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LIGHT AGAINST DARK: THE PRESENTATION OF
HEROIC LIFE IN FOUR MEDIEVAL ENGLISH
ALLITERATIVE POEMS: "BEOWULF," "MALDON,"
"MORTE ARTHURE," AND "GAWAIN AND THE GREEN
KNIGHT."

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, PH.D., 1979

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LIGHT AGAINST DARK: THE PRESENTATION OF HEROIC
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BEOWULF, MALDON, MORTE ARTHURE, AND GAWAIN AND
THE GREEN KNIGHT

by

ROBERT LEE MILGROM

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Abstract

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LIFE IN FOUR MEDIEVAL ENGLISH ALLITERATIVE POEMS:
BEOWULF, MALDON, MORTE ARTHURE, AND GAWAIN AND
THE GREEN KNIGHT

by

Robert Lee Milgrom

Advisor: Professor Helaine Newstead

The medieval heroic poem, like so much of heroic poetry, is an expression of the inevitable clash between human potentiality and human limitation. Human limitation, the necessities which determine the perimeters of the hero's world, range in their concrete form from the monsters of Beowulf to Fortune's wheel in Morte Arthure, and may be defined as all those forces which transcend the human will, frustrate human need, and deny human value. Human potentiality, expressed through the values and aspirations of heroic life, may be said to represent man's attempt to demonstrate his worth against those very forces which negate him. This irreconcilable tension between heroism and necessity, between the hero and the given limits of his world, is the essential mainspring of the heroic poem.

More specifically the connection between the hero and the necessities which surround him largely determines the nature of heroic life in each poem. The hero is always commensurate with his fate. Beowulf's eagerness for fame is to be understood in terms of the transitory nature of his world, and his gentleness measured against the web of irrational violence which engulfs him. The courage of Byrhtnoth's loyal retainers is to be

viewed in light of their inevitable defeat and death. Arthur's heroic aspirations are to be understood in the tragic perspective of Fortune's wheel. As for Gawain, only in the context of mutability does the full value of his troth emerge.

The nexus of heroism and tragedy also shapes the structure and rhetoric of all four poems. In Beowulf, the structural juxtaposition of the hero's ascendant prime with his age and death reflects the underlying tensions of heroic life. The formal strategies of Maldon are closely tied to the poet's portrayal of heroic values exercised under desperate circumstances. In Morte Arthure, the structure mirrors the rise and fall of de casibus tragedy. And in Gawain, cyclical structure and rhetorical pattern formally sustain the framework of mutability within which Gawain's heroism gains its full significance.

The clash between human aspiration and necessity not only accounts for the narrative strategies of the medieval heroic poem, it helps to distinguish heroic poetry from those kinds of verse which most closely resemble it: elegy, tragedy, battle poetry, romance, and the medieval saint's life. At one end of the literary spectrum, the Old English elegist and the de casibus tragedian share the heroic poet's concern with the tragic forces of existence, but not his confidence in the viability of heroism. At the other end, the Middle English chivalric romance and the Anglo-Saxon battle poem celebrate the accomplishments of heroic life, but do not set them in opposition to necessity. As for the saint's life, the genre does pit its protagonist against all which is inimical in the world, but since what transcends man in the vita is ultimately God, the hagiographer represents the relationship between man and necessity as one of positive identification rather than as one of desperate confrontation.

Thus, in the end, the heroic vision of man remains singular and unique, a vision in which human existence may be said to resemble an unresolvable mathematical equation, wherein the two terms--the tragic and the heroic--remain locked in permanent struggle. Time, change, and death correspond to one side of the equation; but they are balanced by the weight of heroism. Men gain no victories over destiny; but neither are they wholly defeated. Life is transitory--but magnificent.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have long awaited an opportunity to publicly express my gratitude to Professor Helaine Newstead. She has taught me so much, and now there seems to little space to acknowledge all that I owe to her. Let me simply say then that I am deeply grateful to Professor Newstead for her guidance, her encouragement, and, above all, for the warm friendship she readily extended to me throughout my years of graduate study. It was from her that I learned--precious lesson that she has taught to so many--that scholarship is synonymous with intellectual adventure and discovery.

I would also like to thank Professors Sam Levin and Robert Payne for their careful critical reading of this manuscript. Their suggestions often proved invaluable.

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EPIGRAPH

Good against evil; youth against age;
Life against death; light against darkness;
Army against army; foe against foe;
Hostile with hostile shall always fight . . .
A wise man must ponder this world's strife.

Cotton ms. Maxims
trans. Charles W. Kennedy

INTRODUCTION

Although the four poems which form the nucleus of this study span six centuries, there is an unmistakable family resemblance among them.¹ No doubt the narrative strategies and heroic outlook of Old English poetry were transmitted in at least some degree to the poets of the 14th century Alliterative Revival through what the intermediate poetry preserved of the linguistic, thematic, and rhetorical conventions of Anglo-Saxon heroic verse.² This is certainly true of Morte Arthure, which owes much to the Chronicle tradition exemplified by Lazamon's Brut, the only significant surviving English alliterative poem composed between the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English periods.³ Moreover, the Morte Arthure and Gawain poets may well have been familiar with an extensive oral tradition of heroic alliterative verse which we can only guess at.⁴

While Beowulf, Maldon, Morte Arthure, and Gawain and the Green Knight may all be assumed to fall within a single, continuous, literary tradition, to place them thus does not altogether resolve the formal questions which they raise, particularly with respect to the kind of poems they are and the critical frame of reference within which they are to be approached. Two procedures are open to us: we may attempt to classify these poems according to genre, with respect to their ostensible formal sources and models; or, given that Beowulf, Maldon, Morte Arthure and Gawain and the Green Knight share what is, by and large, a common vocabulary, style, and subject,⁵ we may approach them more directly, in terms of mode, that is to say, according to the values and vision of life to which they are committed.

To the degree that kind is identified with genre, such works are not easily categorized. At the very least, generic classification requires a demonstrable reliance on formal models, and this is precisely what is lacking. It is easy enough to identify self-proclaimed epics like The Aeneid and Paradise Lost, the crowning achievements of poets who were hardly reticent about their generic sources and aspirations. But what of a poem such as Beowulf, a work whose origins and antecedents can only be surmised? On what basis and according to what criteria is it to be identified as an epic? Despite claims to the contrary, no convincing evidence has been put forth to establish Virgil's Aeneid (or, for that matter, any classical source) as a formal model for the Beowulf poet.⁶

Of course, critics vary in their concepts of epic form, and not all who have identified Beowulf as epic attempt to force it into a strictly classical mold.⁷ Indeed, the term is often used in a looser, almost nominal sense, more to establish a conveniently familiar context for the discussion of medieval heroic narrative than as a means of formal generic classification. In the end, however, even the most discrete application of classical nomenclature to a poem like Beowulf inevitably tends to foster Aristotelian assumptions about its form and its hero, perpetuating--even if unintentionally--the most inappropriate and misleading expectations about its nature and meaning. Thus Beowulf has been measured against classical standards of unity at which its poet did not aim,⁸ while the hero himself has been viewed as flawed by hubris or hamartia, moral categories utterly alien to the heroic spirit of the work.⁹ On the whole, generic considerations are rarely relevant to medieval English poetry, particularly in the case of narrative alliterative verse.¹⁰ In the study of works such as Beowulf, Maldon, Morte Arthure, and Gawain and the Green

Knight, we would do well to altogether dispense with classical categories, replacing the unapt Aristotelian terminology with a critical vocabulary more consistent with the actual values, aims, and concerns of Old and Middle English alliterative poetic practice. In this respect, insofar as Beowulf is concerned, as C. L. Wrenn suggests, "Beowulf may best be described as an heroic poem rather than as an epic."¹¹

What is true of Beowulf is also true of Maldon, Morte Arthure, and Gawain and the Green Knight. Maldon, for example, is commonly treated either as an epic, albeit a "short epic,"¹² or as a "battle poem"--a work commemorating an historical military engagement and celebrating the participants thereof. Epic is as inappropriate to Maldon as it is to Beowulf and has led to similar confusions about the nature of heroism and the character of the hero.¹³ Even the identification of Maldon as a battle poem proves ultimately inadequate and misleading; for as has been often recognized, Maldon shares the heroic outlook and formal strategies of Beowulf to a far greater degree than it does the attitudes, aims, and conventions of its sister battle poem, Brunanburh.¹⁴ In the end, as we shall see, there is far more to be gained by treating Maldon as a heroic poem than by classifying it as battle poetry.

The generic status of Morte Arthure is unclear. It has been called everything from a romance¹⁵ to a chanson de geste¹⁶ to a tragedy.¹⁷ While superficially the poem does have much in common with the chivalric romance, the grimly heroic values and stark scenario of the Alliterative Morte remove it a good distance from the ordinary concerns and conventions of courtly romance.¹⁸ As for the chanson de geste, there probably are echoes of the chanson world in Morte Arthure, particularly the monumental scale of the battles and the magnitude of the odds against which the

Round Table heroes fight.¹⁹ Such similarities are, however, relatively minor; and there is absolutely no justification for ascribing the heroic qualities of Morte Arthure to the influence of the chanson,²⁰ especially when the native English alliterative tradition from which the poet inherits his matter and his verse form is itself so thoroughly imbued with a heroic temperament far closer to the spirit of Morte Arthure than is anything to be found in the French chanson. Finally, although William Matthews' insights into the de casibus structure of the Morte Arthure are invaluable,²¹ his view of the poem as tragedy--like Tolkien's view of Beowulf as elegy²²--fails to engage the work in its entirety, particularly with regard to the nature and significance of the heroic values which the poet celebrates. Like Beowulf and Maldon, Morte Arthure is best understood in its own terms--as an example of medieval heroic poetry.

The generic nature of Gawain and the Green Knight is somewhat less ambiguous than that of Beowulf, Maldon, or Morte Arthure. Gawain is a chivalric romance.²³ Nevertheless, Gawain is too complex and multifaceted a poem to be relegated to any one category.²⁴ The poet's ironic treatment of romance conventions alone suggests that we are dealing with something more than, or at least not wholly romance.²⁵ For the moment, let us simply note that despite its considerable range of comic and romance elements, there is so significant a concern with heroic values and attitudes in Gawain and the Green Knight that the full meaning of the work is not to be sought without reference to the formal conventions and social ideals of heroic poetry. Thus, whatever the differences between them, Beowulf, Maldon, Morte Arthure, and--to some degree at least--Gawain and the Green Knight are to be read as medieval heroic poems.

The medieval heroic poem, like so much of heroic poetry, is an expression of the inevitable clash between human potentiality and human limitation. Human limitation, the necessities which determine the perimeters of the hero's world, range in their concrete form from the monsters of Beowulf to the wheel of Fortune of Morte Arthure, and may be defined as all those forces which transcend the human will, frustrate human need, and deny human value. Human potentiality, expressed through the attitudes and values of the heroic life, may be said to represent man's attempt to realize his highest aspirations and demonstrate his worth against those forces which negate him.²⁶ This tension between heroism and necessity, between the hero and the given limits of his world, is the essential mainspring of the heroic poem.²⁷

More specifically, a study of the connection between the hero and the necessities which hem him round helps to clarify the particular nature and significance of heroic life in each poem. It is a truism of heroic poetry that a poet's vision of necessity and his representation of heroic values are closely related. In this sense, the hero is always commensurate with his fate. Beowulf's eagerness for fame is to be understood in terms of the transitory nature of his world, and his gentleness is to be measured against the web of irrational violence which engulfs him. The courage of Byrhtnoth's loyal retainers is to be viewed in the light of their inevitable defeat and death. Arthur's heroic aspiration is to be understood in the tragic perspective of Fortune's wheel. As for Gawain and the Green Knight, only in the context of mutability does the full value of Gawain's troth emerge.

The nexus of heroism and tragedy also accounts in large part for the structure and rhetoric of all four poems. In Beowulf, for example,

the formal unity of the poem, the so-called diptych structure²⁸ which juxtaposes the hero's ascendant prime with his age and death, in itself reflects the underlying tensions of heroic life, the "opposition of ends and beginnings . . . rising and setting . . . first achievement and final death."²⁹ In Maldon, the narrative and dramatic strategies of the poem, its focus and its organization, are closely tied to the poet's portrayal of heroic values. In Morte Arthure, as Matthews has demonstrated, the structure is the rise and fall of de casibus tragedy,³⁰ while the rhetoric and diction of the poem express the opposition between the tragedy and heroism of Arthur's Round Table. And in Gawain and the Green Knight, the cyclical structure and major rhetorical configurations of the poem establish the framework of mutability and recurrence within which the heroism of Gawain gains its full significance.

The controversial question of the hero's responsibility for his fate is, again, best pursued in light of the tension between heroism and necessity. To what extent is the hero to be held accountable for what ultimately befalls him? The question arises in a different form in each poem. In Beowulf we must consider the hero's decision to confront the dragon single-handed; in Maldon we must take up the question of Byrhtnoth's ofermod; in Morte Arthure there is the issue of Arthur's sin; and in Gawain and the Green Knight we must consider whether Gawain's "imperfection" is to be viewed as a moral flaw or as an intrinsic aspect of his heroic role. I shall treat these questions in detail as a part of my analysis of each poem. For the moment, I would suggest only that what has too often been viewed as sin in Arthur and his knights, as egoistic pride in Byrhtnoth (and Roland), and as error in Beowulf, is neither flaw, nor pride, nor error, nor sin; what we witness in each of these situations is,

quite simply, a form of heroic excess--an overflowing of heroic ardor. Arthur's aspiration toward heroic glory, Roland's refusal to blow the Oliphant, Byrhtnoth's inexpediently generous offer, Gawain's journey to the limits of human possibility, Beowulf's passion for honor--these make the hero more, not less than other men.³¹ Ironically, in rising above ordinary men, the hero precipitates himself into a tragic confrontation with human limitation. But although the consequences of this confrontation may contribute to the fall of the hero, and often to the fall of those closest to him, this proves not that heroic excess is sinful, but that heroism is tragic. In this respect, in so far as heroic poetry is concerned, responsibility is not a moral category. It is a tragic fact of heroic life.

The parameters of the heroic poem are then, conceptual as well as formal. Indeed, to a large degree medieval heroic poetry shares its formal conventions with the romance, the elegy, and the panegyric. Far from distinguishing the heroic poem from modes contiguous with it, such criteria as rhetoric, theme, and diction tend to vary in meaning according to the literary context within which they function. Battle poetry signifies one thing in a tragic-heroic poem like Maldon and quite another in Brunanburh, a panegyric celebration of a national triumph. Elegy suggests something different in Beowulf than it does in The Wanderer, the latter being a reflective monologue which considers the glories of heroic life only in retrospect, whereas in Beowulf the heroic life is dramatized and lives at the center of the poem. In Morte Arthure and Gawain and the Green Knight, the traditional elements of romance--from dream vision and feats of arms to supernatural phenomena--reflect attitudes and values notably different from those expressed in roughly

contemporary Arthurian romances.³¹ What ultimately determines the modality of the heroic poem, what finally distinguishes heroic poetry from its closest literary neighbors, is not so much its special reservoir of formal strategies as its fundamental vision of man--its representation of life as a clash between heroic value and tragic necessity.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION

¹The exact dates cannot be determined. Beowulf was probably composed in the first half of the eighth century, Maldon in the first half of the eleventh century, Morte Arthure and Gawain and the Green Knight in the latter half of the fourteenth century. The best discussion of the dating of Beowulf is to be found in Dorothy Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf (London, 1951); for Maldon, see John Mc Kinnell, "On the Date of The Battle of Maldon," Medium Aevum, 44 (1975), 121-136; Fred C. Robinson, "Some aspects of the Maldon Poet's Artistry," JEGP, 75 (1976), 28-32; George C. Clark, "The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem," Speculum, XLIII (1968), 55-56; for Morte Arthure, see John Finlayson, ed. Morte Arthure (London, 1967), p. 33; "Morte Arthure: The Date and a Source for the Contemporary References," Speculum, 42 (1967), 624-638; for Gawain and the Green Knight, see Norman Davis, ed. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 2nd ed. (London, 1967), xxv-xxvi.

²See for example Dorothy Everett, Essays on Middle English Literature (London, 1955), pp. 23-25, 62-63; A. C. Spearing, The Gawain Poet: A Critical Study (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 18-27; R. W. Chambers, "The Lost Literature of Medieval England," The Library, V (1925), reprinted in Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry, p. 22; C. Moorman, "The Origins of the Alliterative Revival," SoQ, VII (July, 1969), 345-371; Marie Borroff, trans. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New York, 1967), p. xi. But cf. Larry Benson, "The Alliterative Morte Arthure and Medieval Tragedy," TSL, XI (1966), 76-78; William Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative Morte Arthure (Berkeley, 1960), pp. 97-98. Benson and Matthews, while acknowledging the similarity between Old English and Middle English heroic values, argue against the influence of the former on the latter, Benson contending that the Morte Arthure poet receives his heroic outlook from contemporary chivalric practices and ideals, Matthews arguing that the Morte Arthure poet inherits his attitudes "from Alexander poems and histories composed in France in the fourteenth century or earlier." For Matthews and Benson to discount the inherently heroic properties of alliterative verse and the self-evident continuity of the alliterative tradition is surely an error.

³For the transmission of Old English heroic values through the Chronicle tradition, see Everett's discussion of Lazamon in Essays in Middle English Literature, pp. 23, 25, 61-62; Helaine Newstead, "Malory and Romance," in Four Essays on Romance, ed. Herschel Baker (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 3-14, especially p. 6; D. S. Brewer, "Courtesy and the Gawain Poet: An Historical Note," in Chaucer and his Contemporaries: Essays on Medieval Literature and Thought, ed. Helaine Newstead (New York, 1968), pp. 339-341; Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 5.

⁴Spearing, The Gawain Poet, pp. 18-28; Marie Borroff, Sir Gawain and

the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study (New Haven, 1962), pp. 34, 38; Kenneth Sisam, Fourteenth-Century Verse and Prose (Oxford, 1965), pp. xviii, 57-58; J. L. N. O'Loughlin, "The English Alliterative Romances," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (London, 1959), p. 520. J. R. R. Tolkien places Gawain and the Green Knight squarely in the heroic tradition, together with Beowulf and Maldon, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," Essays and Studies, NS I (1953), 1-18; reprinted in The Tolkien Reader (New York, 1966), pp. 19-24.

⁵The focus of all four poems is the ideals and aspirations of the English military nobility.

⁶See T. B. Haber, A Comparative Study of the Beowulf and the Aeneid (Princeton, 1931); Haber fails to firmly establish the Beowulf poet's indebtedness to Virgil. cf. T. A. Shippey, Old English Verse (London, 1972), p. 35, "Nor is the Old English poem at all like any Classical one . . ., having apparently no visible model."

⁷It has been so identified by a number of critics, among them Stanley B. Greenfield, "Beowulf and Epic Tragedy," in Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur, ed. S. B. Greenfield (Eugene, Ore., 1963), pp. 91-105; Jan de Vries, Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, trans. B. J. Timmer (London, 1963), pp. 55-62; W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1908), pp. 158-175; Peter F. Fisher, "The Trials of the Epic Hero in Beowulf," PMLA, LXXIII (1958), 171-183; William Witherle Lawrence, Beowulf and Epic Tradition (Cambridge, 1928); Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ed. Beowulf and Judith (New York, 1953), lv. Of course, such critics vary in their interpretations of the poem as well as in their understanding of the relationship between Beowulf and classical epic.

⁸By Ker for one, Epic and Romance, pp. 159-161. But cf. C. L. Wrenn, ed. Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment (London, 1958), p. 41; Wrenn argues against classifying Beowulf as epic, noting that "the classical name at once suggests structural qualities which the poet did not aim at."

⁹See below, Ch. I, pp. 75-77.

¹⁰There are, of course, exceptions: see, for example, J. E. Cross, "On the genre of The Wanderer," Neophilologus, xlv (1961), 63-72; John Conley, "Pearl and a Lost Tradition," JEGP, liv (1955), 332-347.

¹¹Wrenn, Beowulf, p. 41.

¹²Greenfield, A Critical History of Old English Literature (New York, 1968), p. 94.

¹³See below, Ch. II, pp. 154-172.

¹⁴E. V. Gordon, ed. The Battle of Maldon (London, 1937), p. 23, observes that "Maldon is of the same school as Beowulf and nearer to Beowulf in heroic art than any other Old English poem."

¹⁵Everett, p. 64, discusses the critical attempts to classify Morte Arthure as a romance; see also Matthews, pp. 94-96.

¹⁶Finlayson, Morte Arthure, pp. 3-20. Here we might note that Morte Arthure, like Beowulf and Maldon, has been classified as an epic as well as a chanson. See R. W. Chambers, Man's Unconquerable Mind (London, 1939), p. 93; O'Loughlin, p. 524.

¹⁷Matthews, passim, especially pp. 94-114.

¹⁸Newstead, Malory and Romance, pp. 3-14; "A Review of William Matthews' The Tragedy of Arthur," Romance Philology, XVI (1962), 119-120. See also Everett, pp. 21, 64; Finlayson, Morte Arthure, pp. 5-11; Matthews, pp. 94-96.

¹⁹Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 11, suggests that Morte Arthure shares with the chanson a common emphasis on patriotism and Christianity. On close observation, however, one cannot fail to conclude that religion and patriotism play a greater role in the chansons than in the Morte Arthure. For the prominence of religion and patriotism in the chanson tradition, see Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (Berne, 1946), trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1963), pp. 96-97; Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (Berne, 1948), trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1953), pp. 168-169. Curtius and Auerbach distinguish between the chanson and the Germanic heroic traditions on just these grounds.

²⁰As does Finlayson, Morte Arthure, pp. 5-11.

²¹Matthews, pp. 94-114.

²²Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," Proceedings of the British Academy, XXII (1936), 245-295, reprinted in The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Donald K. Fry (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), p. 38. For a critique of this view, see below, Ch. I, pp. 90-94.

²³This is almost universally accepted. See, for example, Spearing, The Gawain Poet, p. 173.

²⁴See J. A. Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London, 1965), pp. 177-179; Spearing, The Gawain Poet, p. 236.

²⁵See Everett, p. 75.

²⁶This is not to say that the medieval hero attempts to surpass the given limitations of the human condition. Such a conception of heroism belongs to a later period. The medieval hero does not aspire to be more than human; he simply opposes his humanity to what transcends him.

²⁷While readers of heroic poetry have long recognized the special relationship between heroism and necessity, there is considerable controversy as to whether the final mood of the heroic poem is one of tragic

despair or heroic triumph. This debate, while heuristic and valuable, is based upon a misconception. It is not a question of determining whether heroism or tragedy predominates; on the contrary, it is a question of recognizing that the two are locked in a state of equilibrious and irreconcilable tension. The balance is all: man cannot surpass his limitations, but neither is he reducible to them; time, change and death are irrevocable, but--far from obviated by the tragic facts of life--heroism prevails, an affirmation of existence in the very face of necessity.

For varying views of the relationship between tragedy and triumph in the heroic poem, see C. M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (London, 1952), esp. pp. 4, 75-78, 84, 90, 128, 130-131; Stanley B. Greenfield, "Beowulf and Epic Poetry," in Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield (Oregon, 1963), pp. 91-105; Peter F. Fisher, "The Trials of the Epic Hero in Beowulf," PMLA, LXXIII (1958), 171-183; C. L. Wrenn, ed. Beowulf with the Finnsburh Fragment, 2nd ed. (London, 1958), esp. pp. 41-42; Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf (Berkeley, 1959), esp. 105, 227; Adrien Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers 1940-1960 with Additional Comments (Geneva, 1962), pp. 28, 44-47; "The Beowulf Poet and the Tragic Muse," in Studies in Old English Literature, pp. 129-135.

²⁸Charles Donahue, "Beowulf and Christian Tradition: A Reconstruction from a Celtic Stance," Traditio, 21 (1965), 55-116.

²⁹J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," Proceedings of the British Academy, XXII (1936), 245-295, reprinted in The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Donald K. Fry (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), pp. 34-35.

³⁰William Matthews, The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative Morte Arthure (Berkeley, 1960), pp. 94-115.

³¹A good general discussion of this aspect of heroism is to be found in G. N. Garmonsway, "Anglo-Saxon Heroic Attitudes," Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr. (New York, 1965), pp. 139-146. See also. Bowra, pp. 122-125; Frederick Whitehead, "Of ermod et desmesure," Cahiers de Civilization Medievale, III (January-March 1960), 115-117; Larry D. Benson, "The Alliterative Morte Arthure and Medieval Tragedy," TSL XI (1966), 80; Clark, 52-71; Edward B. Irving, Jr., "The Heroic Style in the Battle of Maldon," SP LVIII (1961), 462.

³²For a survey of the Arthurian romances in the English middle ages, see Robert W. Ackerman, "The English Rimed and Prose Romances," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (London, 1959), pp. 480-519; J. L. N. O'Loughlin, "The English Alliterative Romances," in ALMA, pp. 520-527.

CHAPTER I

BEOWULF

In the medieval heroic poem, the hero is measured by his fate, the specific values he exemplifies determined in large part by the vision of human limitation against which his affirmation of man's worth is ranged. Indeed, where the protagonists of such poems as Beowulf, Maldon, Morte Arthure, and Gawain and the Green Knight differ, the difference between them is to be accounted for as much by the particular form of necessity with which each is faced as by the years which separate them. Thus in the shifting, uncertain world of Gawain and the Green Knight, the heroic value most heavily stressed is Gawain's trawþe; similarly, in Maldon, where Byrhtnoth's loyal retainers are confronted with the clear-cut choice between death and dishonor, the virtues they are called upon to demonstrate are, above all, uncompromising courage and indomitable will; and in Morte Arthure, where the Arthurian fellowship is subjected to the reversals and sleights of Fortune, Arthur must finally achieve a mode of heroic affirmation uncompromised by the machinations of the Lady with her wheel. In Beowulf, although the representation of human limitation is multiple and complex, the primary form of necessity is temporal. In this poem haunted by loss and darkened by a sense of inevitable doom, all is transitory. Everything fades and fails--heroes, halls, nations and peoples. Nothing is permanent, neither good kings nor the precarious peace which they safeguard. In the end, "the dragon comes,"¹ and the hero, though he fells the serpent, is himself slain, his death anticipated by that of Scyld, Hnaef, and Hygelac, and itself signalling the end both of the Hretheling dynasty and the Waegmunding line. In this regard, Beowulf is himself a type of last survivor:

Dyde him of healse hring gyldenne
 þioden þristhygig, þegne gesealde,
 geongum garwigan, goldfahne helm,
 beah ond byrnan, het hyne brucan well--:
 'þu eart endelaf usses cynnes,
 Waegmundinga; ealle wyrd forsweop
 mine magas to methodscafte,
 eorlas on elne; ic him aefter sceal.'
 (2809-2816)²

His fall augurs not only the end of his kin group, but ultimately of the
 Geats as an independent nation:

'Ac sceal geomormod, golde bereafod
 oft nalles aene elland tredan,
 nu se herewisa hleahtor alegde,
 gamen ond gleodream.'
 (3018-3021)

As Beowulf is the mightiest of men, Heorot is the greatest of halls,
 the "Camelot" of Germanic heroic tradition.³ Like all else in the poem,
 its glory is intrinsically transient. No sooner is it introduced than
 we are warned of its ultimate destruction:

Sele hlifade
 heah ond horngeap; heaðowylma bad,
 laðan liges; ne waes hit lenge þa gen,
 þaet se ecghete aþumsweoran
 aefter waelniðe waecnan scolde.
 (81-85)⁴

And again, at the height of Beowulf's wrestling match with Grendel:

þaes ne wendon aer witan Scyldinga
 þaet hit a mid gemete manna aenig
 betlic ond banfag tobrecan meahte,
 listum toluacan, nymþe liges faeþm
 swulge on swaþule.
 (778-782)

The tragic curve of the narrative is from the beginning orchestrated
 by an elaborate elegiac rhetoric which serves not only as a vehicle of
 highly charged lyrical lament, but as a figurative means of emphasizing
 the tragic universality of the action. Elegy is most prevalent in the

final portions of the poem, but from the start Beowulf is threaded with adumbrations and reflections which suggest the fleeting nature of temporal value, such passages characteristically occurring at moments of triumph and celebration.⁵ The most extensive elegiac commentary in the Danish portion of the poem is provided by Hrothgar's sermo, which--whatever else its function--links Beowulf's triumphs at Heorot with his heroic death in Geatland.⁶ While Hrothgar's great monologue has often been recognized as a Christian homily against pride,⁷ the viewpoint expressed therein is remarkably similar to the traditional precepts of Germanic heroism.⁸ Indeed, the arrogance against which Hrothgar inveighs⁹ entails not so much a sinful violation of religious prohibition as a tragic neglect of human limitation--specifically time, change, and death.¹⁰ The stress on mutability is unmistakable,¹¹ culminating in Hrothgar's account of the vicissitudes of his own long reign:

'Swa ic Hring-Dena hund missera
 weold under wolcnum ond hig wigge beleac
 manigum maegþa geond þysne middangeard,
 aescum ond ecgum, þaet ic me aenigne
 under swegles begong gesacan ne tealde.
 Hwaet, me þaes on eþle edwenden cwom,
 gyrn aefter gomene, seoþþan Grendel wearð,
 ealdgewinna, ingenge min;
 ic þaere socne singales waeg
 modceare micle. Þaes sig Metode þanc,
 ecean Dryhtne, þaes ic on aldre gebad,
 þaet ic on þone hafelan heorodreorigne
 ofer eald gewin eagum starige!'

(1769-1781)

Like unforeseen reversals of fortune, old age and death are given conditions of existence, and the hero is warned that he--even as all men--must eventually come to the limit of his powers, the end of his apportioned days:

'Maere cempa! Nu is þines maegnes blaed
 ane hwile; eft sona bið,

þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafopes getwaefed,
 oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm,
 oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht,
 oððe atol ylðo; oððe eagena bearhtm
 forsited and forsworced; semninga bið,
 þæt þec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðed.'
 (1761-1768)

The general tenor of Hrothgar's sermo is reinforced by a skein of elegiac commentary which is interspersed throughout the Danish sections of the poem. For example, Hrothgar's remarks on the inevitability of old age are amplified by his regret for his own lost youth:

Hwylum eft ongan eldo gebunden,
 gomel guðwiga gioguðe cwidan,
 hildestrengo; hreðer inne weoll,
 þonne he wintrum froð worn gemunde.
 (2111-2114)

And by the poet's earlier proverbial observation:

þæt waes an cyning
 aeghwaes orleahtra, of þæt hyne ylðo benam
 maegenes wynnum, se þe oft manegum scod.
 (1884-1887)

Hrothgar's remarks on Beowulf's mortality are echoed by his ruminations on Hygelac's eventual end:

'Wen ic talige,
 gif þæt geganged, þæt ðe gar nymed,
 hild heorugrimme Hreþles eaferan,
 adl ofðe iren ealdor ðinne,
 folces hyrde, ond þu þin feorh hafast . . .'
 (1845-1849)

Then too, there is real elegiac power in the verses which close Hnaef's funeral:

Wand to wolcnum wael fyra maest,
 hlynode for hlawe; hafelan multon,
 bengeato burston, ðonne blod aetspranc,
 laðbite lices. Lig ealle forswealg,
 gaesta gifrost, þara ðe þær guð fornam
 bega folces; waes hira blaed scacen.
 (1119-1124)

And in the verse which serves as an epitaph for Hrothgar's doomed thanes, against whom Grendel is about to launch his initial attack:

Fand þa Ðaer inne aeþelinga gedriht
Swefan aefter symble; sorge ne cuðon,
wonsceaft wera.

(118-120)

And again as the unsuspecting Danes celebrate Beowulf's victory over Grendel on the eve of his dam's retaliatory raid:

Ðaer waes symbla cyst,
druncon win weras. Wyrð ne cuþon,
geosceaft grimme, swa hit agangen wearð
eorla manegum.

(1232-1235)

While elegy plays a significant role in the Danish portions of the poem, it is not until the final section--Beowulf's dragon fight, death, and funeral--that this strain emerges as dominant, culminating in two profoundly elegiac passages, the Plaint of the Last Survivor and the Lament of the Bereaved Father. Both passages ponder the fleeting nature of temporal values, particularly the transitory symbols and achievements of the heroic life. Each juxtaposes past glory with present desolation, the vivid contrast between then and now emphasizing--as it does in The Wanderer and The Ruin--the role of mutability in human affairs while flooding the passage with a sense of irrevocable loss and longing.¹²

The Plaint of the Last Survivor is particularly poignant:

'Heald þu nu, hruse, nu haeleð ne mostan,
eorla aehte! Hwaet, hyt aer on ðe
gode begeaton; guðdeað fornam,
feorhbealo frecne fyra gehwylcne
leoda minra þara ðe þis [lif] ofgeaf,
gesawon seledream . . .

Naes hearpan wyn,
gomen gleobeames, ne god hafoc
geond sael swingeð, ne se swifta mearh
burhstede beateð. Bealocwealm hafað
fela feorhcynna forð onsended!'

(2247-2252; 2262-2266)

Equally moving are the concluding verses of Beowulf's parable of the Bereaved Father, with its empty courtyards where the ghosts of departed warriors circle amidst the echoes of their past joys:

'Gesyhð sorhcearig on his suna bure
winsele westne, windge reste
reote berofene,-- ridend swefað,
haeleð in hoðman; nis þær hearpan sweg,
gomen in geardum, swylce ðær iu waeron.
Gewiteð þonne on sealman, sorhleodð gaeleð
an aefter anum; þuhte him eall to rum,
wongas ond wicstede.'

(2455-2462)

The account of the Bereaved Father clearly demonstrates the generalizing function of the elegiac passages in Beowulf. The powerful, closing verses of the passage are not generated by the hero's analogy between the predicament of Hrethel (who is unable to avenge the accidental slaying of one son by the other) and the plight of the father (who is prevented by law from avenging a son executed as a criminal). One senses something of a leap between the body of the analogy and the windswept wastes of its elegiac conclusion. In terms of Anglo-Saxon poetic, there is of course no inconsistency here. The poet is simply seizing another opportunity to represent the underlying conditions of his hero's world. The empty halls and fallen warriors serve as conventional figures of the transience of earthly joys.¹³ They illustrate not Hrethel's inconsolable dilemma, but the universal forces of necessity which are about to overwhelm the hero and his people.

The elegiac tone of the dragon-fight section is hardly limited to these two examples of formal, almost self-contained elegiac verse. As the poem draws toward its tragic conclusion, the epicedial rhetoric becomes increasingly pervasive and profound, especially in the messenger's

prophetic lament and the description of the hero's funeral. First the messenger:

'Forðon sceall gar wesan
 monig morgenceald mundum bewunden,
 haefen on handa, nalles hearpan sweg
 wigend weccan, ac se wonna hrefn
 fus ofer faegum fela reordian,
 earne secgan, hu him aet aete speow,
 þenden he wið wulf wael reafode.'
 (3021-3027)

And the funeral:

Him ða gegiredan Geata leode
 ad on orðan unwacligne,
 helm(um) behongen, hildebordum,
 beorhthum byrnum, swa he bena waes;
 alegdon ða tomiddes maerne þeoden
 haeleð hiofende, hlaforð leofne.
 Ongunnon þa on beorge baelfyra maest
 wigend weccan; wudurec astah
 sweart ofer swioðole, swogende leg
 wope bewunden --windblond gelaeg--,
 oð þaet he ða banhus gebrocen haefde
 hat on hreðre. Higum unrote
 modceare maendon, mondryhtnes cw(e)alm;
 swylce giomorgyd (s)io g(eo)meowle
 (aefter Biowulfe b)undenheorde
 (song) sorgcearig, saede geneahhe,
 þaet hio hyre (hearmda)gas hearde (ondre)de,
 waelfylla worn, (wigen)des egesan,
 hy(n)ðo (ond) h(aeftny)d. Heofon rece swe(a)lg.
 (3137-3155)

Among the most striking of the remaining elegiac passages are those directly connected with Beowulf's death. The lines which follow hard upon the worm's initial assault are typical:

Ne waes þaet eðe sið,
 þaet se maera maga Ecgðeowes
 grundwong þone ofgyfan wolde;
 sceolde (ofer) willan wic eadian
 elles hwergen, swa sceal aeghwylc mon
 alaetan laendagas.
 (2586-2591)

Again, following the dragon-slaying:

ƿaet ƿam ƿeodne waes
 siðas(t) sigehwile sylfes daedum,
 worlde geweorces . . .

Wisse he gearwe,
 ƿaet he daeghwila gedrogen haefde,
 eorðan wynn(e); ƿa waes eall sceacen
 dogorgerimes, deað ungemete neah.

(2709-2711; 2725-2728)

And finally, as Beowulf's companions gather at the fatal battle site:

Wundur hwar ƿonne
 eorl ellenrof ende gefere
 lifgesceafta, ƿonne leng ne maeg
 mon mid his (ma)gum meduseld buan.

(3062-3065)

In these passages, elegy serves to place the hero on common ground with humanity. His days, as the days of all men, are numbered; his fall, however portentous, is identified with the general fate of mankind. Heroism is not above, beyond, or distinct from human experience. The hero embodies not only the highest potentialities of man, but the universal limitations to which all are subject.

It is not without interest that in a number of elegiac verses Beowulf is coupled with his foe, the dragon.¹⁴ Even before the battle is joined, the poet warns,

Sceolde laendaga
 aƿeling aergod ende gibidan,
 worulde lifes, ond se wurm samod,
 ƿeah he ƿone hordwelan heolde lange.

(2341-2344)

At the moment of his death, the hero is again elegiacally yoked with his opponent:

ƿaet waes ƿam gomelan gingaeste word
 breostgehygdum, aer he bael cure,
 hate heaðowylmas; him of hreðre gewat
 sawol secean soðfaestre dom . . .

Bona swylce laeg,
 egeslic eorðdraca ealdre bereafod,
 bealwe gebaeded. Beahhordum leng

wyrn wobogen wealden ne moste,
 ac him irenna ecga fornamon,
 heard heaðoscearpe homera lafe,
 þæt þe widfloga wundum stille
 hreas on hrusan hordaerne neah.
 Nalles aefter lyfte lacende hwearf
 middelnihtum, maðmahta wlonc
 asyn ywde, ac he eorðan gefeoll
 for þæs hildfruman hondgeweorce . . .
 Biowulfe wearð
 dryhtmaðma dæl deaðe forgolden;
 haefde aeghwaeðer ende gefered
 laenan lifes.

(2817-2845)

And yet again, as Beowulf's companions arrive in the aftermath of the
 fateful struggle:

Fundon ða on sande sawulleasne
 hlimbed healdan þone þe him hringas geaf
 aerran maelum; þa waes endedaeg
 godum gegongen þæt þe gudcýning,
 Wedra þeoden wundordeaðe swealt.
 AEr hi þær gesegan syllicran wiht,
 wyrn on wonge wiðerrahtes þær
 laðne licgean; was se legdraca
 grimlic gry(refah) gledum beswaeled;
 se waes fiftiges for gemearces
 lang on legere; lyftwynne heold
 nihtes hwilum, nyðer eft gewat
 dennes nioian; was ða deaðe faest,
 haefde eorðscrafa ende genyttod.

(3033-3046)

Nor is elegy reserved to the dragon alone among monsters. Both
 Grendel and his dam provide the occasion for elegiac lament. A propos
 of Grendel's death, the poet observes:

No þæt yðe byð
 to befleonne -- fremme se þe wille--,
 ac geseccan sceal sawlberendra
 nyðe genyðde, niþða bearna,
 grundbuendra gearwe stowe,
 þær his lichoma legerbedde faest
 swefeþ aefter symle.

(1002-1008)

And earlier, as the doomed creature flees Heorot in search of his under-
 water bier:

Scolde Grendel þonan
 feorhseoc fleon under fenleoðu,
 Secean wynleas wic; wiste þe geornor,
 þaet his aldres waes ende gegongen,
 dogera daegrim.
 (819-823)

. . . he werigmod on weg þanon
 niða ofercumen, on nicera mere
 faege ond geflymed feorhlastas baer.
 (844-846)

Deaðfaege deog, siððan dreama leas
 in fen freoðo feorhe alegde.
 (850-851)

Similarly, the poet's mournful commentary on the raid by Grendel's dam extends the balm of elegy to the monsters as well as to the men:

Ne waes þaet gewrixle til,
 þaet hie on na healfa bicgan scoldon
 freonda feorum!
 (1304-1306)

Finally, as Beowulf struggles up through the mere after killing Grendel's dam and beheading her son's corpse, the familiar rhetoric of elegy is once more associated with the monstrous foe:

Waeron yðgebland eal gefaelsod,
 eacne eardas, þa se ellorgast
 oflet lifdagas on þas laenan gesceaft.
 (1620-1622)

That such rhetoric falls to the monsters is somewhat unexpected and has misled not a few readers to the unlikely conclusion that the poet is expressing an anachronistic, romantic sympathy for Beowulf's-- and mankind's--enemies.¹⁵ While it is true that the proliferation of elegy implies that monsters and men share a common fate, this in no way suggests sentimental commiseration with the monsters. What these passages do indicate is that the poet is persistently concerned with pointing what is tragic and universal in the individual narrative event, his eagerness to expound the fundamental terms of heroic life here and again

overriding moral categories of good and evil. Thus it is that death, any death--even that of monsters--becomes the occasion for a general reflection on the given conditions of existence.¹⁶ As with the conclusion to the lament of the Bereaved Father, elegy is an almost reflexive response to necessity, a means of establishing the limits within which the hero functions and against which he strives to affirm the nobility of man.

The heroic response to transience is glory, the fame which survives death. In a world where nothing lasts, hemmed in on all sides by the brevity and instability of existence, the hero exemplifies man's refusal to wholly succumb to the forces of time and change. His deeds represent man's capacity to achieve at least a limited and provisional victory over necessity; so long as men revere his memory from generation to generation, the hero stands as living proof of what fidelity and courage can wrest from death.¹⁷ Little wonder then that exhortations to heroic glory are among the most stirring passages in the poem; as, for example, when Beowulf prompts Hrothgar to avenge the murder of Aschere:

'Ne sorga, snotor guma! Selre biþ aeghwaem,
 þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.
 Ure aeghwylc sceal ende gibidan
 worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
 domes aer deaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
 unlifgendum aefter selest.'

(1384-1389)

Here in cameo form is the whole meaning of the hero's eagerness for fame--on the one hand, the death which awaits us all, and, on the other, the possibility of opposing to it the form of immortality that a man can gain þonne his ellen deah. On the other side of the coin, equally expressive of the heroic ideal of glory, is Wiglaf's rebuke to the cowards:

'Deað bið sella
 eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif!'
 (2890-2891)

Nor is the poet reluctant to confirm these sentiments in his own right:¹⁸

Swa sceal man don,
 þonne he aet guðe gegan þenceð
 longsumne lof; na ymb his lif cearað.
 (1534-1536)

Throughout, glory is singled out as the primary heroic virtue and ultimate heroic goal. The poem begins with an invocation of the glory of the Danes:

HWAET, WE GARDENA in geardagum,
 þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,
 hu ða aefelingas ellen fremedon!
 (lines 1-3)

And it ends with a tribute to Beowulf's own eagerness for glory:

Cwaedon þaet he waere wyruldcyning(a)
 manna mildust ond mon(ðw)aerust,
 leodum liðost ond lofgeornost.
 (3180-3182)

In between, fame is everywhere celebrated as the foremost heroic motive, even prime values such as courage, loyalty, and magnanimity often being viewed in terms of the glory which they earn.¹⁹ As Beowulf prepares to engage Grendel, Hrothgar warns him to be mindful of his fame:

'Hafa nu on geheald husa selest,
 gemyne maerþo, maegenellen cyð.'
 (658-659)

Following Beowulf's victory, Hrothgar declares that the hero has earned everlasting fame:

'þu þe self hafast
 daedum gefremed, þaet þin (dom) lyfað
 awa to aldre.'
 (953-955)

Hrothgar's praise is echoed by Wealtheow:

'Halfast þu gefered, þaet ðe feor ond neah
 ealne wideferhþ weras ehtigað,
 efne swa side swa sae bebugeð,
 windgeard, weallas.'
 (1221-1224)

Before plunging into the mere, Beowulf vows to gain renown or die in the attempt:

'Ic me mid Hruntinge
dom gewyrce, oððe mec deað nimeð!'
(1490-1491)

Conversely, Unferth, who does not dare to undertake the adventure, is said to lose glory:

Selfa ne dorste
under yða gewin aldre geneþan,
drihtscype dreogan; þær he dome forleas,
ellenmaerðum.
(1468-1471)

As Beowulf determines to close in hand in hand combat with Grendel's dam, Hrunting having failed in the fray, glory is placed above life itself:

Eft was anraed, nalas elnes laet,
maerða gemyndig maeg Hygelaces:
wearp ða wundenmael wraettum gebunden
yrre oretta, þæt hit on eorðan laeg,
stið ond stylecg; strenge getruwode,
mundgripe maegenes.
(1529-1534)

Once again, victory is crowned with glory:

þa com in gan ealdor ðegna,
daedcene mon dome gewurþað,
haele hildedeor, Hroðgar gretan.
(1644-1646)

In the dragon fight, as Beowulf sets forth against the serpent, he characteristically vows to achieve renown:

Beowulf maðelode, beotwordum spraec
niehstan siðe: 'Ic geneoðe fela
guða on geogoðe; gyt ic wylle,
frod folces weard faehðe secan,
maerðu fremman, gif mec se mansceaða
of eorþsele ut geseceð.'
(2510-2515)

Later, as Wiglaf enters the contest, he exhorts his lord to be mindful of glory:

'Leofa Biowulf, laest eall tela,
 swa ðu on geoguðfeore geara gecwaede,
 þæt ðu ne alaete be ðe lifigendum
 dom gedreosan; scealt nu daedum rof,
 aeðeling anhydig, ealle maegene
 feorh ealgian; ic ðe fullaestu.'
 (2663-2668)

Nor are his words wasted:

þa gen guðcýning
 m(aerða) gemunde.
 (2677-2678)

Finally, on the verge of death, Beowulf bids that his companions raise a commemorative barrow:

'Hatað heaðomaere hlaew ge wyrcean
 beorhtne aefter baele aet brimes nosan;
 se scel to gemyndum minum leodum
 heah hlifian on Hronesnaesse,
 þæt hit saeliðend syððan hatan
 Biowulfes biorh, ða ðe brentingas
 ofer floda genipu feorran drifað.'
 (2802-2808)

When Wiglaf faithfully transmits his chief's last request, his message stands as unequivocal evidence that the hero's glory is commensurate with his achievement, in direct proportion with his courage and generosity:

'Worn eall gespraec
 gomol on gehðo, ond eowic gretan het,
 baed þæt ge geworhton aefter wines daedum
 in baelstede beorh þone hean,
 micelne ond maerne, swa he manna waes
 wigend weorðfullost wide geond eorðan,
 þenden he burhwelan brucan moste.'
 (3094-3100)

The hero's eagerness for glory and the tribute paid to him by his followers teach us much about the collective nature of heroism. It is one of the fundamental assumptions of the heroic poem that human value is a joint enterprise. The hero is special, an exceptional individual uniquely equipped to champion mankind. But he is not himself adequate

to necessity. Even Beowulf, although the thirty-fold might of his arm suffices to quell Grendel and his dam, requires Wiglaf at his side to overcome the dragon. Moreover, fame--the wages of heroism by which the hero hopes to survive his death--depends not only on the quality of his own deeds, but upon the commitment of his companions (and those who come after) to honor his memory and the meaning of all he stands for. The relationship between the hero and the rest of humankind is reciprocal, the hero ennobling mankind by fulfilling to the utmost the highest potentialities of human nature, men commemorating the hero and all he exemplifies, maintaining his glory and safeguarding his achievements from the indifferent sweep of time and change. Born of man's need to affirm his worth in the face of his mortality, earned through courage and paid for by death, heroic fame is kept alive by what might be termed a self-renewing act of collective loyalty--a common commitment on the part of general mankind to human value and its representatives. This commitment is illustrated by the heroic poem itself. Like Beowulf's barrow, heroic poetry is a form of tribute to the hero, a means of celebrating human worth and preserving it beyond the reach of passing years. The scop has a unique role to play in the realization of the heroic ideal, not only by virtue of his transmission of traditional legend and lore, but by memorializing a precious moment of human triumph in this transitory world. The privileged task of the heroic poet is best expressed in the concluding verses of Widsith, where the scop speaks from within the persona of his own alter-ego:

Swa scriþende gesceapum hweorfað
 gleomen gumena geond grunda fela,
 þearfe secgað, þoncworð sprecað,
 simle suð oþþe norð sumne gemetað
 gydda gleawne, geofum unhneawne,

se þe fore duguþe wile dom araeran,
 eorlscipe aefnan, oþþaet eal scaeceð,
 leoht ond lif samod; lof se gewyrceð,
 hafað under heofonum heahfaestne dom.
 (135-143)²⁰

If transience is an aspect of tragic necessity, a given and unalterable condition of human existence, tragedy itself is given added force and depth by the sense of doom which permeates the action. Throughout the poem we are reminded that the course of events depends upon agencies larger than human, ineluctable forces which operate independently of man's will. At times, the power of fate is explicit and direct. In anticipation of Grendel's imminent defeat at the hands of Beowulf, the poet declares:

Ne waes þaet wyrd þa gen,
 þaet he ma moste manna cynnes
 ðicgean ofer þa niht.
 (734-736)

Similarly, when Beowulf's own death is foreshadowed, the poet once again ascribes the outcome to the intervention of fate:

Scyld wel gebearg
 life and lice laessan hwile
 maerum þeodne, þone his myne sohte,
 ðaer he þy fyrste forman dogore
 waldon moste, swa him wyrd ne gescraf
 hreð aet hilde.
 (2570-2575)

More often than not, however, the inscrutable workings of fate are represented obliquely. It is in this light that we are to understand the poet's habit of describing victories as being granted or withheld from combatants.²¹ For example, of Hrothgar's rise we are told:

þa Waes Hroðgare heresped gyfen
 wiges weorð mynd.
 (64-65)

Again, the Danish coast-guard, predicting Beowulf's success, declares:

'Godfremmdra swylcum gifeþe bið,
 þaet þone hilderaes hal gedigeð.
 (299-300)

Recounting his swimming match against Breca, Beowulf tells of slaying a sea-monster, recalling:

'Hwaeþre me gyfeþe weard,
þæt ic aglaecan ordre geraehte,
hildebille; hearþoraes fornam
mihtig meredeor þurh mine hand.'
(555-558)

And:

'Hwaeþere me gesaelde, þæt ic mid sweorde ofsloh
niceras nigene.'
(574-575)

Later, as the hero tears Grendel's arm from its socket, we are informed:

Beowulfe weard
gudhred gyfeþe.
(818-819)

In his farewell address to his companions, Beowulf--reminiscing about his relationship with Hygelac--boasts:

'Ic him þa maðmas, þe he me sealde,
geald aet guðe, swa me gifefþe waes,
leohtan sweorde.'
(2490-2492)

Finally, as Naegling shatters harmlessly against the dragon's head, the poet ruefully observes:

Naegling forbaerst,
geswac aet saecce sweord Biowulfes
gomol ond graegmael. Him þæt gifede ne waes,
þæt him irenna ecge mihton
helpan aet hilde; waes sio hond to strong.
(2680-2684)

There is then a necessity which shapes the outcome of events. That victories are granted and withheld suggests that the human being, at least in so far as what befalls him is concerned, is subject to forces beyond the scope of his will and understanding.

The most common form of fate in Beowulf is the doom which appoints the time, place, and means of death for each man.²² In the verse which

introduces Scyld's funeral, we read:

Him ða Scyld gewat to gescaephwile
felahror feran on Freat waere.
(26-27)

Even Grendel is described as subject to this form of doom:

Faege ond geflymed feorhlastas baer . . .
Deaðfaege deog, siððan dreama leas
in fenfreoðo feorh alegde.
(846-851)

In the Finnsburh episode, the death of Hnaef and his nephew are portrayed as fated:

Hie on gebyrd hruron
gare wunde.
(1074-1075)

Aschere too is said to be doomed just before he is killed by Grendel's dam:

Beorscealca sum
fus ond faege fletraeste gebeag.
(1240-1241)

So also Beowulf describes the death of Hondscio at the hands of Grendel:

Þaer waes Hondscio hild onsaege,
feorhbealu faegum.'
(2076-2077)

Beowulf himself is fated to die in battle against the dragon:

Him waes geomer sefa,
waefre and waelfus, wyrd ungemete neah,
se þone gomelan gretan sceolde,
secean sawle hord, sundur gedaelan
lif wið lice; no þon lange waes
feorhe aepelingas flaesce bewunden.
(2419-2424)

And the dragon as well is said to hasten to his fate:

Gewat ða byrnende gebogen scriðan,
to gescipe scyndan.
(2569-2570)

Clearly, the power of necessity in such passages stems in large part from the fact that the time and place of death is prescribed. At a given moment, a man--or monster--undergoes his foreordained end in a manner appointed from on high by wyrd or metod. But beneath this initial stratum of fate lies a yet deeper layer of necessity. Each is fated, but the fate to which each is predestined is the same: whatever the variations in time, place, and circumstance, the sentence is death. The universality of the fated man is particularly apparent in those passages where the rhetoric tends to be generalized. For example, in Hrothgar's lament for his retainers:

'Is min fletwerod,
wigheap gewanod; hie wyrd forsweop
on Grendles gryre.'

(476-478)

Here the particular form of death, the fearsome toils of Grendel, is essentially represented as but a specific manifestation of the fate which sweeps all men off to their common destiny. A variation of this construction is later applied to Grendel himself:

Ac gesecan sceal sawlberendra
nyde genydde, niþða bearna,
grundbuendra gearwe stowe,
þær his lichoma legerbedde faest
swefef aefter symle.

(1004-1008)

And to Hygelac:

Hyne wyrd fornam,
syþðan he for wlenco wean ahsode
faeðe to Frysum.

(1025-1027)

And finally, and most poignantly, by the hero to his fallen kinsmen:

'Ealle wyrd forsweop
mine magas to methodscaefte,
eorlas on elne; ic him aefter sceal.'

(2814-2816)

The universal shadow cast by each doom is again apparent on those occasions when fate is invoked negatively, that is, in those passages where it is declared that a protagonist is "not yet doomed." In his account to Hygelac of his struggle with Grendel's dam, Beowulf explains:

'Unsofte ponan
feorh oðferede; naes ic faege þa gyt.'
(2140-2141)

Wulf's survival of Ongentheow's sword-stroke is similarly described:

Feoll on foldan; naes he faege þa git,
ac he hyne gewyrpte, þeah ðe him wund hrine.
(2975-2976)

In each case, the warrior escaping death is said to be "not yet doomed." But to be not yet doomed is to be ultimately doomed. We can perceive this even in Beowulf's confident assertion that

'Wyrd oft nered
unfaegne eorl þonne his ellen deah!'
(572-573)²³

The unfaegne eorl whom fate spares is but temporarily reprieved; he too is merely "not yet doomed." In this respect, the world of Beowulf resembles that of Hamlet:

If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come,
it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come--
the readiness is all.
(Act V, scene ii, 209-211)

Thus Wealthew admonishes Hrothgar:

'Bruc þenden þu mote
manigra medo, ond þinum magam laef
folc ond rice, þonne ðu forð scyle,
metodsceaft seon.'
(1177-1180)

And Hrothgar himself warns Beowulf:

'Nu is þines maegnes blaed
ane hwile; eft sona bið,
þaet þec adl oððe ecg eafopes get waefed,
oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm,
oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht,

oððe atol yldo; oððe eagen a bearhtm
 forsited̄ ond forsworced̄; semninga bið,
 þæt þec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð.'
 (1761-1768)

In sum then, while the foreordained circumstances of each man's death point to the ineluctable nature of wyrð--identifying fate as fate, as it were--our deepest sense of necessity in these passages arises not so much from the fact that death falls on an appointed, predesignated day, but rather from the fact that death is appointed as the predesignated end of all men. Necessity is identified not so much with the fate of individuals as with the fate of the species. Here is no Oedipus uniquely destined to murder his father and marry his mother, no Aeneas specially fated to sow the seed which will flower in Rome. Beowulf, unique as he may be in the thirty-fold strength of his hand-grip, shares his heroic character with men like Sigemund and Wiglaf and his fate with all mankind. Far from differentiating one man from another, necessity in Beowulf gathers all men under a single, mortal yoke:

'Ure aeghwylc sceal ende gebidan
 worolde lifes.'
 (1386-1387)

It has been argued that fate in Beowulf functions as an agent of God's will. Supporters of this view have cited a number of passages where fate is ostensibly subordinated to Divine Providence. An early instance of God's putative power to set aside fate occurs in Hrothgar's lament for his lost warriors:

'Hie wyrð forsweop
 on Grendles gryre. God eaþe maeg
 þone dolsceaðan daeda getwaefan!'
 (477-479)

Now God (and Beowulf) can and does finally put an end to the evil

ravager. But this is not at all the same thing as revoking fate, which God, whatever he can do does not do in Beowulf. Grendel can be killed, and Beowulf kills him. But fate continues to sweep men to their doom, events remaining tragically beyond human control.

Again, after Beowulf has slain Grendel, the poet remarks that the monster would have continued to slaughter warriors:

Nefne him witig God wyrd forstode
ond ðaes mannes mod.

(1056-1057)

To begin with, in so far as fate is identified with the tragic necessities of existence, it has not been set aside. We are not being told here that more men were actually destined to die at the hands of Grendel but that God (and Beowulf's courage) intervened to repeal fate. Rather, the meaning of the line, as I understand it, is simply that Grendel would have killed more men had not Beowulf (and all-seeing God) destroyed him. In other words, it would have been the fate of many more of mortal men to be murdered and devoured by Grendel had not God and Beowulf put an end to his raids. In this respect, as Donaldson aptly renders it, wyrd is to be translated not as "fate," but as "that fate":

And he commanded that gold be paid for the one
whom in his malice Grendel had killed--as he
would have killed more if wise God and the man's
courage had not forstalled that fate.²⁴

The drift of this passage is reminiscent of Beowulf's own earlier-cited declaration that

'Wyrd oft nered
unfaegne eorl þonne his ellen deah!'
(572-573)

In both instances, human courage, under the aegis of a superhuman agency, temporarily prevents a doom which would normally have resulted from

actually occurring. In this second passage, the absolute prerogatives of necessity and the limited scope of human accomplishment are, as we have seen, suggested by the qualifying phrase, unfaegne eorl, the implication clearly being that where a man is truly fated, no degree of heroic courage suffices to save him--as the tragic denouement of Beowulf convincingly demonstrates.

Nor, apparently, is it only human powers which are felt to be circumscribed by the workings of fate. When the cup-snatching "slave" survives his descent into the dragon's barrow, the poet comments:

Swa maeg unfaege eaðe gedigan
wean ond wraecsið se fe Waldendes
hyldo gehealdeþ!

(2291-2293)

The relationship between unfaege and se fe Waldendes hyldo gehealdeþ is equivocal; one cannot altogether escape the impression that it is perhaps only the doomed whom the favor of God preserves.²⁵ If it is only so long as a man remains doomed that he is to be spared or preserved, then we must be cautious about subordinating fate to Divine Providence. Further, even if it could be demonstrated that, in Beowulf, God's will intermittently countermands wyrð, this would in no way reduce fate to an agent of Divine Providence. To argue that fate functions as an arm of Providence, one would have to demonstrate not only that fate can be overruled by God, but that fate itself serves as a direct expression of the Divine Will. Arguments to this effect have been far from convincing.²⁶

Rather than providing evidence that fate is an arm of Providence, the passages which celebrate divine power are best understood simply as straightforward affirmations of God's omnipotence. Indeed, references to God's power are manifold, the most striking examples taking

the form of sententious commentary. For example, as the Geats prepare for sleep at Heorot, the poet concludes his prediction of Beowulf's victory over Grendel with a gnomic observation on God's overall governance of humankind:

Soð is gecyþed,
 þæt mihtig God manna cynnes
 weold wideferhð.

(700-702)

Following Beowulf's triumph, Hrothgar offers a prayer of thanksgiving,²⁷ which again testifies to the boundless power of the Almighty:

'A maeg God wyrcean
 wunder aefter wundre, wuldres Hyrde.'
 (930-931)

Similarly, after Beowulf has decapitated both Grendel's dam and Grendel's corpse, the poet--striking a memorable simile between melting sword blade, melting icicle, and spring thaw--invokes God's omnipotence:²⁸

þa þæt sweord ongan
 aefter heaþoswate hildegicelum,
 wigbil wanian; þæt waes wundra sum,
 þæt it eal gemealt ise gelicost,
 ðonne forstes bend Faeder onlaeted,
 onwinded waelrapas, se gewæld hafað
 saela ond maela; þæt is soð. Metod.
 (1605-1611)

Finally, as Wiglaf futilely attempts to revive his fallen lord, the poet gravely observes:

Ne meahte he on eorðan, ðeah he uðe wel,
 on ðam frungare feorh gehealdan,
 ne ðaes Wealdenes wiht oncirran;
 wolde dom Godes daedum raedan
 gumena gehwycum, swa he nu gen deð.
 (2855-2859)

These gnomic commemorations of divine omnipotence are accompanied by a number of specific references to God as arbiter of events, particularly as bestower of success in war. Twice he is called Lord of

victories, first when Wiglaf ascribes Beowulf's conquest of the dragon to the grace of God:

'Hwaeðre him God uðe,
sigora Waldend, þæt he hyne sylfne gewraec
ana mid ecge, þa him waes elnes þearf.'
(2874-2876)

And again, when the poet declares God's power to obviate the heathen curse which hangs over the dragon's hoard:

Ðonne waes þæt yrfe eacencraeftig,
iumonna gold galdre bewunden,
þæt ðam hringsele hrinan ne moste
gumena aenig, nefne God sylfa,
sigora Soðcýning sealde þam ðe he wolde
--he is manna gehyld-- hord openian,
efne swa hwylcum manna, swa him gemet ðuhte.
(3051-3057)

Beowulf's triumph over Grendel is five times ascribed, at least partially, to God. Before engaging the monster, Beowulf places the issue squarely in divine hands:

'Ond siþðan witig God
on swa hwaefere hond halig Dryhten
maerðo deme, swa him gemet þince.'
(685-687)²⁹

Immediately preceding Grendel's attack, the poet anticipates Beowulf's victory by announcing that God had already awarded success to the Geats:

Ac him Dryhten forgeaf
wigspeda gewiofu, Wedera leodum,
frofor ond fultum, þæt hie feond heora
ðurh anes craeft ealle ofercomen.
(696-699)

In his gratitude for the slaying of Grendel, Hrothgar attributes Beowulf's victory at least partly to God:

'Ne scealc hafað
þurh Drihtenes miht daed gefremede,
ðe we ealle aer ne meahton
snyttrum besyrwan.'
(939-942)

Again, during the festivities celebrating Grendel's defeat, we are told that Grendel would have continued his murderous ravages,

Nefne him witig God wyrd forstode
ond ðæs mannes mod.
(1055-1056)

Finally, the poet, recounting Beowulf's triumph, stresses the role played by God's grace:

Hwaeþre he gemunde maegenes strenge,
gimfaests gife, ðe him God sealde,
ond him to Anwaldan are gelyfde,
frofere ond fultum; ðy he þone feond ofercwom,
gehnaegde helle gast.
(1270-1274)

Beowulf's victory over Grendel's dam also is twice attributed in part to divine intervention. At the turning point of the battle, we are told:

Ond halig God
geweold wigsigor.
(1553-1554)

Beowulf himself attributes his victory, in some degree at least, to divine intervention:

'Ic þæt unsofte ealdre gedigde,
wigge under waetere, weorc geneþde
earfoðlice; aetrihte waes
guð getwaefed, nymðe mec God scylde.'
(1655-1658)

Once more, toward the end of the poem, ripe for death in the aftermath of his last battle, the hero thanks God for permitting him to win treasure for his people:

'Ic ðara fraetwa Frean ealles ðanc,
Wuldurcyninge wordum secge,
ecum Dryhten, þe ic her on starie,
þæs ðe ic moste minum leodum
aer swyltdaegge swylc gestrynan.'
(2794-2798)

Given the range and scope of God's power in Beowulf, there can be

no doubt about the poet's intention to glorify the Diety. Yet for all that, the domain of fate is neither absorbed nor overshadowed by invocations of the Divine Will.³⁰ Rather, there emerges a dual structure of determinism in which God and fate coexist, parallel and coordinate arbiters of human events.³¹ If on the one hand we are told that,

Soð is gecyðed,
 þæt mihtig God manna cynnes
 weold wideferhð .
 (700-702)

Beowulf himself calls fate,

'Metod manna gehwaes.'
 (2527)

If, as Hrothgar declares,

'A maeg God wyrcean
 wunder aefter wundre, wuldres Hyrde.'
 (930-931)

It is equally true that,

'Gaeð a wyrd swa hio scel!'
 (455)

Victories attributed to God are balanced by similar attributions of victory and defeat to the power of fate, as, for example, in the dragon-fight:

Swa him wyrd ne gescraf
 hreð aet hilde.
 (2574-2575)

Once we put to rest the romantic illusion which Greenfield has appropriately termed the "fallacy of homogeneity,"³² it is easy enough to see that the dual vision of necessity in Beowulf is in fact quite consistent with the complex fusion of Germanic and Christian attitudes which we can assume to have shaped the mind and craft of the eighth century Anglo-Saxon heroic poet.³³ Our own approach to the incipient

contradictions generated by the convergence of these two traditions must however be narrower and less tolerant than that of the poet himself; for we must finally address ourselves to the very question which neither the Beowulf poet nor, apparently, the intended audience of his poem felt impelled to raise:³⁴ What finally in Beowulf is the balance between Christianity and tragedy? Between Providence and fate? Between the consolations of heaven and the desperate affirmations of man's heroism?

The question finally turns on our assessment of the nature of necessity and the source of value. Reduced to its purest form, the problem may be outlined as follows: In the heroic poem, necessity is tragic, an expression of human limitation; that which transcends the human will frustrates human aspiration and denies human value. In the Christian poem, necessity is divine; that which transcends the human will is ultimately God--the very source of human value, the very goal of human aspiration. Again, in the heroic poem, value originates in man, the hero opposing to necessity what is highest in a specifically and irremediably human nature. In the Christian poem, men do not oppose necessity; on the contrary, they achieve worth and fulfill what is highest in their natures by subordinating themselves to, identifying with, or embracing that which transcends them.

Of course there are no such clear-cut, hard-and-fast distinctions in Beowulf. As we have seen, both faces of necessity are present in this poem where tragedy determines the overall course of events while the Christian faith of the poet intermittently touches even the darkest and most tangled regions of the hero's world with a promise of light and solace. In the end however, as we shall see, the scales tip in favor of tragedy and heroism. Despite the many allusions to God's power

and the few instances of Christian consolatio in Beowulf, the operative necessity which defines the world of the poem remains tragic.³⁵ The grace of God is tentative, distant, and uncertain; but the shadow of tragedy--the forces of darkness, death, and disorder--are pervasive and profound. Surely Spearing was thinking above all of Beowulf when he wrote:

By the fourteenth century the world-picture of secular men had become far more completely "Christianized" than it was in the time of Beowulf or Maldon. Man was no longer alone in the world, as the Anglo-Saxon poets had continued to feel him to be, long after their conversion to Christianity.³⁶

Whether it is to the poet or, as Rosemary Woolf argues,³⁷ to the poem alone that we are to attribute the essentially tragic-heroic temperament of a work like Beowulf, what must be recognized is that it is not unusual for a medieval Christian poet to compose in a fundamentally tragic or elegiac mode. In any case, whatever the religious hopes and beliefs of the Beowulf poet,³⁸ the world he creates is a world governed by time, change, and death--a tragic world where the sole source and guarantee of human value remains human. It is not by grace or faith that the hero ultimately fulfills himself--though both may be, and are present in the poem--but by virtue of his own courage, loyalty, magnanimity, and passion for glory. Beowulf is no Christian allegory; like Maldon and Morte Arthure, it is a heroic poem composed by a Christian poet with a tragic sense of life and a heroic view of man.

Confronted by transience, the heroic warrior seeks fame, aspiring to preserve the memory of his deeds beyond the brief span of his life. If successful, he gains if not eternity, then at least heroic immortality. Similarly, in the face of fate, in the face of all which is given and

ineluctable in life, the hero insists upon the potency of his will and the validity of heroic action. Not that he hopes to alter what is irremediably ordained. It is Grendel who blindly relies upon his own powers and expectations while Beowulf, with characteristic humility and foresight, either places the outcome in the hands of God or frankly acknowledges that, Gaeð a wyrd swa hio scell! (455).³⁹ Nevertheless, though fate be inexorable, the hero is determined to prove what courage can salvage from a world dominated by necessity. While he cannot insure the triumph or duration of those things most precious to him, the man who chooses heroism can--through his own acts--determine the quality of his character and, most important, his lof or dom. That survives death--and fate!⁴⁰

Among the most manifest expressions of heroic resolve in Beowulf are the beots the hero utters against the monsters. At Heorot, immediately before the Danes withdraw in anticipation of Grendel's nightly onslaught, Beowulf vows to do or die against the monster:

'Ic gefremman sceal
 eorlic ellen, oþðe endedaeg
 on þisse meoduhealle minne gebidan!
 (636-638)

Beowulf's pledge, a public token of his heroic determination, represents a heroic wager whereby the hero stakes all--life, honor, and fame--on the ability to fulfill the terms of his boast.⁴¹ Hygelac's thane will either carry out the wishes of Hrothgar's Danes or fall in death; either show the courage of a hero or pass his last day. The either/or, do-or-die nature of Beowulf's vow suggests both the power of the heroic will and its limitations; for the beot is both a pledge to purge Heorot and a tacit admission that the outcome of the battle is ultimately--even if only ultimately--beyond human control.

Again, when Beowulf urges Hrothgar to avenge Aeschere, his exhortation, like his beot, represents both his recognition that the fundamentals of existence lie beyond human control and his unstinting determination to pursue the heroic choice into the teeth of destiny:

'Ure aeghwylc sceal ende gebidan
 worulde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
 domes aer deaðe; þaet bið drihtguman
 unlifgendum aefter selest.'
 (1386-1389)

As Beowulf prepares to advance against the dragon, he vows not to flee a single foot from the foe; once more, the yielding of the outcome to fate coupled with the either/or form of the beot reflects both his awareness of necessity and his resolve to live or die heroically:

'Nelle ic beorges weard
 oferfleon fotes trem, ac unc (furðer) sceal
 weorðan aet wealle, swa unc wyrd geteoð,
 Metod manna gehwaes . . .
 Ic mid ealne sceall
 gold gegangan, oððe guð nimeð,
 feorhbealu frecne frean eowerne!'
 (2524-2537)

That the course of events is ultimately beyond human control does not mean that man's will is altogether impotent, his heroism devoid of consequence, his victories always either symbolic or pyrrhic. There are a number of crucial passages where the poet emphasizes the efficacy of heroic action. When Hrunting fails at need against Grendel's dam, Beowulf determines to rely upon his own strength and courage:

Eft waes anraed, nalas elnes laet,
 maerða gemyndig maeg Hygelaces:
 wearp ða wundenmael wraettum gebunden
 yrre oretta, þaet hit on eorðan laeg,
 atyð ond stylecg; strenge getruwode,
 mundgripe maegenes.
 (1529-1534)

Moments later, even as God intervenes to decide the outcome of the

underwater struggle, it is the hero's own resolve which is portrayed as decisive:

witig Drihten,
 rodera Raedend hit on ryht gesced
 yðelice, syððan he eft astod.
 (1554-1556)

This is significantly reminiscent of Beowulf's earlier observation that,

'Wyrd oft nered
 unfaegne eorl, þonne his ellen deah!'
 (572-573)

In each instance the qualifying phrase, syððan he eft astod and þonne his ellen deah, places the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the hero himself. Unlike victory, heroism is a wholly human achievement.⁴²

The extent to which heroism represents a choice is clarified by the role of those figures in Beowulf who by way of contrast help to define the nature of heroic life, most notably the retainers who abandon Beowulf in the midst of the dragon-fight. Their ignominious cowardice represents a wholesale repudiation of the heroic ideal and, appropriately enough, results in their utter exclusion from heroic society:

'Nu sceal sincþego ond swyrdgifu
 eall eðelwyn eowrum cynne,
 lufen alicgean; londrihtes mot
 þaere maegburge monna aeghwylc
 ideal hweorfan, syððan aedelingas
 feorran gefricgean fleam eowerne,
 domleasan daed.'
 (2884-2890)

Essentially the cowards--no ordinary men, but Beowulf's picked body-guard (2638-2641)--demonstrate how strong the pull of fear and self-preservation is, even at the heart of the heroic world.⁴³ After all, Beowulf himself is said to feel terror at the approach of the dragon:

Sweord aer gebraed
 god gudcyning, gomele laf,

ecgum unslaw; aeghwaedrum waes
 bealohycgendra broga fram oðrum.
 (2562-2565)

But Beowulf does not flee:

Stiðmod gestod wið steapne rond
 winia bealdor, ða se wurm gebeah
 snude tosumne; he on searwum bad.
 (2566-2568)

The choice upon which the cowardice of Beowulf's disloyal retainers turns is pointed by the example of Wiglaf who not only passionately urges them to come to the aid of their beleaguered king, but who by his own exemplary act discloses the heroic alternative which was open to them:⁴⁴

Nealles him on heape handgesteallan,
 aðelinga bearn ymbe gestodon
 hildecystum, ac hy on hold bugon,
 ealdre burgan. Hiora in anum weoll
 sefa wið sorgum; sibb' aefre ne maeg
 wiht onwendan þam ðe wel þenceð.
 (2596-2601)

Heroism represents an act of will, betrayal a failure of will. To be afraid is human, an experience common to all men, even the best of them. But fear is no excuse for cowardice. For all its sensitivity to fate, the heroic world of Beowulf is a moral world in which men are held fully responsible for the lives they choose and the deeds they commit:

'Deað bið sella
 eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif!'
 (2890-2891)

The figure of Unferth is somewhat of an enigma,⁴⁵ but there is no question that to some degree at least he is portrayed as a foil to the heroic character of Beowulf. This is borne out by their first encounter at Heorot where Beowulf proves to be as formidable an adversary in verbal conflict as in physical combat:

'Secge ic þe to soðe, sunu Ecglafes,
 þæt naefre Gre(n)del swa fela gryra gefremede,
 atol aeglaeca ealdre þinum,
 hyndo on Heorote, gif þin hige waere,
 sefa swa searogrim, swa þu self talast;
 ac he hafað onfunden, þæt he þa faehðe ne þearf,
 atole ecgþraece eower leode
 swiðe onsittan, Sige-Scyldinga;
 nymeð nyðbade, neanegum arað
 leode Deniga, ac he lust wigeð,
 swefeð ond snedeþ, secce ne weneð
 to Gar-Denum. Ac ic him Geata sceal
 eafodð ond ellen ungeara nu,
 guðe gebeodan.'

(590-603)⁴⁶

The contrast between Unferth and Beowulf is drawn even more sharply at Grendel's mere where Beowulf aggressively seeks underwater battle with Grendel's dam, a feat which Unferth--as we are explicitly told--dares not undertake:

Huru ne gemunde mago Ecglafes
 eafopes craeftig, þæt he aer gespraec
 wine druncen, þa he þaes waepnes onlah
 selran sweorfreca; selfa ne dorste
 under yða gewin aldre geneþan,
 dryhtscype dreogan; þaer he dome forleas,
 ellen maerðum. Ne waes þaem oðrum swa,
 syðþan he hine to guðe gegyred haefde.

(1465-1472)

Nothing could be simpler. The explicit antithesis between the hero and the unheroic foil is clearly intended to draw attention to the volitional nature of heroic existence: Beowulf chooses to secure glory at the risk of losing his life; Unferth chooses security and loses his glory.

One of the most important contrasts between the heroic and the non-heroic life arises from the juxtaposition of Beowulf's career with that of Heremod.⁴⁷ At a number of critical points, Heremod serves as an overtly anti-heroic foil to Beowulf, his aberrant behaviour representing an explicit violation of the heroic principles of loyalty, magnanimity, and honor:

Ar-Scyldingum

ne geweox he him to willan, ac he to walfealle
 ond to deaðcwalum Deniga leodum;
 Breat bolgenmod beodgeneatas,
 eaxlgesteallan, oð þæt he ana hwearf,
 maere þeoden mondreamum from . . .

Hwaeþere him on ferhþe greow
 breosthord blodreow; nallas beagas geaf
 Denum aeftter dome; dreamleas gebað,
 þæt he þaes gewinnes weorc þrowade,
 leodbealo longsum.

(1710-1722)

Point by point, Beowulf's conduct is directly opposed to that of Heremod. He is the very model of loyalty and generosity,⁴⁸ and, as for the indiscriminate slaughter of companions and the misrule of the folk, Beowulf himself testifies before his death:

'Ic þæs leode heold
 fiftig wintra; naes se folccyning,
 ymbesittendra aenig ðara
 þe mec guðwinum gretan dorste,
 egesan ðeon. Ic on earde bad
 maelgesceafta, heold min tela,
 ne sohte searoniðas, ne me swor fela
 aða on unriht. Ic ðæs ealles maeg
 feorhbennum seoc gefean habban;
 forðam me witan ne ðearf Waldend fira
 morðobealo maga, þonne min sceaceð
 lif of lice.'

(2732-2743)

Thus too in the concluding words of the poem the people of the Geats mourn for their king:

Swa begnorndon Geata leode
 hlaflordes (hry)re, heorðgeneatas;
 cwaedon þæt he waere wyruldcyning(a)
 manna mildust ond mon(ðw)aerust,
 leodum liðost ond lofgeornost.

(3178-3182)

While the antithesis between Beowulf and Heremod sheds important light on the place occupied by choice in the heroic life, the voluntary nature of heroism is illustrated at least as fully by what these two warriors share as by what divides them. Beowulf is said to enjoy the

special favor of the Creator; his strength is said to be a special gift of God; his victories are, to some degree at least, ascribed to Providence. But Heremod too enjoys the special favor of God who exalts him as well as Beowulf with strength, power, and success beyond the scope of other men:

ðeah þe hine mihtig God maegenes wynnum,
eafesum stepte, ofer ealle men
forð gefremede.

(1716-1718)

This is of the utmost importance. Nothing could better demonstrate the significance of the heroic choice in Beowulf. Both men share common gifts and what appears to be a common destiny. But where Beowulf seeks to fulfill every exigency of heroic life, perfecting his heroic nature and realizing his potentiality to the fullest, Heremod chooses to pervert his gifts,⁴⁹ betraying his commitments and violating the very premises of heroic life. What finally counts is not so much what is given to a man, but what he chooses to do with his gifts. Beowulf's supernatural strength (like all strength) and Beowulf's victories (like all victories) may be said to come ultimately from God (or fate); but Beowulf's heroism (like Wiglaf's) is the product of his own courage, generosity, fidelity, and love. This much at least the unaided human will can wrest from necessity.

Still another indication of the Beowulf poet's concern with the heroic will is the prominent place he accords in his poem to the hortatory gnome, a figure which, appealing directly to the will, per se reflects the notion of choice. Gnostic passages occur regularly in Old English poetry, a literature unabashedly given to sententiously pointing its traditional truths.⁵⁰ Students of Old English gnomes have divided them into two categories, "descriptive" and "prescriptive."⁵¹

The first consist essentially of aphoristic reflections on the nature of things; the second of sententious promptings to ideal conduct. The distinction is clear enough, and there are a number of more or less typical examples of both types in the Cotton Ms. and Exeter Book Maxims.⁵² Beowulf too contains a goodly store of both kinds of gnomic utterance. The descriptive, or reflective gnome is represented by a wide variety of observations on the nature of, among other things, fate, God, feuds, wealth, change, life, and death. For example:⁵³

Wel bið þaem þe mot
 aefter deaðdæge Drihten secean
 ond to Faeder feaþum freoðo wilnian!
 (186-188)

.

Gaeð wyrd swa hio scel!
 (455)

.

Soð is gecyþed,
 þaet mihtig God manna cynnes
 weold wideferhð.
 (700-702)

.

Wyrd oft nered
 unfaegne eorl, þonne his ellen deah!
 (572-573)

.

No þaet yðe byð
 to befleonne --fremme se þe wille--
 as gesecan sceal sawlberendra
 nyde genyde, niþða bearna,
 grundbuendra gearwe stowe,
 þaer his lichoma legerbedde faest
 swefeð aefter symle.
 (1002-1008)

.

Fela sceal gibidan
 leofes ond laþes se þe longe her
 on ðyssum windagum worolde bruceð!
 (1060-1062)

.

Oft seldan hwaer
 aefter leodhryre lytle hwile
 bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd ðuge!
 (2029-2031)

.

Swa maeg unfaege eaðe gedigan
wean ond wraecsið se ðe Waldendes
hyldo gehealdeð!

(2291-2293)

.

Swa sceal aeghwylc mon
alaetan laendagas.

(2590-2591)

.

Sinc eaðe maeg,
gold on grund(e) gumcynnes hehwone
oferhigian, hyde se ðe wylle!

(2764-2766)

.

Wolde dom Godes daedum raedan
gumena gehwylcum, swa he nu gen deð.

(2858-2859)

.

Wundur hwar þonne
eorl ellenrof ende gefere
lifgesceafta, þonne leng ne maeg
mon mid his magum meduseld buan.

(3062-3065)

.

Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan
wraec adreogan.

(3077-3078)

In sharp contrast to the relatively broad spectrum of experience covered by the reflective gnome in Beowulf, the range of the prescriptive gnome is quite narrow: Without a single exception, the hortatory gnomes in Beowulf are heroic. There is not one gnomic moral imperative or exhortation that could be misconstrued as anything other than a ringing affirmation of the ideals and attitudes of Anglo-Saxon, Germanic heroism.⁵⁴ Of the eight major prescriptive gnomes in Beowulf, three exhort predominantly to generosity and loyalty; two to loyalty and courage; and three to courage and glory. Of the three dedicated to loyalty and generosity, the first celebrates the heroic largesse of Scyld's son:

Swa sceal (geong g)uma gode gewtrcean,
fromum feohgiftum on faeder (bea)rme,
þaet hine on ylde eft gewunigen

wilgesiðas, þonne wig cume,
 leode gelaesten; lofdaedum sceal
 in maegþa gehwaere man geþeon.
 (20-25)

The second affirms the loyalty and generosity of the hero himself as he delivers the treasures he earned at Heorot into the hands of his beloved Hygelac:

Swa sceal maeg don,
 nealles inwitnet oðrum bregdon
 ðyrnum craefte, deað ren(ian)
 hondgesteallan.
 (2166-2169)

And the third commemorates the magnanimity of Beowulf's loyal retainers who unstintingly sacrifice the entire hoard to honor their dead king:

Swa hit gede(fe) bið
 þaet mon his winedryhten wordum herge,
 ferhðum freoge, þonne he forð scile
 of lichaman (laeded) weorðan.
 (3174-3177)

As for the two gnomic imperatives urging loyalty and courage, Wiglaf's resolve to stand with Beowulf against the dragon prompts both:

Sibb' aefre ne maeg
 wiht onwendan þam ðe wel þenceð.
 (2600-2601)

And, after the dragon is slain:

Swylc sceolde secg wasan,
 þegn aet ðearfe!
 (2708-2709)

The iron link between courage and glory is the subject of three of the poet's most memorable hortatory gnomes. First, as Beowulf rouses Hrothgar to wreak vengeance on Grendel's dam:

Selre bið aeghwaem,
 þaet he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.
 Ure aeghwylc sceal ende gebidan
 worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
 domes aer deaþe; þaet bið drihtguman
 unlifgendum aefter selest.
 (1384-1389)

Again, after Hrunting fails, as Beowulf resolutely advances against the "she-monster":

Swa sceal man don,
 þonne he aet guðe gegan þenceð
 longsumme lof; na ymb his lif cearað.
 (1534-1536)

Finally, after Beowulf's death, Wiglaf--in his tirade against the cowards--gives voice to the heroic motto par-excellence, perhaps the most powerful prescriptive gnome in the whole of Beowulf:

Deað bið sella
 eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif!
 (2890-2891)

What is prescribed, advocated, urged, is everywhere one and the same. However complex the presentation of necessity in Beowulf, all its ethical imperatives and exempla are unambivalently heroic, the network of hortatory gnomes clearly evidencing that the values which constitute the moral core of the poem are the traditional, Germanic warrior ideals of Anglo-Saxon heroic society--military valor, loyalty, magnanimity, and the pursuit of glory.

The primary prescriptive gnomes in Beowulf are supported and amplified by a secondary system of somewhat less direct, but equally heroic maxims. For example, Hrothgar--eulogizing Aeschere's wisdom, fidelity, and courage--characteristically concludes with a gnomic exhortation:

'Dead is AEschere,
 Yrmenlafes yldra broþor,
 min runwita ond min raedbora,
 eaxlgestealla, þonne hniton feþan,
 eoferas cynsedan. Swy(lc) scolde eorl wesian,
 (aeþeling) aergod, swylc AEschere waes!'
 (1323-1328)

Wisdom, particularly the practical judgment required of a warrior in a

volatile heroic society, is the subject of a gnomic observation uttered by the Danish coastguard a propos of Beowulf's offer to aid Hrothgar against Grendel:

'Aeghwaefres sceal
scearp scyldwiga gescad witan,
worda ond worca, se fe wel þenced.'
(287-289)

The need for prudence and understanding amidst the turbulent vicissitudes of heroic life moves the poet to still another didactic gnome:

Forþan bið andgit aeghwaer selest,
ferhðes foreþanc.
(1058-1059)

There is a group of hortatory verses which, taking a rather different form, might best be termed heroic encomia. A characteristic example is the recurrent exclamatio, þaet waes god cyning, which is first applied to Scyld:

Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
monegum maegþum meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eorl(as), syððan aereþ wearð
feasceaft funden; he þaes frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah,
oð þaet him aeghwylc ymsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
gomban gyldan; þaet waes god cyning!
(4-11)⁵⁵

More than a parenthetical phrase of tribute, þaet waes god cyning serves as an oblique form of heroic exhortation, here punctuating the introduction of the poem in such a way as to draw attention to Scyld's flourishing powers and accomplishments as exemplary achievements meant to inspire admiration and imitation.⁵⁶ A variation of the heroic encomium is used to praise the magnanimity with which Hrothgar rewards the Geats for purging Heorot:

þa waes on gange gifu Hroðgares
oft geahted; þaet waes an cyning
aeghwaes orleahre.
(1884-1886)

Another variant commends the warlike customs of the Danes:

Waes þeaw hyra,
 þaet hie oft waeron an wig gearwe,
 ge aet ham ge on herge, ge gehwæfer þara
 efne swylce maela, swylce hira mandryhtne
 þearf gesaelde; waes seo þeod tilu.
 (1246-1250)

When Beowulf, with elaborate tact and courtesy, returns Hrunting to Unferth, the poet--wishing to point the hero's exemplary nobility of conduct--turns once more to this mode:

Heht þa se hearda Hrunting beran
 sunu Ecglafes, heht his sweord niman,
 leoflic iren; saegde him þaes leanes þanc
 cwaeð, he þone guðwine godne tealde,
 wigcraeftigne, nales wordum log
 meces ecge; þaet waes modig secg.
 (1807-1812)

Finally, a somewhat understated version of the heroic encomium underscores the admirable courage of the hero as he single-handedly undertakes to confront the dragon:

Strengo getruwode
 anes mannes; ne bið swylc earges sið!
 (2540-2541)

Like the major prescriptive gnomes, the ancillary hortatory rhetoric praises heroic behavior, glorifies heroic values, and prompts to heroic action. We should note however, that to the traditional ideals of the Germanic heroic code--loyalty, courage, generosity, and fame--the poet joins the more courtly virtues of wisdom, restraint, and nobility of manner.⁵⁷ This entails no blurring of heroic focus. In a world plagued by irrational and unpredictable violence, the virtues of the civitas⁵⁸ are, as we shall see, raised to the level of heroic values, emblems of that desperate effort by which men seek to preserve their humanity against almost insurmountable odds. This struggle takes final form in Beowulf's war against the monsters.

If heroic life is inherently tragic, it is the monster-raids which render tragedy concrete. Embodying all which is dark and destructive in existence, Grendel, his dam and the dragon represent necessity in its most violent and irrational form. Breaching the defenses of the heroic world, the monsters challenge its basic premises, lay siege to its most cherished institutions, and threaten its very existence. When Grendel usurps Heorot, he does far worse than disrupt Danish society; he jeopardizes heroic life at its very core. Heorot is the best of halls, husa selest (285), foremaerest foldbuendum receda under roderum (309-310). Veritable symbol of heroic civilization, the hall is the crowning glory of the Scylding dynasty, world-renowned site wherein are celebrated the essential rituals of heroic life:

Him on mod bearn,
 þæt healreced hatan wolde,
 medoaern micel men gewyrcean
 þon(n)e ylðo bearn aefre gefrunon,
 ond þær on innan eall gedaelan
 geongum ond ealdum, swylc him God sealde
 buton folcscare ond feorum gumena.
 (67-73)

So long as Grendel holds the hall, he suspends the heartbeat of heroic existence,⁵⁹ relegating the Gar-Dena þeodcyninga þrym to ignominious impotence:

þa waes eadfynde þe him elles hwaer
 gerumlicor raeste (sohte),
 bed aefter burum, ða him gebeacnod waes,
 gesaegd soðlice sweotolan tacne
 healðegnes hete; heold hine syðþan
 fyr ond faestor se þaem feonde aetwand.
 Swa rixode ond wið rihte wan,
 ana wið eallum, oð þæt idel stod
 husa selest.
 (138-146)⁶⁰

Powerless to resist the invader, the king himself is reduced to grief-stricken immobility:

Swa ða maelceare maga Healfðanes
singala seað; ne mihte snotor haeled
wean onwendan; waes þaet gewin to swyð,
laþ ond longsum, þe on ða leode becom,
nydwracu niþgrim, nihtbealwa maest.
(189-193)⁶¹

At Heorot, under the pressure of Grendel's assault, the human world of heroism temporarily gives away, retreating before the dark forces which lurk at its borders. Until the hall is reclaimed, the Danes live as if exiles in their own homeland, barred from participating in the sacraments of heroic life. Until Grendel is overcome, the viability of heroism itself is placed in question.

The hero's role is cut from just this cloth. As Heorot's champion against Grendel, Beowulf stands as a bulwark against those alien forces which everywhere threaten to engulf the heroic world in darkness and shame.⁶² In sharp contrast to the paralysis of the Scyldings, he moves forcefully and at once to resist Grendel's usurpation:

þaet fram ham gefraegn Higelaces þegn
god mid Geatum, Grendles daeda;
se waes moncynnes maegenes strengest
on þaem daege þysses lifes,
aeþele ond eacen. Het him yðlidan
godne gegyrwan; cwaed, he gudcýning
ofer swanrade secean wolde,
maerne þeoden, þa him was manna þearf.
(194-201)

Responding to Hrothgar's "need of men" represents, in effect, a heroic act of human solidarity:⁶³

'Waes þu, Hroðgar, hal! Ic eom Higelaces
maeg ond magoðegn; habbe ic maerða fela
ongunnon on geogoþe. Me wearð Grendles þing
on minre eþeltyrf undyrne cuð;
secgað saeliðend, þaet þaes sele stande,
reced selesta rinca gehwylcum
idel ond unnyt, siððan aefenleoht
under heofenes hador beholen weorþeð.
þa me þaet gelaerdon leode mine,
þa selestan, snotere ceorlas,
þeoden Hroðgar, þaet ic þe sohte,
forþan hie maegenes craeft min(n)e cuðon . . .

ond nu wið Grendel sceal,
 wið þam aglaecan ana gehegan
 ðing wið þyrse.'

(407-426)

The bonds of heroic community are implicit also in Beowulf's vow to restore Heorot to the mainstream of heroic life:

'Ac ic him Geata sceal
 eafoð ond ellen ungeara nu,
 guðe gebeodan. Gaeþ eft se þe mot
 to medo modig, siþþan morgenleoht
 ofer ylða bearn ofres dogores
 sunne sweglwerod suþan scined!'

(601-606)

Slaying Grendel, the hero makes good his boast:

Haefde þa gefaelsod se þe aer feorran com,
 snotor ond swyðferhð, sele Hroðgares,
 genered wið niðe. Nihtweorce gefeh,
 ellen maerþum. Haefde East-Denum
 Geatmecga leod gilp gelaested,
 swylce oncyþðe ealle gebette,
 inwidsorge, þe hie aer drugon
 ond for þreanydum þolian scoldon,
 torn unlytel.

(825-833)

With respect to Beowulf's role as the champion of heroic society, Hygelac's original misgivings about his nephew's venture are illuminating:

'Ic ðaes modceare
 sorhwylmum seað, siðe ne truwode
 leofes mannes; ic ðe lange baed,
 þaet ðu þone waelgaest wihte ne grette,
 lete Sud-Dene sylfe geweordan
 guðe wið Grendel.'

(1992-1997)

On the one hand, Hygelac's concern serves to enhance Beowulf's daring and resolve. But beyond this, Hygelac's rather provincial view of the Scyldings' plight provides a foil to Beowulf's more comprehensive and magnanimous brand of heroism. Beowulf's reply to his uncle affords a further glimpse of the universal implications of his struggle against

Grendel--a round in the endless battle between the heroes and the monsters, between those who fight to uphold all which is noble in human existence and those who seek ever to humiliate and destroy human worth:

Ʒaet is undyrne, dryhten Higelac,
 (micel) gemeting, monegum fira,
 hwylc (orleg)hwil uncer Grendles
 wearð on ðam wange, þær he worna fela
 Sige-Scyldingum sorge gefremede,
 yrmðe to aldre; ic þaet eall gewraec,
 swa begylpan (ne) þearf Grendeles maga
 (aenig) ofer eorðan uhthlem þone,
 se ðe lengest leofað laðan cynnes,
 f(acne) bifongen.'

(2000-2009)⁶⁴

After Grendel is killed, his dam's raid on Heorot, while apparently representing a lesser danger to heroic society,⁶⁵ nevertheless undermines it at its roots. Whether or not the monster intends further attacks, her murder of Aeschere threatens to return the Danes to a state of passive futility:

Hream wearð in Heorote; heo under heolfre genam
 cuþe folme; cearu waes geniwod,
 geworden in wicun.

(1302-1304)

Again Hrothgar is reduced to mourning:

Hroðgar maþelode, helm Scyldinga:
 'Ne frin þu aefter saelum! Sorh is geniwod
 Denigea leodum.'

(1321-1323)

And again Beowulf is called upon to champion mankind against the monsters:

'Nu is se raed gelang
 eft aet þe anum.'

(1376-1377)

Before the heroic world can be wholly restored, Aeschere must be avenged, retaliation a living proof of society's capacity to act--a flesh-and-blood confirmation of its ability to honor its commitments and fulfill

its ideals. A failure to take vengeance constitutes a failure at the very heart of the Anglo-Saxon heroic world, a confession of weakness, paralysis, and ultimate defeat. Thus, as we have already seen, Beowulf counters Hrothgar's despair with a prompt exhortation to vengeance:

'Ne sorga, snotor guma! Selre bið aeghwaem,
 þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne . . .
 Aris, rices weard, uton braþe feran,
 Grendles magan gang sceawigan.
 Ic hit þe gehate: no he on helm losað,
 ne on foldan faefm, ne on fyrgeholt,
 ne on gyfenes grund, ga þær he wille!'
 (1384-1394)

Making good his boast, the hero once again acts as redeemer of heroic life:

'Fyrendaeda wraec,
 deaðcwealm Denigea, swa hit gedefe waes.
 Ic hit þe þonne gehate, þæt þu on Heorote most
 sorhleas swefan min þinra leoda,
 duguðe ond iogofe, þæt þu him ondraedan ne þearft,
 þeoden Scyldinga, on þa healfe,
 aldorbealu eorlum, swa þu aer dydest.'
 (1669-1676)

Like Grendel and his dam, the third monster--the dragon--jeopardizes heroic society. Utterly ravaging the countryside, he humbles the Geatish nation:

þa se gaest ongan gledum spiwan,
 beorht hofu baernan,-- bryneleoma stod
 eldum on andan; no þær aht cwices
 lað lyftfloga laefan wolde.
 Waes þe wyrmes wig wide gesyne,
 nearofages nið nean ond feorran,
 hu se guðsceaða Geata leode
 hatode ond hynde.
 (2312-2319)

Significantly, like Grendel, the serpent attacks the king's hall, center and symbol of heroic civilization:⁶⁶

þa waes Biowulfe broga gecyðed
 snude to soðe, þæt his sylfes ham,
 bolda selest hrynewylmnum mealt,
 gifstol Geata.
 (2324-2327)

Yet again, everything is at stake--life, land, and heroic glory. And once again Beowulf moves forward as the heroic representative of man at his highest:

'Nis þæt eower sið
ne gemet mannes, nefn(e) min anes,
þæt he wið aglæcean efofoðo daele,
eorlscype efne.'

(2532-2535)

As against Grendel and his dam, Beowulf immediately resolves to take action, sealing his decision with "words of boasting":

Beowulf maðelode, beotwordum spræc
niehstan siðe; 'Ic geneoðe fela
guða on geogoðe; gyt ic wylle,
frod folces weard faehðe secan,
maerðu fremman, gif mec se mansceaða
of eorðsele ut geseceð.'

(2510-2515)

Together, Beowulf and Wiglaf kill the dragon:

þa gen sylf cyning
geweold his gewitte, weall-seaxe gebraed
biter ond beaduscearp, þæt he on byrnan waeg;
forwrat Wedra helm wurm on middan.
Feond gefyldan --ferh ellen wraec--,
ond hi hyne þa begen abroten haefdon,
sibaeðelingas.

(2702-2708)

Their triumph is of course tinged with tragedy, ending in the death of the hero as well as the monster:

Biowulfe wearð
dryhtmaeoðma dæl deaðe forgolden;
haefde aeghwaeðer ende gefered
laenan lifes

(2842-2845)

But the dragon-slaying is an exemplary victory nevertheless; for in destroying the fire-drake, the hero at his end has accomplished all that man can accomplish in this transitory world against the forces of darkness. In his death, as in life,

Heold on heahgesceap.

(3084)

The significance of Beowulf's three major monster fights is amplified and elaborated in two supplementary passages, Beowulf's own account of his youthful swimming match against Breca and the narrative account of the hero's underwater ordeal at Grendel's mere.⁶⁷ Telling of the hardships he endured during his contest with Breca, Beowulf describes a long, hard fight against sea-monsters in which he is ultimately victorious, slaying nine of the laðgeteonan with his sword (549-580). While the anecdote perhaps serves a narrative function--the hero validating his monster-slaying credentials to a possibly skeptical Danish audience--⁶⁸ thematically it serves to anticipate the meaning of Beowulf's future monster-battles; for even here, in this brief narrative summary, the monsters are portrayed as intrinsically inimical to man and Beowulf's victory is represented as a service to humanity:⁶⁹

'Ac on mergenne mecum wunde
be iðlafe uppe laegon,
sweo(r)dum aswefede, þæt syððan na
ymb brontne ford brimliðende
lade ne letton.'

(565-569)

Later, as Beowulf plunges to the bottom of the mere in the clutches of Grendel's dam, he is again beset by a host of sea-monsters who seek to destroy him:

Bær þa seo brimwyl(f), þa heo to botme com,
hringa þengel to hofe sinum,
swa he ne mihte --no he þæs modig waes--
waepna gewaldan, ac he wundra þæs fela
swe(n)cte on sunde, saedeor monig
hildetuxum heresyrcan braec,
ehton aglaecan.

(1506-1512)

Although here he is unable to take arms against this sea of monsters, we

are told that earlier a Great warrior (probably Beowulf) does manage to kill one of these nicras:

Gesawon ða aefter waetere wýrmcynnas fela,
 sellice saedracan sund cunnina,
 swylce on naeshleoðum nicras licgean,
 ða on undernmael oft bewitigað
 sorhfulne sið on segrade,
 wyrmas ond wildear. Hie on weg hruron
 bitere gebolgne; bearhtm ongeaton,
 gudhorn galan. Sumna Geata leod
 of flanbogan feores getwaefde,
 yðgewinnes, þæt him on aldre stod
 herestrael heardra; he on holme waes
 sundes þe saenra, þe hyne swylt fornam.
 (1425-1436)

Finally, after Beowulf has killed Grendel's dam, we learn that the hero's destruction of the Grendel clan has entirely purged the mere, presumably of its monster host:⁷⁰

Waeron yðgebland eal gefaelsod,
 eacne eardas, þa se ellorgast
 oflet lifdagas ond þas laenan gesceaft.
 (1620-1622)

In each of these passages then, the multiplication of subsidiary monsters basically serves to reinforce and generalize the meaning of Beowulf's primary monster-fights, underscoring the heroic significance of his role as hall-purger and dragon-slayer--a role whose ramifications we have not yet fully examined.

The nature of the monsters is peculiarly ambivalent. On the one hand, they are utterly alien and inimical to man; on the other, they possess distinctly human or "humanoid" characteristics. Both aspects are basic to the portrayal of heroic life: To the extent that the monsters are alien, the monster-fights reflect the antagonism between the "civitas" and the "wasteland,"⁷¹ between the courtly virtues of civilized society and the terrible, mysterious forces--natural and unnatural--

which are felt to inhabit the dark places at the boundaries of the Anglo-Saxon world; to the degree that the monsters possess human attributes, they reflect the inherently tragic contradictions--vengeance, feud, war--which threaten to destroy heroic society from within the civitas itself.⁷²

To point the antithesis between civitas and wasteland, the monsters outcast and outlaw status is emphasized.⁷³ Grendel and his dam are called micle mearcstapan (1348); Grendel himself is termed, among other things, feond mancynnes (164), angenga (449), ellorgast (807), mancynnes feond (1276), and leodsceaðan (2093).⁷⁴ The dragon too, though less emphatically malignant, is called eald uhtsceaða (2271), nacod niððraca (2273), and ðeodsceaða (2278).⁷⁵ All three inhabit the wilderness, far from human dwellings and halls. Grendel is first introduced as a denizen of marshes, moors, fens, and wastes:

Waes se grimma gaest Grendel haten,
maere mearcstapa, se þe moras heold,
fen ond faesten; fifelcynnes eard
wonsaeli wer weardode hwile.

(102-105)⁷⁶

The mere is notoriously wild, eerie, and sinister:

'Hie dygel lond
warigeað wulfhleofu, windige naessas,
frecne fengelad, þær fyrgenstream
under naessa genipu niþer gewiteð,
flod under foldan. Nis þæt feor heonon
milgemeances, þæt se mere standeð;
ofer þaem hongiað hrinde bearwas,
wudu wyrtum faest waeter oferhelmað.
Þær maeg nihta gehwaem niðwundor seon,
fyr on flode. No þæs frod leofað
gumena bearna, þæt þone grunde wite.
Þeah þe hæðstapa hundum geswenced,
heorot hornum trum holtwudu sece,
feorran geflymed, aer he feorh seleð,
aldor on ofre, aer he in wille,
hafelan (beorgan); nis þæt heoru stowe!
Þonon yðgeblond up astigeð
won to wolcnum, þonne wind styref
lað gewidru, oð þæt lyft drysmað,
roderas reotað.'

(1357-1376)

And the path to it is almost equally appalling:

Ofereode þa æþelinga bearn
 steap stanliðo, stige nearwe,
 enge anpaðas, uncuð gelad,
 neowle naessas, nicorhusa fela;
 he feara sum beforan gengde
 wisra monna wong sceawian,
 oþ þæt he faeringa fyrgenbeamas
 ofer harne stan hleonian funde,
 wynleasne wudu; waeter under stod
 dreorig ond gedrefed.

(1408-1417)

Even the dragon's barrow, albeit less ominous by far than Grendel's lair, is portrayed as inaccessible, barren, and forbidding:

oð ðæt an ongan
 deorcum nihtum draca rics(i)an,
 se fe on hea(um) h(aeð)e horde beweotode,
 stanbeorh steapne; stig under laeg
 eldum uncuð.

(2110-2114)

The monsters not only dwell outside the isolated circles of human settlement, they dwell in shadow. As if by some immutable law of nature, all three are nocturnal creatures.⁷⁷ Seemingly prohibited from harming men during the clear light of God's day, each attacks only under a covering shroud of darkness, his power restricted to those hours when the tentative perimeters of civilization shrink back within the firelit sanctuaries of hall and bower. Grendel is called se fe in bystrum bad and nihtbealwa maest (86, 193). Like Hamlet's father's ghost, his time abroad is limited to the hours after nightfall:

(Ac se) aeglaeca ehtende waes,
 deorc deapscua, duguþe ond geogoþe
 seomade ond syrede; sinnihte heold
 mistige moras.

(159-162)

It is only after sunset that Grendel usurps Heorot:

'Secgað saeliðend, þæt þaes sele stande,
 reced selesta rinca gehwylcum

idel ond unnyt, siððan aefenlecht
 under heofenes hador beholen weorþeð.
 (411-414)

Predictably, Grendel's original attack on the hall was launched at
 night:

Gewat ða neosian, syððan niht becom,
 hean huses, hu hit Hring-Dene
 aefter beorþege gebun haefdon.
 Fand þa ðær inne aefelinga gedriht
 swefan aefter symble; sorge ne cuðon,
 wonsceaft wera. Wiht unhaelo,
 grim on gradig, gearo sona waes,
 reoc ond reþe, ond on raeste genam
 þritig þegna.
 (115-123)

It is well understood that his sortie against the Geats too will occur
 only after dark:

Oþ þeat semninga
 sunu Healfdenes secean wolde
 aefebraests; wiste þaem ahlaecan
 to þaem heahsele hilde gefinged,
 siððan hie sunnan lecht geseon mehton,
 oþ ðe nipende niht ofer ealle,
 scaduhelma gesceapu scriðan cwoman
 wan under wolcnum.
 (644-651)

And, as expected:

Com on wanre niht
 scriðan sceadugenga.
 (702-703)

Like Grendel, the dragon is a power of the night, an eald uhtsceaða who
 nihtes fleogeð (2271-2273). Having discovered the theft of his
 treasure, the dragon must impatiently wait for night to fall before
 launching his devastating raid on the Geatish nation:

Hordweard onbad
 earfoðlice, oð ðaet aefen cwom;
 waes ða gebolgen beorges hyrde,
 wolde se laða lige forgyldan
 drincfaet dyre. Þa waes daeg sceacen
 wyrme on willan; no on wealle la(n)g
 bidan wolde, ac mid baele for,
 fyre gefysed.
 (2302-2309)

Grendel's dam too attacks by night:

Ond his modor þa gyt
 gifre ond galgmod gegan wolde
 sorhfulne sið, sunu deoð wrecan.
 Com þa to Heorote, þaer Hring-Dene
 geond þaet saeld swaefun.

(1276-1279)

The association of the monsters with night and lawlessness is no mere poetic device. The outer darkness and ominous wastes which surround the halls of men contribute more than a note of gloom to the tragic atmosphere of Beowulf's world. Figurative aspects of necessity, they represent the same destructive, irrational forces to which the monsters lend flesh-and-blood form, and against which human civilization wages perpetual war, striving to impose its own ideals of light and order on a world of chaos and darkness.

As we have noted, the relationship between the civitas and the wasteland is not one of simple opposition; there is a significant degree of interpenetration and overlap. However dark, alien, and inhuman, the invaders bear a marked resemblance to their victims. As we have already seen, the elegiac rhetoric applied to Grendel, his dam, and the dragon suggests a link between monsters and men on the basis of their common mortality. More important, Grendel and his dam are specifically identified as human, or at least "humanoid" creatures, and, no matter how aberrant and abhorrent, both mother and son possess human form:

þaera oðer waes,
 þaes þe hie gewislicost gewitan meahton,
 idese onlicnes; oðer earmsceapen
 on weres waestmum wraeclastas traed,
 naefne he waes mara þonne aenig man oðer,
 (1349-1353) 78

As monsters resemble men, men resemble monsters, the family like-

ness marked by the sign of Cain.⁷⁹ Exiled and outcast from human society, Grendel and his dam are explicitly named as Cain's descendants:

Siþðan Cain wearð
to ecgbanan angan breþer,
daederenmaege; he þa fag gewat,
morþre gemearced mandream fleon,
westen warode. Ðanon woc fala
geosceaftgasta; waes þara Grendel sum.
(1261-1266)

The curse of Cain's blood runs through the veins of the civitas as well. There are numerous slayers of their own kin portrayed in Beowulf, beginning with Unferth who is denounced by Beowulf himself:

'þeah ðu þinum broðrum to banan wurde,
heafodmaegum; þaes þu in helle scealt
werhðo dreogan, þeah þin wit duge.'
(587-589)⁸⁰

Hrothulf, it is hinted, will murder his cousins and usurp his uncle's throne:

faegere beþaegon
medoful manig magas þara
swiðhicgende on sele þe hean,
Hroðgar ond Hroþulf. Heorot innan waes
freondum afylled; nalles facenstafas
þeod-Scyldingas þenden fremedon.
(1014-1019)

.
Ðaer þa godan twegen
saeton suhtergefaederan; þa gyt was hiera sib aetgaedere,
aeghwylc oðrum trywe.
(1163-1165)⁸¹

Haethcyn's slaying of Herebeald, although accidental, is technically a fratricide and cannot be forgiven by Hrethel:

'Swa Wedra helm
aefter Herebealde heortan sorge
weallinde waeg; wihte ne meahte
on ðam feorhbonan faeghðe gebetan;
no ðy aer he þone heaðorinc hatian ne meahte
laðum daedum, þeah him leof ne waes.'
(2462-2467)

And earlier:

'Waes þam yldestan ungedefelice
 mages daedum morþorbed stred,
 syððan hyne Haeðcyn of hornbogan,
 his freawine flane geswencte,
 miste mercelses ond his maeg ofscet,
 broðor oðerne blodigan gare.
 Ðaet waes feohleas gefeoht, fyrenum gesyngad,
 hreðre hygemeðe; sceolde hwaedre swa þeah
 aedeling unwrecen ealdres linnan.'

(2435-2443)

Onela kills his nephew Eanmund, and Eanmund is avenged by his brother

Eadgils who, with Beowulf's help, slays his uncle:

Se ðaes leodhryres lean gemunde
 uferan dogrum, Eadgilse wearð
 feasceaftum freond; folce gesteppe
 ofer sae side sunu Ohteres,
 wigum on waepnum; he gewraec syððan
 cealdum cearsiðum, cuning ealdre bineat.

(2391-2396)⁸²

In the Finnsburh episode, Hnaef and his nephew--his sister's son--fall
 in battle, each fighting against the other:

Ne huro Hildeburh herian þorfte
 Eotena treowe; unsynnum wearð
 beloren leofum at þam lindplegan
 bearnum ond broðrum; hie on gebyrd hruron
 gare wunde; þaet waes geomuru ides!

(1071-1075)

.
 Het ða Hildeburh aet Hnaefes ade
 hire selfe sunu sweoloðe befaesten,
 banfatu baernan, ond on bael don
 eame on eaxle.

(1114-1117)

Although Heremod is not said to murder his blood kin, he slays his
eaxlgesteallan, which, according to Anglo-Saxon custom and law, is a
 crime perhaps even more heinous:⁸³

Breat bolgenmod beodgeneatas,
 eaxlgesteallan.

(1713-1714)

In a more generalized form, the Cain motif is reflected in the web
 of blood feud and vengeance which dominates the so-called "digressions,"⁸⁴

where it serves to point the tragic universality of the main action by raising irrational violence to the level of an archetypal historical pattern. The first of the tragic feuds portrayed in Beowulf is the feud between the Danes and the Frisians in the Finnsburh episode. All the elements of Germanic tragedy are present: conflicting loyalties, duplicity, the death of chieftains, the fall of kin, and the inconsolable grief of a bereft widow. The most telling aspect of the scop's tale however, is its emphasis upon the endless spiral of attack and retribution which renders peace and security all but impossible to the heroic world. If, as has been surmised,⁸⁵ the marriage of Finn and Hildeburh was originally arranged to guarantee peace between the warring Danes and Frisians, the plan fails when Finn renews the feud by attacking his visiting brother-in-law, Hnaef:

Ne huru Hildeburh herian þorfte
Eotena treowe.
(1071-1072)

After fierce fighting in which Hnaef is killed but neither side is able to gain decisive victory, Danes and Frisians ratify a truce:

þa hie getruwedon on two healfa
faeste frioðuwaere.
(1095-1096)

But when Hengest resolves to avenge the slaying of Hnaef, sworn oaths and treaties suffice no better than marriage bonds to prevent the feud from breaking out anew:

He to gyrnwraece
swiðor þohte þonne to saelade,
gif he torngemot þurhteon mihte,
þaet he Eotena bearn irne gemunde.
(1138-1141)

Strife ends only with the death of Finn and the sacking of his hall:

Ne meahte waefre mod
forhabban in hreþre. þa waes heal roden

feonda feorum, swilce Fin slaegen,
 cyning on corþre, ond seo cwen numen.
 Sceotend Scyldinga to scypon feredon
 eal ingesteald eorðcyninges,
 swylce hie aet Finnes ham findan meah-ton
 silga searogimma.

(1150-1157)

A remarkably similar pattern emerges from Beowulf's account of the feud between the Danes and the Heathobards. In hope of settling the hostilities, Hrothgar gives his daughter Freawaru to Ingeld in marriage:

'Sio gehaten (is)
 geong goldhroden, gladum suna Frodan;
 (h)afað þæs geworden wine Scyldinga,
 rices hyrde, ond þæt raed taleð,
 þæt he mid ðy wife waelfaehða dæl,
 saecca gesette.'

(2024-2029)

But once again the call of blood proves stronger than the ties of marriage, and the attempt to weave peace proves--or will prove--futile when an old Heathobard warrior incites a younger fighter to vengeance:

þonne bioð (ab)rocene on ba healfe
 aðsweord eorla; (syð)ðan Ingelde
 weallað waelniðas, ond him wiflufan
 aefter cearwaelmum colran weorðað.'

(2063-2066)

It is almost certainly as a consequence of this very feud that Heorot is later to be put to the torch when Ingeld unsuccessfully leads an invading army against Hrothgar and Hrothulf:

Sele hliflade
 heah ond horngeap; heaðowylma bad,
 laðan liges; ne waes it lenge þa gen,
 þæt þe ecghete aþumsweoran
 aefter waelniþe waecnan scolde.

(81-85)

Truly, as Beowulf ruefully observes to Hygelac:

'Oft seldan hwaer
 aefter leodhryre lytel hwile
 bongar bugeð, þeah seo byrd duge!'

(2029-2031)

Amidst the volatile interactions of the heroic world, man's dreams of peace invariably fail, endless war and feud emerging as the inevitable concomitants of heroic life. Indeed, it is one of the ironies of Beowulf that the very warrior values which preserve and enoble the civitas ineluctably generate a self-perpetuating and self-destructive round of vengeance and retaliation which pose as great a threat to human society as do the monsters themselves.⁸⁶ A dragon incinerates Beowulf's hall. But Finn's hall is pillaged by Hengest; and Heorot will be burned by Ingeld. Hondscio is killed by Grendel, Aeschere by Grendel's dam, and Beowulf by the dragon. But Haethcyn is killed by Ongentheow, Ongentheow by Hygelac,⁸⁷ Hygelac's son Heardred by Ongentheow's son Onela, Onela by Beowulf,⁸⁸ and Beowulf's Geats by Onela's Swedes, perhaps in conjunction with the Franks who earlier slew Hygelac. Against this tidal wave of darkness and blood the hero can but assert the ephemeral yet precious light of human reason, his foredoomed attempt to secure peace a noble and heroic aim.⁸⁹ In the face both of the relentless logic of internecine violence which subverts human order from within,⁹⁰ and the cosmic darkness which batters it from without, Beowulf's prudence and moderation represent almost as significant an affirmation of human worth as do his courage, prowess, and thirst for glory. Thus it is no small tribute that Hrothgar pays to Beowulf when he praises the hero's discretion and wisdom as well as his might:

þe þa wordcwydas wigtig Drihten
 on sefan sende; ne hyrde ic snotorlicor
 on swa geongum feore guman þingian.
 þu eart maegnees strang, ond on mod frod,
 wis wordcwida!

(1841-1845)

Similarly, it is no mean accomplishment that Beowulf secures peace between the Geats and Danes:

'Hafast þu gefered þæt þam folcum sceal,
 Geota leodum ond Gar-Denum
 sib gemaene, ond sacu restan,
 inwitniþas, þe hie aer drugon,
 wesan, þenden ic wealde widan rices.'

(1855-1859)

And it is no slight measure of the hero's stature that he is able to enforce a 50-year truce with his volatile and aggressive neighbors:

'þone ðe aer geheold
 wið hettendum hord ond rice,
 aefter haeleða hryre, hwate scyldwigan,
 folcred fremede, oððe furðer gen
 eorlscype efnde.'

(3003-3007)⁹¹

Beowulf himself, on the verge of death, considers it boast-worthy that he kept the peace, sought no unjust quarrels, broke no oaths, slew no kin:

'Ic ðas leode heold
 fiftig wintra; naes se folccyning,
 ymbesittendra aenig ðara,
 þe mec guðwinum gretan dorste,
 egesan ðeon. Ic on earde bad
 maelgesceafta, heold min tela,
 no sohte searoniðas, ne me swor fela
 aða on unriht. Ic ðaes ealles maeg
 feorhbennum seoc gefean habban;
 forðam me witan ne ðearf Waldend fira
 morðobealo maga, þonne min sceaced
 lif of lice.'

(2732-2743)

The identification of heroism with the pacific virtues of the civitas is confirmed at Beowulf's funderal where the Geats praise the mildness and gentleness of their king as well as his eagerness for glory:

Swa begnornodon Geata leode
 hlaflordes (hry)re, heorðogeneatas;
 cwaedon þæt he waere wyruldcyning(a)
 manna mildust ond mon(ðw)aerust,
 leodum liðost ond lofgeornost.

(3178-3182)

And perhaps most important of all, the poet never directly portrays Beowulf fighting against a human opponent. All of Beowulf's campaigns

against men are carefully relegated to the background and reduced to brief narrative summations of events long past.⁹²

All of this is not to suggest that the poet heaps indiscriminate condemnation on those who take part in war and feud. Some are praised and others blamed. What is essential to recognize is that two modes of heroic life are here contrasted. The older, more blood-thirsty Germanic code of vengeance, its heroes inextricably embroiled in a tragic web of conflicting loyalties and betrayal, proves ultimately inadequate precisely because it ends by contributing to those irrational forces which undermine all which is humanly valuable in Beowulf's world. To compare the heroic role of Beowulf with a form of heroism which, although admirable, is essentially compromised by an unwitting complicity with necessity does much to clarify the special form and significance of the heroic life celebrated in the poem. For the Beowulf poet, through his obvious admiration of social stability, his somewhat skeptical treatment of blood-feuds, and his substitution of monsters for human opponents, has undertaken a modulation of traditional Germanic heroic ideals,⁹³ bringing heroic aspirations into accord with the ideals of peace, concord, and civilization--all of which would be consistent with the development of Anglo-Saxon Christianity in and about the eighth century, as is evidenced by the church's denunciation of the blood-feud, its advocacy of wergild, and its attempts to consolidate and stabilize social order, preserve culture, and expand civilization.⁹⁴

One final caveat: Perhaps as a consequence of the poet's concern with the ideal of social concord, a number of readers--misconstruing the identification of the hero with the civitas--have read into the poem an indictment of the martial enthusiasms of Germanic heroism, concluding

that Beowulf himself is implicitly rebuked for his "rash" determination to engage the dragon single-handedly.⁹⁵ Such interpretations, whatever the discrepancies among them, rest finally on Wiglaf's oft-cited lament for the fallen hero:⁹⁶

'Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan
wraec adreogan, swa us geworden is.
Ne meahton we gelaeran leofne þeoden,
rices hyrde raed aenigne,
þaet he ne grette goldweard þone,
lete hyne licgean, þaer he longe waes,
wicum wunian oð woruldende.
Heold on heahgesceap.'

(3077-3084)

To begin with, Wiglaf does not "rebuke" Beowulf for taking on the dragon single-handed. He says rather that he regrets that Beowulf could not be prevailed upon to shun the dragon altogether--an unthinkable alternative in light of the dragon's devastating assaults.⁹⁷ Although some commentators make much of Beowulf's "arrogant" decision to confront the dragon unaided, Wiglaf himself is silent on this point. And no wonder! How is the hero to be blamed for fighting single-handedly against the dragon? One need only recall his earlier battles against the Grendel clan. In each case Beowulf meets the foe in single combat. Was he wrong all three times? Or only the last time?⁹⁸ Moreover, how reckless shall we judge him to be once we acknowledge that his intention to fight alone does not absolve his retainers from their obligation to assist him when he is in mortal peril? The responsibility of the comitatus is made abundantly clear by Wiglaf's tirade against the cowards, his own act of heroic loyalty, and by the behavior of the faithful retainers who come unhesitatingly to Beowulf's aid at Heorot, although he had characteristically vowed to confront Grendel alone (794 ff.).⁹⁹ If blame is to be assigned, then it must be assigned to the cowards rather than to the

hero; it is their courage and loyalty which fail, not Beowulf's judgment:

'Wergendra to lyt
 þrong imbe þeoden, þa hyne sio þrag becwom.'
 (2882-2883)

But we must take care not to exaggerate. At the level of final catastrophe events are given, not volitional. Tragedy results neither from an imagined flaw in the hero, nor even from the real cowardice of his retainers; it is a condition of heroic life.¹⁰⁰ In the end, Beowulf is not to be judged by the consequences of his acts. Ironically, the hero does not ultimately fight to win. Whatever his efforts, whatever his hopes, in the end he cannot win. Beowulf's slaying of the dragon, can no more prevent the destruction of the Geats¹⁰¹ than his slaying of Grendel can prevent the ultimate destruction of Heorot. Given the tragic nature of his world, the hero finally fights, or rather, the poet portrays his fight not so much as a contest, but as a desperate attempt to demonstrate the power and glory of human existence, limited and transitory as it is. There are cowards, and there are those ordinary men who are unequal to the struggle. But there are also heroes like Beowulf whose task it is to prove the worth of mankind.

Of the values exemplified by the hero in his struggle against the forces of darkness and disorder, one particularly deserves to be singled out for special consideration, loyalty--the reciprocal ties and obligations which stand surety for the stability and coherence of Anglo-Saxon society.¹⁰² There are two major examples of loyalty in the poem: Beowulf's loyalty to Hygelac, and Wiglaf's loyalty to Beowulf. Beowulf's loyalty to Hygelac is so profound a part of the work as to constitute almost an independent motif.¹⁰³ He is first introduced as Hygelac's thane:

þæt fram ham gefraegn Higelaces þegn
god mid Geatum, Grendles daeda.
(194-195)

Thereafter, each time he introduces himself, Beowulf invokes his relationship to Hygelac. To the Danish coast-guard he identifies himself as Hygelac's hearth-companion:

'We synt gumcynnes Geata leode
ond Higelaces heorðgeneatas.'
(260-261)

To Wulfgar, as Hygelac's table-companion:

'We synt Higelaces
beodgeneatas; Beowulf is min nama.'
(343-343)

And to Hrothgar, as Hygelac's retainer and thane:

'Waes þu, Hroðgar, hal! Ic eom Higelaces
maeg ond magoðegn.'
(407-408)

Again and again, at some critical turn of the action, Beowulf is identified as Hygelac's kinsman or retainer.¹⁰⁴ As Grendel attacks, the hero is called Hygelac's mighty kinsman:

þryðswyð behold
maeg Higelaces, hu se manscaða
under faergripum gefaran wolde.
(736-738)

As he closes with the monster, Hygelac's brave kinsman:

Gemunde þa se goda, maeg Higelaces,
aefenspraece, uplang astod
ond him faeste wiðfeng.
(758-760)

And again, as he tears off Grendel's arm:

Ac hine se modega maeg Higelaces
haefde be honda.
(813-814)

When the poet compares the hero with Heremod, he refers to him as Hygelac's kinsman:

He þær eallum wearð
maeg Higelaces manna cynne,
freondum gefaegra.

(913-915)

Even when, long after Hygelac's death, Beowulf--waefre ond waelfus (2420)
--looks back over his life before challenging the dragon, "he is still
in his own heart, 'Hygelac's thane'":¹⁰⁵

'Symle ic him on feðan beforan wolde,
ana on orde, ond swa to aldre sceall
saecce fremman, þenden þis sweord þolað.'

(2497-2499)

The whole of Beowulf's heroic achievement is here represented as a
fulfillment of his commitment to Hygelac, the ond swa firmly establish-
ing his loyalty to his uncle as the source and pattern of his life-long
endeavor. We catch an early glimpse of this dynamic when Beowulf renounces
the use of weapons against Grendel:

'Ic þæt þonne forhicge, swa me Higelac sie,
min mondrihten modes bliðe,
þæt ic sweordbere ofðe scyld.'

(435-437)

And again when Beowulf, recounting his heroic deeds at Heorot to Hygelac,
views his accomplishments as a glorification of his chief's people:¹⁰⁶

'Þær ic, þeoden min, þine leode
weorðode weorcum.'

(2095-2096)

Beowulf's subsequent loyalty to Heardred should also be understood as a
continuation of his relationship to Hygelac.¹⁰⁷ In sharp contrast to
Hrothulf who betrays his uncle and kills his cousins in a drive to usurp
the throne,¹⁰⁸ Beowulf refuses Hygd's offer of the crown, keeping post-
mortem faith with his uncle and serving as his cousin's regent and
protector:

Þær him Hygd gebead hord ond rice,
beagas ond bregostol; bearne ne truwode,

paet he wið aelfylcum eþelstolas
 healdan cuðe, ða waes Hygelac dead.
 No ðy aer feasceafte findan meah-ton
 aet þaem aeðelinge aenige ðinga,
 þaet he Heardrede hlaford waere,
 oððe þone cyne-dom ciosan wolde;
 hwaedere he hine on folce freondlarum heold,
 estum mid are, oð ðaet he yldra wearð,
 Weder-Geatum weold.

(2369-2379)

In a world where treachery threatens to disrupt the foundations of heroic society, loyalty balances and counters the centrifugal pull of feud and war, preserving what can be preserved of harmony amidst uncertainty and discord. Here Beowulf's life-long fidelity to Hygelac not only reflects his own undeviating integrity, but secures for the Geats their portion of dynastic continuity and concord.

Wiglaf's loyalty to Beowulf in many respects resembles Beowulf's fidelity to Hygelac. Above all, Wiglaf demonstrates the reciprocity and interdependence upon which heroic society rests. The hero, even the hero of this poem, is not altogether self-sufficient. As the dragon-fight proves, heroic life ultimately depends upon a cooperative effort:

Feond gefyldan --ferh ellen wraec--,
 ond hi hyne þa begen abroten haefdon,
 sibaeðelingas; swylc sceolde secg wasan,
 þegn aet ðearfe!

(2706-2709)¹⁰⁹

No individual, however great, is in himself wholly adequate to the forces of necessity. No hero, however unique, exceeds the common forms and limits of existence. As men rely upon the heroic champion in their war against the monsters, so the hero turns back towards men in his time of need--and beyond, to preserve his fame and glory oþþaet eal scaececð, leoht ond lif somod.

If loyalty is "the cement of Anglo-Saxon society,"¹¹⁰ it is the

exchange of treasure which publicly consecrates the bond between lord and retainer,¹¹¹ a rite perhaps best illustrated by the hero's triumphant return to Hygelac's court. As a proper thane,¹¹² Beowulf offer his uncle the tribute he earned at Heorot, his words an especially moving expression of the personal intensity of Anglo-Saxon fealty and kinship bonds:

'Nealles ic ðam leanum forloren haefde,
maegnes mede, ac he me (maðmas) geaf,
sunu Healfdenes one (min)ne sylfes dom;
ða ic ðe, beorncýning, bringan wylle,
estum geywan. Gen is eall aet ðe
lissa gelong; ic lyt hafo
heafomaga nefne, Hygelac, ðec.'
(2145-2151)

Hygelac generously reciprocates:

Het ða eorla hleo in gefetian,
heaðorof cýning Hreðles lafe
golde gegryde; naes mid Geatum ða
sinmaðþum selra on sweordes had;
þaet he on Biowulfes bearm alegde,
ond him gesealde seofan þusendo,
bold ond bregostol.
(2190-2196)

The exchange serves as a veritable model of heroic relations:

Swa sceal maeg don,
nealles inwitnet oðrum bregdon
drynum craefte, deað ren(ian)
hondgesteallan. Hygelace waes
niða heardum nefa swyðe hold,
ond gehwaeder oðrum hroþa gemyndig.
(2166-2171)

Treasure also provides the material incentive for heroic deeds.

Hrothgar explains to Wulfgar that he intends to offer Beowulf treasure as a reward for fighting Grendel:

'Ic þaem godam sceal
for his modþraece maðmas beodan.'
(384-385)

And he does so:

'Ne bið þe wilna gad,
gif þu þaet ellenweorc aldre gedigest.'
(660-661)

Again, as recompense for pursuing Grendel's dam, Hrothgar promises
treasure:

'Sec gif þu dyrre!
Ic þe þa faeðe feo leanige,
ealdgestreonum, swa ic aer dyde,
wundnum golde, gyf þu on weg cymest.'
(1379-1382)

In each case, the king is as good as his word: he promptly rewards
Beowulf for slaying Grendel:

'Ne bið þe (n)aenigre gad
worolde wilna, þe ic geweald haebbe.
Ful ofte for laessan lean teohhode,
hordweorþunge hnahan rince,
saemran aet saecce.'
(949-953)

And again, after Aeschere is avenged:

Forgeaf þa Beowulfe bearn Healfdenes
segen gyldenne sigores to leane,
hroden hildecumbor, helm ond byrnan;
maere maðumsweord manige gesawon
beforan beorn beran. Beowulf gefah
ful on flette; no he þaere feohgyfte
for (sc(e)oten(d)um scamigan ðorfte,--
ne gefraegn ic freondlicor feower madmas
golde gegyrede gummana fela
in ealobence oðrum gesellan.
(1020-1029)

.
Swa manlice maere þeoden,
hordweard haeleþa heaþoraessas geald
mearum ond madmum, swa hy naefre man lyhð
se þe secgan wile soð aefter rihte.
(1046-1049)¹¹³

In like fashion, Hygelac rewards Wulf and Eofer for vanquishing
Ongentheow:

He ð(am) fraetwum feng ond him fraegre gehet
leana (mid) leodum, ond gelaeste swa;
geald þone gudraes Geata dryhten,
Hreðles eofera, þa he to ham becom,

Iofore ond Wulfe mid ofermaðmum,
 sealde hiora gehwæðrum hund þusenda
 landes ond locerna beaga,-- ne ðorfte him ða lean oðwitan
 mon on middangearde, syððā(n) hie ða maerða geslogen;
 ond ða Iofore forgeaf angan dohtor,
 hamweorðunge, hylde to wedde.

(2989-2998)

The importance of treasure as an incentive to heroism is again stressed as Wiglaf recalls Beowulf's generosity before going to his aid against the dragon:

Gemunde ða ða are, þe he him aer forgeaf,
 wicstede weligne Waegmundinga,
 folcrihta gehwylc, swa his faeder ahte;
 ne mihte ða forhabban, hond rond gefeng,
 geolwe linde, gomel swyrd geteah.

(2606-2610)

Wiglaf himself invokes this obligation in a futile attempt to urge his cowardly comrades into the fray:

'Ic ðaet mael geman, þaer we medu þegun,
 þonne we geheton ussum hlaforde
 in biorsele. ðe us ðas beagas geaf,
 þaet we him ða guðgetawa gyldan woldon,
 gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe,
 helmas ond heard sword.'

(2633-2638)

And again when he upbraids them for their cowardice:

'þaet, la, maeg secgan se ðe wyle soð specan,
 þaet se mondryhten, se eow ða maðmas geaf,
 eoredgeatwe, þe ge þaer on standað,--
 þonne he on ealbence oft gesealde
 healsittendum helm ond byrnan,
 þeoden his þegnum, swylce he þrydlicost
 ower feor oððe neah findan meahte--,
 þaet he genunga guðgewaedu
 wraðe forwurpe, ða hyne wig beget.'

(2864-2872)

Even Beowulf conceives of his role as Hygelac's thane in these terms:

'Ic him maðmas, þe he me sealde,
 geald aet guðe, swa me gifede waes,
 leohtan sweorde; he me lond forgeaf,
 eard eðelwyn. Naes him aenig þearf,
 þaet he to Gifðum oððe to Gar-Denum
 oððe in Swiorice secean þurfe
 wyrsan wigfreca, weorðe gecypan.'

(2490-2496)

Although Beowulf engages the dragon essentially to avenge the outrages wreaked upon countryside and hall, treasure plays at least some part in motivating the ring-giver of the Geats to his last heroic encounter:

'Nu sceall billes ecg,
hond ond heard sweord ymb hord wigan.'
(2508-2509)

.
'Ic mid elne sceall
gold gegangan, oððe guð nimeð,
feorhbealu frecne frean eowerne!'
(2535-2537)

Guarantee of loyalty, incentive and reward for courageous deeds, treasure is the life's blood of heroic society. Little wonder then that Wiglaf, banishing the cowards and their families, phrases their ex-communication from heroic society in terms of their exclusion from the sacramental exchange of treasure:

'Nu sceal sincþego ond swyrdgifu
eall eðelwyn eowrum cynne,
lufen alicgean; londrihtes mot
þare maegburge monna aeghwylc
idel hweorfan, syððan aedelingas
feorran gefricgean fleam eowerne,
domleasan daed.'
(2884-2890)¹¹⁴

In all this, treasure is not sought solely, or even primarily for its monetary value, but rather for the honor it confers upon both giver and recipient.¹¹⁵ When Beowulf rewards the Danish coast-guard for his courtesy, we are told that the gold-adorned sword increases the esteem in which that warrior is held by his companions:

He þaem batwearde bunden golde
sweord gesealde, þaet he syððan waes
on meodubence maþme þy weorþa,
yrfelafe.
(1900-1904)

The coast-guard is henceforth more honored on the mead-bench not because he is richer, but because the "heirloom" is a public token of the noble

conduct which impelled Beowulf to bestow it upon him. Similarly, when Beowulf rejoices in the bountiful gifts with which Hrothgar has rewarded him, we are not to infer that he is greedy for wealth:

Him Beowulf þanan,
guðrinc goldwlanç graesmoldan traed
since hremig.

(1880-1882)

Beowulf is proud of his treasure because it is a manifest measure of the heroic deeds which earned it, a public display of his heroic prowess and worth.¹¹⁶ It is in precisely this spirit that Beowulf earlier asks Hrothgar to forward his rewards to Hygelac in the event that he--Beowulf-- is killed by Grendel's dam:

'Gif mec hilde nime,
swylce þu ða madmas, þe þu me sealdest,
Hroðgar leofa, Higelace onsende.
Maeg þonne on þaem golde ongitan Geata drihten,
geseon sunu Hraedles, þonne he on þaet sinc starað,
þaet ic grmcystum godne funde
beaga bryttan, breac þonne moste.'

(1480-1487)

The quest for treasure in Beowulf, far from signifying covetousness,¹¹⁷ reflects the quest for honor. If the poet is concerned with avarice, and on the evidence of Hrothgar's homily we must conclude that he is, his focus is not so much covetousness as parsimony. This is evident from the relevant portions of Hrothgar's sermo itself:¹¹⁸ first in the exemplum of Heremod:

'Nallas beagas geaf
Denum aefter dome.'

(1719-1720)

Then in the parable of the avaricious man:

'þinceð him to lytel, þaet he lange heold,
gytsað gromhydig, nallas on gylp seleð
faette beagas, ond he þa forðgesceaft
forgyteð ond forgymeð, þaes he him aer God sealde,
wuldres Walend, weorðmynda dæl.

Hit on endestaef eft gelimpeð,
 þæt se lichoma laene gedreoseð,
 faege gefealleð; fehð ofer to,
 se þe un murnlice madmas daeleþ,
 eorles aergestreon, egesan ne gymeð.'
 (1748-1757)

The alternatives are not lust for wealth and contemptus mundi, but magnanimity and illiberality. Thus cupiditas is measured throughout not against other-worldly indifference, but against the Germanic ideal of princely generosity. If avarice is a mortal sin, it is essentially a heroic rather than a religious sin. Indeed, in heroic terms the choice between liberality and niggardliness is definitive: Generosity represents the fulfillment of heroic life while hoarding, like cowardice, denotes a disruption of the essential transactions of heroic society.

The identification of avarice with hoarding sheds important light on the three controversial passages in Beowulf which have been put forth as evidence of the inherent worthlessness or unworthiness of treasure in the poem:¹¹⁹ Hrothgar's caveat against avarice; the poet's admonition that treasure can get the best of any man; and the lines describing the dragon's hoard as "useless." We have already observed of Hrothgar's homily that avarice, as there presented, is essentially a function not of getting and spending, but of hoarding, a sin of which Beowulf is certainly not guilty.¹²⁰ As for the poet's admonition against the lure of treasure, if the dragon's hoard poses a threat, neither Beowulf nor Wiglaf succumbs to the temptation:

Sinc eaðe maeg,
 gold on grund(e) gumcynnes gehwone
 oferhigian, hyde se ðe wylle!
 (2764-2766)

Beowulf fights for the hoard, it is true; but he does so in order that he may bequeath it to his people:

'Ic ðara fraetwa Frean ealles ðanc,
 Wuldurcyninge wordum secge,
 ecum Dryhtne, þe ic her on starie,
 þaes ðe ic moste minum leodum
 aer swyltdaege swylc gestrynan.
 Nu ic on maðma hord mine bebohte
 froð feorhlege, fremmað gena
 leode þearfe; ne maeg ic her leng wesan.'
 (2794-2801)

Moreover, Beowulf's selfless generosity is fully reciprocated when the Geats, presumably at Wiglaf's command, consign the entire hoard to his commemorative pyre-barrow:

'Ne scel anes hwaet
 meltan mid þam modigan, ac þaer is maðma hord,
 gold unrime grimme gecea(po)d,
 ond nu aet siðestan sylfes feore
 beagan (geboh)te; þa sceall brond fretan,
 aeled þeccean.'
 (3010-3015)

.
 Hi on beorg dydon beg ond siglu,
 eall swylce hyrsta, swylce on horde aer
 niðhedige men genumen haefdon.
 (3163-3165)

The warning against the lure of treasure far from suggesting that either Beowulf or Wiglaf is guilty of some incipient form of avarice, serves rather to underscore their mutual magnanimity.

The designation of the hoard as unnyt (3167) raises a number of important questions. Klaeber's conjecture (p. 230) that "in part this could be explained as a corollary of the motive of the curse resting on the gold" merits consideration. But even more valuable is his citation from Grettissaga, ch. 18.16: "all treasure which is hidden in the earth or buried in a howe is in a wrong place." As Klaeber's analogy suggests, buried treasure, like hoarded treasure, is "useless" not because it is intrinsically without worth, but because it is removed from the life-lines of heroic society and thereby alienated from its proper function as catalyst for heroic action.

The reference to the hoard interred with Beowulf as unnyt is anticipated by an earlier observation on the dragon's proverbial instinct for guarding treasure:

He gesecean sceall
 (ho)r(don) hrusan, þær he hæðen gold
 warað wintrum frod; ne byð him wihte ðy sel.
 (2275-2277) 121

From the outset, the question of the hoard's value is posed in terms of heroic utility, as is evidenced by the soliloquy of the Last Survivor:

'Nah, hwa sweord wege
 oððe fe(o)r(mie) faeted waege,
 dryncfaet deore; dug(uð) ellor sceoc.
 Sceal se heardra helm (hyr)stedgolde,
 faetum befeallen; feormynd swefað,
 þa ðe beadogriman bywan sceoldon;
 ge swylce seo herepad, sio aet hilde gebad
 ofer borda gebraec bite irena,
 broснаð aefter beorne. Ne maeg byrnan hring
 aefter wigfruman wide feran,
 haeleðum be healfe. naes heapan wyn,
 gomen gleobeames, ne god hafoc
 geond sael swingeð, ne se swifta mearh
 burhstede beateð. Bealocwealm hafað
 fela feorhcynna forð onsended!'
 (2252-2266)

Throughout the elegy can be traced an implicit antithesis between treasure actively employed in the service of heroic life and treasure divorced from heroic context.¹²² Swords are to be borne; shields and armor worn to ward off the biting sword-blade; harps played to provide joy and delight; hawks to be flown; horses to be ridden. Outside the living relationships of heroic society, precious heirlooms--swords, flagons, cups, helmets, masks--tarnish and rust, uselessly wasting in the bowels of the earth, buried together with those who originally won and used them. The degeneration of unused treasure is once more suggested as Wiglaf rifles the hoard:

Geseah Ða sigehreðig, þa he bi sesse geong,
 magoþegn modig maððumsigla fealo,
 gold glitnian grunde getenge,
 wundor on wealle, ond þaes wyrmes denn,
 ealdes uhtflogan, orcas stondan,
 fyrnmanna fatu, feormendlease,
 hyrstum behrorene; þaer waes helm monig
 eald on omig, earmbeaga fela
 searwum gesaeled.

(2756-2764)

And again when the Geats gather to view the carcass of the dragon:

Him big stodaþ bunan ond orcas,
 discas lagon ond dyre swyrd,
 omige þurhtone, swa hie wið eorðan faeðm
 þusend wintra þaer eardodon.

(3047-3050)

In all this I do not mean to diminish the universal range of the poet's lines on the once and future uselessness of the interred hoard. One would have to be tone deaf to miss the deeper, more tragic resonances of the verse--its elegiac reminder that all temporal value is ultimately transitory:

Forleton eorla gestreon eorðan healdan,
 gold on greote, þaer hit nu gen lifað
 eldum swa unnyt, swa hi(t aero)r waes.

(3166-3168)

The Geats, like their king, are faege. Neither fabulous treasure nor a hero's courage can revoke fate. In this setting, the hoard is futile, its futility signalling the end of Geatish heroic life:

'Nalles eorl wegan
 maððum to gemyndum, ne maegð scyne
 habban on healse hringweorðunge,
 ac sceal geomormod, golde bereafod
 oft nalles aene elland tredan,
 ne se herewisa hleahtor alegde,
 gamen ond gleodream.'

(3015-3021)

Beowulf is dead. His nation is about to be swept away. No amount of treasure will suffice to save them. But this no more implies that treasure is worthless than it implies that the hero's courage is worth-

less. What it does tell us--again tells us--is that the meaning of treasure depends upon its connection with the living interactions of heroic life. Gold, ornament, and torque are of no use to a people whose heroic days are numbered, a nation bound for diaspora, exile, and captivity. Wyrð bið ful araed! (Wanderer, line 5). But, so long as a heroic society remains viable, the nobility and value of treasure remain beyond dispute:

Swa sceal (geong g)uma gode gewyrcean,
 fromm feohgiftum ond faeder (bea)rme,
 þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
 wilgesiþas, þonne wig cume,
 leode gelaesten; lofdaedum sceal
 in maegþa gehwaere man geþeon.

(20-25)

Transience is balanced by glory, fate by indomitable will, death by courage, the wasteland by the civitas, tragedy by heroism: Everything--style, diction, theme--contributes to the dynamic equilibrium of the heroic poem. Let us conclude by noting that the tension between heroism and necessity, between man and his fate, determines not only the major narrative and rhetorical strategies of Beowulf, but its architectonics as well. Tolkien, who argues for a "static" bipartite structure--a balanced contrast between "rising and setting . . . youth and age . . . first achievement and final death"--, has already drawn our attention to the coincidence of form and meaning in Beowulf, demonstrating the extent to which the structural oppositions of the poem serve to express its thematic nexus--the hero's confrontation with his destiny.¹²³ A similar pattern may be discerned in the frame of the poem, the way in which the narrative action is enclosed within its beginning and end.¹²⁴ Beowulf begins with the almost miraculous arrival of Scyld and ends with the hero's departure from earth. More important perhaps, whereas the

arrival of Scyld signals the founding of a powerful and glorious Danish dynasty--one which continues to flourish after the departure of its eponymous founder--the death of Beowulf augurs the death of the Geatish nation. In a word, the frame of Beowulf, a poem which opens with beginnings and closes with ends, parallels the general structure of the poem, which Donahue, following Tolkien, has compared to a diptych,¹²⁵ one panel depicting the hero at the peak of his youthful powers and the other portraying him as an old king (still powerful and heroic) at the moment of his death. Beginnings and ends. The structure of Gawain and the Green Knight is cyclical; but that of Beowulf is progressive and inevitable, reflecting the inexorable course of time and human events.

While the linear inevitability of the narrative tends in some ways to corroborate Tolkien's view of the poem's structure, it also reveals the limitations of that approach. The analogy between Beowulf and diptych is, at least in one critical respect, somewhat imprecise and misleading: the emphasis on the "static" contrast between beginnings and ends tends to draw attention away from the degree to which the final catastrophe both draws upon and fulfills earlier tragic substrata. A good part of the formal strategy of Beowulf may well be based upon the oppositions of the diptych structure, but we must take care to recognize the extent to which tragedy is incremental and cumulative, a dialectical development in which the contrapuntal tragic ironies and auguries of the first portion of the poem grow, swell, and finally culminate in the tragic denouement of the closing catastrophe.¹²⁶ Moreover, just as elegy and tragic anticipation play an important role in the Danish sections of the poem, the predominance of elegy in the final portion entails no diminution of the hero or of heroic life.¹²⁷ Beowulf himself

is no whit less heroic or exemplary against the dragon than he was in his earlier campaigns against the Grendels:

Aras Ða bi ronde rof oretta,
heard under helme, hiorosercean baer
under stancleofu, strengo getrowode
anes mannes; ne bið swylc earges sið!
(2538-2541)

While Beowulf's retrospective account of his heroic career does tend toward elegy--suggesting the tragic force of time and age--the hero himself has lost none of his original powers:¹²⁸

Ða gen guðcýning
m(aerða) gemunde, maegenstrengo sloh
hildebille, þæt hyt on heafolan stod
niþe genyded; Naegling forbaerst,
geswac aet saecce sweord Biowulfes
gomol ond graegmael. Him þæt gifede ne waes,
þæt him irenna ecge mihton
helpan aet hilde; was sio hond to strong,
se ðe meca gehwane mine gefraege
swenge ofersohte, þonne he to saecce baer
waepen wund(r)um heard; naes him wihte ðe sel.
(2677-2687)

Moreover, the scope of Beowulf's final heroism is augmented by the corresponding heroism of Wiglaf, whose role enhances the representation of heroic life as the poem draws towards its conclusion:¹²⁹

Feond gefyldan --ferh ellen wraec--,
ond hi hyne þa begen abroten haefdon,
sibaeðelingas; swylc sceolde secg wesan,
þegn aet ðearfe!
(2706-2709)

Finally, let us take note that of the eight major hortatory gnomes, four occur in the dragon-fight section, giving some indication at least of the heroic temper of the final portions of Beowulf. Time passes, the dragon comes, and Beowulf finally falls. But at the end, no less than at the beginning, in his fall as in his rise, the hero opposes to necessity the whole weight of his strength, courage, and indomitable will.

Indeed, it is the final portion of Beowulf, especially the fatal encounter with the dragon, which establishes the hero's full humanity. For all his exceptional strength, Beowulf is a man, and, as Hrothgar warns, subject to the pressures of time, nature, age, and death. Were it not for the final episodes of the poem, Beowulf would be merely a uniquely powerful and exceptional figure. As it is, he is fully representative of what is highest in mankind. Ultimately it is only in the context of mortality that heroism signifies its fullest capacity. In a world so mutable and precarious as that of Beowulf, so long as heroism does not prove itself in the face of death, its powers of human affirmation remain suspect, perhaps inadequate and futile. Since the task of the hero is to validate man in all his mortality, heroism must be tested in the fires of tragedy.

Like Morte Arthure and The Iliad, Beowulf concludes with a funeral.¹³⁰ There can be no more fitting close to a heroic poem. On the one hand, the funeral is a figure of the mortality which encompasses and defines the heroic world: to such an end must all things eventually come. On the other hand, the funeral, like the heroic poem itself, is an expression of the tribute men pay to the fallen hero. Death may topple the mightiest of men; but so long as men themselves keep alive the memory of the hero and his deeds, death cannot obviate human greatness.

Tolkien has claimed of Beowulf that "in a sense, all its first 3136 lines are the prelude to a dirge."¹³¹ --An affecting formulation, but only half true. Like the poem itself, Beowulf's funeral is more--much more--than elegy and dirge. It is a celebration of heroism, of the power and beauty of the heroic life. In the heroic poem, human existence may be said to resemble an unresolvable mathematical equation, an equation in

which the two terms--the tragic and the heroic--remain locked in timeless and irreconcilable struggle. Elegy and dirge correspond to one side of the equation; but they are balanced by the weight of heroism. Men gain no victories over destiny; but neither are they wholly defeated. Life is trasitory--but magnificent.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

CHAPTER ONE

¹Tolkien, Monsters, p. 41, uses this phrase to suggest the inevitable passing of all temporal phenomena. Tolkien's paper is still the most sensitive study of this aspect of the poem. See also Bonjour, "Jottings on Beowulf and the Aesthetic Approach," in Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays, ed. Robert F. Creed (Providence, 1967), p. 181; Wrenn, pp. 61-62.

²All citations to Beowulf are from Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, ed. Fr. Klaeber, third edition (Boston, 1950).

Literally, Wiglaf is the last survivor of the Waegmundings--endelaf Waegmundinga (2813-2814). That Beowulf and Wiglaf are cast in the role of last survivors is noted by Edward B. Irving, Jr., A Reading of Beowulf (New Haven, 1968), pp. 168, 228, 235. Herbert G. Wright, "Good and Evil; Light and Darkness; Joy and Sorrow in Beowulf," RES, VIII (1957), 1-11, reprinted in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, ed. L. E. Nicholson (South Bend, 1963), p. 265, notes that the Bereaved Father (2444-2459) is a kind of last survivor.

³See Tolkien, Monsters, p. 21.

⁴See Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, p. 18.

⁵Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, p. 20. The insecurity of heroic life is underscored by the suddenness and unpredictability of the monster-raids. In each case the attack signals a catastrophic reversal, the monster striking at what appears to be the very height of human stability, power, and success. Grendel attacks Heorot at the very pinnacle of Danish power (1769ff.); Grendel's dam makes her raid on the heels of Beowulf's triumphant restoration of Heorot (1276-1281); the dragon's attack abruptly terminates Beowulf's glorious 50-year reign (2209-2212). In each instance, the unexpected yet inevitable assault is marked by the prepositional phrase op̄ ƿaet which characteristically punctuates periods of reversal in the poem, emphasizing the tragic susceptibility of human existence, not only to violent disruption, but to the inevitable fluctuations of time, change, and circumstance (see lines 99-101, 2115-2118, 2208-2212). For a general discussion of the "pattern of 'until,'" see Irving, Reading, pp. 31-42, 134, 145; see also Richard N. Ringler, "Him Seo Wen Geleah: The Design for Irony in Grendel's Last Visit to Heorot," Speculum, 41 (1966), 65.

⁶G. V. Smithers, "The Meaning of The Seafarer and The Wanderer," Medium AEvum, XXVIII (1959), 10, notes that Hrothgar's sermo is a "hinge on which the two halves of the poem are set."

⁷For a convenient survey of the patristic sources and milieu of the sermo, see Margaret E. Goldsmith, The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf (London, 1970), pp. 183-209; "The Christian Perspective in Beowulf," CL, XIV (1962), 71-80, reprinted in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, p. 383; R. E. Kaske, "Sapientia Et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf," SP, LV (1958), 423-457, reprinted in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, pp. 280-284; Levin L. Schucking, "The Ideal of Kingship in Beowulf," MHRA, III (1929), 143-154, trans. and reprinted in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, pp. 41-42.

⁸See Charles Donahue, "Potlatch and Charity: Notes on the Heroic in Beowulf," in Anglo-Saxon Poetry, Essays in Appreciation, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame, 1975), p. 27; Beowulf and Christian Tradition, 82; Kenneth Sisam, The Structure of Beowulf (London, 1965), pp. 78-79; Kaske, p. 284; Irving, Reading, p. 153; E. Talbot Donaldson, trans. Beowulf (New York, 1966), p. ix; Ringler, 64; Michael D. Cherniss, Ingeld and Christ: Heroic Concepts and Values in Old English Christian Poetry (The Hague, 1972), pp. 145-149.

⁹The heroic perspective of Hrothgar's attack on avarice is taken up below, pp. 85-87.

¹⁰See Donahue, Potlatch, p. 27; Irving, Reading, p. 152. It should be understood that the elegiac strain in Old English verse represents neither an exclusively Christian nor yet Germanic heroic tradition, but a convergence of both, and perhaps a Celtic current as well. See Stanley B. Greenfield, "The Old English Elegies," in Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature, ed. Eric Gerald Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 142-143; Frederic Norman, "The Early Germanic Background of Old English Verse," Medieval Literature and Civilization: Studies in Memory of G. N. Garmonsay, ed. D. A. Pearsall and R. A. Waldron (London, 1969), pp. 3-27; Irving, "Image and Meaning in the Elegies," Old English Poetry, ed. Creed, pp. 153-154; Rosemary Woolf, "The Wanderer, The Seafarer, and the Genre of Planctus," in Anglo-Saxon Poetry, p. 201; Margeret Schlauch, English Medieval Literature and its Social Foundations (London, 1956), p. 69.

¹¹Irving, Reading, pp. 147-148, regards this as "the chief purpose of Hrothgar's sermon."

¹²Greenfield, A Critical History of Old English Literature (New York, 1965), p. 214, identifies the two fundamental concerns of Old English elegy as "(1) a contrast between past and present conditions, and (2) some awareness of the transitory nature of earthly splendor, joy, and security."

¹³Cf. The Wanderer, 73ff.; The Ruin, passim.

¹⁴See Irving, Reading, p. 236.

¹⁵See for example, Klaeber, pp. xlix-l; S. L. Dragland, "Monster-Man in Beowulf," Neophilologus, LXI (1977), 611-613.

¹⁶See John C. Mc Galiard, "The Poet's Comment in Beowulf," SP, LXXV (1978), 250, "It may be a bit surprising that Grendel should provide occasion for verses that remind us momentarily of Everyman and of the Elegy in a Country Churchyard. But, apart from Scyld in the 'Prologue,' this is the first death which offers the poet a suitable chance for comment; and, knowing his fondness for reflective remarks, we could scarcely expect him to ignore the opportunity." See also Robert B. Burlin, "Gnomic Indirection in Beowulf," in Anglo-Saxon Poetry, p. 46-47, who suggests the elegiac generalization of Grendel's death.

¹⁷Nor is glory reducible to mere personal immortality. The infamous name of Heremod illustrates the distinction between fame and notoriety. Heroic glory represents the survival of what is highest in the species--not of the individual qua individual. There is nothing idiosyncratic about Anglo-Saxon heroism. In this literature, standards, ideals, and the men who embody them are typical of man at his noblest.

¹⁸I cannot agree with Tolkien that there is a distinction between the points of view of the poet and his protagonists in such matters; see Monsters, pp. 26-53, esp. 49-53. For a recent assertion that Beowulf's point of view on such questions is distinguished from that of the poet, see Stanley J. Kahrl, "Feuds in Beowulf: A Tragic Necessity?" MP, 69 (1972), 193. Donahue, in Beowulf and Christian Tradition, argues even more forcefully than does Tolkien for distinguishing the attitudes of the protagonists within the poem from those held by the Christian poet and his audience, who--according to this view--regard the pre-Christian world of their Germanic ancestors from the secure vantage point of their own Christian faith, sympathetic to the heroic society of their forebears, though not themselves restricted to the tragic assumptions of the Germanic heroic ideal. Donahue's conjectures concerning the "Celtic Christianity" of Beowulf and the light he brings to bear on the poem's concern with the principle of natural good and its tolerance for the traditions of pre-Christian, Germanic society are all quite valuable. But while some distinction between the world-view of the protagonists and that of the poet is in order, there is no evidence that the Beowulf poet or his audience made quite the consistent and systematic distinctions between themselves and the pre-Christian world of the poem which Donahue here seems to suggest. With the obvious exception of religious practices specifically designated as heathen, the heroic world of Beowulf is a world by and large shared by the Christian poet and his audience. Indeed, the heroic assumptions and ideals of the Germanic warrior caste remained, if somewhat moderated, still intact and viable throughout the Christian Anglo-Saxon period, the accommodation of Christian and heroic attitudes a matter of literary and historical record. See below, Chapter II, p. 112 and notes 5, 7, 45. See also, Dorothy Whitelock, The Beginnings of English Society (Baltimore, 1952), pp. 29-47; The Audience of Beowulf (Oxford, 1951), pp. 1-30; Peter Hunter Blair, Roman Britain and Early England 55 B.C.--A.D. 871 (New York, 1963), pp. 238-254; Helen Cam, England Before Elizabeth (London, 1950), pp. 57-59; William Witherle Lawrence, Beowulf and Epic Tradition (New York, 1928), pp. 31-70. For the view that the Beowulf poet is essentially depicting the values and institutions of his own society, see Milton McC. Gatch, Loyalties and Traditions: Man and His World in Old English Literature (New York, 1971), pp. 52-60; Lawrence, p. 48; Brodeur, pp. 182-219; Wrenn, pp. 42-43.

¹⁹Donahue, Beowulf and Christian Tradition, 75, "The motive for the generosity of the lord and the loyalty of the warrior is good repute (dom). That survives death." For an abbreviated survey of passages emphasizing the role of heroic glory, see G. V. Smithers, "Destiny and the Heroic Warrior in Beowulf," in Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature in Honor of Herbert Dean Merrit, ed. James L. Rosier (The Hague, 1959), pp. 75-79.

²⁰Widsith, in The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, vol. III, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie (New York, 1936), p. 153.

²¹See Smithers, Destiny and the Heroic Warrior, pp. 70-71. Smithers argues for the ultimately Germanic and tragic nature of fate in Beowulf. But the distinction he draws between "pagan" and "Christian" aspects of the poem is problematical. More apt is Donahue's discussion of "pre-Christian" and "Christian" elements in Beowulf and Christian Tradition. See also Larry D. Benson, "The Pagan Coloring of Beowulf," in Old English Poetry, pp. 193-214: Benson distinguishes between "secular" and "pagan" elements, the latter being limited to "heathen" religious practices such as idol worship, and the former referring to Germanic heroic social values and ideals; Cherniss, Ingeld, pp. 28-29, also argues against using terms such as "pagan" and "heathen" to describe heroic life as represented in Beowulf, suggesting that we limit ourselves to adjectives such as "pre-Christian," "Germanic," "secular," and "heroic."

While it is of course quite true that "secular" or "pre-Christian" Germanic attitudes were indeed originally "pagan" or "heathen," they would no longer be perceived as such by the eight-century Anglo-Saxon heroic poet. Not only would Germanic values like loyalty, courage, vengeance, generosity, and fame be understood as consistent with Anglo-Saxon Christianity, they would be generally recognized as obligatory for the good Christian. See above, note 25; see also Blair, The World of Bede (New York, 1970), p. 113, who, citing an Anglo-Saxon biography of Saint Wilfrid, recounts an anecdote which charmingly demonstrates the fusion of Christian and Germanic attitudes in Anglo-Saxon England.

²²For a discussion of the connection between wyrd and death, see Alan H. Roper, "Boethius and the Three Fates of Beowulf," PQ, 41 (1962), 386-400.

²³This richly connotative phrase is, as we shall see, the nexus at which a number of key themes intersect.

²⁴Donaldson, p. 19; see also the translation of John R. Clark Hall, revised by C. L. Wrenn (London, 1963), p. 74, "had not all seeing God and the courage of the man kept off that fate." For a similar interpretation of the passage, see Mary C. Wilson Tietjen, "God, Fate, and the Hero of Beowulf," JEGP, LXXIV (1975), 163-164; Shippey, p. 40.

²⁵See Tietjen, 164, "What is implied is that a man's fortunes can be reversed if he is unfaege, but cannot be reversed if he is faege." See also Blanche Colton Williams, Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon (New York, 1914), pp. 36-37, "2292-2294a . . . seems to be a distinct Christianizing of the heathen expression found in 572b-573."

²⁶See for example, Klaeber, xlix; Brodeur, p. 218; Marie Padgett Hamilton, "The Religious Principle in Beowulf," PMLA, LXI (1946), 309-331, reprinted in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, pp. 124-129; Donahue, Potlach, pp. 33-34; Charles W. Kennedy, The Earliest English Poetry (New York, 1943), pp. 87-88; M. B. Mc Namee, S. J., "Beowulf--An Allegory of Salvation?" JEGP, LIX (1960), 190-207, reprinted in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, p. 332; Goldsmith, "The Christian Theme of Beowulf," Medium AEvum, XXIX (1960), 86; Fisher, 181; Morton W. Bloomfield, "Patristics and Old English Literature: Notes on Some Poems," CL, XIV (1962), 36-41, reprinted in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, p. 368; Mc Galliard, 248-249.

²⁷For the importance of the Thanksgiving prayer in Beowulf, see Donahue, Beowulf and Christian Tradition; "Beowulf, Ireland, and the Natural Good," Traditio, 7 (1951), 263-277.

²⁸Here the affirmation of divine power has increased force, perhaps because sententia is reinforced by a particularly appropriate figurative elaboration in which the cyclical rhythms of nature themselves imply divine power and order. The perpetual round of the seasons is also alluded to toward the end of the Finnsburg episode (1130ff.) The seasons motif is noted by Mc Galliard, 251.

²⁹Earlier, in somewhat more eschatological terms, the hero assumes essentially the same stance (440-441).

³⁰As Alain Renoir observes, "God's will is little comfort, for while divine will is at best a very unpredictable element, we have emphatically been told earlier in the poem, 'Gaeð a wyrd swa hio scel.'" "Point of View and Design for Terror in Beowulf," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, LXIII (1962), 154-167, reprinted in The Beowulf Poet, pp. 160-161.

³¹For another view of the parallelism of Christian and Germanic concepts of necessity--the interplay of wyrd and providence--see Tietjen, 159-171. See also Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, p. 17; The Beowulf Poet and the Tragic Muse, pp. 134-135; Kaske, p. 274.

³²Greenfield, The Interpretation of Old English Poems (London, 1972), p. 9. Medieval Christianity itself is far from a monolithic dogma. It is a social and historical body of beliefs, and, as such, varies from age to age, and, perhaps even more significantly, from poet to poet within any one given age. See Donald R. Howard, The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World (Princeton, 1966), p. 27, "We will never know the intentions of the medieval poet . . . unless we look at the particular poet, writing a particular poem at a particular moment in history, in a culture whose extraordinary 'integrity' existed nonetheless in diverse, contradictory, particular elements."

³³The best discussion of the date of Beowulf is Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf, who suggests that the poem was composed in the second half of the eighth century. Ritchie Girvan argues for a date in the latter part of the seventh century, Beowulf and the Seventh Century: Language and Context (London, 1971).

³⁴See Cherniss, Ingeld, p. 27, "Anglo-Saxon society appears to have nourished a system of secular heroic values alongside of its Christian values, often without recognizing any essential contradiction between the two."

³⁵See Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, p. 46.

³⁶A. C. Spearing, The Gawain Poet: A Critical Study (Cambridge, 1970), p. 26.

³⁷Rosemary Woolf, The Genre of Planctus, p. 197, "An assessment of the equilibrium . . . between a lament for transience and its Christian solution will be an inevitable part of a critical interpretation, but it cannot provide the foundations for any inference about the poet's personal beliefs . . . A Christian poet may write about the experience of transience with little or no interest in the Christian promise of eternal life."

³⁸A convenient survey of the critical literature generated by the controversy over the nature and extent of the Christian material in Beowulf is to be found in Cherniss, Ingeld, pp. 124-150. Cherniss himself concludes, pp. 149-150, "Germanic heroic ideals of conduct control the action of the poem; Christian piety is incidental to it . . . It is essentially secular, Germanic and heroic, not primarily either Christian or pagan."

³⁹See Ringler, 49-67; Irving, Reading, pp. 22-27, 54, 99-104.

⁴⁰I do not mean to imply that the hero is indifferent to victory. It is just that victory, so often hinging upon a decree of God or fate, is not man's to guarantee. Thus the hero's ultimate goal, one which lies solely within his own powers, is not so much to win as to conduct himself in accordance with the principles which--win or lose--ennoble the world he represents. For a general discussion of the role of the heroic will in Beowulf from a somewhat different point of view from mine, see Irving, Reading, pp. 43-82.

⁴¹For a slightly more Christian understanding of these passages, see Tietjen, 168. Tietjen notes, however, that "although the Christian view that God affords grace and guidance to the efforts of the worthy is evident throughout Beowulf, the kind of 'worth' that merits God's favour is by no means Christian. Beowulf most certainly exemplifies the Christian virtues of mildness and humility, but he is worthy of God's favour because of his great strength and courage. Virtue in the world of Beowulf lies largely in the fulfillment of the heroic ideals of personal prowess and earthly lof."

⁴²See Donaldson, p. xi; for a fuller discussion of the role of the heroic beot, see below, Chapter II, pp. 125-129.

⁴³For a discussion of cowardice and the heroic choice in Maldon, see below, Chapter II, pp. 140-150.

⁴⁴See Irving, Reading, pp. 155, 161.

⁴⁵See Greenfield, Interpretation, for a provocative reconsideration of Unferth's character.

⁴⁶Here we must exercise restraint. The Danes are not represented as cowards or weaklings. Indeed, a number of Hrothgar's followers are said to have challenged Grendel (480-489), and on the eve of Grendel's dam's raid the Scyldings prove warlike enough (1242-1251, 1288-1291). Still, the Danes are not heroic in the way that Beowulf is heroic. There are simply different orders of manhood in the poem. There are cowards, like Beowulf's treacherous companions; there are ordinary warriors like the Danes, some of them capable of real courage and integrity; and there are heroes like Beowulf and Wiglaf, men wholly committed to the heah gesceap of heroic life.

⁴⁷See Klaeber's note to line 901.

⁴⁸See below, pp. 77-80.

⁴⁹See Irving, Reading, pp. 4-5, 149.

⁵⁰For the didacticism of Germanic and Old English verse, see Williams, pp. 36-37; Lawrence, p. 5, 230; Sisam, pp. 13-15, draws attention to the didactic aspects of Beowulf. See also the discussion of the Exeter Book "elegies" in Shippey, pp. 53-79.

⁵¹Stanley B. Greenfield and Richard Everet, "Maxims II: Gnome and Poem," in Anglo-Saxon Poetry, pp. 339-340, 345; Burlin, p. 42; H. Munro Chadwick and Nora K. Chadwick, The Ancient Literatures of Europe, vol. I of The Growth of Literature (Cambridge, 1932), pp. 377-378; Williams, p. 80.

⁵²The descriptive far outnumber the prescriptive gnomes.

⁵³For a fuller list which at some points diverges from my own, see Williams, p. 29.

⁵⁴I can discover in Beowulf no example of what could be termed a Christian hortatory gnome. The closest thing to a Christian prescriptive gnome is the concluding verse of the so-called Christian excursus (186-188). But this is more in the way of consolatio than hortatory gnome.

⁵⁵The phrase is later applied both to Hrothgar and to Onela (863, 2390).

⁵⁶See Irving, Reading, p. 44, "Memorable strength and courage, then, is the announced subject of the poem, and we are presented at the outset with a paradigm of praiseworthy conduct in Scyld, the god cyning. This brief proem that tells of Scyld does what the poem as a whole does: it defines these terms, shows them in action, and perhaps even tests them."

⁵⁷See Schucking and Kaske, passim.

⁵⁸See Donahue, Beowulf and Christian Tradition, for an excellent discussion of this aspect of the poem.

⁵⁹Irving, Reading, p. 105, "This murdering demon . . . paralyzes the function of society by occupying its vital center." See also Cherniss, Ingeld, p. 57.

⁶⁰See also lines 166-177, 272-276, 411-414. Grendel attacks only the hall itself. Apparently he is uninterested in the outlying chambers. See lines 138-143.

⁶¹See also lines 126-134, 147ff., 170ff., 473ff., 932ff.

⁶²With respect to the universal connotations of Beowulf's fight against the monsters, the seminal article is again Tolkien's Monsters; but see also Lawrence, p. 131; Irving, Reading, pp. 83-128; Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, p. 79.

⁶³See Klaeber, li, "In his role as deliverer from the ravages of monsters he might well be likened to ancient heroes like Hercules and Theseus. --With all the heroic attributes the poet has conferred on him, the dominant trait of the hero is his wonderful eagerness to help others." See also Brodeur, pp. 64, 86. This motif of course in no way conflicts with the hero's aspiration for glory.

⁶⁴As Irving notes, Reading, p. 128, the hero's defeat of the monsters signals "the significant reestablishment, at long last, of human community in Heorot."

⁶⁵See lines 1282-1287.

⁶⁶Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, p. 105.

⁶⁷There is a third passage in which Beowulf boasts of slaying giants and monsters, but it is merely a passing reference (417-425).

⁶⁸Kemp Malone, "Beowulf," ES, XXIX (1948), 161-172, reprinted in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, pp. 145-146; Irving, Reading, pp. 69-70.

⁶⁹Malone, Beowulf, p. 146.

⁷⁰See Fisher, 178-179. Fisher's view that "Beowulf . . . has not merely performed an act of deliverance and revenge but also of atonement," must be rejected.

⁷¹This formulation is coined by Donahue, Beowulf and Christian Tradition, 112.

⁷²There is a good discussion of this duality in Irving, Reading, pp. 83-128, esp. 93-94, 110-112; see also Tolkien, Monsters, pp. 30-31; Kathryn Hume, "The Theme and Structure of Beowulf," SP, LXXII (1975), 7.

⁷³See Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, p. 39.

⁷⁴For a list of titles by which Grendel and his dam are designated, see Tolkien, Monsters, pp. 41-44.

⁷⁵There is considerable controversy over the extent to which the monsters represent evil, particularly with respect to Grendel's dam and the dragon. Actually, the monsters take the stage in a descending order of evil: first Grendel, then his dam, and then the dragon. Both Grendel and his dam are descended from Cain and identified with giants, ogres, elves and evil spirits (107ff., 1260ff.). Grendel himself is three times called God's adversary, twice during his mortal combat with Beowulf (786, 811), and again as Beowulf hands Hrothgar the hilt of the sword with which he slew Grendel's dam (1681ff.). Grendel is also said to bear God's wrath (712). He is called, in succession, creature of evil (120), sin-stained man (978), monster stained with evil deeds (1000), fierce evil-doer (2090). Bound for hell, he is associated with demons and devils and tagged with such epithets as hell-demon (163), demoniac foe (707), prisoner of hell (788), spirit of hell (1274). In the midst of his fight with Beowulf, we are told that Grendel wished to escape back into the press of devils (755ff.). After he is killed, it is said that he journeys into the power of fiends (806ff.). And as he plunges to his underwater bier, we are told that hell takes him (851ff.). Grendel is originally goaded into his raids on Heorot by the sounds of revelry and the scop's praise of God's creation; that is to say, he sets himself against God's order as well as human order (86-91). His cannibalism is stressed and vividly portrayed (740ff., 446ff., 1580ff., 2080ff.). His description suggests evil incarnate: his eyes flicker with unwholesome light (726), and his laughter is sheer perversity (730ff.). By far the most evil of the monsters, Grendel is a thoroughly sinister and malignant creature.

Grendel's dam shares her son's genealogy and nature, but not his most sinister attributes. Although she is variously termed, wandering slaughter-spirit (1331), mighty evil-doer (1339), accursed monster of the deep (1518), monstrous hag (2120), she is never referred to as God's enemy or a hell-fiend. Although she bears the trappings of the monster, terrible claws and all (1502), she lacks Grendel's aura of supernatural malevolence. Although her lineage and environment invest her with an air of dread, she herself is oddly devoid of the manifest aspects of evil. There are hints and allusions, but no explicit portrayals of her cannibalism (1276, 1332ff.). She attacks Heorot not out of perverse enmity against man and God, but to avenge her son (1276-1280, 1333, 1339, 1547, 2120), a motive which gains a sympathetic nod--or something very close to it--from the poet (1305ff.).

At the other end of the scale from Grendel is the dragon whose connection with evil is tenuous at best. To be sure, the dragon is avaricious, wrathful, malicious, and hostile (2270-2277). But such traits fall more under the category of natural than of moral phenomena. Cupiditas, wrath, and hostility are, so to speak, in the nature of the beast. Moreover, as in the case of Grendel's dam, the dragon's raid is motivated not by depravity, but by a desire for revenge (2302-2306). Dangerous, destructive, implacable: the dragon is, if roused, a terrible enemy to man. But in Beowulf at least, he is not God's adversary.

In any case, however one views the monsters, the question of evil is not in the end as critical as we have been led to believe. To whatever degree the monsters are or are not evil, they are, neverthe-

less, without exception, inimical to mankind. The essential unity of the poem, to put the matter baldly, does not hinge upon the identification of the monsters with evil; it is in fact wholly independent of the moral status of Beowulf's opponents. The essential confrontation in Beowulf is between man and necessity, not between good and bad. It is only to the extent that the two patterns of opposition overlap that Beowulf may be said to be man's champion (and God's) against the forces of evil.

Among those who argue that the monsters represent undifferentiated evil are Tolkien, Monsters, p. 21; Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, pp. 97-113; Goldsmith, Mode, pp. 97-145; Alvin Lee, The Guest Hall of Eden: Four Essays on the Design of Old English Poetry (New Haven, 1972), pp. 214-220.

Among those who argue that the monsters must be differentiated in this respect, see especially Bruce Mitchell, "Until the Dragon Comes," Neophilologus, 47 (1963), 131, "The dragon is a different kind of monster from Grendel and his dam. Very simply, it is the instrument of Beowulf's death." See also T. M. Gang, "Approaches to Beowulf," RES, n.s. iii (1952), 1-12, esp. 6-9; Irving, Reading, pp. 113-114, 214-216; Donahue, Potlach, p. 29; H. L. Rogers, "Beowulf's Three Great Fights," RES, VI (1955), 339-355, reprinted in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, pp. 247, 251; Lawrence, p. 208; Brodeur, pp. 126-127, 217-218; John Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King," Medium Aevum, XXXIV (1965), 89-91.

⁷⁶See also 161-163, 710-711.

⁷⁷See Wright, pp. 257-261; Girvan, p. 58; Irving, Reading, pp. 40, 86; Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, p. 104.

⁷⁸See also lines 1258ff.

⁷⁹The Cain motif--or fratricide theme--is examined by Goldsmith, Christian Perspective, p. 378; Christian Theme, 87; Mode and Meaning, p. 112; Donahue, Beowulf and Christian Tradition, 97-98, 112; Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of Beowulf," University of Toronto Quarterly, 37 (1967), 1-17, reprinted in Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation; Backgrounds and Sources; Criticism, ed. Joseph F. Tuso (New York, 1975), p. 167. See also Dragland, 606-617; but Dragland's contention that the poet associates Beowulf himself with the monsters is wholly unacceptable.

⁸⁰See also lines 1164-1168.

⁸¹See also lines 1181ff. But cf. Sisam, pp. 33-39.

⁸²See also lines 2611-2625.

⁸³See for example, Lawrence, p. 55; Whitelock, Beginnings, pp. 37-38.

⁸⁴For a wide-ranging discussion of the feud motif, see Lawrence, pp. 71-128.

⁸⁵Klaeber, p. 231; Lawrence, p. 114; Bonjour, The Digressions in Beowulf (London, 1950); Irving, Reading, p. 137.

⁸⁶Irving, Reading, p. 189, "Everywhere in the poem, we can perceive the central tragic fact about the society that heroic poetry reflects: that in its very strength and beauty, in its cohesive loyal ties and allegiances, lie inevitable forces of destruction and anarchy." See also pp. 178-179. See also Kahrl, Feuds, 189-198; also Hume, 7ff., who emphasizes the tragic ironies attendant upon heroic warfare and who attempts to argue that the basic theme of the poem is "threats to social order."

⁸⁷As Tacitus early observed in Germania, credit for a retainer's deeds accrues to his lord in the Germanic heroic tradition.

⁸⁸See note 87, above.

⁸⁹As exemplar of the heroic civitas against the forces of chaos, the hero does not stand alone; he is everywhere supported by the elaborate rituals and ceremonies of the Anglo-Saxon aristocratic society he represents, a world whose manners and customs--from the prescribed amenities of the mead-hall to the sacramental exchange of treasure--affirm the grandeur and dignity of human civilization. The virtues of the civitas are reflected as well in the ornate rhetoric and elevated style of the poem itself. While it has long been recognized that the traditional diction of Beowulf dovetails with its heroic outlook--one has only to compare Beowulf with a poem like Andreas, a work to which the inherited heroic formulas of Anglo-Saxon oral poetry are not intrinsically suited, to grasp what an advantage it is for a poet to work with a poetic language forged expressly for the purpose of telling a tale such as his is--it has not been sufficiently emphasized that its stylistic strategies are as well suited to its heroic vision as its conventional "word-hoard." Beowulf is composed in the traditional Anglo-Saxon "high style." At virtually every point, it exhibits the nobility of tone and elevation of narrative manner everywhere associated with aristocratic, courtly poetry. The elaborate rhetoric, the specialized poetic diction, the processional movement of the verse, the figures and formulas of repetition and retardation, the dense texture, the web of variation, apposition, enumeration, parallelism, and periphrasis--all these converge in a remarkably solemn and ceremonious verse form which, although the product of long-standing conventions of Anglo-Saxon versification, in Beowulf at least serves as an expression of the civitas--of man's heroic struggle to impose human meaning, order, and value on the given world.

For a general discussion of Anglo-Saxon poetic style, see Greenfield, Interpretation; E. V. Gordon, ed. The Battle of Maldon (London, 1937), pp. 23-30. For the style and diction of Beowulf, see Klaeber, pp. lv-lxviii, esp. lv, lxi, lxiii, lxvi; Eric Gerald Stanley, "Beowulf," in Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature, ed. Eric Gerald Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 104-141; Shippey, p. 114; Brodeur, pp. 1-70. For Beowulf's "unique grandeur of diction and style," see Brodeur, pp. 5, 16, 60; see also Lawrence, pp. 4-5. For the suitability of diction to theme in Beowulf, see G. Storms, "The Subjectivity of the Style of Beowulf," in Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur, pp. 171-186, reprinted in Old English Literature: Twenty-two Analytical Essays, ed. Martin Stevens

and Jerome Mandel (Lincoln, 1968), pp. 301-303; Stanley, pp. 137-138; for a comparison on this account between Beowulf and Andreas, see Stanley, 137-138; Tolkien, Monsters, p. 52. Finally, see Tolkien's passing remark, Monsters, p. 37, "Beowulf is indeed the most successful Old English poem because in it the elements, language, metre, theme, structure, are all most nearly in harmony."

⁹⁰What Donahue, Beowulf and Christian Tradition, p. 112, felicitously refers to as "the wasteland within the civitas."

⁹¹See also lines 2208-2211, 2910-2913.

⁹²For the suppression of Beowulf's wars against human opponents, see Malone, pp. 143-144, 148; Goldsmith, Christian Perspective, pp. 375-376; Irving, Reading, p. 190; Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, pp. 67-82; Whitelock, Audience, pp. 96-98.

⁹³For a variety of views of the fusion of Christian and Germanic values in Beowulf, see Schucking, passim; Kaske, passim; Wrenn, p. 329; Lawrence, pp. 232-233; Klaeber, cxviii; Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, pp. 55-58; Whitelock, The Beginnings, pp. 29-47; Brodeur, pp. 183-185; McC. Gatch, p. 25.

⁹⁴For the role of the Anglo-Saxon church in moderating the extent and consequences of the blood-feud, see Whitelock, The Beginnings, pp. 42-43; Audience, p. 13; G. O. Sayles, The Medieval Foundations of England (London, 1948), p. 55; McC. Gatch, p. 128. See also Lawrence, p. 284, who cites the example of "King Sigebert of East Anglia who would not bear a sword in battle, lest he should shed blood." See too, Juliana, lines 483-490, where the devil confesses that it is he who provokes warriors to drunken, bloody wars. But cf. F. H. Whitman, "The Kingly Nature of Beowulf," Neophilologus, LXI (1977), 278; Whitman cautions, "There is no good reason to believe that the moderating qualities which can be seen in Beowulf are attributable to the influence of Christianity. The principle of moderation was one which found appeal in many traditions." See also Girvan, p. 49, who, while acknowledging "that the new conditions were largely due to Christianity," nevertheless observes, "This ameliorating influence is clearly earlier than the formal acceptance of Christianity."

For the continuing role of vengeance and feud throughout the Christian Anglo-Saxon period, see Whitelock, The Beginnings, pp. 29-47; Audience, pp. 13-19: "Killing for the sake of vengeance was not felt to be incompatible with Christian ethics at any period in Anglo-Saxon times," p. 13.

⁹⁵The seminal article is Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," Essays and Studies, ed. G. Bullough, n.s. VI (1953), 1-18, reprinted in The Tolkien Reader (New York, 1966), pp. 2-24. Tolkien, pp. 19-24, regards the hero's decision to fight the dragon alone as a "chivalric excess" and an abdication of the responsibilities which are attached to leadership. The question which Tolkien raises by way of Beowulf and Byrhtnoth is that of the final balance between the (literary) exigencies of heroism and the (social) obligations of leader-

ship. For other opinions which fault Beowulf for his decision to meet the dragon in single combat, see Goldsmith, Mode and Meaning, pp. 224-239; Christian Perspective, *passim*, esp. 376-377; Christian Theme, 84; Leyerle, Interlace, pp. 164-165; Hero and King, 89-102. For the opinion that Beowulf is blameless in his sortie against the dragon, see Kaske, pp. 299-302; Mc Galliard, 266-269; Donahue, Potlach, pp. 29-30; see also Fisher, 181; but Fisher's view of Beowulf's death as "an imitatio Christi . . . a blameless sacrifice," is not convincing.

⁹⁶See Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, p. 24; Goldsmith, Mode and Meaning, p. 224; Leyerle, Hero and King, p. 98.

⁹⁷Cf. Hygelac's attempt to dissuade Beowulf from undertaking his mission against Grendel (1995ff.). Both passages serve to enhance Beowulf's heroic resolve. Moreover, the tone of Wiglaf's speech is one of regret, not one of censure. The griefstricken retainer is not remarking the putative impropriety of the hero's action, he is marking its fatal consequences. Shippey, pp. 28-29, "Old English heroes are not presented to be judged. They inculcate rather an uneasy awareness that good intentions can lead to evil results, that the same mental quality . . . may bring success or misery, depending on circumstance." See also Mc Galliard, 269. Goldsmith, Mode and Meaning, p. 224, speaks of "Wiglaf's censure of Beowulf's decision to go after the dragon." Greenfield, Interpretation, p. 158, takes issue with this view.

⁹⁸Indeed, Beowulf's single-handed conquest of Grendel and his dam prepares the audience to approve without reservation the hero's claim that the dragon-fight is solely his responsibility (2532ff.). Beowulf's dependence on Wiglaf indicates not that Beowulf was wrong, but that loyalty occupies the place of honor in Anglo-Saxon heroic life (2706ff.).

⁹⁹Mc Galliard, 268, "To subdue the dragon Beowulf did not lead an army (werod), but he did take with him eleven picked men from his comitatus. Their proper role was to assist their chief if, in the single combat, he found himself in difficulty. Thus his men attempt to assist Beowulf against Grendel in the struggle in Heorot (794-7). This is what his present companions were expected to do."

¹⁰⁰See Kaske, p. 308; Donaldson, xi; Tolkien, Monsters, pp. 23, 31, 39; Smithers, 78-79; Brodeur, p. 105; Greenfield, Interpretation, p. 158; Fisher, 179. In this respect (and in this respect alone) I find unacceptable Mc Galliard's conclusion, 269, that "it would not seem unreasonable to infer that, if the other ten men had been, say, half as valiant as Wiglaf, the victory might have been won without serious injury to the leader." See also Robert B. Burlin, "Inner Weather and Interlace: A Note on the Semantic Value of Structure in Beowulf," in Old English Studies in Honor of John C. Pope, pp. 81-89, esp. pp. 84, 88.

¹⁰¹Nor does it cause the destruction of the Geats. Those who fault Beowulf on this account appear to be operating under the unhappy illusion that it lies within the hero's power to choose to live forever. It is, however, the basic premise of this poem that men do not live forever; and Beowulf, by the time of the dragon-fight, had already lived very long.

¹⁰²For the role of loyalty in Anglo-Saxon society, see below, Chapter II, pp. 129-140, especially note 45.

¹⁰³See Brodeur, pp. 71-87. While in some respects excessive, Brodeur's emphasis on the role of Hygelac has helped to focus attention on the importance of the bonds between Beowulf and his uncle.

¹⁰⁴Brodeur, p. 78, "The hero himself is first mentioned not by name, but as Higelaces þegn; this and maeg Higelaces are the most frequent substitutions for the name of Beowulf in Part I."

¹⁰⁵Brodeur, p. 85.

¹⁰⁶See Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, pp. 58-59.

¹⁰⁷See Brodeur, p. 84.

¹⁰⁸Is there a comparison as well with Onela? See Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, p. 74.

¹⁰⁹See Irving's interesting observation, Reading, p. 163: "What kills the dragon? Neither one of the two heroes as individuals, but the relationship between these two sibaedelingas almost as a hypo-stated entity in itself, the reality of heroic comradeship, affectionate loyalty, and self-sacrificing courage."

¹¹⁰McC. Gatch, p. 113.

¹¹¹For a general account of the role of treasure in Anglo-Saxon heroic relationships, see Donahue, Potlach, passim, esp. pp. 25-26; see also Irving, Reading, p. 208; Donaldson, pp. ix-x; Michael Cherniss, "The Progress of the Hoard in Beowulf," Phil. Q., 47 (1968), 473-486; Ingeld, pp. 79-101; Leyerle, Interlace, p. 168-169; Whitelock, Beginnings, pp. 29-37.

¹¹²In Germania, Tacitus notes that the deeds and gains of the retainer accrue to the lord. In Beowulf, see lines 2985ff., where Eofer delivers Ongentheow's armor to Hygelac, and lines 2611ff., where Weohstan proffers Eanmund's armor to Onela. See also line 1968, where Hygelac is called bonan Ongenþeowes, and lines 2391ff., where Beowulf is credited with the slaying of Onela. It is no doubt in this context that we are to understand Wiglaf's crediting Beowulf with the single-handed slaying of the dragon (2874ff.).

¹¹³See also lines 1192-1231 for an account of the torque with which Wealtheow both rewards Beowulf for his heroism and induces him to be attentive to the interests of her sons.

¹¹⁴See Exeter Book, Maxims I, ASPR, vol III:
 Gearo sceal gudbord, gar on sceaft,
 ecg on sweord ond ord spere,
 hyge heardum men. Heal sceal cenum,
 ond a þaes heanan hyge hord unginnot
 (201-204)

¹¹⁵For the difference between treasure and wealth as exchange value, see Cherniss, Ingeld, pp. 79-101.

¹¹⁶Cherniss, Ingeld, p. 81, observes that treasures "give moral value to their possessors . . . They are, in fact, the material manifestations or representations of the proven or inherent worthiness of whoever possesses them. We may define the function of treasure as that of a tangible, material symbol of the intangible, abstract qualities of virtue in a warrior." Cherniss elaborates this position, pp. 79-101. His concluding argument that the Geats who survive Beowulf are unworthy of wielding the hoard is, however, far from convincing.

¹¹⁷For the argument that treasure ultimately represents "man's pride and cupidity," see Goldsmith, Mode and Meaning, pp. 94-96; Christian Theme, passim. For a similar and equally unconvincing argument, see Thomas A. Carnecelli, "The Function of the Messenger in Beowulf," SP, LXXII (1975), 246-247.

¹¹⁸Stanley B. Greenfield, "'Gifstol' and Goldhoard in Beowulf," in Old English Studies in Honor of John C. Pope, p. 113, "Hrothgar's sermon is not directed against gold as such, only against an unremitting accumulation of it."

¹¹⁹See Goldsmith, Mode and Meaning, pp. 92-96, for the view that treasure is "intrinsically worthless." See also Rogers, pp. 235, 252-253, who argues that "treasure is positively evil."

¹²⁰But cf. Goldsmith, Mode and Meaning, p. 230; Christian Theme, 95.

¹²¹Irving, Reading, p. 209, "The dragon is a little like a mock king . . . an extremely stingy king . . . He does not even use the treasure itself but exerts every effort to keep it from being put to any use whatever. In the poem's terms, Heorot is where treasure is used to the fullest extent; the dragon's mound is where it must be wholly unused."

¹²²In this respect, it is worth noting the degree to which treasure in Beowulf characteristically takes the form of objects for heroic use, especially weapons. See Irving, Reading, pp. 212-213, who observes, "We should remind ourselves that this treasure consists largely of functional objects . . . These are things to be carried, worn, drunk out of, fought with, eaten from, as well as exchanged." See also Cherniss, "The Progress of the Hoard in Beowulf."

¹²³Tolkien, Monsters, pp. 34-35; Tolkien is challenged by Gang and Sisam, and defended by Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, pp. 98-113.

¹²⁴See Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, p. 123; see also Greenfield, A Critical History, pp. 86-87.

¹²⁵Beowulf and Christian Tradition.

¹²⁶One might draw a distinction between structure and infra-structure: with regard to the latter, the relation of beginning to end is as

much one of continuity as of contrast. For the role of tragic anticipation and elegiac generalization in the Danish portions of the poem, see above, pp. 18-19.

¹²⁷Greenfield, A Critical History, pp. 88-89, observes that the large-scale contrasts between the opening and concluding sections of Beowulf are modified by elegiac elements in Part I and heroic elements in Part II. For another view of structural contrast and structural continuity, see Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, pp. 43-50. The point is, finally, that the heroic tension between human affirmation and necessity is not solely a product of the opposition between rise and fall, but is inherent and definitive throughout the whole of the action.

¹²⁸See Sisam, pp. 23-24; Rogers, p. 237. See also Mc Galliard, 265, who shrewdly observes, "I suspect that some readers have automatically transferred the weakness of Hrothgar's old age to their image of the aged Beowulf."

¹²⁹Lawrence, p. 226, "The whole climax of the poem is designed to celebrate the two great ideals of Germanic warrior-life: the conduct of the perfect retainer and the conduct of the perfect king."

¹³⁰Actually there are three funerals in Beowulf--Scyld's, Hnaef's, and Beowulf's. The funeral is, in fact, one of the underlying unifying figures of the poem.

¹³¹Monsters, p. 38.

CHAPTER II

MALDON

Beowulf is one of the earliest extant Anglo-Saxon poems, and Maldon is one of the latest. Beowulf, treating subject matter of the sixth century¹ was, to the best of our knowledge, composed in the first half of the eighth century² while Maldon, commemorating Ealdorman Byrhtnoth's ill-fated defense of Essex against Viking raiders on August 10 or 11, 991,³ was probably composed somewhere toward the middle of the eleventh century.⁴ What is important to note is that in Maldon, on the very eve of the Norman invasion, traditional Germanic heroism still served as an inspiration and model to the Anglo-Saxon English, at least as an exemplary ideal.⁵ When we make the necessary allowances for the differences between the political and military organization of eighth and eleventh century England--the difference, say, between the comitatus and the fyrð or heorthwerod--⁶the heroic life celebrated by Maldon is remarkably similar to that celebrated by Beowulf.⁷ The poetry of Maldon may be less stately and ornate than that of Beowulf, and its stance may be more "realistic," but it is unequivocally Germanic heroic poetry.⁸

Where Maldon perhaps differs most significantly from Beowulf is in its conception of tragic necessity. At the very core of the medieval view of what is tragic in the human condition is the concept of mutability. This is as true for the poets of Morte Arthure and Gawain and the Green Knight as it is for the Beowulf poet. It is equally true of Old English alliterative poems such as the Wanderer and the Seafarer, Christian poems of great elegiac force which demonstrate man's earthly limitations without fully invoking his heroic powers. In this sense, Maldon falls somewhat outside the mainstream of extant medieval heroic

poetry. The sweep of mutability is wholly absent from Maldon. The focus (like that in the heroic fragments Finnsburh and Waldhere) is narrower, sharper, and clearer--a single battle; a tragic necessity of one dimension. In the heroic poem, the hero is commensurate with his fate: in Maldon, in the face of certain defeat and death, what is required is indomitable courage and unwavering loyalty. Facing neither Fortune's wheel, nor the post-lapsarian universe of Gawain and the Green Knight, nor the all-encompassing darkness of Beowulf, the fighters at Maldon are required neither to reject vainglory, nor to cope with human imperfection, nor to display the virtues of the civitas. Within the almost classical confines of their own world, Byrhtnoth and his loyal retainers are exemplary, providing a model of heroic conduct at the Götterdämmerung of Anglo-Saxon England.⁹

Although the Maldon poet draws directly on history for his subject, he does not subordinate his poem to the event. It might prove useful in this regard to begin with a brief comparison between Maldon and Brunanburh,¹⁰ a Chronicle poem commemorating an important English victory over a combined force of Scots and Vikings in 937.¹¹ Both are battle poems; both commemorate actual encounters; both invoke the values of the Germanic heroic code. But they are composed in different modes: Maldon is a heroic poem, while Brunanburh is composed in the panegyric mode.¹² This is critical; for it is ultimately mode which determines the form and meaning of each. Thus in Maldon heroic principles stand as a desperate demonstration of the dignity of man; but in Brunanburh heroic values are subordinated to the celebration of the victory of which they are the instrument and the decoration.¹³ Brunanburh is an excellent poem and contains many fine things. What it lacks is the tragic universality and power of heroic poetry.

The mode of each poem not only shapes its values, but largely controls its narrative techniques. In Brunanburh the perspective is, appropriately enough, panoramic--the long, broad overview.¹⁴ The historical outcome of the battle remains the unwavering focus of the poem. There is not one account of an individual encounter, not one speech, not a single description of a specific action of any kind. It is not the exemplary hero or heroic act which inspires the Brunanburh poet; it is the triumphant glory of the English success, and individual heroic actions are absorbed in the sound and fury of a goal which transcends them.

It is immediately apparent that the poetic techniques and conventions of Maldon are quite different from those of Brunanburh. Where Brunanburh is panoramic, Maldon moves in close,¹⁵ intent upon particular heroes and deeds. The battle of Maldon unfolds as a series of individual encounters, brief lightning flashes which momentarily illumine the battlefield. The Maldon poet is primarily concerned with persons rather than history and, in contrast with the Brunanburh poet who lists only kings and earls, he names some two dozen of Byrhtnoth's retainers,¹⁶ including a ceorl, a hostage, and the cowardly sons of Odda who, rather than Byrhtnoth, are blamed for the English defeat. Perhaps most striking of all is the difference between the formal modes of the two poems. Brunanburh is wholly and unvaryingly narrative in form. Maldon, on the other hand, is, like virtually all heroic poetry, highly dramatic in form.¹⁷ The connection between dramatic form and heroic poetry is their common concern with human beings on a human scale.¹⁸ Dramatic utterance is natural to heroes who must demonstrate their prowess without recourse to anything above or beyond their own powers.¹⁹ It subordinates the hero

to nothing and leaves him free to define himself in his own terms, guaranteeing him the independence so necessary to his heroic affirmation of human worth.

When the Maldon poet does turn to the "long view," he does so for reasons wholly different from those of the Brunanburh poet, and with wholly different effects. For example, both poets introduce the conventional "beasts of battle" figure²⁰ to convey a sense of large-scale carnage. The Brunanburh poet inserts the figure after the battle has concluded, at the close of his poem, in order to reinforce the impression he has created of the massiveness of the conflict and the extent of the havoc inflicted upon the enemy:

Letan him behindan hraew bryttian
 saluwigþadan, þone sweartan hraefn,
 hyrnednebban, and þane hasewanþadan,
 earn aeftan hwit, aeses brucan,
 graedigne guþhafoc and þaet graege deor,
 wulf on wealde. Ne wearð wael I mare
 on þis eiglande aefre gieta
 folces gefylled beforan þissum
 sweordes ecgum.

(60-68)

The figure is a rhetorical flourish emphasizing the scale of the war and the completeness and historical import of the English victory.²¹ The Maldon poet, on the other hand, invokes the figure early in the poem, immediately preceding the battle, where it creates a rare and powerful moment of generalization, investing the imminent carnage with overtones of universal human tragedy:²²

þa waes feohte neh,
 tir aet getohte. Waes seo tid cumen
 þaet þaer faege men feallan sceoldan.
 þaer wearð hream ahafen, hremmas wundon,
 earn aeses georn; waes on eorþan crym.

(103-107)

Occurrences of the "long view" are relatively rare in Maldon, but

each instance of intermittent generalization strikes just this universal note.²³ Immediately after the "beasts of battle" passage, the battle itself commences in language resonant with intimations of mortality:

Hi leton þa of folman feolhearde speru,
gegrundene garas fleogan;
bogan waeron bysige, bord ord onfeng.
Biter waes se beaduraes, beornas feollon
on gewaefere hand, hyssas lagon.
(108-112)

And some few lines later:

hogodon georne
hwa þaer mid orde aer est mihte
on faegean men feorh gewinnan,
wigan mid waepnum; wael feol on eorðan.
(123-126)

After Byrhtnoth's death and the flight of the cowards has determined the fate of the remaining English fighting force, the fall of Offa is framed by rhetoric which again underscores the tragic universality of the action.

The passage opens thus:

Baerst bordes laerig. and seo byrne sang
gryreleoda sum.
(284-285)

and concludes thus:

He laeg ðegenlich ðeodne gehende.
þa wearð borda gebraec. Brimmen wodon,
guðe gegremode; gar oft þurhwod
faeges feorhhus.
(294-297)

The lengthening of perspective is not the only rhetorical means through which the narrative is shadowed by necessity. There are, for such a short work, a surprising number of tragic adumbrations which foreshadow the denouement of the poem. At the very outset of the action there occurs the first of four anticipations which, well spaced throughout the poem, are constructed on a single þa hwile pattern:²⁴

He haefde god geþanc
 þa hwile þe he mid handum healdan mihte
 bord and bradswurd.

(13-15)

When the tide goes out, permitting the Vikings a hazardous access to the mainland, this somberly prophetic "as long as" construction is reintroduced as Byrhtnoth orders three staunch fighters to defend the causeway:

þa noldon aet þam forða fleam gewyrcean,
 ac hi faestlice wið ða fynd weredon,
 þa hwile þe hi waepna wealdan mosten.

(81-83)

It again recurs after Byrhtnoth's fall and the retreat of the cowards, as Offa exhorts his companions:

Us is eallum þearfe
 þaet ure aeghwylc oþerne bylde
 wigan to wige, þa hwile þe he waepen maeg
 habban and healdan.

(233-236)

The final use of the device appears in the portrayal of Aescferth, the Northumbrian hostage:

He ne wandode na aet þam wigplegan,
 ac he fysde forð flan genehe;
 hwilton he on bord sceat, hwilon beorn taesde,
 aefre embe stunde he sealde sume wunde,
 þa hwile ðe he waepna wealdan moste.

(268-272)

We are not unprepared or unmoved when the forboding in these adumbrations is explicitly fulfilled by Byrhtnoth's death which is signalled by his inability to continue wielding his sword:²⁵

Feoll þa to foldan fealohilte swurd;
 ne mihte he gehealdan hearne mece,
 waepnes wealdan.

(166-168)

There are several further instances of tragic anticipation in Maldon which, although less direct than those just cited, serve a similar function. The phrase to fela which occurs in the

controversial passage depicting Byrhtnoth's decision to allow an uncontested Viking crossing is of this nature:

Þa se eorl ongan for his ofermode
 alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode.
 (89-90)

Rather than implying a "severe criticism" of Byrhtnoth's action,²⁶ to fela serves as a rueful anticipation of the battle's outcome, its tone elegiac and retrospective rather than critical or judgmental.²⁷ A variation of this very construction occurs in the passage depicting Byrhtnoth's death wound where to forð (like to fela) signals eventual death and defeat:

Forlet þa drenga sum daroð of handa
 fleogan of folman, þaet se to forð gewat
 þurh ðone aefelan AEFelredes þegen.
 (149-151)

Clark detects an additional instance of tragic adumbration in the opening lines of the poem:

Het þa hyssa hwaene hors forlaetan,
 feor afysan, and forð gangan,
 hicgan to handum and to hige godum.
 Þa þaet Offan maeg aereft onfunde,
 þaet the eaorl nolde yrhðo geþolian,
 he let him þa of handon leofne fleogan
 hafoc wið þaes holtes, and to þaere hilde stop.
 (2-8)

According to Clark, "a sense of impending crisis attends Byrhtnoth's exhortation and darkens into a foreboding of disaster. The horse and hawk poignantly recall the joys of the aristocratic life and summon up the prospect of death in battle--or even of disgrace in flight."²⁸ This is an attractive reading, but one which does not easily lend itself to verification. Nevertheless, the implicit relationship between the hawk and horse and the beasts of battle does draw a clear parallel between the rewards and risks of the heroic life: "As the horse is

driven off and the hawk released, the benefits and joys of the heroic world are behind and the corresponding obligations are at hand. Birds of prey and carnage, the young man's prized hawk, the hremmas and earn aeses georn of 106-107 precisely balance the two poles of the aristocratic experience."²⁹ The point is (if I might be permitted a brief digression) that the joys and trappings of the heroic existence are earned or they are nothing. Unless purchased at the price of fidelity to the most exacting heroic obligations, horse and hawk are not tokens of nobility, but empty vainglories, or worse--as in Maldon, badges of infamy and deceit. This lesson in heroic "heraldry" is implicit in the poet's description of Godric's treachery:

Godric fram guðe, and þone godan forlet
þe him maenigne oft near gesealde;
he gehleop þone eoh þe ahte his hlaford,
on þam geraedum þe hit riht ne waes.
(187-190)

Cowardice and betrayal here make of the horse--normally an emblem of the heroic life and its reciprocal obligations--an instrument and symbol of ignominy. The lesson is pointed by Offa's condemnation of the cowards:

"Wende þaes formoni man, þa he on meare rad,
on wlanca þam wicge, þaet waere hit ure hlaford:
forþan weard her on felda folc towaemed,
scyldburch tobrocen."
(239-242)

In the heroic poem, horse and hawk, sword and armor, treasure, feast and finery, all reflect the nobility and accomplishments of the life they betoken; and it is as palpable signs of heroic will and heroic deeds, pledges of a continuing commitment to the most strenuous heroic obligations, that the "trappings" of heroic existence come to occupy a special place of honor in the Germanic heroic poem.

In any case, what is essential to note at this point is that despite

its comparative brevity, Maldon is touched throughout with tragic anticipations of its conclusion. The battle is hopeless only at the end; yet from the beginning the poem is shadowed by necessity, by defeat and death. And it is against this darkness that the heroes measure themselves and the value of the heroic life which they represent.

The tension between heroism and necessity not only informs the rhetorical and thematic patterns of Maldon, but determines its focus and structural strategies as well, accounting for the rather startling fact that it is not Byrhtnoth himself but his heorthwerod who occupy the central place in the poem. Byrhtnoth is unquestionably heroic; from the beginning he establishes the nobility of the heroic life which he embodies and represents. Bold, resolute, and generous, he risks all and deserves all from those who follow him. But Byrhtnoth, although he possesses the essential virtues and attributes of the hero, does not act under wholly heroic circumstances. So long as he holds the field, the outcome of the battle is uncertain:

"god ana wat
hwa þaere waelstowe wealdon mote."
(93-94)

It is only after his fall and the cowardly retreat of a significant number of his troops that defeat is certain; as Offa explains:

"Us Godric haefð,
earh Oddan bearn, ealle beswicene.
Wende þaes formoni man, þa he on meare rad,
on wlancan þam wicge, þaet waere hit ure hlaford;
forþan wearð her of felda folc towæmed,
scyldburch tobrocen. Abreode his angin,
þaet he her swa manigne man aflymde!"
(237-243)

Unlike his faithful heorthgeneatas who, in the end, face certain death and defeat, Byrhtnoth fights not only for heroic glory, but for home, king, God and victory:

". . . her stynt unforcuð eorl mid his werode,
 þe wile gealgan eþel þysne,
 AEþelredes eard, ealdres mines,
 folc and foldan.

(51-54)

To Byrhtnoth alone--an important and seemingly overlooked fact--is ascribed an authentic Christian temperament. When at the moment of his death Byrhtnoth commends himself to God, there is at least a hint of transcendence of the tragic conditions of the heroic life:

"Gefancie þe ðeodne waldend,
 ealra þaera wynna þe ic on worulde gebad.
 Nu ic ah, milde metod, maestre þearfe
 þaet þu minum gaste godes geunne,
 þaet min sawul to ðe siðian mote
 on þin geweald, þeoden engla,
 mid friþe ferian. Ic eom frymði to þe
 þaet hi helsceaðan hynan ne moton."

(173-180)

"No moment of human existence," writes Schücking, "characterizes Christian and non-Christian attitudes so unequivocally as that of death."³⁰ When Byrhtnoth dies with a prayer on his lips, it not only suggests a commendatory view of him and his deeds,³¹ it further implies that here at least the tension between heroism and necessity is resolved in a faith which supersedes the ultimate earthly realities of death and defeat. For the heorthwerod, the end is not heaven, but death. Unlike Byrhtnoth, his loyal companions--at least after their chief's death and the flight of the cowards--do not hope for victory. These men stand their ground, fight, and die solely to fulfill their commitments and preserve their honor. In sharp contrast with Byrhtnoth, as the heorthgeneatas go forward to their fate they remain within the strict confines of the Germanic heroic world, their loyalty, valor, and fortitude a pure and unambiguous expression of human heroism in the face of necessity.³²

The heroic focus of Maldon accounts for its narrative structure.

For the first half of the poem, the action unfolds according to what we might call a normal linear or "causal" logic. There is a strict sequence of events, each growing out of the one previous to it and leading logically to the one following. The poem as we have it begins with Byrhtnoth preparing his troops and then alighting among his personal bodyguard (1-24). Then follows his exchange with the Viking messenger wherein, by refusing to pay tribute, he sets the stage for inevitable combat between the English forces and the invading host (25-61). While the tide prevents a Viking landing, Byrhtnoth again rallies his forces and, when the tide goes out, he orders Wulfstan and two companions to hold the causeway against the Norsemen; this they successfully accomplish (62-83). The Vikings then ask permission to land their forces; Byrhtnoth grants their request, precipitating the battle in which, after fighting heroically, he is finally cut down by the invading shipmen (84-184). Immediately after his fall, the cowards flee (185-201) and, in a brief generalized passage, the loyal hearth-companions resolve to fight to the finish (202-208). At this point, for all intents and purposes, the narrative as developmental sequence comes abruptly to a close. The remainder of the poem is basically confined to the variation of a single heroic pattern wherein a succession of heroic retainers, each facing certain death, declares and fulfills his heroic intention. In short, once the flight of the cowards has set the stage for an inevitable and direct confrontation with necessity, the narrative strategy dramatically shifts from horizontal to vertical, from plot to theme, from progressive unfolding of events to a ritualistic repetition of one, single great heroic action.³³ For the remainder of the poem, one after another, from AElfric to Godric (not the Godric who fled from the battle), individual heroes move to the center of the stage,

perform their beots in language so conventional as to render them almost interchangeable,³⁴ and then disappear again into the general tumult of the battle. Fully forty percent of Maldon, and that at or toward the close, is reserved for variations on one heroic theme: loyalty and courage unto death. In such a compressed and tightly constructed poem as is Maldon,³⁵ reiteration of this magnitude is conclusive. Until his fall (which, one must recall, occurs only a little past the midway mark) Byrhtnoth dominates Maldon. But the real focus of the poem is elsewhere. As the narrative structure suggests, the early stages of the poem essentially serve as an elaborate preparation for its sustained climax wherein the tragic drama of heroism and necessity is played out to its conclusion--a drama in which the central protagonists are Byrhtnoth's loyal retainers rather than the ealdorman himself.³⁶

The shift in narrative pattern is accompanied by a parallel development which Irving describes as an "elevation of style":

The general structure of the poem . . . seems to fall naturally into two parts: the first part deals with the beginning of the battle and the death of Byrhtnoth; the second part describes the individual speeches and actions of the surviving retainers. These two parts are noticeably different in style and tone . . . Epic diction becomes noticeably more frequent as the poem goes on, not only in set pieces . . . but also in the language of the speeches and particularly in the highly stylized way of describing the fighting. Indeed, the pattern of the poem from line 205 on might be described as an elevation of style, if we may extend style to mean a way of acting as well as a way of speaking.³⁷

If we look more closely, we discover that by far the most significant "elevation of style" has to do with the increased role of dramatic utterance in the latter portions of the poem. Earlier we discussed the relationship between dramatic form and heroic poetry, the essential connection between them being their common concern with human beings on

a human scale.³⁸ Dramatic utterance is peculiarly appropriate to the task of the hero who must pit his specifically human resources against the very limits of the human condition. It is a mode which by putting the hero's life (or its articulation) in his own hands, tends to preserve his autonomy and guarantee the authenticity of his accomplishments. Maldon, like most heroic poetry, is highly dramatic in form--something more than twenty five percent. But the ratio of dramatic utterance alters radically after the flight of the cowards, that is, once the fundamental heroic equation is set.³⁹ Before this point, the only dramatic portions of the poem occur in Byrhtnoth's two exchanges with the Vikings (29-61, and 93-95) and his death prayer (173-180). Afterwards, five of Byrhtnoth's retainers are assigned a dramatic role: AElfwine (212-224); Offa (231-243); Leofsunu (246-253); Dunnere (258-259); and Byrhtwold (312-319).⁴⁰ Until the turning point of the poem at line 202, roughly twenty percent of Maldon is cast in dramatic form. As the heorthgeneates carry the poem to its conclusion (202-325), the proportion of drama to narrative is almost doubled, a full thirty four percent being given over to dramatic utterance. Thus, as the heroes move into a prolonged tragic confrontation with necessity, the narrative strategies of Maldon radically change, and the ratio of drama to narrative increases sharply, formally marking the climax of the poem while charging it with stepped-up energy and power.

The values which Byrhtnoth's retainers oppose to necessity are the conventional core values of the Germanic heroic code: loyalty, courage, martial prowess, and fidelity to one's word or beot. The significance of courage and prowess are self-evident; the common heritage of all warriors, such virtues are shared at Maldon by Vikings and Englishmen alike, denied only to (by) those traitors who flee the field. But something further

might be said about the role that loyalty and the heroic boast play in Maldon. First, both are restricted to the English. It would, in fact, be wholly inappropriate to allocate such a stance to the invading Norsemen. The Vikings fight with great courage and skill, advancing wiges georne (line 73) once the battle has been irrevocably joined. But they do not fight as heroes. They are explicitly described as pirates,⁴¹ self-proclaimed mercenaries who, though unflinchingly ready to risk their lives for booty, would sooner be bought off with tribute than hazard the hardships of the spear-contest. Early in the poem, there is a sharp exchange between Byrhtnoth and the Viking messenger who proposes:

"ƿaet ƿu most sendan raðe
beagas wið gebeorge; and eow betere is
ƿaet ge ƿisne garraes mid gafole forglydon,
ƿon we swa hearde hilde dælon.
Ne ƿurfe we us spillan, gif ge spedaþ to ƿam."
(30-34)

More than the locking tides of the Pante separates the two forces. In reality, no true exchange is possible between them, only an inevitable clash of spears. Germanic "cousins" though they be, they speak different languages--one the hard-eyed language of profit and loss to which heroic attitudes are foreign, and the other the traditional language of Anglo-Saxon heroism wherein loyalty and the beot are essential elements of the vocabulary:

"Gehyrst ƿu, saelida, hwaet ƿis folc segedþ?
Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan,
aettrynne ord and ealde swurd,
ƿa heregeatu ƿe eow aet hilde ne deah."
(45-48)

If, as Clark suggests, Maldon divides Englishmen into heroes and cowards,⁴² the beot plays a critical part in distinguishing between them. Immediately following the cowards' flight, the narrator recalls that

Swa him Offa on daeg aer asaede
 on þam meþelstede, þa he gemot haefde,
 þaet þaer modiglice manega spraecon
 þe eft aet þearfe þolian noldon.
 (198-201)

Hard on the heels of this pointed observation, AElfwine, the first of the English fighters to advance against the enemy after his leader's fall, calls out to his fellows:

"Gemunan þa maela þe we oft aet meodo spraecon,
 þonne we on bence beot ahofon,
 haeleð on healle, ymbe heard gewinn;
 nu maeg cunnian hwa cene sy."
 (212-215)

The beot, then, helps nail down the antithesis between the heroes who stay and the traitors who run. Those who do not fulfill their vows are those who violate the fundamental tenets of the heroic code, betraying their obligations, their honor, their lord, and their comrades:

"Us Godric haefð,
 earh Oddan bearn, ealle bescicene."
 (237-238)

Those who remain faithful to their vows not only fulfill their obligations, but testify to the integrity of the heroic life which they exemplify:

Ne maeg cunnian hwa cene sy."
 (215)

As with so much that is central to the poem, the motif of the beot is introduced at the outset where the narrator remarks of Eadric:

beot he gelaeste
 þa he aetforan his frean feohtan sceolde.
 (15-16)

After the declarations of Offa and AElfwine (already cited above), AElfwine himself boasts, utilizing the conventional terminology of the beot,

"Ic wylle mine aefelo eallum gecyþan,
 þaet ic waes on Myrcon miccles cynnes."
 (216-217)

There follows the formal vow of Leofsunu:

"Ic þæt gehate, þæt ic heonon nelle
fleon fotes trym, ac wille furðer gan,
wrecan on gewinne minne winedrihten.
(246-248)

And Eadweard the tall:

Þa gyt on orde stod Eadweard se langa,
gears and geornful, gylpwordum spræc
þæt he nolde fleogan fotmael landes,
ofer braec bugan, þa his betera leg.
(273-276)

Offa accomplishes his beot:

Raðe wearð aet hilde Offa forheawen;
he hæfde ðeah geforþoð þæt he his frean gehet,
swa he beotode aer wið his beahgifan
þæt hi sceoldon begen on burh ridan,
hale to hame, oððe on here crincgan,
on waelstowe wundum sweltan.
(288-293)

And finally, concluding perhaps the most oft-cited heroic lines in the literature, the vow of Byrhtwold:

"Ic eom frod feores; fram ic ne wille,
ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,
be swa leofan men, licgan þence."
(317-319)

The beot then is more than an affirmation or demonstration of prowess. It is at once a claim to honor and a pledge to be called in at any moment. Rarely in Anglo-Saxon poetry is the beot a boast of past deeds. It almost invariably takes the form of a vow, a commitment to the future, an ever-renewable heroic wager upon which the hero stakes himself completely every time. No wonder then that the Wanderer (albeit in a somewhat different context) counsels prudence:

Beorn sceal gebidan þonne he beot spriced
oððæt collenferð cunne gearwe
hwider hreþra gehygd hweorfan wille.
(70-72)

The stakes are high. The dom of the hero and of the life he represents hangs in the balance in a world where all depends upon an absolute congruence of word and deed.⁴³

The format of vow and accomplishment makes of the last half of Maldon almost a series of formal exempla wherein time-honored heroic principles are first proclaimed and then directly illustrated by the appropriate heroic action. Dunnere's exhortation is typical of this process:

"Ne maeg na wandian se þe wrecan þenced
frea on folce, ne for feore murnan."
þa hi forð eodon, feores hi ne rohton.
(258-260)

Heroic sententia is immediately demonstrated by heroic illustration. Somewhat more diffuse, less compressed and aphoristic, is the example set earlier by AElfwine:

"Ne sceolan me on þære þeode þegenas aetwitan
þæt ic of ðisse fyrde feran wille,
eard gesecan, nu min ealdor liged
forheawen aet hilde . . ."
þa he forð eode, faehðe gemunde.
(220-225)

And by Leofsunu:

"Ne þurfon me embe Sturmere stedefaeste haeled
wordum aetwitan, ne min wine gecranc,
þæt ic hlafordleas ham siðie
wende fram wige, ac me sceal waepen niman,
ord and iren." He ful yrre wod,
feht faestlice, fleam he forhogode.
(249-254)

And later by Eadweard the tall, although in his case heroic utterance is related indirectly (narratively) rather than dramatically:

þa gyt on orde stod Eadward se langa,
gears and geornful, glypwordum spraec
þæt he nolde fleogan fotmael landes,
ofer baec bugan, þa his betera leg.
He braec þone bordweall and wið þa beornas feht,
oðþæt he his sincgifan on þam saemannum
wurðlice wrec, aer he waele laege.
(273-279)

And finally by Godric the good, the last to appear in the poem as we have it:

Swa hi AEFelgares bearn ealle bylde,
 Godric to guþe. Oft he gar forlet,
 waelspere windan on þa wicingas,
 swa he on þam folce fyrmest eode,
 heow and hynde, oðþaet he on hilde gecranc.
 Naes þaet se Godric þe ða guðe forbeah.
 (320-325)

The dynamic of heroic declaration and demonstration is perhaps best exemplified by the justly famous counsel of Byrhtwold, whose heroic exhortation is cast in the form of heroic adage:⁴⁴

"Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
 mod sceal þe mare, þe ure maegen lytlað
 (312-313)

Here in quintessential form is the heroic imperative for which the entire denouement of Maldon serves as fulfillment and demonstration.

The cornerstone of heroic life as presented in Maldon is loyalty. In this, the poem is all of a piece with the world of which it is born and to which it is addressed. From its earliest Germanic origins on the continent (as described in Tacitus' Germania), "the bonds of loyalty . . . were the very cement of Anglo-Saxon society."⁴⁵ Clearly, even as late as the close of the tenth century, the comitatus (or a variant thereof) played a critical role in the military society of pre-invasion England, the ties between lord and retainers serving as a primary basis of social coherence and stability in what was, in general, a time of social upheaval, war, fragmentation, and uncertainty. Everyday life and well being, material survival as well as lasting fame and glory, still depended in large degree on the integrity of the group. Maldon, like all heroic poetry (perhaps even more so) draws upon life in order to enhance it. Its idealized expression of heroic values is firmly rooted in flesh and

blood, and this immediate connection with reality no doubt accounts, at least partially, for its enormous power and conviction.

Maldon celebrates every aspect of Anglo-Saxon loyalty, including the ties of kinship, which, side by side with the even more potent bonds linking retainer to lord, are poignantly invoked in Aelfwine's lament for Byrhtnoth.

"Nu min ealdor ligeð
forheawen aet hilde. Me is þæt hearma maest;
he waes aegðer min maeg and min halford."
(222-224)

One set of obligations complements and reinforces the other. The full seriousness of kinship ties is suggested by an earlier portion of AElfwine's speech:

"Ic wylle mine aefelo eallum gecyþan,
þæt ic waes on Myrcon miccles cynnes;
waes min ealdre faeder Ealhelm haten,
wis ealdorman, worulgesaelig."
(216-219)

Such declarations recall that in the Germanic heroic poem almost any formal reference to lineage--no matter how slight--does more than elevate style or help to identify a particular hero. The convention almost invariably invokes the weight of a heroic tradition in which the individual warrior inherits not only the privileges, but also the obligation to uphold and, if possible, enhance the honor and prestige earned by his forebears. Responsibility for the dom of the entire kinship group--not only the individual, not only his immediate relations, but his ancestors and unborn progeny as well--is transmitted from generation to generation, to be lost, preserved, or extended in accordance with how an individual aeðel conducts himself in any given crisis. Each reference to a hero's lineage confirms anew what is at stake at Maldon and helps to explain why so many men

uncompromisingly choose death before dishonor. There are many such references. The youth whom Byrhtnoth orders to drive off his horse is identified as Offan maeg (line 5); and Wulfstan is identified as

cafe mid his cynne, þæt was Ceolan sunu.
(76)

Byrhtnoth himself is named as Byrthelmes bearn (line 92), and Wulfmaer is called Byrhtnoðes maeg . . . his swuster sunu (114-115). A second Wulfmaer is referred to as Wulfstanes bearn, Wulfmaer se geonga, (line 155), and of Ascferth the Northumbrian hostage we are told:

he waes on Norðhymbron heardes cynnes,
Ecglafes bearn, him waes AEscferð nama.
(266-267)

Ætheric is identified as Sibyrht's broðor (line 282), and Offa as Gaddes maeg (line 287). Wistan is called Þurstanes sunu (line 298) and Wigelines bearn (line 300). Oswold and Eadwold,

begen þa bebroþru, beornas trymedon,
hyra winemagas wordon baedon
þæt hi þær aet ðearfe þolian sceoldon.
(305-307)

Finally, probably in order to distinguish him from his cowardly namesake, Godric the good is identified as Æþelgares bearn (line 320).

On the other side of the coin, the implied reference to kinship obligations in Offa's denunciation of the cowards points the full extent of that other Godric's treachery, his failure of will entailing a demeaning of his family line as well as a personal loss of honor:

"Us Godric haefð,
earh Oddan bearn, ealle beswicene."
(237-238)

And indeed, as the poet has just told us:

þær wearð Oddan bearn aereſt on fleame,
Godric fram guþe, and þone godan forlet
.

and his broðru mid him begen aerndon,
 Godrine and Godwig, guþe ne gymdon.
 (186-192)

In addition to kinship loyalties, there are three modes of what might be termed fealty loyalty represented in Maldon: national or overlord fealty, as expressed through Byrhtnoth's loyalty to Aethelred; retainer fealty, as expressed through the heorthwerod's loyalty to Byrhtnoth; and finally, the loyalty which binds the heorthgeneatas to each other. During his fierce exchange with the Viking messenger, Byrhtnoth proclaims his loyalty to Aethelred,⁴⁶ stressing the national scope of his fealty by his explicit commitment to homeland and people as well as to the king himself:

. . . her stynt unforcuð eorl mid his werode,
 þe wile gealgean eþel þysne,
 AEþelredes eard, ealdres mines,
 folc and foldan.

(51-54)

As he receives his death wound, Byrhtnoth's loyalty to his king is once more invoked, the phrase AEþelredes thegen again suggesting the national scope of the English leader's bonds and obligations:⁴⁷

Forlet þa drenga sum daroð of handa,
 fleogan of folman, þaet se to forð gewat
 þurh ðone aeþelan AEþelredes þegen.

(149-151)

Although the poet does not emphasize Byrhtnoth's fealty to Aethelred, by sounding this note, he strengthens the role of loyalty in the poem, extending its range throughout Anglo-Saxon society.

The primary form of loyalty celebrated in Maldon, and perhaps its central theme, is the bond which unites the retainer to his lord. Although this motif is raised to pre-eminence only after the death of Byrhtnoth, it is first introduced in the opening lines of the poem:

Eac him wolde Eadric his ealdre gelaestan,
frea to gefohte,

(11-12)

After Byrhtnoth receives his mortal wound, the theme is again touched upon:

Him be healfe stod hyse unweaxen,
cniht on gecampe, se full cafllice
braed of the beorne blodigne gar,
Wulfstanes bearn, Wulfmaer se geonga,
forlet forheardne faran eft ongean;
ord in gewod, þæt se on eorþan laeg
þe his þeoden aer þearle geraehte.

(152-158)

And again when Byrhtnoth is cut down after his death prayer:

þa hine heowon haeðene scealcas
and begen þa beornas þe him big stodon,
AElfnoð and Wulmaer begen lagon,
ða onemn hyra frean feorh gesealdon.

(181-184)

Here again, the cowards serve as a foil, clarifying the meaning of loyalty by their betrayal. No sooner has Byrhtnoth fallen than the cowards flee, "abandoning the good man" and forgetting "all that he had done for their honor."

Hi bugon þa fram beaduwe þe þaer beon noldon.
þaer weard Oddan bearn aerest on fleame,
Godric fram guþe, and þone godan forlet

.
and his broðru mid him begen aerndon,
Gordrine and Godwig, guþe ne gymdon,

.
and manna ma þonne hit aenig maeð waere,
gyf hi þa geearnunga ealle gemundon
þe he him to duguþe gedon haefde.

(186-197)

Nothing could be clearer: the cowardice of Godric and all who follow him is essentially a violation of the bond which unites retainer and lord. But this is not all. Their flight also entails a betrayal of their comrades, the heorthgeneatas.⁴⁸ The point is forcefully made in Offa's denunciation of Godric:

"Us Godric haefð,
 earh Oddan bearn, ealle beswicene.
 Wene þaes formoni man, þa he on meare rad,
 on wlanca þam wicge, þaet waere it ure hlaford;
 forþan wearð her on felda folc towaemed,
 scyldburh tobrocen. Abreoðe his angin,
 þaet he her swa manige man aflymde!"
 (237-243)

Everything in Anglo-Saxon society--order, stability, and survival as well as honor and fame--depends upon the integrity of the group.⁴⁹ Just as loyalty binds and sustains the heroic world, treason fragments and subverts it. When Godric flees, he divides the people (folc towaemed) and breaches the shield-wall (scyldburh tobrocen). His treachery is contagious, triggering disintegration (swa manige man aflymde) and inevitably leading to death and defeat for those who remain (Us Godric haefð . . . ealle beswicene.) Thus the cowards betray their obligations, their world, their lord, and their companions. Placed in a truly heroic situation where "life can only be purchased by denial of what one stands for,"⁵⁰ they

. . . wendon fram þam wige and þone wudu sohton
 flugon on þaet faesten and hyra feorhe burgon.
 (193-194)

The cowards choose to save their lives. But at what a cost! We already know what awaits them from the terms of AElfwine's boast:

"Ne sceolon me on þaere þeode þegenas aetwitan
 þaet ic of ðisse fyrde feran wille,
 eard gesecan."
 (220-223)

And Leofsunu's remarkably similar protest:

"Ne þurfon me embe Sturmere stedefaeste haeleð
 wordum aetwitan, nu min wine gecranc,
 þaet ic hlafordleas ham siðie."
 (250-252)

Offa predicts their fate with a curse:

"Abreoðe his angin."
 (242)

And Byrhtwold, the last to speak, fortells their end in terms that are evidently meant to carry the weight and authority of prophecy:⁵¹

"A maeg gnorian
se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenced." (315-316)

Immediately following and sharply contrasting with the cowards' retreat, Byrhtnoth's loyal heorthwerod advances, moving forward as a single unit, united by a common will:

þa ðær wendon forð wlance þegenas,
unearge men efston georne;
hi woldon þa ealle oðer twega,
lif forlaetan oððe leofne gewrecan.
(205-208)

From this point on, loyalty overshadows all other themes. The primary motivation of Byrhtnoth's faithful retainers, it assumes an almost obligatory place of honor in the passage accorded to the arsteia of each individual fighter. As he goes forth, intent on battle, Aelfwine recalls and declares his allegiance to his lord:

"Nu min ealdor liged
forheawen aet hilde. Me is þaet hearma maest;
he waes aegðer min maeg and min hlaford."
(222-224)

Offa invokes his dead chief as he urges his companions on:

"Nu ure þeoden lið,
eorl on eorðan. Us is eallum þearf
þaet ure aeghwylc oþerne bylde
wigan to wige."
(232-235)

Leofsunu swears to avenge his lord:

"Ic þaet gehate, þaet ic heonan nelle
fleon fotes trym, ac wille furðor gan,
wrecan gewinne minne winedrihten.
(246-248)

Dunnere too, the unorne ceorl,⁵² exhorts them all to avenge Byrhtnoth:

Dunnere þa cwaed, daroð acwhete,
unorne ceorl, ofer eall clypode,

baed þaet beorne gewhylc Byrhtnoth wraece:
 "Ne maeg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð
 frean on folce, ne for feore murnan."
 (255-259)

Following Dunnere's exhortation, the poet (in a passage which parallels lines 203-208, cited above) again generalizes the theme of heroic loyalty, placing individual acts in a collective context which itself exemplifies the heroic unity expressed:

þa hi forð eodon, feores hi ne rohton;
 ongunnon þa hiredmen heardlice feohtan,
 grame garberend, and god baedon
 þaet hi moston gewreca hyra winedrihten
 and on hyra feondum fyl gewyrca.
 (260-264)

After this momentary lengthening of perspective, as the focus again narrows to individual fighters and deeds, Eadweard accomplishes his vow to avenge his leader:

He braec þone bordweall and wið þa beornas feaht,
 oðþaet he his sincgyfan on þam saemannum
 wurðlice wrec, aer he on waele laeg.
 (277-279)

Offa too fulfills his obligations in exemplary fashion before he lies dead, "ðegenlice," at the side of his lord:

Raðe wearð aet hilde Offa forheawen;
 he haefde ðeah geforþof þaet he his frean gehet,
 he laeg ðegenlice ðeodne gehende.
 (288-294)

And finally, the hauntingly eulogistic vow of Byrhtold:

"Ic eom frod feores; fram ic ne wille,
 ac ic me ne healfe minum hlaforde,
 be swa leofan men, licgan þence."
 (317-319)

There can be no more fitting tribute to Byrhtnoth than the loyalty of those who love and die for him.

Although the primary form of loyalty celebrated by Maldon is the

bond which unites retainer to lord, there is a second, closely related bond which, like virtually all heroic themes in the poem, comes to the fore only after Byrhtnoth falls and the cowards flee. This is the loyalty within the heorthwerod, the ties which bind each to all and all to all. Although we view them serially, we perceive the loyal members of Byrhtnoth's heorthwerod always as a group, a small band of heroic warriors dedicated to common values and willingly sharing a single fate.⁵³ The key expression of this form of loyalty is the exhortation by which individual fighters rally and encourage each other in the fray.⁵⁴ As Offa declares:

"Hwaet þu, AElfwine, hafast ealle gemanode
 þegenas to þearfe, nu ure þeoden lið,
 eorl on eorðan. Us is eallum þearfe
 þaet ure aeghwylc oþerne bylde
 wigan to wige, þa hwile þe he waepen maege
 habban and healdan, heardne mece,
 gar and godswurd."

(231-237)

Under the pressure of Byrhtnoth's fall and the cowards' retreat, or, in other words, once the situation has become desperate and hopeless, solidarity is the essence of resistance; as each fighter advances, he urges his comrades on, simultaneously drawing upon and reaffirming their mutual resolve and unity. AElfwine is the first to speak; he encourages them forward, his exhortation identified by an explicit narrative tag:

Swa hi bylde forð bearn AElfrices,
 wiga wintrum geong, wordum maelde,
 AElfwine þa cwaed, he on ellen spraec.

(209-211)

Dunnere urges every man to avenge Byrhtnoth:⁵⁵

Dunnere þa cwaed, daroð acwehte,
 unorne ceorl, ofer eall clypode,
 baed þaet beorne gehwylc Byrhtnoð wraece.

(255-257)

Oswold and Eadwold rally their companions, bidding them to be resolute:

Oswold and Eadwold ealle hwile,
 begen þa gebroþru, beornas trymedon,
 hyra winemagas wordon baedon
 þæt hi þær at ðearfe þolian sceoldon,
 unwaclice waepna neotan.

(304-308)

Byrhtwold boldly exhorts the fighters:

Byrhtwold maþelode, bord hafenode
 (se waes eald geneat), aesc acwehte;
 he ful baldlice beornas laerde.

(309-311)

And finally Godric, Aethelgar's son, urges all of them to battle:

Swa hi AEFelgares bearn ealle bylde,
 Godric to guþe.

Naes þæt na se Godric þe ða guþe forbeah.

(320-325)

Significantly, Byrhtnoth's own fatal combat is framed at either end by an heroic exhortation to his men. As he joins the battle, he urges the young warriors to be mindful of fighting and fame:

Stihte hi Byrhtnoþ,
 baed þæt hyssa gehwylc hogode to wige
 þe on Denon wolde dom gefeohtan.

(127-129)

And again, mortally wounded, about to offer his death prayer, he nevertheless encourages his retainers forward:

þa gyt þæt word gecwaeð
 har hilderinc, hyssa bylde,
 baed gangan forð gode geferan.

(168-170)

Although this "enveloping" of Byrhtnoth's aresteia bears witness to the significant place of the exhortation in the poem, the poet draws a clear distinction between the ealdorman's exhortations to his troops and the encouragement they offer to each other.⁵⁶ From the beginning, Byrhtnoth's exhortations are cast in a hierarchical context, the promptings of a leader to his subordinates.⁵⁷ The vocabulary and tone are unmistakable.

In the very first lines of the poem, as we have it,⁵⁸ Byrhtnoth appropriately issues commands to his men:

Het þa hyssa hwaene hors forlaetan,
feor afysan, and forð gangan,
hicgan to handum and to hige godum.
(2-4)

Soon afterwards there is a fuller description of the ealdorman's military preparations, the diction of which clearly indicates the nature of his relationship to his followers:

Þa þær Byrhtnoð ongan beornas trymian,
rad and raedde, rincum taehte
hu hi sceoldan standan and þone stede healdan,
and baed þaet hyra randas rihte heoldon
faeste mid folman, and ne forhtedon na.
(17-21)

And again, after his exchange with the Viking messenger:

Het þa bord beran, beornas gangan,
þaet hi on þam easteðe ealle stodon.
(62-63)

As soon as the tide goes out, rendering the causeway shallow enough to be forded,

Het þa haeleða hleo healdan þa bricge
wigan wigheardne, we waes haten Wulfstan.
(74-75)

And again, after granting the Vikings permission to land, as the raiders advance:

He mid bordum het
wyrcaþ þone wihagen, and þaet werod healdan
faeste wið feondum.
(101-103)

Byrhtnoth orders, commands, and instructs. When he urges or exhorts, he does so in the unmistakable accents of authority. Such a stance is consistent with his obligations as a leader and implies no qualification of those intensely personal ties which bind a lord and his retainers. It is only that these ties, however reciprocal, are by their very nature

hierarchical, whereas the ties between the members of the heorthwerod, at least after Byrhtnoth's fall, are essentially represented as ties inter pares.⁵⁹ Once all is hopeless, it is as if death and defeat impose an emergency suspension of social divisions, a kind of forced collectivity in the face of necessity. Here, face to face with certain death, heroism assumes its most universal features. The fighters at Maldon, meeting hopelessness with courage, come to represent mankind at its highest, their solidarity singularly appropriate to a world where our common destiny makes of heroic value a joint enterprise. In the end, having nowhere else to turn, men are thrown back upon themselves, forced to rely upon one another to preserve and confirm their worth in the face of all which would deny them. Small wonder then that cowardice and betrayal are so repugnant to heroic poetry.

As the failure of the cowards suggests, heroism is always a decision, a struggle for human value, a refusal to permit man to be defined by the arbitrary determinations of necessity. In Maldon, however, the role of choice is raised from an implicit assumption of the heroic life to the very center of the poem which, in one sense, may be seen as an elaboration of the archetypal conflict between heroism and cowardice, between loyalty and treachery, nobility and dishonor.⁶⁰

The possibility of flight is present from the beginning. As Irving observes, "behind the battle field is a forest where safety may be found, where the horses and hawk of Offa's kinsman were sent before the battle began; and it is to this forest that Godric the coward, his brothers, and apparently a large part of the peasant fyrd . . . flee. . . . These Englishmen, in other words, are not heroic automata to whom the idea of flight cannot even occur. They are aware of it and of the crushing burden of individual choice . . . confronting them."⁶¹

Because he has options, the fighter at Maldon is continually called upon to reaffirm his courage and determination. The voluntary nature of the heroic commitment is implied not only through the suggestion of an escape route, but through the inferences generated by Byrhtnoth's initial rallying of his troops (lines 2-4, and 16-24), a precaution which "implies the possibility of a failure of will, and hints at the poem's main issue: the tension between the demands of the heroic code and the brute urge to survive."⁶² Later, when Byrhtnoth's early promptings give way to the desperate exhortations which dominate the last half of the poem, the cumulative intensity and power of these stirring pronouncements convey how arduous and exacting is the heorthwerod's struggle to sustain their heroic commitments once hyra hearra laeg (line 204). Where heroes are so often obliged to encourage each other (us is eallum þearfe þaet ure aeghwylc oþerne bylde, lines 233-234) as they publicly reaffirm their determination, we are compelled to infer that their resolve is being tested to the limit. In contrast with Godric and his brothers, who are steadfast only under the diligent eye of Byrhtnoth's authority,⁶³ and only so long as the situation is not desperate, Byrhtnoth's faithful followers demonstrate that heroic obligations are based not so much upon constraint as upon freedom and love. Just as mod sceal þe mare þe ure maegen lytlað (line 313), so loyalty is even more binding once wearð afeallen þaes folces ealdor (line 202). In its purest and noblest form, the heroic obligation is primarily voluntary--both a public duty and a personal commitment; a social imperative and an autonomous expression of what is highest in the hero's own nature.⁶⁴

The fundamental choice between honor and shame is reflected in the structure of the narrative which unfolds according to a series of four

critical decisions, each of which moves the action forward and defines its meaning. Byrhtnoth faces the first of these decisions in his encounter with the Viking messenger; the importance of this scene is marked by the fact that it is one of only three dramatic passages in the predominantly narrative first half of the poem. The Viking offer is nothing more or less than outright blackmail:

". . . þu most sendan raðe
beagas wið gebeorge
we willað mid þam sceattum us to scype gangan,
on flot faran, and eow friþes healdan."
(30-41)

Byrhtnoth's options are clear-cut: pay or fight. Although in similar circumstances Aethelred and his representatives chose to pay enormous sums of tribute in an ultimately futile attempt to buy off the invading Norsemen, Byrhtnoth, choosing the heroic alternative, elects the risks of combat:

"Ne sceole ge swa softe sincegegangan;
us sceal ord and ecg aer geseman,
grim guðplega, aer we gafol syllon."
(59-61)

Here as elsewhere, Byrhtnoth is exemplary, and, "when the initial choice is offered again in still harsher terms, the heroes are those who ratify Byrhtnoth's decision with their lives."⁶⁵

The second of Maldon's four major decisions also falls to Byrhtnoth. When the Vikings realize that they cannot breach the defended ford by force of arms, they request leave to lead their troops to shore:

þa hi þaet ongeaton and georne gesawon
set hi þaer bricgweardes bitere fundon,
ongunnon lytegian þa laðe gystas,
baedon þaet hi upgang agan moston,
ofer þone ford faran, feþan laedan.
(84-88)

Byrhtnoth's reply is unhesitating, his decision once again italicized, as it were, by being cast in the form of dramatic utterance:

ƿa se eorl ongan for his ofermode
 alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode.
 Ongan ceallian ƿa ofer cald waeter
 Byrthelmes bearn (beornas gehlyston):
 "Nu eow is gerymed, gað ricene to us,
 guman to guþe; god ana wat
 hwa ƿaere waelstowe wealdan mote."
 (89-94)

Now, whether Byrhtnoth is right or wrong to permit the Vikings to land their forces, and whether ofermod here means "overmastering pride"⁶⁶ or "great high courage,"⁶⁷ it is immediately apparent that the two major choices with which he is confronted are remarkably similar.⁶⁸ In each case he is presented with a decision between fighting and circumventing combat. In the first instance he has the option of paying tribute, in the second of holding the ford and presumably forcing a relatively bloodless Viking withdrawal.⁶⁹ In both cases, Byrhtnoth chooses to fight, rejecting first the ignominy of tribute, and then the easy (and uneasy) security of stalemate.⁷⁰ Byrhtnoth's resolve to fight is, in fact, implicit from the beginning where his military preparations manifest his determination to engage the enemy. And when the poet tells us that

He lihte ƿa mid leoden ƿaer him leofost waes,
 ƿaer he his heorðwerod holdost wiset
 (23-24)

he places Byrhtnoth in the traditional Germanic heroic setting--a brave, chieftain among his comitatus--most likely to raise the most heroic expectations among his Anglo-Saxon audience.

While the decisions facing Byrhtnoth are similar, there does perhaps occur what we might term an escalation of pressure, or rather temptation, between the first and the second crisis. The original demand for tribute

is arrogant and abrupt, replete with the rhetoric of intimidation.⁷¹ To accept would entail a clear imputation of cowardice, and Byrhtnoth responds with the counter-threats and scathing irony which the Viking proposal deserves. The temptation of stalemate is, on the other hand, at least if we are to believe the critics,⁷² more alluring in that it offers Byrhtnoth an opportunity to avoid combat without the clear-cut stigma of cowardice that would attach to the payment of tribute. While side-stepping ourselves, for the moment, the complex question of whether or not such a policy would have been consistent with the actual military obligations of the English commander of the Essex fyrd, let us simply observe that far more (or at least something far different) is required from an Anglo-Saxon hero than from an English general. In this respect, it is precisely when he chooses to fight--when he prepares a way for the Vikings to cross over to battle--that Byrhtnoth conducts himself in a manner which is consistent both with his first decision to refuse tribute and with the honor and glory he represents in Maldon.⁷³

Byrhtnoth's death precipitates the decisive crisis of the poem.⁷⁴ So long as he is in the field, Byrhtnoth's exemplary will dominates the English host, his choices inspiring and unifying the entire fighting force. After he falls, his followers are on their own. "There seems to be a moment of silence at this point," Irving observes, "as the English grasp the meaning of their leader's death. Now that his tangible authority, so forcefully asserted in the early part of the poem, is gone, now that what we would understand as military discipline has broken down, what will the individual do?"⁷⁵ The two remaining major choices, those which "determine the outcome of the battle and the catastrophe of the poem,"⁷⁶ follow in rapid succession. First the treacherous sons of Odda flee:

Hi bugon þa fram beaduwe þe þaer beon noldon.
(185)

Then, hard upon the cowards' retreat, Byrhtnoth's loyal heorthgeneatas heroically choose to fight to the death:

þa ðaer wendon forð wlanca þegenas,
unearge men efston georne.
(205-206)

While the choice in Maldon is always a choice between heroism and cowardice, here we may observe that at each critical juncture the choice grows increasingly difficult. We have already commented on the apparent escalation of pressure which marks Byrhtnoth's two decisions. Now we may observe that his death adds another full turn of the screw. By it, the predicament of the English, deprived of the leadership and example of their lord, is severely worsened, especially if we are mindful of how desperate--according to Anglo-Saxon tradition--is the plight of a leaderless folk. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 1003 admonishes:

As the saying goes: 'When the leader gives way,
the whole army will be much hindered.
ASC, 1003 C (D, E)

Beowulf tells the same story, not only at the end when the Geats are deprived of their great king, but at the beginning when Scyld's son, Beowulf's namesake, is born, he whom

þone God sende
folc to frofre; fyrendearfee ongeat,
þe hie aer drugon aldor(le)ase
lange hwile.

(13-16)

In any case, Byrhtnoth's death proves too much for the cowards who, making the third of the poem's four critical choices, flee rather than face the increased danger. Their flight, in turn, drives the screw home, dividing the shield-wall and insuring certain death for those who must finally choose to remain and fight against the now hopeless odds.

From the beginning then, there is a progressive intensification of difficulty in the series of choices faced by the English. To sum up briefly: Byrhtnoth chooses (twice) to fight at apparently even odds; Godric and his followers opt for flight, unwilling to face what we must surmise to be unfavorable odds; and Byrhtnoth's loyal retainers decide to fight and die at what we know to be impossible odds. At the same time, there is, as we have seen, a causal pressure reflected in this sequence of choices: Byrhtnoth's initial choices insure combat; that combat leads to his death; his death, in turn, entails an increased risk for the defenders; that risk triggers Godric's treachery which precipitates a mass retreat among the fyrd;⁷⁷ and that retreat sentences the heroes who remain to death and defeat, forcing the poem to its conclusion and making of the heorthwerod's last stand the final and perhaps most perfect expression of Anglo-Saxon heroic life in all of Old English literature.⁷⁸

The profound role of choice in Maldon is reflected in its diction which, as one might expect, everywhere stresses the importance of the heroic will. In the opening episode of the poem, Byrhtnoth urges a young warrior forward, commanding him to be resolved with his hands and heart:

Het þa hyssa hwaene hors forlaetan,
feor afysan, and forð gangan,
hicgan to handum and to hige godum.
(2-4)

From this the youth learns that his chief does not intend to countenance cowardice:

þa þaet Offan maeg aereſt onfunde,
þaet þe eorl nolde yrhðo geþolian.
(5-6)

And when Offa's kinsman sends his hawk off to the wood and advances to the battle, we are told that he wishes to demonstrate that he does not intend to waver in the fight:⁷⁹

Be þam man mihte oncnawan þaet se cniht nolde
wacian aet þam wige, þa he to waepnum feng.
(9-10)

Next we learn that Eadric wished to stand by his chief and that he had
good resolve:

Eac him wolde Eadric his ealdre gelaestan,
frea to ge feohte, ongan þa forð beran
gar to guþe. He haefde god geþanc.
(11-13)

Soon afterward, the Viking messenger tempts Byrhtnoth with an offer of
peace--if he wishes to ransom his people with tribute:

"We willað wið þam golde grið faestnian.
Gyf þu þat geraedest, þe her ricost eart,
þaet þu þine leoda lysan wille."
(35-37)

When Byrhtnoth responds, he is described as angry and resolute:

Byrhtnoð maþelode, bord hafenode,
wand wacne aesc, wordum maelde,
yrre and anraed ageaf him andsware.
(42-44)

And he announces, with some harshness, that he is determined to defend
his homeland:

". . . her styt unforcuð eorl mid his werode,
þe wile gealgean eþel þysne."
(51-52)

When Byrhtnoth places his bricgweardes at the ford, we learn that they do
not propose to flee and that they will hold out resolutely:

Þa noldon aet þam forda fleam gewyrcan,
ac hi faestlice wið ða fynd weredon.
(81-82)

Early in the battle, when Wulfmaer is cut down, the poet tells us that he
chose battle-death, anticipating the poem's denouement when the heroic
heorthgeneatas literally choose death before dishonor:

Wund wearð Wulfmaer, waelraeste geceas,
Byrhtnoðes maeg; he mid billum wearð,
his swuster sunu, swiðe forheawen.
(113-115)

As the battle continues, the English stand stalwart and resolved, intent on fighting:

Swa stemnetton stiðhicgende
 hysas aet hilde, hogodon georne
 hwa þaer mid orde aereſt mihte
 on faegean men feorh gewinnan.

(122-125)

Again they are described as standing steadfast as Byrhtnoth urges them to be determined on battle and to desire glory:

Stodon staedefaeste; stihte hi Byrhtnoð,
 baed þaet hyssa gehwylc hogode to wige
 þe on Denon wolde dom gefeohtan.

(127-129)

When Byrhtnoth himself advances to the fray, he is described as moving forward singleminded to the fight:

Wod þa wiges heard, waepen up ahof,
 bord to gebeorge, and wið þaes beornes stop.
 Eode swa anraed eorl to þam ceorle.

(130-132)

The vocabulary of choice is very prominent in the passage depicting the flight of the cowards. Those who turn from the battle are those who do not wish to be there:

Hi bugon þa fram beaduwe þe þaer beon nolde.

(185)

They abandon their leader, take no heed of the battle, and seek the safety of the woods:

þaer wearð Oddan bearn aereſt on fleame,
 Godrick fram guþe, and þone godan forlet

 Godrine and Godwig, guþe ne gymdon,
 ac wendon fram þam wige and þone wudu sohton,
 flugon on þaet faesten and hyra feore burgon.

(186-194)

Earlier, Offa had predicted that many spoke bravely at council who did not intend to stand fast in the time of need:

Swa him Offa on daeg aer asaede
 on þam meþelstede, þa he gemot haefde,
 þaet þaer modiglice manega spraecon
 þe eft at þearfe þolian noldon.
 (198-201)

After Byrhtnoth falls and the cowards flee, as the heroes rush eagerly to battle, the poet tells us that they wish either to avenge their chief or to die:⁸⁰

þa þaer wendon forð wlance þegenas,
 unearge men efston georne;
 hi woldon þa ealle oðer twega,
 lif forlaetan oððe leofne gewrecan.
 (205-208)

As Ælfwine goes forth, he declares that he wants to clearly demonstrate his nobility:

"Ic wylle mine aefelo eallum gecyþan."
 (216)

No one, he boasts, will be able to accuse him of wanting to leave the battle:

"Ne sceolon me on þaere þeode þegenas aetwitan
 þaet ic of ðisse fyrde feran wille."
 (220-221)

He advances, his mind set on the fight:

þa he forð eode, faehðe gemunde.
 (225)

When Dunnere goes forth, he warns that those who propose to avenge their lord must neither waver nor fear for their lives:

"Ne maeg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð
 frean on folce, ne for feore murnan."
 (258-259)

And Byrhtwold prophesies that he who intends to turn from the battle will mourn forever:

"A maeg gnornian
 se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð."
 (315-316)

He himself intends to lie by the side of his beloved lord:

"Ic eom frod feores; fram ic ne wille,
ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,
be swa leofan men, licgan þence."
(317-319)

The pervasive emphasis on choice in Maldon indicates that the poem is invested with considerable moral purpose. Heroic poetry is, of course, always moral in that the hero, by his very nature, embodies an exemplary standard of conduct, projecting an idealized image of human capabilities and providing a measure by which men may judge themselves. In Maldon, however, the element of choice is so pronounced, the range of choices so narrow and explicit, and the nature of choice so definitive, that we are obliged not only to acknowledge that the poem has moral purpose, but to speculate as to the immediate sources and applications of the heroic imperative which it presents. Some of Maldon's closest readers have in fact recently suggested that the poet intended it as an exemplary celebration of time-honored Anglo-Saxon virtues which had been severely undermined in the age of Aethelred, the poem--like the relevant sections of Cnute II⁸¹--serving as an attempt to recall the demoralized English to their traditional ties and ideals.⁸² Whatever the actual nature of the historical conditions which prevailed in England during the first decades of the 11th century, the poet's contemporaries were themselves convinced that theirs was a degerate age, sadly in need of moral revitalization. The Viking raids which everywhere threatened and undermined English social relations were regarded as a direct result and conclusive evidence of declining Anglo-Saxon loyalties and traditions.⁸³ To this effect we have not only the impassioned denunciations of Wulfstan's Sermo ad Angli, but the frustration and despair of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles which, for

the years 991 through 1017, read like a litany of betrayal, failure, cowardice and defeat.⁸⁴ While the Norsemen moved freely through the countryside, burning, pillaging, and plundering almost at will, the English defense was at best sporadic and irresolute. At worst, English resistance degenerated into a sorry tale of cowardice and treason. In 992, the Chronicles describe the treachery of Ealdorman AElfric and its consequent disaster for the English naval forces:

And the king then entrusted the expedition to the leadership of Ealdorman AElfric . . . and they were to try if they could entrap the Danish army anywhere at sea. Then Ealdorman AElfric sent someone to warn the enemy, and then on the night before the day on which they were to have joined battle, he absconded by night with the army, to his own great disgrace, and then the enemy escaped, except that the crew of one ship was slain. And then the Danish army encountered the ships from East Anglia and from London, and they made great slaughter there.

ASC, 992 C (D, E)

In 993, the cowardice of the English military leaders Fraena, Godwine, and Frythegyst is noted:

Then a very large English army was collected, and when they should have joined battle, the leaders, namely Fraena, Godwine, and Frythegyst, first started the flight.

ASC, 993 C (D, E)

In 1003, Ealdorman AElfric's second disastrous act of treason is recorded:

Then Ealdorman AElfric was to lead the army, but he was up to his old tricks. As soon as they were so close that each army looked on the other, he feigned him sick, and began retching to vomit, and said that he was taken ill, and thus betrayed the people whom he should have led . . . When Swein saw that they were irresolute, and that they all dispersed, he led his army into Wilton, and they ravaged and burnt the borough, and he betook him then to Salisbury, and from there went back to the sea to where he knew his wave-coursers were.

ASC, 1003 C (D, E)

In 1010, Thurcetul Mare's Head is the culprit, leading the East Anglian fyrð in a retreat which leaves the men of Cambridgeshire to face the marauders alone--with predictable results:

In this year, the afore-mentioned army came to East Anglia after Easter and landed at Ipswich, and went straightway to where they heard that Ulfcetel was with his army . . . And at once the East Angles fled. The men of Cambridgeshire stood firm against them. The king's son-in-law Athelstan was killed there . . . and many other good thegns and a countless number of people. It was Thurcetul Mare's Head who first started that flight. The Danes had control of the field . . . and ravaged and burnt that country for three months and even went into the wild fens, slaying the men and cattle, and burning throughout the fens; and they burnt down Thetford and Cambridge.

ASC, 1010 C (D, E)

In 1015, Ealdorman Eadric plots to betray Edmund, causing the English to retreat without engaging the enemy:

Then Ealdorman Eadric collected an army, and so did the atheling Edmund in the North. When they united, the ealdorman wished to betray the atheling, and on that account they separated without fighting, and retreated from their enemies. And then the Ealdorman Eadric seduced 40 ships from the king, and then went over to Cnute.

ASC, 1015 C (D, E)

In 1016, Eadric again turns to treachery, betraying the whole of England (at least as the annalist views it) into the hands of Cnute:

Then Ealdorman Eadric did as he had often done before: he was the first to start the flight . . . and thus betrayed his liege lord and all the people of England. There Cnute had the victory and won for himself all the English people.

ASC, 1016 C (D, E)

Against this dark canvas,⁸⁵ the courage and fortitude of Byrhtnoth and his loyal heorthgeneatas would doubtless prove inspirational,⁸⁶ whether the poem was addressed to the harried English of the early 11th century, or whether it was composed during the reign of Cnute and addressed to an

England still chafing under the painful memory of its recent humiliations and defeats. Compared with recalcitrant military commanders like Eadric and AElfric, Byrhtnoth's eagerness to engage the enemy, and especially his scornful refusal to pay tribute, could not have failed to stir a native English audience. In 991, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, shortly after the battle at Maldon, the English paid tribute to the Vikings in the amount of 10,000 pounds; in 994 they paid 16,000 pounds; in 1002, 24,000 pounds; in 1007, 36,000 pounds; in 1012, 48,000 pounds; and again, in 1014, 21,000 pounds. Thus, in a period of less than twenty-five years, the English paid out a total of 155,000 pounds in an utterly fruitless attempt to buy off, or stave off, the crushing weight of the Viking invasions. Little wonder then that Elliott is led to conclude that "perhaps the poem is intended as a deliberate criticism of the policy of appeasement so characteristic of AElthelred's reign."⁸⁷

Byrhtnoth's controversial second decision, his willingness to allow the Vikings to land their troops, is likely to have proven equally inspirational to a demoralized English audience. This is true not only of his determination to engage the enemy, but with respect to his stance as a national leader--AElþelredes þegen (line 151). It has been suggested that it is precisely as a military commander with national obligations that Byrhtnoth resolves to risk combat rather than seeking to insure the safety of his own district by forcing a stalemate at Maldon which would leave the invading Norsemen free to continue their raids on neighboring territories. According to Samouce, "the Saxons . . . had not assembled for the purpose of merely forcing the retirement of the raiders. In addition to preventing further attacks by the Norwegian force, Byrhtnoth desired to avenge the previous sackings of Folkestone, Sandwich, and

Ipswich."⁸⁸ In other words, as Clark puts it, "The narrator portrays Byrhtnoth as the defender and spokesman of England, not as a provincial earl of Essex, and a Byrhtnoth so conceived could not simply hold the ford until the vikings sailed or marched or rode away. The vikings cannot be thought of as simply going home empty-handed. They must be paid or beaten, and while a defender of Essex (or merely Maldon) might rest content with a comparatively bloodless stalemate--let the other counties defend themselves--our poet's Byrhtnoth cannot let the raiders escape intact."⁸⁹ If the conjectures of Samouce and Clark are appropriate, and there is good reason to believe that they are, then we may conclude that here, as elsewhere, Byrhtnoth is a model leader, providing--as do his loyal retainers--an exemplary standard of conduct to a population sorely in need of it.

Much of the scholarship devoted to Maldon, at least that portion devoted to literary rather than strictly historical questions, has been focused on precisely this issue of Byrhtnoth's decision to permit the Vikings an unobstructed access to the mainland rather than maintaining his impregnable position at the causeway, bottling the enemy up at what was apparently Northey Island, and thereby forcing their ultimate retreat.⁹⁰ Much of the controversy surrounding Byrhtnoth's decision was originally generated by and still revolves around Tolkien's influential "extended commentary on lines 89, 90,"⁹¹ in which he argues that "Beorhtnoth was wrong," his deed an act of "pride and misplaced chivalry . . . too foolish to be heroic," stemming from a "defect in character," and viewed by the poet with "severe criticism."⁹² Thus summarized, Tolkien's argument is representative of what, until very recently, has been a dominant tendency in Maldon criticism,⁹³ so dominant in fact that Clark can speak of a

"received interpretation."⁹⁴ This view, however, has not gone altogether unchallenged. Byrhtnoth has long has his supporters who, while generally willing to accept Tolkien's rendering of ǰa se eorl ongan for his ofermode alyfan landes to fela laþere ǰeode as "then the earl in his overmastering pride actually yielded ground to the enemy, as he should not have done,"⁹⁵ have nevertheless expressed serious reservations about his conclusions, advocating a more heroic interpretation.⁹⁶ More recently, a number of critics have wholly rejected the contention that the poet is critical of Byrhtnoth's actions at the ford. N. F. Blake, suggesting that "Maldon has much in common with the vitae," proposes that the poet's depiction of Byrhtnoth, especially in his death prayer, militates against the possibility that there is any hint of criticism in lines 89, 90.⁹⁷ From another perspective, Milton McC. Gatch, placing the poem squarely in the Germanic heroic tradition, apparently discounts the possibility that the poet is critical of Byrhtnoth without extended discussion or explicit refutation.⁹⁸ Finally, Clark, after a brief summary of the controversy, does explicitly challenge the thesis that Byrhtnoth is faulted in Maldon, arguing that the indictment of Byrhtnoth originates with the scholars rather than the poet and is based on "three recurring errors which may be described as the lexical, the historical, and the analogical."⁹⁹ Clark's three-fold critique of what might conveniently be termed the "Tolkien thesis" provides an excellent framework for further discussion of the controversy and is deserving of closer scrutiny and elaboration.

Without exception, those who argue that Byrhtnoth is guilty of some form of error or excess base their reading on a single, short passage which occurs about one-quarter of the way through the poem:

Ongunnon lytegian þa laðe gystas,
baedon þaet hi upgang agan moston,

ofer þone ford faran, feþan laedan.
 Ða þe eorl ongan for his ofermode
 alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode.
 (86-90)

The key terms are ongunnon lytegian, for his ofermode, and landes to fela; and the most pivotal and widely debated phrase in the passage is, of course, for his ofermode.¹⁰⁰ Here, Tolkien, after a brief lexical argument (during which he urges us to remember "how strongly the taste and wisdom of the English . . . rejected 'excess'"), states the case against Byrhtnoth most succinctly, concluding that "ofermod is in fact always a word of condemnation. In verse the noun occurs only twice, once applied to Beorhtnoth, and once to Lucifer."¹⁰¹ Tolkien's widely accepted gloss of ofermod as "overmastering pride"¹⁰² has most recently been supported and elaborated by Swanton who writes, "In the simple equivalence of glosses, as well as in continuous contexts, the word is invariably one of condemnation . . . It is applied here to Bryhtnoth, and elsewhere to Satan (Genesis, 272). And now can be added a third instance from the newly printed Instructions for Christians (130)."¹⁰³ But the citation of appearances of ofermod outside of Maldon in support of the "Tolkien thesis" has been challenged by Clark who warns that "the other contexts are ostensibly theological or at least religious and possibly represent only one aspect of the word's meaning. Modern English 'pride' had differing values in religious and heroic contexts . . . The heroic context of Maldon may preserve an older, unspecialized sense of ofermod, and an examination of the word's other appearances in Anglo-Saxon poetry strengthens this impression."¹⁰⁴ Tolkien's rendering of ofermod has also been challenged by both Britton and Blake who, after their own lexical deliberations, suggest alternative glosses of "great high courage" and "high spirits, greatness of heart."¹⁰⁵ Blake further observes of

Tolkien's argument, "It is generally assumed that Byrhtnoth suffered particularly from overconfidence and pride. . . . It is possible to concur only if one takes ll. 89-90 in isolation . . . Immediately after ll. 89-90, Byrhtnoth . . . invites the attackers over and then says:

"God ana wat
hwa þaere waelstowe wealdan mote."
(94-95)

He places the outcome firmly in God's hands. He himself does not assume in any way that the English are going to win the battle. Byrhtnoth's action may have been foolish in military terms, but he did not do it because he necessarily thought he was going to win; he did not suffer from overconfidence. On the contrary he showed humility and deference to God.¹⁰⁶ While to acquit Byrhtnoth of arrogance does not altogether exonerate him from Tolkien's charge of "chivalrous" excess,¹⁰⁷ such a display of restraint and humility does not accord easily with "overmastering pride," especially when Byrhtnoth's humility is reiterated and deepened in his death prayer:

"Gefancie þe ðeoda waldend,
ealra þaera wynta þe ic on worulde gebad.
Nu ic ah, milde metod, maeste þearfe
þæt þu minum gaste godes geunne,
þæt min sawul to ðe siðian mote
on þin geweald, þeoden engla,
mid friþe ferian. Ic eom frymde to þe
þæt hi helsceaðan hynan ne moton."
(173-180)

As Blake concludes: "We must accept that Byrhtnoth's prayer presupposes that his soul went to heaven. One cannot conceive that the prayer was inserted for any other reason . . . Nevertheless we are asked to believe that Byrhtnoth suffered from pride. Yet is it likely that the soul of a man who suffered from pride, Satan's sin, would be allowed to go to heaven? It was exactly for this sin that Satan was expelled from there.

I think we are obliged to give up the idea that Byrhtnoth suffered from pride and overconfidence."¹⁰⁸

The second phrase which Tolkien marshals as evidence of what he terms Byrhtnoth's "folly"¹⁰⁹ is to fela: "To fela means in Old English idiom that no ground at all should have been conceded."¹¹⁰ One must assume that the "Old English idiom" referred to is a form of litotes. To fela does fit this rhetorical pattern, but the litotes need not take the direction Tolkien infers, need not mean that Byrhtnoth "yielded ground to the enemy as he should not have done."¹¹¹ It appears far more likely that foreboding rather than condemnation is the kernel of the litotes, the almost elegiac restraint of to fela pointing the gravity of the tragic end it foreshadows. "The narrator's comment that Byrhtnoth granted the vikings landes to fela (90)," observes Clark, "does not rebuke the hero for his decision but rather forewarns the audience of its outcome."¹¹² A variation of this very usage in fact occurs in the description of Byrhtnoth's death wound:

Forlet þa drenga sum daroð of handa,
fleogan of folman, þæt se to forð gewat
þurh ðone aeþelan AEþelredes þegen.
(149-151)

Like to fela, to forð hints darkly of the imminence of death and defeat, the litotes ruefully anticipating the implicit outcome of the action.

In an article supporting Tolkien's reading of Maldon, F. A Battaglia strives to strengthen the case against Byrhtnoth by drawing a connection between the ealdorman's ostensible error and the Viking "deceit" he finds implicit in the conventional gloss of lytegian in line 86: "We know the poet thought Byrhtnoth's decision wrong because the scop tells us he was tricked. The Northmen were let cross after they 'ongunnon lytegian' . . .

If this specification were not made, the poet's view of the arrangement might be open to conjecture."¹¹³ In short, Byrhtnoth is not only "chivalric" and foolhardy as in Tolkien's interpretation, but fooled and foolish as well, committing not only "a noble error, or the error of a noble,"¹¹⁴ but a more mundane error in the realm of practical military judgment. Thus Byrhtnoth stands twice indicted: on the one hand, he is accused of deliberately sacrificing his official responsibilities to an unrealistic ideal;¹¹⁵ on the other, he is criticised for his lack of military acumen. In each case, Byrhtnoth is indicted for poor leadership. That the actual terms of accusation may stand in sharp contradiction with each other seems to have escaped notice, or at least does not appear to have merited serious consideration. Yet it is difficult to see how one can equate a cavalier disregard for consequences with an ignorance of their existence. Clark, challenging Battaglia's interpretation, offers an alternative gloss of lytegian. Following a complex lexical argument involving a lengthy examination of cognates, he suggests that lytegian indicates not that the Vikings employ deceit, but that they "acted prudently or sensibly," being forced by Byrhtnoth's staunch defense of the ford to adopt some form of "obsequious behavior . . . The tone of lytegian in The Battle of Maldon is heroic mockery . . . Lytegian deflates the masterly presence, the assured posture which had been assumed by the vikings' messenger and treats the invader with . . . fine contempt . . . Lytegian does not mean that Byrhtnoth was somehow tricked."¹¹⁶

The rejection of the conventional gloss of lytegian as "trickery" or "guile" is critical for Clark who, like Battaglia, believes that "if the vikings acted cunningly, Byrhtnoth was indeed tricked."¹¹⁷ But why should this be so? The syllogism appears something less than iron-clad. To put

it baldly, that the Vikings use trickery is no proof that Byrhtnoth is tricked; nor is it apparent that Clark's interpretation of lytegian is necessarily inconsistent with the conventional gloss of the term as "cunning" or "guile." The Vikings, however courageous and warlike, are pirates, mercenaries who are ready to adopt the most expedient means to achieve their ends. They seek booty, preferably in the easy form of tribute, but if necessary in the hard-earned form of plunder. Faced with a stalemate at the ford which can only result either in their piecemeal slaughter or in their empty-handed retreat,¹¹⁸ they drop their bluster and threats and cynically turn to negotiation for what they cannot directly accomplish by intimidation or force.¹¹⁹ Although the strategy is hardly of Odyssean proportions, it is shrewd enough, perhaps even cunning or guileful. But this is no indication that Byrhtnoth has the wool pulled over his eyes. His choice is not contingent upon any Viking sleight of hand. "Byrhtnoth's decision," Elliott notes, "is not the outcome of a moment's Übermut; it is the last step in a series of events which necessitated some such action."¹²⁰ As Clark himself observes, "The viking request for leave to cross the ford implies they will not again attempt to cross it except by leave. At this point Byrhtnoth knows that his opportunity to defeat the enemy depends on his willingness to risk defeat in a pitched battle on his side of the ford."¹²¹ Throughout the poem, the standard of what is heroic and appropriate in Maldon is the determination to move forward and engage the enemy.¹²² Like the last stand of his loyal retainers, Byrhtnoth's decision at the ford is consistent with that standard, all of a piece with himself and at one with the underlying pattern of values and choices which unifies the poem.¹²³

The brief stalemate at the ford parallels two earlier passages in

the poem: like the locking of the tides, it momentarily suspends the action, building tension and storing further momentum; and like Byrhtnoth's earlier exchange with the Viking messenger, the scene provides the occasion for a dramatic demonstration of Byrhtnoth's continuing resolve and courage. Far from gullible or gulled, Byrhtnoth emerges from this second exchange clear-eyed and resolute:

Ongan ceallian þa ofer cald waeter
 Byrhtelmes bearn (beornas gehlyston):
 "Nu eow is gerymed, gað recene to us,
 guman to guþe; god ana wat
 hwa þaere waelstowe wealdan mote."
 (91-95)

Here, as in his earlier dramatized confrontation with the enemy, Byrhtnoth's stance is exemplary.

Since the lexical deliberations and arguments must, in the end, remain inconclusive, it would be foolhardy to risk an interpretation of Maldon based on such flimsy evidence as is afforded by the uncertain gloss of three ambivalent phrases like for his ofermode, landes to fela, and ongunnon lytegian. It would be misleading in any case to wrench these few lines out of context so that they serve as the axis upon which the interpretation of the whole poem turns. Even under more auspicious circumstances, the contrary procedure would be in order. Rather than attempt to approach the meaning of Maldon by way of speculation on the meaning of Byrhtnoth's ofermod--to fela and lytegian are, after all, relegated to the position of supporting evidence--we must interpret Byrhtnoth's ofermod in the context of Maldon, that is to say in light of the poem's whole configuration of values, attitudes, structural and rhetorical strategies, all of which point to a heroic rather than a deleterious understanding of Byrhtnoth's controversial decision at the ford.

The second major error which confounds Maldon scholarship is, according to Clark, the "analogical" error which "lies in interpreting The Battle of Maldon by conscious analogy or unconscious assimilation with other literary texts."¹²⁴ After rejecting Ker's equation of Byrhtnoth's ofermod with Roland's desmesure,¹²⁵ Clark addresses himself to the "analogical error" as it operates on a more general, or rather generic level: "We have been told repeatedly that traditional heroic poetry favored desperate last stands in tight places against overwhelming odds, and the conventional reading of Maldon identifies the ford with the traditional local, an analogy which leads to the assumption that the vikings so far outnumbered or outclassed the English that once the invaders crossed the Pante, the critical point in the action had passed and Byrhtnoth's army was doomed. The poem does not support this assumption: it is not until after the flight of the cowards that the English speak or act as if they were fighting without hope,¹²⁶ and the narrator is conspicuously non-committal before the battle begins."¹²⁷ This is Clark's most telling argument. If, as appears certain,¹²⁸ Byrhtnoth's decision to engage the Vikings does not of itself entail disaster, if "the flight of the cowardly retainers and ensuing panic bring the action of the poem to its decisive point,"¹²⁹ then a reading of Maldon which holds Byrhtnoth accountable for the defeat and slaughter of the English forces is clearly inaccurate and misleading. To choose to do battle with a resolute and formidable foe is, admittedly, to risk death and defeat; but to risk death and defeat is not necessarily to court inevitable disaster. "A traditional last stand and death in battle against great odds concludes The Battle of Maldon";¹³⁰ but this is not the situation at the outset, and, if we are to believe Offa (lines 237-243), is a consequence not of Byrhtnoth's "chivalrous

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excess" or "overmastering pride," but of the straightforward cowardice of Godric, his brothers, and all those who--betraying their chief and their comrades--

guþe ne gymdon,
ac wendon fram þam wige and þone wudu sohton,
flugon on þaet faesten and hyra feore burgon.
(192-194)

Byrhtnoth cannot be held directly accountable for the catastrophic denouement of Maldon.¹³¹ The only way to read ofermod as a term of condemnation is to assume that, whatever the odds, he should have chosen stalemate rather than risking a direct confrontation with the foe. Of course, one is free to assume just this. But one is not free to proceed as if the heroic poet who composed Maldon shared this opinion.

Within the confines of the poem, all evidence points to a heroic appraisal of Byrhtnoth. Thus we must look further afield to discover the bias which has led so many sensitive readers of Old English poetry to affirm confidentially that Byrhtnoth is held up as an object of "severe criticism" in Maldon. Here the "analogical error," as further elaborated by Clark, might be of some service: "The most seductive analogies nearly escape our conscious awareness; they form part of our general idea of literary genres. Thus, the received view of The Battle of Maldon defines as 'tragedy' and views tragedy in the dubious light of the theory of the tragic flaw once generally applied, or perhaps misapplied, to the dramatic tragedies of the English Renaissance."¹³² The misapplication of Aristotelian poetics is, unhappily, not limited to Maldon. Hardly a medieval hero has escaped unscathed. As we have seen, Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, Roland, and the Arthur of Morte Arthure have all been viewed as tragically flawed heroes who are ultimately responsible for their own fate and that of their people. The theory of the tragic flaw is, of course, wholly

inappropriate to the relationship between the medieval hero and his fate. Although the hero of the heroic poem is, in a very special way, tragic, he is not so because a supposed flaw in his character makes of him an accomplice to his fate, but because--whether by choice or by circumstance--his very heroism catapults him beyond the pragmatic confines of prudence and into a direct confrontation with necessity. If one were absolutely forced to rely on the Aristotelian vocabulary, hybris, at least in Irving's application of it, would be a far more serviceable term than hamartia for describing Byrhtnoth's ofermod, which, according to Irving, "clearly bears some resemblance to Aristotelean hybris, but the kind of tragic situation we find here is perhaps . . . peculiar to a heroic society, where the very assertion of a heroic virtue may in itself be the cause of a tragic outcome . . . It is not a mere mistake or an error of judgment--it is inevitable."¹³³ This is a sensitive appraisal of Byrhtnoth's ofermod. But it would be best to dispense altogether with the Aristotelian vocabulary. Hybris, like hamartia, inherently implies moral categories wholly alien to the medieval heroic poet who is not concerned with psychological characterization or an ethic of restraint. Heroic morality is large, bold, and direct. It has nothing to do with flaw or moderation, and everything to do with magnanimity, loyalty, and courage. Quite simply, the hero, qua hero, risks death and operates on the edge of disaster. His role is to affirm an ideal human value, not to circumvent necessity by stratagem, prudence, or cunning. Here, at least, an analogy may be drawn between Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, Roland, and Arthur, and, if one might be permitted to extend figuratively Irving's comment on the relationship between Byrhtnoth and his retainers, "It is the very heroic style itself which is embodied in the figure of Byrhtnoth, both in the way he

speaks and in the way he acts. He is the pattern and formula for the rest."¹³⁴

The third major error which Clark identifies in Maldon scholarship is the "historical error" which, he argues, "rests on the assumption that since the poem is specific and detailed, it must have been composed soon after the historical Byrhtnoth's death and must accurately represent 'what really happened' at Maldon in August of 991 . . . To view The Battle of Maldon as the imperfect copy of an external reality and to suppose that its 'omissions' can be supplied by scrutinizing the present-day Blackwater Estuary is to fall into the 'historical error.'"¹³⁵ This assumption had earlier been challenged by J. B. Bessinger, Jr., who warned that "the opinion held by many that it [Maldon] was first composed shortly after the battle, possibly by an eyewitness, has no historical basis but springs from an impression of the vivid and minute detail found in the poem."¹³⁶ Adding that "the powerful sense of verisimilitude . . . may derive more from our knowledge that some such event did happen, plus the emotional and stylistic competence of the poem as a whole, rather than from any group of details," Bessinger concludes, "tests of specific realism . . . would appear to be largely beyond our reach."¹³⁷ Clark enlists two additional arguments against the supposition that Maldon is "a contemporary and authentic account of the battle."¹³⁸ Noting (after some abbreviated geographical and linguistical observations of the manuscript) that "little hard evidence connects our text with the period or locale of the actual battle," he challenges the "almost unshakable confidence that it was composed close upon the event," arguing that "no evidence compels us to assume that the surviving version of the poem is much older than the MS which preserved it."¹³⁹ Then, observing that "the

discrepancies between the various accounts of Byrhtnoth's death . . . seem as striking as the parallels,"¹⁴⁰ Clark concludes, "Our text of The Battle of Maldon is best approached as imaginative literature not history, and possibly as a work of art aimed at an audience near the middle of the eleventh century."¹⁴¹

While such "historical caveats" are bracing and important, the immediate questions with which they are concerned must, to a large extent, be regarded as still open, or at least not wholly resolved. In the absence of an authoritative account of the actual battle, it is impossible to determine the relative accuracy of the poet's depiction of events; lacking "hard evidence," one would be equally hard put to date the poem with anything approaching confidence.¹⁴² The point is that it is not imperative to do so. All that is necessary is to recognize the tentative nature of Maldon's historical status and avoid the error of attempting to interpret the poem by way of its uncertain historicity. The historical reliability of events portrayed in Maldon matters little or not at all. What does matter is how those events signify in the heroic poem of which they are an essential part. Earlier, in our comparison of Maldon with Brunanburh, we saw how the poetical strategies of the former revealed a poet essentially concerned with historical events as a vehicle for the presentation of exemplary heroic ideals. As Gordon observes, "The poet's real subject was not the battle, but the deeds and deaths of the English heroes. Like most of the old heroic poets, he was interested less in the spectacle and movements of battle than in the heroic problem and how it was solved by the hero."¹⁴³ Swanton, who is almost everywhere else wrong-headed, shrewdly comments, "There is no sense of historic perspective . . . Instead a great deal of space is given to stating the apparent motives of

those who take part in the action of the poem. We are intended not to concentrate on the action of the battle, nor on its consequence, but on the exact nature of what it is that leads the English party to act in the way it does."¹⁴⁴ Even Irving who speaks of Maldon as "almost a news story" and as a "fragment of medieval journalism"¹⁴⁵ recognizes that the critical relationship between poetry and event is one in which "a real historical event is being raised to a higher level of significance; the actions thus become increasingly symbolic; the ordinary identifiable men of Essex approach and enter the world of heroes, the world of legend."¹⁴⁶ In Maldon then, it is heroic values and attitudes, not history, which give to events--real or otherwise--their final shape and meaning.

With respect to the date of composition, here too we are restricted to supposition; nor is it critical to establish whether the poem was composed "pen in hand"¹⁴⁷ or as "a work of art aimed at an audience near the middle of the eleventh century."¹⁴⁸ The later date accords well with Clark's observation that "the rhetoric of Maldon militates against its historicity; an omniscient narrator judges the poem's actions from a vantage point appropriate to heroic legend."¹⁴⁹ But at best, this does no more than corroborate what is already obvious from the poem itself--that unlike Brunanburh, Maldon is primarily concerned with individuals and motives, its subject not history, but the heroic life. In any case, whatever Maldon's date of composition, "it is certainly not a work of hot haste,"¹⁵⁰ a work shaped by the rush and press of events. Even if composed relatively early, at the end of Aethelred's reign or during the brief tenure of Edmund Ironsides¹⁵¹ (a date which would, by the way, eliminate the inconvenience of a harsh portrayal of the Norsemen during

the reign of Cnute), the poem would not thereby become magically transformed into a historical document concerned with historical judgments rather than heroic ideals, into a chronicle poem rather than a heroic one.

Despite the evidence and the caveats, and despite the fact that almost all commentators on the poem recognize and acclaim it as heroic poetry of a very high order, the "historical error" continues to run very deep. Indeed, as the controversy surrounding Byrhtnoth's ofermod demonstrates, it is still crucial to determine whether one regards Maldon as versified history or as heroic poetry. Everything depends upon and follows from this initial decision. There is no middle ground; one brings an entirely different set of expectations to each kind of poem. What is at issue for the purpose of our present discussion is whether Byrhtnoth is to be judged as a historical figure in a social situation--as the English military commander of the Essex fyrð--or whether he is to be judged as the protagonist of a heroic poem.

It is probably safe to say that the ideal Germanic hero seldom makes a good general. The priorities are of a different order. The heroic obligation is to demonstrate the essential worth of the human being, whatever the consequences. Not obliged to win or to survive, not particularly renowned for his prudence or caution, the hero is judged according to his magnanimity, courage, fidelity and resolve. The general, on the other hand, is measured ultimately by his success--or his failure. Unlike the hero, he is judged by the event. Victory and defeat are the definitive terminals of his endeavor; prudence, command, and strategy are his virtues. The milieu of generals is historical and real, that of heroes poetic and ideal. They converge but rarely and to measure one by the standards of the other entails a disastrous confusion of contexts.¹⁵²

Yet this is precisely the trap into which Tolkien falls when he accuses Byrhtnoth of "making a 'sporting fight' on level terms."¹⁵³ This is the vantage point one might adopt to judge a historical personage engaged in a historical event.¹⁵⁴ Essentially, Tolkien accuses Byrhtnoth of acting as if he were the hero of a heroic poem rather than the socially responsible commander of the Essex fyrð. "Why did Beorhnoth do this?" he asks. "Owing to a defect of character, no doubt; but a character, we may surmise, not only formed by nature, but moulded also by 'aristocratic tradition,' enshrined in tales and verse of poets now lost save for echoes. Beorhtnoth was chivalrous rather than strictly heroic."¹⁵⁵ Whatever one surmises, Byrhtnoth is the hero of a heroic poem, at least he is so in Maldon, and it is as such that he must be judged.¹⁵⁶ If one insists upon approaching Maldon as if one were a social commentator examining a historical document, then in fairness one must condemn Byrhtwold, Offa, Edward, and the rest as well as their chief; for they too act like characters "enshrined in tales and verse of poets now lost save for echoes."¹⁵⁷ Viewed in the same light to which Tolkien subjects Byrhtnoth, the hearth-companions who stay to fight and die waste themselves in a futile chivalric gesture, allowing traditional (and poetic) heroic loyalties to supercede their "real" social obligation to defend the countryside. As historical figures, would it not have been more prudent and practical to withdraw, strategically rally their retreating comrades, regroup, and reengage the invaders under more auspicious circumstances? So much for "history." One has only to apply the "historical" viewpoint to the heorhtwerod to see it for the non-sequitur it is. And indeed, when it comes to judging Byrhtnoth's loyal retainers, Tolkien takes quite a different tack. "In their situation," he writes, "heroism was superb.

Their duty was unimpaired by the error of their master, and (more poignantly) neither in the hearts of those near to the old man was love lessened. It is the heroism of obedience and love not of pride of wilfulness that is the most heroic and the most moving."¹⁵⁸ In short, Tolkien employs something of a double standard:¹⁵⁹ the retainers are judged in the flattering light of traditional, Germanic heroic values, Byrhtnoth in the harsh glare of history. To distinguish between an "authority to be obeyed on the spot"¹⁶⁰ and "a subordinate . . . who had no responsibility downwards, only loyalty upwards"¹⁶¹ or between "the desire for honour and glory, in life and after death"¹⁶² and "the heroism of obedience and love"¹⁶³ is improper and misleading. But perhaps it is only by some such eloquent sleight of hand, one which masks an almost imperceptible shift of perspective, that Byrhtnoth's heorthwerod can be praised while he himself is blamed. The love of honor and fame is in no way inferior to or in conflict with the love which binds lord and man. They are two interlocking halves of that single whole which is the Germanic heroic code. As Donahue has so aptly remarked: "English heroic verse was the poetry of an aristocratic warrior class. Courage was the first prerequisite for every member of that class. Courage and loyalty for the noble retainer; courage and generosity for the lord. Death is the ultimate proof of courage and, as the poet saw it, its wages. The motive for the generosity of the lord and the loyalty of the warrior is good repute (dom). That survives death."¹⁶⁴

If we eliminate a priori conclusions, false assumptions and inappropriate expectations, if we reject the temptation to read Maldon as a poem à clef, as if we could find the key to its meaning in history, Aristotelian tragedy, or other poems of like genre, what then remains to

corroborate Tolkien's opinion that Byrhtnoth is subjected to "severe criticism" in the poem? Clearly, we are back where we started; the only evidence upon which such a supposition might be based is to be found in the three highly ambivalent phrases ongunnon lytegian, for his ofermode, and landes to fela. Admittedly, in isolation from their context, the conjunction of these three terms in a single passage would be disturbing, implying that Byrhtnoth's actions are being questioned, if not "severely criticized." But the lines do not exist in a vacuum; they are an intrinsic part of a heroic narrative every aspect of which militates against such a reading. If the poem conveys an exemplary ideal, it is a heroic ideal, not an idealization of prudence or wisdom.¹⁶⁵ If the narrative unfolds according to a series of critical choices, the valid choice is always to engage the enemy.¹⁶⁶ If the flight of the cowards is the turning point of the narrative action, then Byrhtnoth cannot be held accountable for the outcome of the battle. If the poetic strategies of Maldon--its structure, style, rhetoric, and diction as well as the poet's proven preference for dramatic utterance and "close-up" narrative techniques--demonstrates a concern with the nature of heroism rather than its consequences, then we cannot judge the heroic action by its results.¹⁶⁷ In the end, nothing in Maldon really supports Tolkien's indictment of Byrhtnoth. Tolkien would have us believe that a fitting epigraph for Maldon would be Wiglaf's mournful comment following the fall of Beowulf, his chief:¹⁶⁸

"Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan
wraec adreodan."

(3077-3078)

But far closer to the spirit of what proved to be the final flowering of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry in England is Beowulf's own sober appraisal of the human situation:

"Ure aeghwylc sceal ende gebidan
worolde lifes, wyrce se þe mote
domes aer deaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
unlifgendum aefter selest."

(1386-1389)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

CHAPTER II

¹The subject matter of the poem can be dated with some accuracy from the historical account of Hygelac's last raid in Gregory of Tours' Gregorii episcopi Turonensis Historia Francorum, cited by Jane Acomb Leake, The Geats of Beowulf (Madison, 1967), p. 121.

²The best discussion of the date of Beowulf is that of Dorothy Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf (Oxford, 1951). Whitelock suggests, however, that it is equally plausible that the poem was composed in the second half of the eighth century. Ritchie Girvan argues for a composition date in the latter part of the seventh century; Beowulf and the Seventh Century: Language and Context (London, 1971).

³For a discussion of the actual date of the battle, see Bruce Dickins, "The Day of Byrhtnoth's Death and other Obits from a Twelfth Century Ely Kalendar," Leeds Studies in English and Kindred Languages, VI (1937), 14-24.

⁴According to George Clark, "The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem," Speculum, XLIII (Jan. 1968), 55-56. The date is in contention; see below, pp. 165-168. See also Fred C. Robinson, "Some aspects of the Maldon Poet's Artistry," JEGP, 75 (1976), 28-32; John Mc Kinnell, "On the Date of The Battle of Maldon," Medium AEvum, 44 (1975), 121-136.

⁵A concise account of the relationship between heroic ideals and actual social practice in late 10th and early 11th century England can be found in Clark, 59-60, 71; Milton McC. Gatch, Loyalties and Traditions: Man and His World in Old English Literature (New York, 1971), p. 130; but cf. Michael J. Swanton, "The Battle of Maldon: A Literary Caveat," JEGP, LXVII (1968), 441-450, who argues that the poem treats heroic values ironically, viewing them as an anachronism in Ethelred's England.

⁶The make-up of the fyrd is discussed by Clark, 63-64; M. McC. Gatch, pp. 133-134; Swanton, 444. Swanton believes that the fighting force at Maldon was composed of the general rather than the select fyrd, but this is doubtful.

⁷The similarities are summarized by E. V. Gordon, ed. The Battle of Maldon (London, 1937), reprinted 1960, p. 23. Cf. Swanton, p. 443, who warns that "the Anglo-Saxon period does not present the socially static picture that the literary critics have too often considered it. We have often been warned how dangerous it is to read into even the society of the Migration Age, the social patterns described by Tacitus of the first-century Germani; how much more incredible (however conservative military society) that such an ethos should have consciously survived until almost

the end of the millenium." The caveat is well taken. But Swanton's conclusion that Maldon is "a travesty of antique heroic values" in which Byrhtnoth's "faithful . . . followers strut and puff to their deaths"(448) is more incredible by far. Certainly the history of early English social institutions is not static. No history is. But as M. McC. Gatch remarks, "Anglo-Saxon institutions had a remarkable continuity," (p. 121). With respect to the traditional patterns of Anglo-Saxon loyalty and military organization, especially as reflected in literary and social ideals (one thinks immediately of the early 11th century Laws of Cnute as well as Maldon) all the evidence points to a gradual, conservative process that stubbornly retained at least as much as it relinquished. See below, pp. 129-130 . See also Malone, Beowulf, p. 142.

⁸The heroic style of Maldon is examined by Gordon, pp. 21-30; Ralph W. V. Elliott, "Byrhtnoth and Hildebrand: A study in Heroic Technique," Studies in Old English Literature, ed. Greenfield, 53-70; Edward B. Irving, Jr., "The Heroic Style in The Battle of Maldon," SP, LVIII (1961), 457-467.

⁹They are regarded as exemplary by M. McC. Gatch, p. 135; Clark, 59-60, 71; Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ed. The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems (New York, 1942), p. xxx; all citations to The Battle of Maldon in my dissertation are to The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems, pp. 7-16.

¹⁰All citations to The Battle of Brunanburh in my dissertation are to The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems, pp. 16-20.

¹¹An account of the Chronicle manuscripts and the historical background of the poem can be found in Dobbie, p. XXXVII; see also John C. Pope, Seven Old English Poems (New York, 1966), pp. 5-9.

¹²There have been a number of interesting comparisons drawn between Maldon and Brunanburh: see for example, Swanton, 442-443; J. B. Bessinger, Jr., "Maldon and the Olafsdrapa: An Historical Caveat," CL, XIV (1962), reprinted in Old English Literature, ed. M. Stevens and J. Mandel (Lincoln, 1968), 240, 251; Dobbie, p. XXX; Gordon, pp. 28-30.

¹³For a general discussion of the relationship between heroism, patriotism, history, and religion in heroic poetry, see W. P. Ker, Epic and Romance (Oxford, 1908), pp. 20-23; C. M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (London, 1952), p. 21, points out that Brunanburh, because of its emphasis on panegyric, falls short of heroic poetry; See also Margaret Ashdown, ed. English and Norse Documents Relating to the Reign of Ethelred the Unready (London, 1930), p. 1; Gordon, p. 28.

¹⁴This is noted by many commentators, for example, Pope, p. 56.

¹⁵This too has been observed by almost all readers of the poem: see for example, Gordon, p. 28; Dobbie, pp. XXIX-XXX.

¹⁶They are listed, together with an attempt to identify their historical counterparts, in Gordon, pp. 83-86.

¹⁷Twenty-six percent of the poem is cast in dramatic form, according to Adeline Courtney Bartlett, The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry (New York, 1935), p. 103.

¹⁸There is a discussion of the relationship between heroic poetry and dramatic form in Ker, pp. 17, 20, 23; Bowra, pp. 30-31; Dorothy Everett, Essays on Middle English Literature (Oxford, 1955), p. 19.

¹⁹I mean, of course, essential recourse--not the sort of thing where Beowulf or Arthur thanks God for victory or the Gawain poet invokes the protection of the Virgin for her knight.

²⁰See Francis P. Magoun, Jr., "The Theme of the Beasts of Battle," NM, LVI (1955), 81-90.

²¹Neil D. Isaacs, Structural Principles in Old English Poetry (Knoxville, 1968), p. 123, notes that "the traditional beasts of battle appear in order to complete what warriors and weapons had begun."

²²See Bonjour, Twelve Beowulf Papers, pp. 138-139.

²³For another view of the cinematic alternation of perspectives, see Elliott, 62-63, who observes, "In Maldon the technique is often that of the cine-camera: close-up one moment, long shot the next."

²⁴See Swanton, p. 448: "The inevitability of their warrior deaths had been anticipated throughout, being capable of brave acts only fa hwile they might hold their weapons." See also, Irving, 463; Clark, 67; Isaacs, p. 165.

²⁵Isaacs, p. 165, notes that "where men consistently and conventionally vow to fight as long as their hands may hold their swords, the failure represents final doom."

²⁶J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son," Essays and Studies, NS I (1953), 1-18, reprinted in The Tolkien Reader (New York, 1966), 22. Tolkien's comment is not only unconvincing but, as I hope to demonstrate, dangerously misleading. For a full discussion of Byrhtnoth's decision as well as the related controversy surrounding the interpretations of to fela, lytegian, ofermod, see below, pp. 154-172.

²⁷Clark, 70, writes that "the narrator's comment that Byrhtnoth granted the vikings landes to fela (90) does not rebuke the hero for his decision but rather forewarns the audience of its outcome."

²⁸Clark, 63.

²⁹Clark, 63.

³⁰L. L. Schücking, "Das Königsideal in Beowulf," Englische Studien, LXVII (1932), 1-14. trans. Nicholson, An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame, 1963), 64.

³¹See for example, N. F. Blake, "The Battle of Maldon," Neophilologus, XLIX (1965), 339.

³²Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 22, implies that Byrhtnoth's loyal heorthgeneatas are the true heroes of the poem, but he bases this judgment on the mistaken belief that Byrhtnoth is subjected to "severe criticism" for allowing

the Vikings to land their forces. Tolkien's reading is examined below, pp. 154ff.

³³Isaacs, p. 160, points out that "the formality or formalization of action, diction, characterization, motivation and exhortation suggests that an examination of ritual elements might be fruitful." Both Clark, 61-62, and M. McC. Gatch, p. 135, recognize Byrhtnoth's death and the flight of the cowards as the narrative and thematic pivot of the poem.

³⁴Irving, 460, stresses the "rigid conventionality" of the retainers' speeches; Elliott, 66-68, notes the variations among them as well; see also Gordon, p. 27.

³⁵For an appreciation of the structure of Maldon, see Clark, 61-62.

³⁶Both M. McC. Gatch, pp. 131-132, 135, and Clark, 61-62, argue convincingly that Byrhtnoth's death and the consequent flight of the cowards form "the pivot" and "turning point" of the poem. It logically follows that if Byrhtnoth's death and the cowards' retreat serve as the pivot and turning point of Maldon, then its climax can be nothing other than the heroic last stand of Byrhtnoth's loyal retainers.

³⁷Irving, 458-460. See also Elliott, 56-57; B. S. Phillpotts, "The Battle of Maldon: Some Danish Affinities," MLR, XXIV (1929), 173.

³⁸See above, note 18.

³⁹Elliott, 64, observes that "the second part varies the technique of the first by giving greater prominence to speech-making . . . While Byrhtnoth dominated the field there was no need for other voices to be heard. But once he lay slain, the mutual encouraging began."

⁴⁰It is interesting to note that Byrhtnoth, as commander, speaks directly only to the Vikings and to God. His loyal companions, on the other hand, in their assertion of tragic fraternity, address only one another.

⁴¹See Clark, 67; Swanton, 444-445.

⁴²Clark, 57.

⁴³Irving, 461, "A central theme of the poem is words and deeds, and there is an ultimate point where they become almost indistinguishable . . . It is the consistent pattern of this poem that words must be validated by acts."

⁴⁴Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 5, calls it "an ancient and honoured expression of heroic will."

⁴⁵M. McC. Gatch, p. 127. The fighters at Maldon are, in fact, only the last and most dramatic examples of a long succession of historical figures whose heroic demonstrations of loyalty have been recorded and preserved. For a brief summary of the best known of such heroic figures

as well as an account of the nature and role of loyalty in Anglo-Saxon society see Whitelock, The Beginnings of English Society (Baltimore, 1952), pp. 29-47; Audience, pp. 87-90; Peter Hunter Blair, Roman Britain and Early England 55 B.C. - A.D. 871 (New York, 1963), pp. 247-252; An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 209-210; see also M. McC. Gatch, pp. 115-135; Helen Cam, England Before Elizabeth (London, 1950), pp. 25, 39.

⁴⁶See Blake, 338; M. McC. Gatch, p. 132.

⁴⁷Some commentators argue that this helps to explain Byrhtnoth's decision to allow the Vikings an uncontested passage to the mainland rather than forcing a stalemate and Viking retreat by maintaining his impregnable military advantage at the causeway--an advantage that would protect Essex at the cost of leaving the rest of the nation open to attack from an unengaged and undefeated Viking host. See below, pp.

⁴⁸Cnute II, 77 condemns to death both those who betray their comrades and those who betray their lord; such traitors are also condemned to loss of all property: "And the man, who in his cowardice deserts his lord or his comrades . . . whether it is on an expedition on sea or on land, is to forfeit all that he owns and his own life; and the lord is to succeed to the possessions and to the land which he previously gave him." (Cited by M. McC. Gatch, p. 127). Godric and his brothers clearly fall into this category on both counts, traitors both to their lord and to their comrades. Elliott, 43, and M. McC. Gatch, p. 130, note that the cowards serve as foils to Byrhtnoth's loyal retainers.

⁴⁹Cam, p. 125.

⁵⁰Tolkien, 20.

⁵¹With these words of Offa and Byrhtwold, compare Wiglaf's denunciation of the cowards in Beowulf, lines 2884-2891.

⁵²One cannot help being reminded of the swineherd who avenged Ealdorman Cumbra on Sigeberht according to the account in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 755. The dislocation of chronology which misdates the entry by two years is noted by Whitelock, ed. and trans. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (New Brunswick, 1961), p. 30. All citations to the Chronicle in my dissertation are to Whitelock's edition.

⁵³Clark, 64-65, discovers in Byrhtnoth's own response to the Viking messenger a ringing declaration of the unity of the fyrd from which he refuses to differentiate himself on the grounds of superior rank.

⁵⁴Irving, 465-466, points out that "heroism in Maldon . . . tends to be social and cooperative. Byrhtnoth himself, in his life and death, is a great example to his men, but there is also a clear pattern of mutual encouragement and example among the retainers themselves."

⁵⁵Although every speech of the heorthgeneatas takes the form of an exhortation, I am citing here only those specifically named as such by the poet.

⁵⁶There is an excellent exposition of this distinction in Elliott, 56-57; Elliott's discussion of diction in this context is especially valuable.

⁵⁷Elliott, 56.

⁵⁸As Dobbie, XXVIII, notes, "Not all of the text has been preserved, matter having been lost both at the beginning and at the end. But the extant fragment begins with Byrhtnoth's preparations for the battle, and ends some time after the death of Byrhtnoth; it is therefore likely that not a great deal has been lost in either place, and the assumption of a single leaf lost from the manuscript before and after the extant text would be enough to account for both the missing portions."

⁵⁹Elliott, 56, observes, "Byrhtnoth . . . commands and directs . . . After the earl has fallen, the tone changes and those who remain to fight on exhort each other as equals."

This does not mean to imply that the poet seeks to challenge the fundamentally hierarchical relations upon which Anglo-Saxon heroic society rests. Such a challenge would entail an anachronism of monstrous proportions. No. Offa and the rest remain firmly within their world, going forward to meet their deaths with vows of allegiance to their chief upon their lips, the distinctions between retainer and ceorl, heorthwerod and fyrð, novice and tried veteran, carefully upheld. Yet such distinctions do not impair for a moment our sense of the fighters at Maldon as a collective unit, men who--whatever their social origins or position--share a common situation and are resolved to meet a common fate with a common will.

⁶⁰Clark, 57-58; "The Anglo-Saxon poet intends to praise heroes and condemn cowards, to divide men--Englishmen that is--into the classes of sheep and goats according to an unambiguous criterion: those who advance against the enemy are the good, those who flee from him are the bad . . . The central conflict . . . is not between Anglo-Saxons and vikings but between heroism and cowardice. "There are fine discussions of the role of choice in Maldon in Clark, passim, especially 57-58, and in Irving, 464-465.

⁶¹Irving, 464; see also Clark, 63.

⁶²Clark, 62.

⁶³Irving, 464.

⁶⁴The convergence of personal and public, social and individual, is recognized by Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 20; Irving, 465-466.

⁶⁵Clark, 57.

⁶⁶Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 19.

⁶⁷G. C. Britton, "The Characterization of the Vikings in The Battle of Maldon," Notes and Queries, XII (1965), 137. Byrhtnoth's decision to permit the Vikings uncontested access to the mainland is, of course, a source of major critical controversy and has generated considerable debate.

Our present discussion of this passage is however confined to a preliminary examination of Byrhtnoth's decision as one of the four crucial choices which govern the narrative movement of the poem. This issue and the critical debate to which it has given rise are fully discussed below, pp. 154ff.

⁶⁸See Elliott, 57; Clark, 71.

⁶⁹This is the scenario according to Gordon, p. 4; Bowra, p. 122; Warren A. Samouce, "General Byrhtnoth," JEGP, LXII (1963), 131; Bessinger, 247; J. E. Cross, "Oswald and Byrhtnoth: A Christian Saint and a Hero who is Christian," ES, XLVI (1965), 67-68; Clark, 67-68; but cf. Irving, 462, who unaccountably concludes that "presumably the English could have held the Vikings on the island until they starved them out."

⁷⁰Uneasy because an undefeated raiding force allowed to withdraw intact might well return when the Essex fyrd was less prepared; even if this danger were averted, there remained the near certainty that the Vikings would continue to ravage and loot the neighboring English provinces. In fact, the Vikings did indeed continue to plunder the countryside after their success at Maldon; see Gordon, pp. 6-7.

⁷¹Although even here arrogance may be somewhat qualified by the subtly manipulative deference which the Viking messenger pays to Byrhtnoth, hoping to flatter him as the potential ransomer of his people; see Clark, 64-65.

⁷²So alluring in fact that many argue that stalemate represents the correct choice and condemn Byrhtnoth for permitting the Vikings access to the mainland. For exponents of this view, see Tolkien, Beorhtnoth; Cross; A. D. Mills, "Byrhtnoth's Mistake in Generalship," NM, LXVII (1966), 14-22; F. J. Battaglia, "Notes on Maldon: Toward A Definitive ofermod," ELN, II (1965), 247-249.

⁷³The distinction between socio-historical and literary-heroic obligations is taken up below, pp. 168-170.

⁷⁴See M. McC. Gatch, p. 135; Clark, 61-62.

⁷⁵Irving, 464.

⁷⁶Clark, 61.

⁷⁷Are the mass who flee less culpable than the cowardly sons of Odda? The tone and focus of the narrative would appear to indicate so. In that the mass of those who flee believe that their chief has fled, they believe that their most profound obligations have been liquidated. Moreover, these men are clearly of the fyrd rather than the heorhtwerod, else they would have known that their leader had fallen, not fled:

ealle gesawon

heordgeneatas þæt hyra heorra laeg (203-204)

Still, though their guilt may be mitigated, they are still culpable:

. . . hyra feore burgon

and manna ma þonne it aenig maed waere. (194-195)

⁷⁸Gordon, pp. 24-26, calls Maldon "the only purely heroic poem in Old English . . . the clearest and fullest expression known in literature of the ancient Germanic heroic code."

⁷⁹More than half the verbs specifically denoting choice or will in Maldon (eleven of twenty) are variant forms of the verb willan which everywhere cited means "to will, wish, desire" rather than "to be about to."

⁸⁰Just as verbs like aerndon (191), wendon (193), flugon and burgon (194) all emphasize the volitional nature of the cowards flight, so verbal phrases like wendon forð (205) and efston georne (206) implicitly express the role of heroic will and resolve throughout the poem. There is a good general discussion of the diction of Maldon in Isaacs, 159-166, who especially stresses the importance of terms for departing, standing fast, and moving forward.

⁸¹With respect to Maldon, see especially Section 77 which dooms the man who deserts either his lord or his comrades in the field to loss of all property and life; Section 78 provides for the remission of the heriot for the man who falls in the service of his lord. The suggested date of Cnute II is 1020-1023. There is a good account of the relationship between Cnute II and Anglo-Saxon heroic life in M. McC. Gatch, pp. 120-130.

⁸²M. McC. Gatch, p. 135, suggests that "given . . . the laws drafted by Archbishop Wulfstan, one could argue that the author of The Battle of Maldon had the same goal as the legislator: to reform and revitalize the nation by means of a revival of the traditional standards of loyalty." Clark argues precisely this: "Both the laws of Canute and The Battle of Maldon express a common desire to rehabilitate or reassert a heroic ideal which is seen as having fallen into regrettable decline." Cf. Swanton who contends that the discrepancy between the heroic ideals represented in Maldon and the distinctly unheroic age in which they are set indicates that the poet is treating these ideals ironically.

⁸³Blair explains the Viking victories in a way which at least qualifies the view that Ethelred's England was debased and degenerate, Anglo-Saxon England, pp. 92-99.

⁸⁴There are, of course, exceptions. Aside from the example of Byrhtnoth and those of his companions who fought to the death at Maldon in 991, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle commemorates the heroic resistance of the East Anglians under Ulfcytel in 1004 and that of the men in Cambridge in 1010. For a brief synopsis of the social conditions under Ethelred during the Viking raids, see Blair, Anglo-Saxon England, pp. 91-99; Clark, 58-60; Swanton, passim, especially 442, 444, 448; M. McC. Gatch, p. 131.

⁸⁵For further instances of cowardice, treachery, and futility among the English, see Chronicle entries for the years 998, 999, 1001, 1006, 1009, 1011.

⁸⁶Clark, 59, notes that "Byrhtnoth's patriotism, leadership, and courage stand out brilliantly against this background, and that contrast was part of the poet's intention in composing The Battle of Maldon."

⁸⁷Elliott, 69; see also Clark, 58.

⁸⁸Samouce, 131.

⁸⁹Clark, 58. See also Robinson's supposition, 32-33, that the existence of a causeway suggests that the island upon which the Vikings were camped was populated, the danger to the inhabitants providing Byrhtnoth with further incentive to risk combat with the raiding force.

⁹⁰See above, note 73.

⁹¹Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 19.

⁹²Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 15-16.

⁹³Major proponents of this view are Tolkien, Cross, Battaglia, and Mills.

⁹⁴Clark, 52.

⁹⁵Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 19.

⁹⁶See for example Frederick Whitehead, "Ofermod et desmesure," Cahiers de Civilization Medievale, III (1960), 115-117; Irving; Elliott.

⁹⁷Blake, especially 338-339. With respect to Blake's suggestion of the Saint's Life as a generic model for Maldon, Clark rightly observes, "Maldon is ostensibly heroic, and we should first attempt to read it thus. If the result is satisfying, an assumption like Blake's would seem unnecessary and misleading."

⁹⁸M. McC. Gatch, pp. 129-135.

⁹⁹Clark, 52.

¹⁰⁰Tolkien focuses on for his ofermode and landes to fela, Clark on for his ofermode and ongunnon lytegian. Clark, of course, is arguing against Tolkien's interpretation.

¹⁰¹Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 22.

¹⁰²Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 19.

¹⁰³Swanton, 445. See also J. E. Cross, "Mainly on Philology and the Interpretive Criticism of Maldon," in Old English Poetry in Honor of John C. Pope, pp. 243-248; Helmut Gneuss, "The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnoð's ofermod Once Again," SP, LXXIII (1976), 117-137. The philological evidence marshalled by Cross and Gneuss to support their gloss of ofermod as "pride" is impressive; but, as Gneuss acknowledges throughout his article, far from conclusive.

¹⁰⁴Clark, 69; see also Rosemary Woolf, "The Devil in Old English Poetry," Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry, ed. Bessinger and Karhl (Hamden, 1968), 171; Blake, 338-339; Burlin, pp. 88-

89; Gneuss, 130.

¹⁰⁵Britton, 137; Blake, 339; see also Clark, 69.

¹⁰⁶Blake, 338-339; see also Clark, 70.

¹⁰⁷Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, p. 20.

¹⁰⁸Blake, 339. Cf. W. F. Bolton, "Byrhtnoth in the Wilderness," MLR, 64 (1969), 483, who unsuccessfully attempts to argue that "Byrhtnoð failed because of ofermod . . . but he later redeems the failure by prayer."

¹⁰⁹Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 23.

¹¹⁰Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 22.

¹¹¹Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 19.

¹¹²Clark, 70.

¹¹³Battaglia, 248; see also Cross, Oswald and Byrhtnoth, 102.

¹¹⁴Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 23.

¹¹⁵This, in essence, is Tolkien's position.

¹¹⁶Clark, 68. Clark's rendering of lytergian is challenged by J. E. Cross, Mainly on Philology, 235-243. But cf. Gneuss, 131-132, who concludes, "It seems very doubtful to me that lytegian is intended to suggest that Byrhtnoth was gullible."

¹¹⁷Clark, 68.

¹¹⁸Clark, 67-68.

¹¹⁹One may assume, with Clark, that it is this very switch in tactics that is referred to by the phrase ongunnon lytegian, whether lytegian implies deceit or prudence.

¹²⁰Elliott, 57.

¹²¹Clark, 68. See also O. D. Macrae-Gibson, "How Historical is The Battle of Maldon?" Medium AEvum, XXXIX (1970), 100-101. Macrae-Gibson's suggestion, 103-104, that ofermod might be an anticipatory judgment of Byrhtnoth's "rash" advance against the Viking ceorl is rightly rejected by Gneuss.

¹²²Isaacs, passim.

¹²³Like the juxtaposition of ceorl and eorl in line 132, the juxtaposition of Viking "cunning" and English "pride" (lytegian and ofermod) may well be another example of the contrast between mercenary and heroic attitudes which underlies the conflict between the raiding and defending forces.

¹²⁴Clark, 56.

¹²⁵Ker, pp. 54-55. Cf. Whitehead who carefully distinguishes between Byrhtnoth's ofermod and Roland's desmesure.

¹²⁶Clark, 56; one assumes he would apply the same argument to Tolkien's equation of Byrhtnoth's ofermod with Beowulf's "excess," and, indeed, at the conclusion of his article, 70-71, Clark does contrast the two.

¹²⁷Clark, 56. Clark cites Mills and Greenfield as purveyors of this error; see also, for example, Elliott, Irving, and Britton.

¹²⁸See lines 237-243.

¹²⁹Clark, 61.

¹³⁰Clark, 57.

¹³¹Cf. Robinson, 32, who, in an otherwise illuminating article, compounds all three errors--the lexical, analogical, and historical--arguing that "Byrhtnoth's noble qualities and the factors that would have tempted him to his disastrous error have misled some scholars into viewing him as flawless in judgment and character. This view ignores the inescapable meaning of the poet's words in lines 89-90, to say nothing of the disastrous outcome of the battle. It is true that the flight of the cowardly retainers precipitated the massacre and was wholly reprehensible, but the retainers had reason for their cowardice: Byrhtnoth had committed his forces to a battle which they could not win."

¹³²Clark, 57, citing Tolkien and Mills as purveyors of this error.

¹³³Irving, 462.

¹³⁴Irving, 460.

¹³⁵Clark, 54-56.

¹³⁶Bessinger, 239. Both Macrae-Gibson and Gneuss have recently argued in favor of the historical accuracy of Maldon. Both articles are, however, as their authors recognize, highly speculative.

¹³⁷Bessinger, 246, 250.

¹³⁸Clark, 54, citing E. D. Laborde, "The Site of the Battle of Maldon," EHR, XL (1925), 161.

¹³⁹Clark, 55-56.

¹⁴⁰Clark, 55.

¹⁴¹Clark, 56. The varying accounts are summarized by Gordon, pp. 5-9.

¹⁴²Nevertheless, most scholars argue for an early date roughly contemporary with the battle. Clark, 56, and Bessinger, 239, are notable exceptions to this view, as are Robinson and McKinnell.

¹⁴³Gordon, 28.

¹⁴⁴Swanton, 443.

¹⁴⁵Irving, 458.

¹⁴⁶Irving, 460.

¹⁴⁷As is tentatively suggested by Elliott, 56.

¹⁴⁸Clark, 56.

¹⁴⁹Clark, 55.

¹⁵⁰Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 22.

¹⁵¹Ethelred fled England in April of 1016; Edmund reigned from April through November of that same year.

¹⁵²There is a fine discussion of the distinction between heroic and pragmatic values in Garmonsway.

¹⁵³Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 21. Almost all those who condemn Byrhtnoth's "folly" share, to one extent or another, in this version of the "historical error."

¹⁵⁴See Whitehead's astute observation that "Il se peut que M. Tolkien s'insurge moins contre l'interpretation traditionnelle que contre ceux qui, a la faveur de cette interpretation, essaient de donner un interet d'actualite aux valeurs preimees de monde heroique," 116.

¹⁵⁵Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 20.

¹⁵⁶For the opposite view, cf. Thomas D. Hill, "History and Heroic Ethic in Maldon," Neophilologus, 54 (1970), 293, "Byrhtnoth's error can be described in terms of this contrast . . . between Germanic martial rhetoric and realism . . . Though he responds to the Viking's challenge as if he were one of the heroes of Germanic legend . . . he is not in fact such a hero, but rather an aging English eorl with a rather heterogeneous and undependable fyrð under his command. Given the 'historical' context, Byrhtnoth should have avoided giving battle until he could be sure of victory." Hill is, in fact, the most flagrant of the recent purveyors of the "historical error." See especially 291-292.

¹⁵⁷Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 21; Tolkien tentatively acknowledges this when he suggests, 20-23, that the heorthwerod shares Byrhtnoth's "excess." But he is, for obvious reasons, reluctant to carry this observation forward to its logical conclusion. Swanton, who lacks both Tolkien's discretion and his exquisite sensitivity to poetic values, does follow the argument to its end, concluding, 448, that both Byrhtnoth and his hearth-companions are criticized "as they strut and puff to their deaths" in a "travesty of antique heroic values."

- 158 Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, p. 22.
- 159 The same double standard is employed by Hill, 294-295.
- 160 Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 21.
- 161 Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 20.
- 162 Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 20.
- 163 Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 22.
- 164 Charles Donahue, "Beowulf and Christian Tradition: A Reconstruction from a Celtic Stance," Traditio, 21 (1965), 75.
- 165 Cross, Oswald and Byrhtnoth, 103, contends that Byrhtnoth "lacked the third cardinal virtue, prudentia or sapientia."
- 166 For a somewhat different view of the relationship between the structure and the thematic unity of Maldon, see David G. Hale, "Structure and Theme in The Battle of Maldon," Notes and Queries, 15 (1968), 242-243. Hale argues for a tripartite structure corresponding to "an extended affirmation of the Germanic moral order (lines 1-184), a serious challenge to this order (lines 185-259), and a concluding reaffirmation of the heroic code (lines 260-324) . . . The poem's real conflict . . . has little to do with the Earl's ofermod. Establishing a heroic spirit, overcoming a serious threat to it, and putting intention into action--this progress defines the structure and theme of The Battle of Maldon."
- 167 Clark, 70, writes, "We cannot judge the rightness of Byrhtnoth's decision by the event; The Battle of Maldon is not a television western. Defeat and death do not come only to those who have somehow deserved them but also to those who have deserved better. To deserve better and accept the worse magnanimously is heroism indeed; Byrhtnoth and his faithful followers display that heroism."
- 168 Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 24: "There could be no more pungent criticism in a few words of 'chivalry' in one of responsibility than Wiglaf's exclamation . . . 'by one man's will, many must woe endure.' These words the poet of Maldon might have inscribed at the head of his work."

CHAPTER III

MORTE ARTHURE

Some three-hundred years fall between Beowulf and Maldon, and another three centuries divide Maldon from Morte Arthure. Although it is impossible to trace a continuous alliterative line between Beowulf and Morte Arthure, there can be little doubt that the poets of the 14th century Alliterative Revival were influenced by the poetic strategies and heroic ideals of Old English verse, presumably through what was preserved of the traditional Anglo-Saxon style and matter by Chronicle poems like Lagamon's Brut, and, it can only be surmised, a transitional body of orally transmitted poetry now irrecoverably lost.¹ In any case, insurmountable as the difficulties which prevent us from ascertaining the precise line of development may be, it remains clear that the presentations of heroic life in Morte Arthure, Maldon, and Beowulf are closely linked.² The heroic code which governs Arthur and his knights is in most respects almost identical with that which determines the conduct of the earlier heroes. Courage, daring, martial prowess, fame, honor, loyalty, and magnanimity--such are the fundamental values common to both Old and Middle English heroic poetry.³

Both kinds of poetry share as well a tragic view of human limitation. Indeed, where the heroes of poems such as Beowulf, Maldon, Gawain and the Green Knight and Morte Arthure do differ, the difference is to be accounted for as much by the form of necessity with which the hero is faced as by the years which separate them.⁴ With respect to his vision of necessity, the Morte Arthure poet works squarely in the mainstream of the alliterative tradition, his view of tragedy based upon a characteristically medieval perception of the instability of temporal value. Nevertheless,

his concrete conception of necessity differs radically from that of both the Beowulf and Gawain poets, and this difference significantly affects the shape and meaning of his poem.

Morte Arthure is a de casibus tragedy.⁵ But while the shadow of tragedy extends to the furthest reaches of Arthur's world, it is always and everywhere contested by examples of the heroic life, the fellowship of the Round Table systematically opposing the ravages of Fortune with undeniable evidence of human worth. No matter what the circumstances, the knights of the Round Table, like the fighters at Maldon, are never less than exemplary.⁶ And what is true of the Round Table is even truer of Arthur whose pre-eminence among the worthies on the wheel serves as irrefutable proof that, on the very rack of Fortune, in the face of all which transcends and denies him, the heroic achievements of man bear permanent witness to his everlasting greatness.

Here again, then, at the very heart of Morte Arthure, is the opposition between heroism and necessity, the essential mainspring of the heroic poem. It is a major thesis of this study that the tension between heroism and necessity not only provides the thematic core of the heroic poem, but accounts for its structure as well. In Beowulf, as we have already observed, the so-called diptych structure juxtaposes the hero's ascendant prime with his age and death, expressing the underlying tensions of heroic life. In Maldon, the formal strategies of the work are closely tied to the poet's tragic portrayal of heroic values. And in Gawain and the Green Knight, the cyclical structure of the poem contributes to the framework of mutability within which the heroism of Gawain gains its full significance. The connection between form and meaning is perhaps even more explicit in Morte Arthure, a tragedy of fortune depicting the rise

and fall of Arthur and his Round Table. Matthews was the first to remark the thematic value of the de casibus structure of Morte Arthure: "This structure . . . is motivated in part by the aesthetics of pattern. But the structure is also symbolical; and for medieval writers the philosophical and moral concepts mirrored in the pattern were at least as important as the pattern itself."⁷ The philosophical and moral concepts mirrored in the pattern of Morte Arthure are, as Benson observes, rooted in "the medieval conviction that all human possessions--power, love, life--are transitory . . . their loss inevitable and painful . . . the villain . . . the human condition itself, with death and the unforeseen chances of life (which medieval writers called 'Fortune') the agents of a hero's downfall."⁸

De casibus is then a conventional medieval form used to express the mutable and transitory frailty of the human estate.⁹ This is by no means to suggest that all de casibus tragedies share a single outlook. On the contrary, de casibus allows for a wide variety of attitudes, ranging from contemptus mundi to the stirring affirmations of a heroic poem like Morte Arthure. In each instance, however, it is a form in which the inevitable alternation of rise and fall emphasizes the role of tragic necessity in human affairs--the inescapable power of time, change, and death.

The de casibus structure of Morte Arthure conveys the role of necessity in a second, albeit minor key, with respect to the different rhythms according to which events unfold in the respective rise and fall portions of the poem. Arthur's rise is somewhat rambling, loosely constructed, with a marked tendency toward an expansive and episodic structure.¹⁰ Arthur's fall, on the other hand, is precipitous and spare.¹¹ From his

vision of Fortune onward, there is no longer even the flimsiest illusion that the course of events is subject to change or choice. Foretold and foreshadowed, the fall of the Round Table unfolds with a speed and precision which, especially when measured against the circuitous wanderings of Arthur's rise, bears witness to the inexorable hand of necessity on human event.

It is not through structure alone that the poet formally conveys the role of necessity in Morte Arthure, but through rhetoric as well. In Morte Arthure, theme, figure, formula and diction all contribute to create a rhetorical matrix which sustains an underlying note of tragedy throughout the poem. Often criticized for carelessness and clumsiness, the Morte Arthure poet demonstrates a considerable degree of formal poetic command, not only in matters of structure and narrative pace, but in the systematic and effective manipulation of rhetorical patterns which operate to convey the fundamental meanings of his poem.

The most elaborate and highly wrought rhetorical passage of the poem is Arthur's dream of Fortune in which the pivotal transition, the underlying structure, and deepest meanings of the work are explicitly surfaced and set forth in emblematic form. One can hardly overestimate the significance of the dream which has the unmistakable authority of revelation and which needs no philosophers to rede its basic import. In essence, the figure of the lady and her wheel serves as a rhetorical concretion of the tragic necessities of Arthur's world, commenting upon not only the course of his own tragic career, but bringing into bold relief the exemplary nature of a career which ultimately is not so much the product of an individual will or failure as it is an instance of the general fate of all mankind.

As is traditional in medieval depictions of Fortune,¹² three of the nine worthies on the wheel are classical pagans (Alexander, Hector, and Julius Caesar), three are Old Testament Hebrews (Judas Maccabeus, Joshua, and David), and three are Christian (Charlemagne, Godfrey, and Arthur himself). This particular configuration, spanning the entire medieval spectrum of history, points the essential fact that all mankind, whatever its spiritual state, is bound by the parameters of Fortune's wheel. In addition, the historical range represented by the nine worthies suggests that the whole of human time is subject to Fortune's sway. Arthur represents the present of the poem. The Hebrews and pagans represent the past. Godfrey and Charlemagne represent the future. The wheel is a constant turning. Those who have fallen, Arthur who is about to fall, and those who will rise and fall in the future--all are bound to its movement. The universality of Fortune's power is thus doubly emphasized.

In the 14th century alliterative Parlement of the Thre Ages, the poet expands the number of worthies beyond the traditional nine, adding lovers and wise men to kings, conquerors and heroes in order to emphasize the broad range of human experience subject to the forces of time, change and death.¹³ In Morte Arthure, although the number of worthies remains conventionally at nine, the power of Fortune is amplified through the individual portraits, details of which provide a concrete enumeration of types of human aspiration susceptible to mutability. First there is an intimation of the general fate of mankind in the collective lament of the six already fallen worthies:

'That euer I rengnede one thir rog, me rewes it euer!
Was neuer roye so riche that regnede in erthe!
Whene I rode in my rowte, roughte I noghte elles,

Bot reuaye, and reuelle, and rawnsone the pople!
 And thus I drife forthe my dayes, whilles I dreghe myghte,
 And there-fore derflyche I am dampnede for euer!
 (3272-3277)14

After this collective lament, individual worthies, each representing varying aspects of human potential, demonstrate the transitory nature of human achievement. Alexander demonstrates the precarious nature of power:

'I was lorde,' quod the lede, 'of londes i-newe,
 And alle ledis me lowttede that lengede in erthe;
 And nowe es lefte me no lappe my lygham to hele,
 Bot lightly now ame I loste, leue iche mane the sothe!'
 (3284-3287)

Hector adds love and sensuality:

'On gone see hafe I sittene, als souerayne and lorde,
 And ladys me louede to lappe in theyre armes;
 And nowe my lordchippes are loste, and laide for euer!'
 (3291-3293)

Caesar, physical strength and wealth:

The thirde thorowely was throo, and thikke in the schuldyrs,
 A thra man to thrette of, there thretty were gaderide;
 His dyademe was droppede downe, dubbyde with stonys,
 Endente alle with diamawndis, and dighte for the nonis;
 'I was dredde in my dayes,' he said, 'in dyuerse rewmes,
 And now dampnede to the dede, and dole es the more!'
 (3294-3299)

Judas, beauty and fame:

The fourte was a faire mane, and forsesy in armes,
 The fayreste of fegure that fourmede was euer!
 'I was frekke in my faithe,' he said, 'whilles I one fowlde
 regnede,
 ffamows in ffere londis, and floure of alle kynges;
 Now es my face defadide, and foule es me hapnede,
 ffor I am fallene fro ferre, and frendles by-leuyde!'
 (3300-3305)

Joshua, perhaps heroic resolve:

The fifte was a faire mane thane fele of thies other,
 A fforsesy mane and a ferse, with fomand lippis;
 He fongede faste one the feleyghes, and fayled his armes,
 Bot 3it he failede and felle a fifty fote large.

Bot 3it he sprange and sprete, and spraddenc his armes,
 And one the spere-lenghe spekes, he spekes thire wordes--
 "I was in Surrye a syr, and sett be myne one,
 As souerayne and seyngnour of sere kynges londis;
 Now of my solace I am fulle sodanly fallene,
 And for sake of my syne, 3one sete es me rewede!"
 (3306-3315)

David, the Book, civilization, heroic deeds:

The sexte had a sawtere semliche bowdene,
 With a surepel of silke sewede fulle faire,
 A harpe and a hande-slyng with harde flynte stones;
 What harmes he has hente he halowes fulle sone,--
 'I was demede in my dayes,' he said, 'of dedis of armes
 One of the doughtyeste that duellede in erthe;
 Bot I was merride one molde in my moste strengthis,
 With this maydene so mylde, that mofes vs alle.'
 (3316-3323)

The worthies serve to dramatize the universality of necessity in still another way. In The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne, the ghost of Gaynour's mother serves as a memento mori.¹⁵ At the same time, the details of her appearance invoke such attendant miseries of the human condition as time, loss, pain, decay, and disfiguration. Periodic references to the poor of the earth further generalize and deepen our sense of the general misery of the human estate in much the same way that in Gawain and the Green Knight the plight of the beasts and birds of the field, whether in the hunt scenes or in strategically placed passages throughout the poem, serves to give figurative voice to the tragic necessities which underlie Gawain's world. In Morte Arthure, the portraits of the worthies on the wheel similarly flesh out the poem's vision of necessity, placing mutability in the context of such general human afflictions as isolation, deformity, poverty, old age, death, and despair. Alexander, the first to speak, serves as a veritable emblem of the shocks and ills the flesh is heir to:

The laste was a litylle mane that laide was be-nethe,
 His leskes laye alle lene and latheliche to schewe,
 The lokkes lyarde and longe the lenghe of a 3erde,
 His lire and his lyghame lamede fulle sore;
 The two eyne of the byeryne was brighttere thane siluer,
 The tother was 3alowere thene the 3olke of a naye.
 (3278-3283)

Such are the miseries that lie in wait for us all: the wasted limbs;
 the crippled body, the mutilations and degradations of old age; and,
 finally, the rags and unprotected flesh that are the tokens of poverty,
 weakness, and oncoming death:

And nowe es lefte me no lappe my lygham to hele,
 Bot lightly now ame I loste, leue iche mane the sothe!
 (3286-3287)

Following Alexander, Julius Caesar concludes his monologue with a
 pointed memento mori which emphasizes the finality of the grave:

"I was dredde in my dayes," he said, 'in dyuerse rewwes,
 And now dampnede to the dede, and dole es the more!
 (3298-3299)

Judas' lament underscores the inevitable curve of time and the isolation
 which is an irrevocable portion of the human estate:

Now es my face defadide, and foule es me hapnede,
 ffor I am fallene fro ferre, and frendles by-leuyde!
 (3304-3305)

The futility of Joshua's continued attempts to remount the wheel suggests
 the ultimate vanity of human endeavor:

He fongede faste one the feleyghes, and fayled his armes,
 Bot 3it he failede and felle a fyfty fote large;
 Bot 3it he sprange and spreunte, and spraddene his armes,
 (3308-3310)

The tragic conditions of Arthur's world are hardly unique to the
 conqueror; nor are they solely the portion of kings and heroes. They
 are inherent in human existence, the very fabric of heroic life.

Matthews observes that Arthur's dream of Fortune not only projects the core meaning of the poem, but reflects its underlying structure as well.¹⁶ Indeed, this is true. After Arthur enters the paradisaical garden and encounters the Lady, his dream does mirror the de casibus structure of Morte Arthure, paralleling Arthur's rise to the crest of the wheel and his sudden fall. But Matthews' perception, valuable as it is, is incomplete, all but ignoring the first segment of the dream where Arthur, wandering through a wood, discovers his knights slaughtered by wild beasts:

Me thoughte I was in a wode willed myne one,
 That I wiste no waye whedire that I scholde,
 ffore woluez, and whilde swynne, and wykkyde bestez;
 Walkede in that wasternne, wathes to seche;
 Thare lyouns fulle lothely lykkyde theire tuskes,
 Alle fore lapyngge of blude of my lele knyghtez!
 Thurghe that foreste I flede, tharefloures whare heghe,
 ffor to fele me for ferde of tha foule thynggez;
 (3230-3237)

His philosophers interpret this section briefly, noting that it signals the treasonous tyranny of Mordred and his allies in Arthur's lands:

Bot the wolfes in the wode, and the whilde bestes,
 Are some wikkyd mene that werrayes thy rewmes,
 Es entirde in thyne absence to werraye thy pople,
 And alyeny and ostes of vncouthe landis.
 (3446-3449)

But there is more to it than this. The opening sequence of the dream functions as a nightmarish preview of Cornwall where Arthur will come upon the bloody corpses of his knights on a desolate field, a last and doomed survivor of the heroic fellowship of the Round Table.¹⁷ Thus, in the unfolding of the dream, the simple rise and fall pattern of de casibus tragedy is preceded by a dark presentiment of the ultimate catastrophe. Moreover, by projecting a prophetic vision of the tragic finale of the dream itself before the central events of the dream occur,

Arthur's vision of Fortune parallels the method and structure of Morte Arthure very closely indeed. In the poem, as in the dream, the tragic outcome is foreshadowed at the very threshold of the action, implying the weight of necessity and its governance of events.¹⁸

At the very outset of the poem there are significant and unmistakable tragic adumbrations. Among these are the ironies which accompany Arthur's appointment of Mordred as regent and his farewell to Guinevere.

Doubtless, the poet himself assumes an awareness on the part of his audience that Arthur's regent as well as his queen will betray him and that their treason will signal both his death and the end of the Round Table. Arthur's appointment of Mordred, however, does not, as Matthews suggests it does, indicate a moral flaw or lack of judgment on the part of the conqueror;¹⁹ nor do the ironies involved suggest that Mordred is from the beginning tainted with a proclivity toward betrayal. What is suggested is that unlike hearers of poems based upon traditional material, men cannot foresee or effectively shape the ends of their acts. Mordred begs to accompany Arthur to prove his prowess and take his full place as a member of the heroic fellowship. But like Arthur the hero, Mordred the villain is caught in a web of necessity. In a world where tragedy is the cornerstone of existence, the intention which motivates an act cannot define the consequences of the act. There are forces larger than men's wills. Mordred, without ceasing to be a villain, and while remaining responsible for his villainy, is in a sense half-victim and half-accomplice of his fate. This irony flowers later in the poem after he slays Gawain. Following his lament for the fallen hero, Mordred rues and repents his role in the tragedy:

3it that traytour alle tite teris lete he falle,
Turnes hym furthe tite, and talkes no more,

Went wepand a-waye, and weries the stowndys,
 That euer his werdes ware wroghte siche wandrethe to wyrke:
 Whene he thoghte on this thyng, it thirlede his herte;
 ffor sake of sybb blode sygheande he rydys;
 When that renayede renke remembirde hym seluene,
 Of reuerence and ryotes of the Rownde Table,
 He remyd and repent hyme of alle his rewthe werkes,
 Rode awaye with his rowte, ristys he no lengere,
 (3886-3895)

Our sense of tragedy is reinforced by Mordred's poignant nostalgia for the lost joys of the heroic fellowship, a nostalgia which looks forward to Arthur's own lament at Cornwall after the destruction of the Round Table.

The tragic ironies which are generated in Arthur's farewell to Guinevere are of a somewhat different nature. Within a strictly dramatic context, Guinevere's grief might be perceived as the conventionally extreme response of the bereaved lady about to be deprived of the company of her lord for a significant period of time while he pursues a particularly precarious adventure. Given the outcome, of which the audience is aware, the conventional rhetoric of leavetaking assumes the objective power of prophecy:

Waynour waykly wepande hym kyssiz,
 Talkez ro hym tenderly with teres ynewe,--
 "I may wery the wye, thatt this werre mouede,
 That warnes me wyrchippe of my wedde lorde;
 Alle my lykyng of lyfe owte of lande wendez,
 And I in langour am lefte, leue 3e euere! --
 Whyne myghte I, dere lufe, dye in 3our armes,
 Are I this destanye of dule sulde drye by myne one!"
 (697-704)

So that there be no mistaking the import of Guinevere's lines, the poet adds his own distinctly elegiac comment:

He pressed to his palfray, in presance of lordes,
 Prekys of the palez with his prys knyghtes,
 Wyth a realle rowte of the Rounde Table;
 Soughte to-warde Sandwyche, cho sees hyme no more!
 (717-720)

There is of course a sense in which Guinevere's grief, when measured against her subsequent betrayal, is ironic in a different way. But the major power of the lines resides in their tragic accuracy as a foreshadowing of events to come, a foreshadowing which, like all others in the Morte Arthure, underscores the role of necessity in the poem.

Another example of tragic adumbration occurs in Arthur's first dream. As his philosophers interpret it, the dream is a forecast of Arthur's imminent victories over the giant and Lucius. But portions of the dream are strangely ambivalent:

Hym dremyd of a dragone, dredfulle to be-holde,
Come dryfande ouer the depe to drenchene hys pople,
(760-761)

And, in the gloss of the philosophers:

"Sir," said they sone thane, thies sagge philosophe,se,
"The dragone that thow dremyde of, so dredfulle to schewe,
That come dryfande ouer the deepe, to drynchene thy pople,
Sothely and certayne they seluene it es,
That thus saillez ouer the see with thy sekyre knyghtez;"
(814-818)

Here Arthur himself is envisioned as the destroyer of his people, at least obliquely. John Gardner, following Matthews, reads this as evidence that Arthur's sinful imperial conquests cause his ultimate ruin.²⁰ This cannot be correct. Arthur's fight with the Giant and his wars against Lucius cannot in any regard be read as sinful.²¹ The philosophers themselves are clear on this point:

The bere that bryttene was abowene in the clowdez,
Be-takyns the tyrauntez that tourmentez thy pople;
Or elles with somme gyaunt some journee salle happyne,
In syngulere batelle by zoure selfe one;
And thow salle hafe the victorye thurghe helpe of oure Lorde,
As thow in thy visione was opynly schewede!
(823-828)

The ambiguities of Arthur's dream point not to a condemnation of Arthur, but rather to the ultimate catastrophe and the tragic ironies which bind the hero to his fate.

Although the tragic nature of the action is first rendered explicit in Arthur's dream of Fortune, the wheel has in fact been turning from the beginning, scattering ruin and death among men and towns. Matthews distinguishes between the radically different rhetorical patterns which dominate the rise and fall sections of the poem.²² This is a perceptive and critical observation. In that portion of *Morte Arthure* which is devoted to Arthur's ascendancy, the poem is indeed adorned with the rhetoric of celebration, especially with respect to the themes of feast, riot and revel. Conversely, in the final section of the poem, this rhetoric is subordinated to the more tragic rhetoric of elegy and lamentation, which orchestrates the swift and inexorable fall of the Round Table. But the distinction is not quite so "clean-cut" as Matthews suggests. Tragedy is in fact present from the outset, systematically sustained through the poem's rhetoric--in theme, formula, figure, and diction--even when not dominant or directly operative in event.

One of the poem's major themes of fortune is the fall of the conquered town, a recurrent motif which serves to remind us that violent reversal and catastrophe are permanent conditions of life. The first such passage depicts the fall of Lorraine in language suffused with a sense of pain, doom, loss, and grief:

Thane boldly thay buske, and bendes engynes,
 Payses in pylotes and proues theire castes;
 Mynsteris and masondewes they malle to the erthe,
 Chirches and chapelles chalke-whitte blawnchede.
 Stone [s]tepelles fulle styffe in the strete ligges,
 Chawmyrs with chymnes, and many cheefe inns,
 Paysede and pelid downe playsterede walles;
 The pyne of the pople was pete for to here!
 (3036-3043)

The theme recurs in the fall of Como:

Thane brekes oure buschement, and the brigge wynnes,
 Brayedez in-to the burghe with baners displayede,

Stekes and stabbis thorowe that them a-3ayne-stondes;
 ffowre stretis, or thay stynte, they stroyene fore euere!
 (3124-3127)

Finally there is the fall of Tuscany in which the tragic strains are amplified in preparation for Arthur's second dream and the downward turn of the wheel which immediately follows:²³

In-to Tuskane he tourne, whene thus wele tymede,
 Takes townnes fulle tyte with towres fulle heghe;
 Walles he welte downe, wondyd knyghtez,
 Towres he turnes, and turmentez the pople,
 Wroghte wedewes fulle wlonke, wrotherayle synges,
 Ofte wery and wepe, and wryngene theire handis;
 And alle he wastys with werre, thare he awaye rydez,
 Thaire welthes and theire wonny[n]ges, wandrethe he wroghte!
 Thus they spryngene and sprede, and sparis bot lyttille,
 Spoylles dispetouslye, and spillis theire vynes;
 Spendis vn-sparely, that sparede was lange,
 Spedis theme to Spolett with speris inewe!
 ffro Spayne in-to Spruysland the worde of hyme sprynges,
 And spekyngs of his spencis, disspite es fulle hugge!
 (3150-3163)

The diction of this passage inevitably suggests an analogy between Arthur's fighters and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, between the devastations of war and such natural catastrophes as death or plague which similarly torment and waste and spare but little. In Morte Arthure, war is neither gratuitous nor an ethical aberration.²⁴ Violence is a central fact of life. The world at war is the world of the poem, the entire weight of which rests upon the universality of battle and its attendant heroic values.²⁵ The poet juxtaposes no consistent or continuous perspective of peace (such as is projected by the Homeric epic simile) in the light of which war may be judged.²⁶ War is given; tragic waste is woven into the fabric of life. In the end, all towers must fall; and all women must be widowed. Nothing which is saved up will be spared.

There is a suggestion of all this in Arthur's vision, which itself implies the ubiquitous nature of violence and its ambivalent role in the heroic life. Before Arthur enters the garden of Fortune, he must pass through that fearful wood where wild beasts lap up the blood of his knights. As noted above,²⁷ this initial nightmarish section of the dream, almost unique in Middle English dream vision poetry,²⁸ foreshadows the tragic end of both Arthur's dream and his career. But might it not serve an additional purpose as well, suggesting that in the military world of the heroic poem, the paths of glory lead inevitably through violence, suffering, terror, and blood-shed? It would be no accident then that before entering the garden and being raised to the pinnacle of Fortune's wheel, Arthur must first pass through a wilde nness of carnage and death. The end is in the beginning. Tragic waste and brutality are the ineluctable concomitants of heroic life--an irony of heroism, not a moral condemnation of it.²⁹

It is not merely the overwhelmingly high incidence of battle scenes in Morte Arthure, but the rhetoric of which they are composed which establishes war as a tragic *donné* of the human condition. One might choose passages almost at random:

There ware gomes thurghe-girde with grundyne wapynes,
 Grisely gayspande with grucchande lotes!
 Grete lordes of Greke greffede so hye;
 Swyftly with swerdes, they swappene there-aftyre,
 Swappez doune ffulle sweperlye swelltande knyghtez,
 That alle swellttez one swarthe, that they ouer-swyngene,
 So many sweys in swoghe swounande att ones!
 (1461-1467)

Or:

With culubbez of clene stele clenkkede in helmes,
 Craschede doune crestez, and craschede brayneze;
 Kyllede cou[r]sers and couerde stedes,
 Choppode thurghe cheualers one chalke-whytte stedeze.
 Was neuer stele ne stede myghte stande them a-3ayneze,
 Bot stonays and strykez doune, that in the stale houys.
 (2113-2118)

With wyghte wapynez of werre, thay wroghtene one helmes,
 Rittez with rannke stele fulle ryalle maylez;
 Bot they fitt theme fayre, thes frekk byernez,
 ffewters in freely one fferaunte stedes,
 ffoynes fulle felly with flyschande speris,
 ffretene of orfrayes feste appone scheldez.
 So fele fay es in fyghte appone the felde leuyde,
 That iche a furthe in the firthe of rede blode rynnys!
 By that swyftely one swarthe the swett es by-leuede,
 Swerdez swangene in two, sweltand knyghtez
 Lyes wyde opyne welterande one walopande stedez;
 Wondes of wale mene werkande sydys,
 ffacez feteled vn-faire in filterede lakes,
 Alle craysed for-trodyne with trappede stedez,
 The faireste fygured folde that fygurede was euer,
 Ahs ferre alls a furlange, a thosande at ones!
 (2137-2152)

Or again:

Thare myghte mene see chiftaynes, on chalke whitte stedez,
 Choppe doune in the chaas cheualrye noble;
 Romaynes the rycheeste and ryalle kynges,
 Braste with ranke stele theire rybbys in sondyre!
 Braynes fore-brustene thurghe burneste helmes,
 With brandez for-brittene one brede in the launde.
 They hewede doune haythene mene with hiltedeswerdez,
 Be hole hundreth on hye, by the holte eynyes!
 Thare myghte no siluer thaym saue, ne socoure theire lyues,
 Sowdane, ne Sarazene, ne senatour of rome!
 (2268-2277)

The elegiac strain which winds through such poetry serves as a tragic commentary on the action, relating each particular battle to the general conditions of existence and sustaining a pervasive context of pain, loss, and death which are the tragic givens of the heroic world.

The impression that war is tragic and universal is reinforced by the power and violence of the alliterative patterns characteristic of battle passages in Morte Arthure:

With hir bryngges one burde burliche cogges,
 Qwhylls the bilynge and the beme brestys in sondyre;
 So stowttly the forsterne one the stam hyttis,
 That stokkes of the stere-burde strykkys in peces'
 Be thane cogge appone cogge, krayers and other,
 Castys crepers one crosse als to the crafte langes:
 Thane was hede-rapys hewene that helde vpe the mastes;
 There was conteke fulle kene, and crachynge of chippys!

Grett cogges of kampe crasseches in sondyre!
 Mony kabane clevede, cabilles destroyede!
 Knyghtes and kene mene killide the braynes!
 Kidd castelles were corvene with alle their kene wapene,
 Castelles fulle comliche, that coloured ware faire!
 Vpcynes eghelynge thay ochene thare-aftyre,
 With the swynge of the swerde sweys the mastys;
 Ovyre-fallys in the firste frekis and othire,
 ffrekke in the forchipe fey es byleuefede!
 Than brothely they bekyre with boustouse tacle,
 Bruschese boldlye one burde brynyede knyghtes,
 Owt of botes one burde was bruskede with stonys,
 Bett downe of the beste, brystis the betches;
 Som gomys thourghe-gyrde with gaddys of yryne,
 Gomys gayliche clede englaymous wapene!
 Archers of Inglande fulle egerly schottes,
 Hittis thourghe the harde stele fulle hertly dynnttis!
 Sonne hotchene in holle the hethenne knyghtes,
 Hurte thourghe the harde stele, hele they neuer!
 Than they falle to the fyghte, ffoynes with sperys,
 Alle the frekkeste one frownte that to the fyghte langes;
 And ilkone frechely fraystез their strenghts,
 Were to fyghte in the flete with their felle wapyne.
 Thus they dalte that daye, thire dubbide knyghtes,
 Tille alle the Danes ware dede, and in the depe throwene!
 Than Bretones brothely with brondis they hewene,
 Lepys in vp one lofte lordeliche berynes;
 When ledys of owt-londys leppyne in waters,
 Alle oure lordes one lowde laughene at ones!
 Be thane speris whare spronngene, spalddy chippys,
 Spanyolis spedily sprentyde ouer burdez;
 Alle the kene mene of kampe, knyghtes and other,
 Killyd are colde dede, and castyne ouer burdez!
 Their swyers sweyftly has the swete lauyde,
 Hethene heuande on hatche in ther hawe ryses,
 Synkande in the salte see seuene hundrethe at ones!
 Thane sir Gawayne the gude, he has the gree wonnene,
 And alle the cogges grete he gafe to his knyghtes,
 Sir Geryne, and sir Grisswolde, and othir gret lordes;
 Garte Galuth, a gud gome, girde of thaire hedys!
 Thus of the false flete appone the flode happenede,
 And thus their feryne folke fey are beleuede!
 (3663-3711)

Finlayson observes of this passage that, "the scene of violence is conveyed by accumulation of details in a paratactic style. The general impression is of striking swords, falling men, crashing timbers, with long, "blocked" sequences of "b" and "k" alliterations (3669ff.). Four- and six-line groups of identical alliteration are common, and many

lines have four stresses on the same letter, giving a very harsh, rapid, staccato rhythm."³⁰ All that needs to be added is that the force and energy of the alliteration is greatly enhanced by the poet's careful selection of strong, active verbs.

Finlayson would appear to be on less secure grounds when he suggests that, "one battle is much like another and was evidently expected to be so, even in more sophisticated or courtly works such as The Knight's Tale, where the battle between Palamon and Arcite could quite easily have come from an alliterative, formulaic poem."³¹ While it is true that Chaucer's passage is alliterative, one need only briefly compare Chaucer's tournament with the Morte Arthure poet's battle to perceive the difference in alliterative strategies:

There is namoore to seyn, but west and est
 In goon the speres ful sadly in arrest;
 In gooth the sharpe spore into the syde.
 Ther seen men who kan juste and who kan ryde;
 Ther shyveren shaftes upon sheeldes thikke;
 He feeleth thurgh the herte-spoon the prikke.
 Up spryngen speres twenty foot on highte;
 Out goon eht swerdes as the silver brighte;
 The helmes they tohewen and toshrede;
 Out brest the blood with stierne stremes rede;
 With myghty maces the bones they tobreste.
 He thurgh the thikkeste of the throng gan threste;
 Ther stomblen steedes stronge, and doun gooth al;
 He rolleth under foot as dooth a bal;
 He foyneth on his feet and with his tronchoun,
 And he hym hurtleth with his hors adoun;
 He thurgh the body is hurt and sithen take,
 Maugree his heed, and broght unto the stake.

(2601-2618) ³²

Chaucer composes his alliterations of basically subdued sounds, predominantly initial s, sh, and h rhymes, formally softening and restraining--civilizing, as it were--the violence of combat. The Morte Arthure poet, on the other hand, chooses alliterative patterns which intensify the brutality of battle, creating a world of violence and destruction

within which the heroic life stands as the sole source of meaning and value.

Like the fall of the conquered town, the theme of the fallen warrior swells the tragic progress of Morte Arthure. Invariably, there is wound into the linguistic matrix of such passages an elegiac strain which suggests the tragic universality of the action and the unique and irreplaceable value of what has been lost. The description of Kay's death has an unmistakably elegiac cast:

Sir Kayous knewe wele, be that kyde wounde,
That he was dede of the dynnte, and done owte of lyfe.
(2177-2178)

.
He weyndes to the wyese kyng, and wynly hym gretes,
"I am wathely woundide, waresche mone I neuer!
Wirke nowe thi wirchipe, as the worlde askes,
And bryng me to beryelle, byd I no more!
Grete wele my ladye the gwene, gife the werlde happyne,
And alle the burliche birdes that to hir boure lengez,
And my worthily weife, that wrethide me neuer,
Bid hire for hir wyrchipe wirke for my saulle!"
(2185-2192)

As do the death of Beril:

Thane this cruelle kyng castis in fewtire,
Kaghte hym a couerde horse, and his course haldez,
Beris to sir Berille, and brathely hym hittes,
Throwghe golet and gorgere he hurtez hym ewyne!
The gome and the grette horse at the grounde liggez,
And gretez graythely to Gode, and gyffes hym the saule!
Thus es Berelle the bolde broghte owtte of lyue,
And byddez aftyre beryelle, that hym beste lykez.
(1769-1776)

And the death of Bedivere:

Sir Bedwere was borne thurghe, and his breste thyrllede,
With a burlyche brannde, brode at the hiltis;
The ryalle rannke stele to his herte rynnys,
And he rusches to the erthe, rewthe es the more!
(2238-2241)

And that of Child Chastelain as well:

So thay chase that childe, eschape may he neuer!
Bot on Swyane of Swecy, with a swerde egge,

The swyers swyre-bane he swappes in sondyre!
 He swounande diede, and on the swarthe legede,
 Sweltes ewynne swiftly, and swanke he no more!
 (2957-2961)

The theme culminates in Arthur's long lament for his knights at Cornwall:

Bot whene sir Arthure anone sir Ewayne he fyndys,
 And Errake the auenaunt, and other grett lordes,
 He kawghte vp sir Cador with care at his herte,
 Sir Clegis, sir Cleremonde, thes clere mene of armes,
 Sir Lothe, and sir Lyonelle, sir Lawncelott, and Lowes,
 Marrake and Meneduke, that myghty ware euer;
 With langoure in the launde thare he layes theme togedire,
 Lokede on theyre lighames, and with a lowde steuene,
 AHs lede that liste noghte lyfe and loste had his myrthis;
 Than he stotays for made, and alle his strenghe faylez,
 Lokes vpe to the lyfte, and alle his lyre chaunges,
 Downne he sweys fulle swythe, and in a swoune fallys,
 Vpe he coueris one kneys, and kryes fulle oftene,--
 "Kyng comly with crowne, in care am I leuyde!
 Alle my lordchipe lawe in lande es layde vndyre!
 That me has gyfene gwerdone, be grace of hym seluene,
 Mayntenye my manhede be myghte of theire handes,
 Made me manly one molde, and mayster in erthe;
 In a tenefulle tyme this torfere was rereryde,
 That for a traytoure has tynte alle my trewe lordys!
 Here rystys the riche blude of the Rownde Table,
 Rebukkede with a rebawde, and rewthe as the more!
 I may helpes one hethe house be myne one,
 AHs a wafulle wedowe that wanttes hir beryne!
 I may werye and wepe, and wrynge myne handys,
 for my wytt and my wyrchipe awaye es for euer!
 Off alle lordchips I take leue to myne ende!
 Here is the Bretones blode broughte owt of lyfe,
 And nowe in this journee alle my joy endys!"
 (4262-4290)

Here at the Armageddon of the Round Table, tributary streams of lament swell and culminate in a passage of almost unbearable power as earlier instances of the theme echo and resonate, informing Arthur's threnody with an intensity and range that reaches back, as it were, to gather up and unify the whole of the preceding action within a single tragic focus.

This passage exemplifies what is perhaps the key rhetorical strategy of Morte Arthure, a poem in which themes, figures, and formulas are repeated and varied until brought to fruition in a climactic tragic

episode which they, in turn, orchestrate. Arthur's lament at Cornwall provides a model illustration of this strategy, realizing as it does a wide variety of the poem's tragic themes, figures and formulas. There is, for example, something clearly funereal about the laying out of corpses on the battlefield. As Benson notes,³³ the funeral is a recurrent theme in Morte Arthure. It is introduced in the complaint of the aged widow mourning for the duchess slain by the giant on Saint Michael's Mount:

"Loo! here the duchez dere,--to daye was cho takyne,--
 Depe doluene and dede, dyked in moldez;
 He hade morthirede this mylde be myddaye war rongene,
 With-owttyne mercy one molde, I not watte it ment:
 He has forsede hir and fylede, and cho es fay leuede;
 He slewe hir vn-slely, and slitt hir to the nauylle!
 And here haue I bawmede hir, and beryede ther-aftyre;
 ffor bale of the botelesse, blythe be I neuer!
 Of alle the frendez cho hade, there folowede none aftyre,
 Bot I, hir foster modyr of fyftene wynter!
 To ferke of this farlande, fande salle I neuer,
 Bot here be foundene on felde, tille I be fay leuede!"
 (974-985)³⁴

The funeral theme is prominent in the episode of Kay's death.³⁵ It appears again in Arthur's treatment of the Roman dead which implies a human bond in the face of necessity which transcends even enmity:

Bot sir Arthure onone ayeres ther-aftyre
 Ewyne to the emperour, with honourable kyngis;
 Laughte hym vpe fulle louelyly with hordlyche knyghttez,
 And ledde hyme to the layere, thare the kyng lygges.
 Thane harawdez heghely, at heste of the lordes,
 Hunttes vpe the haythemene, that on heghte lygges,
 The Sowdane of Surry, and certayne kynges,
 Sixty of the cheefe senatours of Rome.
 Thane they bussches and bawmede thaire honourliche kyngis,
 Sewed theme in sendelle sexti-faulde aftire,
 Lappede them in lede, lesse that they schulde
 Chawngge or chawffe, 3if that myghte escheffe;
 Closed in kystys clene vn-to Rome,
 With their baners a-bowne, their bagis there-vndyre,
 In whate countre thay kaire that knyghttes myghte knawe
 Iche kyng be his colours, in kyth whare [he] legende.
 (2290-2305)

The funeral theme recurs when, after the defeat of the Romans, Arthur pauses to bury Bedivere, Kay, Beril, Baldwin, Bedwar, and Cador:

He bydes for the beryenge of his bolde knyghtez,
That in batelle with brandez ware broughte owte of lyfe.
He beryes at Bayone sir Bedwere the ryche;
The cors of Kayone the kene at Came es be-leuefede,
Koueride with a crystalle clenly alle ouer;
His fadyre conqueride that kyth knyghtly with hondes.
Seyne in Burgoyne he bade to bery mo knyghttez,
Sir Berade and Bawdwyne, sir Bedwar the ryche,
Gud sir Cador at Came, as his kynde askes.

(2377-2385)

Later, Gawain's burial is prepared for with great religious ceremony:

And he be-tuke thame the cors of the knyghte noble.
"Lokis it be clenly kepyd," he said, "and in the kirke holdene,
Done for derygese, as to the ded fallys,
Menskede with messes, for mede of the saule:
Loke it wante no waxe, ne no wirchipe elles,
And at the body be bawmede, and one erthe holdene,
3iff thou kepe thi couent encroche any wirchipe
At my comyng a-gayne, 3if Crist wille it thole;
A-byde of the beryenge tille they be broughte vndire,
That has wroghte vs this woo, and this werre mouede."

(4015-4024)

Like Beowulf, Morte Arthure ends with a funeral:

The baronage of Bretayne thane, bechopes and othire,
Graythes theme to Glaschenbery with gloppynnande hertes,
To bery thare the bolde kyng, and bryng to the erthe,
With alle wirchipe and welthe that any wy scholde.
Throly belles thay ryng, and Requiem syngys,
Dosse messes and matyns with mournande notes:
Relygeous reueste in their riche copes,
Pontyficalles and prelates in precyouse wedys,
Dukes and dusszeperis in their dule-cotes,
Cowntasses knelande and claspande their handes,
Ladys languessande and lowrande to schewe;
Alle was buskede in blake, birdes and othire,
That schewede at the sepulture, with sylande teris;
What neuer so sorowfulle a syghte seene in their tyme!

(4328-4341)

Here the full meaning of the theme is released. Arthur's funeral stands as an emblem of a world so bereft of value, a world so subject to the forces of time, change and death, that all must finally settle into a tableau of irreparable loss, resignation and grief.

One of Morte Arthure's most eloquent and striking figures of human misery is that of the woeful widow. As cited above, the figure is prominent in Arthur's lament:

"I may helples one hethe house be myne one,
 AHs a wafulle wedowe that wanttes hir beryne!
 I may werye and wepe, and wrynge myne handys,
 ffor my wytt and my wyrchipe awaye es for euer!
 Off alle lordchips I take leue to myne ende!
 Here es the Bretones blode broughte owt of lyfe,
 And nowe in this journee alle my joy endys!"
 (4284-4290)

The woeful widow first appears in the form of the foster-mother of the duchess whom the giant of Saint Michael's Mount has raped and murdered:

He ferkez to the fyrste fyre, and euene there he fyndez
 A wery wafulle wedowe, wryngande hire handez,
 And gretande on a graue grysely teres,
 Now merkyde one molde, sene myddaye it semede:
 (949-952)

The figure recurs in the portrayal of Arthur's conquest of Tuscany, where it points the tragic universality of war:

Towrres he turnes, and turmentez the pople,
 Wroghte wedewes fulle wlonke, wrotherayle synges,
 (3153-3154)

Finally, at Arthur's funeral, the figure of the woeful widow reappears for the last time in generalized form as all women, brides and others, are veiled in black, weep, kneel, and wring their hands:

Cowntasses knelande and claspande theire handes,
 Ladys languessande and lowrande to schewe;
 Alle was buskede in blake, birdes and othire,
 That schewede at the sepulture, with sylande teris;
 Whas neuer so sorrowfulle a syghte seene in theire tyme!
 (4337-4341)

The figure of the woeful widow is recognizable by three particulars which are constant and invariable; wherever she appears and whatever letter provides the key in which the alliteration is composed, she is always weeping, kneeling, and wringing her hands. These are the

details which identify the figure and which mark its use, even where not overtly designated. For example, the giant of Saint Michael's Mount provides an example of the woeful widow figure, even though not specifically named as such:

Thane the balefulle bierdez bownez to the erthe,
 Kneland and cryande, and clappide theire handez,--
 (1136-1137)

There is also a hint of the figure in the description of Arthur's grief for Gawain:

Bot whene oure wiese kyng wiste that Gawayne was landede,
 He al to-wrythes for woo, and wryngande his handes,
 (3919-3920)

And again in the rebuke of the Round Table to what they consider to be the excessive mourning of their chief:

"Blyne," sais thies bolde mene, "thow blondirs thi selfene,
 This es botles bale, for bettir bees it neuer!
 It es no wirchipe i-wysse to wryng thyne hondes.
 To wepe als a womane it es no witt holdene!"
 (3975-3978)

What is essential to recognize is that each time the figure of the woeful widow occurs, she projects an image of humanity isolated, unprotected, and immersed in loss and lamentation. Equally important is the phenomenon of recurrence itself. The multiplication of the figure suggests that what she represents is neither arbitrary nor accidental. Recurrence functions as a refrain, suggesting that such catastrophes are inherent in the nature of existence.

Special care should be devoted not only to the themes and figures, but to the diction of Arthur's threnody for his fallen knights, specifically those formulaic phrases of elegiac commentary which deepen and clarify the action. One such phrase, at least, is familiar enough:

Here rystys the riche blude of the Rownde Table,
 Rebukkede with a rebawde, and rewthe es the more!
 (4282-4283)

The formula, bespeaking grief and loss, is first used to comment on Bedivere's death:

The ryalle rannke stele to his herte rynnys,
And he rusches to the erthe, rewthe es the more!
(2240-2241)

A variation appears in Caesar's speech from the wheel:

'I was dredde in my dayes,' he said, 'in dyuerse rewmes,
And now dampnede to the dede, and dole es the more!"
(3298-3299)

Three variants occur in the depiction of Gawain's last stand, the first as part of the poet's ominous description of Gawain's original landing and assault:

Whene he growndide, for grefe he gyrdis in the watere,
That to the girdylle he gos in alle his gylte wedys;
Schottis vpe appone the sonde in syghte of the lordes,
Sengly with hys soppe, my sorowe es the more!
(3726-3729)

The second as a despairing admission during Gawain's own lament for his doomed knights:

I syghe noghte for my selfe, sa helpe oure Lorde;
Bot for to [see] vs supprysede, my sorowe es the more.
(3796-3797)

The third as a poignant element of the poet's eulogy for the dead hero:

And thus sir Gawayne es gone, the gude man of armes,
With-owttyne reschewe of renke, and rewghes es the more!
(3858-3859)

The formula resurfaces twice more in Arthur's lament for the fallen Gawain:

Was neuer sorowe so softe that sanke to my herte,
Itt es fulle sibb to my selfe; my sorowe es the more!
(3983-3984)

The penultimate recurrence of the phrase³⁷ appears in the poet's commentary on the last battle:

So the droughte of the daye dryede theire hertes,
That bothe drynkles they dye, dole was the more!
(4171-4172)

A second elegiac refrain contributing to the force of Arthur's lament is the following:

ffor my wytt and my wyrchipe awaye es for euer!
(4287)

The key phrase is "forever" with its burden of irrevocable loss: it is reminiscent of Guinevere's prophetic complaint:

Alle my lykynge of lyfe owte of lande wendez,
And I in langour am lefte, leue 3e for euer!
(701-702)

There are echoes as well of the fall of Como:

Thane brekes oure buschement, and the brigge wynnes,
Brayedez in-to the burghe with baners displayede,
Stekes and stabbis thorowe that them a-3ayne-stondes;
ffowre stretis, or that stynte, they stroyene fore euer!
(3124-3127)

And of the mournful lamentation spoken in unison by the worthies of the wheel:

'And thus I drife forthe my dayes, whilles I dreghe myghte,
And there-fore derflyche I am dampnede for euer!'
(3276-3277)

A variant occurs in Hector's complaint:

'And nowe my lordchippes are loste, and laide for euer!'
(3293)

And another in the description of Gawain's last stand:

The doughttyste of Danemarke vndone are for euer!
(3752)

The phrase recurs one time more before Arthur's lament in Frederick of Frisland's eulogy for Gawain:

"He was the sterynneste in stoure that euer stele werryde,
ffore he has stonayede oure stale, and stroyede for euer!"
(3872-3873)

Still another formula of elegiac tribute winds in and out of the poem before climaxing in Arthur's final lament:

He kawghte vp sir Cador with care at his herte,
 Sir Clegis, sir Cleremonde, these clere mene of armes,
 (4264-4265)

The variation on the basic formula is clere men of armes, a phrase serving as epitaph and eulogy, commemorating the irretrievable value of what has been lost. The formula first appears in Gawain's lament for Child Chastelain:

The guyte was a gude mane, be-gynnande of armes.
 (2963)

It recurs in the narration of Gawain's slaying of the King of Gutland:

He gyrdes hym in at the gorge with his gryme lance,
 That the growndene glayfe graythes in sondyre!
 With that boystous brayde he bownes hym to dye!
 The kyng of Gutlande it was, a gude mane of armes.
 (3760-3763)

The formula is most poignantly sounded in the poet's lament for Gawain:

And thus sir Gawayne es gone, the gude man of armes,
 (3858)

Such formulas and phrases are perhaps, in themselves, not especially meaningful. What is significant is the cumulative effect of their reiteration. Like elegiac themes and figures, the formulas appear and reappear, weaving a pattern of grief and suffering throughout the whole of the action and informing critical scenes like Arthur's eulogy for the Round Table with measureless depth, making of Morte Arthure a poem in which man's fate is never far from the surface.

Thus far we have seen to what extent event, structure, narrative pace, and rhetoric serve to convey the tragic necessities which shadow the Arthurian world. But tragedy accounts for only half the foundation upon which the heroic poem rests. In Morte Arthure, the pervasive negations of fortune are always and everywhere opposed by the heroic

attitudes and actions of the Round Table. In the aftermath of Cornwall, dirge and funeral are evidence of the inevitable triumph of Fortune and all that she represents. But the deeds of Arthur and his knights stand as undeniable proof of the unconquerable worth of the heroic life.

If the tension between heroic affirmation and tragic negation is indeed the mainspring of Morte Arthure, then one might expect this to be reflected in Arthur's dream of Fortune, which is an explicit rendering of the poem's form and meaning in microcosm. To focus exclusively on those portions of the dream which emphasize human limitation would be a serious error. One must not forget, and Arthur's philosophers do not permit us to forget, the authentic achievements of the worthies on the wheel. Alexander, Hector, Caesar, and the rest represent humanity at its highest. What they suffer on the wheel does not belittle their stature or demean their deeds. Time, change and death do not render the heroic life contemptible or vainglorious. The sentence implicit in the figure of the worthies on the wheel is that even the greatest men and their most glorious acts are subject to those mortal limitations that define life on earth as human. At the same time, it is those very heroes and what they have dared and done which insure that the triumph of time and death does not obviate the worth and meaning of human history. The enduring fame of the worthies is living proof that heroic glory is not vainglory, that the most essential conquests of the hero are not cancelled by Fortune. And Arthur is not only named as one of this heroic company, but is chief among them; as his philosophers advise him:

ffore-thy ffortune the fetches to fulfille the nowmbyre,
 Alls nynne of the nobileste namede in erthe;
 This salle in romance be redde with ryalle knyghttes,

Rekkenede and renownde with ryotous kynges,
 And demyd one domesdaye, for dedis of armes,
 ffor the doughtyeste that euer was duelland in erthe:
 So many clerkis and kynges salle karpe of 3oure dedis,
 And kepe 3oure conquestez in cronycle for euer!
 (3438-3445)

This passage is especially noteworthy. Here the philosophers teach just exactly what it is that heroism wrests from time and death. Arthur's heroic deeds will be remembered forever, recorded in romance, renowned among kings, attaining perhaps a duration beyond that of the world.³⁸

Here indeed is heroic power and glory capable of withstanding, on its own terms the full force of Fortune and her wheel.

Fittingly enough, at the conclusion of the poem, the Worthy theme is again sounded with mention of Arthur's heroic lineage which, like that of Britain itself, stretches back to Troy:

Thus endis kyng Arthure, as auctors alegges,
 That was of Ectores blude, the kynges sone of Troye,
 And of sir Pryamous, the prynce, praysede in erthe;
 ffro thethene broghte the Bretons alle his bolde eldyrs
 In-to Bretayne the brode, as the Bruytte tellys.
 (4342-4346)

The narrative ends with a funeral which is appropriate to a tragedy of fortune which had all along insisted upon the mortality of man. But the poem itself ends with a convention which places the victory of the wheel in its proper perspective. All must fall and pass away. But in the endless round of human history, great men have inhabited the earth and accomplished great deeds. The fame of heroes like Hector and Priam shall not pass away. Neither shall that of Arthur. The brevity of life cannot impair its validity.

It is worth noting that once again, at the end, just as in the philosophers' interpretation of Arthur's dream, there is reference to the role of literature in preserving heroic value from the assaults of

time. Heroic poetry--whether Brut, romance, or Morte Arthure itself-- is a special form of heroic loyalty, a means of paying tribute to and sustaining the hard-won achievements of the heroic life. There is no surer evidence that, for all its individualism, heroism is ultimately a collective human enterprise.

The nature of heroism, like that of tragic necessity, is clarified in Arthur's vision of Fortune. But from the outset, Morte Arthure is a thoroughly heroic poem in its language, rhetoric, outlook and values. Arthur and his Round Table, and even his enemies as often as not, are described in the conventional diction which identifies the heroic life: noble, prince-like, wise, valiant, kind, courteous, honorable, worthy, mighty, knightly, comely, brave, gallant, bold, fierce, and fair; these are some of the adjectives (in rough translation) characteristically designating the fighters in the poem. More important, Arthur's aspirations are heroic throughout. He never fights for mere gain and power. Like the legitimate hero he is, he despises the mere material rewards of war. Worldly goods are only significant insofar as they serve as emblems of the nobility of the heroic life.³⁹ Arthur fights to protect his people; to avenge wrongs; and in accordance with the traditional heroic passion for fame and glory. Despite the tragic ironies which inevitably accompany such heroic aspirations,⁴⁰ the quest for fame and glory remains admirable to the end, a heroic means of demonstrating human grandeur in a world hedged round with evidence of irremediable failure.

The tragic themes which play such an important part in defining the objective conditions of the Arthurian world have their counterparts in recurrent heroic themes equally important, equally definitive, and equally traditional in heroic poetry. One of these is the heroic vow.

As Benson notes, "Before each battle Arthur's knights boast of the deeds they will do in vows that seem to echo the beots of Old English warriors, and their relation to their leader is similar to that of the Anglo-Saxon comitatus."⁴¹

This theme is first sounded at the council at which Arthur determines to wage war against Lucius.⁴² In succession, prominent knights of the Round Table pledge to perform heroic deeds against the Roman armies,⁴³ pledges which the poet takes great care to point the accomplishment of later.⁴⁴

The heroic vow entails far more than a knight's resolve and capacity to perform a particularly courageous act. Ultimately, what is at stake is his heroic identity and the status of the heroic life itself. When Beowulf vows to confront the monster, when Byrhtwold vows to die--fegnlice--by the side of the lord that he loves, when Gawain (in Gawain and the Green Knight) vows to seek out the Green Knight on New Year's day--in each instance the hero is pledging to remain faithful to what is worthiest in himself, indeed, to what is highest in human nature, no matter what the consequences. So too, the knights of the Round Table in Morte Arthure stake their heroic reputations on the fulfillment of their vows.

In Beowulf and in Maldon, the meaning of the heroic life was, in part, clarified by a contrast with its opposite--cowardice. So too, in Morte Arthure, the full import of the heroic vow is partially conveyed via a comparison with Lucius' failure to fulfill his "vow." In a battle episode, the King of Wales, an Arthurian knight, pledges in a manner reminiscent of Maldon:

"Vnenuenquiste for this place voyde schalle I neuer!"
(2049)

A few lines earlier, Lucius expresses a somewhat similar resolve, but with a far different sentiment:

"Here es no waye i-wys, ne no wytt elles,
Bot feghte with oure foo-mene, for flee may we neuer!"
(2020-2021)

This is not exactly the most heroic approach. But even this watered-down resolve does not hold up under pressure:

Be than the Romaynez ware rebuykyde a lyttille,
With-drawes theyme drerely, and dreches no lengare;
(2153-2154)⁴⁵

Failure underscores the full significance of the heroic vow, which is, in essence, an unswerving commitment to what is noblest in human life. This is the underlying meaning even of an abbreviated battle vow such as Lotte's:

"To daye salle my name be laide, and my life aftyre,
Bot some leppe fro the lyfe, that one gone lawnde houez!"
(2083-2084)

And Gawain's challenge to Mordred:

"Thow salle be dede and vndone for thy derfe dedys,
Or I salle dy this daye, 3if destanye worthe!"
(3778-3779)

It is equally true of Arthur's seemingly less dramatic vow to avenge Gawain:

"Here I make myn avowe," quod the kynge thane,
"To Messie, and to Marie, the mylde qwenne of heuene,
I salle neuer ryvaye, ne racches vn-cowpylle
At roo ne rayne-dere, that rynnnes apponne erthe;
Neuer grewhownde late glyde, ne gossehawke latt flye,
Ne neuer fowle see fellide, that flieghes with wenge;
ffawkone ne formaylle appone fiste handille,
Ne gitt with gerefawcone rejoyse me in erthe;
Ne regnne in my royaltéz, ne halde my Rownde Table,
Tille thi dede, my dere, be dewly reuengede!
Bot euer droupe and dare, qwylles my lyfe lastez,
Tille Drightene and derfe dede hafe done quate theme likes!"
(3997-4008)

The vow is profoundly serious. In pledging to abstain from hunting⁴⁶ and

holding his Round Table, Arthur vows to abstain from the celebration of the heroic life until he has satisfied his heroic obligations. The trappings and pleasures of the heroic life are earned, or they are nothing. This is, in fact, the essential means by which the heroic poem distinguishes glory from vainglory.

Vengeance is a fundamental tenet of the Germanic heroic code and a major theme of Morte Arthure. Since there are those who apparently have some difficulty coming to terms with this aspect of heroic life,⁴⁷ it is critical to recognize what revenge is not in a heroic poem like Morte Arthure. First, there is nothing primitive, irrational or uncivilized about revenge in Morte Arthure. On the contrary, it is the very essence of aristocratic propriety--a heroic virtue and obligation.⁴⁸ Nor is Arthurian vengeance to be confused with the eye-for-an-eye justice of the Old Testament. Vengeance in the heroic poem has essentially very little to do with justice. It is rather a means of affirming and preserving heroic reputation, virtue and honor.

There are two basic forms of vengeance in Morte Arthure: the avenging of wrongs and the avenging of comrades. In the opening passages of the poem, as the Round Table pledges to wage uncompromising war against the forces of Rome, the avenging of wrongs is proclaimed as a primary cause for war. First in the vow of King Aungers:

"Whene the Romaynes regnede, thay raunsounde oure eldyrs,
 And rade in theire ryotte, and rauyschett oure wyfes,
 With-owttyne resone or ryghte refte vs oure gudes;
 And I salle make myne avowe deuotly to Criste,
 And to the haly vernacle, vertuus and noble,
 Of this grett velany I salle be vengede ones
 On zone venemus mene, wyth valiant knyghtes!"
 (293-299)

Next in the vow of the King of Wales:

"A!A!" sais the Walsche kynge, "wirchipid be Criste!

Now schalle we wreke fulle wele the wrethe of oure elders!
 In West Walys i-wysse syche wonndyrs that wroghte,
 That alle for wandrethe may wepe, that one that were thynkes."
 (320-323)

Finally, in Lottes' original vow:

Thane laughes sir Lottez, and alle one lowde meles,
 "Me likez that sir Lucius lannges aftyre sorowe;
 Now he wylnez the were, hys wanedrethe begynnys,
 It is owre weredes to wreke the wrethe of oure elders!"
 (382-385)

Later, when Arthur learns of Mordred's treason and prepares to launch his second major war, his initial concern is vengeance:

Than the burliche kyng, for brethe at his herte,
 And for this botelesse bale alle his ble chaungede!
 "By the rode," sais the roye, "I salle it revenge!
 Hym salle repente fulle rathe alle his rewthe werkes!"
 (3557-3560)

Revenge takes precedence even over his well-demonstrated kingly concern for his subjects. This is not, at least according to the heroic tenets of Morte Arthure, a confusion of priorities. Vengeance is primary. To avenge a wrong is to defend the heroic integrity of the Round Table. To fail to avenge a wrong is to accept and confirm dishonor and degradation. For the hero, like the failure to fulfill a vow, it is an act of self-repudiation, a betrayal of all that makes life precious and worthwhile. Worse than defeat, the shirking of revenge is the equivalent of surrender, flight, or cowardice, entailing a confession of inferiority, humiliation and impotence. The hero, insofar as he is the sole representative of what is highest in mankind, can ill afford to abrogate such an essential obligation.

The duty to avenge the death of a fallen comrade is, if possible, even more central to the heroic life portrayed in Morte Arthure than the need to avenge an injury. Such vengeance must be swift, final, and take precedence over all other obligations. It is the heroic sine qua non

and is accorded a large and essential role in the poem. The first prominent member of the Round Table to fall is Beril, whose slayer vaunts over his corpse:

Thane this cruelle kynge castis in fewtire,
 Kaghte hym a couerde horse, and his course haldez,
 Beris to sir Berille, and brathely hym hittes,
 Throwghe golet and gorgere he hurtez hym ewyne!
 The gome and the grette horse at the grounde liggez,
 And gretez graythely to Gode, and gyffes hym the saule!
 Thus es Berelle the bolde broghte owtte of lyue,
 And byddez aftyre beryelle, that hym beste lykez.
 And thane sir Cador of Cornewayle es carefulle in herte,
 Be-cause of his kynyse-mane, that thus es myscaryede;
 Vmbeclappes the cors, and kyssez hyme ofte,
 Gerte kepe hym couerte with his clere knyghttez.
 Thane laughs the Lebe kynge, and alle on lowde meles,--
 "3one lorde es lyghttede! me lykes the bettyre!
 He salle noghte dere vs to daye, the deuylle haue [his]
 bones!"

(1769-1783)

Cador grieves, vows revenge, and fulfills his pledge:

And thane sir Cador of Cornewayle es carefulle in herte,
 Be-cause of hys kynyse-mane, that thus es myscaryede;
 Vmbeclappes the cors, and kyssez hyme ofte,
 Gerte kepe hym couerte with his clere knyghttez.

"3one kynge," said Cador, "karpes fulle large,
 Be-cause he killyd this kene; Criste hafe thi saule!
 He salle hafe corne bote, so me Criste helpe!
 Or I kaire of this coste, we salle encontre ones!
 So may the wynde weile turnne, I quytte hym or ewyne,
 Sothely hym selene, or summ of his ferez!"

(1777-1789)

.

Thane sir Cador the kene castez in fewtire
 A cruelle launce and a kene, and to the kynge rydez,
 Hitzte hym heghe one the helme with his harde wapene,
 That alle the hotte blode of hym to his hande rynnez!
 The hethene harageous kynge appone the hethe lyggez,
 And of his hertly hurte helyde his neuer!
 Thane sir Cador the kene cryez fulle lowde,--
 "Thow has corne botte, sir kynge, thare God gyfe the sorowe,
 Thow killyde my cosyne, my kare es the lesse!
 Kele the nowe in the claye, and comforthe thi selfene!
 Thow skornede vs lang ere with thi skornefulle wordez,
 And nowe has thow cheuede soo; it es thyne awene skathe!
 Holde at thow hente has, it harmez bot lyttille,
 ffor hethynge es hame holde, vse it who so wille."

(1830-1843)

Cador's vaunt which explicitly repudiates the scorn of Beril's slayer points one of the key functions of revenge. Vengeance is a means of denying to the enemy his victory, redeeming the defeat of a fallen warrior, demonstrating the continuing viability of the heroic fellowship, and proving that the heroic prowess of the Round Table has not been impaired by the death of one of its members.

The next important Round Table fighter to fall is Kay, who avenges his own mortal wound:

Sir Kayous knewe wele, be that kyde wounde,
 That he was dede of the dynte, and done owte of lyfe.
 Than he raykes in arraye and one rawe rydez,
 One this ryalle his dede to reuenge;
 "Kepe the, cowarde," and calles hym sone,
 Cleues hym with his clere brande clenliche in sondire!
 "Hadde thow wele delte thy dynt with thi handes,
 I hadde for-geffene the my ded, be Crist now of hewyne!"
 (2177-2184)

He is then avenged by Arthur:

Thane remmes the riche kyng fore rewthe at his herte,
 Rydes in-to rowte his dede to reuenge;
 Presede in-to the plumpe, and with a prynce metes,
 That was ayere of Egipt in thos este marches;
 Cleues hym with Collbrande clenlyche in sondyre!
 He broches euene thorowe the byerne, and the sadille bristes,
 And at the bake of the blonke the bewelles entamede!
 Manly in his maly[n]coly he metes a-nother,
 The medille of that myghtty, that hym myche greuede;
 He merkes thurghe the maylez the myddes in sondyre,
 That the myddys of the mane on the mounte fallez,
 The tother halfe of the haunche on the horse leuyde.
 Of that hurte, alls I hope, heles he neuer!
 He schotte thorowe the schiltrouns with his scharpe wapene,
 Schalkez he schrede thurghe, and schrenkede maylez;
 Baneres he bare downne, bryttenede scheldes,
 Brothely with browne stele his brethe he thare wrekes;
 Wrothely he wryththis by wyghtnesse of strenghe,
 Woundes these whydyrewyns, werrayede knyghttes,
 Threppede thorowe the thykkys thryttene sythis,
 Thryngez throly in the thrange, and chis euene aftyre!
 (2197-2217)

The emotional power, the melancholy, rage, and ferocity of the passage are particularly noteworthy. The same pattern recurs in Gawain's revenge for Child Chastelain:

Than sir Gawayne gretes with his gray eghne;
 The guyte was a gude mane, be-gynnande of armes.
 ffore the charry childe so his chere chawngide,
 That the chillande watire one his chekes rynnyde!
 "Woo es me," quod Gawayne, "that I ne wetene hade;
 I sale wage for that wye alle that I welde,
 Bot I be wrokeneon that wye, that thus has hym wondyde!"
 (2962-2968)

.
 Thofe sir Gawaynne ware wo, he wayttes hym by,
 And was warre of that wye that the childe wondyde,
 And with a swerde swiftly he swappes hym thorowe,
 That he swyftly swelte, and on the erthe swounes!
 And thane heraykes to the rowte, and ruysches one helmys;
 Riche hawberkes he rente, and rasede schyldes;
 Rydes one a rawndoune, and his rayke holdes;
 Thorow-owte the rerewarde he holdes wayes,
 (2979-2986)

Emotional intensity climaxes in Gawain's vengeance for his doomed
 fighters and Arthur's revenge for Gawain himself. Gawain's fury and
 grief are almost without measure:

Thane sir Gawayne grette with his gray eghene,
 ffor grefe of his gud meme that he gyde schulde;
 He wyste that thay wondyde ware, and very forfoughttene;
 And what for wondire and woo, alle his witte faylede.
 (3790-3793)

.
 Than grymly sir Gawayne gryppis hys wapyne,
 Agayne that gret bataille he graythes hym sone;
 Radly of his riche swerde he reghttes the cheynys,
 In he schokkes his schelde, schountes he no lengare;
 Bot alls vnwyse, wodewyse, he wente at the gayneste,
 Wondis of that wedirwyns with wrakfulle dynttys,
 Alle wellys fulle of blode, thare he awaye passes;
 And thofe hym ware fulle woo, he wondys bot lyttille,
 Bot wrekys at his wirchipe the wrethe of hys lorde!
 He stekys stedis in stoure, and sterenefulle knyghttes,
 That sterne mene in theire sterapes stone-dede thay lygge!
 He ryvys the ranke stele, he rittes the mayles;
 Thare myghte no renke hym areste, his resone was passede!
 He felle in a fransye for fersenesse of herte,
 He feghttis and fellis downe that hyme be-fore standis!
 ffelle neuer fay mane siche fortune in erthe!
 In-to the hale bataile hedyngs he rynnys,
 And hurtes of the hardieste that one the erthe lenges!
 Letande alls a lyone, he lawnces theme thorowe,
 Lordes and ledars, that one the launde houes!
 3it sir Gawayne for wo wondis bot lyttille,
 Bot woundis of thas wedirwynes with wondirfulle dyntes,

Alls he that wold wilfully wastene hyme selfene;
 And for wondrousome and wille alle his wit failede,
 That wode alls a wylde beste he wente at the gayneste;
 Alle walewede one blode, thare he a-waye passede;
 Iche a wy may be warre, be wreke of an-other!
 (3813-3839)

Arthur's own rage and sorrow are truly boundless:

Than gliftis the gud kyng, and glopyns in herte,
 Gronys fulle grisely with gretande teris;
 Knelis downe to the cors, and kaught it in armes,
 Kastys vpe his vmbre, and kyssis hyme sone,
 Lokes one his eye-liddis, that lowkkide ware faire,
 His lippis like to the lede, and his lire falowede!
 (3949-3954)

.

Than swe[l]tes the swete kyng and in swoune fallis,
 Swafres vp swiftly, and swetly hym kysses,
 Tille his burliche berde was bloody be-rowne,
 Alls he had bestes birtenede, and broghte owt of life;
 Ne had sir Ewayne comene, and othire grete lordys,
 His bolde herte had broustene for bale at that stownde!
 (3969-3974)

.

"ffor blode," said the bolde kyng, "blyne salle I neuer,
 Or my brayne to-briste, or my breste other!
 Was neuer sorowe so softe that sanke to my herte,
 Itt es fulle sibb to my selfe, my sorowe es the more!
 Was neuer so sorrowfulle a syghte seyne with myne eyghene!"
 (3981-3985)

.

"praye the kare noghte, sir knyghte, ne caste thou no dredis!
 Hadde I no segge bot my selfe one vndir sone,
 And I may hym see with sighte, or one hym sette hondis,
 I salle evene amange his mene malle hym to dede,
 Are I of the stede styre halfe a stede lenghe!
 I salle [stryke] hym in his stowre, and stroye hyme for euer,
 And thare-to make I myne avowe devottly to Cryste,
 And to hys modyre Marie, the mylde qwene of heuene!"
 (4034-4041)

The passionate nature of vengeance reflects something beyond even the heroic spirit and magnanimity of the avenger. In revenge, grief, rage, and prowess combine to pay implicit tribute to the unique and unrecoverable value of the fallen comrade. Vengeance is a form of heroic loyalty.⁴⁹

Loyalty is doubtless the most fundamental and distinctive value of the English medieval heroic tradition, the cornerstone upon which the weight of the heroic life rests. Whatever the social conditions and historical pressures it reflects,⁵⁰ loyalty--whether it takes the form of the comitatus ties of Beowulf and Maldon or the bonds of heroic fellowship in Morte Arthure-- is in essence, like troth, a commitment to that which is worth preserving and celebrating in life, a desperate attempt to prove that there are human bonds and values even stronger than death. No wonder that danger and risk are the inevitable concomitants of heroic loyalty, especially that which binds the retainer to his chief. When Gawain determines to counterattack against a vastly superior Roman ambush force, his primary motive is to demonstrate the depth of his allegiance to his lord:

Thane sais sir Gawayne, "so me God helpe!
 We hafe bene chased to daye, and chullede as hares,
 Rebuyked with Romaynes appone theire ryche stedez,
 And we lurkede vndyr lee as lowrande wreches!
 I luke neuer one my lorde the dayes of my lyfe,
 And we so lytherly hyme helpe, that hyme so wele lykede!"
 (1443-1448)

Cador, also enormously outnumbered by a Roman ambush, invokes the reciprocal ties and obligations of heroic fellowship as he exhorts his men to battle in a manner reminiscent of the most moving Old English heroic poetry:

Syr Cador thane knyghtly comforthes his pople,
 And with corage kene he karpes thes wordes,--
 "Thynk one the valyaunt prynce that vesettez vs euer,
 With landez and lordcheppez, whare vs beste lykes;
 That has vs ducheres delte, and dubbyde vs knyghttez,
 Gifene vs gersoms and golde, and gardwynes many,
 Grewhoundez and grett horse, and alkyne gamnes,
 That gaynez tille any gome, that vndyre God leuez;
 Thynke one riche renoune of the Rounde Table,
 And late it neuer be refte vs fore Romaine in erthe;
 ffeyne 3ow noghte feyntly, ne frythes no wapyns,
 Bot luke 3e fyghte faythefully, frekes 3our selfene;

I walde be wellyde alle quyke, and quarterde in sondre,
 Bot I wryke my dede, whils I in wrethe lenge."
 (1724-1737)

Later, Gawain again urges his men on against outrageous odds in terms that echo the sentiments of the Old English comitatus:

"3if wettlesse goo home, the kyng wille be greuede,
 And say we are gadlynges, agaste for a lyttille."
 (2727-2728)

.

"That kane carpe with the coppe knyghtly wordes;
 We salle proue to-daye who salle the prys wyne."
 (2750-2751)

And again in his doomed assault against Mordred's superior force:

"ffightes faste with the frape, the felde salle be owres;
 May I that traytoure ouer-take, torfere hyme tyddes,
 That this tresone has tymbyrde to my trewe lorde!"
 (3740-3742)

In each case, the very length of the odds suggests that loyalty,-- the bonds of fellowship--like the desire for honor and fame, takes precedence over all practical considerations. Such heroic obligations far outweigh survival or victory. At Cornwall, with full prescience of the tragic outcome, Arthur's final exhortation to his knights leaves no doubt as to the proper order of relations among heroic values:

"I be-seke 3ow, sirs, for sake of oure Lorde,
 That 3e doo wele to-daye, and dredis no wapene!

.

3if vs be destaynede to dy to-days one this erthe,
 We salle be hewede vn-to heuene, or we be halfe colde!

.

Take no tente vn-to me, ne tale of me rekke,
 Bes besy one my baners with 3oure brighte wapyns,
 That they be strengthely stuffede with steryne knyghtes,
 And holdene lordly one lofte ledys to schewe;
 3if any renke theme arase, reschowe theme sone.
 Wirkes now my wirchipe, to-daye my werre endys!
 3e wotte my wele and my woo, wirkkys as 3ow likys!
 Crist comly with crowne comforthe 3ow alle,
 ffor the kyndeste creatours that euer kynged ledde!
 I gyffe 3ow alle my blyssyng with a blithe wille,
 And alle Bretowns bolde, blythe mote 3e worthe!"
 (4094-4104)

There is no question of self-sacrifice here. Honor and heroic fellowship count for everything; life itself, for nothing. Life without heroism is worthless. In order to validate life, one must risk death. In the heroic view as well as the Christian, "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it."⁵¹

As one would expect, the most stirring displays of loyalty are reserved for certain death and defeat. Early in the poem, Arthur honors Ewain by refusing all ransom and terms to the Roman captives until his knight is recovered from his wounds:

"Bot say to the senatour I sende hyme thes wordez,
Thare salle no siluer hym saue, bot Ewayne recouere;
I had leuer see hym synke one the salte strandez,
Than the seegge ware seke, that es so sore woundede;"
(1571-1574)

At Cornwall, that tribute is repaid ten-fold:

"Idrous," quod Arthure, "ayre the by-houes!
I see sir Ewayne ouer-sette with Sarazenes kene!
Redy the for rescows, arraye thee sone!
Hye the with hardy mene in helpe of thy ffadire!
Sett in one the syde, and socoure 3one lordes;
Bot they be socourrede and sownde, vnsawghte be I neuer!"

Idrous hyme ansuers earnestly thare-aftyre,--
"He es my fadire in faithe, for-sake salle I neuer,
He has me fosterde and fedde, and my faire bretherene,
Bot I for-sake this gate, so me Gode helpe,
And sothely alle sybredyne bot thy selfe one;
I breke neuer his biddyng for beryne one lyfe,
Bot euer bouxvme as beste blethely to wyrke!
He commande me kyndly, with knyghtly wordes,
That I schulde lelely one the lenge, and one noo lede elles;
I salle hys commandement holde, 3if Criste wil me thole!
He es eldare thane I, and ende salle we bothene;
He salle ferkke be-fore, and I salle come aftyre:
3iffe hyme be destaynede to dy to-daye one this erthe,
Criste comly with crowne take kept to hys saule!"
(4135-4154)

At the twilight of the Round Table, all bonds--even that of blood kinship--are subordinated to the ties of the heroic fellowship which alone

have sufficient power to sustain human value in the very teeth of tragic necessity.

One of the most poignant expressions of heroic loyalty occurs after Gawain and his small band of retainers are destroyed. Arthur comes upon the field:

The riche kyng ransakes with rewthe at his herte,
 And vp rypes the renkes of alle the Rownde Tabyll;
 Ses theme alle in a soppe in sowte by theme one,
 With the Sarazenes vn-sownde enserchede a-bowte;
 (3939-3942)

The heroic scenario is reminiscent of Maldon. These are knights who die as they should--all in a band, together by themselves, their dead enemies all around them, the heroic fellowship unbroken even in death. There are echoes of this episode at Cornwall, where Arthur thanks God for allowing him and his knights to perish among their own, as one heroic body:

'Of this dere day werke, the Dryghttene be louede,
 That vs has destaynede and demyd to dye in oure awene."
 (4305-4306)

The Round Table is no more. Arthur's prayer is the utterance of a last survivor. But the Round Table dies as it had lived, the heroic fellowship inviolate and intact.

The hero's eagerness to accept risks and ignore odds, coupled with the inevitably tragic end of the heroic poem, has led many to wonder to what degree the hero, through his rashness, is to be held accountable for his own fate as well as what befalls those closest to him.⁵² The question is raised in many forms, but in each case comes essentially down to this: Is heroism inherently flawed by the seemingly reckless abandon with which the hero characteristically disregards practical considerations--secular or sacred--in order to fulfill his heroic

nature? In Beowulf, as we have seen, the question was raised à propos of the hero's decision to encounter the dragon single-handed; and in Maldon, there was Byrhtnoth's ofermod, his decision to grant land to fela to the Vikings. In Morte Arthure, there is the rashness with which Arthur, Gawain, and Cador pursue their heroic obligations without apparent heed to the consequences. Because rashness is as much a part of the Germanic heroic code as courage, prowess, revenge, or loyalty; because it is precisely his disregard for danger and indifference to consequences that distinguishes the hero from other men; because the criticism of the hero's recklessness is raised from within as well as from without the heroic poem; and because, as a heroic theme, rashness plays so prominent a part in Morte Arthure, it needs to be examined at some length and in some detail.

For Matthews, rashness is "a weakness of character, a desmesure of generous courage that does not escape the poet's criticism."⁵³ It is, in short, a flaw and major factor in the downfall of the Round Table.⁵⁴ Finlayson, while initially recognizing the propriety of desmesure in the heroic poem as contrasted with the romance, ends by tying it to sin and error, concluding that "it is this reckless disregard for odds, for which he had reprimanded Cador, that brings about Arthur's own destruction, as it had destroyed Gawain. Thus Arthur's end comes not as an inexplicable twist of Fortune, but as the inevitable retribution for his sins, of which Mordred is the direct, and Arthur's reckless engagement of a superior force the indirect instrument."⁵⁵ Such views as these are, as we shall see, not only incorrect, but radically inconsistent with the premises of the heroic poem.⁵⁶

To begin with, until well after the tragic turning point of his

vision, Arthur exhibits kingly restraint while it is the foremost members of the Round Table, notably Cador and Gawain, who display that reckless abandon characteristic of the hero.⁵⁷ The rashness motif is introduced at the war council Arthur convokes after Lucius' messengers deliver the Roman emperor's insulting ultimatum. Cador's response is fairly representative of the entire fellowship:

Sir Cador of Cornewayle to the kynge carppes,
 Lughe one hyme luffly with lykande lates,--
 "I thanke Gode of that thraa that vs thus thretys!
 3ow moste be traylede, I trowe, bot 3ife 3e trett bettyre:
 The lettres of sir Lucius lyghttys myne herte!
 We hafe as losels liffyde many longe daye,
 Wyth delyttes in this lande with lordchipez many,
 And forelytenede the loos that we are layttede:
 I was abaischite, be oure Lorde, of oure beste bernes,
 ffore gret dule of deffuse of dedez of armes!
 Now wakkenyse the were! wyrchipide be Cryste!
 And we salle wyne it ag[a]yne be wyghtnesse and strenghe!"
 (247-258)

Although Arthur obviously shares this attitude to a considerable degree, he employs surprising moderation:

"Sir Cadour," quod the kynge, "thy concelle es noble,
 Bot thou arte a meruailous mane with thi mery wordez!
 ffor thow countez no caas, ne castes no forthire,
 Bot hurles furthe appone heuede, as thi herte thynkes;
 I moste trette of a trew towchande thise nedes,
 Talke of thies tythdands that tenes myne herte;"
 (259-264)

After Cador's rash determination to engage Lucius' forces despite almost impossible odds leads to the first Round Table casualites of the war, the conflict between heroism and prudence is crystalized in a confrontation between the conqueror and his nephew:

Karpes to his cosyne sir Cador theis wordez,--
 "Sir Cador, thi corage confunde vs alle!
 Kowardely thow castez owtte alle my beste knyghttez!
 To putte mene in perille, it es no pryce holdene,
 Bot the partyes ware puruayede, and powere arayedede;
 When they ware stade on a strenghe, thou sulde hafe
 with-stondene,
 Bot 3if thowe wolde alle my steryne stroye fore the nonys!"

"Sir," sais sir Cador, "3e knowe wele 3our selfene;
 3e are kyng in this kythe, karpe whatte 3ow lykys!
 Salle neuer vpbrayde me, that to thi burde langes,
 That I sulde blyne fore theire boste, thi byddyng to wyrche;
 Whene any stirttez to stale, stufte thame the bettere,
 Ore thei wille be stonayede, and stroyede in 3one strayte
 londez.

I dide my delygens to daye, I doo me one lordez,
 And in daungere of dede fore dyuerse knyghttez,
 I hafe no grace to thi gree, bot syche grett wordez;
 3if I heuen my herte, my hape es no bettyre."

(1920-1937)

It has been proposed that Arthur here speaks for the poet, voicing a serious criticism of Cador and the heroic attitude he represents.⁵⁸ But there is little evidence, here or elsewhere, that the poet concurs with Arthur's point of view or condemns heroism's imperviousness to practical consequences. The heroic poet does not judge matters as would the military strategist. As we have seen in our study of Beowulf and Maldon, one must take care not to superimpose upon the assumptions and values of the heroic poem a network of social and moral standards alien to it. If anything, Arthur's attack on Cador would appear to be motivated more by grief for his fallen knights than by any serious critique of the heroic attitude. In this respect, Arthur's change of heart at the conclusion of his debate with Cador must be recognized as a grudging acknowledgement of the heroic propriety of Cador's action despite its tragic cost.

Arthur's judiciousness is again emphasized, this time in contrast with Gawain's reckless heroics, immediately following the sea battle against Mordred. The tide is unfavorable for a landing. Arthur, weighing the danger to men and horses, decides not to land, and instead takes the opportunity to attend to his dead and wounded.⁵⁹ Gawain, on the other hand, brings a small band ashore on a galley, engages Mordred's troops

though vastly outnumbered, and--pursuing the battle well beyond his means--is eventually killed along with his followers.⁶⁰ This contrast between Arthur and his knight does not suggest that we are meant to choose between them; that one is right and the other wrong. They act according to different exigencies and must be judged by different lights. Gawain is the loyal retainer avenging the treason against his lord. It is not for him to weigh the chances of success and failure. He is a heroic warrior, not a shopkeeper--or a king. Arthur, at this stage of the poem at least, is still the warrior king, and his heroism is yoked with his responsibility for the welfare of his knights and people. It is only after the death of Gawain, only after he understands the full import of his dream--the inevitable and imminent end of his Round Table and kingdom--that Arthur exchanges the obligations of kingship for the unabashed abandon of the hero.

There are, however, two early episodes in which, on the surface at least, Arthur might appear to display some degree of heroic rashness. In his fight with the giant, Arthur--like Beowulf--explicitly rejects all aid. Matthews suggests that "in making Arthur forego the help of the two knights who assist him in other versions, the poet may have had in mind to prepare for the rash self-reliance that Arthur displays on other occasions."⁶¹ But even Matthews does not imply that there is in this action anything improper or incommensurate with Arthur's role as a leader [in this action]. Interestingly enough, even in this adventure, Arthur's prudence is underscored when he requests that Bedivere insure his victory with a redundant coup de grace:

Onone stryke of his heuede, and stake it there-aftyre,
(1178)

At the siege of Metz, when Arthur casually hazards the shafts of enemy bowmen, he is criticized for his "rashness" by Ferrer:

"Sir," said sir fferrere, "a ffoly thowe wirkkes,
 Thus nakede in thy noblaye to neghe to the walles,
 Sengely in thy surcotte, this cete to reche,
 And schewe the with-ine, there to schende vs alle.
 Hye vs hastylve heynne, or we mone fulle happene,
 ffor hitt they the or thy horse, it harmes for euer!"
 (2432-2437)

Arthur responds:

"Ife thow be ferde," quod the kyng, "I rede thow ryde vttere,
 Lesse that they rywe the with theire rownnd wapyne!
 Thow arte bot a fawntyne, no ferly me thynkkys!
 Thow wille be flayed for a flye that one thy flesche lyghttes!
 I ame nothyng agaste, so me Gode helpe!
 Thof siche gadlynges be greuede, it greues me bot lyttille!
 Thay wyne no wirchipe of me, bot wastys theire takle!
 They salle wante or I wecnde, I wagene myne hevede!
 Salle neuer harlotte haue happe, thorowe helpe of my Lorde,
 To kylle a corownde kyng with krysme enoyntede!"
 (2438-2447)

Once again, heroism and pragmatism are set in opposition. Arthur of course escapes unscathed and, without evidence to the contrary, one would be hardput to demonstrate that the poet disapproves of Arthur's aristocratic view of the divine exemptions granted to a crowned king with crimson annointed.⁶²

Arthur cannot be said to be rash, in the full heroic sense of the word, until after Gawain's death. Once he discovers Gawain's corpse, the change in Arthur's character is pointed by his encounter with Ewain who, together with other members of the Round Table, attempts to restrain their chief's apparently excessive grief:

"Blyne," sais thies bolde mene, "thow blondirs thi selfene,
 This es botles bale, for bettir bees it neuer!
 It es no wirchipe i-wysse to wryng thyne hondes,
 To wepe als a womane it es no witt holdene!
 Be knyghtly of contenance, als a kyng scholde,
 And leue siche clamoure for Cristes lufe of heuene!"
 (3975-3980)

But the worldly standards by which Arthur's grief is deemed excessive are in no way sufficient to take the full measure of the heroic poem which can only be judged in accordance with its own values. Arthur's grief is wholly appropriate to the loss of so worthy a knight as Gawain, a loss which occasions passionate lament not only from Arthur the king, but from Mordred the traitor and from the poet himself.

Nor is Arthur's reaction altogether unique. Cador kisses the corpse of Beril after that fighter is borne down:

And thane sir Cador of Cornewayle es carefulle in herte,
 Be-cause of his kynyse-mane, that thus es myscaryede;
 Vmbeclappes the cors, and kyssez hyme ofte,
 (1777-1779)

Arthur weeps when he learns of the deaths of Beril, Alidike, Maurel, Maurin, and Meneduke:

Thane the worthy kynge wrythes, and wepede with his eghne,
 (1920)

Gawain weeps for the fallen Child Chastelain:

Than sir Gawayne gretes with his gray eghne;
 The guyte was a gude mane, be-gynnande of armes.
 (2962-2963)

And again for the men he has led into Mordred's treacherous ambush:

Thane sir Gawayne grette with his gray eghene,
 ffor grefe of his gud mene that he gyde schulde;
 (3790-3791)

What is unique about Arthur's grief for Gawain is its intensity, and this is wholly consonant with the extent of his loss, especially when we realize that Gawain's death--as Arthur clearly perceives--signals the end of the Round Table and all it stands for:

"Dere kosyne o kynde, in kare am I leuede!
 ffor nowe my wirchiþe es wente, and my were endide!"
 (3956-3957)

Here too, Arthur's response has been anticipated. After Gawain's joust with Priamus, Richer and others believe him to be mortally wounded.

Their reaction is a brief foreshadowing of Arthur's own:

Be alle the welthe of the werlde, so woo was theme neuer!
 "ffor alle oure wirchipe i-wysse awaye es in erthe!"
 (2684-2685)

Far from excessive, Arthur's response is apt, motivated by heroic ties and objective circumstance.

Arthur's "rashness" reaches its peak in his exchange with Richer immediately preceding the final battle at Cornwall against Mordred's vastly superior forces:

Than sais sir Wychere the wy, a wyese mane of armes,
 "I rede 3e warely wende, and wirkes the beste;
 Soiorne in this cete, and semble thi berynes,
 And bidde with thi bolde mene in thi burghe riche:
 Get owt knyghttez of contres, that castelles holdes,
 And owt of garysons grete gude mene of armes,
 ffor we are faithely to fewe to feghte with theme alle,
 That we see in his sorte appone the see bankes."
 (4025-4032)

Arthur answers with some heat:

"I praye the kare noghte, sir knyghte, ne caste thou no dredis!
 Hadde I no segge bot my selfe one vndir sone,
 And I may hym see with sighte, or one hym sette hondis,
 I salle evene amange his mene malle hym to dede,
 Are I of the stede styre halfe a stede lenghe!
 I salle [stryke] hym in his stowre, and stroye hyme foreuer,
 And thare-to make I myne avowe devottly to Cryste,
 And to hys modyre Marie, the mylde qwene of heuene!
 I salle neuer soiourne sounde, ne sawghte at myne herte,
 In cete ne in subarbe sette appone erthe,
 Ne 3itt solmyre ne slepe with my slawe eyghne,
 Tille he be slayne that hym slowghe, 3if any sleyghte happene:
 Bot euer pursue the payganys that my pople distroyede,
 Qwylls I may pare theme and pynne, in palce thare me likes."
 (4034-4047)

The pattern is familiar: a dramatic confrontation between two profoundly different moral views--heroic and pragmatic, or, if one prefers, prudent.

On the one hand, Richer advises a course of action determined by practical

military considerations. Arthur, on the other hand, pursues the purely heroic path, bound by nothing but his impassioned vow to avenge Gawain. Indeed, for Arthur prudence would be mean and despicable. To compute the odds at this stage is unthinkable. The heroic life requires nothing less than rashness of this sort, even at the risk of the wholesale destruction of the Round Table. For although the heroic fellowship is the ultimate source of all value, to preserve the fellowship as a physical entity at the cost of its heroic nature would be to destroy it in a way it is not destroyed through physical annihilation.

Indeed, to speak of preserving the Round Table, to posit as a real option a military course which would leave the fellowship intact, is to miss the point. Arthur's vision of Fortune is a true vision. In the end, the Round Table can no more survive than can Heorot, the Geats, or Beowulf himself. Necessity in the heroic poem is, as Arthur finally realizes after Gawain's death, ful araed. Human destiny is tragic, not moral. The fall of the Round Table, like the fall of all earthly things, is inherent in the human condition. Arthur and his knights get not what they deserve, but what is the ultimate portion of all mankind. In this light, Arthur's heroism rather than Richer's prudence proves correct,⁶³ serving to secure the undying fame and glory of the heroic fellowship. As the poet himself comments, in obvious approbation:

Siche honoure neuer aughte none erthely kyng
At theire endyng daye, bot Arthure hyme seluene!
(4169-4170)

Like Arthur's extreme grief, his utter disdain for military odds--no matter how disastrous--is periodically anticipated throughout the poem. We have already examined the clash between prudence and heroism as exemplified in the debate between Arthur and Cador after Cador's

rashness resulted in the first Round Table mortal casualties of the war against Lucius. On the threshold of that battle, there is a similar, if lower keyed, exchange between Cadore and Clegis:

Thane sir Clegis to the kynge a lyttille enclinede,
 Kayres to sir Cadore, and knyghtly hym tellez,--
 "We hafe foundene in 3one firthe, floreschede with leues,
 The flour of the faireste folke that to thi foo langez,
 ffifty thousandez of folke of ferse mene of armez,
 That faire are fewteride on frounte vndyr 3one fre bowes;
 They are enbuschede one blonkkes, with baners displayede,
 In 3one bechene wode appone the waye sydes.
 They hafe the furthe for-sette alle of the faire watyre,
 That fayfully of force feghte vs byhowys;
 ffor thus vs schappes to daye, schortly to telle,
 Whedyre we schone or schewe, schyft as the lykes."
 "Nay," quod Cadore, "so me Criste helpe!
 It ware schame that we scholde schone for so lytylle!
 Sir Lancelott salle neuer laughe, that with the kyng lengez,
 That I sulde lette my waye for lede appone erthe;
 I salle be dede and vndone ar I here dreche,
 ffor drede of any doggesone in 3one dyme schawes!"
 (1706-1723)

While we cannot quite claim with Matthews that Clegis "advises retreat,"⁶⁴ there is more than a hint of that conflict between prudence and desmesure that recurs throughout the work.

A similar exchange under like conditions takes place between Gawain and Florent after Gawain's encounter with Priamus; first Florent:

"3e are at the ferreste noghte passande fyve hundrethe,
 And that es fully to fewe to feghte with theme alle,
 ffore harlottez and hansemene salle helpe bott littille;
 They wille hye theyme hyene for alle theire gret wordes!
 I rede 3e wyrke aftyre witte, as wyesse men of armes,
 And warpes wylily a-waye, as wirchipfulle knyghtes."
 "I grawnte," quod sir Gawayne, "so me Gode helpe!
 Bot here are galyarde gomes that of the gre seruis,
 The kreuelleste knyghttes of the kynges chambyre,
 That kane carpe with the coppe knyghtly wordes;
 We salle proue to-daye who salle the prys wyne."
 (2741-2751)

Gawain's stance is validated in a number of ways. For example, his heroism is portrayed through the eyes of his enemies:

Thane saide the erle Antele to Algere his brother,--
 "Me angers earnestly at Arthures knyghtez!
 Thus enkerly one an oste awnters theme selfene;
 They wille be owtrayedede anone, are vndrone rynges,
 Thus folily one a felde to fyghte with vs alle!
 Bot they be fesede in faye, ferly me thynkes!
 Walde they purposse take, and passe one theire wayes,
 Prike home to theire prynce, and theire pray leue,
 They myghte lenghene theire lyefe, and lossene bott littille!
 It wolde lyghte my herte, so helpe me oure Lorde!"

(2837-2846)

Here is prudence at its meanest. The Earl of Antele is the very champion of anti-heroic "realism." To him, the odds are all, and his "reasonable" surmise that retreat might well lengthen the life span of Gawain and his knights indicates how dangerously close--in the heroic poem--prudence borders on cowardice. His brother, Algere, has a far more accurate estimate of the situation:

"Sir," sais sir Algere, "thay hafe littille vsede
 to be owtrayedede withe oste: me angers the more!
 The fayreste schalle be fulle feye, that in ourefloke ryddez,
 Alls fewe as they bene, are they the felde leue!"

(2847-2850)

Such indeed soon proves to be the case. Gawain and his small heroic band drive the numerically superior enemy from the field, the cowardice of the Romans serving to exalt and glorify the heroic rashness of the Round Table by contrast:

Was neuer siche a justynge at journe in erthe,
 In the vale of Iosephate, as gestes vs telles,
 Whene Iulyus and Ioatalle ware juggede to dy,
 As was whene the ryche mene of the Rownde Table
 Ruschede in-to the rowte one ryalle stedes!
 ffor so raythely thay rusche with roselde speris,
 That the raskaille was rade, and rane to the grefes,
 And karede to that courte as cowardes for euer!

(2875-2882)

The incident which most closely parallels and anticipates Arthur's desperate heroism at Cornwall is that in which Gawain rashly pursues Mordred, ultimately at the expense of his knights and his own life.

Here, rather than a dramatic debate between the hero and a representative of prudence, the poet himself expresses what might appear to be a cautionary or critical attitude. The narration of the battle is interspersed with such rueful comments as:

Bot sir Gawayne for grefe myghte noghte agayne-stande,
(3757)

.

ffor hade sir Gawayne hade grace to halde the grene hille,
He had wirchipe i-wys wonnene for euer!
(3768-3769)

.

Bot alls vnwyse, wodewyse, he wente at the gayneste,
(3817)

.

Thare myghte no renke hym areste, his resone was passede!
He felle in a fransye for fersenesse of herte,
(3825-3826)

.

Alls he that wold wilfully wastene hyme selfene;
And for wondsome and wille alle his wit failede,
That wode alls a wylde beste he wente at the gayneste;
(3835-3837)

To begin with, it must be recognized that with respect to the ideals of knighthood in late 14th-century England, "rash is used as a term of Praise."⁶⁵ The beserker-like fury which Gawain exhibits increases rather than belittles his heroic stature. At the same time, the poet makes it clear that Gawain's rash heroics are motivated by his exemplary loyalty to his lord:

May I that traytoure ouer-take, torfere hyme tyddes,
That this tresone has tymbyrde to my trewe lorde!
(3741-3742)

And again:

Bot thane sir Gawayne i-wysse, he waytes hym wele
To wreke hyme on this werlaughe, that this werre mouede;
(3770-3771)

Moreover, if there is any excess in Gawain's heroics, it is significantly qualified by the fact that the ambush he and his knights fall into is sprung through cunning and deceit:

Thane his enmye, with oste of owtlawede berynes,
 Alle enangylles abowte oure excellente knyghttez,
 That the traytoure be tresone had tryede hym seluene;
 Dukes of Danemarke he hyghttes fulle sone,
 And leders of Lettowe, with legyons inewe,
 Vmbylappyde oure mene with launcez fulle kene,
 Sowdeours and Sarazenes owte of sere landys,
 Sixty thosande mene semyly arrayede,
 Sekerly assembles thare one seuenschore knyghtes,
 Sodaynly in dischayte by tha salte strandes.

(3780-3789)

Gawain's rashness is ameliorated by the trickery which surprises him. Gawain cannot be held wholly accountable for a predicament which could not be foreseen, and which is finally the result not of the hero's failure, but of the enemy's cowardice.

As is characteristic of such episodes in Morte Arthure, Gawain's heroic attitude is further validated by an explicit association with Christianity:

"ffor dere Dryghttyne this daye, dredys no wapyne.
 We salle ende this daye alls excellent knyghttes,
 Ayere to endelesse joye with angelles vnwemyde.
 Thofe we hafe vnwittyly wastede oure selfene,
 We salle wirke alle wele in the wirchipe of Cryste.
 We salle for 3one Sarazenes, I sekire 3ow my trowhe,
 Souppe with oure Saueoure solemly in heuene,
 In presence of that precious, prynce of alle other
 With prophetes, and patriarkes, and apostlys fulle nobile,
 Be-fore his freliche face that fourmede vs alle!
 3ondire to 3one zaldsones, he that zeldes hyme euer,
 Qwhylles he es qwykke and in qwerte vnquellyde with handis,
 Be he neuer mo sauede, ne socourede with Cryste,
 Bot Satanase his sawle mowe synke in-to helle!"

(3799-3812)

Nothing could be clearer. Heroism is the straight and narrow path to heaven's gates. As in Roland, the hero is saved and the coward damned.

Perhaps even more important, Gawain's battle-madness does not

emerge until after it has become apparent that both he and his men are doomed:

Thane sir Gawayne grette with his gray eghene,
 ffor grefe of his gud mene that he gyde schulde;
 Hy wyste that thay wondyde ware, and wery forfoughttene;
 And what for wondire and woo, alle his witte faylede.
 (3790-3793)

Under these conditions, one can hardly view Gawain's actions as unreasonable or suicidal.⁶⁶ The die is already cast. Nothing remains to the hero but to live out his heroism to the fullest extent of his capacity.

What then are we to make of the running commentary which accompanies the narrative in this episode? It is my belief that such comments, rather than expressing criticism of Gawain, are expressions of admiration and regret for his approaching end. A line such as the following has, in context, a distinctly elegiac cast:

ffor hade sir Gawayne hade grace to halde the grene hille,
 He had wirchipe i-wys wonnene for euer!
 (3768-3769)

Such lines are more utterances of grief than reproach, and they culminate in the three eulogies for the dead hero, not in his condemnation. Heroism is its own standard; and the heroic poetry of Morte Arthure is a closed system which resists criticism antithetical to its own assumptions and values.

It is truism of heroic poetry that the poet's vision of necessity and his representation of heroic values are closely related. In each heroic poem, the hero is faced with a unique form of necessity and must respond with a brand of heroism appropriate and adequate to that form of necessity which he faces. In this sense, the hero is always equal to his fate. Morte Arthure is a de casibus tragedy of fortune, and

Arthur's heroic aspiration is to be understood in the tragic perspective of Fortune's wheel. But it is a peculiarity of this poem that Fortune's most subversive negations are reserved for Arthur's rise rather than his fall. Not only does Fortune shadow the heroic life with mutability and transience, she claims the very triumphs and achievements of that life as her own, leaving the hero nothing but vanity and vainglory. The lady herself expounds her claim in Arthur's vision:

And cho said, 'welcomei-wis! wele arte thow fowndene;
 The aughte to wirchipe my wille, and thow wele cowthe,
 Of alle the valyant men that euer was in erthe;
 ffore alle thy wirchipe in werre by me has thow wonnene,
 I hafe bene frendely, freke, and fremmede tille other;
 That has thow fowndene in faithe, and fele of thi biernez,
 ffore I fellid downe sir Frolle with frowarde knyghtes;
 ffore-thi the fruytes of Fraunce are freely thynne awene.
 Thow salle the chayere escheue, I chese the my selfene,
 Be-fore alle the chiftaynes chosene in this erthe.'
 Scho lifte me vp lightly with hir lene hondes,
 And sette me softely in the see, the septre me rechede;
 Craftely with a kambe cho kembede myne heuede,
 That the krispane kroke to my crownne raughte;
 Dressid one me a diademe, that dighte was fulle faire,
 And syne profres me a pome pighte fulle of faire stonys,
 Enamelde with azoure, the erth there-one depayntide,
 Selkylde with the salte see appone sere halfes,
 In synge that I sothely was souerayne in erthe.
 Than broght cho me a brande with fulle bryghte hiltes,
 And bade me brawdysche the blade, 'the brande es myne awene:
 Many swayne with the swynge has the sw[el]tte leuede;
 ffor whilles thow swanke with the swerde, it swykkede the neuer.'
 (3339-3361)

The argument is clear: all Arthur's worship in war has been won through Fortune's favor. It was she who felled Frollo; she who granted the fruits of France; she who lifts Arthur above all others; she who awards sword, septre, diadem, and sovereignty over all the earth. The hero is as dependent upon Fortune in his rise as he is vulnerable to her in his inevitable fall. It is according to the fickle whim of the lady that victory and glory are won and lost. Not only are human attainments

transitory, they are--to a significant degree--external to man. The king with his sword and crown is but Fortune's puppet playing with Fortune's toys.

The hero then is in a dilemma, his very heroism compromised by his dependency upon the inhuman forces against which he stands as representative of mankind. In order to be fully equal to the necessity with which he is faced, Arthur must eventually extricate himself from his unwitting reliance upon Fortune, repudiate vainglory, and assert a form of heroism which owes nothing to forces and powers outside the heroic fellowship itself.

Arthur's understanding unfolds slowly and painfully. Although all is revealed to him in vision and interpreted for him by his philosophers, it is not until he is immersed in disaster that he is able to grasp the true connection between his revelation and his fate. This is in fact quite consistent with the logic and wisdom of the heroic poem, where tragic knowledge is not to be gleaned from prophecy or the interpretation of divines, but emerges only from experience--from a full, dramatic involvement with the limitations of existence. It would be inappropriate to expect Arthur to immediately comprehend the meaning of his dream. One might as well fault Oedipus for not unravelling oracular ironies, or Lear for failing to see except by the blinding light of the storm. Such initial failures of vision are characteristic of tragedy where the rise of consciousness is necessarily in proportion to the fall of the hero--in proportion, that is, to his immersion in the human condition.

It is not surprising, then, that hard upon Arthur's dream and his conference with his philosophers, he is described as donning his most opulent finery:

Thane rysez the riche kynge, and rawghte one his wedys,
 A reedde actone of rosse, the richeste of floures,
 A pesane, and a paunsone, and a pris girdille;
 And one he henttis a hode of scharlette fulle riche,
 A pauys pillione hatt, that pighte was fulle faire
 With perry of the Oryent, and precyous stones;
 His gloues gayliche gilte, and grauene by the hemmys,
 With graynes of rubyes fulle gracious to schewe;
 (3456-3463)

Matthews subjects Arthur to some rather harsh criticism in this light:

"The king, who before his dream had seen himself as an avenger of Christ as well as a new Alexander, a king to be crowned on Christmas day, is certainly not made contrite by the interpreter's spiritual advice.

Magnificently arrayed in jeweled garments of scarlet and gold, he stalks out of the camp in typically angry mood."⁶⁷ Arthur's magnificent array,

however, is not as incriminating as it might first appear. He arrays

himself with equal magnificence before his battle with the giant of

Saint Michael's Mount:

Aftyre euesange, sir Arthure hyme se[l]fene
 Wente to hys wardrope, and warpe of hys wedez,
 Armede hym in a actone with orfraeez fulle ryche,
 Abouen one that a jeryne of Acres owte ouer,
 Abouen that a jesseraunt of jentylle maylez,
 A jupone of Ierodyne jaggede in schredez;
 He brayedez one a bacenett burneschte of syluer,
 The beste that was in Basille, wyth bordurs ryche;
 The creste and the coronalle, enclosed so faire
 Wyth clasppis of clere golde, couched wyth stones;
 The vesare, the aventaille, enarmede so faire,
 Voyde with-owttyne vice, with wyndowes of syluer;
 His gloues gaylyche gilte, and grauene at the hemmez,
 With graynez and gobelets, glorious of hewe;
 (900-913)

As Finlayson points out, "Each of these descriptions occurs just before a significant event in Arthur's career; they are not purely ornamental, but have a function . . . The elaborate richness of armour and dress, besides giving the poem concreteness and feeding the audience's love of color and wealth, is also a method of expressing visually the rank and

importance of the character. In addition, the formality of the elements of the description--based as they are on stereotyped models--produces a sense of order and power, of that order which is in one case threatened and in the other about to be overthrown."⁶⁸ It is a question of balance. The ornaments of the heroic life are not in themselves contemptible or vainglorious; on the contrary. Still, there can be little doubt that Arthur's finery, at this stage of the narrative at least, indicates a continuing concern with the outward trappings of the heroic life as yet undifferentiated from its essence. This engrossment with surface and ornament is underscored by the fact that his garments are suspiciously reminiscent of Fortune's luxurious apparel:

Than discendis in the dale, downe fra the clowddez,
 A duches dereworthily dyghte in dyaperde wedis,
 In a surcott of sylke fulle selkouthely hewede,
 Alle with loyotour ouer-laide lowe to the hemmes,
 And with ladily lappes the lenghe of a zerde,
 And alle redily reuersside with rebanes of golde,
 Bruchez and besauntez, and other bryghte stonys,
 With hir bake and hir breste was brochede alle ouer,
 With kelle and with corenalle clenliche arrayede,
 And that so comly of colour one knowene was neuer!
 (3250-3259)

Both are juxtaposed with the simple pilgrim guise of Craddock⁶⁹ whose appearance implies a renunciation of vainglory--albeit in a religious rather than heroic form--and who obliquely rebukes Arthur for his fine array:

A renke in a rownde cloke, with righte rowmme clothes,
 With hatte, and with heyghe schone homely and rownde;
 With flatte ferthynges the freke was floreschede alle ouer,
 Manye schredys and schragges at his skyrttes hynnges,
 With scrippe, ande with slawyne, and skalopis i-newe,
 Both pyke and palme, alls pilgram hym scholde.
 (3470-3475)

.
 Thane karpes sir Cradoke to the kynge selfene,
 (3487)

.

ffor thow my noghte reche me, ne areste thy selfene,
 Thoffe thou be richely arayed in fulle riche wedys;
 (3492-3493)

Even the gloomy tidings of Mordred's treachery that Craddock bears are not sufficient to effect a definitive transformation of the conqueror's outlook. Although Arthur is grieved and has intimations of tragedy, he does not yet perceive that Mordred's treason signals a tragic fulfillment of his prophetic dream. Characteristically, he remains deeply concerned with preserving the fruits of his conquests, even as he prepares to make war on the traitor:

"Sir Howelle and sir Hardolfe here salle be-leue,
 To be lordes of the ledis that here to me lenges;
 Lokes in-to Lumbardye, that thare no lede chaunge,--
 And tendirly to Tuskayne take tente alls I byde;
 Resaywe the rentis of Rome qwene thay are rekkenede;
 Take sesyne the same daye that laste was assygnede,
 Or elles alle the ostage, with-owttyne the wallys,
 Be hynggyde hye appone hyghte alle holly at ones!"
 (3583-3590)

Although there is of course a positive side to Arthur's preparations, a prudence and competence that befits a king of his power, there is more than a hint that he is perhaps too engrossed with his newly conquered territories, as yet unwilling to perceive the extent to which they are the ephemeral vanities of Fortune.

It is not until the death of Gawain that Arthur truly understands. Staining his beard with the blood of his kinsman, for the first time he is able to apply the tragic prophecy of his dream to the reality of his life:

Than the corownde kyng cryes fulle lowde,--
 "Dere kosyne o kynde, in kare am I leuede!
 ffor nowe my wirchipe es wente, and my were endide!
 Here es the hope of my hele, my happynge of armes!
 My herte and my hardynes hale one hym lengede!
 My concelle, my comforthe, that kepide myne herte!
 Of alle knyghtes the kyng that vndir Criste lifede,
 Thou was worthy to be kyng, thofe I the corowne bare!

My wele and my wirchiþe of alle this werlde riche
 Was wonnene thourghe sir Gawayne, and thourghe his witt one!
 Allas!" saide sir Arthure, "nowe ekys my sorowe!
 I am vttrily vndone in myne awene landes!
 A doughtouse derfe dede, thou duellis to longe!
 Why drawes thou so one dreghe? thow drownnes myne herte!"
 (3955-3968)

Once having solved the riddle of his mortality, having learned to view himself in the tragic perspective of man's fate rather than through the aspiring eyes of the conqueror, Arthur fights as the doomed hero, unencumbered by his passion for imperial conquest and glory. Arthur's full tragic enlightenment is achieved in the final battle. Earlier, immediately preceding his dream and at the very apex of his climb, all but blinded by his rising fortunes, Arthur--like the Worthies on the wheel--had been dangerously insensitive to the role of necessity in human life:

We salle be ouerlynge of alle that one the erthe lengez!
 (3211)

This is the pride which goeth before a fall. But it is precisely this aspiration which Arthur rejects at Cornwall where, knowing that doom is imminent, he renounces the vainglories of Fortune in the name of the specifically human value of the heroic fellowship:

Than remys the riche kyng with rewthe at his herte,
 Hewys hys handys one heghte, and to the heuene lokes,--
 "Qwythene hade Dryghttyne destaynede at his dere wille,
 That he hade demyd me to-daye to dy for 3ow alle!
 That had I leuer than be lorde alle my lyfe tyme,
 Off alle that Alexandere aughte qwhilles he in erthe legende."
 (4155-4160)

Arthur's renunciation, like virtually all critical passages in Morte Arthure, is anticipated earlier in the poem. There is an ironic adumbration in the giant's perverse preference for the beards of heroes over material wealth and glory:⁷⁰

ffor he has more tresour to take whene hyme lykez,
 Thane euere aughte Arthure, or any of hys elders;

If thowe hafe broghte the berde, he bese more blythe
 Thane thowe gafe hym Burgoyne, or Bretayne the more;
 (1015-1018)

There is a straightforward anticipation of Arthur's renunciation in his lament for the slain duchess:

"Allas!" sais sir Arthure, "so lange haue I lyffede,
 Hade I wytene of this, wele had me chefede;
 Me es noghte fallene faire, bot me es foule happynede,
 That thus this faire ladye this fende has dystroyede!
 I had leuere thane alle Fraunce, this fyftene wynter,
 I hade bene be-fore thate freke, a furlange of waye,
 Whene he that ladye had laghte and ledde to the montez:"
 (868-874)

As sincere as this sentiment is, it remains an anticipation, a rhetorical statement of grief which lacks the full power and authenticity of the later renunciation at Cornwall which consummates the experience of the poem and provides its definitive moment of transformation. Previously, Arthur's appreciation of his knights had been stated in terms of their role in his continuing lordship:

Thane the conquerour kyndly comforthes these knyghtes,
 Allowes thaime gretly theire lordly a-vowes,--
 "Alweldane Gode wyrchipe 3ow alle!
 And latte me neuere wantte 3ow, whylls I in werlde regne;
 My menske and my manhede 3e mayntene in erthe,
 Myne honour alle vtterly in other kyngys landes;
 My wele and my wyrchipe, of alle this werlde ryche,
 3e haue knyghtly conqueryde, that to my coroune langes;
 Hym thare be ferde for no faees, that swylke a folke ledes,
 Bot euer ffresche for to fyghte, in felde whene hym lykes.
 I acounte no kyng that vndyr Criste lyffes,
 Whilles I see 3owre alle sounde, I sette be no more."
 (395-406) 71

The king's modesty and respect for his knights are admirable qualities. But at Cornwall the heroic relationship between Arthur and his followers is brought to a new level. Rather than simply acknowledging that his worldly glory depends upon the valor and loyalty of his men, the conqueror reverses his priorities and would sacrifice all glory--his

very life--to redeem the lives of his knights and preserve the heroic fellowship. Not that glory is intrinsically vain or base. On the contrary, it is a noble aspiration and emblem of the heroic life which itself depends upon fame to preserve its hard-won validation of human existence. But conquest and glory are essentially a means toward and expression of the heroic fellowship, not ends in themselves. This is what Arthur confirms through his renunciation, establishing once and for all the proper relationship between heroism and glory, distinguishing between the nature and the trappings of the heroic fellowship.⁷²

In the end, then, Arthur is able to assert the value of the heroic life in uncompromised and unqualified form, no longer dependent upon Fortune who is the ultimate arbiter of crown, throne, and victory. True--the devastations of the wheel cannot be evaded. They are by definition given and ineluctable. But once he has learned the truth, the hero is able to free himself from the ironies which compromised his heroism. What is essential is that the hero's affirmation of human value be purged of all equivocation. In so doing, Arthur reestablishes the paradoxical tension upon which heroic poetry rests. Necessity remains necessity, that which transcends human will and denies human value. But man is not crushed or humiliated. Unable to overcome his fate, the hero nevertheless opposes to it irrefutable evidence of man's worth.

All this is well and good. Unhappily, however, a classical bias of scholarship has blurred the critical approach to the poem. As Benson has observed: "The difficulty is that when we think of tragedy we think in Aristotelian terms, and if we classify a work like Morte Arthure as tragedy and think furthermore that it is a very good work, almost unconsciously we begin trying to justify our judgment by discover-

ing Aristotelian elements in it. . . . We scrutinize the hero for a 'tragic flaw' and discover it in the hamartia of Arthur's incestuous engendering of Mordred. . . . Or closer to the truth, we look for evidence of justice in the hero's fall, and we find it in Arthur's 'excess.'"73

As for O'Laughlin's argument that Arthur's "hamartia" resides in his incestuous engendering of Mordred,⁷⁴ this position has been largely rejected by recent criticism.⁷⁵ Matthews' more elaborately developed criticism of Arthur's excess or "sin" has, however, been more favorably received, whether in large part⁷⁶ or with serious reservations.⁷⁷ Essentially, Matthews locates Arthur's sin in "an imperial ambition . . . that recalls the pride that brought the medieval Alexander to eternal damnation."⁷⁸ This "ambition" is "accompanied by cruelties that justify the dream of fortune and the interpretation that Arthur's philosopher makes of it."⁷⁹ According to Matthews, the heroic deeds of the Round Table are viewed as, "pitiless annihilation . . . ruthlessness in war . . . a nightmare of terror . . . imperial conquests . . . brutal efficiency . . . hateful cruelty . . . unprovoked barbarism."⁸⁰ This impious ambition then, coupled with barbaric cruelty and blind recklessness, leads Arthur and his knights to a calamity they must have deserved, a fate which is essentially "divine retribution" for sins committed and unrepented.⁸¹

Finlayson accepts Matthews' basic supposition while rejecting certain of his particulars: "Prof. Matthews' view, with which I disagree, is that Arthur's fall is retribution for the imperialistic nature of all his wars, whereas my opinion is that his wars do not become 'wilful' until after his victory over the Romans, i.e., that his sin

is not waging war, but the alteration of his wars from just to unjust."⁸² In essence, Finlayson agrees with Matthews that it is the sinful nature of Arthur's imperial wars together with the characteristic rashness of the Round Table which brings about their fall which is, finally, a form of divine retribution: "Thus Arthur's end comes not as an inexplicable twist of Fortune, but as the inevitable retribution for his sins, of which Mordred is the direct, and Arthur's reckless engagement of a superior force the indirect, instrument."⁸³

Larry Benson, approaching the poem from the vantage point of Arnold Hauser's theory of Gothic duality,⁸⁴ corrects much that is faulty or excessive in the hypotheses of Matthews and Finlayson.⁸⁵ He argues convincingly that all Arthur's wars are just and that the bloody violence and destructiveness of the Round Table campaigns--both to enemies and ultimately to the Arthurian civilization itself--are the result of ironies inherent in the very nature of the heroic life rather than wilful and barbaric excesses perpetrated by Arthur and his knights.⁸⁶ Thus, when catastrophe occurs, Arthur suffers his "inevitable fall, not because of some fate seeking retribution for his sins, and not because God's justice demands that he be punished for the excesses of his campaigns."⁸⁷

Arthur falls because, "the hero, like all men, will inevitably fall to death or wretchedness even though he be flawless, for the lesson of medieval tragedy is simply that man is not the master of his own destiny . . . The only remedy for this universal situation is to recognize the frailty of this world and turn instead to a faith in heaven."⁸⁸

But as Benson himself is well aware, Morte Arthure is not an example of contemptus mundi: "The tension in a work like Morte Arthure is . . . not between good and evil, between the 'excess' of earthly

kingship and the virtue of renunciation; the tension is between two goods, between the Christian detachment that is necessary for ultimate happiness even on this earth and the complete engagement with an earthly ideal that is necessary for heroism." This tension, "the ability to maintain contradictory viewpoints, sincerely admiring and just as sincerely rejecting worldly ideals . . . accounts for the aesthetic strength of even so simply constructed a work as Morte Arthure."⁸⁹

As insightful as Benson's article is, his reading of Morte Arthure as a poem sustaining a "Gothic duality" of viewpoints raises as many questions as it attempts to answer. As Benson interprets the poem, there is a clearly implied hierarchic relationship between the two viewpoints sustained. There is no question of measuring the Christian eschatological perspective by the rule of the heroic life. But there is an obvious subjection of the heroic principle to the strictures of Christian eschatology. In this sense, one cannot properly speak of maintaining "the tension of conflicting viewpoints." Without some semblance of equipoise, tension degenerates into subordination, which is exactly what occurs in Benson's reading of Morte Arthure. For as sensitive as Benson is to the role of tragic necessity in the poem, and as sensitive as he is to the value of heroic life and ideals, he nevertheless ends by viewing Arthur's fall as a consequence of his "moral blindness" and desmesure,⁹⁰ though that blindness is not viewed as individual sin or error, but rather as implicit in the worldly code to which the hero must adhere: "Arthur's fall is the result not of any flaw in himself but of a flawed ideal, the worldly ideal of heroic kingship that, like all worldly ideals, leads even its finest adherents to the inevitable turn of Fortune's wheel and a tragic fall."⁹¹ To say

that "we finally admire the medieval tragic hero for the very qualities which lead to his fall,"⁹² is to beg the question.

With respect to his criticism of Arthur, Benson's reading, like the interpretations of Matthews and Finalyson, leans heavily on the philosopher's gloss of Arthur's dream.⁹³

The philosopher does indeed imply a degree of moral blindness on the conqueror's part:

Thow has schedde myche blode, and schalkes distroyede,
 Sakeles, in cirquytrie, in sere kynges landis;
 Schryfe the of thy schame, and schape for thyne ende!
 Thow has a schewynge, sir kyng, take kepe 3if the lyke,
 ffor thow salle fersely falle with-in fyve wynters!
 ffownde abbayes in ffraunce, the froytez are theyne awene,
 ffore ffroille, and fferawnt, and for thir ferse knyghttis,
 That thowe fremydly in ffraunce has faye be-leuede;
 (3398-3405)

.

"I rede thow rekkyne and rehearse vn-resonable dedis,
 Ore the repenttes fulle rathe alle thi rewthe werkes!
 Mane, amende thy mode, or thow myshappene,
 And mekely aske mercy for mede of thy saule!"
 (3452-3455)

There is no question as to the meaning of these lines; the question remains, however, as to how heavily the lines are to be weighted. First of all, as Benson notes, "In the same speech that the philosopher admonishes Arthur for his 'vn-resonable dedis' he praises him for those very deeds":⁹⁴

This salle in romance be redde with ryalle knyghttes,
 Rekkenede and renownde with ryotous kynges,
 And demyd one domesdaye, for dedis of armes,
 ffor the doughtyeste that euer was duelland in erthe:
 So many clerkis and kynges salle karpe of 3owre dedis,
 And kepe 3oure conquestez in cronycle for euer!
 (3440-3445)

Then too, there is an odd incongruity in the fact that Frolo, who along with Feraunt is named as an innocent victim of Arthur's sinful pride

and a prime cause for repentance, is killed before the narrative action of the poem begins. It is even odder that Feraunt, who is slain by Florent, is not portrayed as an innocent victim of Arthur's surquidrie, but is in fact depicted as the progeny of the devil:

One sir Feraunt be-fore, apone a fayre stede,
Was fosterde in Famacoste, the fende was his fadyre.
(2760-2761)

Such incongruities are perhaps not unusual in a poem of this length and nature. But if the philosopher's admonition were indeed as critical as Matthews, Finlayson and Benson would have us believe, it is hardly likely that the poet would have allowed inconsistencies such as these to stand.⁹⁵

One might perhaps be tempted to approach a poem like Troilus and Criseyde in terms of "Gothic duality," seeing in it a simultaneous admiration for and skepticism towards worldly values. But whereas in Chaucer's tragedy the so-called "palinode" comes at the conclusion of the poem and is possessed of considerable poetic power, in Morte Arthure the philosopher's caveat occurs some two-thirds of the way into the poem--a more or less brief interlude in a work unremittingly heroic in its action and outlook.⁹⁶ Surely in a work of this length, meant for oral recitation, a poem designed to make its points in a broad, clear manner,⁹⁷ the poet would have displayed his major thesis more prominently, presented it more forcefully, at greater length, and--particularly in this poem which relies so heavily on repetition and variation--with some reiteration. But no. The imputation of sin and exhortation to repentance are all but buried somewhere in the middle of the poem, immersed in a lengthy interpretation of Arthur's dream, accounting for no more than one-fifth of the philosopher's commentary. Nor does the penitential theme ever re-emerge in a clear or commanding fashion. Surely if this were the core

of Morte Arthure, somewhere, at some point, in some way, we would be reminded that "the conqueror heeded not his philosopher's warning," or: "nor did he repent and found abbeys in France." We have a right to expect at least something to this effect. In fact there is nothing.

In the end, there seems little justification for disputing the clearly heroic nature of a poem like Morte Arthure primarily on the basis of these few lines. It is far more likely that the penitential admonition, coming as it does immediately following Arthur's dream and preceding his downfall, represents little more than an orthodox reflex, a conventional Christian response to the instability and brevity of earthly existence.⁹⁸ But to say that the penitential habit of mind is conventional is not to imply that it thereby provides the controlling viewpoint of a given work of art. A pious platitude, even when uttered by a philosopher, is not necessarily the moral focus of a poem. Moreover, while it is true, as Benson contends, that the poet "uses the fall of this ideal conqueror as a means of probing for the weakness in the ideal of conquest itself,"⁹⁹ conquest is not exactly a synonym for the heroic life. Conquest is surpassed, but it is surpassed as an end in itself, surpassed in the name of the heroic fellowship which it serves. There is no question in Morte Arthure of "sincerely admiring and just as sincerely rejecting worldly ideals." This heroic poem, when faced with the final realities of time and death, does not "turn ot heaven"; it looks instead toward the ideals and values of heroism itself.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

CHAPTER III

¹See above, Intro., notes 2 and 3.

²See above, Intro., note 4.

³While most of these values are the common stock of all heroic poetry, the last two are especially characteristic of Germanic heroism.

⁴See Bowra, p. 91, "Just as there is more than one kind of human excellence, so there is more than one kind of hero. The different kinds reflect not only different stages of social development but the different metaphysical and theoretical outlooks which the conception of a hero presupposes."

⁵Matthews, pp. 94-114.

⁶As is clearly evidenced by the adjectives characteristically used to portray them.

⁷Matthews, pp. 114-115.

⁸Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 79.

⁹A good survey of the genre is to be found in Willard Farnham, The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy (Oxford, 1936).

¹⁰The dynamic of amplification is appropriate to the rise section where the poet not only builds and gathers momentum towards the fall, but--perhaps even more important--establishes the weight and worth of the poetic world about to be overthrown. The heroic poet, in contrast with the elegiast who presents heroic values only in retrospect, dramatizes those values and elaborates them in the present tense, so to speak, so that they are invested with the power and immediacy to oppose to necessity the evidence of human worth.

¹¹See Matthews for an extended summary of Arthur's rise and fall, pp. 6-31.

¹²See for example M. Y. Offord, ed., The Parlement of the Thre Ages (London, 1959), reprinted 1967, pp. xl-xlii. All citations and references to the Parlement are from this edition.

¹³The pertinent lines are 584-630.

¹⁴All citations to Morte Arthure are from Morte Arthure, ed. Edmund Brock (London, 1961).

¹⁵The Awntyrs, one version of which is to be found in the Thornton manuscript which contains the only text of Morte Arthure, is believed to be derivative of that poem. See Matthews, pp. 156-163; Robert J. Gates, ed. The Awntyrs of Arthure at the Terme Wathelyne (Pennsylvania, 1969), pp. 26-29.

¹⁶Matthews, p. 104.

¹⁷Finlayson, Morte Arthure, notes that the opening of the dream foreshadows the end of both poem and dream.

¹⁸It is interesting to note that Arthur's rise as well as his fall is foretold in dream and interpretation. See lines 756-831.

¹⁹Matthews, p. 143. Benson rejects this position, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 81. See also George R. Keiser, "The Theme of Justice in the Alliterative Morte Arthure," Annuaire Mediaevale 16 (1964), 103-104.

²⁰John Gardner, trans. The Alliterative Morte Arthure, The Owl and the Nightingale, and Five other Middle English Poems (Carbondale, 1971), p. 254; Matthews, p. 24.

²¹Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 14; Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 83; See also Robert M. Lumiansky, "The Alliterative Morte Arthure, The Concept of Medieval Tragedy, and the Cardinal Virtue of Fortitude," in Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Chapel Hill, 1968), pp. 95-118; Keiser, 95-96.

²²Matthews, pp. 109-111.

²³Cf. Lumiansky, pp. 110-113, who regards this passage as evidence that Arthur's Tuscan campaign signals a degeneration of his character. For a more temperate version of this argument, see Keiser, 97ff. All such readings are, I would suggest, a consequence of attempting to force the poem into the mold of an interpretation based upon the philosopher's reading of Arthur's second dream. See below, pp. 249ff.

²⁴As Matthews argues it is, passim, but see especially pp. 134-135.

²⁵See Finlayson, Morte Arthure, pp. 11-12, "That the prime subject of Morte Arthure is war and the glories of war will be obvious enough from the narrative progression, from the zest of the battle descriptions (as well as from their multiplicity) and from the enthusiasm of the knights when war is first mooted." See also Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 82-83.

²⁶The passages which frame the Gawain-Priamus encounter and the scene which precedes the conquest of Como certainly do not provide a framework within which war is measured and judged, "pastoral" though they may be.

²⁷See above, p. 195.

²⁸Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 23.

²⁹One might note, in this respect, the emphasis on physical violence in Arthur's fall from Fortune's wheel in his second dream, lines 3388-3391.

³⁰Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 103.

³¹Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 30.

³²Citations to the Canterbury Tales are from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston, 1957).

³³Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 82.

³⁴The passage provides an interesting variation on the theme of unwavering heroic loyalty in desperate circumstances on the part of someone other than a heroic warrior.

³⁵See above, p. 205.

³⁶Arthur's humanity is somewhat qualified, however, in ll. 2342-2347. As Benson notes, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 77, "When he sends the dead emperor back to Rome, he is not only paying homage to a worthy opponent; he is creating the occasion for a grim jest, sending the body instead of the taxes demanded."

³⁷The last is in Arthur's lament at Cornwall, cited above, p.

³⁸See Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 80, "The mention of Doomsday seems to imply that even God admires these earthly deeds."

³⁹For evidence of Arthur's indifference to material power and gain, see for example, lines 538-541, 1212-1217, 1579-1582, 2262-2264.

⁴⁰To be fully discussed below, pp. 228ff.

⁴¹Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 76; see also Everett, p. 62. See also Finlayson, p. 68, "The making of vows and their execution in battle is a common feature of heroic poetry, especially in the O.F. chansons de geste." No more so, of course, than in the Old English heroic poem.

⁴²Finlayson, p. 68.

⁴³See lines 288-394.

⁴⁴Lines 2044-2094.

⁴⁵A similar failure of heroic will is demonstrated by the villain Mordred, who fights the crucial last battle at Cornwall under false colors, an almost emblematic betrayal of the heroic identity he has already repudiated by his treason to Arthur. See ll. 4181-4186.

⁴⁶For the role of hunting in the chivalric and heroic scale of values of the 14th century aristocracy, see Spearing, The Gawain Poet, p. 9.

⁴⁷This is apparently true of Matthews to some degree, see pp. 131, 174.

⁴⁸In this sense, Morte Arthure differs somewhat from a poem like Beowulf which, with its sensitivity to the irrational, makes of the struggle for order and peace a heroic endeavor and suggests an analogy, or complicity, between what is dark and uncontrolled in human nature--in this case revenge--and all that is dark and uncontrollable in the natural universe. However, even in Beowulf, this qualification or implied critique is limited. See above, Ch. I., pp. 68ff.

⁴⁹See Cherniss, Ingeld, p. 60, "Acts of vengeance emphasize the intensity and seriousness of the heroic vows of loyalty, loyalty which survives even the death of the party to whom it has been sworn." This aspect of Cherniss' discussion of the role of vengeance in Old English poetry, pp. 60-78, is even more appropriate to Morte Arthure than it is to Beowulf or Maldon.

⁵⁰In the earliest stages of Old English society, the comitatus, with its strict personal and military ties, secured whatever social stability could be salvaged in that violent and unpredictable world. Even in its later permutations, Old English society relied significantly on variations of the comitatus for social coherence and unity. Feudalism itself rested to a significant degree on a complex series of personal fealties and military obligations although, in a far more complex and hierarchic society, such bonds were less personal and intense and played perhaps a somewhat less critical role in sustaining the social order. See above, Ch. II., pp. 129-140.

⁵¹Luke xvii. 33. See also Matthew x. 39; xvi. 25; Mark viii. 35; John xii. 25.

⁵²See for example Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorthelm's Son," reprinted in The Tolkien Reader, 3-18.

⁵³Matthews, p. 146.

⁵⁴Matthews, see pp. 26, 29-31, 50, 130, 132-133, 146-147.

⁵⁵Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 20; see also pp. 7, 15, 18-19, 57, 106.

⁵⁶A good general discussion of this aspect of heroism is to be found in G. N. Garmonsway, "Anglo-Saxon Heroic Attitudes," Franciplegus, Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr. (New York, 1965), pp. 139-146. See also C. M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (London, 1952), pp. 122-125; Frederick Whitehead, "Ofermod et desmesure," Cahiers de Civilization Medievale, III (January-March 1960), 115-117; Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 80; George Clark, "The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem," Speculum, XLIII (Jan. 1968), 52-71; Edward B. Irving, Jr., "The Heroic Style in The Battle of Maldon," SP LVIII (July 1961), 462.

⁵⁷Finlayson notes this; Morte Arthure, p. 15.

⁵⁸See Matthews, p. 130; Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 15.

⁵⁹Lines 3712-3723.

⁶⁰Lines 3724-3859.

⁶¹Matthews, p. 128.

⁶²But cf. Matthews, pp. 132-133; Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 84.

⁶³Keiser, 106, acknowledges that "Arthur's decision to fight seems the only natural one." But Keiser's conclusion that "Arthur's decision is even more compelling when we consider it in light of the increased emphasis on the workings of the divine will" is unacceptable.

⁶⁴Matthews, p. 130.

⁶⁵Gervase Mathew, "Ideals of Knighthood in Late Fourteenth Century England," Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke, ed. R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin, R. W. Southern (Oxford, 1948), pp. 358-362, reprinted in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Denton Fox (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.), 1968, p. 68; The Court of Richard II (London, 1968), p. 118, where Mathew again cites a number of 14th century works which celebrate rashness as a virtue and term of praise.

⁶⁶As Matthews evidently does, see pp. 146-147.

⁶⁷Matthews, p. 136.

⁶⁸Finlayson, Morte Arthure, pp. 21-22.

⁶⁹The contrast between Arthur and Craddock is noted by Matthews, p. 136; Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 99; Gardner, p. 248.

⁷⁰Gardner draws a rather disconcerting analogy between Arthur and the giant, seeing the latter as a type of what the former is eventually to become.

⁷¹See above, Arthur's lament for Gawain, lines 3956-3968.

⁷²Cf. Lumiansky who argues that Arthur's last stand represents a recovery from despair and reaffirmation of fortitude, and, what is more, entails a Boethian rejection of temporal goods for the love of God. I am far from convinced by Lumiansky's arguments. For one thing, Arthur's lament for Gawain does not suggest--as Lumiansky claims it does--that he has fallen into the "mortal sin" of despair. Arthur's reaction is commensurate with Gawain's loss and his own tragic recognition of the imminent demise of the Round Table. Moreover, there is no hint that regret saps Arthur's resolve. On the contrary, Arthur's grief quickens his determination to avenge himself on the traitor. Finally, there is

no reason to assume that Arthur's final stance reflects a Boethian posture-- or anything other than a sharpening of the heroic values which have informed the poem from the outset.

For still another view of the poem's denouement, see Keiser, p. 95, who argues that "through the first half of the poem, the Morte Arthure poet shows Arthur as a just king who is 'like to god the souerayne gouvernoure.' In the latter half of the poem, he shows us Arthur's decline from this just ideal and, subsequently, his eventual recovery and restoration through the grace of God."

Both Lumiansky and Keiser correctly perceive that there is a modulation in Arthur's heroic character; but both mistakenly attempt to reconcile the final stages of the conqueror's career with the penitential admonitions of his philosophers. Arthur does redeem himself; but he does so in heroic rather than religious terms.

⁷³Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 79.

⁷⁴J. L. N. O'Loughlin, "The English Alliterative Romances," Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (London, 1959), p. 524.

⁷⁵See for example Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, p. 86. Matthews makes no mention of O'Loughlin; neither does Finlayson in his edition of the poem.

⁷⁶See Gardner and Finlayson, Morte Arthure.

⁷⁷See Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure.

⁷⁸Matthews, p. 132.

⁷⁹Matthews, p. 132.

⁸⁰Matthews, ll. 133-134.

⁸¹Matthews, pp. 115-150, especially pp. 120, 125, 139, 140.

⁸²Finlayson, Morte Arthure, p. 14.

⁸³Finlayson, p. 20; see also pp. 12-13, 18-19, 80-81.

⁸⁴Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 75.

⁸⁵Op. cit., 83.

⁸⁶Op. cit., 82-83.

⁸⁷Op. cit., 83.

⁸⁸Op. cit., 79-80.

⁸⁹Op. cit., 80-81.

⁹⁰Op. cit., 80.

⁹¹Op cit., 84.

⁹²Op. cit., 81.

⁹³Op. cit., 80, "Arthur does suffer from a form of desmesure, and an interpretation of the poem that fails to recognize this must ignore that important speech in which the philosopher interprets Arthur's dream."

⁹⁴Op. cit., 80.

⁹⁵Keiser, 101, notes "the somewhat unclear references to the destruction of 'ffroille' and 'fferaunt'."

⁹⁶I am not advocating such an approach to the Troilus, merely noting that it is plausible.

⁹⁷See Helaine Newstead, "A Review of William Matthews' The Tragedy of Arthur," Romance Philology, XVI (1962), 119-120.

⁹⁸J. A. Burrow notes the wide-spread dissemination of penitential doctrine in the 14th century in A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London, 1965).

⁹⁹Benson, Alliterative Morte Arthure, 81.

CHAPTER IV
SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Whereas Morte Arthure has received far less critical attention than it deserves, Gawain and the Green Knight is probably the most popular and widely studied poem of the alliterative revival. What the poem owes to Celtic tradition and French romance is well known,¹ and recently its comic and ironic qualities have been the subject of thorough commentary.² The subject of my own study will be the heroic outlook of the poet, and I will be far more concerned with the attitudes he inherits from the English alliterative tradition than the conventions he appropriates from French romance.³ But although the Gawain of Gawain and the Green Knight is clearly the uncorrupted, heroic Gawain of the English tradition, that tradition, in the hands of the Gawain poet, has undergone rather extensive modifications which raise serious questions about the nature of heroism in the poem,⁴ forcing us to investigate the relationship between heroic values and necessity in a poem which is skeptical of conventional heroic values and which suppresses tragedy, at least insofar as the main outline of the plot is concerned. The major task of this study will be to determine the nature of the heroism which pertains to Gawain and the Green Knight and to ascertain how, although relegated to the periphery of the action, necessity is reintroduced through rhetoric and structure in order to invest Gawain's trawþe--"imperfect" is it is--with a full portion of heroic dignity.

As Burrow argues, Gawain and the Green Knight is a poem about how a knight goes forth to meet his death.⁵ Yet Gawain does not meet his death; he meets the Green Knight instead. He suffers humiliation, yes, and an acute reminder of his imperfection. But as for death itself, it

At the same time, on a deeper level, what the Seasons Passage contributes to Gawain and the Green Knight is a lyrical declaration of the universal law of mutability which shadows Gawain's adventure and all human experience in the poem.¹⁰ The passage opens with a powerful generalization of this theme:

A gere 3ernes ful 3erne, and 3eldes neuer lyke,
 þe forme to þe fynisment foldes ful selden.
 (498-499)

Then, as if in demonstration of this gnomic observation, winter gives way to spring and the year presses forward in earnest, each season occupying its brief appointed time and passing as swiftly as it had come, suggesting how little on middle earth is permanent or constant, save for the endless round of changeless change itself:

Forþi þis 3olouer3ede, and þe 3ere after,
 And vche sesoun serlepes sued after oþer.
 (500-501)

With the spring equinox, which marks the first actual seasonal rotation in the passage, there is a quickening of lyrical intensity:

Bot þenne þe weder of þe worlde wyth wynter hit þrepez,
 Colde clenges adoun, cloudes vplyften,
 Schyre schedez þe rayn in schowrez ful warme,
 Fallez vpon fayre flat, flowrez þere schewen,
 Boþe groundez an þe greuez grene ar her wedez,
 Bryddez busken to bylde, and bremlych syngen
 For solace of þe softe somer þat sues þerafter
 bi bonk.
 (504-511)

The 3onge 3er (l. 492) continues to unfold, spring shading almost imperceptibly into summer:

After þe sesoun of somer wyth þe soft wyndez
 Quen Zeferus syflez hymself on sedez and erbez,
 Wela wyne is þe wort þat waxes þeroute,
 When þe donkande dewe dropez of þe leuez,
 To bide a blysfyl blusch of þe bryzt sunne.
 (516-520)

Summer itself is rather abruptly overtaken by autumn, which, in turn, brings the year full circle when it fades again, as þe worlde askez, into winter:

Bot þen hyges heruest, and hardenes hym sone,
 Warnez hym for þe wynter to wax ful rype;
 He driues wyth droȝt þe dust for to ryse,
 Fro þe face of þe folde to flyȝe ful hyȝe;
 Wroþe wynde of þe welkyn wrastelez with þe sunne,
 þe leuez lancen fro þe lynde and lyȝten on þe grounde,
 And al grayes þe gres þat grene watz ere;
 þenne al rypez and rotez þat ros vpon fyrst,
 And þus ȝirnez þe ȝere in ȝisterdayez money,
 And wynter wyndeȝ aȝayn, as þe worlde askez,
 no fage.

(521-531)

With the return of winter and the start of a new cycle, the circle of the single year widens into an infinite spiral of years, projecting the alternation of the seasons indefinitely. This multiplication of the year points the critical two-fold nature of temporal necessity, time being both linear and cyclical.¹¹ Each single year is in itself linear insofar as it is unique, finite, and irrecoverable:

A ȝere ȝernes ful ȝerne, and ȝeldez neuer lyke,
 þe forme to þe fynisment foldez ful selden.
 (498-499)

But the continuum of years--decades, centuries, ages--is cyclical, every year beginning anew the endless succession of changeless change:

And þus ȝirnes þe ȝere in ȝisterdayez mony,
 And wynter wyndeȝ aȝayn, as þe worlde askez.
 (529-530)

As these two verses demonstrate, the cyclical pattern of natural time is expressed structurally as well as thematically, reflected in the enveloping frame of the passage which, like the poem itself, explicitly returns to its starting place.¹² Now, cyclical time is no whit less tragic than linear time; they are complementary phases of necessity. The linear year, with its ineluctable alternation of seasons, implies the

finitude and ephemerality of human endeavors; the cyclical recurrence of years implies their ultimate vanity and futility.¹³ In this respect it is important to distinguish between changeless change and simple mutability. Mutability, although rendering human activity transient, does not thereby deprive it of meaning or consequence. Change itself can be purposeful, the process of progress or Providence. But cyclical recurrence tends to subvert the relationship of means to ends, absorbing progress and goals in endless whirlpools of repetition. To endlessly come full circle and begin again is to breathe the melancholic air of Ecclesiasticus.¹⁴

It is perhaps not without significance that from the time that the seasons actually begin their rotation to the point at which both the year and the passage come to a close, that is, from the spring equinox to the Me3elmas mone, there is no reference to the Christian liturgical calendar¹⁵ which elsewhere provides the dominant temporal grid of the narrative action. Orthodox Christian temporality, extending from Creation to Judgment, is nothing if not teleological--a providential unfolding of God's Will. But the natural cyclical rhythms of the Seasons Passage suggest time without purpose or end, a recurring flux of change in which nothing is changed, an endless round of human experience in which blysse and blunder alternate ad infinitum.¹⁶ It is this time, as distinct from liturgical time, which imbues Gawain's world with its darkest shades and deepest shadows of necessity.

If time has its own tragic logic in Gawain and the Green Knight, so does the course of events. The two are of course related, each in its own way representing an aspect of necessity, and both proving beyond man's control. It is not surprising then that the Seasons Passage is

prefaced by a series of verses which point the ironic discrepancy between human intention which motivates an act and the objective consequences which define it,¹⁷ a dilemma especially appropriate to the action of a poem where everything conspires to keep the hero in the dark about the nature of his surroundings, the full meaning of his tests, and the consequences of his own deeds.

This hanselle hatz Arthur of auenturus on fyrst
 In 3onge 3ere, for he 3erned 3elping to here.
 Tha3 hym wordez were wane when þay to sete wenten,
 Now ar þay stoken of sturne werk, stafful her hond.
 Gawan watz glad to begynne þose gomnez in halle,
 Bot þa3 þe ende he heuy haf 3e no wonder.

(491-496)

Arthur yearns for adventure; his wish is granted, but the hanselle assumes an ironic form which contradicts rather than fulfills his intention. As for the court, the implicit contrast between the wordez which were initially lacking and the sturne werk with which they have their hands full turns on essentially the same irony, the implication being that the Arthurian Fellowship has, so to speak, gotten more than it bargained for. And so too with Gawain, whose unsuspecting eagerness to begin those gomnez in halle is measured against the projected heuy ende of those New Year's games.¹⁸ In the next verse, the inability of the protagonists to foresee or control the ends of their deeds is expressly universalized as the level of irony is raised from the realm of narrative comment to that of gnomic utterance:¹⁹

For þa3 men ben mery in mynde quen þay han mayn drynk,
 A 3ere 3ernes ful 3erne, and 3eldez neuer lyke,
 þe forme to þe fynisment foldez ful selden.

(497-499)

By introducing the fleeting seasons as an example of man's incapacity to predict or forestall the tragic rush of time and events, the Gawain poet links human weakness to the seasonal rhythms of recurrence and mutability,

securing a connection--albeit a rhetorical one--between man's limited powers and the objective forces which bind him. This tentative identification of human frailty with objective necessity not only graces Gawain's adventure with an extra degree of universality, it anticipates the crucial relationship between post-lapsarian imperfection and tragic necessity which, more than any other single factor in the poem, determines the boundaries of heroism in Gawain and the Green Knight. To this relationship we shall return shortly.

Thus far we have treated the Seasons Passage as if it were a formal elaboration of the various modes of necessity which operate in Gawain and the Green Knight. In a certain sense, this is so. But the verse also possesses significant lyrical power. To fully appreciate the tragic overtones of these stanzas, one must attend to the poetics as well as the dialectics of necessity, paying special attention to the rhetorical strategies from which the description of the passing year draws its emotional urgency and poignancy. For example, the seasons topos is introduced--as Silverstein points out--by a particularly moving example of the figure traductio, which I will risk reproducing here one more time:

A 3ere 3ernes ful 3erne, and 3eldez neuer lyke.
(498)

The primary meaning of the line is, literally, "a year runs running and yields never the like." But 3ernes and 3erne can not only be glossed as "runs" and "running," but as "yearns" and "yearning." Thus, "since the nicely chosen 3ernes can represent either of two Anglo-Saxon verbs, geirnan (gerinnan) or girnan (giernan), the phrase may mean two different things at once; as if we were to say, the year runs running, or the year yearns yearning."²⁰ What the traductio accomplishes is to insure that the verse conveys both the objective reality and the subjective experience

of time, not only the perception of transience, but the human response to it as well. The sensation of irreparable loss which is thus projected on to the passing year is reiterated when the line--or a variation thereof--recurs at the close of the seasons' cycle:

And þus 3irnes þe 3ere in 3isterdayez mony.
(529)

Again, the primary meaning of the verse--"and thus passes the year in yesterdays many"--possesses substantial elegiac power; but this power is enhanced by the connotations of yearning and pain which the traductio superimposes upon the denotative declaration of life's transience.

Another instance of poetic enhancement of theme occurs in the autumn section of the passage where heruest, harbinger of winter, emotionally prepares us for the imminent close of the year:

Bot þen hy3es heruest, and hardenes hym sone,
Warnez hym for þe wynter to wax ful rype.
(521-522)

This verse is comparable to Marvell's famous couplet, which in function and feeling it closely resembles:

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near.²¹

In each case, the initial "but" (bot) is a dramatic means of signaling the ominous and inexorable rush of time.²² Moreover, the verse contains what may well be another example of deliberate ambivalence, an ambiguous pronoun reference which, if intentional, would serve to enlarge the affective range of the tempus fugit theme: hym may refer to the wort of line 518, in which case hardenes would be glossed as "urges"; but hym can also refer to autumn himself, in which case hardenes would be glossed as "grows severe." In the first instance, the lines would be rendered as

"But then autumn hastens on and encourages it at once, warns it to ripen for fear of the winter."²³ In the second, as "But then autumn comes hurrying along, and soon grows severe, warning it to grow ripe for fear of the winter."²⁴ The two glosses are closely related, but, to my ear at least, the ambivalence contributes an extra degree of urgency and intensity to the fleeting year.²⁵

In our study of Morte Arthure, we noted that a natural correspondence between the rise and fall pattern of de Casibus tragedy and the rhythms of human life invested that poem with increased range and power.²⁶ This is equally true of Gawain and the Green Knight where the presentation of necessity is deepened by a loose analogy between the seasons of the year and the ages of man.²⁷ This implicit analogy is artfully underscored by a second use of traductio in line 527:

And al grayes þe gres þat grene watz ere.

In Middle English, gres can mean, and here is clearly intended to mean, both grass and flesh.²⁸ Moreover, this connection is reinforced by the verb grayes: grayes literally means to "grow grey," suggesting the human aging process; but the figurative meaning of the verb is "to wither," a gloss which applies equally to flesh and grass. By this two-fold rhetorical yoking of the rhythms of human life with those of the passing year--each with its fixed periods of early rise and ultimate fall, its characteristic curve of growth, decline, decay, and death--²⁹the traductio points an inherently tragic analogy, and, like the rhetorical figures of ambivalence which anticipate it, considerably enhances the range of necessity in the passage.

The association of winter with old age and death brings us to the second major figurative representation of necessity in Gawain and the

Green Knight: the winter journey. As a thematic expression of the tragic conditions of existence, the winter journey is hardly original with the Gawain and the Green Knight poet.³⁰ As early as the Old English Seafarer and Wanderer this theme had been used to represent man as a homeless exile on earth.³¹ In Gawain and the Green Knight there are two winter journeys, Gawain's initial expedition to Bercilak's castle and his brief ride from Hautdesert to the Green Chapel. Each of these journeys invokes aspects of necessity not touched upon, or at least not emphasized in the Seasons Passage, especially the miseries of human isolation and alienation.³²

As a figurative expression of necessity, Gawain's journey from Arthur's court to Bercilak's castle unfolds in stages, each phase focusing on a specific hardship and stressing a particular aspect of necessity. From the outset, Gawain's isolation is heavily underscored. He glides through the winter landscape, comfortless and companionless, without sustenance or succour--deprivation lending to solitude a desolate air of finality:

Now ridez þis renk þurȝ þe ryalme of Logres,
 Sir Gauan, on Godez halue, þaȝ hym no gomen þoȝt.
 Oft leudlez alone he lengez on nyȝtez
 þer he fonde noȝt hum byfore þe fare þat he lyked.
 Hade he no fere bot his fole by frythez and dounez,
 Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp.

.
 Mony klyf he ouerclambe in contryez straunge,
 Fer floten fro his frendez fremedly he rydez.

.
 Bi contray caryez þis knyȝt, tyl Krystmasse euen,
 al one.

.
 þe gome vpon Gryngolet glydez hum vnder,
 þurȝ mony misy and myre, mon al hym one.

(691-749)

Gawain's solitude is heightened by the relentless movement which carries him further and further from the familiar environs of Arthur's court.

As he rides by gates straunge into a foreign and forbidding world, his

only contact with strangers who al nykked hym wyth nay or potential enemies, few of whom þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied, the sustained impression of restless motion conveys something of the rootlessness and instability of the human estate:

Alle þe iles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldez,
 And farez ouer þe fordez by þe forlondez,
 Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
 In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrle; wonde þer bot lyte
 þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied.
 And ay he frayned, as he ferde, at frekez þat he met,
 If þay hade herde any karp of a kny3t grene,
 In any grounde þeraboute, of þe grene chapel;
 And al nykked hym wyth nay, þat neuer in her lyue
 þay se3e neuer no segge þat watz of suche hwez
 of grene.

þe kny3t tok gates straunge
 In mony a bonk vnbene,
 His cher ful oft con chaunge
 þat chapel ere he my3t sene.

(698-712)

The winter world through which Gawain rides is not only precarious, it is actively hostile. Dangerous foes, natural and unnatural, human and inhuman, attack from every side:

At vche warþe oþer water þer þe wy3e passed
 He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,
 And þat so foule and so felle þat fe3t hym byhode.
 So mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez,
 Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole.
 Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolues als,
 Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarres,
 Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,
 And etaynez, þat hym aneledede of þe he3e felle;
 Nade he ben du3ty and dry3e, and Dry3tyn had serued,
 Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte.

(715-725)

Worse, nature itself proves inimical to unaccommodated man:

For werre wrathed hym not so much þat wynter nas wors,
 When þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadde,
 And fres er his falle my3t to þe fale erþe;
 Ner slayn wyth þe slete he slepede in his yrnes
 Mo ny3tes þen innoghe in naked rokkez,
 þer as claterande fro þe crest þe colde borne rennez,
 And hengede he3e ouer his hede in hard iisse-ikkles.
 þus in peryl and payne and plytes ful harde
 Bi contray caryez þis kny3t.

(726-734)

The very earth demonstrates its hostility, or at the very least its indifference to man, as Gawain makes his way through the forbidding terrain:

Bi a mounte on þe morne meryly he rydes
 Into a forest ful dep, þat ferly watz wylde,
 Hiþe hillez on vche a halue, and holtwodez vnder
 Of hore okez ful hoge a hundreth togeder;
 þe hasel and þe haþþorne were harled al samen,
 With roþe raged mosse rayled aywhere,
 With mony bryddez vnblyþe vpon bare twyges,
 þat pitosly þer piped for pyne of þe colde.
 (740-747)

In all, Gawain's journey from Camelot to Hautdesert evokes a familiar medieval vision of winter peregrination--the vision of a barren and inhospitable earth upon which man wanders, a homeless exile, making his uncertain way towards death.³³ As Gawain resumes his winter journey in the Fourth Fitt, his isolation is once more emphasized, particularly after his guide spurs off, leaving the knight as abruptly al one as he had been on the first phase of his quest:

'Now farez wel, on Goddez half, Gawayn þe noble!
 For alle þe golde vpon grounde I nolde go wyth þe,
 Ne bere þe felasþchip þurþ þis fryth on fote fyrre.'
 Bi þat þe wyþe in þe wod wendez his brydel,
 Hit þe hors with þe helez as harde as he myþt,
 Lepez hym ouer þe launde, and levez þe knyþt þere
 al one.

(2149-2155)³⁴

Predictably enough, the winter terrain between Hautdesert and the Green Chapel recalls the wild and uninhabitable waste of the first journey,³⁵ the frozen landscape of pilgrimage and exile, the barren geography of necessity:³⁶

þay boþen bi bonkkez þer boþez ar bare,
 þat clomben bi clyffez þer clengez þe colde.
 þe heuen watz vphalt, bot vgly þer-vnder;
 Mist maged on þe mor, malt on þe mountez,
 Vch hille hadde a hatte, a myst-hakel huge,

Brokez byled and breke bi bonkkez aboute,
 Schyre schaterande on schorez, þer þay down schowued.
 Wela wylle watz þe way þer þay bi wod schulden.

.

Thenne gyrdez he to Gryngolet, and gederez þe rake,
 Schowues in bi a schore at a schaze syde,
 Ridez þur3 þe roze bonk to þe dale;
 And þenne he wayted hym aboute, and wylde hit hym þo3t,
 And se3e no syngne of resette bisydez nowhere,
 Bot hy3e bonkkez and brent vpon boþe halue,
 And ru3eknokled knarrez with knorned stoncz;
 þe skwez of þe scowtez skayned hym þo3t.
 þenne he houed, and wythhylde his hors at þat tyde,
 And ofte chaunged his cher þe chapel to seche:
 He se3 non suche in no syde, and selly hym þo3t,
 Saue, a lyttel on a launde, a lawe as hit were;
 A bal3 ber3 bi a bonke þe brymme bysyde,
 Bi a for3 of a flode þat ferked þare;
 þe borne blubred þerinne as hit boyled hade.

(2077-2174)

Measured against the austerity of the winter landscape through which he moves, confronting the final human realities of isolation, suffering and death, Gawain gains not only an extra degree of universality, but an increased measure of heroic stature. It is not precisely that he is more heroic here than elsewhere; but it is perhaps only in these passages that we are permitted to view him directly, emblematically as it were, as the embodiment of the heroic tradition he represents. For the first time he has the stage wholly to himself. Armed, mounted, passing through strange and hostile territories, he is the very picture of the knight-errant--not only stripped of all which mediates between man and necessity, but free of all the subtle ironies which tend to complicate our view of the courtly world to which he belongs. What is more, the winter journey episodes provide a scenario within which Gawain's specifically military qualities emerge in their clearest form. Generally in Gawain and the Green Knight, Gawain's overtly martial qualities are subordinated to his courtly virtues--his courtesy, fellowship and exquisite command of civilized discourse. Now while it is true that the heroism celebrated

in Gawain and the Green Knight is not explicitly martial in nature,³⁷ and while it is also true, as we shall see shortly, that courtly virtues possess considerable heroic significance, it is equally true that if the chivalric protagonist is to achieve heroic legitimacy, he must (to some extent at least) demonstrate his command of the traditional virtues of the old heroic code: he must, in other words, display some form of military prowess. It is precisely the winter journeys that dramatize Gawain's martial accomplishments, as, helm on head and spear in hand (l. 2143), he displays his physical strength, stamina, and courage, climbing over cliffs, sleeping half-frozen in his irons, pushing on past peaks and crags in search of the Green Chapel in order to keep his appointment with death.³⁸

Only during these journeys does Gawain engage--however summarily--in personal combat, that sine qua non of heroic life. At the beginning of his quest, as he moves from Arthur's court to Bercilak's castle, Gawain fights off a veritable handbook of hostile creatures--dragons, wolves, wildmen, bulls, bears, boars, and giants. And again, as he returns to Camelot from the Green Chapel:

Wylde wayez in þe worlde Wowen now rydez
 On Gryngolet, þat þe grace hade geten of his lyue;
 Ofte he herbered in house and ofte al þeroute,
 And mony aventure in vale, and venquyst ofte,
 þat I ne tyzt at þis tyme in tale to remene.
 (2479-2483)

It has been observed that these brief narrative summaries relegate the military aspects of chivalry to the background of Gawain's adventure.³⁹ So be it. But as abbreviated as they are, these incidents of martial chivalry are obligatory elements of Gawain's heroic status, allowing us to directly envision him as a knight-errant, insuring that we perceive him not merely as a courtier, but as the heroic representative of mankind.

The three hunt scenes which alternate with the temptation scenes at Bercilak's castle provide the third large rhetorical pattern of necessity in Gawain and the Green Knight. There have been a number of attempts to relate the hunt scenes to the temptation scenes by equating Gawain's day-to-day behavior with that of the "timid" deer, the "aggressive" boar, and the "wily" fox.⁴⁰ With the obvious exception of the fox hunt, all such attempts are unconvincing.⁴¹ There is however one crucial, if largely ignored parallel between Gawain and the hunted which depends upon a similarity of predicament rather than a similarity of behavior. This analogy, based upon the common mortality of man and beast, allows the poet to suggest what that plot has not yet disclosed-- that the temptation game is serious; the chase occurring in Gawain's chamber is potentially as deadly as the hunt taking place on the bente-felde.⁴² However graceful and elegant the exchanges between Gawain and the lady, Gawain's life is at issue. Moreover, the implicit identification of Gawain's fate with the fortunes of the hunted beasts does more than suggest the mortal stakes for which Gawain unwittingly plays; it implies that at the level of necessity--in the face of fear, suffering, violence, and death--human and animal natures converge. Man's humanity is redeemable only at the level of his heroism.

The deer hunt with which the Third Fitt commences opens with a sudden pre-dawn burst of energy and excitement as Bercilak's guests bustle about, packing their gear, saddling their mounts, and riding off in several directions:

Ful erly bifore þe day þe folk vprisen,
 Gestes þat go wolde hor gromez þay calden,
 And þay busken vp bilyue blonkkez to sadel,
 Tyffen her takles, trussen her mæles,
 Richen hem þe rychest, to ryde alle arrayde,
 Lepen vp lyztly, lachen her brydeles,
 Vche wyze on his way þer hym wel lyked.

(1126-1132)

This rush of physical vitality is soon harnessed to the chivalric form of the hunt, the bugle, bent-felde, hafeles on hy3e horsses:

þe leve lorde of þe londe watz not þe last
 Arayed for þe rydyng, with renkkez ful mony;
 Ete a sop hastyly, when he hade herde masse,
 With bugle to bent-felde he buskez bylyve.
 By þat any dayly3t lemed vpon erþe
 He with his hafeles on hy3e horsses weren.
 (1133-1138)

The hunt itself opens upon a note of joyous release:

þenne þise cacheres þat coupe cowpled hor houndez,
 Vnclosed þe kenel dore and calde hem þeroute,
 Blwe bygly in buglez þre bare mote:
 Braches bayed þerfore and breme noyse maked;
 And þay chastysed and charred on chasyng þat went,
 A hundreth of hunteres, as I haf herde telle,
 of þe best.
 To trystors vewtors 3od,
 Couples hunttes of kest;
 þer ros for blastez gode
 Gret rurd in þat forest.
 (1139-1149)

But this early impression is short lived. The very trumpet notes that herald the onset of aristocratic sport sound the alarm of terror and bloodshed. It is all a question of point of view. At the outset, the controlling point of view is that of Bercilak and his renkkes. But with the pivotal blast of the bugle and baying of the hounds, the poet abruptly shifts his focus so that the impending hunt is no longer viewed through the eager anticipation of the hunting party, but rather through the shivering panic of the prey:⁴³

At þe fyrst quethe of þe quest quaked þe wylde.
 (1150)

From this perspective, the energy originally released as unfettered exuberance soon culminates in violence and death, as the hapless hinds and does are harried, checked, rounded up, and driven to the slaughter:

Der drof in þe dale, doted for drede,
 Higed to þe hyge, bot heterly þay were
 Restayed with þe stablye, þat stoutly ascryed.

.
 þe hindez were halden in with hay! and war!
 þe does dryuen with gret dyn to þe depe sladez;
 þer myzt mon se, as þay slypte, slentyng of arwes--
 At vche wende vnder wande wapped a flone--
 þat bigly bote on þe broun with ful brode hedez.
 What! þay brayen, and bleden, bi bonkkez þay degen.
 (1151-1163)

Here is the very triumph of mortality, the tragic reality which the exigencies of comic romance exclude from the plot--the underlying necessities of human existence which cannot be permitted to prevail at the level of narrative and so are indirectly surfaced through the figurative connotations of a rhetoric which, if oblique, is nevertheless of such lyric intensity as to render pain, confusion, and despair almost palpable. The raw violence of the scene is heightened by the onomatopoeitic power of the verse,⁴⁴ especially by alliterative patterns such as the one cited directly above where the cumulative reiteration of initial b rhymes conveys something of the brutal force and destructive power of the arrows which tear through the hides of the stricken deer, while the open vowels and internal rhyme of brayen, bleden, and degen echo the screams of the dying.⁴⁵ Of similar effect are the "growelling" initial r's which punctuate the chase as the snarling hounds run down the deer and tear them to pieces amidst the appropriately echoic cacaphony which resounds from the surrounding cliffs:⁴⁶

And ay rachches in a res radly hem folges,
 Hunterez wyth hyge horne hasted hem after
 Wyth such a crakkande kry as klyffes haden brusten.
 What wylde so atwaped wyges þat schotten
 Watz al toraced and rent at þe resayt,
 Bi þay were tened at þe hyge and taysed to þe watterez;
 þe ledez were so lerned at þe loze trysteres,
 And þe grehoundez so grete, þat geten hem bylyve
 And hem tofyched, as fast as frekez myzt loke,
 þer-ryzt.

(1164-1173)

The Gawain poet's choice of indirect rather than direct enumerations of necessity can be accounted for by the conventions of romance and comedy, both of which require that necessity be suspended--that the hero not be subjected to the full force of time, change, suffering, and death. But the poet has still further reason to refrain from a direct presentation of his hero's predicament. Given the reduced scale of heroism in Gawain and the Green Knight, to have fully immersed Gawain in a world of fear, pain, and death would have been to run the risk of pathos, the risk of depicting a pitiable victim rather than an admirable hero. The hunt scenes, through their indirect evocation of necessity, enable the audience to identify emotionally with Gawain's plight without detracting from his heroic stature. Amidst the sound and fury of the hunt, the terror and despair of the slaughtered deer affords a glimpse into the instinctual animal--which is to say, human--reaction to violent death: brute fear, unmediated by Gawain's knightly fortitude and restraint. In other words, through the agony of the suffering wylde we can directly feel what it is like to be hunted down, trapped, and killed while Gawain, whose plight the scenario figuratively expresses, remains insulated from the immediate pathos of the action.⁴⁷

Nor do the hunt scenes mark the first time that those aspects of Gawain's dilemma which are not wholly suitable for direct presentation are figuratively expressed, almost personified, by the plight of the wylde. On Gawain's initial winter journey, the most poignant image of suffering and isolation is projected not by the figure of the knight himself, but by the

. . . bryddez vnblyþe vpon bare twyges,
þat pitosly þer piped for pyne of þe colde.
(746-747)⁴⁸

This impression is heightened by the rough, wild, stony terrain across which the chase unfolds. Given the common focus on mortality, it is perhaps no accident that the rugged landscape of the boar hunt recalls the barren winter world against which the knight was tested on his original journey from Arthur's court to Bercilak's castle:

þen al in a semble sweyed togeder,
 Bitwene a flosche in þat fryth and a foo cragge;
 In a knot bi a clyffe, at þe kerre syde,
 þer as þe rogh rocher vnrydely watz fallen,
 þay vmbekesten þe knarre and þe knot boþe,
 Wygez, whyl þay wysten wel wythinne hem it were,
 þe best þat þer breued watz wyth þe blodhoundez.
 (1429-1436)

Although we are once again moved toward a sympathetic identification with the beast who is to be hunted down and killed, this time the figurative analogy between man and wylde is composed in a somewhat different key. The boar differs significantly from the deer. A formidable adversary—as well as a victim, he arouses admiration as well as pity:

þenne þay beten on þe buskez, and bede hym vpryse,
 And he vnsoundyly out so3t seggez ouerþwert;
 On þe sellokest swyn sweged out þere,
 Long sythen fro þe sounder þat sized for olde,
 For he watz breme, bor alþer-grattest,
 Ful grymme when he gronyed; þenne greued mony,
 For þre at þe fyrst þrast he þry3t to þe erthe,
 And sparred forth good sped bout spyt more.

.
 ful oft he bydez þe baye,
 And maymez þe mute inn melle;
 He hurtez of þe houndez, and þay
 Ful zomerly zaule and zelle.

(1437-1453)

As a fierce fighter who inflicts as well as suffers violence, the boar is as evocative of heroic values as almost anything in the poem, especially in light of the traditional battle rhetoric of which the passage is composed:

Schalkez to schote at hym schowen to þenne,
 Haled to hem of her arewez, hitten hym oft;

Bot þe poyntez payred at þe pyth þat pyzt in his scheldez,
 And þe barbez of his browe bite non wolde--
 þa3 þe schauen schaft schyndered in pecez,
 þe hede hyppede a3ayn were-so-euer hit hitte.
 Bot quen þe dyntez hym dered of her dry3e strokez,
 þen, braynwod for bate, on burnez he rasez,
 Hurtez hem ful heterly þer he forth hy3ez,
 And mony ar3ed þerat, and on lyte drogen.
 (1454-1463)

As we have seen, the deer hunt also draws upon this traditional heroic diction:

þer myzt mon se, as þay slypte, slentynf of arwes--
 At vche wende vnder wande wapped a flone--
 þat bigly bote on þe broun with ful brode hedez.
 What! þay brayen, and bleden, bi bonkkez þay degen.
 (1160-1163)

But in the deer hunt the rhetoric of battle is used more sparingly and primarily serves to emphasize the pitiful suffering of helpless victims whose vulnerability is made even more poignant by specific reference to their female gender:

þay let the herttez haf þe gate, with þe hy3e hedes,
 þe brems bukkez also with hor brode paumez;
 For þe fre lorde hade defende in fermysoun tyme
 þat þer schulde no mon meue to þe male dere.
 þe hindez were halden in with hay! and war!
 þe does dryuen with gret dyn to þe depe sladez.
 (1154-1159)

In the boar hunt where the quarry is a fighter as well as a victim, the heroic overtones generated by the rhetoric convey not only the suffering and violence traditionally associated with warfare, but the fortitude and valor of the heroic warrior.⁵⁰ This duality deepens and extends the original parallel between knight and beast by invoking man's heroic stature without ceasing to point his mortality.

Although the figurative analogy between the hunted beast and the heroic warrior is carefully maintained throughout the episode, the resumption of the boar hunt after the intervening temptation scene marks

a shift of focus. As the hunt moves towards its inevitable conclusion, our awe at the heroic ferocity of the boar is more and more tempered by compassion for his growing fatigue and failing powers. Finally, driven and frenzied, most like to a doomed fighter making a last desperate stand, the great beast stands at bay, exhausted but still formidable and dangerous:

þer he bod in his bay, tel bawemen hit breken,
 And madee hym mawgref his hed for to mwe vtter,
 So felle flonez þer flete when þe fold gedered.
 Bot 3et þe styffest to start bi stoundez he made,
 Til at þe last he watz so mat he myzt no more renne,
 Bot in þe hast þat he myzt he to a hole wynnez
 Of a rasse bi a rokk þer rennez þe boerne.
 He gete þe bonk at his bak, bigynez to scrape,
 þe froþe femed at his moth vnfayre bi þe wykez,
 Whettez his whyte tuscez; with hym þen irked
 Alle þe burnez so bolde þat hym by stoden
 To nye hum on-ferum, bot neze hym non durst
 for woþe;
 He hade hurt so mony byforne
 þat al þu3t þenne ful loþe
 Be more wyth his tusches torne,
 That breme watz and braynwod bothe.

(1564-1580)

As the lord closes with the boar, the poet sustains the heroic pattern of the scene by describing the mortal encounter between man and beast in terms closely paralleling traditional representations of single combat on the battlefield:⁵¹

. . . þe knyzt com hymself, kachande his blonk,
 Sy3 hym byde at þe bay, his burnez bysyde;
 He ly3tez luflych adoun, leues his corsour,
 Braydez out a bryzt bront and bigly forth strydez,
 Foundez fast þur3 þe forth þer þe felle bydez.
 þe wylde watz war of þe wy3e with weppen in honde,
 Hef hy3ly he here, so hetterly he fnast
 þat fele ferde for þe freke, lest felle hym þe worre.
 þe swyn settez hym out en þe segge euen,
 þat þe burne and þe bor were hoþe vpon hepez
 In þe wy3test of þe water.

(1581-1591)

As the boar goes under, his heart shattered, the hunt closes on a distinctly

elegiac note, the poet describing the fall of the beast as if he were commemorating the death of a great warrior:

For þe mon merkkez hym wel, as þay mette fyrst,
 Set sadly þe scharp in þe slot euen,
 Hit hym vp to þe hult, þat þe hert schyndered,
 And he zarrande hym zelde, and zedoun þe water
 ful tyt.

(1592-1596)

Such lines possess considerable tragic power, even where their application to the human situation remains figurative and oblique.

Like the deer and boar hunts, the fox hunt opens with the dawning day:

þe lorde þat his craftz kepez,
 Ful erly he watz digt.
 After messe a morsel he and his men token;
 Miry watz þe mornynge, his mounture he askes.
 Alle þe hapeles þat on horse schulde helden hym after
 Were boun busked on her blonkez bifore þe halle zatez.
 Ferly fayre watz þe folde, for þe forst clenged;
 In rede rudede vpon rak rises þe sunne,
 And ful cler costez þe clowdes of þe welkyn.

(1688-1696)

The daybreak note is struck again at the outset of the corresponding temptation scene as the lady rouses Gawain from his troubled sleep:

Ho comez withinne þe chambre dore, and closes hit hir after,
 Wayues vp a wyndow, and on þe wyze callez,
 And radly þus rehayted hym with hir riche wordes,
 with chere:

'A! mon, how may þou slepe,
 þis morning is so clere?'

(1742-1747)

Moreover, there appears to be a link between the fresh beauty of the morning and that of the lady herself on this the third and final day of Gawain's temptation:

Bot þe lady for luf let not to slepe,

 Bot ros hir vp radly, rayked hir þeder
 In a mery mantyle, mete to þe erthe,
 þat watz furred ful fyne with fellez wel pured,

No hwez goud on hir hede bot þe heger stones
 Trased aboute hir tressour be twenty in ciusteres;
 Hir þryuen face and hir þrote þrowen al naked,
 Hir brest bare bifore, and bihinde eke.

(1733-1741)

The vivid three-fold glorification of temporal life--natural and sexual--stresses the severity of the test, the poet celebrating the joys of the flesh and the world, while his hero, on what is ostensibly his last full day on earth, struggles against the seductive charms of an all-too-vivacious lady and the pressures exerted by his own instinct for self-preservation.⁵² In any case, the characteristic dawn opening is immediately followed by the familiar explosion of noise and motion which introduces the hunt itself:⁵³

Hunteres vnhardeled bi a holte syde,
 Rocheres rounge bi rys for rurde of her hornes;
 Summe fel in þe fute þer þe fox bade,
 Traylez oft a traures bi traunt of her wyles;
 A kenet kryes þerof, þe hunt on hym calles;
 His falazes fallen hym to, þat fnasted ful þike,
 Runned forth in a rabel in his ry3t fare,
 And he fyskez hem byfore; þay founden hym sone,
 And quen þay seghe hym with sy3t þay sued hym fast,
 Wrezande hym ful weterly with a wroth noyse.

.
 Thenne watz hit list vpon lif to lyþen þe houndez,
 When alle þe mute hade hym met, menged togeder:
 Suche a sorze at þat sy3t þay sette on his hede
 As alle þe clamberande clyffes hade clatered on hepes;
 Here he watz halawed, when haþelez hym metten,
 Loude he watz 3ayned with 3arande speche;
 þer he watz þreted and oft þef called,
 And ay þe titleres at his tayl, þat tary he ne my3t.

(1697-1726)

Despite similarities in basic pattern, the fox hunt differs from the previous hunts in a number of important respects. The most significant of these, for our purposes at least, is in the presentation of necessity. Whereas the deer and boar hunts both project necessity at the level of fear, pain, and death--the boar hunt superimposing upon this vision of mortality the heroism of battle--the fox hunt narrows the

range of necessity, focusing on the futility of the hunted animal's efforts to evade its foreordained end. Like Gawain fending off the Lady's persistent advances,⁵⁴ the fox exercises great skill and cunning to escape from his relentless pursuers:

Oft he watz runnen at, when he out rayked,
 And oft reled in a3ayn, so Reniarde watz wyle,
 And 3e he lad hem bi lagmon, þe lorde and his meyny,
 On þis maner bi þe mountes quyle myd-ouer-vnder.
 (1727-1730)

But, as with Gawain, all his stratagems are ultimately in vain; as he twists and turns to dodge from one peril, like the knight he runs headlong into another:⁵⁵

And he trantes and tornayeez þur3 mony tene greue,
 Hauilounez, and herkenez bi heggez ful ofte.
 At þe last bi a littel dich he lepez ouer a spenne,
 Stelez out ful stilly bi a strothe rande,
 Went haf wylt of þe wode with wylez fro þe houndes;
 þenne watz he went; er he wyst, to a wale tryster,
 þer þre þro at a þrich þrat hym at ones
 al graye.
 He blenched a3ayn bilyue
 And stifly start on-stray,
 With alle þe wo on lyue
 To þe wod he went away.
 (1707-1718)

Finally, just as Gawain, successfully eluding the Lady's sexual advances, falls prey to her offer of the "magic" luf-lace, the fox, seeking to escape the sharp edge of Bercilak's sword, is set upon and pulled down by the pursuing hounds:

3et is þe lorde on þe launde ledande his gomnes.
 He hatz forfaren þis fox þat he fol3ed longe;
 As he sprete ouer a spenne to spye þe schrewe,
 þer as he herd þe howndes þat hasted hym swyþe,
 Renaud com richchande þur3 a ro3e greue,
 And alle þe rabel in a res ry3t at his helez.
 þe wy3e watz war of þe wylde, and warly abides,
 And braydez out þe bry3t bronde, and at þe best castez.
 And he schunt for þe scharp, and schulde haf arered;
 A each rapes hym to, ry3t ere he my3t,
 And ry3t bifore þe hors fete þay fel on hym alle
 And worried me þis wyly wyth a wrote noyse.
 (1894-1905)

With respect to Gawain who hopes to escape from his joparde by means of the Lady's talisman, the abrupt and violent termination of the hunt is particularly ominous:

And syþen þay tan Reynarde,
And tyruen of his cote.

(1920-1921)

The skinning of the fox is an abbreviated form of the breaking of the beast with which the deer and boar hunts conclude. For all the aristocratic skill displayed in the breaking down of the carcass,⁵⁶ each of these passages emphasizes the violent death of the slain animal and foreshadows Gawain's impending beheading at the Green Chapel.⁵⁷

Gawain's confrontation with Death at the Green Chapel is of course anticipated not only by the conclusion of the chase, but by the overall rhetoric of the three hunt scenes and the winter journey episodes as well. The relationship between the journeys, hunts and the beheading scene⁵⁸ is in fact marked by a rather striking verbal parallel. As he commences his quest, on his way from Camelot to Hautdesert, Gawain--al one--suffers the severities of the frozen winter wasteland:

Ner slayn wyth þe slete he sleted in his ynes
Mo nyztez þen innoghe in naked rokkez,
þer as claterande fro þe crest þe colde borne rennez,
And hengeð hege ouer his hede in hard iisse-ikkles.

(729-732)

The sound of the icy stream clattering from the mountain is recalled by the cracking horn blasts which violently echo from the cliffs during the deer hunts:

Hunterez wyth hyge horne hasted hem after
Wyth such a crakkande kry as Klyffes haden brusten.

(1165-1166)

And again, during the fox hunt, the clamor of the hounds is compared with clustering cliffs clattering in heaps:

Suche a sorge at þat syȝt þay sette on his hede
 As alle þe clamberande clyffes hade clatered on hepes.
 (1721-1722)

Finally, all echoes converge and culminate as Gawain approaches the Green Chapel and the sinister sound of the Green Knight melodramatically whetting his ax clatters among the cliffs as if they were about to split asunder:

Quat! hit clatered in þe clyff, as it cleue schulde,
 As one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a syþe.
 What! hit wharred and whette, as water at a mulne;
 What! hit rusched and ronge, rawþe to here.
 (2201-2204)⁵⁹

Such clear-cut verbal parallels cannot simply be passed off as the random accidents of oral poetry. Rather, they are at least two, and perhaps three layers of necessity conveyed and sustained by the rhetoric of nature in Gawain and the Green Knight. The Seasons Passage projects necessity as time, its pattern of cyclical recurrence and mutability reflecting the changeless change, the permanent impermanence of all temporal things, natural and human. The winter journey and hunt scenes project necessity as mortality: the journeys as isolation, alienation, and exile; the hunts as fear, suffering, and death. In the shadow of this multi-faceted necessity, Gawain's pentangle stands for the validity of human ideals, serving as an affirmation of man in the face of that which frustrates his deepest aspirations and denies his value. More specifically, each particular level of necessity is yoked with a corresponding pentagonal virtue: transience is paired with trawþe, man's attempt to achieve permanence and stability in the temporal world; the travails of winter exile are ranged against cortaysye, man's attempt to overcome his original isolation and alienation through civilization and human community; and mortality--fear, pain, and death--is, as is customary in the heroic

world, met with courage, which, although not strictly identified as one of Gawain's pentagonal qualities is, as we shall see, essential to them all.⁶¹ These three--troth, courtesy, and courage--are the mainstay of the chivalric ideal celebrated in Gawain and the Green Knight.

Before turning our full attention to the interaction between heroism and necessity, it might be of some value to examine the way in which the rhetorical representation of necessity is reinforced structurally, particularly with respect to the Brutus bokez frame which encloses the narrative. Earlier we noted the relationship between the cyclical structure and the thematic content of the Seasons Passage, observing that the circular form of the verse parallels its meaning by mirroring the recurrent cycle of seasons and years. Like the Seasons Passage, Gawain and the Green Knight is cyclical in structure. Framed at either end by the Brutus bokez account of the Trojan origins of Europe, the poem--like the passage--comes full circle with what is, for all intents and purposes, a reiteration of its opening line: Sifen (After) þe sege (segge) and þe assaut (asaute) watz sesed at Troye.⁶² Here, as in the Seasons Passage, form reflects meaning, cyclical recurrence implying the ultimate vanity of human endeavor. We end where we began. Nothing is essentially changed by Gawain's adventure, itself but one of mony aunterez which here-beforene haf fallen suche er þis (2527-2528).⁶³ History, like time and nature, revolves endlessly, human events seemingly as purposeless and repeatable as seasons and years.⁶⁴

The mutability as well as the vanity of temporal events is stressed by the Brutus bokez frame of the poem, particularly in the initial stanzas which portray history not only as a ceaseless round of recurrence, but as an unstable flux of transience and uncertainty.⁶⁵ Unlike Beowulf which

begins with a beginning (the miraculous coming of scyld), Gawain and the Green Knight opens with an ending--the fall of Troy-- , the initial verse pointing the irreparable destruction of the city as it proceeds from siege and assault to embers and ashes:

Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,
þe bor3 brittened and brent to brondes and askez.
(1-2)

This "ending," however, is also a beginning, presaging not only the founding of Rome but--to the medieval historian, at least--the birth of "modern" history.⁶⁶ Thus Aeneas and his noble kinsmen rise phoenix-like from the Trojan ashes to found kingdoms all across Western Europe, parenthetically adding to the perpetual flux of history by subduing prouinces in the process:

Hit watz Ennias þe athel, and his highe kynde,
þat siþen depreces prouinces, and patrounes bicom
Welnege of al þe wele in þe west iles.
Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyþe,
With gret bobbaunce þat bur3 he biges vpon fyrst,
And neuenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;
Tirius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes,
Langberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes,
And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus
On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez
wyth wyne.

(5-15)⁶⁷

With the joyous founding of Britain, the geographical focus narrows; but the stress on the uncertainty and instability of human events is, if anything, intensified, as British history vertiginously fluctuates between blysse, blunder, werre, wrake, and wonder before culminating at last in the marvelous reign of King Arthur:

. . . Werre and wrake and wonder
By syþez hatz wont þerinne,
And oft boþe blysse and blunder
Ful skete hatz skyfted synne.
And quen þis Bretayn watz bigged bi þis burn rych,
Bolde bredden þerinne, baret þat lofden,

In mony turned tyme tene þat wroȝten.
 Mo ferlyes on þis folde han fallen her oft
 þen in any oþer þat I wot, syn þat ilke tyme.
 Bot of alle þat here bult, of Bretaygne kynges,
 Ay watz Arthur þe hendest, as I haf herde telle.
 (16-26)

At the other end, as Gawain and the Green Knight winds to a close, the Brutus bokez frame again points the ephemerality of temporal things, this time by a progressive distancing from the completed action of the narrative, which, as we draw up and away, recedes further and further into an irremediable past.⁶⁸ First we are made cognizant of the distance separating us from the Arthurian setting of the romance as Gawain's adventure is rather abruptly⁶⁹ removed from the "continuous present" of the narrative and situated in the now explicitly bygone days of Arthur:

þus in Arthurus day þis aunter bitidde.
 (2522)

Next, the historical curve between audience and narrative is lengthened, Camelot located somewhere on a temporal horizon which stretches backward to the fall of Troy:

Syþen Brutus, þe bolde burne, boȝed hider fyrst,
 After þe segge and þe asaute watz sesed at Troye,
 iwysse,
 (2524-2526)

Finally, we view the temporal action from the timeless, changeless, vantage point of eternity:

Now þat bere þe croun of þorne,
 He bryng vus to his blysse! AMEN.
 (2529-2530)

Yet--change, distance, and eternity notwithstanding--Gawain's adventure, even as it fades into an unrecoverable past, stands as a living example of what man may wrest from time and death; an aunter, preserved and commemorated

. . . in þe best boke of romaunce,
 þe Brutus bokez þerof beres wyttenesse.
 (2521-2523)

Thus the poet's fictional source--the Brutus bokkez--and his own composition--Gawain and the Green Knight--dovetail in their commitment to preserve and celebrate the highest forms and ideals of human conduct.⁷⁰

Not only the frame of the poem, but the introductory apparatus of each fitt casts a tragic light across its narrative content. As we have just seen, the First Fitt opens by placing Gawain's adventure within the flux of time and history. As for the Second Fitt, that begins with the wheel of the seasons and its elegiac expression of mutability and recurrence. Although the Third Fitt does not begin with a formal generalization of necessity, it does open with the first of the hunt scenes, the deer hunt which so dramatically conveys the experience of fear, pain, and death. And finally, the Fourth Fitt commences by reintroducing the world of winter into the poem, its evocation of unaccommodated, naked misery--both human and wylde--expressly linking Gawain and his quest to the larger world of suffering and death which the journey and hunt scenes had initially introduced:

Now negez þe Nw 3ere, and þe ny3t passez,
 þe day dryuez to þe derk, as Dry3ten biddez;
 Bot wylde wederez of worlde wakned þeroute,
 Clowdes kesten kenly þe colde to þe erþe,
 Wyth ny3e innoghe of þe norþe, þe naked to tene;
 þe snawe snitered ful snart, þat snayped þe wylde;
 þe werbelande wynde wapped fro þe hy3e,
 And drof vche dale ful of dryfted ful grete.
 þe leude lystened ful wel þat le3 in his bedde,
 þa3 he lowkez his liddez, ful lyttel he slepes;
 Bi vch kok þat crue he knwe wel þe steuen.

(1988-2008)⁷¹

In this way, each individual fitt opens by establishing a framework of necessity, a tragic perspective which remains operative, even when muted, throughout the entire action of the poem.

If, as Donald Howard has observed, symmetry is the dominant

structural strategy of Gawain and the Green Knight,⁷² and if, as we have contended all along, heroic poetry rests upon the tension between necessity and the values of the heroic code, then we might reasonably expect this tension to be reflected in the structural oppositions of the poem. And indeed, such is the case. Earlier, we examined the Seasons Passage at some length. The passage, although carefully integrated within the forward flow of the narrative action, is a highly-wrought, rhetorical elaboration of the dominant mode of necessity in Gawain and the Green Knight. Structurally and thematically, the Seasons Passage is balanced by the pentangle passage, an equally formal and highly-wrought elaboration of the chivalric values which, in Gawain and the Green Knight, represent the highest aspirations of mankind.⁷³ Here in the balanced opposition of what clearly constitute the two rhetorical center-pieces of the poem is a structural expression of the fundamental heroic tension of Gawain's world.⁷⁴

As many readers of the poem have remarked, the pentangle represents an ideal of chivalric perfection wherein courtly, knightly, and religious virtues form an interlocking, inviolate unity. The interdependence of pentagonal values has a number of significant ramifications for our poem and its hero. For one thing, it insures that insofar as the chivalric code is concerned, it is always a question of all or nothing. A failure at any one point of the pentangle entails a violation of the chivalric code in its entirety.⁷⁵ Thus for Gawain, however precarious and complex his quest, the stakes are always absolute. But while the demands which pentagonal chivalry imposes upon its champion are rigorous--at times seeming almost contradictory--this does not mean that the chivalric code is untenable or faulty. There is nothing inherently impossible about Gawain's task. He could have safeguarded his trawþe, clannes, and

cortaysye by politely rejecting the Lady's drurye just as he had refused all her previous offers, fulfilling all his obligations without violating the pentangle at any point whatsoever.⁷⁶ The lesson to be drawn from Gawain and the Green Knight is not that the chivalric code is imperfect or implausible; it is no more so than any human ideal. The point is that man is himself, by nature, fallible--incapable of perfectly sustaining any ideal, including one as noble and viable as chivalry. Ultimately, Gawain's slip is not a failure of the code, or even of the individual, but rather a given limitation of the post-lapsarian human condition.

If the chivalric code is not intrinsically flawed or moribund, neither is it altogether heroic. Indeed, in certain respects the pentagonal ideal may be said to point the difference between late fourteenth century chivalry and traditional Anglo-Saxon heroism. Consider, for example, the portrayal of the five fives in the pentangle passage itself. The pentangle can be seen--and has been seen--as a courtly and Christian ideal which entails an implicit rejection of the more militant and military attitudes of the old heroic code.⁷⁷ In this respect, the first of the five fives, Gawain's fautlez fyue wyttez, has been viewed in a religious context, being taken to mean that he is free of the sins of the five senses.⁷⁸ The second of the five fives has received similar treatment. One critic takes

And efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres
(641)

to indicate that Gawain possesses the five essential Christian virtues,⁷⁹ while another, unconvinced by this reading, can find no pertinent significance in Gawain's unfailing five fingers at all.⁸⁰ As for the third and fourth fives, the fyue woundez and the fyue joyez have been assumed to be solely Christian in their connotations, while the last of the five

fives--fraunchyse and fela3schyp, clannes, cortaysye, and pite--have been regarded as a compilation of essentially courtly and, in the case of clannes and possibly pite (which can mean "piety" as well as "pity"),⁸¹ religious virtues.

Now, if it were true that Gawain's ideal represented only courtly and religious attitudes, then we would be forced to conclude that the iron had indeed gone out of chivalry and that traditional heroic ideals play no significant role in the poem. However, when we subject the pentagonal ideal to closer scrutiny, we soon find that the more military aspects of the chivalric code, though not always primary, are everywhere in evidence. For example, while Gawain's fautlez fyue wyttez may well indicate his abstinence from the sins of the flesh, surely they also suggest the efficacy of his physical and mental powers of perception. In the Fourth Fitt, when Gawain himself uses the phrase at the Green Chapel, the reference is clearly physical rather than spiritual:

'Now iwysse,' quof Wowayn, 'wysty is here;
 þis oritore is vgly, with erbez ouergrowen;
 Wel bisemez þe wyze wruhled in grene
 Dele here his deuocioun on þe deuelez wyse.
 Now I fele hit is þe fende in my fiue wyttez,
 þat hatz stoken me þis steuen to strye me here.
 (2189-2194)

Gawain has already slipped from the chivalric ideal, and, on the evidence of this response, can no longer be said to be wholly fautlez in his fyue Wyttez.⁸² Gawain's imperfection will be fully discussed below. For the moment, let us note only that his impaired wyttez imply not that he has committed sins of the flesh, but rather that he suffers from an imperfection of perception or judgment, qualities that pertain at least as much to the mental and physical as to the spiritual aspects of the chivalric code.⁸³

Again, Gawain's unfailing fyue fynGRES may or may not be meant to conjure up the five virtues. But surely, in a scene devoted to the arming of the knight for his perilous journey,⁸⁴ when the poet refers to Gawain's never having failed in his five fingers, he is referring principally to Gawain's prowess of hand--his military prowess--implying, in short, that the knight has never been defeated in battle.⁸⁵ Even the specifically religious poyntez of the pentangle prove upon closer examination to be directly linked to conventional heroic values. The fyue joyez, like the ymage of the Virgin which adorns the inner half of Gawain's shield, serve not only as devotional subjects, but provide the inspiration for Gawain's steadfast courage on the battlefield:

And quere-so-euer þys mon in melly watz stad,
 His þro þo3t watz in þat, þur3 alle oþer þyngez,
 þat alle his forsnes he feng at þe fyue joyez
 þat þe hende heuen-quene had of hir chylde;
 At þis cause þe kny3t comlyche hade
 In þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,
 þat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer payred.
 (644-650)

As for the courtly and Christian virtues of the fifth five, at least four of the five are invested with heroic connotations which Gawain and the Green Knight inherits from the Old English alliterative tradition. For example, fraunchyse and fela3schyp--loosely corresponding to generosity of spirit and good fellowship--are normally viewed as courtly modes of social conduct, that is to say as courtier virtues. And so they are. But in Gawain and the Green Knight such virtues are not exercised in isolation from the heroic exigencies of Gawain's quest. No matter how festive his surroundings, Gawain is ever mindful

How þat destine schulde þat day dele hym his wyrde
 At þe grene chapel, when he þe gome metes,
 And bihoues his buffet abide withoute debate more.
 (1752-1754)

Gawain's magnanimous conviviality and easy manner are more than the graceful accomplishments of a well-bred courtier. In Gawain's case, fraunchyse and fela3schyp represent the chivalric knight's resolve to prove dauntless in the face of death.⁸⁶ The heroic nature of Gawain's fraunchyse is clearly evidenced on the morning of the third temptation-- the morning, that is, before his steuen at the Green Chapel. After a night of gloomy, oppressive dreams, he is abruptly roused from his þro þo3tes of doom and death by the Lady:

Bot quen þat comly com he kevered his wyttes,
Swenges out of þe sweuenes, and swarez with hast.
þe lady luflych com la3ande swete,
Felle ouer his fayre face, and fetly hym kyssed;
He welcumez hir worþily with a wale chere.
(1755-1759)

Gawain's wale chere is far from reflexive. That he kevered his wyttes implies a considerable initial effort of will, and, in light of his quest, even the wallande joye that ensues is not altogether wanting in knightly discipline. Similarly, we are told that after Gawain's confession,

And syþen he mace hym as mery among þe fre ladyes,
With comlych caroles and alle kynnes ioie,
As neuer he did bot þat daye, to þe derk ny3t,
with blys.
Vche mon had daynte þare
of hym, and sayde, 'Iwysse,
þus myrye he watz neuer are,
Syn he com hider, er þis.'
(1885-1892)

Admittedly, there are a number of ways in which these lines may be approached.⁸⁷ Perhaps Gawain's heart has been lightened by his confession in which the priest

. . . asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene
As domezday schulde haf ben dyzt on þe morne.
(1883-1884)

Perhaps, too the "magic" lace has given him some degree of renewed hope.⁸⁸ But however we choose to view Gawain's gracious disport, it must not be overlooked that this display of light-hearted fela3scyp occurs on what he expects to be his last full day on earth, and, as such, bears witness to his refusal to be intimidated by his imminent fate.⁸⁹

The third of the final fives is clannes, the most controversial of Gawain's pentagonal virtues, and the least likely to be identified with his heroism. One critic--perhaps because Gawain is called Mary's knight,⁹⁰ and perhaps because the temptations play such a prominent part in the poem--is led to identify clannes with celibacy and to place it at the center of Gawain's pentangle.⁹¹ Another argues more cogently that clannes does not preclude "'trweluf' outside marriage" and that it plays a secondary role in Gawain and the Green Knight.⁹² At the crux of this dispute is the pivotal passage in which Gawain definitively rejects the Lady's advances:

For þat prynces of pris depresed hym so þikke,
 Nurned hym so ne3e þe þred, þat nede hym bihoued
 Oþer lach þer his luf, oþer lodly refuse.
 He cared for his cortaysye, lest craþayn he were,
 And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne,
 And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t.
 'God schylde,' quof þe schalk, 'þat shal not befall!'
 (1770-1776)

For Spearing, synne means "sexual sin," while Gawain's concern for his loyalty is relegated to "second place."⁹³ Burrow, on the other hand, argues that the synne specified in line 1774 refers to Gawain's potential betrayal of his host, the knight's chastity taking second place to his concern for his trawþe.⁹⁴ If Burrow is correct, and certainly his reading is more consistent than Spearing's with what I understand to be the overriding concerns of the poem, then Gawain's clannes serves primarily as a means of upholding his trawþe.

Even is Spearing were correct, even if chastity were primary, Gawain's clannes would still be closely linked with his obligations of fealty to his host. In other words, in Gawain and the Green Knight, whether clannes is subordinated to Gawain's trawþe or merely associated with it, far from being an exclusively religious virtue utterly divorced from heroic context, clannes is directly related to just these chivalric values which are most reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon heroic code.

At the end of the five fives is cortaysye,⁹⁵ one of Gawain's most essential virtues,⁹⁶ and, if we can trust the opinion of Bercilak's court, the one for which he is most renowned:

Vch segge ful softly sayde to his fere:
 'Now schal we semlych se sle3tez of þewez
 And þe teccheles termes of talking noble,
 Wich spede is in speche vnsþurd may we lerne,
 Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture.
 God hatz geuen vus his grace godly for soþe,
 þat such a gest as Gawan grauntez vus to haue,
 Wher burnez blyþe of his burþe schal sitte
 and synge.

In menyng of manerez mere
 þis burne now scal vus bryng,
 I hope þat may hym here
 Schal lerne of luf-talkyng.'

(915-927)⁹⁷

Gawain's courtesy has been the subject of a good deal of close attention and valuable commentary.⁹⁸ For the moment, I would like to concentrate on the heroic significance of cortaysye in Gawain and the Green Knight. This is largely a question of recognizing the relationship between Gawain's courtesy and the ideal order of the chivalric world he represents.

One of the major antitheses in Gawain and the Green Knight depends upon a juxtaposition of indoors and outdoors, a contrast between the festive courts at Camelot and Hautdesert on the one hand, and, on the other, the rugged winter terrain which dominates the journey and hunt episodes.⁹⁹ The elaborate contrast reflects the familiar medieval

opposition between untamed nature and the noble order of aristocratic civilization. In this respect, Gawain and the Green Knight recalls Beowulf, Gawain's courtesy reminiscent of the values of the civitas in the older poem.¹⁰⁰ Of course there are serious distinctions to be drawn between the manner in which the Beowulf and Gawain poets handle the opposition between indoors and outdoors in the respective works. In Beowulf--a heroic poem--the dichotomy between civitas and wasteland is fundamental, desperate, and definitive--a direct representation of the tragic dialectic which governs the hero's world.¹⁰¹ In Gawain and the Green Knight, a mixed or multi-faceted poem based upon a rich and perpetually shifting bance of romance, comic, and heroic viewpoints, the alternation of indoors and outdoors is neither so stark nor so absolute.¹⁰² These reservations notwithstanding, it is apparent that in Gawain and the Green Knight the rituals which govern every aspect of chivalric activity--feasts, hunts, games, deportment and discourse--are, in Spearing's words, "social sacraments . . . of aristocratic life . . . a symbol of the vital bonds by which society is held together."¹⁰³ Nor do the elaborate rules of courtly conduct represent merely a means of grappling with encroachments from without--outlandish invaders, ferly sorceresses, or the more familiar impingements of winter nature. Man must also come to grips with his own "lower" nature.¹⁰⁴ The interplay of the hunt and temptation scenes demonstrates that in the face of death, human and animal natures converge. The lesson of the bent-felde is driven home in the castle chamber where the promptings of Gawain's own animal nature--his sexual urges and, more particularly, his instinct for self-preservation--jeopardize his chivalry and perhaps his life.¹⁰⁵ In this context, chivalric courtesy--man's refusal to live at the level

of brute instinct--his attempt to reshape his life according to the highest standards and ideals of human conduct--signifies not only the age-old struggle between men and nature, but man's defense against his own natural appetites and impulses. Far from a gratuitous exercise of effete elegance,¹⁰⁶ cortaysye ultimately proves to be a heroic virtue, a noble affirmation of human value in the face of necessity.

There is a second facet of Gawain's courtesy which, if less dramatic, is no less important: Gawain's respect for the human worth of human beings--subordinates and menials as well as his peers and comrades of the Round Table.¹⁰⁷ This aspect of courtesy emerges most clearly in an amusing but earnest debate between Gawain and the Lady concerning the nature of cortaysye itself:

And wyth a luflych loke he layde hym þyse wordez:
 'Sir, 3if 3e be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez,
 Wy3e þat is so wel wrast alway to god,
 And connez not of compaynye þe costez vndertake,

 3et I kende yow of kyssyng,' quoþ þe clere þenne,
 'Quere-so counteaunce is couþe quikly to clayme;
 þat bicumes vche a kny3t þat cortaysye vses.'
 'Do way' quoþ þat derf mon, 'my dere, þat speche,
 For þat durst I not do, lest I deuayed were;
 If I were werned, I were wrang, iwysse, 3if I prefered.'
 'Ma fay,' quoþ þe mere wyf, '3e may not be werned,
 3e ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strekþe, 3if yow lykez,
 3if any were so vilanous þat yow devaye wolde.'
 (1480-1497)

According to Burrow:

It may appear at first sight that the lady has resorted to a crudely provincial approach; but her words, as before, are less crude than they look. They involve, in fact, a quite subtle sophistry, which can be stated in the following syllogistic form: Anyone who refuses you is a villein (because only a villein could fail to appreciate your excellence); but it is legitimate to use force on a villein (teste Anreas Capellanus and others); therefore it is legitimate for you to use force on anyone who refuses you.¹⁰⁸

Gawain's retort, while remaining well within the boundaries of the ongoing verbal contest between the knight and the Lady, entails a subtle rejection of the Lady's representation of courtesy as little more than a courtly game, a view which violates the most basic tenets of human community:

'3e, be God,' quof̄ Gawayn, 'good is your speche,
Bot ƿrete is vnƿryuande in ƿede ƿer I lende,
And vch gift ƿat is geuen not with goud wylle.'
(1498-1500)

The cortaysye which Gawain represents, the courtesy practiced by Arthurian chivalry, reflects a deeper and nobler ideal, one which transcends-- without denying--hierarchical categories in its essential respect for the integrity and dignity of the human being.¹⁰⁹ This deeper mode of courtesy is reflected in Gawain's treatment of Bercilak's servants. The poet takes some care to show us the knight's ceremonious relations with the men of Hautdesert:¹¹⁰

Syƿen fro ƿe meyny he menskly departes;
Vche men ƿat he mette, he made hem a ƿonke
For his seruyse and his solace and his sere pyne,
ƿat ƿay wyth busynes had ben aboute hym to serue;
And vche segge as sore to seuer with hym ƿere
As ƿay hade wonde worƿyly with ƿat wlonk euer.
(1983-1988)

And again, when he dons his armor:

Fyrst he clad hym in his cloƿez ƿe colde for to were,
And syƿen his oƿer harnays, ƿat holdely watz kepted,
Boƿe his paunce and his platez, piked ful clene,
ƿe rynges rokked of ƿe roust of his riche bruny;
And al watz fresch vpon fyrst, and he watz fayn ƿenne
to ƿonk.
(2015-2020)

And again, as he mounts:

Thenne watz Gryngolet grayƿe, ƿat gret watz and huge,
And hade ben soiourned sauerly and in a siker wyse,
Hym lyst prik for poynt, ƿat proude hors ƿenne.
ƿe wyge wynnez hym to and wytez on his lyre,
And sayde soberly hymself and by his soth swerez:
'Here is a meyny in ƿis mote on menske ƿenkkez.'
(2047-2052)

And once more, as he crosses the drawbridge and takes his leave of Hautdesert:

þe burne blessed hym bilyue, and þe bredez passed--
 Prayses þe porter lifore þe prynce kneled,
 Gef hym God and goud day, þat Gawayne he saue--
 And went on his way with his wy3e one,
 þat schulde teche hym to tourne to þat tene place
 þer þe rufal race he schulde resayue.

(2071-2076)

Finally, when this very guide wounds Gawain's pride by counseling ignominious secret flight, Gawain--with some difficulty--reacts with elaborate civility:

'Grant merci,' quof Gawayn, and gruchyng he sayde:
 'Wel worth þe, wy3e, þay woldez my gode,
 And þat lelly me layne I leue wek þou woldez.'

(2126-2128)

We feel from his gruchyng reply the effort it costs Gawain to restrain his outrage and respond graciously.¹¹¹ To a certain degree, this is a matter of preserving his own dignity. But Gawain's self-control also indicates his reluctance to violate a code of conduct that guarantees reciprocal honor among men.

There is, finally, in the cortaysye of Camelot and Hautdesert a tacit acknowledgment that men share a common condition and a common need.¹¹² Only through reciprocal respect and support does a noble society flourish, a society such as the idealized aristocratic society in Gawain and the Green Knight, where pentagonal courtesy serves as an affirmation of civilized human community in the face of man's original isolation and privation--¹¹³ that natural state of alienation and exile which, unless mediated by the noble passion for civilization, is (as the winter journeys demonstrate) the given condition of human existence.

Gawain's most heroic quality, his quintessential virtue and the

cornerstone of the chivalric system he represents is trawþe.¹¹⁴ Although not included among the five fives, it is the overall virtue betokened by the pentangle itself:

Hit is a synge þat Salamon set sumquyle
In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat it habbez.
(625-626)

Just as Gawain's heraldic device contains five sides of which it is composed, so trawþe--ultimately a symbol of integrity--¹¹⁵ may be said to incorporate and exemplify the complex value cluster upon which the pentagonal ideal rests:

For hit is a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez,
And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oþer,
And atquere hit is endelez; and Englych his callen
Oueral, as I here, þe endeles knot.

.
Now alle þese fyue syþes, for soþe, were fetled on þis knyzt
And vchone halched in oþer, þat non ende hade,
And fyched vpon fyue poyntez, þat fayled neuer,
Ne samned neuer in no syde, ne sundred nouþer,
Withouten ende at any noke, I oquere fynde,
Whereuer þe gomen bygan, or glode to an ende.
(627-661)

In its more narrow and specialized sense, trawþe betokens a form of heroic fidelity, either to a person or to one's own pledged word. In one or another of these forms, virtually all the tests to which Gawain is subjected are tests of trawþe, and it is ultimately upon his ability to uphold his personal commitments that his heroic character depends. In the so-called "beheading-game," what is being tested is Gawain's resolve to honor his pledge to seek out the Green Knight and suffer at his hands the agreed upon return blow. The terms of the test are carefully spelled out before Gawain strikes the initial blow:

'Refourme we oure forwardes, er we fyrre passe.
Fyrst I eþe þe, haþel, how þat þou hattes
þat þou me telle truly, as I tryst may.'

'In god fayth,' quof þe goode knyzt, 'Gawan I hatte,
 þat bede þe þis buffet, quat-so bifallez after,
 And at þis tyme twelmonyth take at þe an ofer
 Wyth what weppen so þou wylt, and wyth no wy3 ellez
 on lyue.'

(377-385)¹¹⁶

The beheading contract is clear--a dramatization of the conventional heroic scenario par excellence:¹¹⁷ Gawain can save his life only at the cost of his honor, and preserve his honor only at the cost of his life:

'þerfore com, ofer recreaunt be calde þe behoues.'
 (456)

In this part of the test, Gawain's success is unqualified; when he arrives at the Green Chapel, the Green Knight praises him for his fidelity:

þat ofer sayde, 'Now sir swete,
 Of steuen mon may þe trowe.

And þou hatz tyled þi trauyl as truee mon schulde.'
 (2237-2241)

Like the beheading contest, the exchange agreement also operates as a test of trawþe. The seriousness of the game in which Gawain and Bercilak agree to exchange their "winnings" on three successive nights rests both upon the contractual nature of the contest and upon the formal pledge of fealty by which Gawain repeatedly binds himself to his host.¹¹⁸ Thus, when he withholds the Lady's drurye on the third night, Gawain violates not only the stated terms of the exchange agreement but, somewhere twixt jest and earnest, his sworn oath of allegiance. If there were any doubt as to the nature of the exchange test, it is dispelled when the Green Knight specifically identifies Gawain's failing as a lack of lewte, that is to say, a failure of trawþe:

'Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wonted.'
 (2367)

Even the temptation scenes turn upon a test of Gawain's trawþe.

On the face of it, the Lady's temptation of Gawain is a test of his chastity, or, more broadly defined, his clannes.¹¹⁹ Gawain's clannes is doubtless at stake in the temptation scenes. So for that matter is his courtesy. But as high as chastity and courtesy rank in the panoply of chivalric values, fealty ranks even higher. Were Gawain to assent to the Lady's proposals, he would make synne, both as a fornicator and an adulterer. But this would be only the beginning; for the would-be seductress is not only a "woman of the flesh" and married as well, she is the wife of Gawain's host to whom he is bound both by feudal custom and by formal oaths of allegiance. While Gawain might conceivably be forgiven for mistaking the exchange game for a jeu d'esprit,¹²⁰ to succumb to the temptation test would entail an infraction of the gravest magnitude against the most basic tenets of the feudal code.¹²¹

In addition to the loyalty which obligates Gawain to Bercilak as guest to host, there are the ties of the Arthurian fellowship which are implicitly expressed by Gawain when he offers to take up the Green Knight's challenge in Arthur's stead:

For me þink hit not semly, as hit is soþ knawen,
 þer such an askyng is heuened so hyge in your sale,
 þa3 3e 3ourself be talenttyf, to take hit to yourseluen,
 Whil mony so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten.

(348-351)

When Gawain lays claim to the adventure, he invokes not only the bonds of the Round Table, but his personal allegiance to Arthur who is both his kinsman and his king:

Bot for as much as 3e ar myn em I am only to prayse,
 No bounte bot your blod I in my bode knowe;
 And syþen þis note is so nys þat no3t hit yow falles,
 And I haue frayned hit at yow fyrst, foldez hit to me.'

(356-359)

At the end of the poem, the integral solidarity of the Arthurian fellow-

ship is exuberantly reaffirmed as members of the Round Table gayly adopt Gawain's green baldric as a token of their corporate renown:

þe kyng confortez þe knyzt, and all þe court als
 Lazen loude þerat, and lufly acorden
 þat lordes and ladis þat longed to þe Table,
 Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
 A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryzt grene,
 And þat, for þe sake of þat segge, in swete to were.
 For þat watz acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table.
 (2513-2519)

Despite occasional imperfections and rifts,¹²² the unity of the Round Table remains essentially intact, and Gawain's achievement ultimately reflects back upon this body of which he is a member and which he never ceases to represent.¹²³

Gawain's personal loyalty to both Arthur and Bercilak is of considerable importance. But of the two forms of trawþe with which the Gawain poet is concerned, fealty--which looms so large in Beowulf, Maldon, and Morte Arthure--plays a relatively minor role in Gawain and the Green Knight, where it is subordinated to Gawain's fidelity to his pledged word, a motif which is heavily stressed throughout the poem, especially with respect to the critical agreements entered into by the knight and his adversary.¹²⁴ Virtually all of Gawain's crucial transactions with the Green Knight take the shape of formal contracts, sealed with sworn oaths. As we have just seen, the beheading contest rests upon just such a contract:

'Refourme we oure forwardes, er we fyrre passe.'
 (378)

The terms of the contract are not simply stated and agreed to; they are repeated and amplified:

'Sir Gawan me lykes,
 And þou hatz redily rehersed, bi resoun ful trwe,
 Clanly al þe couenaunt þat I þe kyngge asked,
 Saf þat þou schal siker me segge, bi þi trawþe,

þat þou schal seche me þiself, where-so þou hopes
I may be funde vpon folde, and foch þe such wages
As þou deles me to-day bifore þis douþe ryche.'

(390-397)

Again, as Gawain reiterates his pledge:

'Bot teche me truly þerte, and telle me how þou hattes,
And I schal ware alle my wyt to wynne me þeder,
And þat I swere þe for soþe, and by my seker traweþ.'

(401-403)

After the Green Knight recovers his severed head, he once more restates
the terms of the contest:

'Loke, Gawan, þou be grayþe to go as þou hettez,
And layte as lelly til þou me, like, fynde,
As þou hatz hette in þis halle, herande þise kny3tes;
To þe grene chapel þou chose, I charge þe to fette
Such a dunt as þou hatz dalt--disserued þou habbez
To be 3ederly 3olden on Nw 3eres morn.
þe kny3t of þe grene chapel men knowen me mony;
Forþi me for to fynde if þou fraystez, faylez þou never.'

(448-455)

The same motif recurs throughout the three days and nights of the
exchange game. On the first night, the agreements proposed by Gawain's
host are repeatedly sealed with oaths and toasts:

'3e han demed to do þe dede þat I bidde;
Wyl 3e halde þis hes here at þys onez?'
'3e, sir, for soþe,' sayd þe segge trwe,
'Whyl I byde in yowre ber3e, he bayn to 3owre hest.'

.
'3et firre,' quof þe freke, 'a forwarde we make:
Quat-so-euer I wynne in þe wod hit worþez to yourez,
And quat chek so 3e acheue chaunge me þerforne,
Swete, swap we so, sware with trawþe,
Queþer, leude, so lymp, lere oþer better.'
'Bi God,' quof Gawayn, þe gode, 'I grant þertylle.'

.
To bed 3et er þay 3ede,
Recorded couenauntez ofte.

(1089-1123)

On the second night, Gawain and Bercilak renew their covenants:

And efte in her bourdyng þay bayþen in þe morn
To fyller þe same forwardez þat þay byfore maden:
Wat chaunce so bytydez hor cheuysaunce to chaunge,

What nwez so þay nome, at naȝt quen þay metten.
 þay acorded of þe couenauntez byfore þe court alle.
 (1404-1408)

And on the thirð night, although Gawain is anxious to resume his quest,
 he resumes his agreements with his host:

'For I haf fraysted þe twys, and faythful I fynde þe.
 Now "þrid tyme þrowe best" þenk on þe morne,
 Make we mery quyl we may and mynne vpon joye,
 For þe lur may mon lach when-so mon lykez.'
 þis watz grayþely graunted, and Gawayn is lenged.
 (1679-1683)

At first glance, the emphasis on contractual agreements might appear to be excessive or repetitious. But the fulfillment of sworn commitments is a matter of no small concern to the Gawain poet. In Gawain and the Green Knight, as in the volatile feudal society from which it springs,¹²⁵ the pledged word of honorable men serves as a unique guarantee of social stability.¹²⁶ Gawain and the Green Knight is a poem where the combined forces of time, change, nature, and history threaten to overturn each and every form of human security. Gawain's trawþe, the degree to which he keeps his word, exemplifies man's struggle for continuity and order in a world deeply and irremediably shadowed by violence and uncertainty.¹²⁷

Within a more traditional context, we are already familiar with the heroic significance of the pledged word. In Maldon and Morte Arthure, beot and vow served as the means by which the protagonists proclaimed their heroic natures, staking their honor, reputations, and their very lives on the fulfillment of their oaths. In Gawain and the Green Knight also, the oath serves as a vehicle for heroic self-realization, trawþe representing not only the hero's commitment to his own word, but what is more important, his commitment to his own worth--his fidelity to what is highest and most noble in his own character. Basically, the Green Knight

challenges the knights of the Round Table to live up to the ideals for which they are renowned:¹²⁸

'What, is þis Arþures hous,' quof þe haþel þenne,
 'þat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?
 Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
 Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?'
 (309-314)

When Gawain accepts the challenge in behalf of the court, he vows to uphold the chivalric ideal, placing honor and reputation above life itself--pledging, in other words, to be heroic in the manner of Maldon and Morte Arthure.

'Bot teche me truly þerto, and telle me how þou hattes,
 And I scal ware alle my wyt to wynne me þedere,
 And þat I swere þe for soþe, and by my seker trawþe.'
 (401-403)

Gawain's trawþe is trawþe militant, a martial value exercised in mortal peril. The terms of the beheading agreement--Gawain's major test--require that he not only passively suffer, but actively pursue his own doom, making of his trawþe, like his felazschyp, an act of will exerted in the shadow of certain and violent death. Gawain's conduct in this part of his test is irreproachable. Fully cognizant of what he believes to be the consequences, he steadfastly fulfills his commitment. Gawain would rather keep his fatal appointment than own all the land in Logres or any of the world's wealth, sentiments which are reminiscent--albeit in a minor key--of Arthur's heroic renunciations at the end of Morte Arthure:

'For I am sumned myselfe to sech to a place,
 I ne wot in worlde whederwarde to wende hit to fynde.
 I nolde bot if I hit negh myȝt on Nw ȝeres morne
 For alle þe londe inwyth Logres, so me oure lorde help!
 Forþy, sir, þis enquest I require yow here,
 þat ȝe me telle with trawþe if euer ȝe tale herde
 Of þe grene chapel, quere hit on grounde stondez,
 And of þe knyȝt þat it kepes, of colour of grene.

þer watz stabled bi statut a steuen vus bytwene
 To mete þat mon at þat mere, 3if I my3t last;
 And of þat ilk Nw 3ere bot naked now wontez,
 And I wolde loke on þat lede, if God me let wolde,
 Gladloker, bi Goddez sun, þen any god welde!
 (1052-1064)

Gawain's espousal of "death before dishonor" is in the mainstream of the heroic tradition:

'Naf I now to busy but bare þre dayez,
 And me als fayn to falle feye as fayly of myyn ernde.'
 (1066-1067)

Moments later, when Bercilak informs him that his goal is directly at hand--not two myle henne (1078)--Gawain is overjoyed, although his quest can (he believes) only terminate in his death:

þenne watz Gawan ful glad, and gomenly he la3ed:
 'Now I þonk yow þryuandely þurz alle oþer þynge,
 Now acheued is my chaunce.'
 (1079-1081)

Later yet, on the very eve of his fateful appointment, Gawain once more exhibits his heroic determination to honor his pledge, whatever the cost:

'For I mot nedes, as 3e wot, meue to-morne,
 And 3e me take sum tolke to teche, as 3e hy3t,
 þe gate to þe grene chapel, as God wyl me suffer
 To dele on Nw 3erez day þe dome of my wyrdes.'
 (1965-1968)

Finally, on the way to the Green Chapel itself, rejecting the guides ignominious offer of secret flight, Gawain again places honor above all:

'But helde þou hit neuer so holde, and I here passed,
 Founded for ferde for to fle, in fourme þat þou tellez,
 I were a kny3t kowards, I my3t not be excused.
 Bot I wyl to þe chapel, for chaunce þat may falle,
 And talk wyth þat ilk tulk þe tale þat me lyste,
 Worþe hit wele oþer wo, as þe wyrde lykez
 hit hafe.'
 (2129-2135)

Ironically, the nature of Gawain's failure as well as the extent of of his success reflects the heroic bias of a poem wherein deeds are largely judged according to heroic assumptions. When Gawain withholds

the luf-lace from Bercilak, technically he commits a two-fold violation of trawþe: first, he breaks his word by failing to fulfill the terms of his exchange agreement; second, this very infraction signals a breach of his fealty oath to his host and is duly noted as disloyalty when Gawain's fault is revealed to him at the Green Chapel:

'Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wonted.'
(2366)

While Gawain is specifically guilty of breaking trawþe, his vntrawþe is in fact the outcome of a complex series of infractions against the chivalric code. As he himself explains in a passionate outburst at the chapel:¹²⁹

'For care of þy knobbe cowardyse me ta3t
To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake,
þat is larges and lewte þat longez to kny3tez.
Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer
Of trecherye and vntrawþe: boþe bityde sor3e
and care!'

(2379-2384)

The Green Knight concurs in Gawain's designation of the source of his flaw, if not on Gawain's view of its extent and ramifications:

'Bot þat watz for no wylde werke, ne wowyng nauþer,
But for 3e lufed your lyf; þe lasse I you blame.'
(2367-2368)

Gawain's instinct for self-preservation, what the Green Knight calls his love of life and Gawain himself his fear of death, leads the pentagonal knight from cowardice to covetousness, disloyalty, falsehood, treachery, and vntrawþe. Obviously the progression is intended to demonstrate the interdependence of chivalric values as described in the pentangle passage: To break the perfect integrity of the pentagonal ideal at any one point is to violate the ideal in toto. Beyond this, the chain of causality which leads Gawain from preserving his life to forsaking his knightly nature establishes the moral context in which

Gawain's imperfection is to be understood. Gawain succeeds in his primary trawþe test, the beheading test, because he places his honor--his trawþe--above life itself. To the extent that Gawain fails the lesser test, he does so because he reverses these priorities. In other words, when Gawain unlawfully withholds the lace from Bercilak, he compromises his honor--unwittingly or no--in order to save his life:

þen kest þe kny3t, and hit come to his hert
 Hit were a juel for þe joparde þat hym jugged were:
 When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,
 My3t he haf slypped to he vnslayn, þe sle3t were noble.
 (1855-1858)

While the whole pentangle is ultimately at stake in both the beheading and the exchange test, in each the outcome essentially depends upon Gawain's courage in the face of death, that is to say upon his heroism.¹³⁰ In a way, this was to be expected. The challenge which Gawain initially accepts on behalf of the court is fundamentally heroic in nature.¹³¹ Despite the Green Knight's protestations of pacific intent, and despite his holly branch and lack of conventional arms, he explicitly makes trial of the Arthurian chivalry, questioning the court's courage, prowess, and heroic reputation:

'To wone any quyle in þis won, his watz not my ernde;
 But for þe los of þe, lede, is lyft vp so hy3e,
 And þy bur3 and by burnes best ar holden,
 Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde,
 þe wy3test and þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde.
 Preue for to play with in oþer pure laykez,
 And here is kydde cortaysye, as I haf herd carp,
 And þat hatz wayned me hider, iwyis, at þis tyme.'
 (257-265)

And again, when it appears that none will take up his challenge:

'What, is þis Arþures hous,' quof þe hafel þenne,
 'þat al þe rous rennes og þur3 ryalmes so mony?
 Where is now your sourquidrye and your conquestes,
 Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?
 Now is the reuel and þe renoun of þe Rounde Table

Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wy3es speche,
 For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!
 (309-315)

When he does take up the challenge, Gawain offers an oblique rejoinder to the Green Knight's taunts, reaffirming the martial prowess of the Round Table:

'For me þink it not semly, as it is soþ knawen,
 þer such an askyng is heuened so hy3e in your sale,
 þa3 ge 3ourselþ be talenttyf, to take it to yourseuen,
 Whil mony so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten,
 þat vnder heuen I hope non hazerer of wylle,
 No better bodyes on bent þer baret is rered.'
 (348-353)¹³²

Finally, at the conclusion of the poem, the Green Knight confirms the heroic nature of his challenge when he explains how Morgan le Fay wished to assay the renown of the Round Table, which Gawain, as its designated champion, is called upon to represent, and which, by and large, he upholds.

'Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wyne halle
 For to assay þe surquidre, 3if it soþ were
 þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table.'
 (2456-2458)

Ultimately, what makes of Gawain's trawþe a heroic value is that it is exercised in the face of necessity. Indeed, there are a number of chivalric romances which, although considerably less heroic than Gawain and the Green Knight, boast a higher incidence of martial encounters and a more overtly martial protagonist.¹³³ The essential difference between such poems and Gawain and the Green Knight is that in Gawain and the Green Knight chivalric values like trawþe, cortaysye, fela3schyp, and fraunchyse are set in opposition to the tragic forces of existence so that rather than merely ornamenting or elevating the narrative, they serve as heroic assertions of human worth. What is more, the heroic diction and rhetoric of the poem operates in much the same way as does

its pentagonal value system. Much of the language in Gawain and the Green Knight, and particularly its specialized "poetic" vocabulary, is derived from the Old English alliterative tradition and inherits the heroic overtones and echoes long associated with that poetry.¹³⁴ That the traditional connotations of the Old English word stock are not altogether absorbed into the harmonies of chivalric romance but, instead, lend to it something of the old heroic style and feeling, is ultimately a function of the role which necessity plays in the poem. In this respect, it can be said that the traditional diction of Gawain and the Green Knight is, in itself, only potentially heroic. The conventional vocabulary of the poem might well remain merely ornamental, perhaps even archaic, were it not operating within an extensive framework of mutability and mortality. It is the interaction with human limitation that proves decisive, that activates and mobilizes the latent powers of heroic affirmation which inhere in the old alliterative vocabulary. In this, rhetoric and diction are one with Gawain's chivalric virtues, which, because they are ranged against the forces of time, change, and death, assume truly heroic proportions that they do not always--or often--possess elsewhere in romance.

Thus far we have concentrated on Gawain's successes, making but brief mention of his flaw, and then only to observe that even his failure illustrates the heroic bias of the poem. Yet it is Gawain's flaw which, perhaps even more than the comic temper of the poem, has placed his heroism in question.¹³⁵ In the heroic poems studied earlier, the question of the hero's "imperfection" was in each case raised a propos of some hypothetical excess of heroism: in Beowulf, Beowulf's "over-confidence"; in Maldon, Byrthnoth's "over-weening pride"; in Morte

Arthur, the "rashness" of Arthur and Gawain. But in Gawain and the Green Knight we are faced with a protagonist who exhibits not too much heroism, but too little--a hero not altogether adequate to his task. The reason that Gawain's imperfection does not in fact obviate his heroism is twofold: First, Gawain's fault is extenuated by the playful, gamelike context of his exchange agreement with Bercilak; second, Gawain's imperfection is inherent in man's fallen nature, a given limitation of his post-lapsarian human estate.

Games play an important role in Gawain and the Green Knight. The poem itself has been viewed as an elaborate game, a sort of mystery or puzzle in which the reader is led from clue to clue until the final revelations of the denouement at the Green chapel.¹³⁶ Then too, there is the generally festive tone of the work--the laughter, the feasts, and especially the New Year's games played at both Camelot and Haut-desert.¹³⁷ On a more abstract level, the conventions of both chivalry and romance are in Gawain and the Green Knight so crystallized, so precipitated out, that they often seem to fluctuate between game and earnest.¹³⁸ All of Gawain's tests are, in a very real sense, games or contests.¹³⁹ When the Green Knight challenges the Round Table at Camelot, he twice describes the beheading contest as a game, carefully distinguishing it from a military encounter:

'Bot if þou be so bold as alle burnez tellen,
þou wyl grant me godly þe gomen þat I ask
bi ryȝt.'

(272-275)

And again:

'Forþy I craue in þis court a Crystemas gomen,
For is is ȝole and Nwe ȝer, and here are ȝep mony.'

(283-284)

The court, relieving Arthur of the adventure and awarding it to Gawain, also term it a game:

Ryche togeder con roun,
 And syþen þay redder alle same
 To ryd þe kyng wyth croun,
 And gif Gawan þe game.

(362-365)

As Gawain sets out in search of the Green Chapel, these same courtiers again refer to the beheading contest as a game, although this time in an apparent attempt to avoid taking responsibility for the consequences of their own original decision:

Al þat seþ þat semly syked in hert,
 And sayde soþly al same segges til oþer,

 'Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take
 As knyȝtez in cauelaciounz on Crystmasse gomez!'
 (672-683) 140

The narrator himself twice compares Gawain's adventure to a game, each time as an ironic means of underscoring the serious nature of the undertaking:

Gawan watz glad to begynne þose gomez in halle,
 Bot þaþ þe ende ne heuy haf 3e no wonder.
 (495-496)

And:

Now ridez þis renk þurþ þe ryalme of Logres,
 Sir Gauan, on Godez halue, þaþ hym no gomen þoȝt.
 (691-692)

The exchange agreement is, to an even greater extent than the beheading contest, a game--a diversion with which to celebrate the holiday season and lighten the time until Gawain rides forth to meet his fate at the Green Chapel. On each occasion that the exchange agreement is proposed, it manifestly offered and accepted as a game, as pure layk, and in all likelihood, the audience--like the hero--is not meant to grasp

the full seriousness of the game until the denouement at the Green Chapel.

On the first night, Bercilak proposes a forwarde:

'3et firre,' quof þe freke, 'a forwarde we make:
 Quat-so-euer I wyne in þe wod hit worþez to yourez,
 And quat chek so 3e acheue chaunge me þerforne.
 Swete, swap we so, sware with trawþe,
 Queþer, leude, so lymþ, lere ober better,'
 'Bi God,' quof Gawayn þe gode, 'I grant þertylle,
 And þat yow list for to layke, lef me þynkes.'
 'Who bryngez vus þis beuerage, þis bargayn is maked':
 So sayde þe lorde of þat lede; þay lazed vchone,
 þay dronken and daylyeden and dalten vnty3tel,
 þise lordes and ladyez, quyle þat hem lyked.

(1105-1115)

As the evening ends, the poet confirms the playful nature of their pact:

To bed 3et er þay 3ede,
 Recorded couenauntez ofte;
 þe olde lorde of þat leude
 cowþe wel halde layk alofte.

(1122-1125)

On the second night, Gawain and Bercilak again rehearse their accords

in terms which underscore the game-like nature of the exchange pact:

And syþen by þe chymne in chamber þay seten,
 Wy3ez þe walle wyn we3ed to hem oft,
 And eft in her bourdyng þay bayþen in þe morn
 To fylle þe same forwardez þat þay byfore maden:
 Wat chaunce so bytydez hor cheuysaunce to chaunge,
 What nwez so þay nome, at na3t quen þay metten.
 þay acorded of þe couenauntez byfore þe court alle;
 þe beuerage watz bro3t forth in bourde at þat tyme.

(1402-1409)

Finally, on the eve of Gawain's tryst at the Green Chapel, they re-enact

their forwardes, this time in language which ironically juxtaposes the

merriment of the exchange game with the lur of the beheading test:

'Make we mery quyl we may and mynne vpon joye,
 For þe lur may mon lach when-so mon lykez.'
 þis watz grayþely graunted, and Gawayn is lenged,
 Bliþe bro3t watz hym drynk, and þay to bedde 3eden
 with ly3t.

(1681-1685)141

The temptation test is also quite gamelike, replete with laughter,

badinage, and playful mockery. Above all, like the beheading and exchange tests, it is a contest--an elaborate tournament of words and wits, the seriousness of which lies just beneath the surface:

þus hym frayned þat fre, and fondet hym ofte,
 For to haf wonnen hym to wo3e, what-so scho þo3t ellez;
 Bot he defended hym so fayr þat no faut semed,
 Ne non euel on nawþer halue, nawþer þay wisten
 bot blysse.

(1549-1553)

Or:

And ay þe lady let lyk as hym loued mych;
 þe freke ferde with defence, and feted ful fayre--
 'þa3 I were burde bry3test,' þe burde in mynde hade,
 þe lasse luf in his lode for lur þat he so3t
 boute hone,
 þe dunte þat schulde hym deue,
 And nede3 hit most be done.

(1281-1287)

It is a measure of Gawain's character that he never doubts or questions the underlying seriousness of the games which constitute his two major trawþe tests. Throughout, he remains quite clear as to the stakes of the beheading game, as is demonstrated by his rejection of the guide's suggestion of flight:

'Bot helde þou hit neuer so holde, and I here passed,
 Founded for ferde for to fle, in fourme þat þou tellez,
 I were a kny3t kowarde, I my3t not be excused.'

(2129-2131)

Never once does he waver in his resolve to fulfill the terms of his contract with the Green Knight:

'And me als fayn to falle feye as fayly of myyn ernde.'

(1067)

The stakes are equally clear in the temptation test, and, accordingly, Gawain's resolve is equally firm:

He cared for his cortaysye, lest craþayn he were,
 And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne,
 And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t.
 'God schylde,' quoþe þe schalk, 'þat schal not befaller!'

(1773-1776)

In the exchange of winnings game, however, the seriousness of Gawain's trial is less obvious,¹⁴² and the knight who would rather die than incur the dishonor of shirking his obligations misconstrues the nature of the test, accepting the lace to "preserve his life" and thereby breaking his exchange pledge to Bercilak:

þen kest þe knyȝt, and hit com to his hert
 Hit were a juel for þe joparde þat hym iugged were:
 When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,
 Myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe sleȝt were noble.
 þenne he þulged with hir þrepe and þoled hir to speke,
 And ho bere on hym þe belt and bede hit hym swyþe--
 And he granted and hym gafe with a goud wylle--
 And bisoȝt hym, for his sake, disceuer hit neuer,
 Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde; þe leude hym acordez
 þat neuer wyȝe schulde his wyt, iwysse, bot þay twayne
 for noȝte.

(1855-1865)

Indeed, it is not until he is confronted by the Green Knight that Gawain recognizes the gravity of his fault:

þat oþer stif mon in study stod a gret whyle,
 So agreued for greme he gryed withinne;
 Alle þe blode of his brest blende in his face,
 þat al he schrank for schome þat þe schalk talked.
 þe forme worde vpon folde þat þe freke meled:
 'Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetyse boþe!
 In yow is vylany and vyse þat vertue disstryez.'
 þenne he kaȝt to þe knot, and þe kest lawsez,
 Brayde broþely þe belt to þe burne seluen:
 'Lo! þer þe falssyng, foule mot his falle!'

(2369-2378)

It is to Gawain's credit that, unlike the carping courtiers of Camelot, he does not invoke the game-like nature of his pact with Bercilak to ameliorate his violation of trawþe,¹⁴³ but regards his flaw as real and irreversible:

'For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit,
 For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer.'

(2511-2512)

That Gawain's pentagonal integrity fails to altogether withstand the test of world and time proves not that Gawain himself is inferior,

but that man and his ideals---however admirable--are fallible. We do not conclude from Gawain's failure that another knight might have succeeded where he faltered. On the contrary, the Green Knight's magnanimous estimation of Gawain stands unchallenged:

'On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede;
As perle bi þe quite pese of of prys more,
So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝtez.'
(2363-2365)

Despite his self-condemnation, Gawain's flaw is less an indication of his personal inadequacy than it is an expression of his humanity, a manifestation of the fallen nature of mankind.¹⁴⁴

Gawain's lapse from pentagonal perfection is, in this sense, a realization of the implicit dynamic of the winter journeys; it constitutes his final initiation into the mortal contradictions of the human condition, where, given the post-lapsarian state of man's nature, necessity operates "internally" as imperfection as well as "externally" as mutability or death. While it is true that the internalization of necessity tends to blur the opposition between the hero and his fate, it is also true that it mitigates his guilt without diminishing his heroic achievement.

Gawain, like the heroes of old, falls in the end because he is better, not worse than other men; it is, oddly enough, his very superiority which accounts for his failure as well as his success.¹⁴⁵ In other words, it is only because Gawain has prevailed so well in the beheading and temptation tests that he progresses to the relatively minor exchange test where he eventually loses his footing; and even here, when the Lady offers the gambit of the "magic" lace, she does so as a last attempt to salvage what she can in a game where the major victories have already been conceded to her noble adversary.¹⁴⁶

Just as Gawain's imperfection is inextricably bound up with his

near-perfection, his pride--which has been viewed as a manifestation of the surquidre that Morgan sets out to assay (line 2457)¹⁴⁷--proves to be at least as much a virtue as a vice. Gawain himself confesses to this fault when he accepts the luf-lace from the Green Knight:

'And þus, quen pryde schal me pryk for prowes of armes,
þe loke to þis luf-lace schal leþe my hert.'
(2437-2438)

But it is not at all clear to what degree Gawain is in fact guilty of pride. From the beginning, the poet is at pains to invest him with a considerable degree of humility. I refer not only to the formal and largely rhetorical modesty with which the knight requests the beheading adventure or fends off the seductive compliments of the Lady,¹⁴⁸ but of the authentic humility with which he undertakes his quest:

þe kny3t mad ay god chere,
And sayde, 'Quat schuld I wonde?
Of destines derf and dere
What may mon do bot fonde?'
(562-565)

Later, as Gawain makes his way towards the Green Chapel itself, there is no evidence of bravado, no surquidre, only a knight whose conduct exemplifies pious resignation:

'Bot I wyl to þe chapel, for chaunce þat may falle,
And talk wyth þat ilk tulk þe tale þat me lyste,
Worþe hit wele oþer wo, as þe wyrde lykez
his hafe.
þa3e he be a sturn knape
To stigel, and stad withe staue,
Ful wel con Dry3ten schape
His seruauntes for to saue.'
(2132-2139)

Again, when his guide rides off:

'Bi Goddez self,' quoþ Gawayn,
'I wyl nauþer grete ne grone;
To Goddez wylle I am ful bayn,
And to hym I haf me tone.'
(2156-2159)

And yet again, when he hears the Green Knight whetting his ax on the grindstone:

'Let God worche! "We loo"--
Hit helppez me not a mote.
My lif þa3 I forgoo,
Drede dotz me no lote.'

This is a strange kind of pride! If in fact Gawain is guilty of pride, his pride--like his imperfection--does not emanate from an individual character flaw; it is the result of that universal condition that makes it an act of pride for a man to aspire to a noble ideal in a post-lapsarian world. More to the point, Gawain's pride ensues not from weakness on his part, but from his strength, from what is highest in his nature--his advocacy of the chivalric ideal. Gawain may learn in the end that perfection is beyond human capacity,¹⁴⁹ but that hard-earned knowledge does not render his ideal vainglorious or his aspiration futile: What may mon do bot fonde?

To sum up then: once imperfection is understood to be inherent in human nature, it becomes clear that Gawain's failure in no way nullifies his heroism. In fact, there is a clear analogy to be drawn between Gawain's fall from perfection and the catastrophes which befall the protagonists of Beowulf, Maldon, and Morte Arthure; just as it is the heroic integrity of Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and Arthur which precipitates their downfall, Gawain proves imperfect precisely because he is the best of Arthur's knights, because he alone is "perfect" enough to undertake and persevere in the quest. Indeed, the denouement of Gawain and the Green Knight is a variation of the central irony of the heroic poem, where, because he is superior to ordinary mankind, in his aspirations as well as his attributes, the hero strains human possibility to the breaking

point, revealing the limits of human capacity, and, in the post-lapsarian world of this poem, the imperfection of human nature.¹⁵⁰

How then in the end are we to judge Gawain's adventure? What is the final balance between his success and his failure? his heroism and his imperfection? Gawain views his performance as a failure, accepting the lace from the Green Knight as a tangible acknowledgment of his weakness and sin:

'Bot your gordel,' quoth Gawayn, 'God yow forȝelde!
 þat wyl I welde wyth goud wylle, not for þe wyne golde,
 Ne þe saynt, ne þe sylk, ne þe syde pendautes,
 For wele ne for worchyp, ne for þe wlonk werkkez,
 Bot in synne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte,
 When I ride in renoun, remorde to myseluen
 þe faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed,
 How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylþe.'
 (2429-2435)

But the Green Knight, while not unmindful of Gawain's fault, stresses his achievement, lauding Gawain's success with encomiastic enthusiasm:

'Now know I wel þy cosses, and þy costes als,
 And þe wowing of my wyf: I wroȝt hit myseluen.
 I sende hir to assey þe, and soþly me þynkkez
 On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede;
 As perle bi þe quite pese is of pryse more,
 So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝtez.
 Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wanted;
 Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowyng nauþer,
 Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame.'
 (2360-2368)

Gawain's last spoken words are a rueful admission of his imperfection:

'For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit,
 For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer.'
 (2511-2512)

But when the Green Knight speaks last, he praises Gawain for his great trawþe:

'And I wold þe as wel, wyȝe, bi my faythe,
 As any gome vnder God for þy grete trauþe.'
 (2469-2470)

There is no question of choosing between these two viewpoints. As

Burrow argues:

As far as the facts of the case are concerned there is no real contradiction between Gawain's confession and Bercilak's judgment. Both their accounts are incomplete; but each is perfectly valid as far as it goes . . . For Bercilak the adventure demonstrates man's possibilities for good; for Gawain it demonstrates his possibilities for evil. Where one sees 'grete traufē' . . . the other sees 'þe faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed.'¹⁵¹

Gawain's encounter with the court generates a similar duality.

Upon his return to Camelot, he hastily displays the lace as an emblem of his shame:

'Lo! lorde,' quof þe leude, and þe lace hondeled,
'þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek,
þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laȝt haue
Of couardyse and couetyse þat I haf caȝt þare;
þis is þe token of vntraufē þat I am tan inne,
And I mot nedeȝ hit were wyle I may last.'

(2505-2510)

But his comrades, laughing off his confession, adopt the baldric as a token of Round Table brotherhood and renown:

þe kyng comfortez þe knyȝt, and alle þe court als
Laȝen loude þerat, and luflyly acorden
þat lordes and ladis þat longed to þe Table,
Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryȝt grene,
And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were.
For þat watz acorded þe renown of þe Rounde Table,
And he honoured þat hit hade euermore after.

(2513-2520)

Again, it is not a matter of choosing one or another of these conflicting judgments. In the end, as Burrow justly observes, "the knights and ladies share the baldric with Gawain as a sign both of their corporate renown and of their common humanity."¹⁵²

At the conclusion of the narrative, as the poem circles back to its Brutus Bokez frame, this tension between opposing views of Gawain's

adventure is fixed in its final form when the poet, reincorporating Gawain's tale into the stream of heroic events which encloses the action, commemorates it as an outstanding example of human prowess--an aunter--and, at the same time, places it in a historical tradition where blysse ambiguously alternates with blunder, while selly, wonder, and ferly mix and mingle with werre, wrake, and tene:

þus in Arthurus day þis aunter bitidde,
 þe Brutus bokez þerof beres wyttensse;
 Syþen Brutus, þe bolde burne, boged hider fyrst,
 After þe segge and þe asaute watz sesed at Troye,
 iwysse,
 Mony aunterez here-biforne
 Haf fallen suche er þis.

(2522-2528)

It should come as no surprise that the two contrasting views of Gawain's adventure are allowed to stand in a state of unresolved tension.¹⁵³ Like so much in the poem which remains uncertain, the final verdict on Gawain's adventure is deliberately left in doubt, a last instance of that ambivalence so characteristic of a poem which simply does not admit of any one single dominant perspective. Once again, form and meaning correspond--complexity for complexity. Gawain and the Green Knight is a multifaceted poem; like a cut jewel turned before one of its own blazing fires, it reflects a wide range of modes and meanings--some complementary, others contradictory, none mutually exclusive.¹⁵⁴ Under these conditions, almost any given episode, protagonist, or passage allows for--often demands--more than one reading;¹⁵⁵ comic, heroic, romantic, and ironic angles of vision alternate with kaleidoscopic rapidity until Gawain comes to resemble the pentangle itself, a whole not reducible to the sum of its parts, and endeles knot, where vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oþer, withouten ende at any noke, whereeuer þe gomen bygan, or glod to an ende.

Thus, in the end, there is no need to deny Gawain's imperfection in order to appreciate his heroism;¹⁵⁶ nor it is necessary to ignore the comic temper of Gawain and the Green Knight to appreciate how much the poem owes to its unique formulation of the confrontation between the hero and his fate. For all its comic rhythms and imperfect hero, the vision of man which Gawain and the Green Knight projects has as much to do with human dignity as it does with human limitation, as much to do with heroic accomplishment as it does with post-lapsarian imperfection.¹⁵⁷ Earlier, comparing Brunanburh with Maldon, we concluded that the presentation of heroic values in isolation from tragic necessity results in panegyric rather than in heroic poetry. Conversely, Gawain and the Green Knight suggests that even when heroic values are less than absolute--even when they are qualified by imperfection and modified by the courtly concerns of chivalry--once such values are placed in tension with necessity, they are capable of generating authentic heroic poetry of considerable power. What proves decisive is not the celebration of heroic values alone, but the opposition between man's heroism and his fate--that clash wherein the hero pits the glory and dignity of man against all which transcends the human will, frustrates human aspiration, and denies human worth. In this respect, Gawain, though less imposing than Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and Arthur, cannot be denied his rightful place among the ranks of medieval English heroes.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

CHAPTER IV

¹A summary of the sources and analogues of Gawain and the Green Knight can be found in George Lyman Kittredge, A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight (Cambridge, 1916); see also Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," in ALMA, pp. 530-537. For a somewhat more speculative account, see Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, 1965), pp. 3-55.

²See Benson, Art and Tradition, pp. 207-248; A. C. Spearing, The Gawain Poet: A Critical Study (London, 1970), pp. 171-236; J. A. Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London, 1965), pp. 160-186; R. H. Bowers, "Gawain and the Green Knight as Entertainment," MLQ, XXIV (1963), 333-341; reprinted in Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 72-84; Don Howard, The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World (Princeton, 1966), 241-254.

Bowers concentrates on the comic elements of delight, laughter and entertainment. But beyond the obviously comic tone and conclusion of the poem, the deepest wellspring of comedy in Gawain and the Green Knight has its source in the poet's ironic tolerance of post-lapsarian human imperfection--what Burrow, p. 156, refers to as his "prevailing comic mercy as opposed to 'tragic justice,'" and what Benson, p. 248, calls "a finely tolerant, vigorously good-natured and characteristically Gothic acceptance of life both as it is and as it should be." See also Spearing, p. 31, "Man lives in a world he did not make, and is at the mercy of non-human powers. For the Gawain-poet this view of man can be held charitably, as comic rather than tragi-comic, chiefly because he sees the power with which man is confronted as itself merciful"; and Howard, p. 254, "Hence the comic balance with which the poet treats the chivalric ideal encompasses, almost miraculously, the saddest and most tragic facts about the World: that the flesh is weak and the World imperfect, that all our best ideals are impossible of fulfillment." Burrow argues that what he terms "Ricardian" tolerance is characteristic of late 14th century English poetry in Ricardian Poetry (New Haven, 1971).

³The best discussion of Gawain and the Green Knight and the English alliterative heroic tradition is D. S. Brewer, "Courtesy and the Gawain Poet," reprinted from Patterns of Love and Courtesy, ed. J. Lawlor, in Chaucer and his Contemporaries, 310-343, see especially 333-342; see also Tolkien, Beorhtnoth, 23, who views Gawain and the Green Knight, along with Beowulf and Maldon as exemplary works of the alliterative heroic tradition, one in the middle and one at the end of the medieval period; Chambers, Heroic Poetry, 93, who regards Gawain as one of "the most heroic poems ever written in the English tongue," and situates it in the tradition of Beowulf and Morte Arthure. Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 18-32, and John Gardner, Critical Studies, 310, place Gawain and the Green Knight in the English alliterative tradition rather than that of the French Romance, but Gardner at least does not appear to view the poem in the context of heroic

poetry. Brewer gives an excellent account of Gawain's heroic attributes, as does Alan M. Markman, "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, LXXII (1957), 574-586; reprinted in Sir Gawain and Pearl, 159-175; there is also a good appreciation of Gawain's heroic qualities, especially his trawþe, in Burrow, Reading. For a view of the poem as an interplay of the heroic-alliterative and courtly-romance traditions, see Arlyn Diamond, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Alliterative Romance," Philological Quarterly, 55 (1976), 10-29.

⁴The quality of Gawain's heroism is questioned by Benson, Art and Tradition, pp. 207-248; Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 171-236; and Burrow, Reading, far more moderately, pp. 160-186.

⁵Burrow, Reading; see also Theodore Silverstein, "The Art of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," University of Toronto Quarterly, XXXIII (1964), 258-278; reprinted in Critical Studies, 182-212; 210, who suggests that the subject of Gawain and the Green Knight "whose hero must go questing forth in the fatal winter season . . . is man's old querela with the harsh uncertainty of the death.

⁶Burrow, Reading, p. 185, "Gawain faces Death, but he does not experience it, any more than he experiences Judgment. What he does experience is rather an analogue of these Last Things."

⁷Burrow, Reading, p. 185, "We cannot, finally, properly appreciate Sir Gawain, either as a lay or as a moral tale, without keeping a grasp on the rather obvious fact that it is a comic poem--by which I mean . . . a poem which ends happily, with the hero reincorporated into his society." also, pp. 152-158, 185-186.

⁸There is an excellent discussion of the rhetorical conventions and themes of the Seasons Passage in Silverstein, Art, which I draw upon at a number of points in my own examination of these stanzas; see also D. A. Pearsall, "Rhetorical Descriptio in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLR, L (1955), 129-134.

⁹All citations to the text are to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 1925, revised by Norman Davis (London, 1967).

¹⁰See Howard, Temptations, pp. 231-232; Silverstein, Art, passim; Burrow, Reading, pp. 33-34.

¹¹Howard, Temptations, 265, "It is not often enough observed that in the later Middle Ages, linear time, though irreversible, is simultaneously figured as a succession of 'revolving' seasons and years and in that sense does repeat itself."; See also Burrow, Ricardian Poetry, p. 101.

¹²Silverstein, Art, 190-191.

¹³For another approach to the relationship between cyclical and linear time in Gawain and the Green Knight, see Burrow, Reading, pp. 174-176.

¹⁴Burrow, Ricardian Poetry, 101, "The ending of Sir Gawain has something in common with . . . the spirit of Ecclesiasticus: 'When a man hath done, then

he beginneth; and when he leaveth off, then shall he be doubtful."; see also Howard, Temptations, pp. 265-268.

¹⁵For a brief account of liturgical references, see Burrow, Reading, pp. 54-55.

¹⁶It is imperative to differentiate between the elegiac connotations of vanity and the moral categories of vainglory and contemptus mundi, between what is temporal and what is worthless.

¹⁷Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 203. "Gawain and Arthur, the narrator maintains, are like all men; they fail to see the consequences of their acts, not realizing how seldom the beginning . . . accords with the end."; see also Burrow, Reading, pp. 31-32.

¹⁸It is characteristic of the ironies in Gawain and the Green Knight that even this expectation is "disappointed" by the comic conclusion of the poem.

¹⁹Burrow, Reading, pp. 32-33, notes the "expansive generalizing comments," concluding that the generalization seems "to spring from an impulse in the poet to see Gawain not only as a knight among his peers but also as a man among men, a representative of the 'humanum genus.'"; see also Silverstein, Art, 184-186.

²⁰See Silverstein, Art, 185, who describes traductio as a figure employing "similar words or syllables with different meaning." In private conversation, Professor Robert O. Payne has suggested to me still a third paranomastic possibility: 3erne as "eagerly"--a gloss which would invoke the ironic interplay of cyclical and linear time, a major thematic and structural motif in Gawain and the Green Knight.

²¹Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress," in Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry, ed. Robert P. Tristram Coffin and Alexander M. Witherspoon (New York, 1967), p. 216.

²²In Gawain and the Green Knight, both the spring and autumn equinoxes are introduced by bot. Given the mutability motif of the passage, this is hardly surprising. The equinoxes are the basic transitions of the year, the pivotal points upon which the year turns toward either rise or fall, growth or decline.

²³Tolkien, Gordon, Davis, p. 88.

²⁴A. C. Cawley, ed. Pearl and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London, 1965), p. 70.

²⁵Such word-play is typical of the Gawain poet; see Silverstein, Art, 184-185; "Sir Gawain, Dear Brutus, and Britain's Fortunate Founding: A Study in Comedy and Convention," M.P., LXII (1965), 192.

²⁶See above, Chapter III. pp. 188-190.

²⁷Silverstein, Art, 193-194, notes that the seasons topos traditionally

exhibits a tendency to identify the seasons of the year with the seasons of man; see also John Speirs, Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition (London, 1957), p. 229.

It is not only in the Seasons Passage that the poet indicates an interest in the ages of man motif: in the Second Fitt (ll. 941-961), there is a traditional contrast of Youth and Age in the facing portraits of Morgan le Fay and The Lady; in the First Fitt, there is a persistent emphasis on the youth of the Arthurian court, its young king, and the young year (ll. 48-59, 85-89); and in the Second Fitt, there is a cameo portrait of Bercilak, the man of hyge elde (ll. 842-849). Burrow, Reading, notes in the portraits of Morgan and the Lady a conventional juxtaposition of Youth and Age.

²⁸According to the glossary in Tolkien, Gordon, Davis, gres as "grass" is derived from Old Danish or Old English graes; gres as "flesh" is derived from the Old French graisse, gresse.

²⁹Silverstein, Art, 209, "Within what might be called the topos of the tempora annorum the assimilation of wintertime to death occurs often enough to constitute a specialized convention."

³⁰Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," in Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History, ed. Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford, 1959), p. 538, observes, however, that the Gawain poet is almost unique among Middle English poets before 1400 in portraying the harsh rigors of winter.

³¹In Beowulf, one of the most dire of the tragic prophecies which foretell the fate of the Geats after the fall of their King is the morgen-ceald gar (ll. 3021-3022) which will await them on many a morning.

³²By far the fullest and best treatment of Gawain's winter Journey is Burrow, Reading, 26-27, 52-56, 118-122, 138-142, 183-184; Burrow views the tragic rhetoric of the journey episodes in light of 14th Century penitential doctrine. Because the penitential material in Gawain and the Green Knight is not in any way connected with the doctrine of contemptus mundi, and because the view of man which the poem projects is as concerned with human achievement as with post-lapsarian limitation, there is no inherent contradiction between the use of penitential doctrine and the presentation of heroic life in the poem. In fact, in Gawain and the Green Knight, given their common concern with final things and human frailty, the penitential and tragic visions of man, far from being mutually exclusive, tend to converge, penitential material tending to reinforce and deepen the tragic connotations of necessity.

³³Within the general vision of life as pilgrimage and exile, Burrow identifies a more specific rhetorical configuration in the winter journey passages; The Summoning of Everyman to Death. Burrow of course does not suggest that this is the meaning of a poem as complex and ambivalent as Gawain and the Green Knight or that the narrative is an allegory of Man's Journey to Death. The Everyman motif is simply a figurative pattern that colors and deepens the larger movement of the poem; Reading, pp. 26-27, 118-122. See also Silverstein, Art, 210; Howard, Temptations, p. 250, both of whom identify Gawain's winter journeys with human misery and mortality.

³⁴As in the first journey (line 735), the al one occurs in the bob of the stanza, the narrowing down of the verse paralleling and pointing Gawain's aloneness.

³⁵Burrow, Reading, p. 118.

³⁶Elliott, Byrhtnoth, 62, notes that in Gawain and the Green Knight "the landscapes themselves become part of the testing of Gawain."

³⁷But see below, pp. 296ff.

³⁸See Gervase Mathew, The Court of Richard II (London, 1968), pp. 118-119, "It is prowess that marks the good knight and brings him honour; chivalry has now become its exercise . . . But the ultimate test of prowess remained adventure. Sir Gawain proved his hardihood alone in the forest . . . or while climbing cliffs in an unknown land."

³⁹Benson, Art, 108; Jan Solomon, "The Lesson of Sir Gawain," Papers of the Michigan Academy, XLVIII (1963), 599-608; reprinted in Critical Studies, 267-278, 272-273.

⁴⁰The seminal article is Henry Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP XXVII (1928), 1-15; see also Speirs, pp. 236-237.

⁴¹Savage's interpretation has been challenged by--among others--Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 215-216; Burrow, Reading, p. 87.

⁴²Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 216-217, "The general parallel between the two sets of scenes is far more important than any detailed parallels. A hunt is going on in the castle as it is in the forest, and in both cases it is a hunt to the death."

⁴³Benson, Art and Tradition, 194, "In the hunts themselves, the narrative point of view shifts from the hunter to the hunted."

⁴⁴Alain Renoir, "An Echo to the Sense: The Patterns of Sound in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, English Miscellany, XIII (1962), p. 23; reprinted in Critical Studies, 144-158, 150-151; Benson, Art and Tradition, pp. 200-201; Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 213-214.

⁴⁵Much of this is brought out in the excellent reading of J. B. Bessinger, Jr. and Marie Borroff, Gawain and the Green Knight and The Pearl in Middle English, Caedmon Records, TC1192.

⁴⁶The terror and carnage of the hunt are further accentuated by the particularly violent verbs which control the tone of the passage throughout.

⁴⁷Later, as the poem moves towards its conclusion, this dynamic is again illustrated, this time by the treatment of Gawain's fear of death. We know that Gawain is afraid. For one thing, he breaks troth and accepts the lady's love-lace on the chance that its "magical" properties will save him from death (ll. 1855-1858). For another, we see him cringe a lytel as the "fatal" ax-stroke descends (ll. 2265-2267). Then too, we glimpse his

troubled dreams when the poet momentarily exposes his fitful slumber on the day before his fateful appointment (ll. 1750-1754). But if we know that Gawain is afraid, we cannot gage, except by conjecture, the depth or quality of his fear. Anything more direct would be inappropriate and destructive to Gawain's chivalric dignity.

⁴⁸Renoir, 153-154, notes that the pitiful plight of the birds is used to convey Gawain's "reaction to his own plight."

⁴⁹Dramatic sound-effects are characteristically used in Gawain and the Green Knight to introduce theatrical turns of event. For example, the Green Knight is ushered into the poem on a chorus of trumpet blasts (ll. 116-136), and his re-entry (at line 2199) is marked by the clamor of ax on whetstone. For the general role of noise in Gawain and the Green Knight, see Renoir.

⁵⁰Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 9, observes that "The hunt . . . functions as a sacrament, a ritual by which violent energies are at once expressed and contained. Hunting was felt to be the most characteristic activity of the medieval aristocracy, the appropriate means by which in peacetime the aggressive instincts of what was still theoretically a warrior class might be given a dignified outlet."

To my knowledge, Gawain and the Green Knight is the only Middle English poem in which the hunt is decked out in heroic rhetoric and invested with heroic implication. Certainly the hunt scenes in The Parlement of the Three Ages, Somer Soneday, and the Awntyrs of Arthur possess no such rhetoric or significance. This seems to me to be good evidence that the heroic coloring of the hunt scenes in Gawain and the Green Knight is deliberate.

⁵¹The hero rides up, views the foe whom no one else is willing to engage, dismounts, draws sword, strides boldly towards opponent, who, on his side, catches sight of hero, rages, and makes for him; they meet in the very thick of things, closing in fatal struggle, while the hero's followers stand by, fearfully awaiting the outcome.

⁵²See Burrow, Reading, p. 91, "Gawain, like the fox, is afraid; and their common fear of death creates a context in which the figure of the lady . . . assumes something of a symbolic value. She is like Dame Life in the alliterative Death and Life . . . By her behaviour, too, Bercilak's lady represents life's cause . . . She throws open a window, wakes Gawain from his nightmares with praise of the morning, laughs and kisses him . . . At this point the poet is stacking the cards more than ever against his hero."

⁵³See also the raucous conclusion of the hunt, ll. 1906-1917.

⁵⁴Unlike the deer and boar hunts, the fox hunt does draw an analogy between Gawain and the pursued wild creature on the basis of the knight's actual behavior.

⁵⁵This parallel between Gawain and the fox is noted by Denton Fox, ed. Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Englewood Cliffs, 1968), 12, "Like the fox Bercilak hunts, Gawain eludes every pursuit until he is suddenly faced with a danger from a totally unexpected direction." For a fuller exposition, see Savage, The Gawain Poet

(Chapel Hill, 1956), pp. 36-38.

The "out of the frying pan and into the fire" dilemma is peculiarly appropriate to the plight of a hero whose test is always expanding while he remains ignorant of the escalating demands. Having originally contracted for the beheading game, Gawain--for whom Bercilak's castle represented safety and solace--finds himself perilously embroiled in the treacherous intricacies of the temptation and exchange games. And if this were not enough, no sooner does he depart Hautdesert for the Green Chapel, than he is tested again by his guide who offers the "safety" of ignoble flight. In all this, there is more than a hint that life--at least for the pentagonal hero--is an endless series of tests and temptations which no mortal man can hope to continuously overcome. For the incremental complexity of Gawain's tests, see Benson, Art and Tradition, pp. 231-232.

⁵⁶See Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 9-10; Tolkien, Gordon, Davis, pp. 111-113.

⁵⁷Spearing, Gawain Poet, "In the end . . . beasts . . . are killed, and their deadness is brought home to us in the poet's descriptions of how they were cut up . . . These episodes . . . are . . . important as a means of emphasizing the death of the animals not just as an idea but as an inescapable physical fact. Previously they were living creatures, full of violent energy; now they are unmoving lumps of meat."

⁵⁸Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 218-219, seems to suggest that there is a three-way parallel, based upon mortality, among the hunt, temptation, and beheading scenes.

⁵⁹The Quat! What! and What! which punctuate the elaborate description of the whetting of the ax are perhaps deliberately reminiscent of the What! which marks the poignant slaughter of the deer at line 1163. These are the only occurrences of the expletive in the poem. The parallelism would be particularly appropriate at this point in the narrative since, as far as we know at least, Gawain is about to be slaughtered just as were the defenseless deer.

⁶⁰Burrow, Reading, p. 157, notes that "Similarity is pointed . . . often by a verbal parallel," and, 72, that such parallels are "an interesting example of purposive formulaic writing." See also Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 175; Marie Borroff, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study (New Haven, 1962), pp. 127-128.

⁶¹In this regard see George J. Engelhardt, "The Predicament of Gawain," MLQ, XVI (1955), 218-225; reprinted in Middle English Survey, 57-69, 59.

⁶²Francis Berry, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," The Age of Chaucer, ed. Boris Ford, 153, "The form and narrative cannot be separated. The poem in its cyclic form corresponds to that cycle of the year which forms the essence of the narrative."

⁶³Burrow, Ricardian Poetry, 96, "The . . . prologue in Gawain introduces an adventure which has no significance at all for the history of the kings of Britain. Gawain's adventure of the Green Chapel is just one of the 'outrage adventures of Arthuruz wonderez.' The reputation of the Round Table is perhaps at stake, but not the fate of the kingdom."

⁶⁴Howard, Temptations, 266-267, "Thus each poem returns us to a starting point, suggests a new beginning and an unpredictable future. We have passed across one stretch of time to another, none of it ever to be retraced; yet all of it is arranged in cycles which repeat a fundamental and predisposed pattern."; See also Burrow, Ricardian Poetry, p. 101.

⁶⁵See Charles Muscatine, Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer (Notre Dame, 1972), pp. 59-60; Fox, 8; Adrien Bonjour, "'werre, and wrake, and wonder'" English Studies, XXXII (1951), 70-72; Howard, Temptations, p. 250.

⁶⁶Professor Payne, in private conversation, has observed that this is an attendant irony of the complex interaction between linear and cyclical time in Gawain and the Green Knight.

⁶⁷The sharp contrast between the destruction of the old and the raising up of the new is underscored by the verbs used in the passage--biges, neuenes lyftes vp, settez--all of which emphasize the rise-and-fall vicissitudes and reversals which characterize human history.

⁶⁸Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain," Speculum, XXXIX (1964), 425-433; reprinted in Critical Studies, 159-173, 168, "The work begins and ends with a reference to the fall of Troy and the founding of Britain, so that the events at Arthur's court are seen in the perspective of history as a point out of the past to which the reader draws up close and then away."; see also, Dale, B. J. Randall, "A Note on the Structure in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLN, LXXII (1959), 161-163.

⁶⁹Cf. the careful transitions which imperceptibly mediate between the historical matter of Britain, the world of Arthurian romance, and the adventure of Gawain and the Green Knight, ll. 1-40.

⁷⁰Howard, Temptations, pp. 262-263, "The Troilus and Sir Gawain both tell the story of a human action and thus preserve the name and reputation of a man, not because of any higher or broader significance but because of the unique and essential worth of his historical deeds. Sir Gawain is to be remembered and his name preserved because he was the best of knights . . . The poet assumes the power to confer fame upon great men . . . by granting them a measure of immortality in the successive stream of human lives through the preservation of their actions, their stories--if you will, the very style of their lives."; see also C. S. Lewis, The Discarded Image (London, 1964), pp. 178-179.

⁷¹In addition, Burrow notes, p. 113, that the passage evokes "what it would really feel like to be on a quest like Gawain's--wakefulness, a heightened sense of the hostility of the external world, a pressing awareness of time."; in another context, Speirs, p. 245, remarks that the opening lines of the Fourth Fitt "correspond to the two opening paragraphs of the Second Fitt conveying the experience of a year's revolution. The sense of time passing is again conveyed--on this occasion the passing of the Old Year's Night in the wintry dawn of the New Year--and it is conveyed in particular terms of the wild weather outside the castle as Gawain listens to it on his bed with foreboding, conscious that his meeting with the Green Knight is now imminent."

⁷²Howard, Structure, 159-173, uncovers an elaborate network of parallels and contrasts which control, organize, and unify the narrative; see also Temptations, pp. 245-248; Muscatine, pp. 43-45; Benson, Art and Tradition, pp. 158-166; Charles Moorman, "Myth and Medieval Literature: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MS, XVIII (1956), 158-172; reprinted in Sir Gawain and Pearl, 209-235, especially 221-224; Everett, pp. 82-83; Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 172; Burrow, Reading, pp. 65-66, 71-77.

⁷³Fox, 9-10, "Before Gawain departs from Arthur's court, the narrative is interrupted by two complementary passages. The first is the famous and beautiful seasons of the year, in which the stress is on the mutability of the world and on the inevitable alternation between life and death . . . The second passage is the description of the pentangle . . . on Gawain's shield . . . It is the symbol of . . . Christian stability and virtue."

⁷⁴Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 165, "In Sir Gawain the juxtapositions are used as . . . the principal method of communicating meaning."

⁷⁵See, for example, Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 209. All this hardly needs amplification, having already been fully elaborated by Spearing, pp. 197-198; Howard, Temptations, pp. 224-225, 240-241; Burrow, Reading, 49-50.

⁷⁶Burrow, Reading, pp. 170-171, "Gawain is subjected to a complex and difficult test--difficult, but not impossible . . . The pentangle represents an ideal of reconciled virtues which can be attained--or rather, could be attained if it were not for the 'badde alayes' in man's fallen nature. There is nothing intrinsically impossible about it. The fact that Gawain 'brestes a-two' does not prove, as is sometimes suggested, that there is some internal contradiction in the courtly-Christian ideal which he represents; nor does it prove merely that life sometimes makes irreconcilable demands even on the best of man. What it does prove is that Gawain--even Gawain--is a sinner like everybody else." See also Richard Hamilton Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," ELH, XXIX (1962), 121-139; reprinted in Sir Gawain and Pearl, 176-194, 176-178; Muscatine, p. 69. But cf. Howard, Temptations, pp. 218-223, 254, who argues that the pentagonal ideal is flawed by internal contradictions among its Christian and courtly values, and, more generally, by a conflict between the worldly aspirations of chivalry and the other-world morality of Christianity; also Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 200-205.

⁷⁷See for example Benson, p. 208, "His strength and bravery are only indirectly stated in the list of virtues that accompanies the description of the Pentangle."

⁷⁸This is argued by R. W. Ackerman, "Gawain's Shield: Penitential Doctrine in Gawain and the Green Knight," Anglia, LXXVI (1958), 254-265; Green, 188; the argument is accepted by Burrow, Reading, p. 46, and, more tentatively, by Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 277. But cf. Morton W. Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," PMLA, LXXVI (1961), 7-19; reprinted in Critical Studies, 24-55, 45, "I am not convinced that Ackerman has completely proved his case. The five wits are

associated with sin, true; but they are also associated with the origin of all knowledge, good or bad."

⁷⁹Green, 188.

⁸⁰Tolkien, Gordon, Davis, p. 94, "The five fingers were sometimes allegorized as five virtues . . . but can hardly be so here since this would partly repeat 651-655. No special significance is apparent." Burrow, Reading, p. 46, is also skeptical of Green's rendering.

⁸¹Burrow, Reading, p. 47, argues that "'pity' makes rather better sense in the context."

⁸²Cf. B. S. Levy, "Gawain's Spiritual Journey" who argues that the Green Knight is the devil--not a very convincing identification.

⁸³Mathew, Richard, pp. 124-125, "The physical beauty of a knight and his power of vivid sense perception were both values, qualities which could be interwoven with that of courtoisie. Gawain . . . was found faultless in all five senses. The pentangle that he bore as coat armour symbolized the five wits as well as franchyse and fellowship, cleanness, cortaysie and pitie."

⁸⁴Burrow, Reading, p. 37-38, notes "the emergence of Gawain as an individual knight hero in the description of the arming of Gawain and his departure from Camelot . . . The sense of Gawain as a dedicated hero set apart from his fellows, already present in the stanza preceding the arming passage, certainly gains strength in the course of his ceremonious preparations for departure." For the traditional heroic connotations of arming scenes, see Bowra, pp. 191-194.

⁸⁵Engelhardt, 59, "The society in which Gawain lived was a valorous society . . . From its members it exacted both in peace and war the unremitting exercise of valor. Their lives were jeopardized even for diversion, as when they jousted in the lists or chased the boar. For their prowess the vassals of Arthur were world-renowned, but it was Gawain who especially excelled in valor. He was the nonpareil, the . . . prince without peer in the field where men fought (873-874)."

Burrow, Reading, pp. 45-46, argues against identifying the five fingers with physical prowess and the five wits with physical perception on the grounds that these qualities have nothing to do with trawþe. I am not sure that I follow his reasoning here. Given that the pentangle represents an interlocking military, courtly, and religious ideal, a knight's physical prowess is hardly likely to be considered irrelevant to his trawþe.

⁸⁶See Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 184-185, "He cannot, of course, forget the terrifying goal of his quest, and this fact makes all the more impressive the display of the courtly virtues that he puts on for the sake of his host and hostess and their court. He eats, he drinks, he dances, he makes conversation, he plays games; but all the while there sits at his heart the knowledge that the real test still lies ahead of him. Here the poet uses his omniscience not only to render Gawain's behaviour intelligible but to bring out most touchingly his genuine courage: not insensibility or forgetfulness, but magnificent self-control."

⁸⁷See Burrow, Reading, p. 110. There is an excellent discussion of Gawain's confession, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-110.

⁸⁸We are soon to see how little faith Gawain actually places in the powers of the lace when faced with the test itself. For a fascinating conjecture on this point, see Stoddard Malarkey and J. B. Toelken, "Gawain and the Green Girdle," JEGP, LXIII (1964), 14-20.

⁸⁹The heroic quality of fela3scyp is initially suggested in the First Fitt where, as the decapitated Green Knight makes his dramatic exit from the court, Arthur and Gawain at fat grene þay la3e and grenne (l. 464) in order to allay the fears of the queen and perhaps the rest of the court as well. In this connection, see Burrow, Reading, p. 29, who points out that "the Green Knight has not, as he claimed, 'ouerwalt' the revelry of the Round Table."

⁹⁰As for Mary's oft-cited intervention on behalf of hir kny3t (l. 1769), one would be hard-pressed to demonstrate that this is anything more than a rhetorical device meant to convey the difficulty of a test (seduction) which we know the hero is bound to pass.

⁹¹Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 194-208; Criticism and Medieval Poetry (London, 1964), pp. 31-36.

⁹²Burrow, Reading, pp. 48, 100; see also Engelhardt, 68-69; Muscatine, p. 67; Friedman, 144-146; Markman, 172-173.

⁹³Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 205-206.

⁹⁴Burrow, Reading, p. 100.

⁹⁵It is difficult to determine what, if any, independent weight is to be given to pitē, the fifth of the final fives in the pentangle passage. If it signifies piety, then it would be associated with Gawain's faith in the five wounds and five joys; if, as is more likely, pity is meant, then it would be identified with Gawain's courtesy. Accordingly, although it is the last of the pentagonal virtues and is said to surpass all points, I have made no attempt to assign to it any independent heroic value. See also Brewer, 324, who remarks, "The pentangle shows that the meanings of the words are not distinct. We are not to attribute the same kind of precision of meaning to part-oral poetry as we are to the poetry of print. Gawain's five moral virtues are doubtless not analytically set down, and they all mingle witheach other."; in this regard, see also Engelhardt, 59; Tolkien, Gordon, Davis, p. 95.

⁹⁶Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 198-199; for Gawain's general reputation for courtesy, see B. J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale," MS, IX (1947), 189-234.

⁹⁷The Lady too, whatever her ulterior motives, bases her "expectations" on Gawain's reputation for courtesy; see for example lines 1226-1229.

⁹⁸The best study of courtesy in Gawain and the Green Knight in Brewer; see also Spearing, Criticism, pp. 26-45.

⁹⁹This is a commonplace of Gawain criticism; see for example Howard, Temptations, pp. 278-279; Berry, 152-153; Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 218-219; Burrow, Reading, pp. 34-35; Muscatine, pp. 44-45.

¹⁰⁰For the role of the civitas in Beowulf, see above, Chapter I, pp. 57ff.

¹⁰¹Outdoors--the Wasteland, the forces of darkness which threaten to swallow up all human achievement and glory; Indoors--the civitas and comitatus, the heroic assertion of human order, meaning and values. For a full discussion of this opposition in Beowulf, see above, Chapter I, pp. 57ff.

¹⁰²For example, in Beowulf as well as in Gawain and the Green Knight, the dangers which threaten from without are also inherent within. In the O.E. poem, it is a matter of the irrational blood feuds which mirror the monstrous violence which lurks outside. In Gawain and the Green Knight, it is a question of the temptation and exchange games which are covertly linked with the concurrent violence of the hunts and the impending violence of the beheading test. But whereas in Beowulf there is little that is attractive in the wasteland that surrounds the precarious habitations of men, in Gawain and the Green Knight the vitality of the winter journeys, hunts, and of the Green Knight himself has stirred any number of readers who have recognized that, just as there is something ominous in the courtly world, there is much that is valuable and attractive in the world of winter nature. Burrow, Reading, p. 87, notes the attractive vitality which resonates through the outdoors winter world of the hunts scenes as compared with the indoors temptation scenes; Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 63, notes that the sheer vitality of the Green Knight is attractive.

¹⁰³Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 8; see also Muscatine, p. 59.

¹⁰⁴See William Goldhurst, "The Green and the Gold: The Major Theme of Gawain and the Green Knight," CE, XX (1958-1959), 61-65; Howard, Temptations, p. 232; cf. Bloomfield, 49.

¹⁰⁵Brewer, 329, "If he had accepted the gift of her body he would have become completely vulnerable. As he accepted only a trivial gift, he received only a nick in the neck."

¹⁰⁶Such are the negative inferences persistently generated by Benson's commentary in Art and Tradition, pp. 97, 100, 107, 210.

¹⁰⁷Mathew, Richard, pp. 123-124, suggests that the deeper moral implications of Gawain's courtesy are related to his generous treatment of subordinates; see also, Ideals of Knighthood, 70-71.

¹⁰⁸Burrow, p. 91.

¹⁰⁹One need not be surprised that chivalry, the ideal of a Christian aristocratic class, should now and again aspire beyond social categories toward an idealized, universal human value. In another context, this aspiration would be called caritas.

¹¹⁰Gawain's courtesy is reciprocated by Bercilak's household who minister to his every need, serving him with grace and affection.

¹¹¹Burrow, Reading, p. 119, notes that the guide puts Gawain's courtesy to the test. Cf. Benson who concludes from gruchyng that Gawain is tempted by the guide's offer.

¹¹²As Brewer remarks, 310, "All viable societies necessarily practice some forms of self-control and mutual help among their members, some forms of decency and gracefulness in daily social intercourse. This necessity in part took the form, in medieval European feudal society, of courtesy."

¹¹³Cf. the outlaws of Wirral (ll. 701-702) and the wodwos (l. 721) who plague Gawain's outbound journey.

¹¹⁴See Markman, 164-165, 172-174; Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 227; See also Mathew, Richard, p. 125, "At the end of the fourteenth century a man could be a good knight because he was of good courage and well born and well bred. It was chivalry's association with the quite distinct concept of loyalty that gave it an over-riding moral force." For the most comprehensive exposition of trawþe in Gawain and the Green Knight, see Burrow, Reading, especially, 23-26, 42-51.

¹¹⁵See Burrow, Reading, p. 44; Engelhardt, 58.

¹¹⁶See also ll. 390-399, 401-403, 448-456.

¹¹⁷Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 184, "What is demanded of Gawain it seems is a response in the tradition of heroic behavior to which we have seen alliterative poetry characteristically giving expression. . . . The action demanded of him in confronting the monstrous Green Knight is approximately the same as that demanded of Beowulf in facing his monsters, or of Arthur in facing the Giant of St. Michael's Mount."; see also Burrow, Reading, pp. 25-26.

¹¹⁸See for example lines 1039-1041, 1092.

¹¹⁹See above, pp. 300-301.

¹²⁰See below, pp. 319-323.

¹²¹See Markman, 172-173, "As the guest of Bercilak, Gawain is in the position, for the duration of his visit, of vassal to his host; his host is, for the time, his lord. It would have been a heinous breach of loyalty to his lord had Gawain made love to his lord's wife. Any feudal audience would have understood that; the lovely chatelaine, at the hands of Gawain, was inviolable."

¹²²ll. 237-247, 672-683. Cf. D. E. Baughan, "The Role of Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," ELH, XLVII (1950), 241-251; Moorman, 209-235. Baughan and Moorman contend that Arthur's court is shadowed by corruption and treachery. Burrow, Reading, pp. 10, 12, justly observes that "this kind of approach to Sir Gawain is fundamentally mistaken, and that nearly all the conclusions to which it leads are false." See also Friedman, 135-149.

¹²³Burrow, Reading, p. 11, "In all this Gawain acts as a member of the 'hered,' a man among his 'cort-feres.'"; see also Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 212.

¹²⁴Burrow, Reading, traces this motif, especially pp. 22-24.

¹²⁵Muscatine, pp. 14-35, for a description of the late 14th Century as an age of crisis.

¹²⁶See Markman, 164-165; Burrow, Reading, p. 24.

¹²⁷See Fox, 9, "Gawain, when he performs the . . . apparently absurd action of going . . . to seek his own death, is in fact asserting the possibility of meaningful human action and of enduring civilization."

¹²⁸Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 212, "The problem is not simply whether Gawain can keep the series of bargains he has made but whether he, the Round Table's representative, can live up to the fame of Arthur's court."

¹²⁹There is an excellent discussion of this passage in Burrow, Reading, p. 129.

¹³⁰In this respect, Gawain duplicates his initial failing when he flinches under the ax at the Green Chapel, provoking the Green Knight's taunt of cowardice, ll. 2265-2273.

¹³¹Burrow, Reading, pp. 25-26, "He has given his word, and the 'renoun of þe Rounde Table' depends upon his keeping it, even in the face of what seems certain death."

¹³²Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 183, "When Gawain . . . received the Green Knight's ax from the king, he is becoming both his personal substitute and, in the most open and official way, the representative of the whole court, who is to redeem their initial hesitance."

¹³³Benson, Art and Tradition, mistakenly argues that the paucity of overtly martial material in Gawain and the Green Knight precludes any serious heroic connotation, 42, 96-97, 100, 107-109, 210-211. See also Burrow, Ricardian Poetry, pp. 94-95; Solomon, 272-273.

¹³⁴See Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 26; Fox, 4; Borroff, trans. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New York, 1967), p. xi; Study, pp. 52-129; Wrenn, "Poetry of Caedmon," in Essential Articles, 423; Burrow, Ricardian Poetry, pp. 23-24; Diamond, passim; Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 163; Everett, p. 23. It should be noted that Borroff and Spearing argue that the traditional heroic diction of Gawain and the Green Knight tends to generate ironies even as it serves to elevate the action. This is all well and good--so long as we remain clear that the predominantly heroic connotations of Gawain's traditional vocabulary are not submerged in the ambivalence.

¹³⁵For two views of the comic diminution of the hero, see Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 241 and Spearing, "Patience and the Gawain-Poet," Anglia, Vol. 84 (1966), 325-329; reprinted in Twentieth Century Interpretations, 101-105; Benson claims that "As the laughter of the Green Knight and the court shows, what Gawain really learns from his adventure is that chivalry takes itself a bit too seriously, that men become ridiculous and foolish when they attempt to live up to so superhuman an ideal."; According to Spearing, "What is firm and real in the poem is . . . the valiant but eventually hopeless struggle against a power beyond the natural, which tests men, searches out their imperfections, and at last, most devastating of all to the heroic aspiration, forgives them."

¹³⁶See Burrow, Reading, pp. 3, 122-127; Bloomfield, 47, 51.

¹³⁷See Bowers, 72-84.

¹³⁸Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture (Boston, 1950), pp. 101-104, explains how chivalry itself may be regarded as a game without thereby diminishing its seriousness or nobility.

¹³⁹Muscatine, pp. 61-65, notes that all Gawain's tests are "games," as does Howard, Temptations, pp. 282-285; see also Burrow, Reading, pp. 21-26, 66-70, 89; Bercovitch, 258-260; Bowers, 79-80.

As Burrow notes, Reading, 21, the gamelike nature of Gawain's tests marks a real difference between the ideals of feudal chivalry (as mediated by romance) and those of Germanic heroism. In Beowulf, the swimming match between Beowulf and Brecca is a game, but is designated as a youthful enterprise and relegated to the periphery of the action. As for Maldon, the only reference to game is the mention of hawking, which is immediately put aside for the essential concern of the poem--war. In Morte Arthure, the all but gratuitous joust between Gawain and Priamus is "game-like," but serves as a romance interlude in the unremitting series of battles which is the narrative matrix of the poem. In heroic poetry, heroism is rooted in the material and political conditions of existence--war and conquest. In the chivalric romance, even a romance like Gawain and the Green Knight which possesses real heroic dimension, the knight proves worthy and honorable almost to the extent that his deeds transcend or are divorced from such material concerns.

For the relationship between heroism and material reality, see Bowra, pp. 154-157; Everett, p. 64; Finlayson, Morte Arthure, pp. 8-9; Ker, Epic and Romance, distinguishes between heroic poetry and romance on this basis, as does George Kane, Middle English Literature (London, 1951), p. 2; The fullest and most far-reaching treatment of this division between heroic poetry and chivalric romance is Auerbach, "The Knight Sets Forth," in Mimesis, pp. 107-123.

¹⁴⁰Tolkien, Beohrtnoth, 23-24, contends that the segges of the Round Table serve as a vehicle for the moral viewpoint of the poet. It is far more likely, however, that their about-face serves as a foil to Gawain's resolute trawþe; then too, insofar as the courtiers shift the blame from themselves to the king, their behavior heightens our appreciation of Gawain's courtesy, fellowship, and magnanimity. That the poet is critical of the courtiers is argued by Friedman, 138; Burrow, Reading, p. 61; Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 184.

¹⁴¹The line recalls the narrator's own ironic observations of the balance between game and earnest in lines 495-496 and 691-692.

¹⁴²Burrow, Reading, pp. 162-163, "The exchange agreement is, even more than the beheading agreement, easily mistaken for a mere Christmas game; and Gawain has no idea that he is being tested. He is led to think of the whole episode as little more than a diversion, thoughtfully provided by his host to take his mind off a forthcoming test--part of the festive interlude between his two winter journeys."

¹⁴³Burrow, Reading, 161, "Gawain's oath to the Green Knight is not entirely solemn, and this casts a shadow of doubt across his obligations. If he chose to ignore them he would have some sort of a case: the affair was, after all, no more than a Christmas game . . . The poet does in fact allow something like this view to be voiced in his poem, by the 'segges' of Arthur's court . . . but the hero himself never entertains it for a moment."

¹⁴⁴Burrow, pp. 169-170, "The poet subjects a superlative hero to a superlative test, and he cracks. There is no suggestion that any other knight could have done better. On the contrary, the reader must surely be meant to feel that if Gawain, the mirror of truth, fails to be true, then no-one else can hope to be." See also Howard, Temptations, p. 251, "The specific events in Sir Gawain's life are presented in some measure as metaphors of the life of man . . . His fall is the fall of man, his weakness the weakness of the flesh." See also Bowers, 83.

To read Gawain and the Green Knight is to enter a world deeply affected by Christianity. Of the four poems studied here, only in the more "domestically" scaled, post-lapsarian world of Gawain and the Green Knight is the hero not wholly cut from traditional heroic cloth or judged wholly by conventional heroic standards. Conventional heroic poems, especially those of Germanic temper, have their own way of judging failure: No one smiles at the cowards who flee from battle in Beowulf or Maldon; and in Morte Arthure, no one flees. In the public realms of these poems, expectations and judgments are explicitly and uncompromisingly heroic, no matter how Christian their makers. The Gawain poet, on the other hand, like Chaucer, demonstrates a generous tolerance for human frailty, which he portrays less as personal failure than as an indication of the fallen nature of man. One of the basic questions which Gawain and the Green Knight in fact raises is, what kind of heroism can man aspire to in a world which both necessitates and forgives human imperfection? And indeed, the heroism portrayed in Gawain and the Green Knight is less absolute, less public, more private and more "realistic" than that represented in the Old English poems or in Morte Arthure. But, as we see, heroism is heroism for all that; and what is more, Gawain's heroic ideal remains viable, even in a world where--in some part at least--a Christian temperament sets the ground rules, reshapes heroic values according to its own standards, and judges the hero according to its own lights.

¹⁴⁵See Brewer, 326, "Were Gawain not brave, he would not have been endangered by the Green Knight's challenge. Similarly, were Gawain not courteous he would not have been endangered by the lady's attempt at

seduction." Also Engelhardt, 57, "It was a predicament not made for petty knights uninitiated in the mysteries of consummate chivalric virtue; they could elude or ignore the dilemmas that it posed, just as the lesser knights in Arthur's hall shrank from the challenge of the 'aghlich mayster.'"

¹⁴⁶Cf. Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 212, who argues that when the Lady proffers the lace, she "plays the card she has presumably held in reserve all the time, and that will win the match."; and Burrow, Reading, p. 96, "When, in the third temptation scene, the lady gives up trying to seduce Gawain, she is not conceding defeat in the main battle--which, indeed, after a tactical withdrawal to better ground, she goes on to win."

While I agree with both Burrow and Spearing that Gawain's compromise is real and significant, I would not conclude that the Lady wins the match or the main battle. Gawain's failure, his lack of loyalty, would have been far greater had he shirked his quest or made love to his host's wife. Game and earnest are far from mutually exclusive categories, but they are not quite identical either. It comes down perhaps to the difference between sin and imperfection--that is to say, between a beheading and a nick on the neck.

¹⁴⁷Howard, Temptations, perhaps somewhat hamstrung by his overall thesis, attempts to identify Gawain's imperfection with "pride of life"; see also Solomon, 277-278, who unconvincingly argues that the theme of Gawain and the Green Knight is Gawain's pride.

¹⁴⁸See lines 339-361, 1241-1247, 1263-1269. For a careful analysis of Gawain's elaborately courteous request for the beheading adventure, see Spearing, Criticism. pp. 38-44.

¹⁴⁹Markman, 163-164, claims that Gawain's chagrin over his failure and his refusal to glorify his adventure when he returns to Camelot demonstrates his humility; cf. Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 227-231, who regards Gawain's remorse as excessive and ostentatious outburst of pride. The best analysis of Gawain's remorse is that of Burrow, Reading, p. 144, who views Gawain's conduct as exemplary--though not necessarily humble.

¹⁵⁰Like Gawain himself, Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David--the Old Testament champions with whom he identifies himself in his so-called "diatribe against women" (ll. 2413-2428)--exemplify not only human frailty, but human greatness. See Burrow, Reading, p. 146, "He is involved in a fictional demonstration of the possibilities and limits of human goodness. This in itself lends point to the catalogue of humbled heroes--Adam the perfect man, Solomon the wise, Sampson the strong, David the Holy."

¹⁵¹Burrow, Reading, p. 157; see also Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 231.

¹⁵²Burrow, Reading, p. 158; see also Howard, Temptations, p. 262.

¹⁵³Almost all of those who read the poem acknowledge that the final judgment of Gawain's adventure is left in the balance: see for example Howard, Temptations, pp. 274-275; Spearing, Gawain Poet, pp. 231-236; Burrow, Ricardian Poetry, p. 87; Reading, pp. 116-117, 132-137, 158-159; even Benson, Art and Tradition, pp. 140-148.

¹⁵⁴See Burrow, Reading, pp. 3-30, 93-94, and especially 177-179; Spearing, Gawain Poet, p. 236; Bloomfield, 52-54; Fox, 7-8. Burrow detects at least "two distinct modes . . . in the poem--an older 'romantic' mode (associated with the superlative hero and the superlative test) and a newer 'realistic' mode (associated with the partial failure in the test)." Burrow's reliance upon Frye's nomenclature--especially on pp. 180-183--is not altogether felicitous, leading him, in this section at least, to somewhat underestimate the extent of Gawain's heroic stature.

¹⁵⁵Little wonder that there is so much controversy surrounding almost every aspect of the poem; so much is left in suspense: is the Green Knight benign or malignant? What exactly motivates the Lady to tempt Gawain? How are we to judge the manner in which the courtiers respond to the Green Knight? Does Arthur respond nobly or rashly to the beheading challenge? Is the line that stretches from Troy to Britain glorious and providential, or is it a turbulent succession of random events signifying nothing? Is the traitor Aeneas or Antenor? The manifestation of Hautdesert hard upon Gawain's prayer, is it a miracle? or a catastrophe? or simply an accident? And on and on. Although some of these questions are perhaps easier to answer than others, nevertheless, instances of ambiguity seem to multiply at every turn.

¹⁵⁶Green, 178-179, takes Markman to task for minimizing Gawain's imperfection.

¹⁵⁷Is there special significance to the 2530-line length of Gawain and the Green Knight? 2525 would constitute the perfect pentagonal number. The actual number of lines thus misses perfection by a single five-line unit, perhaps a numerological commentary on just how close Gawain comes to perfection. Muscatine, p. 43, notes in Gawain and the Green Knight a "certain amount of numerical symbolism"; and Burrow, Ricardian Poetry, p. 65, observes that "The 101 stanzas of Gawain . . . may here be meant to suggest another endless emblem--the 'endeles knot' of the pentangle on Gawain's shield, which symbolizes his perfect truth."

CONCLUSION

In the end, like Gawain, we come full circle. At the outset, we observed that the tension between heroism and necessity serves as the essential mainspring of the heroic poem, the role of the hero being to demonstrate human worth in the face of all which transcends man's will, frustrates his noblest aspirations, and denies his value. More specifically, we noted that the interplay between human potentiality and human limitation in large part shapes the character of the hero and the nature of his heroism, Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, Arthur, and Gawain being not only equal to but commensurate with their fates. In Beowulf, for example, where the primary form of necessity is temporal, the hero aspires above all to glory, the continuing fame of his deeds securing a limited and provisional victory from a world where all is transitory--youth, companions, kinsmen, kingdoms, life itself. Hemmed in on all sides by the brevity and instability of mortal existence, the hero exemplifies man's refusal to surrender to the inexorable forces of time, change, and death.

A second major form of necessity in Beowulf is wyrd, not only the individual fate which hangs over each man, but the binding laws and given conditions of human existence. Against the relentless press of doom, the hero pits the strength of his indomitable will, proving what human determination, faith, and courage can wrest from the iron grip of destiny. In his demonstration of the efficacy of the heroic will, Beowulf is seconded by the heroic example of Wiglaf and by the anti-heroic examples of Unferth, Heremod, and the cowardly Geatish retainers, those foils to the heroic life whose very failure of will testifies to the voluntary nature of heroism.

The third form of necessity which shadows Beowulf is the wave of irrational bloodshed which threatens to submerge the heroic civitas in darkness. Against this irresistible tide of violence--the monsters from without, the tangled web of war, vengeance, and blood-feud from within--the hero exemplifies man's struggle for social order, Beowulf's "gentleness," "kindness," and "mildness" a token of the viability and nobility of heroic civilization. Moreover, as the exemplar of the heroic civitas against the forces of chaos, the hero is everywhere supported by the elaborate rituals and ceremonies of the order he represents, a social world whose aristocratic manners and customs--from the stately amenities of the mead-hall to the sacramental exchange of treasure--affirm the grandeur and dignity of human culture. The virtues of the civitas are reflected as well in the ornate rhetoric and elevated style of the poem itself, the noble tone, the specialized poetic diction, and the processional movement of the verse all converging to produce a remarkably solemn and ceremonious verse form, which, although the result of long-standing conventions of Anglo-Saxon versification, in Beowulf at least serves as an expression of the civitas--of man's heroic effort to impose human meaning, order, and value on the given world.

Transience is balanced by glory, fate by indomitable will, the wasteland by the civitas. What is more, the tension between heroism and necessity shapes not only the major narrative strategies of Beowulf, but its architectonics as well. Tolkien, who argues for a bipartite or "diptych" structure, a balanced contrast between "rising and setting . . . youth and age . . . first achievement and final death," has drawn our attention to the coincidence of form and meaning in Beowulf, demonstrating the degree to which the structural oppositions of the poem serve to

express its thematic nexus: the hero's confrontation with his destiny.¹ A similar pattern may be discerned in the frame of Beowulf, a poem which begins with the marvelous arrival of Scyld and ends with the hero's own departure from earth, the former signaling the founding of a glorious Danish empire, the latter presaging the disappearance of the Geatish nation. In a word, the frame of Beowulf parallels its general structure: beginnings and ends. The form of Gawain and the Green Knight is cyclical; but that of Beowulf is progressive and inevitable, reflecting the inexorable course of time and events.

That Beowulf ends with a funeral is hardly surprising; there is no more fitting figure of the tragic boundaries of the heroic world. But Beowulf's funeral is more than a token of man's mortality. It is, in equal portion, a celebration of his greatness. Like the heroic poem itself, Biowulfes biorh (2807) is a tribute to the undying worth of heroic deeds, living proof of heroism's continuing power to inspire men to realize their highest ideals and aspirations. Death fells the hero. But so long as men revere his memory, death cannot obviate human grandeur.

In this light we may observe that while a good part of the formal strategy of Beowulf may be based upon the diptych structure, this model proves ultimately inadequate. Indeed, the analogy between Beowulf and diptych proves, in at least one critical respect, misleading as well as imprecise. The emphasis upon the "static" contrast between beginnings and ends ignores the considerable degree to which the two portions of the work are interwoven into one continuous fabric, the Danish and Geatish sections dialectically enriching and illuminating one another, the relationship between them as much one of dynamic "interlace" as of "static" opposition.² To divide Beowulf into two facing panels of a diptych, the

first depicting the hero's youthful rise, the second his demise and death, is to imply that heroism is essentially reserved to the opening of the poem and the onslaught of tragedy limited to its conclusion. In reality, the close of Beowulf is no less heroic than those portions which are set in Hrothgar's court; nor is tragedy restricted to the dragon-fight and its aftermath. The glory of heroism waxes unabated and undiminished from beginning to end, from Grendel-fight to dragon-fight, from swimming match to funeral pyre, while tragedy--far from being a function merely of the final catastrophe, has been operative from the outset, in irony, augury, and elegiac lament as well as in the darker connotations of the so-called "episodes" and "digressions." Tolkien's vision of structure, poetic and heuristic as it is, falls short of the mark. The essential heroic tension of Beowulf is not reducible to a set of balanced structural contrasts between "rising and setting . . . youth and age . . . first achievement and final death." On the contrary, the confrontation between heroism and necessity informs the entire poem, shaping the character of its hero, giving life and depth to its form, rhetoric and diction, as implicit in its narrative dynamics as in the structural oppositions of its formal frame.

In Maldon, the confrontation between the hero and necessity is narrower and more direct than in Beowulf. The canvas is restricted to a single battle, a single day, a necessity of one dimension. The poet is not here concerned to measure man against the tragic contradictions of time and the wasteland; hence there is little stress placed upon the commemoration of human achievement or the virtues of the civitas. The heroic equation is reduced to its simplest terms: what is required of the loyal fighters at Maldon is that they display unwavering courage in the face of certain death.

The excessive critical attention generated by Byrhtnoth's decision to allow the Vikings uncontested access to the mainland has unfortunately blurred the heroic focus of the poem. It is not the ealdorman's ofermod, but the valor and fortitude of his faithful companions which is at the center of Maldon. Although Byrhtnoth is a hero--in most respects he is a veritable model of the heroic life which the poem celebrates--he does not act under wholly heroic circumstances. Unlike the loyal heorthgeneatas, who, in the end, fight without hope, solely to fulfill their obligations and preserve their honor, Byrhtnoth fights for homeland, king, God, and victory. While he remains in the field, the outcome of the battle is uncertain. It is only after his fall and the consequent flight of the cowards that a Viking victory is assured and the definitive heroic scenario established. Moreover, whereas Byrhtnoth dies with a prayer on his lips, his end suggesting an avenue of possible escape from the tragic conditions of heroic life, the heorthwerod go to their deaths within the strict confines of the Germanic heroic world, their fiedlity and courage an unequivocal expression of man's refusal to abdicate what is highest in his nature in the face of necessity.

The heroic focus of Maldon is reflected in its structure and style. For the first half of the poem, the narrative is progressive and causal; each event--from Byrhtnoth's initial preparations for battle to the treachery of Godric and his brothers--grows out of the one preceding it and leads logically to the next. But once Byrhtnoth has fallen and the cowards have fled, that is to say, once the stage has been set for the inevitable confrontation with necessity, the narrative strategy shifts abruptly from sequential development to ritualistic reiteration of one great symbolic pattern, as, one after the other, individual retainers

move to the center of the stage, accomplish their vows, and then are resubmerged in the general tumult of the battle. Fully forty percent of Maldon, and that at the close, is devoted to a single heroic theme: loyalty and courage unto death. Here, not in Byrhtnoth's ill-fated decision at the ford, is the core of the poem. As the narrative pattern suggests, the initial portions of the poem essentially serve to prepare for its prolonged climax, wherein the tragic drama of heroism and necessity is carried to its conclusion by Byrhtnoth's loyal retainers, who, against the natural press of fear and pull of survival, prove that man is more than his fate.

In Morte Arthure, as in Beowulf, the opposition between heroism and necessity is multiform and complex. To begin, with respect to his vision of necessity, the Morte Arthure poet works squarely within the mainstream of the alliterative tradition, his view of tragedy born of a characteristically medieval perception of the instability of temporal value. Morte Arthure is, in fact, a de casibus tragedy of Fortune, a form whose structural alternations of rise and fall reflect the medieval conviction that human affairs are mutable, human endeavor vain, and all earthly goods invariably subject to time, change, chance, and death.

Structure is far from the only formal means which the poet employs to convey the role of necessity in Morte Arthure. Repeated figures such as that of the woeful widow; recurrent elegiac formulas such as rewthe es the more! awaye es for euer! and a gude mane of armes!; reiterated themes and motifs such as the fall of the warrior, the funeral, the destruction of the town; all these are as powerful and eloquent an expression of necessity as is Arthur's dream of Fortune or the de casibus form of the poem itself.

While tragedy colors every aspect of Arthur's world, it is consistently contested by examples of the heroic life, the fellowship of the Round Table everywhere opposing the ravages of Fortune with unimpeachable evidence of human worth. Moreover, Arthur's own glorious preeminence among the nine Worthies on the wheel proves that, on the very rack of Fortune, in the face of all which transcends and denies him, man's heroism bears permanent witness to his greatness.

This is all well and good; but the interplay of heroism and necessity is too intricate to be resolved at this level. Were the subversive powers of Fortune limited to the fall of the hero, conventional heroic virtues might prove sufficient to sustain the germinal tension of the heroic poem, the weight of vanity and mutability being adequately counterbalanced by martial courage, loyalty, and fame. But Fortune paradoxically proves as destructive of human value in Arthur's rise as in his fall. As the lady herself mockingly boasts, conquest and victory are her own to bestow or withhold. In triumph as in decline, the hero is bound to the turning wheel, Fortune, not man, the final arbiter of success and failure. To the extent that heroism is linked with victory, it is doomed to futility.

Thus, in the end, Arthur must--and does--achieve a form of heroism unencumbered by the equivocal relationship between conquest and Fortune, a heroism rooted in the bonds of the heroic fellowship itself. That he does so only at Cornwall, on the very eve of the battle that signals the end of the Round Table discloses a fundamental irony of de casibus tragedy: it is at the nadir of his fall rather than at the pinnacle of his rise that the hero achieves his greatest glory. At the crest of the wheel, heroism is alloyed with vanity, the conqueror unwittingly compromised by his complicity with necessity. Arthur's fall, which plunges him from the height of illusion, brings him face to face with his

mortality, in the tragic light of which he is at last able to forge a heroic response equal to the most pernicious challenges of his fate. And at Cornwall, in the gathering twilight of his heroic fellowship, Arthur finally repudiates the vainglories of Fortune, freeing himself once and for all from the lingering vestiges of that ironical dependency upon necessity which had hitherto compromised his heroism.

Although the tension between heroism and necessity in Gawain and the Green Knight is not as direct or explicit as it is in full-fledged heroic works such as Beowulf, Maldon, and Morte Arthure, the meaning of the poem rests to a considerable degree upon a unique formulation of the confrontation between man and his fate. In sum, there are essentially three modes of necessity in Gawain and the Green Knight: time, isolation, and mortality. The first, expressed primarily through the poetry of the seasons passage and the structural tensions of the Brutus bokez frame, stresses the instability of human fortunes and the vanity of human ends; the second, conveyed predominantly through the rhetoric of Gawain's two winter journeys, envisions man as a homeless exile, making his way through an alien world toward his preordained end; the third, a dominant theme of the three hunt scenes, discloses the shocks and ills to which the flesh is naturally heir, our inherited burden of weakness, fear, pain, and death. In the shadow of this three-fold necessity, Gawain's pentangle affirms the nobility of human aspirations and ideals. More specifically, each form of necessity is placed in tension with its corresponding pentagonal virtue: transience is ranged against trawþe, man's struggle to achieve permanence and stability in the temporal world; the perils of the winter journeys are set against cortaysye, man's attempt to mitigate his original isolation and alienation through social bonds; and mortality is met with

courage, which, although not actually identified as one of Gawain's pentagonal virtues, is essential to them all. Further, in Gawain and the Green Knight, courtly values such as fraunchyse and fela3schyp are exercised in the context of Gawain's heroic quest, where, set in opposition to the tragic forces of existence, rather than merely ornamenting or elevating the narrative, they testify to the knight's resolve to prove dauntless in the face of his imminent fate.

The core virtues of the chivalric code which Gawain represents are courtesy and trawþe. Insofar as we are here concerned with the heroic connotations of courtesy, it is to be understood first of all in terms of the familiar medieval opposition between the wild energies of untamed nature and the noble order of aristocratic civilization. In light of the trials and hardships of Gawain's lonely winter journeys, cortaysye--the sacraments and rituals of courtly life--is an expression of the social rules and ties by which men establish human community. In this context, the courtesy of Camelot and Hautdesert suggest a tacit recognition that men share a common condition and a common need: unless mediated by the noble passion for civilization, man's natural estate is one of isolation, privation, alienation, and exile.

Nor is it only with external nature that man must contend; he must also come to grips with his own "lower" nature. In a world where the promptings of Gawain's animal nature--his sexual urges and, more particularly, his instinct for self-preservation--jeopardize his chivalry and perhaps his very life, the knight's courtesy signifies both man's refusal to live at the level of brute instinct and his attempt to reshape life according to the highest ideals and standards of human conduct.

Gawain's most heroic quality and the cornerstone of the society he

represents is trawþe. Although not mentioned among the five fives, it is the overall virtue betokened by the pentangle itself. In a narrower and more specialized sense, trawþe represents a two-fold form of heroic fidelity; loyalty to persons, and, even more important in Gawain and the Green Knight, adherence to one's plighted word. While the emphasis given in the poem to contractual agreements might at first appear to be excessive, the fulfillment of sworn commitments is a matter of no small concern to the Gawain poet. In Gawain and the Green Knight, as in the volatile feudal society from which it springs, the pledged word of honorable men serves as a unique guarantee of social stability. Gawain's trawþe, the degree to which he honors his word and his obligations, exemplifies man's struggle for order and permanence in a world darkened by violence and uncertainty, a world where the given forces of existence, natural and temporal, threaten to overturn each and every form of human security. Trawþe represents not only the hero's commitment to his own word, but his commitment to his own worth--his fidelity to what is highest and most noble in his own heroic character. In the end, Gawain's trawþe, imperfect as it is, stands as a bulwark against necessity, proof, like Beowulf's lof--albeit in a minor key--of what honor and courage can salvage from the inevitable incursions of time, change, and death.

In conclusion, the clash between human value and necessity not only shapes the structural, narrative, and rhetorical strategies of the medieval heroic poem, it helps to distinguish heroic poetry from those kinds of verse which most closely resemble it: elegy, tragedy, battle poetry, romance, and, in a slightly different context, the medieval saint's life. At one end of the literary spectrum, the Old English elegist and the de casibus tragedian share the heroic poet's concern with the tragic forces

of existence, but not his confidence in the viability of heroism.³ At the other end, the Middle English chivalric romance and the Anglo-Saxon battle poem celebrate the values and accomplishments of heroic life, but do not set them in opposition to necessity. As for the saint's life, the genre does pit its protagonist against all which is inimical and destructive in the world, but since what transcends man in the vita is ultimately God, the saint's life represents the relationship between man and necessity as one of positive identification rather than as one of desperate confrontation.

Thus, in the end, the heroic vision of man remains singular and unique. The poets who composed Beowulf, Maldon, Morte Arthure, and Gawain and the Green Knight know as well as the most confirmed advocate of contemptus mundi that temporal life is fleeting and precarious, bound on every side by insurmountable obstacles and limitations. But they also know that so long as men--some men--aspire to live at the level of their highest potentialities, man is not reducible to the sum of his limitations. Necessity can not be circumvented; but neither is the hero invalidated by his fate. In the medieval heroic poem, human existence may be said to resemble an unresolvable mathematical equation, wherein the two terms--the tragic and the heroic--remain locked in irreconcilable struggle. Time, change, and death correspond to one side of the equation; but they are balanced by the weight of heroism. Men gain no victories over destiny; but neither are they wholly defeated. Life is transitory--but magnificent.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

CONCLUSION

¹Tolkien, Monsters, pp. 34-35.

²See for example, Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of Beowulf," 158-170.

³See Greenfield, "Beowulf and Epic Tragedy," for a wide-ranging discussion of the differences between heroic poetry and tragedy.

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