TWO SIDES OF A TRIANGLE: THE BEGINNING OF GAWAIN'S PENTANGLE IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Our endeavour in this paper is none other than that of studying the role that the Gawain-poet has assigned Arthur within the thematic development of the tale. We believe that in Arthur's behaviour lies the true relevance of the story, for without his idiosyncratic tendency to fantasize, the narrator could not have defended the apparition of the Green Knight in Camelot beyond the level of fairy tale. Many are the factors that justified this apparition. Yet, the most basic not to say elementary one resides in the event that Arthur is a king: king of Camelot. What Arthur is affects the way in which he conducts courtly issues, such as celebrations, and this is not a trivial question. He is a king who has a way of being that is not only unique but unmistakable: he is a very young king, a king who owing to his tendency to fantasize maintains intact a habit, or custom, that has little or nothing to do with the social reality of his own time and environment. Certainly Arthur's character conditions the way in which he understands what a court is, and therefore the behaviour of his courtiers.

Surely the Gawain-poet expects his readers to see Arthur in this light: a reader who must reach a constructive conclusion about the role that Arthur plays in the thematic development of the story. Accordingly the poet offers an ample number of relevant elements concerning Arthur's behaviour, that must be analyze and thus judged correctly.

To be able to understand what the Gawain-poet is trying to say, one must start with what a king is: one must consider his conduct, and that of his courtiers, and understand both within a social-juridical frame: the government of a kingdom. It is no whim that Arthur's courtiers murmur, in low voices, when Gawain is about to depart from Camelot in quest of the Green Chapel, that the king is the only one responsible for what may happen to Gawain: and they are right. Yet, they do not voice their opinions to the king; but they do so in the corridors, since nobody seems to dare to exact from the king the necessary responsibilities for what has happened during the celebration of Christmas.

The courtiers grumble, and this signifies that the Gawain-poet is depicting a court that is unhappy about the proceedings of their king. In this crucial moment the courtiers feel the full weight of the irrational, or thoughtless, behaviour of their king, and they feel it precisely because one of their companions at arms is going to die in a futile quest, the acceptance of the Beheading Game. The futility of this act does not stem so much from the event that Gawain accepted the challenge of the Green Knight but from the motives that forced him to do so, principles that are no other than those of trying to avoid a situation in which the king would be faced with an unnecessary danger, since a monarch is an indispensable instrument in the good functioning a country, while a knight, regardless of his worth, is not so in the same degree as a king.[1]

Nor it is a mere coincidence, nor can it be, that Arthur is linguistically speaking the initiator of the major exponent of Gawain's adventure, the pentangle. The king does not only inaugurate the

[1].- The legal aspects related to the necessary process of transference of power when Gawain accepts the Beheading Game have been examined by the present writer. See "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: el Chivo Expiatorio," *Estudios de Filología Inglesa,* 10 (1982: 29-54).

Beheading Game but also initiates the geometrical design of the symbol that will adorn both the shield and clothing of Gawain when he leaves Camelot in quest of the Green Knight. The cause must be examined starting with one of the habits that characterize Arthur's behaviour, that of waiting for something very special and worthy of being qualified with the appellative of marvel to happen, since if it does not happen he cannot eat his meal that day.[1]

Arthur's world, and so that which is depicted in the medieval romances is full of astonishing components: fundamentals or principles which make sense only if the reader manages to unveil the idea, or ideas that were framed in the substratum upon which they used to rest, and so govern certain mores and conventions which, for one reason or other, have survived the demolishing impact of time. What has subsisted has become the exclusive patrimony of those who dedicate themselves to narrate, or invent fabulous tales in order to enchant their readers or their audience, independently of who the

[1].- Arthur used to gather all his knights twice a year, during Christmas and Pentecost. In addition to the habit of not eating till something extraordinary takes place, he was also in the habit of granting boons to suppliants but before knowing the nature of the boon. As time went on, Arthur became a very passive king: a king who lived solely and exclusively from the incentive that was offered to him by his knights who used to narrate their adventures. Arthur does not leave Camelot in quest of the Grail, but waits in his palace to hear about the results. When bearing in mind these changes, certain habits do not make sense: they have become gestures and rites oriented to emphasize the value of words, a value that is well symbolized in the rites inherent in the narration of glorious exploits which deep down did not solve any pressing necessity. E.K. Chambers has done a splendid study on Arthur that we wish to refer the reader to. See *Arthur of Britain* (1927: rpt, New York, Cambridge: Speculum Historiale, 1964). As E. Jane Burns writes in her work *Arthurian Fictions: Rereading of the Vulgate Cycle* (Columbus: Ohio State Universtiy Press, 1984), the possible meaning of the repetitive nature of the adventures narrated at Arthur's Court can be explained in terms of the attitude of knights who narrate only what they considered best to be narrated, and evidently some adventures sounded better than others.

readers or audience might have been.[1] To achieve this end is not difficult since both charm and magic are part of the stale flavour inherent in these tales, or in the the apparent unusual elements that the narrator has managed to bring back to life from some forgotten and mouldy parchment.

When a narrator uses this type of material, he manages to offer his readers something unusual, peculiar, uncanny, and consequently entertaining. What he tenders however may be amusing and of value in two different modes. One, that of an intelligent and imaginative creation that must therefore be judged solely in terms of the creative capacity of the narrator, no more. Two, that of a clever usage, not to say manipulation, of idiosyncratic facts that used to govern the behaviour of olden societies which no longer exist. When the reader, or the critic, manages to comprehend the reasons, or postulates that used to govern these societies, e.g. the celtic world, he [or she] can then appreciate that there is nothing strange or extraordinary in this type of tales. Certain things are not all that pleasant and we rather ignore them because, deep down, it is not easy to digest certain norms

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[1].- We must bear in mind that some tales about wonders have endured the action of time through oral traditions. Thus, the audience may be no more than a child listening to his [or her] grandmother, telling him fantastic tales that he likes. Others, like Lady Gregory have collected stories not only about Cuchulinn, but also about Finn and the Fionna: tales that are available to children as fairy tales. See, James Stephan: *Irish Fairy Tales,* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1924). In this there are stories about the story of Ireland, Oisin's myth, and that of Finn, made comprehensible for children, and yet they are not very different in their basic constituents from Lady Gregory's rendering of these heroes. See *Gods and Fighting Men, The Story of the Tuatha de Dannan and of the Fianna of Ireland, Arranged and Put into English by Lady Gregory* (1904; rpt, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1987), preface by W. B. Yeats. Some events hardly make sense unless an exhaustive analysis is done of the underlying philosophy of life and religion of the ancient Celtic races, and so of the role of the druids. See H. D' Arbois de Jubainville, *El Ciclo Mitologico Irlandes y la Mitologia Celtica* (Barcelona: Vision Libros, S.L., 1981), trans.., Alicia Santiago. See also Jean Markale, *Druidas, Tradiciones y Dioses de los Celtas* (Madrid: Taurus Humanidades, 1989), trans. Juan Aranzadi.

or attitudes to life merely because they are dated and so atypical not to say aberrant. Evolution made possible their disappearance, and yet other habits have developed which would not better stand a close scrutiny had these old societies the chance to judge them.

We can vaguely grasp why in a primitive society, like that of the children of Milé, the king or chief of the tribe could not break the taboos of his ancestors, or the *geis* or *gessa* that were formulated by the gods on his birth, or on the day in which he became chief of the tribe. Yet, what cannot be understood, and perhaps not accepted, is the fact that in an advanced society like that of the Gawain-poet, not Arthur's of course, the narrator would take an apparently personal *geis* so seriously, when it has lost not only its vigency but it seems to clash with the religious principles governing the tenor of people's lives. We are not dealing with Finn and his Fionna, and thus we are not dealing with a society that believed that to break old habits, or *gessa,* was not only dangerous for the life of the ruler, but for the society that he was ruler of.

> It was the belief of the ancient Irish that when their kings observed the customs of their ancestors, the seasons were mild, the crops plentiful, the cattle fruitful, the waters abounded with fish and the fruit trees had to be propped up on account of the weight of their produce.[1]

With information such as that offered by Frazer or Jean Markale, we can begin to intuit what the Gawain-poet was trying to achieve when he wrote this romance, since what Arthur is doing is rooted in obsolete ideas: ideas which, perhaps, he does not want to abolish

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[1].- Sir James George Frazer, *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings,* vol. 1 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1932), p. 367.

perhaps because he was fascinated with the possibility of some wondrous event taking place, or merely because he is a superstitious king and so he thinks he has some kind of divine power that makes possible the occurrence of something that goes beyond the level of the ordinary if he submits himself to a sort of rite that demands of him abstinence and purification. Perhaps it was just a question of a personal *geis* he dare not break.

To accept that in the past people believed there were reasons that rendered it impossible to abandon an ancestral habit, an imposition from without, is easy. Ancient Irish literature abounds with kings who know they are about to die merely because they have unwillingly broken their personal *gessa*. The Hound of Cú knows he is not going to survive precisely because he has broken his *gessa.* We can perceive why Finn sees life as he does, but it is difficult to understand Arthur's attitude to life because it is based on ignorance. This point achieves full force when the reader perceives that Arthur is not with Merlin, with his druid, and this makes all the difference in the world. This Arthur is a purely Christian king, acting on his own, not following the rules of a druid, Merlin. To see Arthur taking this lightly, merely as a game, with somebody enacting a wonder in the fashion of an "enterludez" before he eats is one thing, but to see him there, sitting, waiting for something real to happen is almost intolerable. In Arthur's incapacity to differentiate between myth and his present reality lies the problem. It is easy to appreciate the enormity of his act: an unnecessary act since the court is celebrating a crucial event in the history of mankind, the birth of Christ.

Arthur seems to forget, or ignore, that he is celebrating the episode that has marked the beginning of a new era, and so the rupture with old beliefs and rituals. They are celebrating Christmas, not Beltaine or Samuin. Arthur's words show that he is very conscious of the fact that he is enacting a very old habit, or ritual. It is not for nothing that

when he says he is waiting for something wonderful to happen, he makes an explicit equation between his waiting and the nature of the wonder, a tale of "alderes, of armes, of other auenturus",[1] so he is speaking of his ancestors. His words verbally confirm not only the quality of his ritual but also the indubitable fact that it is he, and only he, who can conjure the apparition of the wonder and so begin to design the geometrical structure of Gawain's pentangle.

Bearing in mind the idea of ritual linked to that of the old concept of a personal geis, or taboo, as well as Arthur's verbalization of his habit, we wish to investigate the system that the poet uses to reveal that Arthur, independently of the way in which he has been idealized in the old romances, is not a suitable king. He may have been so in the past, but according to the New World, the world of Christ, he is not. It is in this point from where not only the didacticism that characterizes this romance stems from, but also its strength and novelty. The poet shows both an uncommon intelligence and equally uncommon knowledge of Arthurian rites. Owing to this he has managed to manipulate elements which in other tales about Arthur seem to be irrelevant, exaggerated, belonging to the realm of faerie land, or purely anecdotic.[2]

The poet's viewpoint prompts us to reflect on considerations related to what it means to be a king, and therefore to judge the negative effects that the anomalous behaviour of a king could have on the welfare of the community he governs. Consequences which, as

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1.- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, second. ed. by Norman Davis (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1972), I, 95. All quotations from this edition.

2.- In Malory's works, this habit becomes the starting point of the quest of the Holy Grail. Arthur has gathered his knights to celebrate Pentecost and therefore he is waiting for something to happen, and what happens is the adventure of the floating stone with a sword stuck on it, that is the prelude to Galahad's apparition in the Court.

we shall be able to show, have little, or nothing to do with the arrival of spring, or the fertility of animals, or the release of imprisoned waters.

In short, and owing to the apparent accessorial, not to say peripheral role that the Gawain-poet seems to have assigned to Arthur, critics tend to see him merely in terms of an indispensable but ancillary figure functioning as some sort of auxiliary character. By placing Arthur in this light the general impression is that of an indispensability which does not stem from what he is, but from what the poet needed him to be in order to formulate the perfect occasion to justify the presence of so many knights at his court: a happening that becomes the leitmotif that renders plausible, not to say coherent, the apparition of the Green Knight within an appropriate frame of reference. This is not however the case. Arthur is more than a trivial target, more than the pivot around which his knights gather during a period of the year dedicated to celebrations, fun, and brotherhood. His indispensability lies in what he does, in what he wants, in what he says, and so it is absolute and unrestricted. There is in Arthur much more than the apparent artistic, not to say aesthetic need to offer a fit occasion to justify the presence of the Green Knight in his Court. When trying to find a harmonious and logical explanation about Gawain's adventure, and so about the possible meaning of the Green Knight, one must not concentrate only on Gawain, or on the Green Knight, but on Arthur as king of Camelot.

Thus the investigation must begin with the king. It must be undertaken without trying to find reasons to exonerate his behaviour[1]

[1].- Even if we move back in time, to the heroic world that preceded Arthur, this world can hardly be praised. The behaviour of Vther Pendragon is not all that commendable. His motives for declaring the war to Gorlois were amoral. His love for Igerne does not justify Vther's behaviour, and even less that of Merlin, who makes possible what now-a-days would have been qualified with the term of physical violation. We can however accept this only if we see in Arthur's conception the unusual or peculiar birth of a god

using illusory parameters to justify how he understands the task of governing his people, the youth of the kingdom youth, or that of his courtiers, and therefore their desire to enjoy life at to fullest.

Without Arthur the gathering of all his knights would not have been possible: without Arthur an anomalous petition would not have been formulated; without Arthur the phantasmagoric appearance of the Green Knight would not have taken place. Ergo, to understand the way in which Arthur precipitates the events, thus producing a binary system of oppositeness symbolized by his court and by Gawain, casts much light on the motives that could have prompted the Gawain-poet to write this romance. The way in which Christmas has been celebrated is marked by the factors such as those of abundance, comfort, energy, noise and by the gathering of people around the king. In opposition to this, Gawain, as he roams in the inhospitable land of Virral, is confronted with a situation of extreme deprivations: he is alone suffering a great deal of physical discomfort. He lacks food, feels fear, and tiredness while a dreadful and appalling silence envelops him.[1]

The Arthur that the Gawain-poet delineates has nothing in common with the warrior depicted by writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, or La¥amon, to name just three. When bearing in mind the

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orchestrated by a druid, Merlin. See Markale, op. cit. For different reasons we cannot applaud the attitude of Ivain, or that of his wife, the Lady of the Fountain, unless we understand it within a purely mythical frame of reference, e.g. the black knight, as a symbol of the night, and Ivain as a symbol of light, a sort of moon-man, as Markale says, in quest of the light of the sun, his lady. See Chrétien de Troyes *Ivain,* and *Iwain and Gawain,* as well as the version of the Lady of the Fountain that appears in one of the branches of the *Mabinogi,* under the title of "Owen, or the Countess of the Fountain." See also *Of Arthur and of Merlin,* and Wace's *Roman de Brut* and La¥amon's *Brut.*

1.- The elements which singularize Gawain's journey to the Green Chapel have been studied by this writer. See "El Viaje de Gawain: a Study of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses,* 13/14 (1987: 35-54).

number of years that divide this Arthur from that of the those writers, changes must be expected. The change however has not been so radical as it should have been. The narrator uses a very old, not to say proverbial, Arthurian custom; a convention that used to characterize two of Arthur's celebrations: Christmas and Pentecost. In old tales about Arthur the narrator uses this habit as the launching board for which he is going to initiate the authentic purpose of his tale, e.g. the quest of the Holy Grail. Here the poet has done the same. Arthur's habit becomes the occasion of the authentic crux of the matter: the Green Knight.

There is in this tale a symbolic lack of the typical deeds which characterize a society of champions. This deficiency serves to show the futility of this custom of Arthur's. So the archaic necessity of narrating exploits oriented to show the worth and value of his institution of the Round Table, does not justify the maintenance of a habit which is both meaningless and ambiguous, especially when the habit is carried to the limits they are. Regardless of the original function of this habit, or *geis,* the poet has not depicted a society of warriors, but a society characterized by idleness, plenty of leisure, and consequently by a strong desire to enjoy itself. When bearing in mind the intention inherent in this lack of dauntless feats, seeing the king maintain such a dated and empty habit, excite uneasy feelings not to say a great deal of mistrust about these ritualistic attitudes towards life. His personal *geis* serves only to emphasize two things. One, the lack of rationality cognate to this habit. Two, the stupidity inherent in moving beyond the level of ritual, since it is enacted to its ultimate consequences, those of severing the head of a man[1] thus placing the

[1].- The fact they think there is no danger in the game, derives from the severing his head. It is not for nothing that in old tales about Finn, the Tuatha dé Danann, or the Irishhero Cuchulinn, the emphasis is placed on the druids' capacity to restore warriors to life if the warriors' heads have not been severed from their bodies, or their brains

life of another man: Gawain, in an unnecessarily and unreasonably hazard.

In this story, unlike that of Malory, there is not a collective phenomenon, and so a collective and communal enterprise: the adventures of the grail. The poet has treated Arthur's habit in such a manner that the consequences are reductive, and so restricted to a very individualized phenomenon. So the aftermath of his protocol does not affect Arthur's court; the departure of Gawain does not change, and does not have to change, the lives of the dwellers of Camelot, and even less that of the king, who does not show much contrition about his inability to ignore the Green Knight's plea. With Arthur's lack of contrition the poet is rendering a king who is not only foolish but unable to recognize the fact that he is responsible for the apparition of the Green Knight. His sightlessness forces his own people to confront a very sad reality, that of his behaviour and so the possible consequences of his thoughtless attitude to life. He functions as a load star that attracts what is not wanted. He seems to be a man endowed with mystical powers, a sort of shaman that lures to his court, with the power that his word confers him, and with the potency inherent in his abstinence, or rite of purification, an obsolete creature;[1] a being that

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damaged. Almost anything could be mended, a severed arm, as is the case of king Nuadu, but never a head. Diancecht, the druid, knew this well enough when he killed his child. It is evident that the people at Camelot knew this, and so they could not foresee the danger cognate to the game. A good study on the meaning of the severing of the head, and therefore on the attitude of the court to it, must be undertaken. This would show they knew more than they seem to know. Also that the way in which Gawain takes up the game makes sense. Gawain is a very cautious knight, he is not the type of man who risks his life unnecessarily. If we think of Gawain, in other tales about him, as a knight who knows a great deal about the healing powers of herbs, it is evident that he has been trained by druids, or faeries. Gawain therefore knew better than anybody else the irrevocability inherent in the cutting of Green Knight's head, even if he were a creature from the Sidhe.

[1].- Two things ought to be considered: one: that Arthur is very young and therefore, that according to tradition Merlin should be with him. Two: that due to Merlin's absence

exists only in the minds of primitive and superstitious societies.[1] Therefore the Green Knight is no more than a remembrance patterned by the scissors of time, a shadowy figure that has lasted long but only in the subconscious of the people, as part of a residual process of beliefs that were linked to the idea of the power inherent in the ancient kings, or in the chieftains of clans, and druids ruling over the health of his subjects, over nature, and the cyclical movement of the seasons. When it comes then to the exact understanding of the Green Knight, inevitably he is what the poet says that he is, a huge game, a huge and untimely joke.

Obliquely the Gawain poet is attributing to Arthur faculties that must be examined in order to reach a lucid comprehension of the thematic nucleus of the tale: the authentic meaning of Mumming with all its corollaries. What the Gawain-poet is trying to do is highly rational. In England, as in many other countries, till the reign of Charles II, people attributed to the king powers which entered within

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Arthur seems to function as his surrogate and therefore, as a shaman's surrogate, full of power. One of the elements that give power to a druid is that of the correct usage of words, in addition to rites, such as those of abstinence. Much has been written about the relationship between Arthur and Merlin, and about the similarities between a druid and a shaman, and so about the tools that give a druid his power, such as words. See the works of Jean Markale, and in particular, *Druidas, Tradiciones y Dioses de los Celtas* (Madrid: Taurus Humanidades, 1989), trans., Juan Aranzadi.

[1].- Here we are using the word "primitive" with a great deal of care. The medieval man seems to be fascinated with mythology, and consequently he tried to explain mythology in terms of allegorical elements that embodied, at times, positive messages. Many writers of this period saw the dangers inherent in this process, but they could do nothing about it. Many were the ways in which elements pertaining to old myths were justified in Christian terms, and at times, the methods used to prove this justification were clever, not to say highly imaginative. This process is not exclusive to the Middle Ages, but a common one during the Renaissance. What a clever exegete could have done with the Green Knight is an intriguing question: it is almost certain that he could have discovered sufficient allegorical elements in him to render him either perfectly evil, or an example to be followed by good Christians. See Jean Seznec, *Los Dioses de la Antigüedad* (Madrid: Ediciones Taurus, 1987), trans.., Juan Aranzadi.

the realm of the supernatural: it was thought that the king could cure scrofulism by means of the imposition of his hands upon the sick. It was a question of attributes which were intimately linked to the concept of monarchy grounded on divine right: a concept which has produced infinite problems. Divine kingship could be a double-edged-weapon for any country ruled by a cruel and incompetent, and hence unwanted, king.

The beginning of the tale is based on the poet's brilliant manipulation of a ritual that Arthur is dramatizing, possibly owing to ignorance, at the wrong time, and on the wrong occasion. Arthur's stimulus is not sufficiently clear. The poet however uses this prerogative to delineate a plausible cause that justifies the apparition of a green portent, and so to censure not the consequence, but the cause of the consequence, the ritual. The poet has managed an ingenious, not to say didactic innovation in the beheading game.[1] The modernization is effective owing to the simplicity of the thematic base of the tale: a king, his behaviour, and the consequences. It is not difficult to see in Celtic literature elements that show the remnants of beliefs in which the power of the king, and in particular that of his druid, was linked to natural phenomena. The focus of attention is of transcendental importance, especially when it comes to the Celtic fictional world: a focus of attention that could still hold the Renaissance reader, or audience, spellbound in stories such as those of Macbeth, or King Lear, to name just two.

1.- The beheading Game is a Celtic game. However what we do not have in this type of stories is a king waiting for something wonderful to happen. See "Bricriu's Feast," in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981). In the case of this feast it is not a question of a wonder, but of some sort of test oriented to show, after a heated discussion, who is the best warrior of Ulster. An interesting compilation of the various versions of the beheading game is that of Elizabeth Brewer, *From Cuchulinn to Gawain* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowan and Littlefield, 1984).

In order to prompt the reader to place in correct perspective how Arthur's behaviour affects his world of chivalry, the poet has emphasized one of Arthur's obsessions, that of hearing tales about wondrous adventures. It is an activity, a conception of amusement, a principle that governs the lives of his knights which, with the passing of time, has dulled not only Arthur's sensibility but also that of his courtiers. His concern has become so persistent and pertinacious that, as the Gawain-poet indicates, it cannot be abandoned even when celebrating peace and brotherhood. Owing to his physical inactivity Arthur cannot think about any thing other than marvellous adventures. This is not only applicable to Arthur but to story tellers who, like him, make a living narrating scenes that are full of violence precisely because his readers, like Arthur and his knights, enjoy this type of tales. One attitude is as irrational as the other, and the proof of it is that at Arthur's court they are celebrating the most important and marvellous adventure of the history of mankind: the birth of the Son of God. To expect therefore for something wonderful to happen shows the spiritual blindness of Arthur and his knights, a lack of insight that is not trivial since it has infected all his court.

Arthur is young and a little irrational: also his courtiers are young and a little extravagant. It is possible to presume that, in part, the behaviour of his courtiers is due to the natural propensity that makes human beings emulate their betters. Consequently, it is feasible to conjecture that Arthur's attitude does not constitute a passing and momentary disposition but a permanent obfuscation that controls the tenor of his life and so that of his knights. What the Gawain-poet is doing is criticizing a whole system of literary values. It is not for nothing that the knight that emerges with greatest frequency from the medieval romances is not spiritually speaking linked to a serviceable and thus authentic hero: the type of hero who is a hero when circumstances prompt him to be so, as happens, within certain limits,

with the Homeric hero. This literary knight is characterized by his unproportionate desire for adventure, exploits which very often have no better motivation than that of the ordinary gratification that the exploit offers him, apart from the fame he achieves, and the opportunity of narrating it at Arthur's court.

In the Arthurian tales part of this adventurous hedonism included the approbation of the king, who encouraged the hero, in the presence of ladies and knights, to narrate his feat with the greatest possible detail. When doing so the narrator used to gain the monarch's approval, his admiration, and his respect. One could go beyond this level for the king's encomiums were seasoned with prizes of no little worth, and with the contingent favours of some enthusiastic lady. What surely had little relevance was the motives that brought about the adventure, or if such adventure could justify the physical risks faced by the knight, or if his opponent were dead in some forgotten field, forest, or bridge. Only the passion aroused by the hearing of the tale and by the details of the adventure, was what truly mattered. Nobody was concerned with the way in which such an adventure developed, or with the possibility of avoiding it, or with the useless death of a human being, and this is not a trivial issue at all. It was a question of heroes who should be considered as uncalled-for heroes. Their paramount ambition was no other than that of earning the appellation of hero, so that the measurement of the exact magnitude of their acts, or the consideration of facts that rendered the adventure worthy of taking place in the light of morals or ethics was always beyond the point.

This attitude is not identical to that of the Homeric hero. Although these men fought, and although being a hero was not a trivial incentive, there was an authentic cause justifying their fight. Many of these heroes looked forward to the end of their fight and a return to their homes, to live there in peace with their families. They fought in

front of a backdrop not of a king, even less that of a court that passed its time hearing about war exploits, but horrid battles and their lucid understanding that such struggles conveyed death and much sorrow. At least as far as the Greeks were concerned, their war was not the product of a capricious and gratuitous desire for adventure. These men, unlike many of Arthur's knights, had weighty reasons to fight against the Trojans. The ones who could be however classified as foolish knights were the Trojans, for they were risking their lives to protect the wife of another king merely because one of Priam's sons had fallen in love with her.

The deeds of the Homeric heroes delineated what the Hellenic world expected of them, the defense of their honour. This is applicable also to the Trojans, although to share their understanding of honour is not an easy task. The same must be said of the young Beowulf, for, in spite of feeling deeply the drive inherent in his wish to be acclaimed as a hero, at least his adventures are not gratuitous. He manages to liberate with his effort and valour Hrothgard's people from the oppression of Grendel. It is difficult to say, with the same kind of enthusiasm, the same about Arthur or his knights. This difficulty is applicable not only to Sir Gawain, but to many tales about Arthur, this being a fact that fully justifies the attitude of the Gawain-poet towards Arthur and his courtiers. Consequently it is not illicit, in certain cases, to doubt the moral worth of their acts. Many critics have shown concern about the ethics that govern Arthur's world. On more than one occasion Spearing feels obliged to accept that the adventures of Arthur's knights contradict Christian sentiments, not to say basic human ones.[1]

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[1].- When Spearing examines the *Alliterative Morte Arthure,* he admits the fact that Arthur and his knights lack, at times, human and Christian sentiments. See A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1970).

This valorization stems from an undubitable reality: that the acts of these heroes, regardless of how deeply they are rooted in one specific literary tradition, or regardless of the fact that they can be placed within a more or less historical context, do not cease to be marked by a disquieting dehumanization that proclaims the widely existence of irreconcilable dichotomies within a purely Christian milieu. It is not surprising to perceive that works such as *Sir Gawain,* or *Of Arthur and of Merlin,* or *The Death of King Arthur,* provoke the reader's admiration, but it is however an admiration that is inevitably tarnished by disturbing sentiments of moral disapproval.

The motive of this moral distress is born in the recognition of the fact that the measureless egos of Arthur's knights push them to commit deplorable acts, not to say despicable ones. The end result is an ill-contained exasperation that the reader tries to ignore since the world of chivalry runs parallel to his own oneiric one, so that in the end one feels like Don Quixote, fascinated but a little insane.[1] If we take too seriously the message that many story tellers, again and again, reproduce during this period, as well as the preponderance they give to all that sustains the fantasy of their readers, negative sentiments will be aroused: sentiments that become profound when perceiving what the narrators are forcing them to do: to inflate their egos as heroes, forgetting, or rather having to forget their internal world, since both their egos and their internal world have become fully incompatible.

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[1].- If we uproot many of the achievements of Arthur's knights from a world of wonder it becomes obvious that some of them are peculiar. This is how the Gawain-poet makes the reader feel for what he has emphasized is a gratuitous violence that leads nowhere. The artificial questing after adventure solves nothing. Thus an ample number of their adventures provoke uneasy feelings, mixed with admiration, approval, tension and finally with an unhappy condemnation. When taken too seriously, their deeds trouble the reader. They cannot be easily understood by the common man; and the more one tries to impose some logical meaning on their acts the more these knights look like Don Quixote, searching phantasmagorical enemies with the purpose of adding more laurel leaves to their be-crowned heads.

Because the Gawain-poet knows that the internal world of any living creature is superior to the external world, he has tried to emphasize both things. In spite of his desire to narrate adventures, unlike other storytellers, he has not lost his moral fibre. He knows that many of the tales about Arthur are the product, or the consequence, of a disproportionate hunger on the reader's part for tales of action. This phenomenon is parallel to what is taking place in our days, for there is a measureless appetite for tales in which sex and crude violence have become the two main protagonists, protagonists which have become obsessively important in the public's mind.

The narrator, in this tale, has depicted Arthur as he really is: a complex young man. His world is recondite and very particular: a world that cannot be severed from that of his court, Gawain, or Lancelot. The macrocosm of Arthur is ruled by his social position: he is a king, and therefore he has power. However, and in view of his acts, it is possible to maintain that according to the narrator, Arthur's dominion goes beyond what can be defined in terms of what is neatly ordinary. The poet has conferred to his natural powers as king, by means of a subtle delineation of characteristics that are rather primitive, other types of prerogatives. They are idiosyncrasies which serve to define with accuracy the way in which this young king behaves, and thus the consequences: corollaries that are reflected in the behaviour of the dwellers of Camelot.

Arthur is a king who craves to either see wonders or to hear about them. It is not a question of harmless, or ordinary adventures, but of exploits that cannot be confined within the boundaries of the commonplace, or the quotidian activities. Therefore, and due to a basic and elementary process of mimicry, it is logical to see his knights spending their time roaming about in deep and dark forests on toilsome quests for all that could be defined in terms of extraordinary.

In showing the way in which Arthur behaves, the narrator has depicted him as a young man of a restless heart:

> So bisied him his ¥onge blod and his brayn wylde.
> And also an oper maner meued him eke
> ? at he pur¥ nobelay had nomen, he wolde neuer ete
> Vpon such a dere day er hym deuise were
> Of som auenturus pyng an vncoupe tale
> Of sum mayn meruayle, pat he my¥t trawe,
> Of alderes, of armes, of oper auenturus
> Oper sym segg hym biso¥t of sum siker kny¥t
> To joyne wyth hym in iustyng, in jopardeå to lay,
> Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oper,
>
> *(Gawain:* 89-98)

And both his restlessness and anxiety are anomalous. The consequences of his *brayn wylde* are reflected not only in the clamorous announcement of the arrival of food but in nature, symbolized by birds: creatures that seem to be orchestrating the brainless gaiety that dominates this court. It is not a coincidence that the *wylde werbles* sing without stopping; they are proclaiming what Arthur seems to be: a king with powers over the natural world, forces that ensure the maintenance of tables full of delicious "meats".

At Arthur's court all is joy, happiness, urgency and vitality. One of the entertainments of his knights is that of *tournayed.* This makes sense because through tournaments they can show that they are full of energy and so ready to undertake adventures. Thus, as the narrator says, the number of jousts is not small: *by time ful mony.* This attitude confers on this celebration an air of vitality that is inevitably dulled by the violence innate in this type of display. Because courtiers are young

and in perfect physical condition, the tournaments are merely a game, a way of amusing themselves for they want to spend these days in *ful jolité*. Giving the motives cognate to the organization of so many tournaments, all that can be expected is a sad trivialization of this activity. There is no textual evidence proving that this activity is, in any way, related to military objectives. Thus it is not possible to speak of a rational and pragmatic physical entertainment, but merely in terms of fun and erotism.

The tournaments, as pure pleasure, lasted fifteen days, and therefore they constituted a dangerous emulation "of Roman art and its order of cultural priorities".[1] To see the Romans however celebrating, as an integral part of their culture, religious festivities with games involving bloodshed is the norm. Their games were part of a social and political pattern that demanded this simply because the Romans were people who expected violence and bloodshed in their entertainments. Arthur's court is not Roman but Christian so that the fact they cannot conceive of a less violent form to amuse themselves is not a trivial issue, or at least this is what the poet thinks. Through the way in which they celebrate Christmas something becomes evident: that Camelot's world is still, linked to both the Greco-roman and Celtic worlds;[2] to the worlds that the poet mentions first by means of an introductory note to his tale and secondly through the Beheading Game.

1.- The growth of tournaments both in number and scope during the tenth and eleventh centuries was no matter of chance: it was an aspect of the deliberate antiquarianism of the age that placed the collection, study and imitation of Roman art high in its order of cultural priorities. Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (London: Weinfeld & Nicolson, 1980), p. 156.

2.- See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism:* "Theory of Myths: Theory of Archetypal Meaning, Demonic Imagery," (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 147.

The world that the beginning of the tale evokes is rather negative. It is not for nothing that the poet strains this world through the sieve of a series of images that are purely demonic, images such as those of a besieged city, desolation, adultery and the total destruction of the Trojans.[1] Bearing in mind the manner in which the narrator begins his tale, it is evident that he has left nothing to chance. He has used a very efficacious comparative system; a system that becomes cumulative with the unfolding of the plot of the tale. He is depicting, on the one hand, jousts that are comparable to a Greco-roman spectacle. On the other, he offers information that must be linked to what he says, as he narrates his tale, with the purpose of reinforcing the thematic nucleus of his story.

There is, juxtaposed to the ludic element inherent in the jousts, the element of Eros: and the erotic load that characterizes this activity, next to its possible consequences, is not a vain issue. The erotic element became an ingrained element in the tournaments due to a gradual transformation of this venture. Slowly the tournaments ceased to be a purely martial activity and became with the passing of time no more than a show: an entertainment oriented to amuse a public putting to the test the valour of its participants. Apart from showing their valour, the knights also wished to attract the attention of ladies, it being something they could achieve easily since the sight of knights fighting carried an emotional load for the ladies.[2] It was an emotional response that otherwise would have been more serene and therefore more rational, not to say natural. Owing to this type of emotional response Gottefried Von Strasburg uses a joust as the perfect occasion leading to the passionate and unhappy love between Blancheflor and Rivalin,

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1.- See Northrop Frye, *idem,* p. 147.

2.- It was more or less at the beginning of the XII century that the ladies began to attend tournaments as spectators. Their presence gives rise to expected and logical changes in the attitude of the knights.

parents of the equally unhappy Tristam. The way in which this writer exploits a tournament is both eloquent and suggestive. His description of the joust begins like this, "in the sweet fullness of this springtide they began a charming knightly sport."[1] The narrator defines the joust as a sport that he qualifies with the adjective *charming*. Among the participants there was Rivalin, and among the audience, Blancheflor.

Given the erotism that singularizes this pastime, the effects on the ladies are devastating. To question this is futile because their own comments exude sensuality, a sensuality that reaches the level of both audacity and indecency:

> 'Look!' they say, 'what a heavenly young man that is! Everything he does, how divinely it becomes him! What a perfect body he has! How evenly those magnificent legs of his move together! How tightly his shield stays glued in its place! How elegant all his robes! How noble his head and hair! How charming his whole bearing! What a divine figure he makes! O, happy, lucky woman, she that will enjoy him!'[2]

When examining this quotation it is evident that the excitement of the ladies is not little, a fact that is conveyed with sufficient clarity by the language used: a language that is hardly decorous. The type of adjectives they use, plus their continuous usage of exclamations, serve to show the cynicism with which the narrator treats the effects of tournaments on the ladies' hearts.

The erotism inherent in the joust becomes a concrete and physical reality in the act of looking at the men. The knight has become an object much coveted by the ladies, who derive a great deal of pleasure

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1.- Gottefried Von Strassburg, *Tristan* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 50.

2.- Ibid., pp. 50-1.

from looking at his body, without omitting the smallest detail. They scrutinize Rivalin with impudence; they look at his legs, at his clothing, at the way in which he stands erect on his horse, at way he moves, at his hair, etc.. His physical beauty awakens carnal desires in the ladies, and especially in the sorrowful Blancheflor, who ends up losing her head because of him:

> Now good Blancheflor was taking in what the ladies were saying, for whatever any of them did, she prized him, greatly in her thoughts. Into her thoughts she has received him, he had come into her heart, and in the kingdom of her heart wore crown and sceptre with despotic sway.[1]

With descriptions of this nature it is easy to perceive why some writers claimed that "the court of chivalry" runs parallel to the court of love.[2] In essence this is precisely what is taking place in Tristan, and what is happening at Arthur's court. So the narrator is talking about a king who encourages his knights to celebrate Christmas in a fashion that is hardly suitable, since he is sponsoring attitudes loaded with violence, erotism, not to say the satisfaction of the senses throught the *mete*.

When the poet describes Camelot, or what is happening at Bertilak's castle, he does not only always dedicate an ample number of lines to relate the way in which his heroes eat, but he introduces

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1.- Ibid., p. 51.

2.- Wickham writes that the combats "served to stimulate the competitive element in this rough sport, giving the knight that fame which he priced so dearly, a development which the presence of ladies as spectators could only encourage. In this way the arts of war became associated with those of love and courtship; that of self-protection and preservation with that of survival into the future through procreation." Wickham, op. cit., p. 155.

very few variations, for what occurs at Bertilak's castle is just a replica of what took place -and is taking place- at Arthur's. The truth is that what separates both castles is far less than what unites them. When the poet narrates the Christmas meal at Camelot, he itemizes the paraphernalia that distinguishes the social act of eating, and he does so with pleasure and much detail. To achieve this he uses a narrative system that is common to his period, that of cataloguing those items the writer wishes to emphasize, in this case food and drink. It is possible to argue that the catalogue that the Gawain-poet offers, when compared with other catalogues in tales about Arthur, is not all that ample. However, this catalogue must be examined within the boundaries of the system used by the poet: a system which, often enough, is based on the most strict poetic economy. Thus to note how he enumerates the victuals is almost surprising and it makes no sense unless he wants to prompt his readers into the appreciation not only of the feast's splendour but something else far more important, its ritualization and the irreverent disvirtualization of the rite of abstinence on Arthur's part.

At first the poet begins with the description of the joy that carries away the diners, but soon he mentions how, as they begin to sit at the table, they become calm. This change in attitude is hardly noticeable; it has been achieved with a tremendous economy and subtlety. It may pass unnoticed for this is all the poet says: "Alle pis mipe pay maden to pe mete tyme." *(Gawain,* 71). In view however of the seriousness with which Arthur undertakes his fasting, this change is important because of what Arthur does. As soon as his guests sit at the table the reader must hear all about an irrational process of inversion of values that is being committed by the king. When the "mete" begins to be served the frivolous tone that characterized the lines that preceded this description, has disappeared. The joy of Arthur's guests has been displaced by ostentatious gestures which are loaded with pomp and

show. Gestures that mark the arrival of the food; food that in theory nobody can eat till the king witnesses some sort of wonder. The way in which the apparition of the dishes takes place is like a show, and in the ponderation of concrete objects and edibles there is a suggestive distortion of values that is not all that different from that which characterized their enactment of the tournaments.

The *mete* has acquired a unsafe ceremonious character that blurs the line that divides the sublime from the ridiculous. The "mete" has reached a ritualistic quality because it has been enhanced with visual pageantry,[1] and accompanied with martial acoustic effects that show that at Arthur's court there is a marked preoccupation with everything that can be appreciated with the senses, such as those of sight and hearing. This meal shows that Arthur places a greater emphasis on what can be externalized than on what belongs to the invisible and serene world of the spirit. To his solicitous interest in the visual arts must be added his preoccupation with what can be heard, because the arrival of food has been accompanied by a set of well calculated acoustic effects, those of the sound of "trumpes" and of "pipes":

> ? en pe first cors come with crakking of trumpes,
> Wyth mony baner ful bry¥t pat pebi henged;
> Nwe nakryn noyse with pe noble pipes,
> Wylde werbles and wy¥t wakned lote,
> ? at mony hert ful hi e hef at her towches.
> Daynteås dryuen perwyth of ful dere metes,
> Foysoun of pe fresche, and on so fele disches
>
> *(Gawain*, 116-22).

[1].- Ibid., p. 155.

In this quotation there is evidence that all of them are effects oriented to celebrate not only the abundance of their food, but its variety.

The poet seems to expect of his readers to intuit that in the act of eating there is much more than mere eating. What they are doing is the prelude to something that goes beyond the level of having a Christmas meal, for so much noise, so much colour, and so much singing of birds inevitably prompts the reader to suspect that his *mete* buries deep a ceremony that perhaps not even Arthur understands: a service that has little or nothing to do with Christmas, since the king, unlike the rest of his diners, cannot eat while he waits for some wondrous event to take place.

Both the ceremony and its ritualistic aspect are important facts seemingly used to hold the attention of Arthur's diners. Their interest is aroused by means of the *nakryn noyse* and the *crakkyng of trumpes.* The visual impressions mixed with the acoustic effects have been enhanced by the loud singing of wild birds. Yet, in this alternation of artificial shrill sounds with visual effects there is a note of discord produced by the birds for they are singing loudly, late at night, when there is no daylight, and therefore they belong to the night. This subtle discord functions as the necessary lack of compatibility that involves Arthur's guests, immersing them in a very discordant harmony which reflects Arthur's immaturity and explains why the poet feels he must qualify him, as he does, with the appellative of *childegere.*

The ceremonial is brilliant. The important aspect is not however its brilliancy but the perturbing ritualization of the *mete.* What there is to this ritualization is none other than a faded drawing of a prelude to hunting, emblematized in the person of Bertilak. A prelude of all that is going to be eaten and drunk by Gawain at Bertilak's castle, reflecting thus both Arthur's youth and irrationality, caricaturized by the excessive joviality of Bertilak, the seductive beauty of his wife, the

Lady of the Castle, and Gawain's foolish acceptance, on two occasions, of his game. It is not for nothing that Arthur is doing now what later Bertilak will do: to solemnize the pleasure inherent in the enjoyment of *ful dere metes,* the food that Bertilak hunts, while Gawain spends his time playing erotic games with his wife, games which constitute an absurd, unnecessary and consistent continuity on both Arthur's and Gawain's part of celebrations dedicated to thank mythical powers for the fertility of the animal world. As far as the celebration is concerned it is evident that there is an unconscious summoning of old and legendary powers; a call that ironically enough culminates with Arthur's abstinence thus crystallizing with the apparition of the Green Knight.[1]

This young king cannot understand what he is doing and so he does not only celebrate Christmas with tournaments and ritualized meals, but encourages his guests to dance all night through fifteen days.

Since *caroles* were of a pre-Christian origin, *carole* dancing served to reinforce the preponderance that the element Eros had at Arthur's court. These types of songs were linked to the celebration of the cyclical movement of the seasons so that they used to be sung and danced, generally speaking, during, or after the collection of the fruit, or the harvest. E. K. Chambers offers the testimony of the Dominican John Bromyard who, knowing sufficiently well the origin of *caroles* condemned them with a great deal of energy. The attitude adopted by this Dominican towards *caroles* was hard, and he went so far as to declare that women who dance and sing caroles, adorned with

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[1].- The primitive relationship between man and powers beyond the level of man was elemental: "It arises out of an endeavour to procure certain goods, which depend, in part, upon natural processes beyond man's control." E.K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage,* 2 vols (1903; rpt, Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 102.

"garlands [were] the devil's packhorse for sale".[1] A quick examination of the *Camina Burana*[2] shows that Father Bromyard was not talking balderdash. Another testimony that is worth considering, offered also by Chambers, is that of M. Jeanroy, who maintains that caroles were erotic songs and therefore songs which had nothing to do with the celebration of the birth of Christ.[3] For many Fathers of the Church Christmas had become "a feast of words, with dancing and ditties."[4] Their attitude towards caroles was sufficiently well known by the writers of this period and consequently by the readers. Thus they could easily deduce that Arthur should have known better than to celebrate Christmas singing *caroles* in order to avoid giving to his people erroneous behaviourial patterns. Arthur was no exception. His way of celebrating Christmas was usual, and hence the existence of so many prohibitions. It is wrong to think that the Fathers of the Church were forbidding what was not practised, but the contrary, otherwise their prohibitions and sanctions would hardly make sense.

What the Gawain-poet describes is not new. At Arthur's court there is nothing other than, combats, carols, dances, gifts and feasting. It was so then, and it is so nowadays because most people are concerned only with externals, not with the spiritual aspect of this celebration. It is a question of attitudes and of habits that the narrator, as well as many Fathers of the Church, did not like. The testimony of E. K. Chambers,[5] among others, shows that many Fathers of the Church considered it improper to celebrate Christmas as Arthur does.

1.- E.K. Chambers, *English Literature at the Close of the Middle Ages* (1945; rpt, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 76.

2.- Ibid., pp. 67-8. See *Carmina Burana* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981).

3.- Chambers, op. cit., p. 69.

4.- Ibid., p. 76.

5.- Ibid., pp. 69 & 71.

They lack nothing, and deprive themselves of nothing. In addition to singing carols they danced incessantly; and the manner in which the poet speaks of these dances suggests that he thinks that the dancers were dedicating themselves to celebrate the physical energy of the new Sun. The fact that they dance during the night, after spending all day long either eating, or jousting, or interchanging gifts,[1] is reminiscent of some ritual dedicated to the night. Young Arthur is full of energy and life. His vitality seems to be contagious: his ladies and his knights, in spite of the fact that the feast lasts full fifteen days, do not seem to need to rest either during the day or during the night.

This event confers to the celebration an air of urgency that is not wholly pleasant. It is the same type of hurry that is going to characterize the Green Knight, who is in such a rush to have his head cut off that he does not waste his time even in the civilized act of saluting those present in the hall, and even less in wishing them a happy Christmas. In the hall of Camelot, as if it were just a physical manifestation of the "brayn wylde" of the king, the sense of urgency, physical energy, and frenzy seem to annul every sentiment related to the peace, tranquillity, and harmony that should prevail during these days. This is how the Green Knights perceives their games: thus without wishing them peace, or commending them to God, he abruptly demands a Christmas game.

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[1].- Fertility is associated to, and celebrated by means of exchange of gifts, Ibid., p. 81. J. Leyerle writes that Arthur's ladies and knights dedicate themselves, as Emerson claims, to exchange kisses. See "The Game and Play of Hero," ed. Norman T. Burns & Christopher Reagan, *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Toronto: Hodder & Sloughton, 1971). It is possible to think that the game of exchanging gifts functions as the prelude to the game that Gawain is going to play at Bertilak's castle. In the exchange of gifts, as Derek Brewer suggests, "there may be a witty if somewhat improper structural pun," that must be, we think, sexual. See Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* (Suffolk: St. Edmund Press, 19890), p. 81. I am very much indebted to Dr. Leyerle not only because of his generous help but also because of his kindness in giving me a copy of this paper before it was published.

Elements such as those of vigour, energy, puissance, activity and restlessness become obvious with their dancing, especially when bearing in mind that they dance during the night. In many cultures a frenzied and incessant dance in the light of the moon was a religious manifestation, a cult that included the physical extenuation of the participants. The thought of reaching a point of extenuation fits in with what so far has been examined, and it achieves full force when perceiving that the "dere dyn" accompanies something more than an innocent and childish exchange of gifts. The poet says that:

> And sypen riche forth runnen to reche hondeselle,
> Áe¥ed ¥eres-¥iftes on hi¥, ¥elde hem bi hond,
> Debated busyly aboute po giftes;
> Ladies la¥ed ful loude, po¥ pay lost haden,
> And he pat wan watz not wrothe, pat may ¥e well trawe.
>
> (Gawain, 66-70)

It is needless to point out that they "run", and that they "debated busily" about the gifts. It could not be different. Thus either when they are dancing, or exchanging gifts, or amusing themselves with tournaments, or eating, or dedicating themselves to games in which the ladies laugh loudly when they lose,[1] and the knights are not displeased with their gains, they are celebrating the erotism, violence and energy inherent in a natural world that offers them food. It should not thus cause much surprise to see the Green Knight appearing at this court.

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[1].- Although it is almost unnecessary to comment on this, one must bear in mind the not always healthy connotations inherent in laughing immoderately. The emphasis on their noisy laughter, as is the case with the exchange of gifts, is just another prelude of the Lady of the Castle's gay laughter, and I dare say this lady laughs a little too much to think that her laughter is totally innocent or harmless.

Arthur with the type of activities that take place at his place, has invoked his presence.

So much activity becomes the sign that shows the type of anxiety that controls this monarch. The poet clearly says that Arthur is restless and anxious, *so bisied him his yonge blod.* Yet he is not talking about spiritual restlessness but surely about earthly worries: concerns that are difficult to comprehend when trying to discover something solid behind so much pomp and show. Deep down there is nothing but ignorance.

It is alarming to think that Arthur's impetuous nature prompts him to hope to see a man demanding a boon involving a dangerous enterprise. It is not a question of a service dedicated to help the ones who need help, but merely of some sort of unusual show. Arthur waits for the appearance of some unknown rider in his hall demanding permission to challenge somebody; and the challenge is unacceptable for it is a challenge that involves the death of the participants. The inversion of values is clear. He wants to see on such a *dere day* a joust in which the life of the combatants is at stake. His motives are banal: an old habit that is not only irrational but sinister since he hopes for something to happen, but appealing to fortune for the result of the context must depend on fortunes's whim.

Arthur trivializes what is serious but aggrandizes and ritualizes what is trivial, simple, basic and quotidian: eating. Let us bear in mind the profound implications inherent in his decision when he declares he will not eat till something wonderful, something beyond the level of normality, occurs. Arthur, unawares, is transforming the important and serious act of fasting into an irrational banality thus giving an irreverent twist to it. He does not seem to know that fasting is a habit that has little, or nothing, to do with bloody combats, and much with religious acts. Arthur is not however talking about a discipline linked to

the celebration of the birth of Christ, but about an act oriented primarily to invoke something that is purely mundane: an amusing and entertaining event that is thus appropriate to his *alderers* for they used to invoke, before the advent of Christianity, mythical principles such as those incarnated in the person of the Green Knight. The behaviour of Arthur implies an unconscious regression to ancestral times. Arthur is thus a monarch who, unaware of it, conjures supernatural powers linked to pre-Christian cults, and therefore linked to the cyclical movement of the seasons.

Owing to what Arthur has unwittingly been invoking, naturally enough he is the initiator of the *pentangle* of Gawain, the talisman painted on his shield with the purpose of protecting him from the lethal axe of the Green Knight. With the purpuse of making his readers aware of the fact that the king is the only one who is responsible for the apparition of the Green Knight, the Gawain-poet has used two linguistic stratagems which Longinos, long ago, recommended in chapter XX of his work, *On Literary Excellence,* the anaphora and repetition. Two linguistic stratagems which have been ingeniously combined to prompt the reader to evaluate correctly the role of Arthur within the thematic context of the tale. To see this one needs only to pay the necessary attention to lines 93-5 of the first Fitt. It is here that Arthur invokes the presence, or the happening of some wonder, by means of a linguistic formula, that is through the power of the word. He has formed the two sides of a triangle, or the two elements of a triple system. Thus, one way or other he has began to draw one of the triangles that configure Gawain's pentangle. Let us observe how the poet has managed this:

> Of sum aueturus pyng an vncoupe tale,
> Of sum mayn meruayle, pat he my¥t trawe,
> Of alderes, OF armes, OF oper auenturus.

(Gawain, 93-5)

These two literary stratagems synthesize all that the poet, up to this point, has been trying to say: that the celebration is more pagan than Christian, and so it constitutes the prelude, or initiation, of the geometrical structure of the pentagon.

To visualize the triangle one needs only to isolate the particle OF contained in the above quoted lines. When doing so the two sides of a triangle emerge. One side has been formed by the initial anaphoras constituted by the repetition of the particle OF at the beginning of each line. The other has been formed by the triple repetition of the particle OF in the third line. The anagram that emerges is as follows:

OF

OF

OF OF OF

The two sides of the triangle will be closed in the very moment in which Gawain cuts the head of the Green Knight, since the game is characterized by a triple structure that will not be broken till the adventure is finished. In addition to this one should note the number of words that appear in each line: in the first line there are seven words, not counting the particle OF, composing the line. In the case of the second line the same should be said; seven words have been used to compose the line. However, when it comes to the third line only four words, with the exception, of course of the particle OF form the line; thus three words are missing, the three words that will serve to close the triangle.

The way in which the Gawain poet renders Arthur's role in the light of conjurer and therefore as the initiator of the beheading Game

has been carefully planned, being this a fact that can be easily appreciated once the symbolic numerological system inherent in the pentacle has been correctly understood. To achieve this the reader must detect the number of games which go into the making of the deep structure of the tale. Unveiling first the number of triangles contained within the five pointed star.[1] This aspect of the study has been carefully examined in another paper and therefore it is a question of mentioning only two basic elements: that the pentangle is formed by five interlaced triangles and that each of the triangles embraces one of the games, games which united constitute the thematic nucleus of the tale.

One can, and must affirm that Arthur is the initiator of the structural fundamentals that govern the tale in the role of promoter of a lethal game. A quick glance at the pentangle confirms this. This event is an expected one because the poet has been playing with the powers that used to be attributed, in the past, and partially in the present to kings, with all the obligations and consequences of censurable behaviour. In other words the narrator has been manipulating the possible dichotomies that could exist between the natural body of the king and his divine nature, emphasizing censurable habits in its correct proportion, in the shape of unacceptable conclusions within a purely Christian frame of reference. The poet warned the reader, from the very beginning of the tale, that there was some flaw or defect in the natural body of the king when he mentioned the fact he is irrational, impulsive and immature. This flaw is what pushes Arthur to direct his gaze to a far distant point, to what can no longer be part of his actual present, and thus he has moved

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[1].- These aspects of the tale have been analyzed by the present writer. See *Actas del Primer Congreso Internacional de la Sociedad Española de Lengua y Literatura Inglesa Medieval,* "A Triple Progression in the Pentangle: A Study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,"* (Sept, 1988), pp. 48-65.

back in time. His regression has given place to an inversion of values for the sake of what is mythical. The deficiency of Arthur, although obliquely, has been suggested by the narrator from the very moment in which he began to narrate the tale, because he did it by means of demonic images that run parallel to the defence of an erroneous cause, adultery. During the first fifteen lines there is something more that a basic not to say literary convention about the origins of the Bretons, because the poet, deliberately, has been tracing a bridge between Camelot and Troy in order to make his readers perceive that in Troy, as well, as in Camelot, they were celebrating a concept primordially related to the elements of Eros.

It is not a mere coincidence that *Sir Gawain* or *Troilus and Criseyde* begin with demonic images, emblems that have been well delineated with terms such as *sege, assaut, brittened, brent, brondez, tresoun, tricherie,* etc. that constitute by themselves a clear warning about the dangers inherent in Eros, a warning that will not be attended either by Arthur or by his knights.

In view of the disastrous end of Arthur and Camelot, these images must not be considered as part of a set of curious and pseudo-historical data, for, indirectly, they are part of the theme of the story since, as the plot of the tale develops, these images, owing to their backdrop, composed by Guinevere and Lancelot, acquire disheartening proportions thus becoming signs that indicate the existence of dangers that must not be ignored in Camelot.[1]

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[1].- The element of space framed by Troy, united to the element of time, determined *For sippen pe sege and pe assaut watz sesed at Troye,* is not a nostalgic evocation, but an important event of great transcendency rooted in the rapid transition to *?is kyng lay at Camylot vpon Krysmasse* (I, 3 7), that forces the reader to move, apparently into two different directions. From an actual present, that of the narrator, to that of Camelot forced upon the reader also by the narrator, an actualized present by both narrator and us in the role of readers. At the same time, the narrative voice / narrator, by beginning the

To be able to appreciate the relevance of these images as far as the themas of the tale are concerned, and the role that the poet has assigned to Arthur, we must weigh correctly the corollaries of meaning innate in the Judgement of Paris, the foundation of Rome and of Great Britain:

> Hit watz Ennias pe athel, and his highe kynde,
> ? at sipen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicome
> Welne ¥e of al pe wele of pe west iles.
> Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swype,
> ( ),
> And fer ouer pe French flod Felix Brutus
> On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez wyth wynne
>
> *(Gawain,* 5-8 & 13-5)

for by means of the recollection of the destruction of Troy and of Aeneas, the narrator incites the consideration of the primordial disaster and its consequences, a fact that should take us not only to the foundation of *prouinces* but to the golden apple and the three goddesses that quarrelled for its possession.[1]

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tale in the past, brings to life that past and actualizes it through Camelot. Yet, it is a fictitious regression in time: we move at too great speed to Camelot's present; and Camelot is a court which will also be destroyed, as the reader knows, for the same reason as Troy: a woman.

[1].- Ovid narrates how Venus won the golden apple that Discord threw among the guests, during the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis, "at the marriage feast of Peleus and Thetis, the future parents of Achilles, a golden apple inscribed with the words for the Fairest, was flung among the guests by Iris (Strife), Juno, Minerva and Venus claimed the prize, and it was agreed that they would refer the dispute to Paris, the handsomest of mortal men. And so Paris was invited to judge the three goddesses. He awarded the prize to Venus, and she assisted him in the abduction of Helen, the wife of Menelaus of Sparta." Ovid, *Heroides,* trans. by C.H. Cannon (New York: Dutton and Co., Inc., 1971), p. 107. This event has been narrated also by Apuleius in his work, *The Golden Ass.*

Arthur is a direct descendant of a caste of heroes that fought defending the man who resolved that quarrel by giving the apple to Venus. He is a worthy descendant because, as the poet suggests, in spite of the years that have elapsed since Aeneas left Troy, Arthur still emulates some of the negative attitudes to life that characterized this people.[1] The link can be appreciated not only in the way in which they celebrate Christmas, but in the consequences that have been neatly assembled in the pentangle. The five pointed star is sacred to the Goddess that Paris selected, Venus. Therefore, whether we consider the Green Knight as real or not, or Gawain's adventure as the result of a joke of Morgan's, the truth is that such a buffoonery is possible only because at Camelot they were celebrating Eros, or Venus, if you wish.[2]

Arthur's responsibility has been emphasized by the narrator when the Green Knight leaves the hall, for he does not describe a king who is genuinely perturbed by the events, but a young man who wants to eat because his wishes have been fulfilled with an apparition that he carelessly defines with the term *enterludez, (Gawain,* 472). Arthur does not lose his appetite, on the contrary because the Green Knight functions, ironically enough, as the element that whets his appetite. He is not distressed by the fact that in a year's time Gawain's head is

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1.- The poet has established the necessary links between the pre-Christian world of the Trojans and that of Arthur by manipulating the element of time and space during the first fifteen lines: manipulation that forces the reader to remember that the Bretons are direct descendants of Brutus, that is of the Trojans. "The *De Excidio Troiae Historia* of the suppositious Dares is like the *Ephemeris Belli Troiani* of the suppositious Dictys, a Latin romance of the late period. Both lay claim to an historical truth from which Homer departed. Dares is on the Trojan side against the Greeks, since both Franks and Bretons claimed, like the Romans, to descend from Troy. Dares enjoyed great prestige in the Middle Ages." E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1953; rpt, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 50. See Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain,* trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1966).

2.- Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977) p. 143.

going to be severed, for what concerns him most is to avoid dulling the brilliancy of his feast with sad thoughts so that he rests importance to the event.

Even a not very sagacious reader would feel uncomfortable with the words that Arthur pronounces. The "interludes" as synonymous of Mumming were forbidden by the Fathers of the Church. At first interludes were tolerated but already in the XV century they were completely forbidden.[1] Apparently it was merely a question of innocent manifestations of joy that used to mark the celebration of Christmas, but deep down they were not as innocuous as they seem to be mainly because of their pagan substratum. For the Fathers of the Church the most exasperating aspect of the situation lay in the fact that such entertainments were not the product of negative attitudes towards Chrsitianity but the end-result of ignorance, and at times of a lack of commonsense,[2] the latter being Arthur's case.

Facts such as those of ignorance, or a lack of commonsense were the ones that the Gawain-poet wanted to emphasize; and to do this the best way was to write a Christmas tale based on an ancient tradition which lay hidden in the celebration of this festivity.

This romance was not written in the twelfth century but in Chaucer's time, and Chaucer was using themes taken from the romances with a didactic purpose. His way of accomplishing this may have been at times unconstrained, at times dramatic, but effective as the tale of the Wife of Bath, or that of *Troilus and Criseyde* show.

1.- Wickham, op. cit., pp.120-21. See Richard Southern, *The Seven Ages of the Theatre* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), pp.142-45.

2.- E. K. Chambers writers that the celebrants "would not stick upon the explicit consciousness that they drank or danced in the might of Eostre or Freyr. And in time, as the Christian interpretation of life became an everyday thing, it passed out of sight that the customs had been ritual at all." Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage,* op. cit., p. 99.

Although the *finale* of the story shows the unreality of the Green Knight, for the Gawain-poet Arthur's irrationality is not a trivial matter. In order to prove his point a supernatural being appears in answer to Arthur's wishes. Given the beliefs of this period, not fully dead during the Renaissance, the Green Knight's appearance says a great deal about Arthur and about the moralizing tone of the tale. It is important to remember that according to tradition all that was magical, or supernatural had no power when the birth of Christ is celebrated.

Marcellus in *Hamlet* thinks so when he declares that "Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated, / the bird of dawn singeth all night long / And then they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;" *(Hamlet,* I, 1, 159-61) and he is probably right. Arthur manages the opposite, the appearance of a portent, thus managing unintentionally to bring about a senseless amalgamation of Christian elements with pagan ones. The poet does not say that this happens due to mischievous intentions , but because of Arthur's inconsideration: he is young and wants to have fun. His craving for recreation is out of proportion, since even when the inevitable has taken place he does not want to think that the life of his nephew is at stake. And he does not because to do so would spoil his feast. According to Arthur nothing truly anomalous has happened but the expected owing to the time of the year:

> Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse
> Laykyng of enterludez, to le¥e and to sing
> Among pise kynde caroles of kny¥tez and ladyez.
>
> *(Gawain,* 471-2),

and he is wrong. With this attitude he is transforming the Green Knight into a conventional and innocuous "enterludez" proper to the

Season, the irony of the case being that Arthur, as the end of the story shows, was not fully mistaken.

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