of pagan nature.

The poem is in four parts or Fits. The action of the first takes place at Arthur's court one Christmastide. The prolonged description of the celebration - the glint of jewelry, the ample dishes of dainty food, the din of innocent revelry - builds up a sense of graceful

[18] See Sir James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, The Macmillan Co., 1922, 1990, especially Chapter 68: "The Golden Bough".

[19] See *From Cuchulainn to Gawain: Sources and Analogues of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, selected and translated by Elisabeth Brewer, D. S. Brewer Ltd., 1973.

and exquisitely refined civilised life. The sudden appearance, out of the wintry cold outside, of the huge awesome horseman, green-complexioned and clad in green from head to foot, has the effect of the irruption of a primitive alien natural force into the sophisticated order of Camelot. His bushy green beard, long green hair and the holly branch he carries in one hand suggest a vegetation aspect of the Green Knight, while the huge axe he holds in the other is the thunder-and-lightning weapon of the pagan sun or sky gods, often associated with spiritual illumination, and anticipating the role of truth-bringer that he is to adopt later in the poem. For the time being, he is a savage intruder from a pre-Christian world who interrupts the courtly Christian ceremony and proposes instead, in a language that is as rude and peremptory as theirs is polite and elaborate, a dangerous game: he challenges anyone present to strike him a blow with his axe on condition he can give a return blow a year later. Gawain accepts the challenge and beheads the Green Knight. The amused fascination with which Arthur's knights first regarded this otherworldly apparition gives way to sheer horror when the body, still living, calmly picks up the head, which admonishes Gawain that he will forfeit his reputation for faithfulness and courage if he fails to seek him out at the Green Chapel on the next New Year's Day. With a savage yell the Green Knight then departs from the hall, fire flying up from the flints struck by his horses hooves, whereupon Arthur and Gawain laugh nervously to preserve the appearance of unconcern and revive the interrupted festive mood.

Fit II opens with the evocation of the all too rapid succession of seasons until a moment comes for Gawain to embark upon his quest for the Green Chapel. While he is ritually dressed for the task, we learn that the image etched on the inside of his shield is that of the Blessed Virgin and that the emblem on its outside is the pentangle, a five-pointed star, its points symbolising Christ's five wounds, the five joys of the Virgin Mary and the five virtues in which Gawain, the paragon of medieval knighthood, excels: they are generosity, lovingkindness, chastity, courtesy and piety. Thus armed Gawain rides north searching Wales, the home of the pre-Christian cult, and therefore the likeliest whereabouts of his opponent. Once there, he loses his way in a deep forest, but then on Christmas Eve, starved and shrivelled with cold, Gawain spots a miraculous castle, shimmering like the sun through the shining oaks and hazels - traditionally, trees of sacred groves - and surrounded by a stream of water. He crosses it and, like Wolfram's Gawain, finds himself in an enchanted, oasis-like place. He is entertained with the abundance of food and drink by Sir Bertilak, the immensely hospitable, robust and boisterous lord of the Castle of High Desert, while his lovely young wife and the repulsive, yet apparently highly honoured, old woman at her side engage him in lively conversation. But beneath its warm hospitality the place is as deceptive as any *fatamorgana*; for unknown to Gawain, and the reader, its inhabitants are all dangerous shape-shifters: Sir Bertilak is none other but the Green Knight, and the old lady is Morgan herself, the fairy capable of transforming herself into a beautiful young woman. Their purpose is to submit Gawain to another test, more important and more dangerous than the test of physical courage awaiting him at the Green Chapel. It is a manifold moral trial and, although Gawain is not conscious of it, his success or failure in it will determine the outcome of the Beheading Game. Like the previous bargain with the Green Knight, this, too, is an exchange game: having persuaded his guest to stay at his castle until New Year's Day, Sir Bertilak proposes that during the intervening three days Gawain should

rest in bed, entertained by his wife, while he goes hunting, and that at the end of each day they will faithfully exchange whatever they had won.

The subject of Fit III are the three temptation scenes alternating with the descriptions of the three hunts. There are unmistakable, if intricate and subtly shifting, correspondences here. Most obviously, the host's chase of the deer, boar and fox are symbolic parallels of the increasingly aggressive and cunning attempts of his wife to seduce Gawain. Thus on the first morning, when the lady "silently and secretly secured the door, then bore towards his bed,"[20] Gawain, like the shy deer, crossed himself in dread and at first tried to conceal his embarrassment and fear by pretending to be asleep. There was no easy escape, however, and Gawain, besides controlling the rising waves of his own desire, had to resort to ever subtler and ingenuous strategies to resist the lady's assaults without offending her. When she bluntly offers him her body, he pleads his unworthiness of such a precious gift, which justly belongs to a more deserving man, and thus reminds her tactfully that she is already married. At her second visit she is another Circe, seeking to turn men into boars: she attempts to arouse the fierceness of his instincts by suggesting that he should rape her. Gawain apologises for his refusal to do so by saying that in his country "threateners are ill thought of and do not thrive."[21] Yet on each occasion the lady seduces him into receiving a kiss from her and on the third morning she presses upon him a gift of a green girdle which, she tells him, magically preserves life and which Gawain, apprehensive about his fate at the Green Chapel, and unaware that, like the fox chased in the field, he may be falling into what he will later call a hidden trap, agrees to accept. Each evening he duly gives the kisses to his host in exchange for the trophies of the hunt but, in obedience to the lady's express wish, conceals the girdle.

The differences between the temptation scenes in *Sir Gawain* and their equivalent in *Parzival* - Gawain's encounter with Lady Orgeleuse and the ordeals of the Perilous Bed in her Castle of Marvels - are a measure of the English author's departure from the original ritual pattern. Unlike Wolfram's Gawain, the Knight of the Goddess of Complete Being, *this* Gawain is devoted to the Virgin. Once a maidens' knight, he has now become the Maiden's - that is, Mary's - Knight. In the bewitchingly beautiful temptress and the sinister old woman at Sir Bertilak's castle he encounters, and is forced to come to terms with, the rejected aspects of the Goddess - the lover and the hag. Yet he cannot do so without ceasing to be the servant of the Virgin. Being Mary's knight, he is also a celibate; in fact he says so much to the lady when he explains that he has not pledged himself to any woman yet, nor intends to do for a while. But instead of considering it an extenuating circumstance, as Gawain meant her to do, she takes his vow of chastity as the greatest insult of all. She cannot believe that this is *the* Gawain whom all the world honours for his "discoveries in the craft of courtly love," and who is therefore a secret passion of many a girl who has never seen him in flesh. Thus, although pledged to chastity, Gawain nevertheless finds himself preceded - and flattered, too - by his traditional reputation for courtesy. Courtesy, explains A. C. Spearing in his analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,

> is an extremely rich and fluid concept, and for that reason it is difficult to define. It meant the kind of behaviour appropriate to courts, and it could cover

[20] *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight,* translated by Brian Stone, Penguin Classics, 1973, p. 66.
[21] Ibid., p. 77.

> the whole range of behaviour from politeness, thoughtfulness, generosity through elegant conversation about love with persons of the opposite sex, to the conduct of a real love-affair. (Hence the lady's assumption that courtly conversation is simply a prologue to love making.) The unifying element in this range of activity seems to be an attitude to women: deference or even devotion. Historically the development of *cortaysye* appears to be connected with the rise in importance of the Blessed Virgin as an object of devotion: the lady to whom deference was supremely due. Thus Christianity and *cortaysye* could fuse into a single aristocratic way of life, with no sense of incongruity.[22]

Indeed chastity and courtesy are named side by side as two of the five surpassing virtues of "the endless knot" of Gawain's pentangle without any sense of incongruity, until its owner is brought to a moral test that sets the Christian ideal of asceticism against the essentially pagan eroticism of courtly love. Unlike *Parzival*, which singled out compassion as an enduring Christian virtue and reconciled it with the sexual mysticism of matriarchal religions, the effect of *Sir Gawain*, as Spearing puts it, is "to break the endless knot of the pentangle, which linked *clannes* (purity) and *cortaysye* in the same line." But, besides "driving a wedge between courtliness and Christianity," it further complicates the matters for Gawain by confronting him with another pair of conflicting loyalties: to the lady and to the lord. To follow the conventions of courtesy and succumb to the desires of the hostess would not only involve a sin against the Virgin, but also the betrayal of his host's trust. Thus the dilemma between chastity and courtesy overlaps with that between love and honour. It is not merely the question of dishonouring another man by taking his wife, though it is that, too, and Gawain's scruple about adultery is one of the inhibiting factors, as the following lines - the most complete formulation of his plight - show:

> For that peerless princess pressed him so hotly,
> So invited him to the very verge, that he felt forced
> Either to allow her love or blackguardly rebuff her.
> He was concerned for his courtesy, lest he be called caitiff,
> But more especially for his evil plight if he should plunge into sin,
> And dishonour the owner of the house treacherously.[23]

Gawain also runs the danger of dishonouring himself by being false to the word he pledged to another man. For what he does not yet know and what will transpire only in the last part of the poem is that the Exchange of Winnings Game is, in one of its aspects, a game of truth: the oath he swore to Sir Bertilak to confess truthfully whatever he has gained from the lady conflicts with his promise to her to keep her gift secret. Thus Gawain is forced to choose between, and define himself against, the two kinds of truths: the one that opens the way to the realm of the female - to love and life - and the moral obligation that bonds one to, and secures an honourable place within, the world of men. Gawain is concerned equally to live up to his reputation for courtesy and to preserve his chastity; he is as much anxious to please the lady as he is reluctant to behave disloyally to the lord. His response to the situation, often described as a triumph of tactfulness, is in

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[22] A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry,* Edward Arnold, 1972, p. 38.
[23] *Sir Gawain*, p. 87.

fact a desperate evasion - until he agrees to accept the "love-lace," as the green girdle is presently referred to, from his hostess and to conceal it from her husband in order not to implicate her. This is a decisive gesture, one by which Gawain commits himself to the lady and, symbolically if not literally, becomes again what he has always been - the Knight of the Goddess of Love. Soon he regrets it bitterly.

In Fit IV a guide provided by Sir Bertilak conducts Gawain halfway to the Green Chapel, but refuses to go any further into the perilous, enchanted forest surrounding it and advises his companion to give up his quest, too. Gawain presses boldly on and discovers indeed that the Green Chapel is not a chapel at all but a cave in the earth, as chilling and demonic as the abode of Grendel's dam in *Beowulf*. What he sees, walled in by crooked, cruelly jagged, crags of a ravine and bristling barbs of rock, is

> A smooth-surfaced barrow on a slope beside a stream
> Which flowed forth fast there in its course,
> Foaming and frothing as if feverishly boiling.
> The knight, urging his horse, pressed onward to the mound...
> Wondering what in the world it might be.
> It had a hole in each end and on either side,
> And was overgrown with grass in great patches.
> All hollow was it within, only an old cavern
> Or the crevice of an ancient crag: he could not explain it
> Aright.[24]

This is, of course, the site of the hidden source of life, once worshipped as sacred, but turned by the Church's attempts to outlaw the old nature cults into a place of black magic and devil worship. To the Christian Gawain it expectedly appears as the most evil holy place, where "might Satan be seen saying matins at midnight." He fears that "it is the Fiend himself that has tricked me into this tryst, to destroy me here." But his forebodings prove wholly unjustified. If the cave is an entrance into the underworld, it is shown not as devouring life but renewing it. It is another pagan realm Gawain enters but, unlike Sir Bertilak's castle, disguised into an imitation of Camelot in order to deceive the unsuspecting Gawain and lure him deeper into life than he was willing to go, here he is exposed to naked truth: a series of revelations that occur at the Green Chapel show nature, elemental and menacing though it is, to be ultimately beneficial.

The Green Knight appears and strikes two feint blows at Gawain's neck and a third that only slightly grazes his skin. Then he discloses his true identity and explains the link between what happened at the Castle and the events at the Green Chapel: the two feints are for the two nights when Gawain faithfully exchanged the kisses he had received from his wife and the third for his acceptance of, and failure to acknowledge, the green girdle. Since Gawain "took it not for a well-wrought thing, nor for wooing either, but for love of your life,"[25] the Green Knight finds it less blameworthy. Yet, in contradiction to this explicit explanation, the green girdle has already been described as a love gift and thus established not only as a symbol of the passion for life, but of the passion for woman, too; besides, the distinction between the two disappears once we remember that woman is

[24] Ibid., 102.
[25] Ibid., p. 109.

an archetype of life itself. We are to understand, therefore, that in readily excusing him for taking it, the Green Knight, a symbol of vital energy more potent than any Christian morality, is forgiving Gawain both his failure in ideal physical courage and his failure in chastity.

His major fault, however, is his attempt to conceal the gift from his host. But it is not, as it turns out finally, a betrayal of truth as understood by the masculine code of knightly honour. For in a new perspective that opens at the Green Chapel, what seemed to be a disloyalty to the male principle is now seen to have been really an echo of the primary take-over of the magic properties of the Goddess by the patriarchal male, who failed to balance it by giving anything in return and even refused to acknowledge her as the true source of his power - an act of usurpation whereby the mutual, give-and-take relationship between man and nature was first disturbed. To re-establish it has been the hidden purpose of both the Exchange of Winnings Bargain and the Beheading Game and the Green Knight, who as Sir Bertilak appeared to represent an order antithetical to that embodied by his wife, has, in fact, all along been aligned with her in this common cause. "For that braided belt you wear belongs to me," roars the Green Knight at Sir Gawain. But when Gawain, at once furious and deeply shamed at being found out, fiercely flings the fair girdle at him, cursing it, and eagerly submits to whatever punishment is his due, the Green Knight assures him of forgiveness:

> 'In my view you have made amends for your misdemeanour;
> You have confessed your faults fully with fair acknowledgement,
> And plainly done penance at the point of my axe.
> You are absolved of your sin and as stainless now
> As if you had never fallen in fault since first you were born.[26]

Just as the Green Chapel replaces a Christian church in this scene, so the Green Knight adopts the role of supreme moral judge conventionally reserved for priests. At first menacing images of unreclaimed, demonic nature, they now mediate its redemptive power. In fact, we may assume that the absolution this strange confessor grants the penitent Gawain is offered in the name of the Goddess Morgan, whose servant the Green Knight reveals himself to be, and who had engineered the twofold test in order to strike fear into Arthur's wife Guinevere and "put to the proof the great pride of the house, the reputation for high renown of the Round Table."[27] Behind this rationalisation, the real purpose of Morgan, Arthur's estranged half-sister, and hence Gawain's aunt, was to gain symbolic re-admittance into the world from which she had been exiled. After he has exchanged kisses with the otherworldly woman and taken her gift, after he has offered his own head in return for the Green Knight's and thus expiated his failure to acknowledge the rightful owner of the girdle, Gawain has deserved to keep it for ever and wear it as a perfect token of the reconciliation between the two hitherto antagonistic worlds. The Green Knight's offer of the girdle - "seeing it is as green as my gown"- is accompanied by an earnest plea to Gawain to return to the castle of High Desert, reunite with his old aunt

[26] Ibid., p. 110.
[27] Ibid., p. 112.

and bring himself and the young hostess "to clear accord, though she was your fierce foe."[28]

Gawain, however, will have none of this. He declines the invitation firmly and rejects indignantly the Green Knight's evaluation of his behaviour, sticking instead to his own Christian point of view. He agrees to wear the green girdle, but refuses to see in it anything but a reminder of "the fault and faintheartedness of the perverse flesh, how it tends to attract tarnishing sin"[29]. It is a mark of his shame, for which his weakness to women is responsible. This angry speech, in which he lists great Old Testament figures - from Adam to David - ruined by the sleights of women, and concludes by saying that it would be best to treat them as necessary evil - "love them, but not believe them, if a lord could" - is an outburst of Christian misogyny, the converse of courtly courtesy. Indeed in attacking women, as A. C. Spearing rightly observes, "Gawain is rejecting *cortaysye* - not simply politeness, but the whole courtly system of behaviour based on devotion to women."[30]

Whether the poem as a whole endorses Gawain's own interpretation of his adventure is highly doubtful, however. The majority of critics, Spearing among them, claim that it does. Whether they find it forgivable or not, they agree that Gawain's acceptance of the girdle was a mistake which put his life in danger and but for which he would have been spared even the slight wound caused by the third stroke of the axe. According to Spearing, Gawain is right to blame his courtesy for this pass: he fails in "a moral test demanding the power to resist a woman, because he is not willing to be discourteous to her...If he were not devoted to courtesy the lady would have no power over him, since he would be able to reject her advances before they constituted a serious temptation."[31] After setting chastity against courtesy, the ultimate meaning of the poem, in Spearing's view, is to uphold the former and denounce the latter, to show, when a morally trying situation arises, "how fragile a defence Christianity adulterated by *cortaysye* provides."[32] The fact that Arthur and his knights take the girdle not as a badge of shame but of honour serves only to emphasise the lack of proper moral understanding in those who have not shared Gawain's experience: "By the end of the poem, Gawain is both wiser and sadder, and the gaiety of Camelot has come to seem rather shallow."[33]

That this may well have been the conscious intention of the poet is supported by the fact that Sir Gawain is found in the same manuscript with another three poems -*Pearl, Patience, and Cleanness* - all dedicated to ascetic Christian virtues. Since their common authorship has been established beyond doubt it is easy to see in this Gawain, the knight of chastity, but another study of the stern moralist of *Cleanness* and *Patience*. Yet, as Speirs remarks in connection with medieval romances, "the tale is larger than the teller."[34] In the preceding paraphrase of its main episodes I have tried also to suggest a possibility of an alternative interpretation, one that does not coincide with, or depend on, the poem's overt message but on the ambiguity of its symbols. Their closer examination will confirm, I believe, that beneath Christian significance superimposed upon the ancient

[28] Ibid., p. 110.
[29] Ibid., p. 112.
[30] Spearing, op. cit., p. 41.
[31] Ibid., p. 39.
[32] Ibid., p. 41.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Speirs, op. cit., p. 101.

ritual pattern, its submerged pagan meaning is nevertheless sufficiently active to justify a claim that the choice the poem *as a whole* is making is not a devotion to life denying asceticism but a life-affirming devotion to women.

Thus Gawain, apparently set against the Green Knight and epitomising a system of Christian values quite opposite to those embodied in his pagan adversary, has still retained the attributes of the vegetative or solar god that he once was. In *The White Goddess* Robert Graves refers the fourteenth- century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to much older Irish and Welsh stories in which the Green Knight and Gawain are both associated with trees - the holly and the oak. In one version of the story the Holly Knight and the Oak Knight make compact to behead each other at alternate New Years, but, in effect, the Holly Knight spares the Oak Knight. In another they fought for the affection of the goddess every first of May until Doomsday.[35] According to John Matthews, the two knights are the gods of winter and summer, or the old and the young sun gods, their combat a ritual enactment of the battle of seasons. Although seemingly opposed, they are, in fact, the incarnations of each other, deriving from the same primal hero, whose sacrifice and resurrection coincided with the phases of the vegetative year. "In the same way", Matthews goes on to say in his analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, "although the figures of... Gawain and... Bercilak seem to be opposing pairs, at a deeper level these variables disappear, leaving us with a single figure - the Knight of the Goddess."[36]

There are indeed numerous indications in the poem that Gawain and the Green Knight can be seen as interchangeable characters. Thus, for example, the manner in which his array is described suggests that Gawain, too, is a symbol of resurgent natural life: on his silk neck-band there is embroidered a profusion of birds and flowers - turtle-doves and parrots, periwinkles and true-love knots - reminiscent of the birds and flies embossed and embroidered on the Green Knight's vesture. If the predominant colour of his dress is red and gold, as distinguished from the glittering green of his opponent, it is to hint that in Gawain, also, there is a touch of the sun. The sparkles that flew up from flinty stones under the hooves of his horse, too, associates him further with the fire and thunder of the sun-gods. Moreover, when he arrives at the Castle of High Desert it seems as though he has exchanged roles with the Green Knight: whereas the hue of the latter's beard is now reddish brown, Gawain himself is stripped of his battle-sark and splendid clothes and attired in green robes so that "It certainly seemed to those assembled as if spring in all its hues were evident before them."[37] Finally, while kneeling to receive the blow of the axe at the Green Chapel, Gawain is compared with "a stump of a tree gripping the rocky ground with a hundred grappling roots."[38]

Gawain's pentangle is another dual symbol, and the fact that courtesy is incongruously included among the Christian virtues it stands for only partly accounts for its ambiguity. Like the Grail, it has a long and complicated history preceding the Christian significance it acquires in the poem. From a brief and useful summary provided in John Matthews' *Gawain: The Knight of the Goddess* we learn that the sign of the pentangle was first found scratched on the fragments of pottery from Ur of the Chaldees

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[35] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, Faber and Faber, 1961, 1986, p. 180.
[36] John Matthews, *Gawain: Knight of the Goddess, Restoring an Archetype,* Aquarian-Thornsons, 1989, p. 67.
[37] *Sir Gawain,* p. 53.
[38] Ibid., p. 106.

(2000 BC) and is associated thereafter with the realm of magic and mysticism. In the Pythagorean system, the pentangle represented marriage of the first, masculine number, three, with the first feminine number, two, and thus became representative of the marriage of upper and lower, the human and the divine, masculine and feminine - precisely the meaning, as Matthews argues, "mystically expressed of the Grail, and therefore eminently suitable to be found in the possession of the successful quest knight."[39] With a similar meaning attached to it, the pentangle appears in alchemy and also in the Gnostic System where Sophia, the divine emanation of Godhead, would not permit anyone to enter the Realm of Light, unless they were in complete balance, and bore the sign of the pentangle upon them. If these particular associations are not realised in the poem, because the poet did not know about them, he certainly was aware of the pentangle's role in the folk-tradition still alive in Medieval English villages: the so-called mummers, whose dances were a last flickering memory of more primitive rites, performed a sword-dance the climax of which was to link their swords into a star and cry "A Nut, a Nut". (i.e. *a knot* - the endless knot which was the ancient name of the pentangle.) They then placed the linked blades over the head of one of their number and pretended to cut off his head. The mock-death was usually followed by the victim's miraculous restoration to life.

In describing it as "the endless knot" the poem evokes, however obliquely, the symbolic connection between Gawain's pentangle and the old sacrificial rites. And the hidden meaning of the poem emerges, I think, when we recognise a kind of sacrificial rite as underlying not only the Beheading Game but the Temptation theme, too. The true nature of Gawain's ordeal at Sir Bertilak's castle is not, as Spearing claims, the test of his moral power to resist a woman but, on the contrary, of his readiness to succumb to her. Nor are, as many critics believe, the killing, beheading and carving up of the three animals that parallel the love scenes in the castle symbolic of Gawain's moral victory over the lady's and his own desire. Quite the opposite, they reflect the breaking up of his rational defences, the mental sacrifices, above all the renunciation, however temporary or reluctant, of head-control[40] - that supreme patriarchal ideal, so whole-heartedly supported by Langland - in order that he may be initiated into the mystery of erotic love. And, as in *Parzival*, his failure, if only on the deepest level, to resist the seduction is, paradoxically, his success, and the green girdle is its token. Like the branch of life in *Parzival*, it is a magic reward, enabling those who have undergone the transformations demanded by the service of love to be initiated into a mystic knowledge beyond death.[41] Far from being a mistake that endangers his life then, his acceptance of the green girdle actually saves him. For whatever moral significance Gawain himself attaches to it, in the Beheading Game the girdle proves, mythologically and psychologically, to be what the lady said it was: a gift of immortality. In so far as the poem is about the rebirth of life in nature, Gawain's mock-beheading is the death of the solar god and his reincarnation into his opponent,

[39] Matthews, op. cit., 187

[40] A similar interpretation of the nature of Gawain's test - both in *Parzival* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* - is found in Part 4, Chapter 11: "The Grail" in Edward C. Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1982, especially pp. 172-178.

[41] Aphrodite also had a magic girdle which made everyone fall in love with its wearer and which saved the life of Anchises, one of the mortals she seduced in this way. In this episode, as reported by Graves, "Zeus...threw a thunderbolt at Anchises, which would have killed him outright, had not Aphrodite interposed her girdle, and thus diverted the bolt into the ground at his feet." See Robert Graves, The *Greek Myths*, Vol. I, op. cit., pp. 67-69.

whom he then replaces in the Goddess's affections, just as winter merges into and is replaced by spring. Psychologically, it is the death or submission of the solar principle of rational self-reliant, self-sufficient consciousness through which only the individual can re-experience his participation in the endless recurrence of nature and thus intuit his own infinity.

There is no marriage to an otherworldly woman to celebrate what Speirs calls a hidden harmony, which the poem finally discovers, within their apparent antagonism, between the human and other-than-human.[42] Instead we see Gawain wearing "the glittering girdle... girt round him, obliquely, like a baldric,... bound by his side and laced under the left arm with a lasting knot."[43] The intertwining of the green girdle and the sign of the pentangle is the final indication that the boon Gawain has brought from his quest to the Green Chapel is indeed the new sense of creative reciprocity between man and nature without which, as the end of *Beowulf* prophetically revealed, and as the contemporary spiritual and ecological wasteland make increasingly evident, both are doomed.

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There are, however, other English romances about Gawain which do end in his marriage and thus restore to his quest the traditional epilogue omitted from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. They are the two anonymous romances *The Wedding of Sir Gawain* and *Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnall* and, of course, "The Wife of Bath's Tale" from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.* The poem is well known and does not require any detailed paraphrase. It should be pointed out, however, that "The Wife's Tale" shows much more unequivocally than any other medieval English poem does that the survival, both physical and moral, of western man is bound up with the correction of his attitude to the female and hence, more clearly than any other medieval English poem, anticipates Shakespeare's tragedies and romances.

Thus *The Winter's Tale* - to take but one example - and "The Wife's Tale" both stage a trial for a crime against the female. Skakespeare's Leontes is suddenly seized by jealousy that has no palpable foundation, but rests solely on what appears to him an exaggerated hospitality and improper friendliness in his wife's behaviour to their guest. Rather than tolerate the ambiguity he believes he detects in her conduct, he is anxious to interpret it unequivocally, to read into it impossible certainties bred by his paranoia. His is indeed the panic any paranoiac feels that, unless he can contain life in the network of causal explanations fabricated by his diseased logic, its seemingly absurd randomness will engulf and obliterate his own identity. Rather than be swallowed, annihilated himself by this vast female nothingness,[44] this absence of any definite, unambiguous meanings that

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[42] Speirs, op. cit., 221.

[43] *Sir Gawain*, p. 113.

[44] For a comparable analysis of the association of woman with nothingness see Chapter 4: "'Nothing': *Othello, Hamlet, Coriolanus*" in Terry Eagletone, *William Shakespeare*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, where, among other valuable insights, the author states the following: "There is some evidence that the word 'nothing' in Elizabethan English could mean the female genitals. From a phallocentric viewpoint a woman appears to have nothing between her legs, which is as alarming for men as it is reassuring. On the one hand, this apparent lack in the female confirms the male's power over her; on the other hand, (...) it is a void which cannot help being powerfully suggestive (...) The woman's nothing is of a peculiarly convoluted kind, a yawning abyss within which man can lose his virile identity. This modest nothing begins to look like terrifying all; and indeed this is

his wife exemplifies for him, he must decipher her enigma, prevent her slipping from the possessive, predatory grip of his sick mind by trapping her in available definitions and categories. Because the preservation of his ego depends on translating her evasive, fluid *nothing* into a definite, solid *something*, he convinces himself that she must be a whore, and that the child she is about to give birth to is not his. He arranges, therefore, a public trial where he appears both as a prosecutor and a judge and orders the killing of his wife and the banishment of his new-born daughter Perdita. It is he, however, who is judged at the end of the trial, by a superior, divine form of justice. The God of truth is invoked to pronounce the Queen innocent and Leontes guilty of tyranny. But in the oracle's warning that the "King shall live without an heir if that which is lost is not found"[45] - i.e. that there shall be no future for him (or us) until his banished daughter Perdita, the lost female, the archetypal anima, is recovered - there is a hint of possible redemption. The King disregards the divine prophesy at first, but it begins to come true all too soon. The news that his son, whom he had separated from the mother so that her presence should not contaminate the child, has died of grief shocks Leontes into an instant recognition of the ultimately self-destructive consequences of the male rejection of woman. It takes him sixteen years of repentance, a period of perpetual winter symbolising his own condition of death-in-life, to atone for his tragic error. But that he is allowed at all to survive and recover his wife and daughter projects a hope for the future that is, after the four centuries dividing us from Shakespeare, still valid.

What makes "The Wife of Bath's Tale" a precursor of Shakespeare's play is a significant new element it adds to the traditional stories of Sir Gawain's marriage. These tell of Gawain's gallant offer to replace King Arthur in performing an unpleasant task of marrying a loathsome hag; his unhesitating kiss changes her, however, into a beautiful girl. In contrast to this noble Gawain, Chaucer's anonymous hero is, like Leontes, initially a woman-destroyer. He is legally sentenced to death for raping a girl, but is similarly offered a chance to save his life by undergoing a transformation that the unofficial Court of Love (consisting, by the way, exclusively of women) demands of him. His atonement is complete when, at the end of one year's quest prescribed by the Court of Love, he discovers that the answer to the question - one, incidentally, that still bewildered Freud at the end of his psychoanalytic career, namely, "What is it that women desire most?" - is "sovereignty" and begins to apply this knowledge in his relationship to his demonic bride. For it was she who disclosed the saving truth to him and demanded, in return, to become his wife. When, repelled by her ugliness and old age, he first refuses to make love to her, she offers him to choose between a young girl of whose fidelity he will never be certain and a chrone who at least will not arouse his jealousy. Rather than choose himself, he leaves the wise decision to his wife and, at her request, finally kisses her withered lips, for which he is immediately rewarded by the best of both alternatives: she becomes a young, beautiful woman and promises ever to be his faithful wife. Sovereignty, then, does not imply any simple, mechanical reversal of the patriarchal subjugation of women into female hegemony; nor does it have anything in common with recent radical

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the riddle of woman, that though for patriarchy she is in one sense mere deficiency or negation - non-man, defective man - she also has the power to incite the tumultuous 'everything' of desire in man himself, and so destroy him. (...) For the sexually jealous, as for Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, (...) the whole world becomes the female genitals; female sexuality is either in one place - the man's private possession - or it is everywhere." (pp. 64-66)

[45] William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, Penguin Books, 1969, p. 96.

feminists' denigration of men as essentially different and inferior to women and therefore incapable of understanding or sharing with them any vital experience. On the contrary, for man to acknowledge woman's sovereignty means to recover an implicit trust in her, and in life, even when they do not seem to coincide with any preconceived ideas of what they should be like, even when, in Leontes' experience, they throw into doubt and confusion all cherished certainties. It is because they could learn to perceive its underlying beauty, to trust its unconditional meaningfulness in spite of all appearances to the contrary, that life in the form of loving, loyal brides - and a daughter in *The Winter's Tale* - is restored to both Chaucer's knight and King Leontes. Hence the instantaneous transformation of the ugly hag into a lovely girl, seemingly miraculous, is as psychologically convincing as the sudden change of Leontes' wife, allegedly dead but, in fact, only petrified, from a cold stone statue into a warm, flesh-and-blood woman: both these transfigurations register the re-shaping that has taken place in the minds of the two men, the alterations in their ways of seeing and knowing a woman. For woman, says Campbell,

> in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures, she guides, she bids him burst his fetters. And if he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation. Woman is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure. By deficient eyes she is reduced to inferior states; by the evil eye of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness. But she is redeemed by the eyes of understanding. The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created world.[46]

Shakespeare's themes recur in modern literature and his influence is openly acknowledged by or can be detected in works of such diverse writers as Max Frisch, A. P. Checkoff, Eugene Ionesco, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Edward Bond, Howard Barker, or Seamus Heaney - the list of those who find Shakespearean stories relevant to our own time, and therefore well worth retelling, is practically inexhaustible. Yet it is important to see that Shakespeare's greatness and originality reside not in the themes of his works but in a new, and still unsurpassed, way in which he managed to re-articulate and transmit to us the forgotten wisdom of the earliest pagan myths. The dedicated reader of English literature, as he surveys it with 'expanding eyes', will be able to trace, not only in the medieval poems, but in works ranging from *Beowulf, The Dream of the Rood, Pears the Ploughman* and the romances, through the gravitational centre of Shakespeare's plays, to the twentieth century major poetry, fiction and drama, an outline of what in his poem "To Juan at the Winter Solstice" Robert Graves called "one story and one story only": of man's voluntary exile from the

[46] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand* Faces, quoted in Matthews, op. cit., p. 13.

"created world" of the Goddess, and his desire, when the temporary sojourn in substitute homes began to feel like imprisonment, to be repatriated into his original homeland.

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GAVEJN: TRANSFORMACIJE JEDNOG ARHETIPA

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Početna pretpostavka u radu jeste teza Dž. Veston, prihvaćena od većine savremenih antropologa i književnih kritičara, da su likovi srednjevekovnih viteških romana u stvari u hrišćansko ruho prerušeni bogovi i boginje iz Keltskih rituala plodnosti. Autor dovodi u vezu Gavejna, po svom poreklu najprimitivnijeg od svih protagonista Arturijanskih priča, sa mitskim sinom i ljubavnikom Velike boginje, paganskim bogom sunca i vegetacije, da bi pratila način na koji transformacije ovog arhetipskog scenarija u najznačajnijim delima srednjevekovne književnosti beleže pokušaj redefinisanja odnosa hrišćanske asketske duhovnosti i paganske prirode. Uporedna analiza tri srednjevekovne priče u kojima je Gavejn glavna ili jedna od glavnih likova pokazuje da je, uprkos svesnim odstupanjima od prvobitnog arhetipskog obrasca, paganska simbolika, latentna u 'podsvesti' teksta, nezaobilazna i odlučujuća dimenzija tekstualnog značenja. Analogije izmedju junaka Čoserove 'Priče žene iz Bata' i Šekspirovog Leonta koje uočava u zaključku rada, kao i činjenicu da Šekspirove teme prepoznajemo u ogromnom broju savremenih dela, autor tumači kao potvrdu stiha iz jedne pesme R. Grejvza posvećene Beloj boginji - naime, da uprkos neiscrpnoj raznolikosti književnih tema i oblika, 'Postoji jedna, i samo jedna priča' o svojevoljnom izgnanstvu iz prirodnog poretka i čežnji zapadnog čoveka da se vrati svom prvobitnom domu.