The Liturgical Calendar in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"

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THE LITURGICAL CALENDAR IN

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Kathleen Connelly
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The anonymous author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight referred both pointedly and indirectly to certain dates from the Christian liturgical calendar. Specifically, he mentioned feast days associated with St. Michael, All Saints and All Souls, the Christmas cycle with its devotions to St. Stephen and St. John, and New Year's Day, the Feast of the Circumcision. If we are to fully understand and appreciate the poem as it was written, the full impact of these dates must be established.

Recent scholarship has placed increasing emphasis on the strong religious background of the poet as well as the poem. Evidence of the poet's skill and artistry, combined with his vast theological knowledge, indicates that a viable and comprehensive approach to the poem must assess carefully the poet's use of significant detail, such as his use of the liturgical calendar. Examining the specific, named dates from the Christian cycle against the historical and religious background of the times, one discovers a dimension of meaning hitherto unexplored by all but a few critics.

That the varied feasts singled out by the poet would have suggested certain associations to a medieval audience is undeniable. Similarly, once the significance of the dates employed becomes clear, they provide deeper levels of meaning for the modern reader as well.
THE LITURGICAL CALENDAR IN

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT
INTRODUCTION

Since the "rediscovery" of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight following its publication in 1839 by Sir Frederic Madden, the poem has received—and continues to receive—a great deal of critical attention. Approaches vary widely, and include mythic, anthropological, psychological, and religious interpretations. Although all of these critical approaches add to our deeper understanding and appreciation of medieval literature, there still remain aspects of this poem which require investigation. One such aspect, the subject of this thesis, concerns the poet's use of specific named dates from the Christian calendar. Curiously, the particular importance, if any, of the liturgical dates mentioned in Sir Gawain has received little attention from the critics, even from those who have examined other religious aspects of the poem. Critics primarily concerned with other kinds of interpretations of the poem have forcefully stated their opposition to a religious approach, and would, of course, be little inclined to search for any hidden significance in the poet's careful notation of the passing of the Church year. Other critics, however, equally convincing, have insisted upon the author's overtly Christian bias and his didactic
intentions. This latter group might well assume that the profusion of named dates from the liturgical calendar is far from being accidental and does, in fact, serve a significant function in the poem. Recent critics have observed the poet's use of religious motifs and significant religious details, and have even commented upon one or more of the dates in question. But while a few critics have occasionally noted one or two dates, no one has undertaken to examine the entire cycle and the possible implications it may have for the author and his contemporary audience. This thesis, therefore, will examine the particular dates the poet mentions in an effort to ascertain their possible significance for a contemporary audience, and to evaluate the overall contribution such significant detail makes to the poem itself.
CHAPTER I

SIR GAWAIN AND THE CHRISTIAN CONTROVERSY

As noted in the Introduction, critical opinions on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are numerous, but most concentrate on the strictly secular interpretation of the work. One critic claims for the poem a clear-cut link to seasonal or vegetation mythology,\(^1\) another interprets it as an encounter between the ego and the shadow,\(^2\) while still another declares that, given certain circumstances, one may well consider the subject of the romance to be romance itself.\(^3\) In recent years, however, increasing attention has focused on the poem's religious background and implications, and this has become the dominant critical approach.

As with any critical approach to which more than one critic adheres, the Christian interpreters of SGGK fall into several groups. If a simplified tripartite division may suffice, one might well group together in one category those critics who include the Christian among other aspects of the poem and who feel that it is essentially a superficial concern; in a second category, those critics who acknowledge the poem's Christian basis but who do not agree that the poet
was purposely writing with didactic intent; and finally, in a third group, those critics who find in SGGK a clear emphasis on the essentials of Christian life and service, and who see the poem as being to some degree an allegory with didactic implications.

The first of these three groups—the critics who will admit only to the poem’s paying lip-service to the dominant religion of the age—includes such scholars as Laura Hibbard Loomis, R. H. Bowers, and Theodore Silverstein. Bowers, for example, calls SGGK "a predominantly secular poem, although, of course, it makes proper genuflection to Christianity, as does most medieval literature." Bowers further reasons that, "after all, the fundamental purpose of ME romance is entertainment, not didactic instruction... which... belongs to the ME sermon." While it is true that sermons were widely used in the Middle Ages as an instrument of education, (and at times they became quite sophisticated), it may be somewhat less true than Bowers supposes that SGGK should be classified with the majority of medieval romances whose purpose was primarily entertainment. Many scholarly and critical discussions have illustrated that Sir Gawain is a romance outside the mainstream of romance tradition, a poem deeply imbibed by its author with a wealth of Christian allegory and doctrine and one that is at once the epitome of the romance tradition and atypical of it.
Disregarding the issue of didacticism, other subscribers to the secular view feel that Gawain's trials, as well as his moral virtues, have little to do with religion. George Engelhardt views the story as primarily a test in which Gawain fails through pride, but Engelhardt means pride in the purely secular sense of the word, not the concept of pride as the chief of the Seven Deadly Sins. Engelhardt discusses Gawain's predicament in terms of "the three virtues that would govern the three domains of activity, the military, the religious, and the courtly," in which Gawain, as the perfect knight, might demonstrate his claims to perfection. The testing of Gawain, to such critics, includes piety but gives equal weight to valor and to courtesy, virtues strictly related to the secular state. The lesson Gawain has to learn is one of humility and moderation, of "mésure" and "démésure" (to use Jan Solomon's terms). Yet this conception of Gawain's test, his failure, and his outlook at the end of the poem, while partially correct, omits an essential aspect of the situation. Gawain's failure, both as an individual and as a representative of Arthur's court, results not only from his "pride" on a secular level, but from his lack of faith as well.

The second group of critics—who feel that Christianity is an important secondary aspect of the poem—have focused
somewhat on the poem's religious background, framework, and intent. Like some of the secular-oriented critics, Donald Howard explores in great detail Gawain's fall as a result of the sin of pride, but Howard does so from a Christian vantage point. In his book, *The Three Temptations*, Howard considers Gawain's pride in light of the medieval preoccupation with the three temptations offered by the Devil, first to Adam, then to Jesus Christ: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (see 1 John 2:16). But although he recognizes the immense volume of learning that permeates the poem, Howard resists calling *Sir Gawain* a purely Christian poem because it "betrays at the center of everything a concern rather for the World itself." Howard prefers to call *SGGK*, not a Christian poem, but "a poem of knighthood written in, and therefore embodying, a Christian ideology." One of the earlier critics to comment on the increased attention being paid to the poem's religious nature stated "indeed the poem grows more moral, religious, and even mystical with every succeeding editor or commentor." Some scholars were still quite cautious about suggesting that the poet's primary concern is religious, for example, Morton Bloomfield, who writes that the poem is "fairly and squarely religious," although he declines to
speculate that the religious import is primary.

A third group of commentators on the poem's Christianity argues quite convincingly that not only is the author of Sir Gawain deeply Christian and his poem religious, but also that Gawain's spiritual quest implies a process that touches the very heart of Christian life. These critics place a great deal of emphasis on Gawain's role as a sort of Everyman, who undergoes temptation in his dual function as an individual and as a representative figure (both for mankind and for Arthur's court). Joseph Longo illustrates the reasoning behind this approach in the following way:

Since the prevailing moral thought of the fourteenth century was Christian and since allegory was not only a major genre of the period but also a conventional pattern of thought, it is possible to consider Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as a romance steeped in Christian allegorical materials. Surely one of the most pertinent levels of the poem to its audience was the universal theme of Gawain as symbol of the Christian humanum genus in his ceaseless battles against the forces of concupiscence.

Joseph Longo also refers to two metaphors which would have come easily to the minds of the medieval audience in connection with Gawain's situation: that of the pilgrimage on which virtue is tested and affirmed by resisting...
temptation, and also that of the Christian "gladiator
or knight." The second of these images is also employed
by Richard Hamilton Green, who speaks in a slightly
larger symbolic context, referring to "the Christian
knight, champion of the Church militant on earth, com­
mited to the pursuit of personal virtue and the preser­
vation of the divinely sanctioned order." Green assesses
SGGK as "an aristocratic romance which embodies the chival­
ric ideals of the English ruling class in the mid-fourteenth
century." But Green, for all his reliance on the chival­
ric virtues Sir Gawain possesses, is not a secular critic,
because, unlike those critics, Green relates the chivalric
ideals and virtues to their ultimate sanction, the Church:

The chivalric ideal, however modified and
tarnished by practice and human imperfection,
was the imitation of Christ, the effort to
realize in the individual and in society the
perfection to which human nature, aided by
grace, could aspire.

Finally, Bernard Levy, the most outspoken proponent
of the imitatio christi interpretation, writes that "what
most critics have failed to see is that the poem has its
basis in an important scriptural pattern which is of the
utmost significance in the Christian heritage of the Middle
Ages." Levy argues that the religious elements of Sir
*Gawain* are not merely a superficial gloss over a romantic adventure story, but rather that the story itself is "a profoundly religious poem which evokes a scriptural pattern that is central to the Christian ethos."¹⁹ Levy, too, recalls the medieval image of "the Christian knight on his spiritual journey in an imitation of Christ."²⁰ Thus, the final group of critics reveals a heightened sensitivity to the centrality of the poet's Christian concerns in SGGK. Far from being mere lip-service or adornment, the Christian elements of the poem are of primary importance.

While this paper does not purport to establish a definitive "reading" of *Sir Gawain*, it does follow most closely the views of the third group of critical opinions, namely that the author of *Sir Gawain* was essentially an intensely religious person, whose work reflects a predominantly Christian-oriented concern with the most minute details of the written story.
CHAPTER II

THE POET AND HIS AUDIENCE

Whatever else they do or do not grant to the anonymous author of Sir Gawain, many critics remark to some degree upon the poet's supreme artistry and the superior qualities of the audience for which he wrote; the two are inextricable. If the poet "can do an incredible number of things in brilliant style," then he deserves an audience to appreciate his talents. Exactly who the poet was we shall probably never know, barring the discovery of some new, decisive information. Not knowing who he was makes describing his audience equally uncertain, since the work bears no inscription, no dedication, and since no suitably clear allusion or personal allegory seems to connect the story with any known personage of the time. There have been numerous tentative associations proposed, for example, Henry Savage's attempt to connect the poet with a retainer in the household of a great landed family, writing with specific reference to Equerrande, the seventh Sire de Coucy. The circumstances, while tantalizing, are tenuous at best. But Savage's remarks about the character of the poet and of his audience, which are deduced directly from the poems ascribed to the Gawain-poet, appear
to be accurate: "the set of his mind is aristocratic rather than democratic; what he says appeals to a sophisticated audience, interests the few rather than the many." Savage points out that the poet apparently knew too much of the world to have been restricted by monastic vows, at least in his early life. Yet, the poet displays a very genuine concern with matters of theology, accompanied by a deeply-knowledgeable education in Christianity; in fact, he may have had at least some clerical training.

A. C. Spearing, in his study of the Gawain-poet, also comments on the poet's theological background. From an examination of the four works generally believed to have been written by the same poet, Spearing lists some of the conclusions which may be drawn regarding the poet's reading materials. The list includes the Vulgate Bible, Latin commentators on the Apocalypse, Genesis, and Jonah, contemporary mystics and theologians, and the Fathers of the Church, with a liberal amount of French romance and courtly literature. "The poem certainly shows a keen and informed interest in what now seem quite complex technical theological issues, though, as always, what chiefly concerns the poet is their human bearing. It was not abnormal for a fourteenth-century Englishman to possess this kind of interest." According to Spearing, the fourteenth-century Englishman who wrote
Sir Gawain displays "a confident and detailed knowledge of courtly ways of life," so evident in the descriptions of the feasts in both Purity and Sir Gawain, in the details of the hunt, and more generally in his understanding and use of "the finer details of everyday behaviour."  

We may conclude, then, both from others' surmises and from the internal evidence of the poem itself, that the Gawain-poet was a man of no small taste and refinement, familiar with the courtly way of life, and yet primarily a man deeply involved with his faith, widely read in matters of theology, and a true artist.

Having established that the author of SGGK was probably a learned and sophisticated man, it remains to be seen what may be deduced regarding his audience. And it is possible to assume that they, too, were something of an elite group of people, sophisticated and intelligent; most importantly, it seems reasonable to assume that they were thoroughly religious. The audience of SGGK lived in an age when, as one may gather from much of the literature that survives, the Church exerted maximum influence on the lives of the people. Following the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council in the thirteenth century, the Church made several attempts at various reformatations. Preaching and confessional instruction became important aspects of the everyday Christian life. Manuals were written for priests and lay people alike to aid
them in understanding, and therefore better living, their faith. These devotional and instructional booklets dealt with a variety of subjects including the analysis of virtue and vice, the ten commandments, certain prayers like the Creed and the Lord's prayer, and much more. W.A. Pantin, in writing about the mystical outpourings of the fourteenth century, notes that the numerous followers and imitators of men like Rolle and Hilton lead one to believe that "the piety of the age had seeped throughout society" with great thoroughness. The more basic manuals had prepared the way for acceptance of the great mystics, whose writings "presuppose an audience thoroughly and severely drilled in the rudiments of faith and morals." From the great popularity enjoyed by the vernacular mystical literature, Pantin deduces that "the programme of religious instruction planned by the reforming bishops of the thirteenth century did succeed in reaching and indoctrinating certain sections of the laity." 

Not only among mystical writers, but in medieval literature in general, there is evidence of much conscious and unconscious assimilation of religious material, which the more educated people would surely recognize. As one critic says, "the concentration of allegory in the air in the Middle Ages was heavy. Readers and hearers were exposed to it from various sources, and many probably followed simple allegories on the literal and on the figurative levels as
naturally as we understand editorial cartoons. It is indeed possible, given the predilection of the medieval mind for allegory, that the more intelligent, alert, and devout audience proposed for Sir Gawain would recognize the subtle details for which we must search. As Henry Savage has observed, "the auditors or readers of his day caught these traffic signals of the story more quickly and were affected by their import, but we have lost the voices which came to medieval men and women through symbolism or through a liturgy that carried more than one meaning to those who heard it." If we, as twentieth-century readers, are to appreciate fully the rich detail of SGGK, we must first attempt to recapture the receptiveness of the medieval auditors.
CHAPTER III
THE POET'S USE OF THE LITURGICAL CALENDAR

The inferences have been drawn that the poet who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was a meticulous artist, and that both he and the audience for which he wrote were sophisticated and devout. Since the poem is essentially religious and was written by a man at the very least knowledgeable in and concerned with matters of faith and doctrine, then it is certainly worthwhile to probe for deeper meanings in the poet's pointed references to specific dates from the liturgical calendar. The named dates from the Church calendar could easily have been omitted or replaced by other expressions if their purpose was simply to mark the passage of time. Yet, as the poem is written, "the student of *Sir Gawain* cannot fail to notice the attention and respect which its hero, and consequently its creator, pay to the regular and orderly sequence of the services of the Church."31 The attention paid by the poet to the holy days within the poem is the mark of a man who, when he uses a particular word, generally has good reason to choose it and no other.

In an investigation similar to the present study, entitled "The Saints in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," another critic, Ronald Tamplin, has written:
The poet's choice of these saints—the Virgin Mary, St. John the Evangelist, St. Peter, St. Giles Aegidius, and St. Julian the Hospitaller—is not casual, but determined by the requirements of the poem's context and atmospheres. Though primarily an examination of the poet's use of significant detail and realistic effect, such an investigation must inevitably help to make clear the themes and intellectual settings of the poem.

For example, Tamplin points out that the invocation of St. Julian the Hospitaller is particularly appropriate to the poem. St. Julian is a patron saint of travellers (like Sir Gawain), renowned for his hospitality, and this hospitality, in turn, grew out of a penance. Penance is a "possible point of parallel" to Gawain's own story "since St. Julian's life of prosperity, sin, penance, and forgiveness affords a reasonable parallel to Gawain's own progress." Tamplin feels that "the poet has deliberately introduced an allusion to a relevant penitential figure, in much the same way as Gawain, in considering the cause of his downfall, cites Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David as parallel cases."  

We come then, finally, to the discussion of the specific feast days mentioned by the poet. If the poet deliberately chose his words and painstakingly crafted his work, there certainly may be significance in his mention of Michaelmas, All Saint's and All Soul's Days, and the entire Christmas cycle from Christmas Eve, through Christmas Day itself, and the saints' days immediately following Christmas through New Year's Day.
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight opens on the final day of the Christmas Octave, New Year's Day. Henry Savage notes that the noise and confusion of this first New Year's Day at Arthur's court are striking, and he remarks upon the "contrast between the noise and hilarity, and the rather indecent haste of the aristocratic congregation to get out of the Chapel and at their presents, and the reverent and devout atmosphere which envelopes the vespers" on Christmas Eve at Bercilak's castle nearly a year later. However, Savage continues, what we see and hear at Arthur's court at the opening of the poem would have been understood by the medieval audience to be perfectly in keeping with, and even expected at, the Mass on New Year's Day. January 1, at the time SGCK was written, still marked the celebration of the festival "commonly known as festum subdiaconorum," or the Feast of Fools. Savage feels that the description of the Mass at Camelot refers to the traditional activities on the Feast of Fools:

Ye chauntré of ye chapel cheued to an ende,
Loude crye watz per kest of clerkez and oper,
Nowel nayted onewe, neuened ful ofte;
And syden riche forth runnen to reche hondeselle,
Je3ed 3eres-3iftes on hij, 3elde hem bi hond.
Debated busily aboute 3o giftes;
Ladies layed ful loude, 3o3 pay lost haden,
And he 3at wan watz not wrothe, 3at may 3e wel trawe. 36
(11.63-70)
The very words suggest the noisy shouts of "Nowel" ringing out in the chapel, and the lines following depict the scene of courtly men and women playing, apparently, a kissing game where the ladies who "lose" do not grieve, and the men who "win" the kisses are far from "wrothe." The games and festivities are entirely appropriate to the practices associated with January 1. In countries outside of France (where the revels in the Church reached the nadir of bad taste in the abuse of the Mass) the Feast of Fools was an occasion for grand festivities in princely courts. Mumming was especially popular in the royal court, as the people feasted, drank, gambled and danced, and generally "made merry."  

One critic suggests that since the author of SGGK is obviously familiar with the kinds of dramatic entertainments enjoyed by the aristocracy, especially at Christmas, the intrusion of the Green Knight may be simply a variation of the "interludez" the poet mentions: "may it not be that in the account of the Green Knight's visit to Arthur's hall, and in his subsequent meeting with Sir Gawain at the Green Chapel, we have before us an admirable description of play-acting?" This critic feels that the Green Knight is "not a ferocious monster like Grendel, but a courteous gentleman masquerading as a monster." Whatever he may be, the Green Knight interrupts the revels at Camelot and challenges Arthur and his court to play the "Beheading Game," a challenge which Gawain
eventually accepts. Gawain agrees to the terms of the "Crystemas gomen" in which he pledges to receive the repayment of his own stroke a year and a day later. Gawain is as surprised as any when the Green Knight picks up his severed head and rides away, but young Arthur turns the minds of his companions away from the horrible aspect of what they have seen and back to their feasting. To Guenivere Arthur says:

'Dere dame, to-day demay yow neuer; Wel bycomes such craft vpon Cristmasse, Laykyng of enterludez, to la:3e and to synyng, Among þise kynde caroles of kny:tez and ladyez. Neuer þe lece to my mete I may me wel dres, For I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake.'

(ll.470-475)

Gawain joins in the celebration and apparently puts the Green Knight's challenge out of his mind, or at least attempts to do so. Thus, we are left with the initial impressions of light-heartedness and gaiety as the court returns to its merrymaking. When New Year's Day comes again, our impressions will be of a very different sort, and the contrast between the two sets of images reflects not only the dual character of the date, but also reinforces the carefully delineated movement of the poem.

In the beginning of Part II, after observing that Gawain "watz glad to begynne Þose gommen in halle,/Bët þaþe ende be heuy haf þe no wonder," (ll.495-496), the poet immediately
moves to the famous passage on the turning of the year, concentrating for a moment on "\textit{pe seson of somer wyth/pe soft wyndez}" (1.516). This "transitional" section ends with the approach of winter, and we realize along with Gawain that the year has passed by swiftly, and rotating, has returned to the season in which Gawain must remember his obligation:

\begin{verbatim}
Til Me\texte{\textemdash}elmas mone
Watz cumen wyth wynter wage;
\textit{\texte{\textemdash}en penkkez Gawan ful sone}
Of his anious uyage.
\end{verbatim}

(11.532-535)

We reach then, the next important date from the liturgical calendar singled out for attention in the poem.

\begin{quote}
Michaelmas, September 29, is the feast of St. Michael the Archangel. Michael, whose name means one "who is like unto God,"\textsuperscript{41} enjoyed great popular veneration throughout the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{42} He appears in the Apocalypse of John (xii 7-9) in the description of the "war in heaven" where he led a triumphant band of angels in the battle that threw Satan and the "bad" angels out of Heaven forever.\textsuperscript{43} This victory led to Michael's identification as the captain of the heavenly host, a protector of Christians in general and soldiers in particular.\textsuperscript{44} He is also the receiver of dead souls,\textsuperscript{45} and helps to save souls from temptations.
\end{quote}

Since Michaelmas was an important feast day in the
Middle Ages, it is possible that certain associations would have come to the minds of the audience reading or hearing Sir Gawain. In the poem, Michaelmas follows "crabbed lentoun," and "ye seson of somer," and marks the point to which the year has turned. It ushers in a season of cold and of dying, the day tinged with the chill of the coming winter ("wynter wage" being the promise of winter). In the trials ahead of him, Gawain will certainly need the protection of the captain of the angels, to keep him from temptation and also to save his soul, which Michael might soon be receiving if Gawain is unsuccessful.

There also exists another, probably later, tradition which links St. Michael and Sir Gawain. Many people associate Michael with the angel who drove Adam and Eve out of Paradise with a flaming sword. While this writer has been unable to identify the origins of such a tradition, it is interesting to speculate on the possible implications of this tradition for the situations in which Sir Gawain finds himself. For example, it is on Michaelmas that Gawain remembers his "anious uyage," and some time later Gawain finds himself alone and shivering in a forest on Christmas Eve, formerly the feast of Adam and Eve. Apparently in answer to his prayers, Gawain comes to Bercilak's castle, a veritable paradise. There seems to be a hint of a "paradise lost" theme to SGGK, in which the "first age" of King Arthur's court, an age of innocence,
proceeds to an age or self-knowledge which is born out of trial and temptation. The cyclical aspects of the Adam and Eve story mirror, to some degree, the cyclical overtones of SGGK. Adam and Eve were innocent, sinned, and were thrown out of Paradise, but the promise was made that Christ would come to save all mankind. Similarly, Arthur's court, represented by Sir Gawain, is tempted out of its first age of innocence, but, like Adam and Eve, Gawain's fall is "felix culpa" since it leads to deeper understanding of his own self and, possibly, deeper understanding and redemption for the company of knights as a whole.

\[\text{3 et quyl Al-hal-day with Ar}^\text{Der he lenges;}
\text{And he made a fare on } \text{Par}^\text{e fest for } \text{freke}^\text{eze sake,}
\text{With much reuel and ryche of R}^\text{e Rounde Table.}
\]

\[(11.536-538)\]

Gawain, then, recalls the journey he must take on Michaelmas, but he remains at Arthur's court from September 29 to November 1. Tolkien and Gordon note that "Arthur regularly held his court then... and Gawain might reasonably wait for so important an occasion before setting out."\(^{46}\) Like the mention of Michaelmas, this reference to "Al-hal-day" advances the cycle of the year, this time definitely into winter, and closer to the fateful encounter with the Green Knight. All Hallows, or All Saint's Day, commemorates all the saints in heaven, known and unknown, and originated in 610 when Pope
Boniface IV was given the ancient temple of the Pantheon. Boniface cleansed it and consecrated it as a church of the Blessed Virgin Mary. St. Mary of the Martyrs, as it was known, became a Christian sanctuary because of all the martyrs who had suffered there and Boniface ordered the annual commemoration of these and all the saints. The date was eventually moved to November 1, on which it is still celebrated. Bernard Levy notes that the history of All Saint’s Day allies Gawain with the “triumph of Christ over pagan deities,” because of the emphasis on the saints’ superseding the pagan gods of the Pantheon. Levy also notes that the feast Arthur prepares for Gawain at which he is honored by the knights of the Round Table identifies Gawain with the best knights in all of Christendom, and in so doing, hints at Gawain’s ultimate success.

The Feast of All Saints has fairly positive connotations, apart from the concentration on the martyrs, and Gawain, though he is concerned about his fate, joins in the feast prepared for him with a philosophical attitude:

De knyȝt mad ay god chere,
And sayde, ’Quat schuld I wonde?
Of destines derf and dere
What may mon do bot fonde?’

(11.562-565)

On the day Gawain is to leave, however, the associations become much darker and more ominous. Anyone hearing or
reading the poem would recognize that November 2 is the Feast of All Souls, a day for remembering all the souls of the faithful departed. The day had only been officially designated for November 2 in the earlier part of the fourteenth century, so one would expect the connotations to be quite fresh in the minds of the audience. On All Soul's Day the emphasis rests not on the joys of Heaven and eternal reward, but on the sorrows of death and the pain of the souls in Purgatory. It is a day on which "the Church on earth particularly emphasizes her relations with the souls in Purgatory by soliciting the divine mercy in their favour," for the Church has long believed that the suffering souls cannot help themselves but may be aided by the prayers of the faithful on earth, and, in return, will help the living.

The liturgical color of All Soul's Day is black, and the Mass is always the Mass of the Dead. Small wonder that at least one critic has been prompted to exclaim upon the appropriateness of the day for Gawain's departure. One of the outstanding features of All Soul's Day is the Mass which Gawain would have heard before setting out, and with which the audience would have been well acquainted,"with its solemn Introitus, Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine; et lux perpetua luceat eis, its fearsome Sequence of Dies irae, dies illa, and the significant absence of the Gloria and the benediction. An appropriate requiem for one who departs to certain death."
Following All Soul's Day, Gawain travels for a month and a half, searching for the Green Knight and facing many terrors and adventures along the way. Some critics discover in Gawain's journey both direct and subtle references to the Devil, against whom he has been armed. Joseph Longo asserts that "the Gawain poet emphasizes the motifs of north, cold and ice, and the left because their theological relationships to the theme of betrayal, pride and Satan foreshadow the fall of Gawain." Levy agrees that the journey follows a path to the north and the left, "toward the realm of the Devil." Wirral appears to be typical of the lands associated with the Devil—all wilderness and wasteland, and there is the suggestion that the numerous adversaries Gawain encounters are appropriate to Satan's domain. One further association with Michael may here be made, for it was in the north of heaven that the rebellious angels took up their stance.

Gawain's travels take him through the icy winter until on "krystmasse euen" (1.734) he stands alone, half frozen, in a wood. At this point, as mentioned previously, the audience might have recalled that Christmas Eve was the feast of our first parents, Adam and Eve. Although the feast was never officially sanctioned by the Church, and it is no longer even mentioned in the canon of feast days, it was quite popularly observed in the Middle Ages. The image of Gawain huddled against the cold brings to mind the similar state of Adam and
Eve when they had been driven out of Paradise, and it stands in sharp contrast to the magical, almost heavenly appearance of Bercilak's castle. Gawain, too, likens himself to Adam later on, as a man whose fall is brought about by a woman.

Gawain prays that he may find "sum herber þer hezly I myȝt here masse, /And þy matynez to-morne" (11.755-756), and in doing this he addresses himself to Christ through "Mary, þat is myldest moder so dere" (1.753). The address reflects the standard approach of the Middle Ages when the cult of the Virgin was at its peak: "In practice she was more important than our Lord, especially in her power of intercession and her ability to influence the Godhead on behalf of those who otherwise had put themselves out of salvation." There are examples too numerous to mention of the miracles ascribed to the Virgin Mary at this time, and one might wonder if the sudden appearance of Bercilak's castle might be another such occurrence.

Once inside Bercilak's castle, Gawain sits down to a superb feast:

*Sone watz telded vp a tabil on trestez ful fayre,*
*Clad wyth a clene cloþe þat cler quyt schewed,*
*Sanap, and salure, and syluerin sponez.*
*De wyȝe wesche at his wylle, and went to his mete.*
*Seggez hym serued semly innoȝe*
*Wyth sere sewes and sete, sesounde of þe best,*
*Double-felde, as hit fallez, and fele kyn fischez,*
*Summe baken in bred, summe brad on þe gledez,*
*Summe sopen, summe in sewe saucred with spyces,*
*And ay sawes so sleȝe þat þe segge lyked.*
*De freke calde hit a fest ful frely and ofte*  
*(11.884-894)*
This "fish feast" has puzzled many critics, including Levy, who says "it seems curious to call such a sumptuous repast a 'penance' until we remember that this is Christmas Eve, until recently a time for the severest fasting, for a truly penitential meal, rather than feasting," and to Levy this "sensual indulgence" indicates that the Green Knight is priming Sir Gawain for a severe test. But the disparity between the ordinary character of a vigil fast and the lavish meal set before Gawain is more apparent than real. While it is true that the vigil of a great feast or holy day was normally kept by reducing food intake to a minimum and abstaining completely from meat, this was not the case in the Middle Ages on the vigil of Christmas. Medieval Catholics could see that to keep the vigil of Christ's birth in such a solemn and negative character was incompatible with the great joy it anticipated. They willingly abstained from meat, but they felt justified in minimizing the strictness of the fast itself. Thus the feast set before Gawain actually reflects the legitimate medieval custom of the "joyous fast," which may help to illuminate more fully the humor and irony behind the remark made to Gawain, "his penaunce now 3e take, And eft hit schal amende" (11.897-898). Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the description of the feast works well on a literal level as well, particularly in its contrast to the humble and rather meagre petitions of Gawain's prayer for a place simply to pray.
The following day, Christmas, would surely have brought many vivid associations to the minds of the audience. The Latin Church had begun to celebrate Christmas about 300 A.D. and by the twelfth century all the nations of Europe had accepted it and celebrated Christmas with great joy and devotion. (The original choice of the date probably reflects the desire of the Popes to turn people's hearts from the pagan worship of the sun god to a Christian adoration of the Son of God, the "Light of the World.") By the late fourteenth century, the time in which SGGK was written, Christmas celebration was at its peak. Doubtless, the audience would have recalled the idea of the three-fold birth that took place on the first Christmas: the birth of God into the world, the birth of Jesus, the true son of Mary, and the day of potential birth (spiritual birth) for all men. At Bercilak's castle Gawain moves toward his own spiritual trial and rebirth, and to some extent his actions may provide spiritual rebirth for other men.

In the final portions of Part II, the poet tells us a little bit about the days following Christmas:

\[
\text{Much dut watz } \text{per dryuen } \text{pat day and pat other,}
\text{And pe } \text{dryd as } \text{pro } \text{pronge in perafter;}
\text{De } \text{loye of sayn Jonez day watz gentyle to here,}
\text{And watz pe } \text{last of pe layk, leudez pe } \text{poitien.}
\] (11.1020-1023)
These days immediately following Christmas had an important function in the Church calendar, for they were used to celebrate special saints who, it was felt, deserved special recognition for their position in Christ's esteem. By virtue of their special favor, these saints were given the days closest to Our Lord's day for their feast days:

We may say here, however, that there is a double reason for which the Church has placed the three feasts of Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Stephen, and the Holy Innocents, immediately after the Nativity of Our Lord. Firstly, the Church wished to place Christ and His first companions together. Secondly, the Church wished to group the three kinds of martyrs close to the Birth of Christ, which is the first reason for all martyrdom.

St. Stephen, the protomartyr, is honored on December 26. He was accused of blasphemy by the Jewish Council and was stoned to death while calling for God's mercy upon his attackers. St. Stephen was one of the more popular saints of the Middle Ages particularly on the Continent, but also in England where there originated the observances of "Boxing Day" and the "Wren Boys," both on Stephen's feast. The poet, however, fairly skips over St. Stephen, and goes on to mention the "joie of sayn Jonez day" (1.1022). St. John's Day, December 27, was a general holy day in medieval times, as both the festival of an apostle and as the third day of Christmas. On the feast of Saint John there was a common practice which involved the drinking of wine:
The significant part of the traditional celebration was the blessing and drinking of wine, called the "Love of Saint John"...because, according to legend, the saint once drank a cup of poisoned wine without suffering harm.  

St. John's wine was drunk with the meals on December 27 and then kept in the house throughout the rest of the year. The wine was believed to be a great aid to travellers who partook of it before commencing a long journey as a token of protection and hope of a safe return. It was also used as a sacramental for the dying after they had received Extreme Unction; "it is the last earthly drink to strengthen them for their departure from this world." The rite of drinking "the Love of Saint John" may have some bearing on Gawain's spiritual quest, for he is on a perilous journey of the soul into temptation from which a safe return cannot be assured. Finally, there are association between St. John and the Virgin Mary which link both of them to Sir Gawain. St. John was notably celibate, and in this way is allied to Mary, but he is also connected to her in another, special way for it was to John that Jesus commended the care of his mother. Both John and Mary, who is Gawain's patroness, in their status as virgins emphasize the forthcoming tests of Gawain's chastity.  

The third day after Christmas, strangely, is not mentioned in the poem and Tolkien and Gordon noting this
omission, agree with Gollancz' deduction that a line appears to be missing from the manuscript. The poet does mention that the feasting goes on very late on St. John's Day and that those guests who must depart early the next day bid farewell to their host before retiring. But Gawain is persuaded to stay, and on the next morning (apparently) the hunt begins. "But the hunt and the three temptations occupy the last three days of the year (1965-8), and this agrees with Gawain's statement in 1066 that he has only three days left. 28 December is therefore not accounted for, and since the author is attentive to dates this is unlikely to be an oversight."

At least one critic, however, regards the omission of December 28 as both significant and deliberate. "Unwilling to accept a slip in the Gawain-poet's rigour some have said a line must be missing after line 1022. But there is no break in either sense or syntax here, and, moreover, in the whole manuscript no other line is missing. So far as we know, that is." Victor Haines's theory is that Gawain sleeps through most of the 28th as a result of the traditional night-long celebration of St. John's Day: "this day after the 'ioye of sayn Jonez day' would not have been so obscured to a fourteenth century audience as it has been to the twentieth, since they would have experienced fourteenth century Christmases," though perhaps even they would have
had to ponder closely to discern the omission. But, Haines feels, Gawain sleeps through most of the day for a logical reason, which is integral to the story:

Gawain's conscience has been put to sleep, as it were, as an innocent babe. He has still much to learn after his journey through Advent, and if, to teach him a lesson, he is snicked on New Year's Day, the Feast of the Circumcision, it is appropriate that he should sleep through Holy Innocents Day, the 28th of December.

Another critic mentions in passing that "it appears likely that the Gawain poet deliberately omitted Childermas," for two reasons, one of which is directly related to the poet's desire to have the culmination of the Be-heading Game fall on the Feast of the Circumcision. But the same critic also feels that the Feast of the Holy Innocents is "a day thematically untenable to the action of the poem since the loss of Gawain's innocence is imminent, as well as a test from which he cannot flee." Whether the poet wishes to emphasize Gawain's innocence, or his association with the children Herod slew in his attempt to kill Jesus, remains unclear. The various connotations could be applied in several ways: either Gawain is like one of the innocent children, and is in danger of being sacrificed by Morgan and Bercilak to reach Arthur and the Court, or else the poet did not wish to have Gawain active on Childermas
because it is not a fitting parallel. In either case, once the missing date is noticed the audience has one more thing to consider in the kind of thoughtful reflection, required by SGGK, which is not incompatible with the contemporary emphasis on allegory.

The three days of the hunt offer little that is remarkable from a liturgical standpoint, except for the first day, December 29, which the medieval audience, if they were paying close attention to the progression of the days (as the poet seems to have done), would recognize as the feast of St. Thomas a Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. The date is the anniversary of his murder, carried out in the cathedral by the soldiers of Henry II in 1170. "Because of the great shock and sensation that this martyrdom caused at a time when all of Europe was Catholic, the Roman authorities, in the thirteenth century, deemed it appropriate to assign the celebration of his feast within the privileged days of Christmas week thus adding him to the group of 'Christ's nobility.'" Perhaps the audience would later remember that Becket bowed his head willingly to the sword of his murderers, just as Gawain bows his head of his own free will.

The second day of the hunt, December 30, appears to have little outstanding significance, and the same is true for the following day. Of course, the poet could not choose to rearrange the days within the liturgical calendar, and no
one would attempt to deny that many of the connotations spoken of above may be merely fortuitous. Nonetheless, it remains a fact that the poet deliberately and with great skill chose those dates of which he made special mention, and wove them into the rich and subtle fabric of SGGK. Many of the feast days have special associations which do not come immediately to our minds, but which would perhaps have come more quickly to the minds of the poet's contemporaries. And, finally, the reader and the student must remain ever-aware of the fact that the story as it is written is constructed around the framework of the Christian year, beginning and ending on a day whose symbolic implications make its choice unquestionably intentional.

Now neiez Pe Nw Eyre, and Pe nyot passez,
Pe day dryuez to Pe derk, as Dry3tyn biddez;
(11.1998-1999)

The time arrives when Gawain must finally leave his host to meet his fate at the hands of the Green Knight. January 1, New Year's Day, is the most important day in the poem, and a day rich in symbolism. The character of January 1 as the "Feast of Fools" has already been discussed, but it is not at all a factor on this second New Year's Day. Rather, January 1 has now become the Octave Day of Christmas and it is as this day that it bears consideration. For now
January 1 has become a day of endings and beginnings, the last day of the Christmas week and the first day of both a new week and a new civil year. The medieval mind was perhaps more accustomed to reacting to the dual nature of time, where, for example, Sunday is both the last day and the first day, the "eighth day." The reasoning behind this expression is that "Sunday commemorates not only a beginning (first day of creation, beginning of Christ's risen life), but also an end and consummation (redemption and eternal glory)."  

The number symbolism connected with eight is discussed in Vincent Foster Hopper's classic work on the subject, Medieval Number Symbolism:

Since the universe is constituted in 7, 8 is the number of Immortality. It returns to Unity as the first day of the second week, or in the eighth sentence of the Beatitudes, which repeats the first. It is the number of resurrection and circumcision and the number of those who did not perish in the flood. It is taken as the eighth age of Eternal Salvation, wherefore, it is written, 'Give a portion to 7, and also to 8.'

(Even today in modern French, the expression for "see you in a week" may be translated "en huit jours," which technically means in eight days, and which probably derives from this tradition.

Its nature as the Octave day of Christmas, however, supplies only one of the several important reasons for considering January 1 at this point. As Hopper mentions, the "eighth day"
is also the day of circumcision, and this factor has great relevance for Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The Feast of the Circumcision originated slowly, considering the fact that the Gospel notes Christ's circumcision on the eighth day after birth (Matthew 2,21). The reluctance to institute such a feast may have resulted from the replacement of circumcision by Baptism under the New Law. Undeniably, the secular celebrations, with all their excesses, contributed to the delay because the Church authorities were unwilling to encourage such objectionable activities as the Roman New Year fostered. Once the feast was established, a special dedication was made to Mary, because she had been somewhat neglected throughout the Christmas Week even though she is the Mother of God. In time this, too, was overshadowed as the feast took on solely the character of a celebration of the Circumcision.75

The special emphasis on the feast of Christ's circumcision centers on the rite itself as performed under the Old Law, and on the interpretation of this rite under the New Law. God in the Old Testament prescribed the practice to Abraham and his descendents, making it a sign of the covenant between Himself and them. The ritual was performed on the eighth day after birth with a flint knife, and included the bestowal of godparents and the child's name.76 The Church has always made a special effort to note that Christ, as the incarnation of the New Law, and because He was born absolutely
sinless, did not have to submit to either the Old Law or the rite. That He did so regardless is a fact of the utmost importance. One medieval commentor gives four reasons why January 1 is an "important and solemn feast" one of which is the "conferring of a new name upon the Lord, for our salvation," though this, and the octave characteristics are the more minor reasons. More importantly, Christ's wish to demonstrate the truth of his humanity and, secondly, his pledge of blood that was to be shed to save all men, these are the primary considerations. One of the lessons the medieval mind found in the Feast of the Circumcision was that Christ "wished to show us that we too should accept spiritual circumcision, that is, we should apply ourselves to the work of our purification."

The numerous significant aspects of the feast would not have been lost upon an alert, devout, and well-educated medieval audience. Savage notes that a medieval reader or auditor "would remember the day as one of the effusions of blood, and would, at first thought, expect no other outcome than the death of the hero. His second thought, if he had one, would tell him that the blood-shedding would not be unto death." Levy also notes the importance of the fact that the poem begins and ends on New Year's Day, not simply because it is the first day of a new year, a new beginning,
but in the Christian liturgical calendar, it is rather, and more importantly, the time for the celebration of the Circumcision of Christ, and significantly, within the Christian scheme of Redemption, the first time that Christ shed a drop of blood for man. . . . Circumcision is conceived by the Medieval Christian to be a prefiguration of Christian Baptism, for both are initiations into the spiritual life.\textsuperscript{81}

In relating the feast to Baptism and to the Crucifixion, Levy also includes the sacrament of Penance, which repeats and advances the symbolic action of rebirth. Penance, which plays such an important role in the working-out of the Gawain story, is connected to what Joseph Longo calls, "the act symbolic of regeneration."\textsuperscript{82}

All aspects of the preceding discussions of the symbolic implications of the Feast of the Circumcision apply to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, from the purely technical to the more abstract. January 1 is the end of Gawain's journey, both spiritual and physical. It is the end of his search for the Green Chapel, and the beginning of his final test and eventual absolution. Gawain must undergo a ritualistic purification not unlike a circumcision or a baptism. As Gawain approaches the Green Chapel he hears a strange and unsettling sound, "As one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a sy^e" (1.2202), (the sounds of sharpening the ritual flint knife?). The third blow of the Green Knight's axe nicks Gawain's neck in a symbolic circumcision.
Not only is it a symbolic circumcision, but, as one critic points out, it is a "punishment" aptly fitted to Gawain's particular crime or sin "since his sin of pride is an intellectual flaw. The stroke becomes symbolic of the dismembering of head or reason from the body or passions." 

Thus, the "nirt in þe nek" (1.2498) acts as a two-fold symbol for the cleansing of Gawain's sin, and for the pledge of his blood which, like Christ's, is shed for other men. The poem tells us that Gawain is the most perfect of King Arthur's knights, who, in turn, are the best knights in Christendom. As the epitome and as a representative of that company of knights, Gawain undergoes temptation and testing and he carries his story back to their midst in an attempt to educate them through his own fall.

Following Gawain's "baptism," the scene at the Green Chapel resembles a formal confession. At this time in the Middle Ages penance and penitential doctrine were especially important. Following the Fourth Lateran Council's decree in 1215 that confession was mandatory at least once a year, there was a great upsurge in time devoted to instruction on the subject. At the same time, an effort was made to improve the clergy so that they could better instruct the laity. The priests and the laity alike were given instructional and devotional materials. The sacrament itself "consists in accusing ourselves of our sins to a priest who has received
authority to give absolution. The necessary requirements add that the confession must be vocal, entire, humble and sincere, and accompanied by sorrow and a firm purpose of amendment. Gawain's self-accusations place the Green Knight in the position of a priest, and since it was he who helped to engineer the test, he is entitled to absolve Gawain of his sins. The Green Knight has already administered a punishment/baptism, and now he says

\[\text{\textit{D}ou art confessed so clene, beknowen of \textit{By mysses}, And hatz \textit{be} penaunce apert of \textit{be} poyn \textit{of myn egge}, I halde \textit{be} polysed of \textit{bat ply\textit{f}}, and pure\textit{d as clene As \textit{D}ou hadez neuer forfeted sy\textit{ben} \textit{D}ou watz fy\textit{rst borne;} (11.2391-2394)}\]

One critic feels so strongly that the poet's religious emphasis in the poem, particularly in the sixteen-line interpretation of Gawain's shield, supersedes all discussions of the chivalric virtues also mentioned, that he says

...moreover, the poet chose, for the most part, to express this fundamental aspect of Gawain's character in language made familiar to his audience by the confessional. . . . One is strongly tempted to speculate further that the Gawain-poet was fully aware that the penitential note is struck, not only here, [in reference to the shield] but also later in his tale—in particular, in Gawain's confession and absolution at the Green Chapel (vv.1867-84) and in his penance-like act of wearing the green lace.86

When Gawain leaves Bercilak he takes with him the green
girdle as a reminder of his imperfection:

But in synne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte,  
When I ride in renoun, remorde to myseluen  
De faut and De sayntye of De flesche crabbed,  
How tender hit is to entye teches of fylpe;  
(11.2433-2435)

With Gawain's return to Arthur's court his quest has  
come full circle, from New Year's Day to New Year's Day;  
following the true form of confessional, his sin is expiated  
and a new life of grace begun. The fact that the poem ends  
on a note of seeming gaity need not deter the application of  
a Christian interpretation to the poem. Part of the author's  
intent no doubt was included making his story entertaining  
and rewarding for his audience, and the elements of humor and  
terror, entertainment and instruction, are entwined throughout.  
The poem remains essentially religious, without being  
heavy-handedly so. The emphasis on the final scenes of  
penance and the lesson of humility make clear the poet's  
intent. If we can assume that the audience was cultured,  
intelligent and devout, then they, too, would have been  
inclined to look for more in the poem than simple fantasy and  
vacuous gaity. In an age dominated by the Catholic Church,  
and in which allegory was a major influence that permeated  
all facets of the written and spoken word, such an audience
would derive great pleasure—similar to our own, six centuries later—in discovering the "hidden" significance of the poet's subtle craft.
NOTES


5. Ibid., p. 341.


9. Ibid., p. 252.

10. Ibid., p. 252.
11 Gladys D. Willcock, M.A., "Middle English II: Before and After Chaucer," *The Year's Work in English Studies*, 16(1947), 90.


14 Ibid., p. 58.

15 Richard Hamilton Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," *ELH*, 29(1962), 122.

16 Ibid., p. 121.

17 Ibid., p. 122.


19 Ibid., p. 66.

20 Ibid., p. 105.


23 Ibid., p. xvi.


30  Savage, *The GAWAIN-Poet*, p. 27.

31  Henry L. Savage, "The Feast of Fools in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *JEGP*, 51 (1952), 537.


36  *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd ed. (1967; rpt. with corrections, Oxford: 1972), p. 3. All references in the text are to this edition and will henceforth be cited by line references in the text itself.
37 Tolkien and Gordon, p.74, note 67.


40 Ibid., p. 158.


45 Ibid., p. 245.

46 Tolkien and Gordon, p. 88, note 536.


48 Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs, p. 309.

49 Butler's Lives of the Saints, IV, 240.

50 Savage, "Feast of Fools," p. 537.
Bernard Levy includes a detailed discussion of the relationship between the arming of Gawain and the miles Christi whose armor is described in Paul's letter to the Ephesians (6.10-17), in "Gawain's Spiritual Journey," p.89.


Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs, p.59.


Levy, "Gawain's Spiritual Journey," p.94.

Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs, p.69.

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The Golden Legend, p.57.

Oxford Dictionary, p.1289. See also, Acts of the Apostles, 6-

Ibid., p.1289.

Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs, p.130.

Ibid., p.130.
65 Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs, p.130.
68 Ibid., p.357.
69 Ibid., p.357.
70 Joseph Longo, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," p.76.
71 Ibid., p.76.
72 Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs, p.122.
73 Ibid., p.8.
75 Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs, pp.135-137.
76 Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary, p.130.
78 The Golden Legend, p.82.
79 Ibid., p.83.
80 Savage, "Feast of Fools," p.538.

82 Longo, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," p.76.

83 Ibid., p.75.


85 A Catholic Dictionary, p.207.

86 Ackerman, "Gawain's Shield," p.265.
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