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THE HEROIC PLOT IN EPIC AND ROMANCE: A STUDY OF THE MONSTER-FIGHT MOTIF FROM "BEOWULF" TO THE "FAERIE QUEENE"

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A STUDY OF THE MONSTER-FIGHT MOTIF
FROM BEOWULF TO THE FAERIE QUEENE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Date April 3, 1981
For my brother Minoo

to whom more is due than I can ever say
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University of New Hampshire, May, 1981

This dissertation is a genre study which focuses on a literary motif, that of the Heroic Plot or the hero-monster conflict, as it appears in five major works: Beowulf, Tristan, Yvain, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and Book One of The Faerie Queene. It traces the survival of this motif from its archetypal deployment in epic song, through its various forms in the romance narratives, to its ultimate metamorphosis in Christian allegory. The recurrence of the Heroic Plot in the main stream of medieval epic and romance is historical fact, and its appearance in literature of diverse climes and ages attests to its lasting hold on the poetic imagination.

Chapter I is an introductory section which looks at the origins of the motif of the monster-fight in myth and points out its derivative implications in heroic legend. It goes on to define the nature and function of the Heroic Plot in literary art as an arduous struggle between the hero and
a monstrous adversary which is resolved in terms of direct physical combat and which serves in itself as a display of heroic worth. A brief overview of the change in the nature of the action and its use in romance narratives is also provided.

Chapter II highlights the archetypal construct of the Heroic Plot as found in Beowulf. The monsters here, though clearly superhuman creatures, are treated seriously as awesome antagonists which must be faced and destroyed in physical combat. The conflicts themselves are described in vivid detail as occurring within the external world. Heroism is defined in purely physical terms and the monster-fights are thus central in the narrative, for it is through the action itself that the physical prowess and resoluteness of will intrinsic to the warrior ideal are exemplified in the figure of the protagonist.

Chapter III illustrates two major traditions in the use of the Heroic Plot within the world of romance. It discusses the comic-parodic and the symbolic deployment of the action as most clearly observable in the Continental romances of Tristan and Yvain. The monster-fights in Tristan draw much of their strength from overturning the epic conventions, and become in themselves a direct source of humour or comic relief. They are distinctly episodic in nature and singularly lacking in thematic import. In Yvain, on the other hand, the hero-monster conflicts are serious in temper, but
the action becomes a means of indicating personal growth in character. The combats are essentially symbolic units within a plot line explicating a moral theme, and their physical dimensions are of far less significance in the narrative than their symbolic function of denoting the protagonist's inward change and moral progress. The fading of belief in the physical reality of monsters is obvious in these Continental romances, and the motif of the monster-fight appears moribund in literary art except as a vehicle for parody or symbolism.

In the English tradition of the romance, however, the Heroic Plot resurges on the physical plane with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Chapter IV notes how the monster-figure is resuscitated with the application of the faery tradition widespread in medieval England, and how the action is accordingly transformed in nature and function. The Green Knight is not a mindless beast like the monsters in the narratives seen earlier. Rather, he manifests the striking ability to probe and assess human nature, and serves to generate in the protagonist and his world a new understanding of the natural human condition. The narrative action, moreover, while still taken seriously on the physical level, details a psychological ordeal as suffered by the hero rather than a physical trial in combat. The conflict which extends our view of Gawain's praiseworthy attributes occurs indeed more in his own mind than within
the external world, and the resolution of the physical action has a much greater impact upon his own personality than upon his external environment. Sir Gawain thus indicates a critical phase in the continued relevance of the Heroic Plot, for it incorporates elements of the physical hero-monster encounter even as it anticipates the allegorical mode of The Faerie Queene.

Chapter V elucidates the metamorphosis of the Heroic Plot as discernible in Book One of The Faerie Queene. The monster-fights are presented in a manner very similar to that of epic song and the battles themselves are as axiomatic to the ideal of heroism extolled, but the arena of the action shifts from the physical world to that of psychological reality. The creatures here are in the main externalizations of aspects of the human psyche, and the combats are visualizations of the psychological struggles that take place within the human mind as an individual strives to attain moral stature. The narrative interest lies in explicating the general pattern of the internal quest for spiritual perfection, but it is the motif of the hero monster conflict that is employed as the apposite means of doing so. Belief in the physical existence of monsters may be dead, but the Heroic Plot lives on in the human imagination.
CHAPTER I

THE HEROIC PLOT

The essential element of the Heroic Plot is physical action, presented in terms of an encounter between the hero and a monstrous adversary. This kind of action can be found in most medieval narratives, and its persistence in literary tradition is undeniable. Monsters such as fearsome giants and fire-breathing dragons figure prominently not only in the eighth century epic Beowulf and the medieval romances Tristan, Yvain and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, but in the sixteenth century epic-romance The Faerie Queene.

Before taking a close look at the Heroic Plot and the changes in its nature and function, however, it would be informative to trace its origins in myth. Myth and heroic legend are similar in the presentation and treatment of action, and both function as educative forces in society. A view of the nature of myth and its great influence on the life of primitive cultural groups would thus heighten our understanding of the Heroic Plot as incorporated in the epic song.

Jan de Vries is particularly illuminating on the close relationship between myth and heroic epic. He calls
myth "the parent of heroic legend"¹ and shows how the lives of the epic heroes are in fact but "repetitions and imitations of the lives of the gods."² Working with myths and legends from all over the world, he charts the basic pattern of the heroic life and demonstrates its correspondence to that of the god in myth. As he observes, the lives of Heracles, Oedipus and Theseus in Greek legend, of Cyrus in Persian legend, of Siegfried in Germanic epic, and of Karna in Indian legend, all serve to indicate the widespread prevalence of certain common motifs, and it is indeed "remarkable that among so many nations the life-history of a hero again and again reveals the same features."³

The motifs that make up the pattern of the heroic life can be easily detailed. Generally speaking, as Vries notes, "the heroic life is a life sui generis, which does not belong to history and which cannot be lived by ordinary mortals."⁴ The hero's birth is clearly unlike that of common people, and his youth is oftentimes passed in secrecy and humiliation at variance with his noble birth or heroic potential. As a child, again, he usually exhibits his great


²Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, p. 225.

³Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, p. 218.

⁴Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, p. 209.
strength or other particular feature: a motif sometimes introduced in place of this is the very slow development of the youth to the fulfillment of his potential. Other common motifs are the hero's rescue of a maiden from a gruesome death, his visit to the underworld, and his ultimate triumph over all his enemies. Gods and supernatural agencies, again, play an important role in the heroic life. The hero, moreover, generally dies young, and his death takes place quite often in a mysterious or miraculous fashion. Vries cautions against a too-rigid application of this pattern to every heroic narrative, for it "is not necessary that the lives of all heroes should contain the complete series of these motifs." Nevertheless, he makes very explicit that the "dragon-fight . . . seem[s] almost obligatory for a hero." The fight against a dragon or some other awesome creature, then, is a central motif in heroic legend as well as in myth, where it serves to explain the creation of the universe to the primitive mind and becomes a cosmological image in keeping with the thoughts of the age. The dragon-fight in myth, as Vries remarks, is "an event in illo tempore, and belongs to the creation of the cosmos." The creature

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7 Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, p. 229.
symbolizes primeval chaos which must be overcome before ordered creation can spring into existence; the god is the divine agent whose hands alone can subdue this disruptive power and who acts selflessly to engender stability and plenty in the world; and the conflict itself is indicative of the tremendous upheaval that takes place during the process of generating peace and order. It is the power-struggle between god and chaos-monster that is made real in the sacred rituals of primitive societies. The rite is the "re-realization of an action that took place in primeval times," as Vries comments, and though its significance becomes increasingly secular and remote from myth with the passage of time, the implications are never quite lost. In blood sacrifice, for instance, the victim stands for the anarchic being that once was killed, and the rite speaks of the hope that through this act happiness can once again be engendered in the world. In the secular rites of puberty so important in primitive societies, the struggle is re-enacted in physical terms and becomes momentous as a rite de passage. The monster here symbolizes the child, the greedy, self-centered aspect of the individual which must be curbed and overcome for the communal good. The "child" must "die" to give birth to the "man" who must act from then on as a fully mature and responsible member of society. The rite thus becomes an integral communal

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8Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, p. 229.
experience which serves to define the new functions expected of the individual by his group.

In heroic legend, however, the dragon-fight is fully secularized and denuded of its cosmological signification, and the motif is integrated into the story-line simply as an event in the heroic life. The tale itself, nevertheless, projects a distinct measure of its importance as the expression of the common tradition, of the simple and positive code of the heroic age. The hero confronts the mighty creature to restore the societal order so ruthlessly disrupted, and his conduct in battle serves to highlight the values of his society. Interestingly enough, dragons are still generally associated with fabulous hoards of treasure, which can only see the light of day and be put to good use after the monster is slain. The association becomes a working-out in "story" terms of the mythic theme where the treasures of a fertile earth are engendered and made manifest through the annihilation of the chaos-monster by the god. Heroic legend, then, incorporates the motif of the battle as the effort by the champion and upholder of the common tradition to ensure the resumption of communal stability, and this "central theme in an heroic life," as Vries observes, "is an echo both of a god's first work of creation and of its imitation in the initiation ritual." 9

9 Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, p. 233.
The educative function of myth, and, by extension, of heroic legend, as the guiding light of the social group and of the individuals that comprise that group cannot be overemphasized. "It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite," as Joseph Campbell remarks, "to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward." Elsewhere, Campbell discusses the four-fold function of myth and stresses the fact that at the root of the metaphysical, cosmological, and sociological function lies the psychological purpose "of shaping individuals to the aims and ideals of their various social groups, bearing them on from birth to death through the course of a human life." This transmission of the group ethic from generation to generation is indeed an important aspect of any society, but it is absolutely essential in relatively primitive ones. As Professor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown comments in his study of the Andaman Island pygmies: "A society depends for its existence on the presence in the minds of its members of a certain system of sentiments by which the conduct of the individual is regulated in conformity with the needs of the society. . . . The sentiments in question are not innate but are developed in the individual by the action


of the society upon him."\textsuperscript{12}

The specific function of the heroic song in Germanic society is explicated by Vries, who points out that it "must have had a great educational power . . . in revealing to the warlike nobility an ideal that was bound to direct their own lives."\textsuperscript{13} The hero is the finest product of his race, the exemplar of the tradition of his age, and the recital of his deeds would inspire the listeners to live up to the example held up before them. Grönbech sums it up strikingly: "It is the \textit{aretê}, the virtue of the poet to clothe immortal deeds in immortal words. . . . Together they are the creators of honour; the heroes bring it to life through their deeds, the poets foster it, and in Greek that means that they renovate it every time."\textsuperscript{14}

With this valuable perspective on the roots of the Heroic Plot in myth and the importance of myth and heroic legend in the life of primitive man, we can now turn our attention to the Heroic Plot itself. It can be seen in its


\textsuperscript{13} Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, p. 191.

\textsuperscript{14} V. Grönbech, Hellas I, Adelstiden (1942), p. 137. Quoted by Jan de Vries, pp. 188-89. Vries considers Grönbech's comment on the role of the poet in Greek literature to accurately reflect that of the \textit{scop} in the heroic age.
simplest and purest form in Beowulf, where the hero has to combat ravening monsters. There is no other kind of action, for there is no other way for the hero to prove his mettle as a warrior except through physical battles. Against the background of dynastic wars and feuds, the hero-monster conflicts stand out in high relief. W. T. H. Jackson rightly perceives that the "grim figures of evil [in Beowulf] . . . reflect the gloomy giants and ferocious beasts whose ultimate triumph is known to Northern gods and heroes alike." The narrative of Beowulf, indeed, presents the archetype of the Heroic Plot in literature. Similarities with regard to the nature of the hero and his deeds, however, are observable in other works as well, such as the Classical epics and the Old French heroic legend The Song of Roland.

The Heroic Plot is essentially a struggle between two mighty antagonists brought face to face in combat. The action is presented in purely physical terms, and the focus remains on the physical conflict between hero and adversary. The fiercer the battle and more dangerous the outcome for the hero, the greater is his worth. The more awesome the adversary confronted, the greater is the hero's glory and the fame he wins. A human opponent, no matter how strong or powerful, cannot match the aura generated by a non-human or superhuman one as a terrifying force unleashed upon the world,

and monsters such as giants and dragons are definitively suited to their role as fearsome antagonists. The Heroic Plot, then, can be viewed as an intense power struggle between hero and superhuman monster in which the protagonist's greatness is measured in direct proportion to the might and power of the adversary so confronted.

As true as this is, it is not all. This view of the Heroic Plot in personal terms is merely one side of the coin. The action has a much wider implication, a social dimension that becomes of even greater importance as we recollect the tightly-knit structure of the social group in the heroic world. The conflict is not just one between the hero and his adversary, but one between the defender of society and a force that threatens its very existence. The hero is no mercenary, fighting merely for profit or personal gain. On the contrary, he is always conscious of his role as the deliverer of the people and lands under attack, and of himself as their sole source of aid and succour. The hero's actions have indeed a tremendous impact on the environment as he annihilates the creatures bent on the disruption and destruction of the prevailing order.

Not only is the existence of societal order at stake in the battles, but it is through society itself that the hero gains the ultimate reward of an heroic life. Lasting fame, which endures even after death, is the only measure of immortality in the heroic world, and this supreme accolade is accorded the hero by an admiring and grateful society in
recognition of his worthy actions. The bards and scops, the repositories and renewers of the common tradition, immortalize his deeds in song and thereby ensure that his memory is kept alive in the mind of his people. In the heroic age, as Jan de Vries comments, the "brave deed only becomes lasting if committed to song, as one knows [that then] it will defy time." The thirst for fame is very characteristic of the heroes of epic narratives. Beowulf and Roland are similar in this respect, as both seek fame in the service of society. Aeneas and Odysseus, again, gain renown by actions related to the re-establishment of societal order. Achilles, on the other hand, appears motivated by personal honour and fame to which even the claims of society yield ground. In this sense, Achilles is a more "individual" hero then any of the others, who are all driven to action through the concern for their respective societies.

Now that we have defined the Heroic Plot and noted its social significance, let us focus on the action and the figures involved. The concentration on physical action demands that those involved be physical realities rather than personifications of abstract concepts or qualities. As W. P. Ker observes: "The heroic age cannot dress up ideas or sentiments to play the part of characters. . . . If its characters are not men, they are nothing, not even thoughts

16 Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, p. 185.
or allegories.  

The epic hero is first and foremost a man, albeit one who has achieved the ideal of excellence in combat. The hero epitomizes the finest qualities of his tradition and embodies the virtues held in admiration by his society, but he remains nonetheless an individual in his own right.

The hero, then, is a man with powers of action greater than those exhibited by the common run of humanity. He represents the potential that all men have but few achieve. He is the most worthy man of his age, one who accomplishes what lesser men shrink from or fail to perform. He is peerless in battle: aggressive, courageous, and totally fearless. Heroism is concomitant with resoluteness of mind and strength of courage, and the hero concentrates singlemindedly on the conflict at hand, heedless and uncaring of the possible consequences to himself. Undeterred by the prospect of death or the certainty of defeat, he continues on his chosen path and is rewarded by a fame which not even death can extinguish. However, as Jackson points out, though the hero serves as a model to be emulated, his character is "not so idealized as to be unattainable," and the world in which he moves is one that a contemporary audience would find recognizably similar to its own.

The adversary, again, has physical reality, physical

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18 Literature of the Middle Ages, p. 190.
concreteness, and must be faced and overcome by purely physical means. The antagonist, moreover, must be an awesomely powerful one, an adversary worthy of the hero. The combatants are generally evenly matched, as are Charlemagne and Baligant in *The Song of Roland* or Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad*, where the whole course of the respective wars trembles in balance until the opposition is crushed. At times, however, the scale of balance weighs ostensibly in favour of the adversary, as when Odysseus and Telemachus face the garrison of the suitors, or when Aeneas battles with Turnus (whose charioteer is a goddess). The possibility of defeat makes the conflict hold a degree of suspense, and the subsequent victory becomes the more commendable. In Germanic epic, the fight in a narrow place against overwhelming odds is distinctively characteristic. The monsters in *Beowulf* are indeed incalculable and terrifying forces which can be checked—if at all—by the hero alone; he is definitively the only man possessing the strength and ability to do so.

The action in which these mighty figures engage reflects their stature. It is almost cataclysmic by implication, and the hero remains ever-conscious of the life-and-death nature of the conflict. Richard Sewall makes a pertinent observation when he remarks that "the epic hero . . . deals with emergencies rather than dilemmas." The action remains

indeed terrifyingly simple in the options open to the hero. There is only one path he can tread, on which he is impelled forward by his code, even though it may lead to certain death. He is not permitted either the time or the luxury to agonize over a decision regarding his course of action. The situation shrieks of immediacy, and the hero unhesitatingly answers the call.

Stanley Greenfield points out another interesting aspect of the action as being one that "does not necessarily involve evil." As is obvious, the heroic conflict is basically pre-Christian in presentation and application, and when "evil appears, however great and terrifying, it is formally contained." In the Classical epics, the adversaries are not viewed as being specifically evil—not even Paris, though the abduction of Helen sets in motion a chain of destructive events culminating in the dissolution of an entire civilization. In the Germanic epic, the viewpoint remains the same. Evil is presented through the actual figures of the monsters. It is not an evil from within man's nature or universally present in society at large. The havoc wrought by the creatures is limited to certain specific lands

XIV (1962), 99. Greenfield agrees with Sewall's observation as applied to Beowulf but expresses some reservations about its application to the Classical epics and to Roland.

20 "Beowulf and Epic Tragedy," Comp. Lit., XIV (1962), 98.

21 "Beowulf and Epic Tragedy," p. 98.
and is tangible in effect. The monsters, again, are defeated in physical confrontations and, with their deaths, the nations are purged of the evil that plagues them. Their appearance is not a moral comment on the society under siege. Nor is there any indication that some other of their ilk may not arise in the future to be similarly confronted: the victory gained, the resolution achieved, is never seen as permanent or eternal in nature. The same holds true in The Song of Roland where Christians and Pagans battle for supremacy in war, even though the Christian ethic is clearly at work in the poem and the action.

Moreover, the inevitable fate of the hero does not detract from the worth of his achievements. The renown gained during life by his formidable exploits does not fade with his death but is often increased and strengthened thereby. Roland's small force is hopelessly outnumbered by the pagan hordes; Beowulf faces the monsters fully conscious that each encounter may well prove his last; and Achilles chooses to win fame through his deeds at the cost of dying young rather than live to an inglorious old age. The hero is aware of his own mortality and of the fact that the only certainty in life is death, but he presses on regardless of the danger or the consequences. It is not the fact of death but the manner of the death and the way it is faced that remain of critical importance in the epic. As Greenfield comments, we "view with awe, more than with admiration, the pride and resolution that, in conformity with accepted patterns of behavior, take
such heroes in their consciousness of Fate into visible and mortal conflict. 22

The arena within which the epic conflict is worked out deserves almost as much attention as the figures involved in the action or the action itself. Supernatural elements are all-pervasive and at times actively affect the action and its outcome. In the Classical epic, gods and goddesses are not only the ultimate initiators of the action, but participate in the events and aid their respective favourites whenever necessary or possible. However, even the gods themselves are governed by the Morae, the Fates, who reign supreme over human as well as divine affairs and to whom all else is subordinate. Fate or Destiny, indeed, becomes almost a presence in the Germanic epic. It is a force of which the heroic world is ever-conscious. Its unfathomable decrees must yet be accepted without subjugated surrender or whining complaint, and the hero strives to do the best he can for as long as he can within the limitations imposed by an inscrutable Fate. In Classical as well as Germanic epic, notes Greenfield, "Destiny seems to brood over the vast abyss of epic life and subsume human will to its purposes," and the ultimate effect of the narratives is to leave on the audience "an impression of historic destiny that binds human activity to its will." 23 In The Song of Roland, where the Christian

22 "Beowulf and Epic Tragedy," p. 106.
23 "Beowulf and Epic Tragedy," p. 96.
ethic prevails, it is God who participates in the action. Fate the all-mighty is here supplanted by the Almighty Himself. God ranges Himself directly on the Frankish side, and victory is thus granted the Frankish host against the heathens who are strangers to His favour. The main power in epic, then, is always something above and beyond human beings. Whether called God or Fate, it is a controlling and encompassing force that draws all to itself in a way never to be fully comprehended by the human mind. The hero is one who accepts that and lives out his life committed to his ideals, even as round every corner death beckons with a shadowy finger. What, indeed, could we call more "heroic"?

The Heroic Plot, as detailed above, comprises the entire action of the epic song of Beowulf and functions directly to illuminate character and theme. Though the Heroic Plot still figures in the world of romance, it is no longer as central to the narrative concerns. The knights may encounter monsters and slay them in combat, but the nature of the action and its significance is modified in keeping with new thematic interests.

In Beowulf, physical action is not only the very basis of the episodes in the narrative but, being the sole mode of delineating heroic worth, it becomes all-important as the means of explicating the general theme. The epic hero embodies the best of his tradition and society, a society geared towards war and with its ethic focused on combat. The hero represents a stabilizing force in action against an
opposing power causing disorder and chaos in society. Accordingly, the hero remains a fundamentally static character in that he does not undergo any significant or unexpected changes in his nature or fortune. As Scholes and Kellogg point out: "The epic plot is to a certain extent bespoken by epic characterization. The plot is inherent in the concept of the protagonist, but that concept is not realized in the narrative until his character is expressed through action." In each situation, just as it is Beowulf's very nature which impels him to act, so the incident itself serves to bring out his admirable qualities. The hero's course of action, moreover, appears fixed, almost preordained by an "historic destiny;" there is no circumventing the fate in store, hard and unyielding as it may be. The hero, the action, and the theme of epic indeed all deal with a society under attack.

In the romance, however, societal order is clearly defined and its stability taken for granted. Chivalric society is formally graded with the aristocratic group of knights at the apex, and the romance ethic pertains specifically and solely to this particular stratum of society. Moreover, society itself recedes into the distance and becomes merely an elaborately detailed background to the set on which the knight engages in battle. The preservation of societal order is no longer a motive for the action. The narrative

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focuses instead on the inner development of the individual hero as indicated through his actions, through the physical confrontations with his adversaries. Romance, unlike heroic epic, generally presents a character whose "personal traits are attenuated so as to clarify his progress along a plot line which has an ethical basis."\(^{25}\) The protagonist learns from his experiences, from actions that seriously affect his fortunes (including his thoughts, feelings and attitudes), and so is a different person at the end from what he was at the beginning.

This change in approach towards plot and characterization is of especial importance in Western literary tradition, as it emphasizes the fact that epic precedes romance in an historical line of descent. Nathaniel Griffin regards the theme and action of epic as characteristic "of isolated peoples, who preserved their birthright intact and uncorrupted by outside influences," while those of romance he sees as characteristic "of a people that has come in contact with an alien civilization and that has allowed its ancestral traditions to be contaminated, if not altogether undermined, by the infiltration of new ideas."\(^{26}\) However, though Griffin considers the establishment of chivalry and the rise of interest in courtly love as being significant in instituting

\(^{25}\) Scholes and Kellogg, p. 169.

\(^{26}\) "The Definition of Romance," PMLA, XXXVII (1923), 57.
the change, R. W. Southern attributes the process specifically to the advent of Christianity, which altered traditional beliefs and changed the view of the place of human beings in the world. Southern explicates the tempering influence of the Christian ethic: "Briefly, we find less talk of life as an exercise in endurance, and of death in a hopeless cause, and we hear more of life as a seeking and a journeying. Men begin to order their experience more consciously in accordance with a plan; they think of themselves less as stationary objects of attack by spiritual foes, and more as pilgrims and seekers." The Christian mode of thought generates a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of individual life and induces a more complex view of the nature of action. As Scholes and Kellogg observe, the "concept of the developing character who changes inwardly is quite a late arrival in narrative, ... [and] is primarily a Christian element."27

The difference between epic and romance, then, can be best characterized as the change from an expression of a public morality to a private one, from a pre-Christian world view to a Christian one. This shift in emphasis signifies the emergence of the Knight as hero, who supersedes the


28 Nature of Narrative, p. 165.
concept of the Warrior as hero. "It is the heroic ideal of the warrior," as Jan de Vries remarks, "to be strong and courageous, to conquer all opponents, and so to win fame with posterity." 29 This ideal postulates a hero whose actions are comprehensible to his world at all times. His trials are thus necessarily those of visible and direct physical combat, in which he proves himself the worthy upholder of the common tradition and the stalwart defender of his society. The knight, however, is for the most part quite isolated in the performance of his deeds, which generally take place within an arena far removed from the eyes of his peers. Within this individualized field of action, he is no longer the exponent of the societal ethic, and he becomes instead the tester and validator of a more personal set of values. His trials are usually tests of his psychological quality, of his inner strength and spiritual fibre.

The knightly ideal, moreover, remains quite explicitly "ideal" in both presentation and application. As Jackson observes: "It can hardly be doubted that the knights of the Round Table were expected to behave in a way far more noble, more generous, and more cultured than the living knights of their day. Their behaviour was in fact an example to be imitated but never attained." 30 The heroic ideal, on the

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29 Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, p. 180.
30 Literature of the Middle Ages, p. 88.
other hand, is in fact more democratic than it appears for, though it pertains to leaders and kings, it remains one to which all of society could relate and one which each warrior could strive to incorporate in his own actions on the battlefield. Significantly enough, it is the romance emphasis on "the inner values of the knightly ideal which caused the connections with the real things of this earth to become ever more fictitious and devoid of practical purpose," as Erich Auerbach points out.\(^{31}\) The epic remains indeed "mainly positive and sensible"\(^{32}\) in its approach towards the action, which is necessitated either by practical circumstance (to kill the ravager of society) or by the heroic code of its world (to battle against overwhelming odds with unwavering courage and fortitude). In direct contrast, the romance postulates no such real social function or motivation for the knight, and the values expressed in the feudal ethic "are all directed towards a personal and absolute ideal—absolute both in reference to ideal realization and in reference to the absence of any earthly and practical purpose."\(^{33}\)

Equally significant is the fact that while epic

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\(^{32}\) Ker, p. 8.

\(^{33}\) Auerbach, p. 134.
focuses on a few earth-shattering confrontations between hero and monster, the activity presented in romance is in the form of avventure or random adventure. The knight, unlike the epic hero, is totally unaware at the start of what is in store for him, and the course of his activities appears to be determined indeed more by casual chance than an inexorable Fate. The fights themselves, moreover, are random and manifold; as Auerbach comments, the "fantastic encounters and perils present themselves to the knight as if from the end of an assembly line." The monstrous adversaries, again, no longer exhibit the same awesomely destructive powers of action as do those in epic, and the fading of belief in their actual physical presence as forces to be reckoned with in the world is clearly reflected in the manner and quantity in which they figure in the narratives.

It is obvious, however, that the heroic ethic has not been completely shelved in the romance. Physical prowess remains a significant criterion for measuring the knight's stature as a hero, though it is no longer the sole criterion. The action is still largely depicted in terms of physical conflicts, but the interest is now more in drawing out the protagonist's inner state of mind or personal development in character. Correspondingly, the Heroic Plot is modified in the manner of its presentation and use. And so it must be,

34"The Knight Sets Forth," p. 135.
for as the centuries go by and the framework of society changes, so too do its values and the way they are expressed in narrative art. We have seen how heroic legend displaces myth and, in turn, is displaced by romance. Paralleling this movement, we find an emphasis on inner strength and spiritual quality taking a deeper, stronger, and more comprehensive hold on the poetic imagination. The Heroic Plot, the straightforward expression of the Anglo-Saxon ethic, is accordingly transmuted through the ages and incorporated into the service of the relatively new tradition which achieves its earliest English apotheosis in *The Faerie Queene*.

More than eight centuries yawn between the song of *Beowulf* and the writing of *The Faerie Queene*. During that time, kingdoms rise and fall, and the structure of society alters beyond recognition. Cultural mores modulate, as does the *modus vivendi*. The Christian mode of thought replaces the Germanic point of view. The ideal of human heroism is transformed to focus explicitly on spiritual fibre and moral strength. But the Heroic Plot endures in literary tradition. Belief in the physical reality of monstrous creatures capable of disrupting societal peace and order may wither with the passing of time, but the motif of the monster-fight is too firmly entrenched in the human imagination for it to be summarily dislodged or discarded. It survives through adaptation, and a line of continuity can be traced from its archetypal mode in *Beowulf*, through its various forms in the romance narratives of *Tristan*, *Yvain*, and *Sir Gawain and the*
Green Knight, to its ultimate metamorphosis in Book One of The Faerie Queene.

Probably because of its mythic origins, the Heroic Plot has perennial appeal. Its recurrence in literary tradition is historical fact, and its appearance in the main stream of medieval epic and romance is indisputable. Its persistence in literary art is indeed all the more remarkable for the very spontaneity of that occurrence. It is not a matter of direct influence or deliberate imitation, for the motif of the monster-fight is integrated into the plot structure of each poem simply as an apposite means of developing or explicating the thematic intent. Its reappearance in literature of sundry climes and diverse ages, nevertheless, attests to its innate value and to its power of appealing to the poets' variety of interests. An analysis of its presentation in the five major works under scrutiny here, then, would serve to illuminate its lasting hold on the poetic vision. And only a knowledge of its archetypal construct in Beowulf enables us to understand and appreciate its deployment in the subsequent narratives.
CHAPTER II

THE ARCHETYPE IN BEOWULF

Beowulf is an heroic epic. In essence, then, it is a song of praise which extolls the martial exploits of a great hero and ensures that his fame will live forever in the world. In an age riven with war and strife, the pre-eminent warrior naturally becomes the exalted ideal of a worthy man. His actions set the ultimate standards which the audience is exhorted to maintain and uphold. The recital of his deeds becomes a source of inspiration for the society of which he is a part, for the race and culture of which he is the epitome. The heroic song serves indeed not only as the hero's lasting memorial, but as the crucible within which the tradition and values of the heroic world are crystallized.

If such an analysis of Beowulf appears simple-minded and puerile, particularly in the light of most modern interpretations of the work, it is nonetheless a traditional reading of a poem in which simplicity and directness are major strengths. It is unfortunate that modern criticism tends to impose upon the narrative a design and purpose which is totally alien to heroic epic. As Morton Bloomfield points out: "It was not that the Beowulf-poet had a personal view to give to the world by means of objective correlatives as a romantic poet might have, but rather he wished to present the
res gestas of a hero so that he may be remembered, to give his audience new strength and a model. His artistry was primarily used to attain that goal."¹ Beowulf is a poem which is deeply rooted in strong communal beliefs and which celebrates the common tradition of its age. Though the heroic ethic may no longer be valid in the world, within the poem itself it still lives and endures.

"Man needs an ideal in accordance with which he can shape his life," notes Jan de Vries,² and Beowulf is presented as just such a figure for the heroic age. He is, and remains throughout the narrative, the Anglo-Saxon ideal of perfection. There is no development in his character, since there is nothing for him to learn and no necessity for him to change. He is always held up for admiration as a great man and a great warrior. His heroism is consistently praised, without irony or reservation, by the poet as well as by the other characters in the poem. Beowulf lives and dies in a blaze of glory, his worth and renown undiminished by the physical fact of death.

The warrior ideal can be exemplified only through battle, and the entire action of the narrative is thus comprised of the hero's fights against the three monsters.


² Heroic Song and Heroic Legend, p. 189.
The adversaries are distinctive forces that ravage society and disrupt the peace and stability of the social world. They are clearly evil creatures whose actions are never justified or condoned. Beowulf is good, and the monsters are bad: these facts are never in doubt in terms of a traditional reading of the poem. Any conflict in which the powers of good and evil are so obviously ranged on opposing sides may gather symbolic overtones, but in Beowulf the symbolism remains of secondary consequence. The monsters, though supernatural creatures, are taken and treated seriously on the realistic level. They are presented as physical entities which must be overcome in combat, external adversaries which must be destroyed by physical means. Their function in the narrative is very clear in terms of the action itself: they are the mighty antagonists against whom the heroic ideal can be defined, against whom Beowulf proves himself the warrior-hero par excellence.

The Heroic Plot, the battle between hero and monster, is presented in its archetypal form in the poem. The confrontations here serve directly to illuminate the character of Beowulf and sharpen the delineation of the social ideal. Beowulf moves from success to success, exhibiting his exemplary nature and gathering greater and greater glory through his exploits. His death becomes in itself the final affirmation of the heroic code which he exemplifies, by which he lives and acts. For heroism in Beowulf is not a moral, spiritual or theological abstraction. The heroic
ideal is a practical one, specifically related to the war-oriented temper of Anglo-Saxon society. The emphasis in Beowulf remains indeed on the social tradition that the hero exemplifies even in death, and the poem celebrates the warrior ethic by detailing the exploits that best illustrate the protagonist's stature and character.

As Jackson remarks, "Beowulf is the story of a man," but the poem is yet "selective in the sense that it concentrates on the points in the hero's career which best illustrate his great qualities."3 Everything in the narrative is cohesively blended towards this single purpose. The narrative focuses on those incidents through which the nature of the heroism extolled can be best detailed. The poem highlights the hero's exceptional qualities as brought out in combat, and it celebrates the great achievements of an heroic life by the focus on the physical conflicts in which the protagonist is seen in action. All the admirable attributes of a warrior are made concrete in the figure of Beowulf and are displayed at every turn in his actions. The hero is delineated in conformity with the ideals of the heroic age, and he remains from first to last the "superlative of every man's positive."4 His attitude in battle reflects the ethical code of his society, and his actions typify the excellence in combat

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3 *Literature of the Middle Ages*, p. 184.

expected of the individual by his world. Throughout the narrative, Beowulf remains "the incarnation of the heroic spirit." He is the man of supreme merit whose great potential is fulfilled through his great deeds, and we are always "conscious of the ways in which he not only accepts but asserts to the fullest extent the values of the world he lives in."6

With true epic simplicity, Beowulf is introduced into the narrative as the hero that he is:

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se was moncynnnes       mægenes strengest
on þæm dæge            þysses lifes,
æpel ond eacen.         (196-98)
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[In his strength he was the mightiest of all mankind in that day and age; he was of high birth, and of more than human stature.]7

Beowulf's physical attributes are indication enough of his heroic nature, and his actions bear out the promise inherent in his appearance. The hero stands out in any company. His sterling quality cannot be overlooked; it shines forth, visible

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5Edward B. Irving, A Reading of Beowulf (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 82.

6Irving, p. 129.

to all. He is obviously geoboren betera (1703), as Hrothgar observes, a man born for true greatness. The course of Beowulf's life is less of his own making than one preordained for him by the same higher power that endowed him with his great strength. His physical might, his mægen, singles him out as a man of destiny, and it is his high destiny, his heahgesceap (3084), that Beowulf follows to the very end.

Unlike Heremod, who failed to live up to his mægenes wynnum (1716), Beowulf utilizes his power to the fullest in the service of society. The hero is always conscious of his role, the role of every warrior, as the protector of nations tyrannized by external enemies. The champion comes to Hrothgar's aid against Grendel and eliminates the unexpected threat posed by the Dam in the same heroic fashion that he rises to the defence of his own people against the Dragon. He acts in order to purge the lands of the creatures that plague them and so gains the lasting renown that is his due. His motives of action are firmly entrenched in the code of the Germanic world that he embodies and exemplifies. The hero's confidence in his ability to act as the champion of his society and his thirst for glory are to be regarded as positive virtues rather than as flaws in his character. In an age where war is a way of life, it is only by physical

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8As Morton Bloomfield observes, "Motivations and reasons are embedded in the narrative level itself." See his article, "Episodic Motivation and Marvels in Epic and Romance," rpt. in Essays and Explorations, p. 103.
means that a stable society can be created and guarded, and
the desire for glory serves as a spur to worthy action. \(^9\) Beowulf's own words are the purest utterance of the code
in light of which his deeds are to be commended:

\[
\text{Ure } \text{æghwylc sceal } \quad \text{ende gebidan} \\
\text{worolde lifes;} \quad \text{wyerce se be mote} \\
\text{domes } \text{ær deape;} \quad \text{þæt bid } \text{drihtguman} \\
\text{unlifgendum } \text{æfter selest}. \\
\]

(1386-89)

[We must each come to the end of life in this world; 
let him who can do so win renown before death, for 
that is the finest thing left to a lifeless man.]

Heremod, who used his strength with arrogant disregard for 
his people and his society, was hated and reviled for his 
actions. Beowulf, who uses his might in the service of 
society by restoring the peace and stability threatened by 
the incursions of the monsters, is accorded the supreme 
reward for an heroic life: lasting renown that endures even 
after death.

The monsters confronted by Beowulf are central to the 
narrative interests. In order to drive home the importance 
of Beowulf's actions, his adversaries are described with 
increasing emphasis on their terrifyingly superhuman--almost 
elemental--dimensions. Grendel is of the earth. He is the

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\(^9\) Edward Irving highlights the significance of the desire 
for fame in his Introduction to Beowulf (Englewood Cliffs, 
N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969). He observes: "Personal and in-
dividual as it is, this drive toward fame is also the 
structural basis of heroic society" (p. 21).
notorious wanderer that stalks the moors, the *maere mearcstapa* (103). None of the Danish host can defeat this creature, and his ravages go on unchecked for twelve long years. His onslaughts are detailed in graphic terms: Grendel dismembers his unfortunate victims and eats them with grim enthusiasm, biting into muscles and drinking blood (739-45). This monster, invulnerable to weapons, is yet bravely faced by the hero, and his subjection of the Danes finally comes to an end. The Dam is not as powerful as her awful son, nor is she as bloodthirsty. Nevertheless, she is a thing of horror, *se broga* (1291), whose very appearance inspires paralyzing terror. She is the monstrous woman, the *brimwy[l][f]* (1506), whose realm is the waters of the foul mere. The hero must track her to her underwater domain and fight her in unfamiliar surroundings. This encounter is a much more perilous one for Beowulf, and it is only with great difficulty that he triumphs once again. The final adversary, the awesome Dragon, is the most destructive and powerful one of all. He is the dread creature of air and *fyre*, *fyre gefysed* (2309), who destroys the countryside with wrathful flames. The hero, unlike the cowardly thanes who flee from the battlefield, fights against the Dragon with unfaltering courage and does not retreat from the confrontation even when mortally wounded. The manner in which Beowulf conducts himself in the very shadow of death is his greatest victory, and not even death itself can tarnish the hero's merit. Beowulf dies indeed at the height of his glory, after having slain the most
fearsome adversary of all.

It is through the battles that the heroic values are detailed and commemorated in the figure of the hero. Sequentially graduated, the three conflicts form a progression where the measure of the hero's worth is in direct proportion to the physical power of the adversary defeated in combat. The fights depict different facets of the "ideal of personal heroism" which includes attributes both of body and mind: the first exalts strength of body, the second exalts strength of spirit, and the third exalts both in the manner in which the champion faces death. The poet artistically links together setting, character, and action to form a perfectly related whole born of "the social desire to recall and memorialize a hero." Edward Irving sums up the nature of the narrative with striking truth when he remarks that to "write of the hero in Beowulf is to write of everything in the poem, for there is nothing that does not serve in some sense to illuminate the character of the protagonist."

The focus remains on the physical nature of the battles and of the antagonists seen in action. As J. R. R. R.


11 Morton Bloomfield, in his review of Sisam's Structure of Beowulf, p. 279.

12 Reading of Beowulf, p. 43.
Tolkien observes, the "large symbolism is near the surface, but it does not break through, nor become allegory." The evil confronted is a physical threat to society which must be met and destroyed on its own terms. The first conflict is physical in the strictest sense, might against might. Beowulf grips Grendel's hand in his firm clasp and holds fast. The hero's trust in his mægen stands him here in good stead. The monster's supernatural might is yet no match for Beowulf's own force and power. Caught in the champion's mighty hold, Grendel's fingers crack under the strain. His sinews tear apart, his bones break, and his entire arm is wrenched off at the shoulder. The creature ultimately slinks back to his fen refuge, but he leaves behind his claw, his grape (836), as visible token of the mortal injury suffered at the hero's hands.

The Beowulf-Grendel fight, then, is literally a hand-in-hand struggle between two physically powerful entities, and the stress is on the awesome extent of the champion's physical strength. In the battle against the Dam, however, the emphasis is not so much on Beowulf's physical might as on the power of his indomitable will. The poet makes explicit that the Dam's physical capacity is less than that of Grendel for she is, after all, a woman (1282-87). Yet the second encounter requires more of the hero. Unlike Grendel, the

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Dam does not remain on the defensive. She uses weapons and fights back with forceful vigour. The battle itself is arduous, and Beowulf is strained to the utmost. So fierce and lengthy is this confrontation that at one point the champion stumbles with weariness and falls to the ground. It is the Dam who now has the dominating position in the struggle, and she does not hesitate to use her advantage. Her death-dealing thrust, however, is fortunately deflected by the hero's sturdy corselet, and disaster is averted. Refusing to accept defeat in tame surrender, Beowulf forces himself back upon his feet and resumes the fight. The action makes very clear indeed that the hero's matchless mægen is here not sufficient in itself to ensure the victory. It is Beowulf's resoluteness of will, which does not falter even at the darkest moment, that obviously carries him through to the ultimate triumph.

The resolution of this combat, moreover, is decided by a higher power, as the poet interrupts the action to explain:

\[ \text{Rodera Rædend} \]
\[ \text{hit on ryht gesced} \]
\[ \text{yðelice,} \]
\[ \text{syþan he eft astod.} \]

\( (1554-56) \)

[It was easy for the Wise Lord, Ruler of the Heavens, to decide this matter according to justice, when Beowulf had risen again to his feet.]

The outcome is determined on ryht according to the immediate situation. Once Beowulf is gamely on his feet again, he clearly deserves to win, and does. The action is indeed
perfectly consistent with the heroic tone of the epic. A
divine power\textsuperscript{14} intervenes, albeit indirectly, on behalf of
the hero at a time of dire stress, after the champion proves
his worth through his own conduct. If Beowulf had despaired
of victory and resigned himself to the seemingly inevitable,
as the poet makes explicit, triumph in battle would have been
denied. The conflict subsequently comes to a speedy close.
Beowulf's eyes light on a sword, an \textit{ealdsweord eotenisc} (1558)
too huge and heavy for use by any other man. The champion,
marked out by his fate, has no difficulty in drawing this
mighty weapon from its fastenings. Despite his fatigue,
Beowulf wields the ancient artifact with killing strength.
At his very first stroke, the sword slices cleanly through
the bones of his adversary's neck, and the Dam is slain.

Against the Dragon, however, neither strength nor
resolution can prevail. In this final conflict, the outcome
is indeed never in doubt. The narrative makes clear from
the start that both Beowulf and the Dragon are to die in
combat in accordance with the decrees of Destiny (2341-44).
Though aware that his end is nigh, the noble warrior faces
his antagonist with undiminished valour. Steadfast and
unflinching to the very last, Beowulf remains exemplary in

\textsuperscript{14}William Whallon argues against the common editorial
tendency to equate the OE word \textit{god} with the Christian Deity in "The Idea of God in Beowulf," \textit{PMLA}, LXXX (1965), 19-28. As Whallon points out, "many of the most common OE names of
god . . . refer to similar forces in ON legend," and they
should not be identified with the Christian idea of God (p. 19).
his conduct. Though in obvious difficulties throughout the battle, the hero never falters or retreats. Even when mortally wounded, he presses on with true heroic courage. Beowulf is aided in this struggle by his kinsman Wiglaf, who strikes the Dragon so that his scorching flames abate. Nevertheless, it is the champion's hand that ultimately inflicts the death-blow to the monster, and the honours of the victory are specifically accorded to Beowulf both by Wiglaf and the poet. As Wiglaf says in his eulogy, Beowulf lives and dies in accordance with his great destiny: Heold on heahgesceap (3084).

Beowulf indeed sings in swelling lines of a mighty hero and his mighty deeds. Just as each conflict demands more of the champion, so his glory increases with each successive fight. There is, however, no real change in the nature or character of Beowulf. What we find is but a deepening and strengthening of the protagonist's heroic attributes. Tolkien mistakes the issue when he remarks that Beowulf gives us "a contrasted description of two great moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death." According to Tolkien, the hero's youthful vigour and enthusiasm are evident in his early combats but, old and enfeebled in his struggle.

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15 "Monsters and the Critics," p. 271.
against the Dragon, Beowulf dies. The text itself, however, gives no indication of such a contrast in the figure of the hero. The renowned warrior is still in full possession of his maegenstrengo (2678), and so powerful are his blows that his weapon shatters, as always, with the force of his thrusts (2669-87). Moreover, Beowulf is as firm and stouthearted in this battle, as stigmod (2567), as he has always been. There is indeed no alteration in the quality of his strength or the temper of his spirit.

Nor is there any contrast in the nature of the hero's achievements. As the narrative makes clear, the slaying of the Dragon is Beowulf's final triumph, the last of his great deeds:

\[ \textit{siδas[t] sigehwile worlde geweорces.} \]

(2709-11)

[For the prince, this was the last time that he would win victory by his own deeds, the last of his great acts in this world.]

Beowulf succeeds in overcoming the monster and, though he dies, the victory is not lessened nor his glory tarnished. We cannot agree with Tolkien's observation on the nature of the final conflict: "Defeat is the theme. Triumph over the foes of man's precarious fortresss is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly the inevitable victory of death."\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{16}\)"Monsters and the Critics," p. 274.
The poet leaves us in no doubt that Beowulf gains not only the victory in this battle but the enduring renown that all men strive for and seek to obtain. The poem itself is the exultant assertion of the fact that the hero has transcended mortality and is triumphant even over death. The tone of the narrative is indeed much closer to that of The Battle of Maldon than that of The Wanderer. Beowulf is not so much "an heroic-elegiac poem"\(^{17}\) mourning the defeat of a great hero and the transience of all life in this world as it is an heroic-celebraic poem commemorating the immortalizing the heroic ideal exemplified in the figure of the protagonist.

W. P. Ker gives us an even more obvious misreading of the text than Tolkien. Ker regards the poem as "defective from the first in respect of plot."\(^{18}\) He remarks: "The principal actions in Beowulf are curiously trivial, taken by themselves. . . . In the killing of a monster like Grendel, or in the killing of a dragon, there is nothing particularly interesting; no complication to make it a fit subject for epic."\(^{19}\)

\(^{17}\) "Monsters and the Critics," p. 275.

\(^{18}\) *Epic and Romance*, p. 165.

\(^{19}\) *Epic and Romance*, p. 165. Ker observes that "the plot in itself has no very great poetical value; as compared with the tragic themes of the Nibelung legend, with the tale of Finnesburgh, or even with the historical seriousness of the Maldon poem, it lacks weight." He feels that Beowulf incorporates the stuff of "old wives' tales" and therefore lacks true "epic dignity."
Tolkien's interpretation of Beowulf attempts to draw out the epic dignity and importance denied the poem by views like those of Ker. Tolkien succeeds in driving home the facts that the monster-fights are to be taken seriously in themselves and that they are central to the poetic interests. His reading of the text, however, fails to bring forth the significance of all three battles as a means of highlighting the heroic values. The ideal presented in the poem is one that pertains directly to the heroic age, and it is set forth through situations to which the contemporary audience could relate. For the Anglo-Saxon people, the establishment and preservation of social stability was an ever-present concern, and the hero-monster conflicts are depicted as wars within the world with the fate of society itself trembling in balance. As Dorothy Whitelock observes: "It is not necessary to give mythological or allegorical significance to the monsters before the central theme can achieve dignity . . . the account of the rescue of a people from the ravages of monsters would seem no less worthy of serious treatment than that of its delivery from a hostile army."\(^{20}\)

It is indeed through the acceptance of monsters as physically powerful creatures operating within the world that the nature of Beowulf's heroism can be best understood. We may today no longer believe in the actual existence of

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supernatural entities such as giants and dragons, but we must refrain from imposing our own beliefs—or non-beliefs—upon a narrative written during an earlier age. "Although Beowulf and his exploits are clearly fictional," as Bloomfield points out, "it is by no means clear that the poet thought so."\(^{21}\) Much of the narrative effect is lost, and its essential message obscured, if we regard the figures involved in the action as merely literary devices by which the poet conveys his own personal idea or vision to the world.

A closer look at the monsters makes evident that they are presented as they are to be viewed, as physical foes and the enemies of human society. Each of the monsters is delineated with emphasis on its corporeal nature; each has a distinct and individual personality of its own in keeping with the action in which it takes part; and, most importantly, each is taken seriously by the hero and the poet as a destructive force working against human society. The manner in which the creatures are treated in the narrative lends credence to Whitelock's observation that the "average man [among the audience of Beowulf] would believe in the monsters, in the creatures of evil lurking in the wastelands round him."\(^{22}\) However, the issue regarding contemporary belief in the physical reality of monsters cannot be resolved with any

\(^{21}\) Review of Sisam's *Structure of Beowulf*, p. 279.

\(^{22}\) *Audience of Beowulf*, p. 76.
degree of certainty, for the evidence remains shrouded in the mists of antiquity. All we may deduce is that the

23The question of belief in the monsters is not an irrelevant digression but rather an issue extremely pertinent to our present concern. As Bloomfield remarks: "We must know what a poem meant [to a contemporary audience] before we can fully know what it means" (review of *The Structure of Beowulf*, p. 278). It is, however, difficult to settle the issue with certainty. Dorothy Whitelock refers to the work of the English Place-Name Society which "has in late years made it clear how deep-seated and widespread was the belief in goblins and ogres who haunted remote places" (*The Audience of Beowulf*, pp. 71-72). She notes that a name applied to Grendel in the poem, Æðrs, occurs in place-names in many and diversely situated areas. Again, R. W. Chambers records the name of Grendel as appearing in legal grants of land listed in the Anglo-Saxon Charters from A. D. 708 right until A. D. 792, in which "Grendel's Pit" and "Grendel's Mere" figure as accepted and sufficient terms to mark off boundaries (*Beowulf: An Introduction*, pp. 304-307). But it cannot be determined when exactly these names were first given or how literally they would have been regarded as denoting the lairs of physical monsters. All we may infer is that creatures like the Grendels would have been believed in to some extent, much in the same fashion that we today believe in the existence of ghosts or haunted houses.

Interestingly enough, the Christian allusions remain localized in the Grendel episodes. The monsters are seen in the narrative as living denizens of the earth but not part of God's own creation; they are explicitly described as descendents of Cain, the first shedder of human blood, from whom were spawned all evil creatures like the Grendels, all the eotenas, ylfe, orcneas and gigantas that warred against God (112-114). Dorothy Whitelock speculates: "Perhaps the strongest evidence of all for the belief in the monsters is that it was found necessary to fit them into a Christian universe. If poet and audience had thought of Grendel and his kind as figments of the imagination, the poet would not have gone to such trouble to explain their descent" (p. 72). Indeed, the Christian dimension in no way alters the essential function of these creatures in the narrative as hostile figures that induce disorder in the social peace of the sixth century Germanic world of the poem.

Once the Dragon appears on the scene, however, references to God and Providence fade from the narrative as Fate explicitly gathers up control of human affairs and human destiny. The
creatures were believed in to an extent and that they were
not summarily dismissed as merely fabulous creations of the
poetic imagination. There is indeed nothing in the text of
Beowulf that negates this cautious conjecture and much to
support it.

For the fact remains: the Beowulf-poet uses the archetypal motif of the power-struggle between hero and monster
not once but three times in the narrative. In each case,
the hero's worth is linked directly to the physical power
and force of the adversary slain in combat, and in each case

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Dragon is accepted as part of the natural, pre-existing order,
and there is no attempt to explain its existence in the
Sons Ltd., 1953), as late as the entry for the year A. D. 793
(pp. 54, 56), dragons are recorded as flying in the air,
ominous heralds of disaster:

793: In this year terrible portents appeared in North-
umbria, and miserably frightened the inhabitants: these
were exceptional flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons
were seen flying in the air, and soon followed a great
famine, and after that in the same year the harrying of
the heathen miserably destroyed God's church in Lindis-
farne by rapine and slaughter.

It is interesting to note that dragons are incorporated in the
entry, without explanation or detail, as heralding events of
national importance. Moreover, they are linked to distinct
occurrences of social disaster in the world, both terrible
and tangible in effect. It is in the same manner and to the
same effect, though with greater and more direct significance,
that the Dragon is presented in Beowulf. Though the entry in
the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, is again not enough in itself to
prove that all men of that time believed in the existence of
dragons, the casual yet specific inclusion of them in an
historical record of late date does indicate that their physi-
cal reality was still believed in to an extent, and that their
appearance even then was not lightheartedly dismissed as being
inconsequential.
the preservation of social order remains the pivotal concern. Beowulf, the defender of society, fights against these disruptive and destructive creatures, and it is the grateful and admiring society which bestows upon him the ultimate reward for such heroic actions. Moreover, though the monsters are clearly evil creatures, their evil natures are brought out through their unlawful activities as affecting the societal interests. They are the enemies of humankind which must be overcome by physical means through physical action and, with their deaths, the lands are purged of the terrors that plague them. Furthermore, Beowulf is always held up as the ideal, as the man worthy of emulation. It is in his figure that the heroic values are embodied and through his actions that the heroic ideal is commemorated.

This may appear a needless repetition of salient facts, but these truths need to be reiterated and emphasized for they are so often ignored or overlooked. The methods and tools employed by modern critics at times yield unhappy results which completely pervert the epic concerns. A case in point is John Leyerle's interpretation of Beowulf as a socio-political condemnation of individualism. Leyerle argues that the narrative presents through the figure of Beowulf "the fatal contradiction" between the roles of hero and king which lies "at the core of heroic society."\(^\text{24}\) Leyerle finds it extremely

\(^{24}\)"Beowulf the Hero and the King," \textit{MÆ}, XXXIV (1965), 89.
significant that Beowulf's physical ability appears to decline in the successive battles, and he regards this as reflecting directly on the physical power of the adversaries "whose force increases as their reasons for fighting become better justified." According to Leyerle, then, the Beowulf-Grendel fight is a conflict between "heroic goodness" and "devilish evil," and so the monster is overwhelmed with relative ease by the hero. The Dam, however, acts under the moral obligation to revenge the death of her son, and is therefore an antagonist much more difficult to overcome. The Dragon has even more justification for his actions than the Dam, for he simply "destroys property as the result of the theft of property;" the creature thus functions as an agent of fate and deservedly kills Beowulf in battle. Basing his analysis on the motives of the monsters, Leyerle regards the narrative as explicating the idea that personal ambition and pride, appropriate in a hero, are yet culpable in a king whose main concern should be the protection of his people. Beowulf's inability to understand the obligations of kingship, in Leyerle's view, is reflected in his totally irresponsible behaviour in challenging the Dragon. The hero's rashness leads to his untimely

25 "Beowulf the Hero and the King," p. 89.
26 "Beowulf the Hero and the King," p. 90.
27 "Beowulf the Hero and the King," p. 91.
death, and his people are thus left helpless against annihilation from the face of the earth by a Swedish army.

Within the narrative of Beowulf, however, the monsters are never seen as "justified" in their actions. The importance attributed by Leyerle to the creatures and their apparent motives of action, moreover, far exceeds their actual significance in the text. Grendel is indeed not so much a representation of "devilish evil" as he is the scourge of society in literal terms. Descended from Cain, Grendel has the same evil in his nature that prompted Cain to destroy the existing natural order and kill his own brother. The monster is depicted in the narrative as a transgressor against the existing social and legal code, as William Chaney points out, and this view is greatly extended in the poem.28 Grendel's actions are recorded as constituting a deliberate perversion of the prevailing human order. He is a hearmscapa (766), a pernicious enemy. For too many years has he waged war against Hrothgar and the Danish people. He refuses to make peace with them, or even to compensate them for his murderous deeds (154-58). Grendel's motives for his long-lasting feud with the Danes remain unknown, and his ferocious rage against human beings seems to be simply an aspect of his warped nature. Excluded from human society, he appears to take pleasure in attacking and humiliating it.

The Dam's motive for action, however, is made evident from the start. The very first mention of Grendel's monstrous mother is as a wrecend (1256), an avenger, who seeks vengeance for the death of her son. Within the code of the heroic world, the relationship between blood-kin was indeed of great significance, and revenge for the slaying of a kinsman was regarded as a sacred duty. In certain cases, nevertheless, the binding code of revenge could not operate. For instance, when the death-sentence is meted out for unlawful activities of an anti-social nature, retaliation becomes in itself unlawful and unjustified. As the narrative explicates, a father may mourn for his only son hanged on the gallows, and his grief may remain unassuaged with the passing of time, but he cannot act in reprisal (2444-62). Grendel is a hearmscæha (766) whose death is effected as a protective measure against cruel persecution, genered wið niðe (827), and he cannot be avenged. In taking revenge, the Dam proves herself a wicked ravager and the foe of humankind, manscæða manna cynnes (712). She is regarded indeed as a criminal, an enemy who indulges in wicked and hostile acts. Just before the Dam is introduced into the action, moreover, the poet recapitulates the bloody deeds of Grendel and denounces his ravages as unriht (1254). And still, the poet goes on to comment, his mother wishes to revenge him and bring further sorrow to the Danes (1276-78). In light of the textual evidence, we really cannot agree with Leyerle's view that the poet considers the Dam as justified in her
actions. Her desire for revenge and her bloody raid on Hrothgar's hall are clearly presented in the narrative as perverse and unjustified.

Nor indeed can we accept Leyerle's observation that the poem sets up a contrast between the figures of Hrothgar and Beowulf to the detriment of the hero. Leyerle regards Hrothgar as the ideal king, a leader who takes his responsibilities seriously and who is not impelled by the desire for fame into acting rashly. However, Beowulf's primary consideration in confronting the Dam, and later the Dragon, is not the gaining of personal renown. Nor is his conduct in any sense reprehensible. In fact, Beowulf does nothing that Hrothgar himself would not have done if he had possessed the same physical ability. For the overriding issue at stake in both conflicts is again the very preservation of social stability. The Dam is a palpable threat to society, and so must be destroyed. Hrothgar expresses his view of the Dam as the foe of humankind in no uncertain terms (1333-43). He calls the monster a {mangæa} (1339) whose hostility causes great distress, {hreþeþeþeþeþeþeþeþeþ} (1343). He sees her death as necessary to ensure peace in his land and expressly asks Beowulf to accomplish the task (1376-77). Furthermore, as Hrothgar himself remarks after the champion's victory (1782-84), Beowulf has greatly distinguished himself by his actions, wiggeword, and the hero's glory is enhanced thereby rather than diminished in any way. The Dam is an evil creature who disrupts the social order, and Beowulf evidences his heroic
worth in the manner in which he faces and defeats the monster.

Though the Dragon also functions as a physical threat to human society which must be eliminated from the world, he nonetheless belongs to an order of nature different in form as well as in effect from that of the Grendels. In contrast to the other monsters, he is never associated with evil in a Christian sense. He is a primordial creature, the primordial enemy that haunts the dusk, eald uht sceadu (2271). The Dragon, as Irving notes, is regarded as an alien being who acts merely in obedience to "the biological law of his own strange nature." The creature is compelled by a totally "blind and instinctive drive" to hoard treasure, and a similar impulse forces him into action when his store is rifled. With reference to this monster, again, it is informative to find that the Cotton Gnomic Poem states in an extremely matter-of-fact tone that "a dragon shall [be] in a mound, ancient, proud of its treasure [Draca sceal on hlæwe, / frod,

As Irving explicates, "there is little indication that this particular dragon stands for the explicitly theological form of evil that Grendel and his mother stand for. To begin with, the Grendel race is named repeatedly as Cain's descendants and God's enemies; nothing of the sort is ever said about the dragon. In certain ways, to be sure, the dragon may be considered to be evil. His hatred for mankind and his destructiveness are plain and unambiguous. Yet, though he may be evil, he is not Evil. There is an amoral aspect to him, alien and remote. In some sense, there is nothing personal about what he does" (Reading of Beowulf, p. 214).

Reading of Beowulf, p. 215.

Reading of Beowulf, p. 215.
frætum wlanç]," in the same manner that it observes stars shall shine in the heavens and fish multiply in the water.\textsuperscript{32}

In Beowulf, too, the nature of the Dragon is taken quite for granted. Though incomprehensible, it is accepted as part of the natural order:

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{eald uhtsceæða} & \textit{Hordwynne fond} \\
\textit{se ðe byrnende} & \textit{opene standan,} \\
\textit{nacod niðdraca,} & \textit{biorgas seceð,} \\
\textit{fyre befangen;} & \textit{níhtes fleoðæ} \\
\textit{(swiðe ondræ)dað.} & \textit{hyne foldbuend} \\
\textit{(ho)r(d on) hrusan,} & \textit{He gescecean sceall} \\
\textit{wara wintrum frød;} & \textit{fær he hæbben gold} \\
\end{tabular}

\[(2270-77)\]

[The ancient scourge that haunts the half-light of dawn found the hoard standing open to be his delight. This smooth-skinned, spiteful dragon seeks out barrows of the dead, and flies by night, burning and encircled in fire; those who dwell in that land dread him greatly. He is wont to seek out what is hoarded in the earth, and there takes up his abode beside the heathen gold, growing wise in ripeness of years, and yet for all that he is no better off.]

Unlike Grendel, then, the Dragon is not impelled by his very existence to attack human society. For three centuries, indeed, he lies dormant and is content to guard his

hoard. When unfortunately provoked by the theft of a cup, however, he runs true to form. The Wyrm reacts with consummate violence and devastates the countryside with his scorching blasts of flame. The Dragon's motive for action may be obvious, but it is hardly "justified" in the narrative to the extent that Leyerle claims. We find a sense of wonder at the baleful impact of the creature's wrath, but it is never seen as commensurate to the provocation offered by human fault. The stress remains on the physically destructive nature of the monster's actions and on his pernicious influence upon the order of human society.

The Dragon himself, moreover, cannot be summarily dismissed as an agent of fate who appropriately effects the demise of a rash hero. The appropriateness of the narrative action lies rather in its epic quality as a confrontation actuated by Fate itself. Both Beowulf and the Dragon, as the poet makes evident, are destined to face each other in battle and both will die (2341-44). The outcome is decreed by Fate, and the death of neither antagonist can be taken as an explicit moral comment by the poet upon the nature of the other. The action is treated in the true epic manner as a physical combat in which the power and might of each opponent reflects the stature of the other, and each antagonist thereby gains an added aura of greatness. At the end of the action, moreover, the Dragon is accorded the epic dignity of a worthy adversary slain in battle. Once the immediate peril is past, the poet pauses to elaborate on the marvellous nature of the creature
and his awesome majesty, and we are given a moving contrast between the Dragon's aerial grace in life and his stillness on the ground in death (2824-35). Throughout the episode, indeed, the focus remains on the physical nature of the monster and his actions rather than on some abstract moral idea as projected through his figure by the poet.

The narrative emphasis, again, is rather on the protagonist's heroic worth than his "heroic susceptibilities."

Beowulf is the good warrior-king, god guðcyning (2563), who is greatly disturbed by the terror that has invaded his land and inflicted itself upon his people. He is aware that in fighting the monster he may meet with his own death, but that does not deter him from proper action. Beowulf rises to the occasion as he must, in the defence of his people against the enemy. He is the leader of the Geats and, as king, their safety and security is in his hands. The champion acts in accordance with his destined fate, and his heroic quality is never in question. His comportment in the battle against the Dragon is indeed explicitly held up for commendation and emulation. The poet approvingly points out that the hero's conduct in this mortal combat is unlike that of a coward, ne bið swylc earges sid (2541), and that he is truly exemplary in his actions. The champion is referred to again towards the end of the narrative as the most worthy warrior on earth, wigend weordfullost wide geond eordan (3098).

Leyerle, p. 95.
Beowulf can never be accused of cowardice, but the charge of vainglorious overconfidence cannot be levelled against him either. His confidence in his prowess and his desire for personal fame are as evident in this combat as in the earlier ones, and equally praised in all.

Beowulf celebrates the heroic ideal, not excoriates it. The poet is fully conscious of the fitting nature of the final conflict, in which the greatest of heroes struggles against the mightiest of adversaries—and triumphs:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Huru po\text{\textae}t on lande} & & \text{lyt manna} \quad \text{\textae}h \\
\text{ma\text{\textae}genagendra} & & \text{mine gefræge,} \\
\text{peah be he d\text{\textae}da gehwæs} & & \text{dyrstig wære,} \\
\text{po\text{\textae}t he wi\text{\textae}t attorscædan} & & \text{orede geraesde,} \\
\text{o\text{\textae}de hringsele} & & \text{hondum styrede,} \\
\text{gif he we\text{\textae}ccende} & & \text{weard onfundé} \\
\text{buon on beorge.} & & \text{Biowulfe weard} \\
\text{dryhtmæma dael} & & \text{dea\text{\textae}e forgolden;} \\
\text{haefde æghwæder} & & \text{ende gefelered} \\
\text{lænan lifes.} & & \\
\end{align*}
\]

(2836-45)

[Yet not one of the mighty men in that land, daring though he might be in every deed, had ever succeeded—or so I heard tell—in facing the breath of that venomous destroyer or laying hands on the rings in that hall, if he found the guardian that lurked in the barrow awake. Beowulf had paid with death for his share in these lordly treasures; thus they had each come to the end of this fleeting life.]

Beowulf is successful in slaying the Dragon and, though he too dies on the battlefield, the triumph is no less a triumph. The Dragon-fight comes indeed as the glorious culmination of
a magnificent career. The end is as it should be. This time, Beowulf confronts the awesome monster in the service of his own people, and he is thus "no longer in danger of appearing a mere wrecca, an errant adventurer and slayer of bogies that do not concern him." 34

The celebratory tone of the narrative, then, goes directly contrary to Leyerle's reading of Beowulf as a pointed commentary on the baneful nature of the heroic attitude. Even the last lines of the poem serve to reinforce the view of the protagonist as the finest of men and of kings in the world (3178-82). Stanley Greenfield's remark is here of particular relevance. He notes: "That the poem ends as it does is generically appropriate, and to try to see irony or a double perspective is to impart dubious criteria into the criticism. . . . Courage is courage and to determine the essence of its value by the outcome is perverse: the readiness is all, and Beowulf is exemplary in this respect as the best man among worldly kings." 35 Leyerle indeed attributes far too much significance to the fact that Beowulf dies in battle. The hero's death cannot be seen as an indication of his culpability in action. Nor can it be regarded as signalling a crushing national disaster for the Geats who are thereby left leaderless and defenceless against annihilation by the Swedes.

34 Tolkien, p. 273.

As Kenneth Sisam points out, neither historically nor textually is there any evidence for such a view. Moreover, as Thomas Carnicelli maintains, Beowulf ends on a distinctly positive note, and the heroic ethic is reaffirmed even at the close of the narrative as a valid code of action within the world. Beowulf is commended for his actions, not condemned. The mourners at the funeral pyre praise their leader's heroism and proclaim the worth of his mighty deeds, and the poem does the same for all eternity. The figure of the champion is presented indeed as a shining example to be emulated rather than a social, political, or moral object lesson on the perniciousness of the heroic values.

Again, it needs to be reiterated that despite the references to God and Providence, it is the heroic ethic that remains central in the narrative. Beowulf is essentially

36 The Structure of Beowulf (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 51-59. Sisam discusses the meagre textual evidence for such a view—the lament of the Geatish woman (3150-5) and the Messenger's speech (3018 ff.)—and stresses the fact that these passages "are best taken as part of the poetic representation of a people's grief and fears when their great king dies" (p. 58) rather than as predictions of war. Indeed, Wiglaf is presented as a worthy successor to Beowulf and is "given not only the qualities of an heroic leader but also extraordinary claims on the goodwill of the Swedes" (p. 58). Moreover, Sisam shows that the Geats "were a distinct and important people at the very end of the Anglo-Saxon period" (p. 55) as indicated by the writings of the Canterbury monk Ailnoth. Sisam comments: "After all, Beowulf is a tale of marvels set in the Heroic Age—poetic fiction, not history. In the last part the outcrop of history, or legend based on history, is obtrusively large; but it need not be extended by interpretation" (p. 58).

pre-Christian in tone and application. We can agree with Klaeber's remark that it is possible "to recognize features of the Christian Savior in the destroyer of hellish fiends, the warrior brave and gentle, blameless in thought and deed, the king that dies for his people." However, it would be dangerous to make too much of this similarity, for what we find is a generic resemblance rather than a deliberately-drawn analogue. Beowulf is an heroic epic, not a Christian

38 The Christian ethic of the Old Testament may be in truth quite amenable to the warrior code, but it is the heroic viewpoint that predominates in the poem. R. E. Kaske illuminates this point in "Sapienza et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf," SP, LV (1958), 423-57. According to Kaske, Beowulf presents the old epic ideal of sapientia et fortitudo as "an area of synthesis between Christianity and Germanic paganism" (p. 426). He feels that the poet has incorporated into the old ethic those aspects of the new as were not incompatible with his material and his mode of presentation. In the figure of Beowulf, then, we find the ideal combination of strength and wisdom as displayed through his actions and behaviour in the narrative. The champion's fortitudo is regarded by Kaske as an expressly heroic attribute; it is in the nature of his sapienza that the heroic and the Christian codes are fused.

39 Introduction to Beowulf, p. xxvii. Klaeber yet remains unwilling to regard Beowulf as a Christian allegory. However, M. B. McNamee, in "Beowulf--An Allegory of Salvation?" JEGP, LIX (1960), 190-207, sees the parallel between the lives and careers of Beowulf and Christ to be "deliberately sustained" so as to allegorize the Christian story. Beowulf's descent into the mere is thus regarded as an allegorization of the Harrowing of Hell and the dragon-fight as a dramatization of the Saviour's death.

40 Though the poem itself never mentions anything specifically Christian, similarities between the figures of Beowulf and Christ are discernible. They are both great heroes pre-eminent in their worlds, deeply committed to their ideals and to their roles as the champions of their societies; both are men of destiny for whom even self-sacrifice is not too great
allegory. The hero is depicted as a great warrior and a worthy Germanic king rather than a good Christian. Beowulf remains unconcerned with the spiritual state of his soul, and he does not even appear aware of the eternal bliss that awaits the good Christian in the life hereafter. What the champion strives for is glory within this world, and his actions are all directed towards that worthy goal. Roland may be finally gathered among the blessed in Heaven because of the nature of his exploits, but Beowulf is immortalized by the praise of his own society.

An allegorical approach towards Beowulf tends indeed to impose on the narrative a type of characterization and theme alien to the tenor of heroic epic, which focuses on human attributes as brought out directly through physical action. Epic characterization is integrally simple and strong, and is not designed to express or show change in the nature of the protagonist. Heroic song is concerned with the revelation of character rather than with delineating a process of inward change. Epic character is clearly preconceived and is static to an extent, as the "recurring epithets of formulaic narrative" serve to indicate.  

\[\text{Mægen}\] becomes a leitmotif in the

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41 Scholes and Kellogg, Nature of Narrative, p. 164.
poem as applied to Beowulf, and the action emphasizes the special strength of body and mind so distinctive of the champion. Within the heroic world, Beowulf is the ideal. As he is, so he acts.

The difficulties that arise in attributing a strictly allegorical significance to the poem may be best illustrated through an analysis of Margaret Goldsmith's reading of Beowulf. Goldsmith regards "the 'plain meaning' . . . [as] a figment,"\(^\text{42}\) and she tries to bring out "the hidden meaning latent in the poem."\(^\text{43}\) Accordingly, she rejects the obvious view of Beowulf as "a flawless hero who does what is best unfailingly and unhesitatingly."\(^\text{44}\) Goldsmith rather sees the poet as offering in the character of the protagonist a moral-religious exemplum discussing the sins of pride and covetousness. Using patristic exegesis to draw similarities and parallels, she asserts: "It is thus reasonable to regard Beowulf as a just man who has fought a good fight during his lifetime, but who is in the end brought to death by the flaw in his human nature, the legacy of Adam's sin, in trying to fight the Dragon alone. He acts as a moral example in his early life, but in his last days he presents to the Christian audience the tragedy of a fallen man, harassed by the Enemy,


\(^{43}\) Goldsmith, p. 3.

\(^{44}\) Sisam, p. 13.
and wanting in the supernatural strength of the miles Christi." 45

The structural basis of Goldmsith's assessment of the protagonist as marked out for death and spiritual ruin is Hrothgar's "homily" (1698-784), which she uses as "a key to unlock the symbolic meaning of Beowulf's life." 46 She finds in Hrothgar's telling of the actions of Heremod "a carefully directed forecast of the story of Beowulf's trial to come." 47 Such an interpretation of the passage, however, goes completely beyond the text for its foundation. According to Goldmsith, "Heremod would not appear in Hrothgar's sermon if he were not also an example of a man dominated by sin and in the power of the Devil." 48 Within the narrative, nevertheless, what Hrothgar expounds through the example of Heremod is rather the definition of an unworthy Germanic king than of an evil person in Christian terms. As R. E. Kaske points out, "Hrothgar's explicit aim is not eternal salvation, but wise kingship." 49 Hrothgar makes very clear what he wishes Beowulf to keep in mind: always to use his mægen

45 Mode and Meaning of Beowulf, p. 239.
46 Mode and Meaning of Beowulf, p. 3.
47 Mode and Meaning of Beowulf, p. 201.
48 Mode and Meaning of Beowulf, p. 191.
wisely and to avoid the hoarding of wealth. And both qualities are greatly valued in the Germanic age as characteristic of the good leader. Physical might is significant in itself for it implements the establishment and preservation of the social order. Generosity in the giving of gifts, again, serves to forge the reciprocal ties so significant in heroic society between the king and his thanes; it wins him the affection and loyalty of his followers and proves him worthy of their devoted service.

Moreover, and most significantly, Heremod provides an explicit contrast to Beowulf. Heremod is a murderous and miserly king. He misuses his authority and his mægen, alienating his people by his deeds until he is finally removed from power and sent into exile. As we have seen, however, the career of Beowulf could not be more different. Even towards the end, he is praised as the god guðcyning (2563) and the wigend weorðfullost wide geond eorðan (3098). In the manner of Leyerle, indeed, Goldsmith extends the text much too far by rather dubious interpretation. There is no basis in the poem for the assumption that the poet uses Hrothgar's speech to prepare us for Beowulf's subsequent moral degeneration and downfall.

Furthermore, the patristic images and metaphors used in this "sermon" remain curiously undeveloped. The consequences of covetous and prideful actions are depicted as they would pertain to this world:
[And yet at the latter end it shall come to pass that this fleeting body must crumble away and fall, marked out for death. Another man takes the inheritance—one who ungrudgingly shares out treasures and ancient wealth of this earl, heeding no terror.]

Conspicuous here by their absence are references to Hell and the eternal suffering that sinful people must endure. These are indeed glaring omissions which cannot be glossed over as in keeping with the poet's "probable" intention of presenting his meaning in a deliberately obscure fashion. Yet Goldsmith finds in this lack no refutation of her analysis. She postulates that "both poet and audience would have been familiar" with the specific ideas of doctrinal theologians, and that the passage "is designed for an informed audience who will understand the allusions." Once again, extra-textual

50 In "The Christian Coloring in the Beowulf," F. A. Blackburn points out that in not one of the Christian allusions in the narrative "do we find any reference to Christ, to the cross, to the Virgin or the saints, to any doctrine of the church in regard to the trinity, the atonement, etc., or to the scriptures, to prophecy, or the miracles" (PLMA, XII (1897), 216). Again, as Norman E. Eliason observes in his review of Goldsmith's book, "an allegory of this particular kind is hardly what we should expect at a time when the central truths of Christianity needed to be expounded rather than obscured" (JEGP, LXX (1971), 285).

51 Mode and Meaning of Beowulf, p. 93.
assumptions are employed to substantiate similar assumptions as Goldsmith proceeds "to fill out the skeletal text" on the basis of what she considers "some valuable guesses."\(^{52}\)

For Goldsmith, then, Beowulf's action in challenging the Dragon becomes indicative of his "spiritual deterioration," directly symptomatic of his "arrogant self-confidence" and "desire for gain."\(^{53}\) As already noted, however, not even in heroic terms do we find such a reversal in the character of the hero. A more plausible interpretation is offered by Charles Donahue, who sees the protagonist as developing towards Christian charity. Donahue insists that "there is no question of allegory here," and considers the figure of Beowulf

\(^{52}\)Mode and Meaning of Beowulf, p. 6. Goldsmith theorizes about the poet's "probable" intentions in writing the poem; about the doctrinal works ranging from those of Augustine, Adhelm, and Gregory to those of Sulpicius Severus and Pseudo-Bede that "may have been" his sources for his material and his elliptical method of allegory; and about the ability of the contemporary audience to elucidate the obscure allusions and parallels for itself. Assumptions built from and upon other assumptions are used to explicate her fundamental theory: "I believe that the Christian poet's purpose was to examine the values of the heroic world as they appear when set against the whole history of mankind from Genesis to the Apocalypse" (p. 2).

In his review of Mode and Meaning of Beowulf, Speculum, LXVI (1971), Kemp Malone points out that "Mrs. Goldsmith's interpretation goes contrary to the poetic text itself and must therefore be rejected as untenable" (p. 370). He notes that though Goldsmith's study of the "writings presumably known or knowable to English clerics of the seventh and eighth centuries" is "valuable" to an extent, the conclusions she draws from her research are unsound. Norman Eliason (see n. 50) concurs with Malone's view: "Well argued as her case is, it is unconvincing" (p. 234). There is indeed too much in Beowulf of a non-Christian nature which cannot be swept under the rug at will.

\(^{53}\)Mode and Meaning of Beowulf, p. 225.
to be conceived by the poet as under Natural rather than Christian Law. Nevertheless, Donahue asserts that the poet has "caught from the Old Testament some insight into change in character through divine tutelage" and so consciously uses "typology" to strengthen the characterization of the protagonist.

With basically the same approach to the poem, then, Goldsmith and Donahue come up with totally contradictory assessments of Beowulf's character. Interestingly enough, both critics agree that the hero is presented as a glorified ideal in the first two episodes. It is with respect to the final combat that the interpretations markedly diverge. Goldsmith sees Beowulf's decision to fight the Dragon as rash and arrogant. Motivated by unworthy and "evil" desires, Beowulf trusts in his own strength rather than in God, and is therefore naturally defeated. Donahue, on the other hand, regards the decision as perfectly just, as a magnificent gesture by one who is concerned about his people to the last.


57Stanley Greenfield, in Interpretation of Old English Poems, p. 157, makes a similar comparison between the interpretations of Goldsmith and Donahue with respect to the dragon-fight in Beowulf, highlighting the frustration that is the inevitable result of trying to analyze the poem as a consistently-maintained Christian allegory.
Again, while Goldsmith regards the Dragon's hoard as a symbol of cupidity, a lure thrown out by the Devil to which the hero succumbs, Donahue sees the winning of the hoard as an indication of the protagonist's merit and greatness of heart. Uncaring of personal danger, Beowulf willingly sacrifices himself so that his people may reap the benefits of his action. The hoard thus becomes for Donahue a valuable image which serves to denote the hero's progress towards an understanding of unselfish Christian charity in the fullest sense. Furthermore, while Goldsmith finds the reburial of the treasure to emphasize its innate worthlessness, Donahue views the act as a voluntary "imitation" by the Geats of Beowulf's charity and an indication of their own spiritual growth. 58

There is, however, no evidence whatsoever in the text for the theory that the Beowulf-poet "handles the religious life of the hero dynamically." 59 As detailed earlier, Beowulf

58 Thomas Carnicelli's article, "The Function of the Messenger in Beowulf," helps us regain the heroic perspective summarily rejected by both Goldsmith and Donahue. Carnicelli points out that the hoard is voluntarily interred by the Geats for whom the Messenger serves as spokesman. The elite of the Geatish warriors have proved craven in battle, and their shame reflects on the entire nation. The reburial of the treasure thus becomes the acknowledgement of the fact that "by the moral standards of heroic society, they have no right to keep it" (p. 256). Carnicelli goes on to assert: "[At the end of the poem] the Geatish people [are portrayed] as still capable of heroic behaviour. . . . After the Messenger's speech the Geats go on to assume, once again, an active role in the heroic life. They participate in the traditional funeral rites, and, in so doing, they reaffirm their allegiance to Beowulf and to the heroic ideals he represents" (p. 256).

59 Donahue, p. 113.
is as exemplary in his last battle as he has always been.

His motives of action and his conduct are no different at the end of his life from what they were at the start of his career. The hero's death, again, is in itself no indication of a moral growth or decline, for within the narrative Beowulf neither advances nor falls in moral terms. He is presented throughout the poem as the heroic ideal. The champion is always brave and resolute in battle; he is always uncaring of personal peril in his defence of the lands and people under attack; he always uses his mægen commendably and so gains the enduring glory that is his due; and he is always generous in distributing the rich spoils of war. Moreover, as Kaske remarks, within the world of the poem "the fact of death, of final physical defeat, is inevitable and relatively unimportant; what is of desperate importance is having fought the good fight." And in that respect we find no change in Beowulf in the final episode. Indeed, the hero's last battle serves to reinforce his stature as the embodiment of the warrior ideal. It functions "not only [as] the climax, but also the summary of Beowulf's kingship and of his life."

To see Beowulf as undergoing a spiritual change or

60 "Sapienta et Fortitudo," p. 455. Kaske notes that this holds true in both the Germanic and the Christian traditions. However, as we observed in Chapter I, the fight against overwhelming odds is distinctively Germanic, and it is the worthy manner of the hero's death that is emphasized in Beowulf.

61 Kaske, p. 455.
development is to distort the narrative interests. The figure of the protagonist is clearly depicted with an "economy of presentation, in which every aspect of character is given expression in action."\(^{62}\) There is no alteration in the personal quality of the hero, for that is not part of the epic purpose and design. As Scholes and Kellogg point out, a "simply conceived character, in a narrative calculated so as to project the qualities of that character starkly and vividly, can achieve profundity of meaning and impact without complexity or richness."\(^{63}\) Beowulf is a hero of particular application to the heroic age which glorified physical capacity and courage in battle. He is, and remains throughout the poem, the ideal man, warrior, and king.

Beowulf gives us a comprehensive view of the heroic ideal with a mægen which has not faded through the ages, if we but have eyes to see. It is no accident that the poet uses the Heroic Plot as the best means of presenting character and theme. Dynamic heroism is the keynote of Beowulf, and the physical battles between the hero and his superhuman adversaries are supremely appropriate in themselves for defining human worth in physical terms. Indeed, Beowulf is unique in English literature. Never again are the monstrous antagonists taken seriously as powerful physical entities whose ravages

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\(^{63}\)Nature of Narrative, p. 173.
threaten the very order of human society. Never again is the hero an individual with such a tremendous impact upon his physical environment. Never again is the Heroic Plot in itself so fundamental to the poetic interests.
CHAPTER III

DECENTRALIZATION IN TRISTAN AND YVAIN

The Heroic Plot loses centrality in the romance. The motif of the hero-monster conflict can still be found in the romance narratives, but it is no longer as all-important as it is in the epic. In heroic song, our attention is riveted on the physical confrontations which are presented as awesome encounters, as death-defying struggles against powerful external forces that threaten the very existence of social peace and order. The attributes leading to success in battle, then, are necessarily the ones which are glorified, and it is not difficult to understand why physical strength becomes in itself a god-given indication of personal destiny. In the romance, however, the narrative focus shifts to concerns other than a display of physical heroism in battle. We are much less interested in the knight's actual performance in combat, or even in the combats themselves, than in the hero's motives of action and what they indicate about his personal frame of mind or inner quality.

The world of romance is a large one, and within it the monster-fight takes various forms. It is still central in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, though dramatically modified in structure and use. More characteristically, however, the Heroic Plot retains a semblance of its archetypal construct
even as it becomes in the main incidental to the narrative interests. The knight confronts monsters and slays them in combat, but the battles are in themselves no longer crucial to our understanding of character and theme. Two major traditions with respect to the hero-monster conflict as incorporated in the romance are observable in the narratives of *Tristan* and *Yvain*. In *Tristan*, it becomes a source of humour or comic relief, and is singularly lacking in thematic importance. In *Yvain*, on the other hand, the monster-fight is integral to the plot, but its significance lies primarily in what the incident reveals about the protagonist's inner development in character. In the major romance traditions, indeed, the action is largely divorced from physical and political reality, and the Heroic Plot borders on the verge of extinction as a motif intrinsically relevant on the physical plane.

**TRISTAN**

Superficially, *Tristan* reads a lot like *Beowulf*. We find a simplicity and directness in the characterization of the hero that is more typical of epic than romance, and our attention remains on the manner in which the almost preordained course of Tristan's life runs to its inexorable conclusion. The monstrous antagonists, again, appear as overwhelmingly powerful creatures before whom entire nations tremble in fear, and the battles themselves are described in lengthy detail. Upon closer analysis, however, *Tristan* is clearly worlds
removed from Beowulf. Our view of the hero as a lover pre-
dominates to the exclusion of all else. The narrative focus
is on the twists and turns of circumstance that surround
the love-affair between Tristan and Isolde, and the emphasis
remains throughout on the fixed and undeviating nature of the
hero's magnificent obsession. His motives with regard to
physical action become indeed progressively more personal and
less significant in social or political terms, and the monster-
fights have comic overtones impossible to ignore.

The chivalric ideal which governs the world of tradi-
tional romance postulates certain social obligations for every
knight. He is honour-bound to fight in the cause of social
justice, to aid the weak and helpless against tyrannous
forces, no matter what the personal cost. He is equally
honour-bound to obey the dictates of love, to submit to the
whims of his lady, no matter what the personal consequences.
The conflict that arises at times between these two aspects
of the knightly life often becomes a major issue in romance
narratives. In Tristan, however, the bifurcation between
loyalty to love and loyalty to the ideals of knighthood is
absolute in the character of the hero. Tristan displays a
total disregard for the values of his society or its problems.
And with the lack of social concern on the part of the hero,
the motivation for the physical battles as found in traditional
epic and romance is here wiped out in one fell swoop.

The extremely unconventional tenor of Tristan's physi-
cal conflicts highlights the fact that physical heroism is at
a complete discount in the narrative. The hero is impelled into action by considerations which most often remain purely personal. He generally acts only when he feels so inclined or when there is some personal advantage to be gained, however pressing the situation. The narrative stress, again, remains on his own personal frame of mind, however far-ranging the implications of the resolution. Tristan is indeed for the most part whole-heartedly involved in activities which have nothing whatsoever to do with the field of battle. He is, and remains throughout the action, an individual so caught up in the throes of an obsessive passion that he counts not just his own life but even the whole world well lost for love.

Tristan's physical conflicts are isolated incidents which have little to do with the establishment of his stature as a hero. It may be argued that the combat against Morold and the dragon-fight constitute exceptions to this statement, but even these remain merely episodes which serve primarily to set the wheels of the love-story into contrived motion. Once the passionate love between Tristan and Isolde is realized, the lovers create for themselves a patently self-contained world with no room to spare for the society around them. Separation from the loved one then becomes indeed a form of living death, and Tristan's other battles are motivated purely by his wish to demonstrate the extent of his love or to divert his mind from grief. Physical desire for the beloved is treated in the poem as an intense, all-absorbing interest, and the physical combats seem to be introduced at times into
the action almost as comic relief.

In the early part of the narrative, Tristan fights in three battles: against Duke Morgan, against Morold, and against the dragon. The first of these events (5069-610) has no real significance apart from being an incident in the hero's life. It is an episode which has no relevance to the main plot or theme. Tristan fights in order to establish his claim to his father's lands, and the action, as introduced, has definite epic possibilities. The possibilities, however, remain undeveloped. Having accomplished his purpose, the hero has nothing further to do with his own newly-won nation. There are no ties of loyalty or responsibility that bind him to his people. Tristan gifts his fiefdom to the faithful Rual and returns to Cornwall, exhibiting his characteristically disregard for social and political concerns. In the battle itself, moreover, Tristan's actions are neither impressive nor commendable. Tristan and his small army, their war-gear concealed under enveloping robes, confront Morgan while the latter is on an hunting expedition and hence quite unprepared for armed combat. When Tristan states his claim and is rejected, he unhesitatingly

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2For a discussion of Tristan's obviously unlawful claim to the land of Parmenie, see Ruth Goldschmidt Kunzer, The "Tristan
strikes Morgan down with two killing blows:

er zucte swert und randin an:
er sluoc im obene ze tal
beidiu hirne und himneschal,
daz ez im an der zungen want.
hie mite so stach er ime zehant
daz swert gein dem herzen in. (5450-55)

[He whipped out his sword and ran at him. With a downward sweep he struck through skull and brain, ending only at the tongue, then at once plunged the sword into his heart.]

Tristan's conduct here is hardly moral, much less heroic. Morgan, unarmed and taken completely by surprise, has no chance to fight back or even to defend himself. Nor indeed is Tristan's leadership in battle worthy of admiration, as subsequent events point out. For the struggle is by no means over. Morgan's men quickly rally themselves and prepare to avenge the brutal murder of their lord. A bloody mêlée ensues which goes on for two days, each side inflicting heavy casualties on the other. Tristan's force dwindles while the numbers of the opposing party increase, and his band is finally surrounded. Defeat and death seem inevitable for the hero. Disaster is ultimately avoided, but more by good fortune than any effort on Tristan's part. It is not the hero's valour or any strategy he implements that reverses the tide of the action, but the timely arrival of the devoted Rual with reinforcements to avert just such a contingency.

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Tristan's battles against Morold and the dragon have epic potential as well, but again it is never exploited. Both adversaries are powerful and tyrannous. Such is their physical might that their defeat in combat appears impossible. Morold, like Grendel, exacts subservience from an entire nation, and, as Gertrude Schoepperle Loomis observes, there "are indications [that Morold] was originally a supernatural being, very recently rationalized by redactors into an Irish champion, the uncle of Isolt." In this conflict, moreover, Tristan's motivation is similar to that of Beowulf. As W. T. H. Jackson remarks, "Tristan is fighting not for his personal honour in any sense but for the salvation of his adopted country." The dragon, again, is an antagonist akin to the awesome Wyrm in Beowulf. It is a destructive creature ravaging the land of Ireland without check. Slaying the dragon appears a task destined for the hero to accomplish, and he alone succeeds in the attempt where thousands before him

3Tristan and Isolt: A Study of the Sources of the Romance, 2nd ed., expanded with a Bibliography and Critical Essay on Tristan Scholarship since 1912 by Roger Sherman Loomis (New York: Franklin, 1963), II, 338. Schoepperle observes: "These monsters [of the older tradition] are frequently represented as dwelling in or near the water. It is possible that the name Morholt, of which the first syllable signifies in the Celtic languages sea, and in the Germanic marsh, may be connected with this belief" (p. 329). The discussion of the Morold episode, particularly pp. 326-38, goes far to substantiate the claim for the epic potential in the nature and presentation of Morold as a monstrous adversary to be defeated in battle.

have failed. But here the similarities end. The epic strain has no scope for development in the poem, and it remains sketchy.

Tristan's encounter with Morold establishes what we need to bear in mind throughout the course of the narrative, that he is the superior in every way to the court, including King Mark. "Unlike most romance heroes," as Jackson remarks, "he does not rise above the values of the court but is superior from the very start." The hero's excellence in the civilized pursuits of hunting and music has already been established, but now we see the extent of his moral courage and physical strength. Tristan is greatly angered by the degradation inflicted on Cornwall by Morold, an abasement to which it is tamely prepared to submit once again. He advises that a champion be selected to confront Morold in battle in an attempt to rid them of his shameful demands. The hero's practical and forceful words, however, are received with trembling fear and hopeless despair. Not a single person is willing to undertake such a hazardous, albeit worthy, task. All the members of the court are only too aware of the fact that no one could hope to survive the combat, that "imme kan nieman vor genesen" (6137). Tristan then steps forward to offer himself as Cornwall's hope of deliverance, and his courage provides a striking contrast to the weak

5The Anatomy of Love, p. 147.
resignation displayed by the others.

In the Tristan-Morold conflict (6834-7230), significantly enough, Gottfried uses allegory for the first and last time in the poem with regard to physical action, and it is the very nature of the allegory which generates the epic dimensions of the action itself. This battle is no surprise attack like that on Morgan, but a formal challenge. The two opponents, fully armed and seated on horseback, meet on a small islet near the shore and commence to fight. Here, we see a youth inexperienced in such desperate ventures, "unversuohte ... ze notlichen dingen" (6534-35), and only recently inducted into "ritterschefte" (6180), facing an opponent whose strength and exploits are legendary. The antagonists, however, are depicted as quite evenly matched: "si kamen mit gelicher ger/geliche vliegende her" (6857-58). Morold may have the overwhelming physical power of "vier manne" (6879), but Tristan is at no disadvantage in this conflict, for his strength is augmented by the force of three other powers ranged on his side:

\[
daz eine got, daz ander reht, 
daz dritte was ir zweier kneht 
und ir gewære dienestman, 
der wol gewære Tristan, 
daz vierde was willeger muot, 
der wunder in den nøeten tuot.\]

(6883-88)

[... first God; second Right; the third was their vassal and servant, loyal Tristan; the fourth was Willing Heart, who works wonders in extremities.]

Not only is the physical force of the two opposing detachments balanced in a manner similar to that of epic action, but the
course of the conflict follows a line quite similar to that of Beowulf's encounter with the Dam. Morold draws first blood with a vicious blow that slices through Tristan's armour and lays bare the bone of his thigh. The hero, weakened yet resolute, refuses to admit defeat, and continues to fight with staunch determination. The powers of God and Right then enter the combat, and the battle comes to a speedy end.

The epic quality of the action, however, remains purely incidental. Tristan is successful in his aim, but his actions on the battlefield are not particularly praiseworthy, as the narrative makes plain:

sus geinger in mit slegen an,
biz erm mit slegen an gewan,
daz Tristan von der slege not
den schilt ze verre von im bot
unde den schirm ze hohe truoc,
biz er im durch daz diech siuoc
einen also hezlichen slac,
der vil nach hin zem tote wac, . . . (6919-26)

[And so Morold went on hacking at him till he mastered him with blows, and Tristan, hard put to meet them, thrust out his shield too far and held his guard too high, so that finally Morold struck him such an ugly blow through the thigh, plunging to the very life of him, . . .]

It is Tristan's obvious lack of skill in physical combat that exposes him to Morold's thrust, and his mistakes indeed cost him dear. The emphasis at the end, moreover, remains rather on the injury received than the victory gained by the hero. Tristan's success in battle is in itself of little significance in the narrative. Cornwall's deliverance from ignominious bondage is quickly dismissed in the world of the poem, and the Cornish noblemen do not even remain grateful for long.
Tristan himself is quite incapable of enjoying the fruits of triumph, for his wound festers and the pervading stench virtually isolates him from society. The stress remains on the injury as it continues the plot action: it necessitates the hero's journey to Ireland for adequate treatment, and thus brings him within Isolde's orbit.

In Ireland, Tristan meets Isolde. He admires her beauty and her accomplishments, he is often in her company as her tutor in music, but he does not fall in love with her. Once he is cured of his injury, Tristan leaves Ireland without any pangs of grief and returns to Cornwall. Moreover, there is no mention all this while of the dragon which has apparently been terrorizing the land for many years. Tristan does not fight the dragon out of love for Isolde, nor indeed to free Ireland from the creature's destructive hold. His motives here are neither chivalric nor heroic, but purely personal and prudential. Tristan's position as Mark's heir gives rise to raging jealousy at the court, and the nobles craftily devise a means of getting him killed without implicating themselves. They exhort Mark to marry, and propose Isolde as the most suitable candidate for such an alliance. Mark, already enraptured by Tristan's glowing praise of the damsel, agrees to the match. The nobles then immediately name Tristan as the emissary for the mission, knowing full well that he has little chance of returning alive to Cornwall. For the danger to Tristan in the pursuance of this enterprise is indeed great. Morold's death plunges Ireland into mourning,
and a decree is issued that any Cornishman found on Irish soil would be summarily executed. Tristan, the slayer of Morold, could expect no mercy if his identity were discovered. During his earlier sojourn in Ireland, he managed to get by as a wandering minstrel. This time, as King Mark's official representative, disguise is impossible. Despite the personal jeopardy, Tristan accepts the task of promoting the alliance. His decision, however, is prompted not so much by altruism as by his desire to alleviate the danger inherent in his present position at the court. He hopes that his return with Isolde would put an end to the murderous enmity of the Cornish nobles, and he expends his energy towards that single purpose.

The dragon is as yet completely outside the picture. It does not enter into any of these plans as a factor to be taken into consideration. Nor are we as yet even aware of its existence. It is only after Tristan is already in Ireland that the monster, as if on cue, enters the narrative. Only then does its presence impinge upon the world of the poem, and the physical conflict functions primarily as a means for Tristan to accomplish his purpose without having to reveal his identity from the start. The figure of the dragon, then, is evidently nothing but a plot device.

Unlike the other heroes we have seen thus far, Tristan undertakes the endeavour by devious means and is not above resorting to falsehood in order to achieve his goal. Once Tristan lands in Ireland, he fabricates a tissue of lies to explain his presence on its shores, and gains the Marshall's protection through bribery. The hero's actions, like his motives, are prudential rather than heroic.
The dragon-fight is in itself a singularly undistinguished conflict (8963-9064). Neither of the antagonists is at all impressive in the action, and the battle resolves itself more into a comic game of tag than an arduous combat. The dragon is referred to as an entire army in itself, "do was sin ouch ein michel her" (9016), but it remains particularly ineffective in action. Nor is the hero's martial prowess here worthy of note, either in quality or extent. Initially, Tristan appears to dominate the situation. He regards the creature more as an eyesore, a beast that "siner ougen ungemach" (8968), than a fearsome adversary to be faced in combat, and treats it accordingly. He boldly rides up to the dragon and pierces it in "dem herzen" with his spear (8978), inflicting a mortal wound with his very first blow. His heroic position, however, is immediately undercut. His horse dies with the shock of contact, and the hero scrambles on foot to reach safety away from his overly-close proximity to the dragon. The creature, meanwhile, ignores Tristan. Rather than pressing its advantage, the monster consumes the dead horse and retreats, maddened by the pain of its injury. Only upon seeing his adversary move away does Tristan emerge from cover. He pursues the dragon until the creature, finally cornered, turns to face its attacker. Tristan, however, does not stand his ground. He does not even fight back. The action in fact now takes a distinctly comic turn as we observe the hero's frantic efforts to evade the dragon's teeth and claws:
Thereafter, the hero has not much more to do save run clear of the monster's feeble attempts to catch him, and the murderous reptile, that "mortsame slange" (9038), dies rather of exhaustion than as a result of Tristan's skill in combat.

Tristan's greatest physical effort is his attempt to wrench the dead monster's jaws apart in order to cut off a piece of its tongue (9060-62) as proof of victory! As compared to Beowulf's magnificent battle against the Wyrm, the conflict here appears indeed a deliberate parody of heroic conventions and attitudes.

Tristan's other battles occur much later in the poem, after the suspicions regarding Isolde's unfaithfulness and Tristan's disloyalty towards Mark make it advisable for the hero to leave Cornwall. The most significant of these is the encounter with the giant Urgan ili vilus (16012-174), which sets the seal on the fact that the narrative interest is never on the nature of Tristan's heroism in battle.

Sojourning in the land of the Swales, the hero remains absolutely grief-stricken at the enforced separation from Isolde. Trying to help his friend, Duke Gilan sends for his most treasured possession, an enchanted dog named Petitcreiu.
Not only is this creature wondrous in appearance, but from a chain of gold around its neck hangs a bell, the sound of which banishes all sorrow from the heart of the hearer. Tristan immediately covets the dog, not for himself but so that he could send it to Isolde and thus alleviate her suffering. Aware that Gilan would never willingly part with the dog, Tristan resorts to devious subterfuge. Without explicitly naming what he seeks to obtain, the hero extracts a promise from Gilan that he would receive whatever he desires as reward if he were successful in freeing the Swales from the hold of Urgan. This time, in contrast to the fight against Morold, Tristan could not care less about delivering the Swales from tyrannous oppression. His sole aim is to win Petitcreiu.  

The hero-monster conflict itself, moreover, is another shoddy affair with particularly strong comic overtones. There is a faint echo of the Beowulf-Grendel confrontation in the importance of the giant's severed hand as tangible proof of victory. Here, however, the comedy predominates, and the

7Ruth Kunzer points out that both the battles against "mythical figure[s] of supernatural strength . . . serve Tristan as effective means to a very practical end and both were planned by him in advance: the defeat of the dragon places Tristan within reach of his goal on his second Irish journey, while his victory over the giant Urgan makes it possible for him to claim the magic dog Petitcreiu, which he wishes to send as a gift to Isold" (p. 68). Kunzer goes on to note that the "structural function as well as some of the details of these two battles stand in ironic contrast to similar feats performed by the hero in other epics" (p. 68, n. 50).
battle becomes a game of hide-and-seek played by the antagonists with the hand as the winner's trophy. Tristan is hardly required to fight at all, much less long and hard, in accomplishing the defeat of this monster. The encounter commences with a skirmish in which the hero blinds his adversary in one eye, cuts off his hand, and lands another blow on his thigh, all without any undue difficulty. Badly wounded, Urgan now advances with ferocious wrath. He remains, nevertheless, quite incapable of doing more than chasing Tristan round some trees:

er jagete Tristanden
under den boumen umbe
maneg angestliche crumbe.

(16060-62)

[He chased Tristan beneath the trees, with many a fearful twist and turn.]

Tristan indeed appears fated to be chased round trees by his monstrous antagonists! Loss of blood through the exertion of the chase, however, compels Urgan to desist. Picking up his hand, he retreats to his stronghold, where he places it on a table before going in search of magic herbs that would make his arm whole again. Tristan, meanwhile, sits on the grass and ponders upon the situation at hand (16078-89).

His deliberations lead him to the conclusion that since he has no actual evidence of what he has done, Gilan would not be bound to honour his promise. Only then does the hero rise and track Urgan to his castle. Upon seeing the hand lying there unguarded, he picks up the booty and hurries away without waiting to confront the giant. Tristan's plans for a
quick and easy getaway, however, are foiled when the monster discovers the theft. Urgan sets off in pursuit and catches up with the hero at a bridge. Another skirmish ensues in which the giant proves as ineffective as before. Tristan blinds the monster in his other eye as well, and then prudently retires to a safe distance from which he watches Urgan's wild thrusts and aimless meanderings. When the giant steps close to the edge of the bridge, the doughty hero seizes his opportunity. He runs up from behind and pushes the monster over the edge to be dashed to pieces on the rocks below.

The action as presented is unheroic to an extreme. If the dragon-fight is a parody of heroic battle, the Tristan-Urgan conflict is clearly nothing but a caricature. The hero undertakes the task of slaying the giant for no reason other than obtaining a toy with which to ease his beloved's grief at their separation, and it is this sole consideration that goads him into renewed activity during the course of the confrontation. Tristan's absorption in love is indeed absolute. Not only does he display a complete disregard for social and political concerns but an equally sweeping lack of consideration towards his friend and host. Tristan repays Duke Gilan for his care and help by depriving him of the one thing he treasures most in the world. The hero, moreover, is so pleased with gaining Petitcreiu as recompense for his feat that not even the conquest of the greatest Empire in the world could have given him greater satisfaction:
Tristan do er daz hundelin
gewan in die gewalt sin,
erne hæte værliche,
Rome und elliu riche,
elliu lant und elliu mer
derwider niht gahtet ein ber. (16263-68)

[When Tristan had gained possession of the little
dog, he would truly have rated Rome and the king-
doms, lands, and seas, as nothing in comparison.]

What a truly world-annihilating reversal of values is found
here! The most shattering aspect of the entire episode, how-
ever, is yet to come. As soon as Isolde receives the dog,
she breaks off the magic bell, for she does not want to be
happy in Tristan's absence. The single practical purpose for
which the hero engages in action is thus ultimately and deli-
berately set at naught.

Tristan's subsequent martial exploits have no other
end save that of diverting his mind from grief:

nu gedähter, solte im disiu not
iemer uf der erden
so tragebære werden,
daz er ir möhte genesen,
daz müese an ritterschefte wesen. (18438-42)

[He thought that if this agony [of separation from
Isolde] was ever to become supportable to the point
where he could survive it, this would have to be
through martial exploits.]

So the hero plunges into the war in Germany, and gains great
glory for his feats in battle:

hie dienter also schone
dem zepter unde der crone,
daz rœmesch riche nie gewan
under sinem vanen einen man,
der ie würde also sagehaft
von manlicher ritterschaft. (18449-54)

[He served the Crown and Sceptre so splendidly that
the Roman Empire never had under its banner a man
who won such fame through deeds of arms.]
Beowulf too wins great renown for his mighty deeds, but his motives of action are so very different. Again, if we remember Roland in the battle of Roncevalles, we are struck by the difference of emphasis in the narratives. Roland's exploit, undertaken in the name of God and France, is the basis of an entire epic, whereas Tristan's deeds, motivated by love-lorn melancholy, are encompassed within the span of a single sentence. In the same vein, Tristan takes action in the feud raging in Arundel (18686-779) simply to find suence from sorrow. He "gedahte sine swære/aber ein teil vergezzen da" (18718-19), and aids Kaedin without any real thought for the political consequences of his deeds.

Tristan's next conflict against the African giant is presented as an afterthought, and the incident has a most ridiculous air. Orgillo's unnamed nephew is involved in following in the family tradition and fashioning a cloak for himself from the beards of his foes. The Spanish emperor naturally refuses to supply the demand, but cannot find any man among his host willing to do battle on his behalf. Tristan steps forward, is wounded, but manages to slay the giant. The whole incident is quickly dismissed. Tristan later subdues another giant, but the fact is mentioned in

\[8\] Gottfried's poem breaks off after Tristan's meeting with Isolde of the White Hands. The rest of the incidents discussed here are examined as presented in the surviving fragments of the Tristan story as told by Thomas and included in A. T. Hatto's translation of the Tristan legend, pp. 301-53.
passing. The narrative moves on without pause to describe the Hall of Statues dedicated to his love that Tristan commands the defeated giant and his minions to fashion. The poem, like its hero, focuses all-exclusively on love, and as Ruth Kunzer points out, "perhaps the bitterest irony of all with reference to chivalry is contained in the implication that, apart from being a possible means of saving Tristan's life and balance of mind, "ritterschefte" as such are valueless."9

Tristan's last battle is another random event. Out hunting one day, he is accosted by a knight, also named Tristan, who implores the hero to aid him in recovering his castle and his lady from a wicked usurper. Unlike the typical heroes of epic and romance, Tristan is stung into immediate action not by the injustice of the situation, but by a reference to his own lost Isolde. He is successful in battle, moreover, only up to a certain point. Though the arrogant usurper and his six brothers are all slain in the skirmish, so is the other Tristan. The unfortunate knight in whose cause the hero fights does not live to benefit from the action, and the victory gained thus remains a hollow one. Furthermore, the hero is himself wounded in the loins by a poisoned lance, and the festering injury ultimately proves fatal. The position of this wound and the nature of the illness are indeed directly indicative of Tristan's lovelorn heartsickness.

9"Tristan": An Ironic Perspective, p. 41.
In detailing the manner of the hero's death, the narrative returns explicitly to the theme of love. Tristan slowly wastes away, but could be saved if Isolde were at his side to cure him by her herbal art. Through an unfortunate series of circumstances, however, Tristan learns that Isolde has refused to come to his aid, when in actuality her ship is already in port. And Tristan succumbs to his wound, dying indeed more of a broken heart than from his injury.

Within similarly fatalistic worlds, then, Beowulf and Tristan both die of wounds incurred in battle. The manner of Tristan's death, however, highlights a fact that is obvious throughout the poem, that heroism in battle is in itself of negligible account in the narrative. It is only in comparison to other human figures, particularly those at the Cornish court, that the extent of Tristan's physical heroism is established. In himself, he does not come through in the action as an heroic character. When he does fight, moreover, he is motivated by personal considerations, and remains totally unmoved by any social issues or external claims to his attention. The physical encounters are in themselves for the most part incidental episodes, quite extraneous to the narrative interests. The battles against the monstrous creatures are parodic in intent and are presented as comic interludes.

None of the adversaries, with the exception of Morold, is treated seriously as an antagonist to be overcome in physical combat.

In Tristan, where the hero pursues self-gratification
with single-minded obsession and the counter-claims of society are summarily dismissed, there is no real scope for the Heroic Plot. What we find instead are merely vestigial traces of the heroic legacy. The narrative incorporates the epic ideal even as it simultaneously diminishes the significance of physical action with regard to the nature of the heroism displayed. The epic dimensions of the monster-fights, clearly visible at times, yet remain purely incidental to plot, character, and theme. The comic effect is paramount in the action, and the use of the motif here points to the tradition of burlesque in romance epitomized in Chaucer's Sir Thopas. With Tristan, indeed, we see a possible end to the survival of the Heroic Plot in literary art except as a vehicle for parody or irony.

**YVAIN**

While Tristan evidences one direction taken by the Heroic Plot in the romance tradition, the narrative of Yvain illuminates another path. The monster-fights here do not project the comic-parodic temper so obvious in Tristan. They are presented more in the epic manner as serious battles undertaken by the hero in the service of society. The monsters, again, are tyrannous forces that exercise their power on the physical plane. The thematic emphasis in Yvain, however, is very different from that of epic song. The interest here is not so much in physical heroism or the maintenance of social
stability as in the personal growth of the hero. As a consequence of this shift in focus, the physicality of the hero-monster combats is of far less significance than their symbolic function in the narrative.

Yvain's physical conflicts indeed have little weight in themselves. The knight fights too often and too casually for the issues involved to be embedded in each encounter in the manner of epic narratives. Like Tristan, Yvain fights against human as well as monstrous antagonists. The combats here, however, are pointed towards cumulative effect, and become carefully detailed rungs on the ladder of moral advance. "In the great age of the romance," as W. T. H. Jackson observes, "the interest usually lies in the failure of a particular knight to be perfect and in the struggle he makes to attain perfection."¹⁰ The poem thus has not world enough or time to dilate on the nature of the physical conflicts themselves, for the stress remains on the ethical issues concerning the protagonist's failure and subsequent achievement.

The world of Yvain, as Auerbach comments, is one "specifically created and designed to give the knight opportunity to prove himself."¹¹ Within such an artistically contrived context, the hero's manifold battles have in themselves a proportionately scaled-down importance. Yvain fights again

¹⁰ *Literature of the Middle Ages*, p. 92.

and again in "a practically uninterrupted series of adventures," but his combats are germane to the thematic interests alone. As Scholes and Kellogg remark: "The developmental formulation itself is primarily a plot formulation. . . . It involves seeing the character at close range, with limited detail, so that his change against a particular background may be readily apparent." Yvain's numerous conflicts thus gain collective importance as personal adventures through which his inner growth may be charted; they constitute a series of events which serve to illustrate his progress towards knightly eminence and moral worth.

The episodes in the plot line are clearly structured in accordance with the moral theme. Yvain has to learn for himself, as Julian Harris points out, "that knightly deeds should be performed only in a good cause and that they should not be an end in themselves." The hero's early conflicts reveal his flaw in character, for Yvain fights simply to gain personal recognition and renown. The turning point in his career comes when his involvement in knightly games at

\[\text{\textsuperscript{12}}\text{Auerbach, p. 136.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{13}}\text{Scholes and Kellogg, Nature of Narrative, p. 168.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{14}}\text{"The Role of the Lion in Chretien de Troyes' Yvain," PMLA, LXIV (1949), 1160. Harris' reading of the poem moves towards Christian allegory; he sees Yvain as the story "of a purposeful knight who, with the help of God--and the lion--was able to overcome all sorts and descriptions of men, giants and devils--i.e., vices" (p. 1163). Though we may not fully agree with Harris' interpretation of character and theme, his detailed analysis of the plot structure is perceptive and illuminating.}\]
the court causes him to forget his solemn vow to Laudine to return after a year; his "overlong absence," as Jackson observes, "brings rejection [by his lady] and mental, moral, and spiritual collapse." 15 Yvain's rehabilitation is detailed through his subsequent adventures. These are battles in which he eschews all forms of self-publicity and fights in the cause of social justice against villainous and tyrannous forces. Now, as Larry Sklute comments, we see "his growth toward a dedication to his woman and toward an integrity of his word." 16 By the end of the poem, indeed, it is most obvious that Yvain has moved "a long way from the heedless state he was in" at the start. 17

With the emphasis remaining on the cumulative impact of the action, the monster-fights in Yvain are necessarily short in duration and swift in culmination. The hero's martial prowess is never in question. His physical ability is clearly far superior to that of the serpent or the giants he encounters. Though still presented as physical antagonists to be slain in direct combat, these adversaries are quite ineffectual in battle. The serpent is a diminutive creature whose powers of action are so limited that it is incapable of offering any resistance to the hero's attack. The

15 Literature of the Middle Ages, p. 108.


17 Harris, "Role of the Lion," p. 1150.
destructive potential of the giants may be greater than that of the serpent, but they too reveal a singular lack of physical force when in action against the hero. Yvain regards these creatures as nothing out of the ordinary, and proceeds to crush them with a facility which provides a direct contrast to the epic action. Yvain's monstrous antagonists are indeed more plot functions than real figures: they appear in the narrative only to be defeated by the knight on his path towards attaining "personal perfection." 18

The narrative action underscores the patently diminished stature and function of the monsters in Yvain. The high points of the hero's career are depicted here in terms of a battle against a human rather than a monstrous adversary. Monsters have no active role at all in the first part of the poem, which deals with Yvain's meteoric rise to fame at the court. The hero's surge from obscurity to prominence is implemented solely by victories over knightly opponents. Yvain demonstrates the extent of his martial prowess for the first time against Esclados, the defender of the fountain, and it is this conflict which serves to establish his position as a knight well worthy of admiration and honour. Yvain consolidates his position by his defeat of Kay and his manifold successes in knightly tournaments. After his downfall, however, he fights against adversaries that include monsters and "demons" as well as men and knights. Yvain's

18 Auerbach, p. 140.
most lengthy and arduous confrontation, nevertheless, is the combat against Gawain, and it is this conflict which climaxes his active career in the poem.

As we look at the first phase of Yvain's career, the narrative appears fairly epic in tone and temper. In contrast to the action in Tristan, physical prowess as displayed on the battlefield is here the criterion for measuring knightly stature. Yvain's activity, however, is limited to conflicts against human antagonists. The single monster-figure that appears in this section of the poem remains quite incidental to the main narrative interest, and has no significant role in the main line of the action.

Right from the start of Yvain, we are aware of a distinct change in attitude towards the monsters. The existence of the supernatural aspect of Nature is here indeed taken quite for granted and no longer calls for immediate action on the part of the hero. The first strange creature encountered in the narrative may be best categorized as a man-monster. He is not exactly a man, but he is not precisely a monster either. The appearance of the stalwart Keeper of the Bulls is described in detail by Calogrenant, but the emphasis remains on the strange and unnatural aspect of his figure rather than his physical strength or prowess. The description itself, moreover, incorporates far too many analogies to known beasts of nature for this creature to inspire anything other than wonder at his physical peculiarities. Black in colour and huge in height, this weird figure has a head larger than
that of a horse, eyes like an owl, a nose like a cat, ears like an elephant, teeth like a wild boar, and jowls split like a wolf, as well as a twisted and hunched backbone so that his chin sinks deep into his chest (288-315). The Keeper of the Bulls is presented indeed as more physically deformed than physically dangerous. Significantly enough, there is no battle, no conflict of any kind. The creature functions here rather as a visual and vocal signpost to adventure than a menacing opponent or adversary. Calogrenant approaches this monstrous human without trepidation and engages him in conversation, whereupon the knight learns of the magic fountain and is directed towards it. Yvain's encounter with the Keeper of the Bulls is in fact merely noted in passing:

... Si vit les tors et le vilain,
Qui la voie li anseigna;
Mes plus de çant foiz se seigna
De la mervoille, que il ot,
Coment Nature feire sot
Oevre si leide et si vilainne. (794-99)

[... he met the bulls and the rustic boor who showed him the way to take. But more than a hundred times he crossed himself at sight of the monster before him--how Nature had ever been able to form such a hideous, ugly creature.]

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Referred to as a "mervoille" rather than as a monster, the Keeper of the Bulls remains an unhappy quirk of nature, a grotesque figure to be marvelled at rather than a fearsome creature to be regarded with terror, awe, or respect.

Again, though victory in battle is here, as in the epic, directly indicative of personal worth, defeat and death are no longer synonymous. The subsequent Yvain-Esclados fight (811-907) does end with the hero having slain his opponent, but Yvain's next encounter with Kay (2224-60) serves to demonstrate the typically swift and bloodless nature of knightly confrontations. Seated on their horses, lances aligned at the proper angle, the two antagonists rush at each other. The shock of contact is enough to unseat Kay and make him fall to the ground in defeat. The conflict is over with the proud and malicious Kay suffering merely a mild disgrace, the "po de honte" (2240) that Yvain sought to inflict, and the entire court applauds the hero's achievement.

As we turn to the second phase of Yvain's active career, moreover, it becomes evident that the narrative emphasis is not on the physical nature of the combats as in Beowulf, but on the change discernible in the hero. The action is quite obviously contrived\(^\text{20}\) to illustrate Yvain's

inner growth, and the incidents serve directly as symbols of his moral progress. The knight fights in different kinds of situations against various kinds of antagonists, including monsters. The narrative focus, however, remains on the hero's inward quality rather than his physical calibre. The monster-fights, again, function rather to indicate significant stages in the hero's personal development than as physical battles important in themselves in the manner of the epic action. The successive conflicts are clearly the interlocking units of a plot line designed to draw out the moral theme of the narrative, and each combat highlights Yvain's increasing awareness of his social obligations as a knight of the realm.

The fight against Count Alier (3142-297) which initiates the active process of Yvain's rehabilitation is no knightly combat. It is rather a bloody battle undertaken to repel the invaders of the Dame de Noroison's township. Here, Yvain has his one moment of epic grandeur. The hero fights with exemplary courage and consummate skill. He singlehandedly clears the guarded pass, leaving a swathe of destruction in his wake, and proceeds to decimate the enemy force. His valour and might inspire the other men of the town to give of their best as well, and the attackers are completely routed. Yvain pursues the Count mercilessly until he surrenders and sues for peace, and the threat of future attacks against the Dame de Noroison is thereby brought to an
end once and for all. Yvain shines in this battle as a "vaillant sodoier" (3199), as an outstanding warrior-knight. His strength, skill, and strategy in battle are commented upon at extensive length by the awed townsfolk (3199-232), and he is even compared favourably by those whom he aids to an heroic figure from a well-known chanson de geste, Roland of Roncevalles fame:

Et veez, comant il let fet 
De l'espee, quant il la tret!
Onques ne fist de Durandart 
Rolanz des Turs si grant essart 
An Roncevaus ne an Espaingne!

(3233-37)

[And see how he wields the sword when he draws it! Roland never wrought such havoc with Durendal against the Turks at Ronceval or in Spain!]

Yvain fights, however, not in any overriding religious and political cause as Roland does, but in the defence of a lady and her people against a marauding foe. The action here is significant primarily in that the hero acts for the first time in a truly noble manner without a single thought of gaining personal honour and renown.

The political implications of the hero's actions have indeed no relevance to the theme or plot of the poem. This shift in emphasis becomes most evident in the very next encounter (3341-92) where Yvain fights against a fire-breathing serpent, the first actual monster to appear in the narrative. Unlike the mighty Dragon in Beowulf, this creature is no threat to the stability of the social world, nor are its ravages such as would hold an entire nation in terror of its destructive force. The danger it represents, moreover, is
extremely specific and localized. When the hero comes upon the arena of the action, the serpent is in fact fully occupied in harrying a lion to death. Though not in any peril himself, Yvain is moved to action by the plight of the noble lion. Brought to the scene by the "cri mout dolereus" that assails his ears (3344), he enters the fray out of pity for the distressed creature, "Que pitiez l'an semont et prie" (3373), and quickly dispatches the serpent. In striking contrast to the Beowulf-Dragon confrontation, however, one sentence of the narrative here proves sufficient to express the entire account of the physical conflict between hero and monster:

A l'espee, qui soef tranche,
Va le felon serpent requerre,
Si le tranche jusqu'an la terre
Et an deus meitiez le tronçone,
Fiert et refiert et tant l'an done,
Que tot le demince et depiece. (3376-81)

[With his sword, which cuts so clean, he attacks the wicked serpent, first cleaving him through to the earth and cutting him in two, then continuing his blows until he reduces him to tiny bits.]

The battle itself remains distinctly one-sided and is scarcely arduous. Yvain does not have to extend himself in overcoming the creature, and the serpent appears to have not even the slightest ability to retaliate or to defend itself against the hero's assault. The physical details of this conflict remain indeed as obviously unimportant as its political dimensions. Of pertinence here is rather the fact that Yvain has exerted himself spontaneously and with no regard for self-aggrandizement on behalf of a beast to which he owes no personal obligation of any kind. The defence of the Dame de
Noroison's town may be taken as the hero's grateful recompense for the lady's care and hospitality in his time of need. Here, however, Yvain goes "beyond the bounds of mere duty," as Julian Harris remarks, and allies himself clearly on the side of justice against all forms of evil and wickedness in society.

Not only does Yvain's rescue of the lion mark an important stage in the moral development of the hero's character, but the creature itself becomes an extremely significant figure in the action that follows. It is the lion, which now travels with Yvain as his faithful and devoted companion, that is primarily instrumental in bringing the hero's succeeding battles to a speedy and successful conclusion. Neither express commands nor locked rooms can prevent this noble beast from aiding Yvain when he is in difficulties, as the opposition discovers to its cost. Yvain's identity as a valiant and worthy knight, moreover, is hereafter inextricably bound up with the figure of the lion. Yvain presents himself in a new guise as the apparently unknown "Chevalier au Lion," and it is as such that he is now accepted and praised by those whom he aids. The lion clearly functions in terms of "Role of the Lion," p. 1147.

As Barbara Nelson Sargent observes, "after the hero's sudden madness, flight, and symbolic suicide, a new personality is born, identified by a new name: the Knight of the Lion. Under this name (one might say: mask), the hero slowly rehabilitates himself" ("Old and New in the Character-.Drawing of Chretien de Troyes," in Innovation in Medieval Literature:...
of the action and theme of the narrative as a literary device, as a means of denoting perhaps some aspect of the hero's character which resurges as he grows towards the chivalric ideal. As John Stevens suggests, the lion may be seen as "Yvain's lost 'trouthe,' his loyalty; and their inseparable companionship, their identity in battle, seems to symbolize in Yvain after his madness (a truly and pitifully animal condition) the reintegration of the powers of man." In broader and more general terms, however, the lion may also be seen as the symbol of the social and moral justice in which cause the hero now serves and which strengthens him in battle against injustice and evil.

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Essays to the Memory of Alan Markman, ed. Douglas Radcliffe-Unstead (Pittsburgh, Penn.: Medieval Studies Committee of the University of Pittsburgh, 1971), pp. 44-45).


24 Chretien tells us explicitly that Yvain aids the lion out of "pitie" for the noble creature (3373), and pity was in itself regarded in the Middle Ages as a virtuous quality concomitant with a sense of justice. Gervase Matthew illuminates this point in his article "Ideals of Knighthood in Late-Fourteenth Century England," rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," ed. Denton Fox (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp. 68-72. He notes: "'Pitie' seems essentially a compassion for an individual which finds expression in immediate action. . . . The epithet had survived into the late Middle Ages from the primitive conception of the hero of the chanson de geste as a 'Justicier,' a punisher of wrong-doers; it remained linked with it" (pp. 69-70). Matthew goes on to suggest that even as late as the fourteenth century the term "justice" would be taken as "primarily . . . [referring] to natural equity" (p. 70). His suggestion highlights Yvain's role in the serpent-fight as the champion of natural order and reflects upon his subsequent function in society as he battles against injustices on the side of the defenceless and the oppressed.
The functional symbolism of the figure of the lion is quite apparent in terms of the chivalric plane of the action as presented in the narrative. We do not need to move into the realm of Christian symbolism or allegory to understand its significance. It is difficult to consider the lion "a symbol of Christ," as Julian Harris does, or to accept Tom Artin's interpretation of the animal as "the emblem of the resurrection of true love within Yvain, the spiritual love [of God] of which he is now capable." While Harris yet maintains a delicate balance between the action as depicted and the Christian symbolism he perceives therein, Artin reads Yvain in purely allegorical terms. Within the narrative itself,

25 "Role of the Lion," p. 1148.


27 Artin sees the action in Yvain as pure allegory. He feels that "the three episodes, the adventure at the fountain, exile and madness, and his discovery and cure by the damsels, are indeed sacramental in character and represent the three parts of Christian initiation" (p. 216). He goes on to note that the "second half of the romance shows us Yvain's gradual spiritual perfection through a sequence of struggles with creatures who represent the dangers presented by the world to the Christian soul in this life" (p. 218). Artin's interpretation follows a line similar to that of Maxwell Luria who remarks that "Yvain's career can be summarized as follows: after successfully sustaining the trial of the fountain and acquiring the spiritual or moral regeneration of its waters (a tropological equivalent of the anagogical vision of salvation which seems to be represented by the serene harmony after the storm), there is a backsliding, then a recovery of spiritual status through the purgative adventures which constitute the body of the romance, and finally the reconciliation with Laudine, which signalizes
however, there is nothing integrally Christian about the noble beast and its actions. Both Harris and Artin base their arguments on extra-textual evidence, with primary emphasis on the Christian symbolism of the lion in the Bestiary tradition of the Middle Ages, but so divergent, and at times even contradictory, are the meanings assigned to the creature within this tradition,²⁸ that we would be well advised to confine our


Though the battles have greater symbolic significance as detailing the nature of Yvain's moral development, the physical action itself is nevertheless quite realistic on its own plane. The figures involved in the action are not presented as personifications of abstract qualities, and the battles are not treated as allegorical conflicts. To consider, as Artin does, the serpent to be a representation of the Devil, or the conflict between Yvain and Harpin to be one between a Christian soldier and the Cardinal sin of Pride, is indeed to make too much of too little within the narrative itself.

²⁸See Beryl Rowland, Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), pp. 118-23. Rowland notes that in "terms of medieval theology, the lion was Christ" (p. 119). However, she goes on to observe: "Since the medieval mind was accustomed to antithetical symbols, the lion could represent utterly opposing principles. In the most extreme form, Christ, the Lion of Judah, was set against the great adversary, the Devil, which "as a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (I Peter v. 8). Who would not rush into the jaws of that lion, asked St. Augustine, if the Lion of Judah should not prevail? Thus Daniel's seven lions symbolized the Seven Deadly Sins, and Samson's lion might signify death or the Devil, since Samson's victory prefigured that of Christ. Some carvers even depicted the lion's jaws, instead of the whale's or dragon's maw, as the mouth of hell, showing the contorted faces of dead sinner's within" (pp. 119-20). Moreover, as Rowland points out, in pre-Christian and non-Christian societies the lion was always "emblematic of invincible power" and "also the symbol of watchfulness," the same symbolism persisting even in Christian times (p. 118). It is these general associations which illuminate our understanding of the figure of the lion rather than any specific Christian meaning.
focus on the narrative itself and deal with it on its own terms.

The increasing emphasis on the battles as indicating the nature of the hero's moral progress becomes clear in the knight's next adventures. Yvain takes shelter for a night at a castle and is implored by his host to fight against the cruel giant, Harpin de la Montaigne. The hero hesitates—not out of fear for his life but because he has already pledged himself to fight on Lunete's behalf at noon the next day. The conflict that arises between Yvain's obligation to honour his promise to Lunete—to whom he owes a personal debt of great magnitude—and his obligation to the knightly code is here of far greater significance than the physical battles. It is through Yvain's mental conflict, directly presented (3992-405), that we grasp his growing sense of responsibility. As Julian Harris notes: "The easy way--and perfectly honorable, of course--would be for him to forget about everything but his obligation to Lunete. But his conscience will not let him off so easily: he is deeply grieved at the unhappy and unjust state of affairs to be found in the castle."29 Yvain tries to achieve a compromise. He agrees to fight the giant, but only if he can do so early enough so as not to bar him from keeping his pledge to Lunete. The next morning, Yvain's anguish is great. The giant has not yet appeared and he cannot delay his departure much

29."Role of the Lion," p. 1150.
longer, but he is unable to simply leave the inhabitants of
the castle at the mercy of Harpin. Finally, as Harris
observes, the hero is forced into making "the difficult but
correct decision to go." At the very moment of his depart-
ture, nevertheless, the giant appears, and thus "his mettle
is doubly tested."

Yvain's battle against Harpin (4196-245) is not as
one-sided as that against the serpent, but the nature of the
resolution is here again never in doubt. The giant himself
comes across in the narrative more as a lascivious and arro-
gant bully than a fearsome monster with supernatural powers.
It is Harpin's thwarted lust for a beauteous maiden that
drives him into action. His destructive rampage, moreover,
is not only restricted to the immediate environs of the
castle, but is pointed towards the specific purpose of forcing
its inhabitants into submission to his demand. Yvain himself
anticipates no real difficulty in dealing with this monster,
and so it proves. Though the giant fights with all his might
and main, he is quickly overcome in combat. The importance
of the aid rendered by the lion to the hero, however, is not
to be discounted. Unasked and unbidden, it springs to Yvain's
defence when the knight is stunned by a powerful blow from
Harpin, thus giving him time to recover and resume the assault.

30"Role of the Lion," p. 1151.
31"Role of the Lion," p. 1151.
Yvain then lops off the monster's arm, and with the very next stroke the giant falls dead to the ground. Having accomplished his aim, the hero dashes off without further delay to present himself at Lunete's trial as her champion against the three villainous accusors. Undaunted by having to face all three together, and in no sense weakened by the preceding fight against Harpin, Yvain confronts the villains singlehandedly. This battle (4475-558) is a more arduous and difficult one. Though Yvain manages to hold his own for a while, he is soon hard-pressed by sheer weight of numbers. In this trial by combat, however, justice cannot be excluded or denied. The lion, though ordered by Yvain (at the villains' cowardly request) not to intervene in the fight, cannot refrain from aiding the hero when it sees him in danger of defeat. It springs onto the battlefield, and attacks one of the villains to leave him on the point of death. It then proceeds to fight at the hero's side against the others, who finally concede. With justice so obviously on his side, Yvain cannot but prevail, and once again we see Right triumphing over Might.

As the ethical concerns of the narrative become more clearly defined, so the symbolic function of the physical action becomes more pronounced. Yvain comes through the test of his knightly fibre with flying colours: he does not fail Lunete, nor does he fail in his duty towards his host and the kin of his friend Gawain. The battles which serve to highlight the hero's developing social conscience, however, are
in themselves treated in an extremely casual manner as everyday events, as deeds that any truly worthy knight should, and would, be able to perform. Yvain not only disposes of a giant but defeats three other antagonists in hard combat, all in the same morning. The fact, however, is not considered particularly remarkable. There is yet another giant that Yvain slays shortly thereafter, but so unimportant are the actual encounters that this battle is passed off in a conversation between two minor characters in the narrative:

"... A cele porte la defors
Demain porroiz veoir le cors
D'un grant jaiant, que il tua
Si tost que gueires n'i sua." (4915-18)

["... Outside yonder gate you may see tomorrow the body of a mighty giant whom he slew with such ease that he hardly had to sweat."]

The praiseworthy extent of the hero's physical prowess is not an issue open for consideration and so receives no elaboration.

At the castle of Pesme Avanture, however, Yvain has another arduous battle on his hands against the half-human creatures fathered by a "deable" (5271) upon a woman. Though at times referred to as "deables" (5337, 5468), these two adversaries are dealt with more as humans: they look like men, fight in the same manner that men do, and succumb to death in physical combat. Nevertheless, Yvain is in serious danger in this conflict (5570-665). Not only do the opponents carry shields which no human sword may penetrate, but the lion is securely pent up in a room. The hero fights bravely and well, but he is soon reduced to desperate straits. His
mighty blows are rendered quite ineffective by the magical shields of his adversaries, while his own protective helmet and shield are hacked to pieces. Yvain struggles on nonetheless, and pushes himself to the utmost even as defeat stares him in the face. Fortunately for the hero, however, the lion breaks free of its confinement and enters the fray. Thereafter, the battle is quickly concluded. The noble beast pounces upon one of the opponents, and eliminates him from the combat by mauling him severely. The other creature, noting his companion's predicament, moves to his aid only to meet with his own death. As he turns, he leaves his back unprotected by the shield, and the hero seizes this opportunity to decapitate his enemy:

La teste nue et le col nu
Li a li gloz abandoné,
Et il li a tel cop doné,
Que la teste del bu li ret
Si soavet, que mot n'an set. (5654-58)

[When the rascal exposed to him his bare head and neck, he dealt him such a blow that he smote his head from his shoulders so quietly that the fellow never knew a word about it.]

The battle itself has a distinct epic quality, but it remains undeveloped. Though the action here parallels that of the Beowulf-Dam encounter, the nature of the conflict is very different. Like Beowulf, Yvain proves himself worthy in this severe test of his will and purpose by refusing to submit tamely to defeat. The outcome, again, is resolved in a similar fashion with the intervention of some higher power. Here, however, the symbolism predominates and in fact takes
over the action. The epic hero displays a remarkable degree of self-sufficiency in combat, and slays the enemy without direct external aid. In Yvain's case, Justice ranges itself in physical form on his side and actively aids him in defeating the enemy. The moral and ethical issues underlying the action are obviously of far greater significance than the conflict itself, and the same degree of physical strength and fortitude required of the epic hero are no longer demanded of the knight.

Again, it is most informative to note that a blow delivered from the back in no way detracts from Yvain's success. The narrative makes explicit that the hero would have had to be totally insane, or "fos" (5649), to let such a golden opportunity slip by. In contrast to the epic action, then, it is winning that is all-important here rather than fighting the good fight. The interest lies not so much in the ethics of physical combat as in the idea of moral victory. The stress is on the triumphant conclusion of the conflict rather than on the heroic means by which it is effected.

The narrative focus, moreover, remains explicitly on the hero's motives of action. This time, Yvain is under no personal obligation of any kind to involve himself in the situation at the castle. He fights freely and willingly on behalf of the three hundred captive maidens and, in so doing, he demonstrates his understanding of his knightly function and his acceptance of his social duties. The political implications of the action in which he is involved, though obvious,
are once again of negligible value in the poem. Yvain delivers
the maidens from their plight, but the deed remains merely an
incident in the hero's personal career to which he spares no
thought once he has accomplished his purpose. Nor does the
narrative slow its pace to dilate upon the liberation of the
King of the Isle of Damsels from paying the ignominious tribute
of thirty maidens each year. The narrative quickly moves on,
along with Yvain, to the next battle and the case of the Noire
Espine sisters.

 Appropriately enough, Yvain's period of trial ends at
the same place where his troubles all began--at the court.
Yvain has proved himself capable and morally responsible as a
knight in the world outside the court. Now he comes face to
face in combat with Gawain, the acknowledged "exemplar and
model of the court." 32 It is Yvain, however, who fights here
in a just cause for Gawain, surprisingly enough, champions
the claim of the wicked Espine sister who seeks to defraud
the other of her rightful share of the inheritance. The lion
has no part in the action of this final conflict (6106-228).
Yvain's regeneration is complete, his moral position is
unassailable, and his effort in the cause of justice is
undertaken before the same company that witnessed his earlier
debacle. The two knights, both incognito, fight long and
hard. They bloody their swords again and again, but neither

32 W. A. Nitze, "The Character of Gauvain in the Romances
is able to gain the advantage. Night falls, and still the struggle for physical supremacy goes on, for the two opponents are most evenly matched in skill and strength. The confrontation itself ultimately ends in a stalemate: Yvain and Gawain discover each other's identities, and each magnanimously concedes the honours of the battle to the other. However, as Harris observes, "the fact remains that Yvain would surely have won [because of the righteousness of his cause] and yet humbly refused to carry off the victory." The hero's declaration of defeat, made before that of Gawain, thus becomes a gesture denoting the extent of his mental and emotional maturation. It is a gesture of knightly humility which provides a direct contrast to the obsessive drive for personal glory he exhibits in the early stage of his career. Moreover, though Yvain may not gain a victory over Gawain in physical terms, he emerges clearly the victor in moral terms. The narrative makes explicit that whereas Gawain treats this battle as just another knightly game, Yvain regards it as a moral cause. The validity of Yvain's position is apparent to all, and Arthur, the rightful arbiter of justice, resolves the issue of the rival claims of the Noire Espine sisters accordingly.

As Jackson pithily sums up: "At the end of the poem Chretien has brought his hero to an understanding of knighthood

33"Role of the Lion," p. 1161.
in the world and has also raised him to a degree of moral responsibility and social awareness far superior to that of the Arthurian court represented by Gawain. The relation with Laudine, which began as a totally conventional "falling-in-love," has thus served its purpose in bringing about the maturity of the hero."34 Yvain's abrogation of his duty towards Laudine forces him to re-evaluate himself and his position as a knight; through his subsequent adventures, he reveals his growing sense of responsibility. Yvain's declaration of devoted service to Laudine proves hollow; in the service of the weak and oppressed in society, he redeems himself. In Yvain, as Jean Frappier observes, Chretien offers "a lesson in wisdom and nobility," and the action records the manner in which the "guilt of the lover was atoned for by the deeds of the knight."35


For an interesting discussion of ethical norms as treated by Chretien and other romance writers, see Sklute's "Ambiguity of Ethical Norms in Courtly Romance." Sklute remarks that "romance shows an interest in psychology and psychologizing with respect to a character and his actions" (p. 322). The episodic structure in romance narratives functions thus "as a correlative to the analytic and experimental impulse" (p. 328) in the writer, who "shows more concern with analyzing episodes from a theoretical point of view than with projecting a consistent ethical system upon the whole" (p. 327). However, as Sklute goes on to
The central conflict in Yvain is thus clearly an internal one, a conflict which takes place within the psyche of the hero rather than within the external world. The interest lies not in the protagonist's struggles against physical adversaries as in the epic, but in his struggle against himself, in his effort to fulfill his true heroic potential and achieve self-realization. Physical action is here deployed as a means of indicating personal growth in character, and the monster-fights become essentially symbolic units within a plot line explicating a moral theme. The focus is not on the battles themselves, but on the hero's psychological change and inward development as charted through the course of the narrative action.

In the Continental romances of Yvain and Tristan, then, the Heroic Plot moves in directions quite divergent from that of epic song. The hero-monster conflicts are still depicted as physical fights to the death in the manner of those in Beowulf. Both Tristan and Yvain actively participate in specific situations within the external world, and slay monsters delineated as perpetrators of physical tyranny and injustice within society. The physical dimensions of the battles themselves, nevertheless, are of far less importance in these

point out, "there are some writers who indicate a desire to arrive at a unified vision by the end." In Yvain, indeed, Chretien "presents a consistent and coherent examination of the problem it establishes and an attempted synthesis by the end of the complexities which the problem presents to the chivalric consciousness" (p. 328).
narratives than their respective comic-parodic and symbolic functions. If the world of medieval romance had contained only Tristan and Yvain and their strain, the relevance of the Heroic Plot on the physical plane would be already moribund in literary art. There is, however, another major work to be considered in the English medieval tradition, and in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the Heroic Plot is indeed very much alive.
CHAPTER IV

THE RESURGENCE IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

The Heroic Plot is central in the narrative of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Unlike the hero-monster battles in the Continental romances, the physical confrontation between Gawain and the monstrous Green Knight is in itself of great importance to the revelation of character and the development of plot and theme. Even as the Heroic Plot resurges within the world of romance, however, it undergoes a transformation in its nature and function. While still depicted as occurring within the external world, the Gawain-Green Knight conflict is not a furious fight to the death. Rather, it extends over two separate meetings in which more words are exchanged than actual blows and neither antagonist is slain. The physical confrontation itself, moreover, functions in the narrative primarily as a diversion which serves to draw the unsuspecting Gawain into an arena other than the field of battle for the crucial trial of his moral rectitude. Heroism in Sir Gawain is indeed neither defined nor demonstrated through physical combat, and it is the quality of the hero's inner psychological and moral fibre that remains explicitly the ultimate determinant of his heroic standing.

The shift in interest from the physical to the psychological plane of reality is not only more pronounced in
Sir Gawain than in Yvain, but it is evidenced through the very nature of the hero-monster conflict itself. The emphasis here remains indeed on quality of the spirit rather than of the flesh. We noted in Yvain that though knightly worth is measured more in terms of intrinsic fibre than physical prowess, the hero's potential and subsequent growth to perfection are exhibited in the narrative directly through success in battle. The assessment of Gawain's heroic calibre, however, remains an issue divorced from a display of physical ability or capacity. The exchange of single blows proposed by the Green Knight not only limits Gawain's physical activity during the first meeting to the barest minimum, but the thrust he delivers remains singularly ineffective upon impact. Bodily strength and martial prowess become of even less account in the second encounter, where the hero has to submit without any attempt at self-defence to a blow from his supernatural adversary. During the course of this confrontation, moreover, Gawain is twice subjected to a feint and his reactions closely observed before the Green Knight finally lands a thrust upon the hero's neck so gently as to merely nick the skin. The action resolves itself into a direct test of Gawain's courage and resoluteness of will as conducted by the authoritative Green Knight, and the focus remains pointedly on the hero's firmness of spirit in the face of what appears to be certain death.

The interest in the psychological fibre of the protagonist, however, extends much further than indicated by a
glance at the physical conflict. The decisive trial of Gawain's heroic quality takes place not on the battlefield but within the peaceful setting of a castle, where he spends three days prior to his second meeting with the Green Knight. The action here, moreover, comprises a direct examination of Gawain's ability to live up to his social and moral code of conduct. The antagonist now sets aside his supernatural guise to appear in human form as the hospitable Bercilak and, through the agency of his beautiful wife, subjects his unwary guest to a scrutiny of his behaviour in situations of mental and moral strain. For two days, Gawain comports himself in an exemplary manner. He reveals his intrinsic virtue as he withstands the sexual temptation offered by the alluring Lady Bercilak, fends off her advances with consummate tact, and faithfully adheres to the exchange-of-winnings agreement made with Bercilak. On the third day, nevertheless, the hero evidences a weakening in moral fibre. The consciousness of his physical peril in the impending encounter with the Green Knight prompts him to accept the magic girdle proffered by the lady and to break faith with Bercilak by keeping this gift a secret. Gawain's strength of character as demonstrated at the castle becomes indeed of supreme significance in the narrative. It not only affects our view of his heroic stature but in fact determines the very course of the physical action in the subsequent confrontation with the Green Knight.

As the entire action in Sir Gawain resolves itself into a single subtly-executed trial of the protagonist's mental
and moral quality, so the direct function of the Heroic Plot diminishes yet further. The Gawain-Green Knight conflict, when taken in isolation, is a test of fighting mettle as conducted through the direct mode of physical action. Gawain's acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge draws his figure into prominence as the most brave and worthy of the knights assembled at Arthur's hall, and the action highlights his truly admirable strength of spirit. In terms of the narrative action as a whole, however, the physical action has another more important and more devious function in the poem. The Green Knight's initial challenge serves rather to create confusion about the real nature of the test than as a declaration of true intent. The second encounter, moreover, while focusing in purport on revealing Gawain's courage in a completely hopeless situation, presents in direct form the results of the investigation carried out by Bercilak. The nature of the action and the extent of the injury received by the hero relate directly to the duration of his sojourn at the castle and the extent of his moral strength as displayed therein. The physical Gawain-Green Knight confrontation is thus quite obviously more a diversionary tactic than a direct means of evaluating heroic quality.

Not only is the deployment of the Heroic Plot in Sir Gawain markedly divergent from the mode of epic song or that of the Continental romances, but it is pointed towards a different purpose. The action itself is here less concerned with an
exhibition of human achievement than with a discussion of human limitation. What Gawain undergoes through the course of the narrative action is a morally educative experience, an experience which teaches him about his own nature and inculcates in him an awareness of his own weakness. Gawain is presented at the start of the poem in the manner of Beowulf as embodying the ideal of human perfection, and he demonstrates a level of achievement in action which very few can attain. As the narrative draws to a close, nevertheless, the stress is on the slight moral weakening displayed at the castle. Like Yvain, Gawain comes to a conscious realization of his personal failing in character. However, the understanding that Gawain gains about the extent of his own moral strength reflects here upon all people capable of noble and honourable actions. For Gawain's failing, unlike that of Yvain, is presented as an intrinsic and irremediable aspect of human nature, as a fundamental and universal trait. In the ultimate analysis, then, Sir Gawain sets forth a qualified assessment of human capacity. It points out that though human beings may be capable of truly commendable behaviour, they cannot ever attain the level of absolute perfection postulated in the ideal of their world.

The radical change in the action of Sir Gawain reflects the transformation in the nature and function of the antagonist. The fading of belief in the physical reality of monsters as awe-inspiring creatures existing within the world is evident in the romances discussed in the previous chapter. With Tristan
and *Yvain*, indeed, the motif of the physical hero-monster conflict appears moribund in literary art. In *Sir Gawain*, however, we see the revival of the Heroic Plot with the use of the faery tradition and the employment of magic to rationalize the existence of the supernatural and the superhuman within the world. The monster-figure is resuscitated and drawn again into prominence in the action, but now as a magical being manifesting aspects of "the other--the other than human"\(^1\) as well as of the human. The supernatural and monstrous aspect of the Green Knight is ultimately explained away as a guise superimposed upon his natural human form through the power of magic. As delineated in the narrative, nevertheless, the Green Knight may be seen as one of the faery race whose physical existence was taken for granted in the widespread medieval tradition. He is an awesome creature with powers of action closely allied to the elemental forces of Nature, but who yet in form resembles human beings. In the manner of the faery, again, the Green Knight's intrusion into human affairs serves to generate in the protagonist and his world a new understanding of the natural human condition on the psychological plane of reality.

Before taking a detailed look at the figures of the hero and the monstrous antagonist, however, let us examine the physical action as depicted in Fits I and IV of the narrative. At the start of the action, we may well imagine ourselves back

\(^1\)John Speirs, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Scrutiny*, XVI (1949), 282.
in the world of heroic epic. All indications are that the Gawain-Green Knight confrontation is to take place at the purely physical level in a fashion very similar to the archetypal deployment of the Heroic Plot. The poet carefully manipulates us into that belief with the manner in which he introduces the adversary into the narrative. The Green Knight appears in truth closely allied in nature and function to the mighty Grendel in Beowulf. He is depicted as a monstrous creature with powers of action far above the usual and the ordinary. Though possessing recognizably human features, the Green Knight has a giant-like stature and an obviously fearsome physical capacity. The colour of his skin, again, is green—a colour which is certainly not a normal or natural human characteristic. His supernatural quality, made evident here, is subsequently demonstrated in the action where he remains, like Grendel, singularly immune to pain, injury, or death through the use of weapons. In terms of the action as initiated in the poem, moreover, the Green Knight functions directly as a mighty opponent to be faced on the field of battle.

At the Green Knight's first appearance in the narrative, the focus remains pointedly on his physical stature and bodily strength. He is described as

an aghlich mayster,
On þe most on þe molde on measure hyghe;
Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware and so þik,
And his lyndes and hys lymes so longe and so grete,
Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were.

(136-40)

Not only does this passage give us a graphic picture of the
Green Knight's terrifying size and build, but the term "etayn" takes us back to the world of Beowulf where monstrous creatures such as eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneâs (112) roamed the earth and warred against human beings. So daunting is the figure of the Green Knight that all activity ceases and the entire court falls silent at sight of this strange creature. The knights all stare in awe and fear, for

He loked as layt so lyt
So sayd al hat hym syj;  
Hit semed as no mon myzt
Vnder his dyntzte dry;e. (199-202)

The narrative goes on to expiate on the horrifying quality of the massive battle-axe he carries (208-20): it appears a "hoge and vnmete" instrument of death, for it is a "spetos sparpe" which is an "elmerde" in length and has a blade as "wel schapen to schere as scharp rasores." As John Speirs remarks, "the stress is on the primitive and heathen nature of the weapon," and we "instinctively" feel the Green Knight "to be an intrusion from a pre-Christian, pre-courtly world." Monster and weapon constitute a most formidable combination, and our expectation with regard to the nature of the conflict at hand runs high.

The scales of battle are here heavily loaded in favour of the adversary, but the issue ostensibly at stake remains one which must be resolved directly through physical action in the epic manner. The Green Knight appears at the

3"Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," p. 282. Speirs, however, sees the figure of the Green Knight not as a faery but as "the old vegetation god" reappearing in poetry.
hall as if in answer to the desire expressed earlier by Arthur to see two worthy antagonists engage in fierce combat

in jopardé to lay,
Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon öpel,
As fortune wolde fulsun hom, þe fayrer to haue.

The monstrous intruder himself specifies that he has been drawn to the court by its reputation for gathering within its environs the most valiant men in the world, men

Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde,
þe wyȝtest and þe worȝesty of þe worldes kynde,
Preue for to play wyth in öpel pure laykez.

The Green Knight, however, goes on to thrust aside the suggestion that his intent is to involve himself in battle. His superiority in terms of physical might is obvious, and he evidences his awareness of the fact in his careless dismissal of the knights as "berdleȝ chylder" (280) amongst whom there is "no mon me to mach, for myȝtez so wayke" (288). What he proposes instead as a "Crystemas gomen" (283) is an exchange of single blows with his battle-axe. The nature of his challenge thus circumvents the issue of physical capacity in one-to-one combat to focus on the more equable issue of valour as displayed in physical conflict.

The challenge as flung out to the court is at first met with a thundering silence. Unlike the epic hero, the protagonist here does not fling himself unhesitatingly into action. At the lack of response, however, the challenger waxes pointedly sarcastic in the flyting tradition of epic narratives:

'What, is þis Arþures hous,' . . .
'Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
Your gryndellayk and your greyme, and your grete wordes?
Now is be reuel and be renoun of be Rounde Table
Overwalt wyth a worde of on wy3es speche,
For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!

(309-15)

The insult is fully merited, and the honour of the entire court has been clouded with "scham" (317). And the insult strikes deep enough to prompt a response. Yet the first to react is not Gawain but Arthur, who is impelled by the Green Knight's mockery into actions at variance with the cherished ideals of his court. As king, it is not Arthur's place to accept the challenge--it is up to his knights to respond. Personally shamed by the prevailing silence, however, he wrenches the axe out of the Green Knight's grasp and speaks in an extremely churlish manner (319-31). Consequently, not only is the valour of the knights in question, but chivalric virtue itself. It is Gawain who defends the reputation of the court and restores the disrupted social order, as he steps forward and courteously requests Arthur to grant him the honour of the fight. The start of the action, then, makes very plain that the sensibilities of the protagonist and his world are here not as singlemindedly rooted in the field of battle as those of the epic hero and his age. Nevertheless, Gawain figures in the conflict against the Green Knight in the epic manner as the worthy representative of his society and the epitome of its values and ideals.

Gawain's acceptance of the challenge indicates his heroic pre-eminence as the "stifest" of all the knights, but his physical strength and ability prove totally ineffective
against the Green Knight. Gawain uses the axe, that "grymme tole" (413), to best advantage and, as in the Beowulf-Dam fight, the hero decapitates his adversary with a single stroke. Unlike the Dam, however, the Green Knight is not slain. Despite the fact that his head is severed and blood gushes from his truncated body, the antagonist here remains fully functional. He calmly retrieves his head, remounts his horse, cautions Gawain to fulfill the terms of the challenge or else "recreaunt be calde pe behoues" (456), and gallops out of the hall with his head tucked securely under one arm.

The undefeatable nature of the adversary and the patently murderous tenor of the proposed "gomen" come indeed as a chilling shock. We appear to have moved back in time to a world where the conflict between hero and monster has purpose sufficient unto itself if it enables the protagonist to reveal the quality and extent of his fighting spirit, even though his physical capacity may prove unequal to the task at hand and the action result in his death. What we find here is apparently the fight against overwhelming odds so characteristic of epic action. The overriding issue is not whether Gawain will win through to victory by killing his antagonist, but whether he will behave in the resolute and courageous manner as befits a true hero even though death stares him in the face.

And it is the warrior ethic in all its stark simplicity that appears to operate in the narrative of Sir Gawain as the hero sets off one year later for his appointment with the monstrous Green Knight. The entire court fears for Gawain
and grieves that such a brave and worthy knight should have
to be cut down in his prime, but the hero himself remains
steadfast in purpose and courageous in spirit. His attitude
towards the impending conflict is one of heroic resolution:

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{He knyt mad ay god chere,} \\
\text{And sayde, 'Quat schuld I wonde?} \\
\text{Of destinès derf and dere} \\
\text{What may mon do bot fonde?'} \\
\end{align*} \] (562-65)

Gawain's words directly paraphrase the credo of the epic world
as found in \textit{Beowulf}, where Destiny remains a major force in
human affairs and the hero is required to act without knowing
or dreading the outcome for fate goes as it must: \textit{geæd a wyrd}
swa hio scell} (455). It is this same heroic temper that Gawain
develops on the morning of the tryst as he rides towards the
Green Chapel. The guide who accompanies him does much more
than merely point out the way. \textit{En route} to the Chapel, he
regales Gawain with horrifying tales of the Green Knight's
bloodthirstiness (2097-117) and urges the hero to turn away
from the meeting, swearing that no one else would ever learn
the truth from him if the projected mission were to be aborted
(2118-25). Gawain treats this idea with disdain and rejects
it out of hand in a truly heroic manner. He scorns to be "a
knyȝt kowarde" (2131) even in his own estimation and refuses
to be deflected from his sworn purpose:

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{Bot I wyl to be chapel, for chaunce þat may falle,} \\
\text{And talk wyth þat ilk tulk þe tale þat me lyste,} \\
\text{Worþe hit wele ober wo, as þe wyrde lykeþ hit hafe.} \\
\end{align*} \] (2132-35)

The tone of this speech is such that it would not be out of
place in an heroic epic. Here again we find the manifestation
of a spirit similar to that of Beowulf in Gawain's readiness to accept whatever is decreed for him by "wyrde" without "grete ne grone" (2157).

As in the dragon-fight in Tristan, however, the epic dimensions of the subsequent physical encounter between Gawain and the Green Knight are built up only to be deflated. Gawain's passive stance goes indeed quite contrary to that of the epic hero, and the initial stage of the hero-monster conflict is tinged with an obvious element of comedy. At the scene of the assignation, Gawain is assailed not by his grim adversary but by "a wonder breme noyse" (2200) as though "one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a sy|?e" (2202). Raising his voice above this awful din, Gawain bellows out a challenge only to find himself compelled to cool his heels; his yet-unseen opponent orders him to wait and continues to hone the blade of the axe until it is to his satisfaction. Again, like the behaviour of the dragon in Tristan, the actions of the Green Knight border on the burlesque. This monstrous figure advances "orpedly" (2232) towards the waiting hero with a burst of fearsome energy, but uses that "felle weppen" (2222), sharpened so carefully and for so long, first as a walking-stick and then as a vaulting-pole with which to jump over a stream.

The confrontation itself is equally unconventional in nature. As the action begins, Gawain tries to behave with careless nonchalance, but obviously fails to maintain his poise. The hero extends his neck for the stroke but, as the sharp and
shining blade of the axe slashes down towards him, he involuntarily shrinks "a lytel" (2267). The Green Knight notes this slight movement and aborts the thrust to mock Gawain for his "cowardise" (2273). Stung by the accusation, Gawain replies with heroic steadfastness:

'I schunt onez
And so wyl I no more;
Bot þez my hede falle on þe stonez,
I con not hit restore.

Bot busk, burne, bi þi fayth, and bryng me to þe poynt.
Dele to me my destine, and do hit out of honde,
For I schal stonde þe a strok, and start no more
Til þyn ax haue me hitte: haf here my trawþe.'

(2280-87)

Gawain verbalizes his intent in the manner of the heroic boast of epic tradition and this time, as the axe comes down with murderous force, he makes good his brave words by remaining as "style" as a "ston" (2293). For the second time, however, the Green Knight withholds making contact with the axe so that he may comment on the hero's response. This unprovoked delay enrages Gawain, and he mocks his antagonist in the flyting tradition of the epic:

'Wy! þresch on, þou þro mon, þou þretez to longe;
I hope þat þi hert arþe wyþ þyn awen seluen.'

(2300-301)

Gawain's pointed goad generates the expected response. The Green Knight looks fierce and his manner is savage as the weapon is "homered heterly" (2311), and the knife-edged blade now even makes fleshly contact. The wound inflicted, nevertheless, is a slight one. The "barbe" (2310) of the axe may be
impelled downwards with forceful might, but it lands so gently
as to merely "snyrt" the skin of Gawain's exposed neck (2312).

The precise terms of the challenge have thus been met,
a blow accepted in turn for a blow given, and the hero's
exemplary character has been clearly revealed through the
action. Nevertheless, the resolution of the conflict, like
the nature of the action itself, indicates that though we may
appear to be in a world similar to that of heroic epic, we
are not so in truth. Not only is the hero spared from death
by the adversary, but we are given a view of the protagonist
which is quite alien to the tenor of heroic epic. When we look
at Beowulf after his conflicts have drawn to a close, we find a
man satisfied that he has done his best in a particular situation.
The epic hero is never either relieved or joyous at having come
through the battle without losing his life. In Sir Gawain,
however, it is not so much that the hero is glad to have emerged
from his ordeal without incurring shame or dishonour, but that
he is overwhelmed with happiness at finding himself alive:

Neuer syn þat he watz burne borne of his moder
Watz he neuer in þis worlde wyþe half so blyþe.

(2320-21)

Just as we get a direct view of Gawain's instinctive reaction
to the first striking motion of the axe during the course of
the confrontation, so we receive a vivid picture of his heart-
felt reaction to the nature of its outcome.

The ideal of physical heroism as presented in Sir
Gawain through the motif of the hero-monster conflict, then,
obviously takes into account aspects of the human personality which the epic regards as detracting from heroic quality and therefore eliminates from the figure of the protagonist. Like Beowulf, Gawain is the hero of his age, the "prynce withouten pere / In felde þer felle men foȝt" (873-74). Beowulf, however, remains always the fighting-machine set forth for public view: other lesser men may show fear or hesitation, but not he. Gawain, on the other hand, has emotional responses not only of a very personal nature but no different in kind from those of his peers. When the Green Knight appears at the court, Gawain shares in the universally-felt fear and awe. His response is in no way singled out from that of the other worthies gathered in the hall. Again, when the intruder throws out his challenge, Gawain does not spring immediately into the arena of physical action. He is clearly as dumbstruck as are his peers, and as much "Overwalt wyth a worde of on wyȝes speche" (314). Unlike the epic hero, then, Gawain does not display a total lack of fear at the start of the action, nor does he evidence an absolute disregard for the personal consequences to himself during the course of the confrontation. The nature of Gawain's heroism indeed focuses more on the fact that he acts in a brave and worthy manner despite his natural fears than on the

4In A Reading of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul Ltd., 1963), J. A. Burrow points out that here we note the "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 'humanum genus' without distinction of social class" (p. 33).
idea that he has none at all.

The comic element so obvious at the start of the final Gawain-Green Knight encounter, moreover, serves directly to diffuse the implications of the traditional Heroic Plot motif and to diminish the significance of physical heroism. The narrative focus in Sir Gawain lies not so much on the physical action itself as on what the action serves to indicate about the personal quality of the protagonist. This fact becomes clearer as we turn from the major hero-monster conflict to look at the manner in which Gawain's other monster-fights are treated. During the course of his journey in quest of the Green Knight, Gawain encounters danger at every twist and turn of the path. The hero bumps into dragons, ogres, and other assorted vicious creatures with monotonous regularity as he rides in search of the Green Chapel, and he overcomes them all by sheer force of his physical strength and martial prowess. The poet, however, does not even bother to detail any of these combats and glosses over them en masse in less than a single stanza:

At vche warbe ober water þer þe wyȝe passed
He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,
And þat so foule and so felle þat feȝt 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 knarrez,
Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,
And etaynez, þat hym anelede of þe heȝe felle;
Nade he ben duȝty and dryȝe, and Dryȝen ten had serued,
Duteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte.

(715-725)

Gawain's fighting ability is revealed as he leaves the bodies
of his slain foes strewn by the wayside. His courage and resoluteness of spirit, again, are evidenced as he continues on his "wyslum way" (690) regardless of the terrible danger facing him at practically every step. The battles that function to draw forth these heroic qualities of the protagonist, nevertheless, are in themselves cursorily dismissed. Though obviously life-and-death struggles of a kind that the confrontation with the Green Knight is not, they are brushed aside with barely a mention. The passage itself is quite satiric in tone and temper, and reveals the "comic-realistic spirit" with which, as Sacvan Bercovitch comments, the poet "laughs good-naturedly at certain artificial romance conventions."5 Neither the "felle" monsters nor the physical threats they pose to the hero are taken seriously in the world of the poem. Physical action involving the physically monstrous and aggressive is here of even less relevance to the narrative concerns than in Tristan or Yvain, for these conflicts remain in themselves essentially purposeless and meaningless.

Even as the monstrous is satirized as being fantastic and comic, the poet makes explicit that the real threat, the serious threat, to the hero comes from a more natural and elemental source. The very same stanza which tells of Gawain's ease in dealing with the physical opponents he meets goes on

5"Romance and Anti-Romance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PQ, XLIV (1965), 30.
immediately to record his difficulty in coping with the freezing winter weather he encounters:

For werre wrathed hym not so much hat wynter nas wors,  
When he colde cler water fro he cloudez schadde,  
And fres er hit falle myȝt to be fale erpe;  
Ner slayn with he slete he sleepe in his yrnes  
Mo nyȝtez þen innmoge in naked rokkez,  
Per as claterande fro þe crest þe colde borne rennez,  
And henged hyȝe ouer his hede in hard iisse-ikkles.

(726-32)

Though the preceding lines give us a clear understanding of the hero's physical excellence in combat, the stress in this stanza remains pointedly on his inability to circumvent the effects of the inclement weather. Gawain may overcome all physical manifestations of the monstrous aspect of Nature, such as "etaynez" and "wormez," but is himself indeed well-nigh physically overcome by the hostile aspect of Nature as manifested in the adverse environmental conditions of "slete" and "rennez."

Significantly enough, the hero's incapacity to control the external elements of Nature extends to encompass aspects of his own inner nature as well. Our view of Gawain is such that we see him steadily and we see him whole. The action in which he is involved during the course of his journey highlights not only his heroic strengths but also his human weaknesses. Though Gawain rides on with unflinching courage, we are informed that "hym no gomen þoȝt" (692) as he makes his solitary way through territory "straunge" and "vn bene" (709-10), so very "Fer ... fro his frendez" (714) and the civilized world of the court. The discomfort suffered by the hero incorporates elements not only of his body and mind, but extends even to his sophisticated
palate as we note that "he fonde noȝt hym before be fare
hat he lyked" (694). These glimpses into Gawain's private
and personal nature, however, in no way tarnish our view of
his heroic stature and worth. Rather, the more we learn of
his personal quality, the more we come to admire him for
pressing on in spite of all the "peryl and payne and plytes
ful harde" (733) that he must endure.

As we turn from the arena of physical action to take
a closer look at the figure of Gawain, the interest in the
inner mental and moral framework of character becomes more
evident. In Fit II, after Gawain has already demonstrated
his valour at the court in action against the Green Knight,
we are given an explicit and detailed account of his heroic
fibre. The poet devotes over a hundred lines to that speci-
fic purpose in the arming-of-Gawain scene (566-699). And
here, though the superlative quality of the hero's armour
provides in itself a clear indication of his outstanding
stature and worth, the focus remains pointedly on the special
features of the shield which signify the truly commendable
nature and extent of his intrinsic virtue.6

6 Burrow regards the description of Gawain to be "clearly
conceived as one of those 'descriptiones personarum' beloved
of medieval rhetoricians" (p. 38). He elaborates on this
idea with reference to a passage from the Ars Versificatoria
by Matthew of Vendôme: "It is a double description of the
kind distinguished by Matthew as eulogistic ('ad laudem'),
praising both the 'homo exterior' and the 'interioris hominis
proprietates'. The 'descriptio superficialis' is somewhat
peculiar, in that it is devoted to armour and weapons to the
exclusion of 'membrorum elegantia' (we never get any clear
Gawain's war-gear, while eminently practical for use in combat, is yet richly embellished, and the description of his accoutrements (566-618) creates an impression of magnificent splendour which corresponds to the knight's heroic standing at this point in the narrative. His armour is fashioned from strong "stel" but gleams with "knotez of golde" and rests upon the "wlonk stuffe" he wears next to his skin; his surcoat is "ryche;" he has "gold sporez;" his sword is fastened at his side with a "silk sayn!" his visor is encased in a covering lavishly embroidered with the "best gemmez / On brode sylkyn borde;" while the circlet that crowns his head is yet "more o prys" and set with flashing "diamantez." Gawain's worth is reflected not only in his own "goodlych gere" but even in the trappings of his horse. The harness is "ryche" and "lemed of golde;" the saddle is decorated "fu1 gayly with mony golde frenges;" the bridle is with "golde bounden;" and all is "rayled on red ryche golde naylez" so that everything "glytered and glent as gleem of ñe sunne." The inference is unmistakable. The emphasis here, however, is on the dazzling quality of the hero's equipment. All we learn of his personal quality is that he is a "stif mon" with "thik prawen þyȝez."

idea of what Gawain looks like); but this is natural in an arming scene. It is for the same reason that the 'descriptio intrinseca' is itself formally subordinated to the description of the equipment. Both peculiarities follow from the one act of artistic economy--the combining of the rhetoricians' set 'descriptio' with the traditional arming scene of the oral poets" (pp. 38-39).
With regard to the description of the shield (619-655), the situation is reversed. All we are told about the physical appearance of the artifact is that it is made of "schyr goulez," and the rest of the passage analyzes the emblem embossed upon it as relating to the hero's personal mental and moral quality. The pentangle passage, as Burrow remarks, contributes directly to our "sense of the moral values which Gawain is to represent in the course of his impending adventure."\(^7\) The poet leaves us in no doubt as to precisely why that "pentangel depaynt of pure golde hwez . . . besemed þe segge semlyly fayre" or how it "apendez to þat prynce noble". We are informed right from the start that the five-pointed pentangle, that "eldeles knot," is a "syngne . . . bytoknyng of trawþe"\(^8\) and as such it "accordez" directly to the knight:

For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue syþez
Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as golde pured,
Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertuez ennourned

\(^7\)Reading of "Sir Gawain," p. 39.

\(^8\)Burrow gives us an idea of what the word "trawþe" may have meant to a contemporary audience. After noting the various meanings of the word as listed in the O.E.D., he comments: "The evidence of the Dictionary . . . suggests that 'truth'--insofar as it was a moral term, denoting the 'properties of the inner man'--had four main distinguishable meanings at the time when Sir Gawain was composed. To praise a man for his 'truth' might mean (a) that he was loyal to people, principles, or promises, (b) that he had faith in God, (c) that he was without deceit, or (d) that he was upright and virtuous. These various meanings are, of course, closely related to one another; but they leave room for a certain amount of semantic manoeuvring, and the Gawain-poet exploits this to the full in his exposition of the pentangle" (pp. 43-44).
in mote;
For py pe pentangel nwe
He ber in schelde and cote,
As tulk of tale most trwe
And gentylest knyjt of lote. (632-39)

The poet, however, is not content with pointing out that the geometrical perfection of this "syngne" and the purity of the rich metal from which it is fashioned emblemize Gawain's own perfection and purity of character. Having given us a view of the extent of the hero's virtue, the poet explicates its precise nature and dilates upon the five-fold basis of the ideal that Gawain embodies and to which he is "ay faythful" (640-56). We learn that the hero is faultless in his "fyue wyttez;" that he has never failed in his "fyue fyngres;" that his fealty is fixed upon the "fyue woundez" received by Christ on the cross; that his valour and prowess in battle

9 R. W. Ackerman suggests that the first pentad should be taken to mean that Gawain was "found without sin in the five senses" ("Gawain's Shield: Penetentiaal Doctrine in Gawain and the Green Knight," Anglia, LXXVI (1958), 263). Ackerman, however, emphasizes the Christian significance of the pentangle too heavily for his interpretation to be wholly acceptable.

10 Ackerman regards the second pentad as a direct extension of the first and feels that here "the poet singled out the sense of touch for special mention" (p. 263). This argument, however, is not too convincing. Richard Hamilton Green presents a more acceptable suggestion. He argues that the five fingers are an allegory of the five natural virtues (justice, prudence, temperance, fortitude, and obedience) and therefore point to "natural perfection" from which with "the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of Mary we move . . . to figures of the theological virtues of faith and hope" ("Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," ELH, XXIX (1962), 134). Perfection in the five fingers, however, may be taken as a simple reference to Gawain's physical strength and martial prowess in battle.
is founded upon the five joys of the Virgin\(^\text{11}\) whose image is "depaynted" on the inside surface of his shield to hearten him in moments of crisis; and that he is unmatched in the "fyft fyue" virtues or in the exercise of his generosity, his brotherly love, his continence, his compassion,\(^\text{12}\) and his courtesy.

The chivalric ideal, then, directly "govern[s] the three domains of activity, the military, the religious, and the courtly, in which a complete knight, the veritable man, might demonstrate his perfection," as George Engelhardt points out.\(^\text{13}\) It is this all-inclusive view that operates in the world of the poem, with neither domain precluding the significance of the others in determining the stature of the hero. Just as the splendid nature of Gawain's armour is directly symptomatic of his courage and might in battle, so the

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\(^{11}\)For an interpretation of the theological implications and associations of the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of Mary in relation to the sacrament of penance, see Ackerman's discussion of these lines, pp. 263-64.

\(^{12}\)With respect to "pite,'" the virtue that "passez alle payntez" (654), Burrow remarks that in "fourteenth-century English the cognate forms 'piety' and 'pity' were not differentiated in meaning: so the Gawain-poet's 'pite' can correspond to either modern word" (p. 47). As he goes on to note, however, "'pity' makes better sense in the context" (p. 47, n. 21).

\(^{13}\)"The Predicament of Gawain," MLQ, XVI (1955), 219. Engelhardt's exposition of the nature of the chivalric ideal is indeed most relevant to the study of the poem as presented in this chapter.
virtues enumerated in the pentangle-passage highlight his outstanding quality in both the social and moral fields of endeavour. The emblem on Gawain's shield may indicate, as Richard Green notes, "the moral perfection to which the knight as miles Christi aspires." However, as Burrow cautions, "the ideal of 'pure' perfection which he [Gawain] represents is not to be identified too exclusively with 'righteousness'--religious faith and sinlessness," for the ideal "involves the perfection of man before society as well as before God."

The interrelated nature of the virtues which comprise the chivalric ideal is brought out not only through the arming-of-Gawain scene, but also through the view of the knight's weakening in character at the castle. The last few lines of the pentangle-passage, as Burrow remarks, point to the idea that though "the qualities which go to make up Gawain's 'trawe' . . . are distinguishable one from another . . . [they] nevertheless in some way form a continuous whole as well." The nature of this emblem is made explicit:

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14"Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," ELH, XXIX (1962), 135.

15 Reading of "Sir Gawain," p. 46.

16 Reading of "Sir Gawain," p. 47.

17 Reading of "Sir Gawain," p. 49.
Now alle þese fyue syþez, for soþe, were fetled on his knyȝt,
And vchone halched in òfer, þat non ende hade,
And fyched vpon fyue poynþez, þat fayld neuer,
Ne samned neuer in no syde, ne sundred nouþer,
Withouten ende at any noke I quere fynde,
Whereeuer þe gomen bygan, or glod to an ende.

(656-61)
The pentangle is a figure in which the parts are in perfect balance. The lines are all equal to each other, and the points are all equidistant from each other. The five separate points of the pentangle-figure are yet all interconnected, for each not only extends from but draws into the other in an overlapping pattern of lines to form the "endeles knot." And so it is with the "fyue poynþez" of Gawain's virtue. Only when found in equipoise do they posit the "ideal of integrity or oneness." Any imperfection in any one aspect of its parts destroys the intrinsic perfection of the whole. It is not surprising, then, that Gawain's failing in the test conducted by Bercilak should reflect on all "three domains of activity" in which the hero's perfection of character is postulated. Gawain's acceptance of the green girdle demonstrates not only a weakening of his courage in battle but a weakening of his faith in the Virgin and her "chylde" (646), and this action leads directly to the subsequent breach of promise in the apparently inconsequential social interaction with his friendly host. Just as the "comprehensive symbolism of the pentangle precludes the exclusive identification of

18Burrow, p. 50.
Gawain with any single virtue,\(^{19}\) so our understanding of the hero's flaw in character cannot be limited to an analysis of his behaviour in terms of any single field of knightly endeavour.

The manner in which Gawain's fall from perfection is dealt with in the narrative, again, serves to highlight the integrated nature of the various aspects of the ideal he represents. The trial itself takes place within the social arena of a castle.\(^{20}\) The action, however, does not preclude an awareness of the significance of the domains of physical battle and religious faith in determining the course of the present "conflict." In contrast to the two previous occasions on which the knight is visited in his bedchamber by the beauteous chatelaine, the third morning finds him still "drowping depe" (1748). As she enters, Gawain is in the throes of an uneasy sleep disturbed by "dreme" (1750) and

\(^{19}\)Engelhardt, p. 219, n. 3.

\(^{20}\)The comic element is as unmistakable here as it is at the start of the second Gawain-Green Knight encounter, and in both instances it is rooted in the startingly uncharacteristic stance of the hero in action. In the arena of amour courtois, as in the arena of physical combat, Gawain is more acted upon than acting. We cannot but chuckle at the view of the doughty hero who is boldly pressured by his fair visitor to accept the offer of her body, and who is even at the end the receiver rather than the bestower of kisses. However, as in the physical confrontation, the comedy here does not detract from the significance of the action. The humorous reversal of the traditional male-female roles in the game of love as enacted in the bedroom does not negate the serious nature of the test itself.
"mony pro postes" (1751) about the physical confrontation on
the morrow against the Green Knight. It is from these dark
"sweuenes" (1756) of "How þat destine schulde þat day dele
hym his wyrde" (1753) that he surfaces to confront the lady
not only eminently desirable but obviously willing. This
time, the lady's approach goes further than a verbal assault
on the hero's "hendelayk" (1228) or his "cortaysy" (1491) to
incorporate a direct assault on his senses, for she walks in
with her lovely face and graceful throat "al naked, / Hir brest
bare bifo re, and bihinde eke" (1740-41). And her purpose comes
close to achievement. Conscious as Gawain is of the certain
death which he must face all too soon, the temptation to enjoy
what life has to offer almost overwhelms the knight and
"wallande joye warmed his hert" (1762). Before informing us
how this situation is resolved, however, the poet interjects
a comment which explicitly draws the domain of Christian faith
into the realm of the action as he points out that Gawain
stands in "Gret perile" (1768) unless the Virgin should protect
her knight, "Nif Maré of hir knyżt mynne" (1769).

Gawain's motives of action in this trial of his char-
acter, again, directly reflect upon all three frames of
reference that illuminate the nature of his accredited per-
fection. His immediate predicament relates specifically to
the social and moral arenas of action, a fact of which the
hero is well aware. His consciousness of the nature of his
predicament is carefully detailed. He "cared for his
courtaysye" and does not wish to be "crapayn" or boorish
towards the lady (1773), but he is "more" concerned "for his meschef" if he "schulde make synne" by succumbing to his lust and thus also be a "traytor" to his friendly host (1774-75). The second consideration overrides the first. Gawain calls upon God to "schylde" him in his stand (1776), and resolves his dilemma without giving offence to the lady through the exercise of his social finesse. As the test continues, however, Gawain's consciousness extends towards the domain of physical combat as well. He courteously rejects the gold ring proffered by the lady as token of her "luf," and at first maintains his position with respect even to the green girdle (1836-45). The lady then goes on to explicate the magical property of the girdle, stressing the idea that whoever wears it "myȝt not be slayn" either by the use of weapons or the deployment of cunning strategy (1852-54). And Gawain falters:

\[
\text{pen kest be knyȝt, and hit come to his hert} \\
\text{Hit were a juel for be jopardé bat hym iugged were:} \\
\text{When he acheued to be chapel his chek for to fech,} \\
\text{Myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn, be sleȝt were noble.}
\] (1855-58)

The lady's words bring Gawain back to the harrowing awareness of the deadly danger he must face on the very next day in the physical confrontation with the Green Knight. And this awareness prompts Gawain to accept the girdle and acquiesce to the lady's plea to keep the gift a secret from "hir lorde" (1859-65).

Gawain's motives of action here, then, reveal a
demarcation in his mind between the fields of social and moral endeavor and that of physical combat. It is about the close relationship between the three that he is later enlightened. After the encounter at the Green Chapel, Gawain not only learns of the interrelated nature of the events that occur at the castle and the physical action that takes place on the battlefield, but attains a new and higher level of awareness as to the integrated nature of the chivalric ideal. Gawain stands in dumbstruck amazement as the Green Knight explicates the direct connection between the "tappe" (2357) suffered during the physical conflict and the failure in "trawpe" (2348) at the castle.

'As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more, 
So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝtez. 
Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wonted; 
Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowyng nauþer, 
Bot for þe lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame.'

(2364-68)

At the conclusion of the Green Knight's speech, Gawain "in study stod a gret whyle" (2369) and, as the implications of what he has heard sink in, "he schranke for schome" (2373). The Green Knight may hold the hero "lasse" to "blame" for being motivated by his love for "lyf," but Gawain's own realization of his fault is too fresh to permit such a tolerant acceptance. He is indeed much more severe and more comprehensive in his own assessment of his failing. He excoriates himself for his weakness both as a warrior and as a man of God, both for his "cowarddyse" (2374) and his
"couetyse" (2374), which prompted him to compromise his quality as a knight of the Arthurian court:

For care of þy knokke cowardyse me taȝt
To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake,
Þat is larges and lewte þat longez to knyȝtez.
Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer
Of trecheryye and vntrawþe.

(2379-83)

Gawain's new understanding of the ideal of heroism extolled in his world, moreover, inculcates in him a new consciousness of the frailty of the flesh and generates in him a new humility. He resolves to wear the green girdle from now on as a badge which

in syngne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte,
When I ride in renoun, remorde to myseluen
Þe faut end þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed,
How tender hit is to entyse teches of fyþe;
And þus, quen pryde schal me pryk for prowes of armes,
Þe loke to þis luf-lace schal leþe my hert.

(2433-38)

And it is with the green girdle worn "in tokenyng he watz tane in tech of a faute" (2488) that the hero returns to the court. As Green comments, the "knight who went out to vindicate the honor of the court bore on his shield the sign [of the pentangle] . . . set as a token of truth; he returned with a new knowledge of his limitations, carrying the girdle about his neck as token of untruth."22 Through the course of his

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21 See David Farley Hills, "Gawain's Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," RES, XIV (1963), 124-31. Hills interprets "couetyse" as "the inordinate love of anything other than God" (p. 126), and notes that in the poem itself the term may be used by Gawain in the sense of an "inordinate love of self, of one's life" (p. 129).

22 "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," p. 153.
his evident fault, Gawain's worth and stature remain undiminished in the eyes of his world. He is at the end still the worthiest of men and the exemplar of the court. The Green Knight himself regards the hero as a veritable "perle" before "pese" when set against his peers (2364), and the court obviously concurs for it adopts the wearing of green baldrics as a sign of high honour "for sake of bat segge" (2515-20).  

Nor indeed is this tolerant attitude towards the hero to be discounted in light of Gawain's own extremely harsh self-evaluation (2374-83; 2505-10). His self-condemnation remains an extremely subjective reaction to the realization of his own failing and seems to be, as Bercovitch points out, almost "ridiculed" by the humane "tolerance and mirth" displayed by the Green Knight and the court. Gawain's motivation does not negate his failing, but it does mitigate the extent of his fault, and those capable of taking a more objective view of the action cannot excoriate him for what he has done. As David Farley Hills comments, "Gawain has

24 It is by no means surprising that a courtly romance such as Sir Gawain should project such a tolerant view of the hero's fault. As Hills remarks, even the doctrinaire theological authorities of the Medieval age, such as Aquinas and Wyclif, saw fear of death or severe bodily harm as "always an extenuating circumstance when a sin is committed," as a consideration which "called for a specially indulgent attitude" (pp. 130-31).

adventure, then, Gawain undergoes a process of self-discovery. The action resolves itself explicitly into an experience which teaches him a valuable lesson about the quality of his own strength of character and about his own fleshly nature as a member of the humanum genus.

And it is precisely in terms of Gawain's fundamental relationship to others of the human race that we are at the end required to judge the extent of his fault. Gawain's failing is to be viewed explicitly in terms of that universal and "basic human instinct for survival"23 which is his primary incentive to action. The poet makes clear that the hero accepts the girdle for no reason other than "to seuen hymself" from death (2040), and the Green Knight takes this fact into account as a mitigating circumstance when he holds Gawain the "lasse" to "blame" because his actions were motivated by his "luj" for "lyf" (2368). Gawain's fear of death is presented in the poem as not only perfectly justified but perfectly understandable as a motive for action. In terms of his position in the action involving the monstrous Green Knight, his death appears both inevitable and imminent; while in terms of his character as delineated in the narrative, his feeling of fear is but another intrinsic aspect of his human personality. It is informative to note, moreover, that despite

'lakked a lyttel' because of his disloyalty to Bercilak . . ., but in the circumstances who would have behaved as well?"26 The same "comic-realistic spirit"27 which is maintained throughout the action operates even at the end, for both the poet and the poem ultimately demand of us that only he who is without sin should cast the first stone. There can be little doubt that Sir Gawain celebrates "the romance values . . . [of] Christian chivalry and courtesy," as Alan Markman notes.28 However, the integrated nature of the chivalric ideal and the spirit in which it is presented make clear that the significance of neither the religious nor the secular frame of reference is to be stressed at the expense of the other. It is difficult to see the poet in the manner of Dorothy Everett as an artist who is "as civilized as Chaucer, but sterner, much more of a moralist, a great deal less of a humorist."29 It is equally difficult to see the poem as a moral exemplum inveighing against the cardinal sin of pride: we cannot agree with Jan Solomon's observation that "the trials of specific virtues [those of courage, loyalty, and courtesy] . . . are subordinated to the more


27Bercovitch, p. 30.


pervasive theme of pride and humility." The Gawain-poet does have a "didactic point" to express in the poem, but he presents it "with a most Chaucer-like indirection," as E. Talbot Donaldson remarks, with "a fine irony that strips Gawain of his pretensions but leaves him his charm and shows him sympathy for the . . . nature of his predicament." The poet displays what Larry Benson defines as "a finely tolerant, vigorously good-natured, and characteristically Gothic acceptance of life both as it is and as it should be." It is indeed in the same spirit that the poem "weighs and gently criticizes the ideal of literature and life that was romance, . . . [suggesting] that this noble ideal can survive only if it takes account of the rest of life and of the human limitations of even its best representatives."

Again, though the genre of romance may be particularly suited to the presentation of moral allegory, we cannot read


33 Benson, p. 248.

34 See Kathleen Williams, "Romance Tradition in The Faerie Queene," RS, XXXII (1964), 147-60.
Sir Gawain as a carefully developed Christian allegory in the manner of Book One of The Faerie Queene. We must perforce strain the narrative in order to see it as "a reasonably self-consistent allegory of the Christian life," or as setting forth "the great medieval theme of the pilgrimage of the human soul." The pentangle is undeniably "the symbol of a supernatural and explicitly Christian stability and virtue," and its placement on the shield may indicate the idea that the hero's "protection against the natural world is his faith and virtue." However, Gawain is not, and cannot be, identified with his shield in the manner of Redcrosse. Nor can we interpret the action here as a delineation in physical form of a purely internal struggle or process. It is well-nigh impossible to see Gawain as an Everyman figure who at the end achieves the "purification of his own soul through baptism by blood (the wound)." It is equally impossible to regard

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38 Fox, p. 14

39 Schnyder, p. 73.
the Green Knight either as the manifestation of "the Word of God"\textsuperscript{40} or of the "powers of darkness"\textsuperscript{41} without simultaneously dismissing much that is of crucial significance to an understanding of the poem.

For, as pointed out earlier, the trial that Gawain undergoes is not an isolated test of any one single virtue such as Christian faith. It is rather a comprehensive test of the virtues that govern praiseworthy activity in all three fields of the knightly life, physical and social as well as moral. The figure of Gawain, again, is directly representative of his particular social class and courtly milieu as much as he is an individual in his own right, and the nature of his failure highlights the awareness that the entire civilized world must maintain with regard to the compulsive force of natural instincts, those deep-rooted and ineradicable impulses to action.

Finally, and most significantly, the Green Knight is not an allegorical figure. He is not an agent of God or the devil. He is a faery, a supernatural creature whose physical existence within the world is taken quite for granted in the

\textsuperscript{40}Schnyder, p. 41. He remarks: "The appearance of the Green Knight [at the court] ... herald[s] the manifestation of divine interference in the course of worldly events. The Green Knight might in that case be accepted as the Word of God and--on a different allegorical level--anagogically as Christ" (p. 41).

\textsuperscript{41}Mills, "Christian Significance," p. 486.
widespread medieval tradition.\footnote{42} Like the faery, the Green Knight is closely associated with the forces of nature while yet possessing a bodily frame similar to that of human beings. Moreover, he interacts freely, albeit capriciously, with human society in a fashion characteristic of the faery. The Green Knight is indeed an awesomely powerful and dynamic entity who remains "A meruayl among po menne" (466).

The reaction of the court to the Green Knight's appearance at the feast gives us a direct indication of his nature:

\footnote{42}It should be noted here that the medieval concept of the faery bears no resemblance to the ethereal spirits or little green people nowadays so termed, but rather postulates the existence of a superb and awesome race of creatures. In his study of British Fairy Origins (London: Watts, 1946), Lewis Spence ascribes to them an undisputed descent from the old Celtic nature gods. Moreover, as J. A. Macculloch notes, in Celtic Mythology (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1918), the deterioration of the gods to faery may be directly attributed to the triumph of the Christian religion among the British Celts. Though Christianity denied the existence of the old gods and forbade the telling of stories which directly preserved their memory, it tolerated the gods in the superhuman form of the faery, and belief in the physical reality of the faery became widespread in the popular imagination. Significantly enough, in the Irish heroic legends wherein the story of their metamorphosis gradually worked its way, the faery are at first presented as a race inhabiting Ireland whose kings have powers which, like those of the old gods, are derived from the forces of nature. [See the story of Tuatha De Dannan as told in "Book of Invasions" in Ancient Irish Tales, ed. Tom Peete Cross and Clark Harris Slover (New York: Henry Holt, 1936).] The association of the faery with both the world of men and that of the natural elements is evidenced again in the common medieval tradition. The faery were generally regarded as superhuman creatures manifesting a direct influence over the elemental world, particularly in the agricultural/vegetational aspect of nature, but who yet in form closely resemble men and involve themselves in human affairs.
The knights have witnessed many marvellous sights, but never one like this green-hued figure; and they maintain a "swoghe sylence" (242) even as they wonder whether it is an illusion, a "fantoum," or one of the faery race, a "fayryže." The Green Knight is certainly no optical illusion. The evidence of his physical reality is indeed forcibly thrust upon the court through subsequent events. As delineated in the narrative, moreover, his figure manifests qualities distinctive of the faery who, as Alfred Nutt remarks, were generally regarded as "beings of ancient and awful aspect, elemental powers, mighty, capricious, cruel and benignant, as is Nature herself." The superhuman and supernatural features of the Green Knight are ultimately brushed away as merely a guise fashioned and superimposed upon his natural human form by

43. The term "fayryže" is noted in the M.E.D. as referring to "One of a class of supernatural beings of diminutive size, in popular belief supposed to possess magical powers and to have great influence for good or evil over the affairs of men." In medieval literary tradition, however, these supernatural beings are more human in size than diminutive. The most striking example of this fact is the appearance of the faery in Sir Orfeo.

the human enchantress Morgan le Fay. However, this attempt at explaining the nature of the adversary remains, as Morton Bloomfield notes, "a kind of gesture to rationality without any real commitment to it."\(^{45}\)

The Green Knight bears indeed an unmistakable resemblance to the faery of popular tradition. His figure is in itself an amalgam of the elemental forces of nature, of aspects of the earth and sky. He is as "grene as þe gres" (235); he has a beard as luxuriant in growth as a bush (182); and he possesses the regenerative capacity of vegetation. His person, again, appears as stunningly swift and powerful as lightning: "He loked as layt so lyȝt" (199). Yet the Green Knight is recognizably human in form, as the poet makes clear: "Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene" (141). His nature, again, is like that of the faery a striking inter-mixture of the cruel and the benign, the grimly aggressive and the tolerantly friendly. He subjects the court and the hero to what appears an extremely trying physical ordeal only to resolve the issue in a peaceable manner as a test of psychological capacity. Throughout the narrative, moreover, the Green Knight interacts with human society in a fashion similar to that of the faery, without ever being or becoming integrated with the nature of its life.

The Green Knight may in himself well be regarded as "the imaginative center"46 of Sir Gawain. In nature and function, his figure serves to draw out the uncontrollable aspects of nature47 with which human beings must learn to cope if perfection in life is to be attained. The character of the Green Knight, as William Goldhurst observes, highlights the narrative interest in the "primitive forces of nature . . . that must be reckoned with, contended against somehow, and if possible mastered."48 In his first appearance as the superhuman adversary, he indicates the external and environmental aspect of nature. The stress here is on his supernatural quality, his grass-green colour, his physical capacity, and his recuperative ability. In his next appearance in human form as the genial Bercilak, however, he illuminates the internal and psychological aspect of human nature as he subjects the hero to a testing of his intrinsic


47 The Green Knight may be closely associated with nature, but he cannot be identified with Nature in the manner of John Speirs who regards his figure as "an up-cropping in poetry of the old vegetation god" (p. 232). Sir Gawain is a chivalric romance, not the retelling of a nature myth, and the "seasonal theme" to which Speirs gives such importance (p. 277) is not crucial to an understanding of the main idea of the poem itself.

For a survey of mythological interpretations of Sir Gawain, see Morton W. Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain the the Green Knight: An Appraisal," PMLA, LXXVI (1961), 5-10.

virtue. In his final appearance, again as the superhuman Green Knight, he explicates the fundamental theme of the poem. It is he who brings the hero to a conscious awareness of the natural human instincts, and who points out the inherent weakness in human nature which must be taken into account by all who aspire towards moral perfection.

The role of the adversary in _Sir Gawain_, then, greatly surpasses that of any other antagonist we have seen thus far. The Green Knight is _not_ human, but he is no longer purely non-human. He is not a mindless beast causing havoc and destruction within society on the physical plane. He is rather an intelligent and powerful being whose intrusion into human affairs, like that of the faery, causes a drastic change in human thought and understanding. The Green Knight is clearly not of the world he tests and assesses. Yet he has an understanding of humans, as well as the striking ability to probe and evaluate human nature. He manifests a judicial temperament and authority which remains unquestioned and unchallenged by the chivalric society, and it is he who formulates the fine distinction between the ideal and the actual as drawn out through the action.

The Green Knight is presented in the narrative

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with a dramatic ambiguity that defies compare. The poet carefully maintains a dual perspective throughout the passage which gives us our initial view of his figure (130-220), a skillful juxtaposition of the human and supernatural frames of reference so apposite to the faery. At first, the focus remains pointedly on his man-like characteristics. After noting that the intruder at the Christmas feast is so massive in stature and build that he seems "Half etayn" (140), the poet proceeds to make clear that

    Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene,
    And hat be myriest in his muckel hat myzt ride;
    For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne,
    Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale,
    And alle his fetures folzande, in forme hat he hade,
    ful clene.

(141-46)

Despite his large frame, there is nothing unusual about the antagonist's bodily structure. He is here in fact described in terms that could as well refer to any strong and worthy knight at the court. It is only in the last lines of this stanza (147-50) that the focus shifts abruptly to the supernatural feature of the adversary who is "ouerall enker-grene." The ambivalence apparent in this stanza with regard to the nature of the antagonist is indeed never fully set aside. His garments may be green in colour, but the green is yet shot through with the sheen of gold and the dazzle of jewels "enbrauded" upon "silk" (164-66) in a manner strongly reminiscent of Gawain's armour. His spurs, like those of Gawain, are fashioned from "golde" (159). His horse may be "grene" (175), but its flowing mane and tail are yet threaded with
filaments of "golde" (190), and its trappings are embellished with "tryfles" (165) and sparkling stones so that everything "glemered and glent" with their dazzling light. The description here in fact directly echoes the view of the "apparayl" on Gawain's horse, which all "glemed" (658) and "glytered and glent" (604). The intentions of this strange creature are as ambiguous as his physical character. The Green Knight may look as fiercely active as lightning (199), but he does not thoughtlessly indulge his destructive potential. Again, though he bears a "hoge and vnmete" axe (209) in one hand, in the other he holds a "holyn bobbe" (206) in direct acknowledgement of the Christmas season. As initially presented in the narrative, then, the Green Knight is an enigma. It is only as his role in the action unfolds that we grasp a sense of his real nature.

The poetry of "muscular energy" and "muscular action that," as Spearing notes, "surrounds the Green Knight"\(^{50}\) provides an insight into his character as a natural and compelling force which cannot be ignored or dismissed. Our first view of the Green Knight is as he bursts into Arthur's court and disrupts the calm and orderly tenor of the Christmas feast. His entrance is heralded by the clattering hooves of his horse which make that "noyse ful newe" (132) and compels all attention towards his figure. The initial impression of

\(^{50}\)"Gawain's Speeches and the Poetry of "Courtayseye," in Critical Studies, p. 174."
boundless energy kept barely in check is heightened as we see him "reled . . . vp and down" (229) even as he requests speech with the "gouernour" of the gathering (225). Throughout this scene, the Green Knight is in well-nigh perpetual bodily motion. Rather than waiting passively for a reply to the challenge he delivers, he remains bodily active:

\[\text{Be renk on his rouncé hym ruched in his sadel,}
\text{And runischly his rede y3en he reled aboute,}
\text{Bende his bresed bro3ez, blycande grene,}
\text{Wayued his berde for to wayte quo-so wolde ryse.}\]

(303-06)

After he leaps "feersly" (329) from his horse to confront Arthur, both his facial muscles and his hands remain notably engaged in active movement: "Wyth sturne schere \text{\textbf{p}er he stod}
\text{he stroked his berde, / And wyth a countenaunce dry3e he dro3}
doun his cote" (334-35). His physical activity does not cease even with decapitation. On the contrary,

\[\text{nawber faltered ne fel \text{\textbf{p}e freke neuer \text{\textbf{p}e helder,}}}
\text{Bot styf\ly he start forth vpon styf schonkes,}
\text{And runyshly he ra3t out, \text{\textbf{p}ere as renkkez stoden,}
\text{La3t to his lufly hed, and lyft hit vp sone;}
\text{And sy3en bo3ez to his blonk, \text{\textbf{p}e brydel he cachchez,}
\text{Steppez into stelbawe and strydez alofte,}
\text{And his hede by \text{\textbf{p}e here in his honde haldez;}
\text{And as sadly \text{\textbf{p}e segge hym in his sadel sette}
As non vnhap had hym ayled.}\]

(430-38)

The startling display of still-active energy extends even to the severed head, as the eye-lids "lyfte vp" to reveal a gaze "ful brode" (445) and his "muthe" opens to utter a stern warning (445-55). The final view of the Green Knight in this episode, again, focuses on the flurry of dynamic energy and movement with which his truncated body leaves the hall:
With a runisch rout be raynez he tornez,
Halled out at be hal dorr, his hed in his hande,
Pat be fyr of be flynte flase fro folle houes.

(457-59)

The Green Knight's compelling power is thus revealed through his physical stature and capacity. The impelling force of his character, however, is brought out most vividly through his speech, which peels away the layers of civilized refinement from the court and incites behaviour on the purely instinctual plane. His first abrupt and short request for speech with the "gouernour" (224-27) suffices to subdue the battle-keen spirit of the entire court. Innocuous as it is, it yet induces a "swoghe sylence . . . / As al were slypped upon slepe" (243-44). It is only Arthur, the founder of the Round Table and the spearhead of chivalry, who recovers himself sufficiently to extend a few words of courteous welcome to the intruder (252-55). The impact of the Green Knight's subsequent speech is even more disturbing to the equanimity of the court. He flatly refuses to indulge in the traditional knightly sport of armed combat, and delivers a physical challenge on his own specific terms (285-300). This time, the stunned silence that greets his words remains unbroken: "If he hem strowned vpon fyrst, stiller were banne / Alle be heredmen in halle, be hyz and be loye" (301-02). The Green Knight goes on to mock the court:

'What, is his Arpures hous,' . . .
'Pat al be rous rannes of byrz ryalmes so mony?
Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?
Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of þe Rounde Table
Ouerwaht wyth a worde of on wyþes speche,
For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!

(309-15)

The scornful tenor of this speech, coupled with the loud laughter that follows, directly impels a mental and bodily reaction from Arthur. The "blod schot for scham into his schyre face / And lere," and he "wex as wroth as wynde" (317-19). The anger and shame that causes the blood to riot through Arthur's body, moreover, generates speech and action at direct odds with the "courtaysye" so valued by the court. All cultured restraints thrust aside, Arthur bursts forth into angry defence (323-27), and moves into frenzied action as he "lepez" to seize the axe and "sturnely sturez hit aboute" (328-31). The incremental effect of the Green Knight's speech, then, provokes behaviour on the instinctual level from Arthur. The very fount of chivalric virtue and convention acts here indeed in a rude and churlish manner. It is Gawain who restores the social order so impulsively cast aside by Arthur and who thereby reveals his capacity to act as the champion of the court against the Green Knight.

The next time we see the adversary is in his human form as Bercilak. As such, he does not manifest the supernatural features so characteristic of the Green Knight. Nevertheless, he is a figure with a most commanding presence and a fiercely compelling air. He is

A hole hapel for þe nonez, and of hyghe eldee;
Brode, bryȝt, watz his berde, and all beuer-hwed,
Bercilak is presented, then, as a man among men, as a noble "prynce" well worthy of the "honour" and service that is "presed" unto him by the "mony proud mon" in his keep (830). Certain of his physical characteristics, however, are strongly reminiscent of those of the Green Knight. He is a "bolde burne" (834) of truly imposing physical stature; his face is fierce as "fyre;" he is unrestrained and "fre" in his "speche;" and his figure is generally in active bodily motion.\(^{51}\) The playful exchange-of-winnings "bargayn" as proposed by Bercilak (1105-09), moreover, directly echoes the serious tenor of the physical challenge issued earlier at the court. Just as the hero was then compelled to "swere" on his "trawpe" to fulfill the terms of the "couenaunt" set by the Green Knight (390-403), so is he now expressly directed to "swere" on his "trawpe" to abide by the terms of the "bargayn" set here by the jovial host (1105-12).

\(^{51}\)The most striking view of Bercilak's physically active nature comes during the three energetic hunts in which he is engaged during the three successive mornings of Gawain's sojourn at the castle. His activity provides an interesting contrast to that of the hero who lies "lenge" in his "lofte" at his "ese" (1106).

For an interesting thematic parallel between Bercilak's hunting expeditions and the events that occur in Gawain's bedroom, see Henry L. Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP, XXVII (1928), 1-15.
The action that takes place at the castle, furthermore, highlights the impelling force of the antagonist. Just as Arthur was earlier driven to act on impulse and at odds with established convention, so Gawain is here ultimately impelled to act on the purely instinctual level and in a manner deviant from the chivalric code. Significantly enough, Gawain's impulse to action, like that of Arthur, is generated through the mode of speech. The hero undergoes an emotional and mental ordeal as executed through the battle of wit and words with his overtly armorous chatelaine. Though it is the lady who is here involved in the actual process of the test, it is Bercilak who directs and controls the situation. This fact is evidenced on the evening of the second day as Bercilak offhandedly remarks to his guest: "I haf fraysted be twys, and faythful I fynde be. / Now "brid tyme browe best" penk on be morne" (1679-80). And on the third morning, as noted earlier, Gawain trembles on the verge of losing his self-control and succumbing to the lust aroused in him by the lady. He recollects himself sufficiently to restrain his instinctive impulse to enjoy life to the hilt. The impulse to action generated by his instinct for survival, however, cannot be suppressed, and he falters in his observance of the chivalric code of conduct.

At the Green Chapel, again, it is the supernatural and terrifying aspect of the antagonist that is at first in focus. The Green Knight may not be visible as Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel, but he nonetheless makes his presence
felt by assailing the hero's ears with

a wonder breme noyse,
Quat! hit clatered in þe clyff, as hit cleue schulde,
As one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a sype.
What! hit wharred and whette, as water at a mulne;
What! hit rusched and ronge, rawþe to here.

(2200-04)

Even here, however, the dual perspective seen earlier remains in evidence. The "noyse" may be wondrously fierce and may project a force fit to cleave a stone cliff in twain; nevertheless, it is also similar to the familiar sounds of a scythe being sharpened at a grindstone and of water being churned at a mill. As the Green Knight comes into view (2221-34), moreover, the same dual perspective operates. He advances with a characteristic outburst of physical energy as he "Whyrlande out of a wro" with his "felle weppen" in hand, but he yet crosses the expanse of ground "on his fote" and jumps over water with the aid of "hys ax." Once the terms of the physical challenge are met, however, the Green Knight sheds his mask of inscrutability. He reveals that the beautiful lady at the castle was none other than "Myn owen wyf" (2359), and that the pursuit of Gawain, the "wowyng of my wyf" (2361), was a trial of character that he himself has planned to the last detail:

'For hit is my wede þat þou werez, þat ilke wouen girdel, Myn own wyf hit þe weued, I wot wel for soþe. Now know I wel þy cosses, and þy costes als, And þe wowyng of my wyf: I wroþt hit myseluen. I sende hir to asay þe.

(2358-62)

The superhuman challenger and the jovial host are thus but
differing aspects of the same figure actively engaged in a trial of heroic quality within the courtly world.

The Green Knight makes very clear that he appeared at the court in order to "assay" the "surquidré" and "grete renoun" of the "Rounde Table" (2456-58) and that is precisely what he does--but in more arenas and in more ways than one. The chivalric ideal of heroism, as pointed out earlier, relates not only to physical activity in battle but also to social and moral conduct, and it is in all three domains of knightly endeavour that the court is placed on trial through the figure of its worthiest representative, Gawain. The challenge issued by the monstrous Green Knight is an obvious test of physical valour within a public arena, and the issue of social decorum is for the most part relegated to the background. At the castle, however, Gawain is tested within an arena similar to that of the court by an antagonist who appears no different from other knights. Here, it is the hero's personal observance of the social and moral aspect of the chivalric code that is in question, and the issue of physical courage remains patently in the background. Once Gawain leaves the castle, the nature of the test changes again to focus on valour in combat, but now as tried within an arena quite evidently removed from public view. The action most significant to the assessment of heroic character, nevertheless, occurs at the castle before the ultimate encounter at the Green Chapel. The narrative makes plain that though it is Gawain's physical bravery that establishes
his position as the worthiest knight of the Round Table, it is his social and moral virtue that remains the final determinant of his heroic stature.

It is clear, then, that in Sir Gawain "the emphasis is not so much on physical action as it is on states of mind and moral problems."52 Not only do we find an utter lack of interest in the physical capacity of the knight, but the demonstration of his heroic calibre takes place within a peaceful social setting far removed from the field of combat. "The initial challenge of the Green Knight," as Engelhardt points out, "is not so much a test as a mode of access to the tests" executed at the castle.53 The physical encounter at the Green Chapel, again, serves rather to illuminate the extent of Gawain's intrinsic virtue than as a trial in itself. The conflict which extends our view of the hero and reveals the nature of his praiseworthy qualities occurs indeed more in the mind of Gawain than in the external world, and the resolution of the physical confrontation has a more significant impact upon his own personality than upon his external environment. In the manner of Yvain, Gawain undergoes a morally instructive experience through the course of the narrative action. The protagonist here, however, displays a

52 Fox, p. 6.

53 "The Predicament of Gawain," p. 223, n. 10. Engelhardt includes the temptation offered by the guide within the specific tests of Gawain's moral integrity and honour.
level of self-awareness which Yvain never does. The attainment of self-knowledge, again, becomes a key issue in the narrative, an issue similar in kind to that worked out in greater detail in Book One of *The Faerie Queene*.

Sir Gawain is thus central to our study of the Heroic Plot in epic and romance. It not only incorporates aspects of the hero-monster conflict as presented on the physical plane, but it indicates the transitional stage in the employment of the Heroic Plot for purely psychological purposes. The faery antagonist serves here rather to inculcate in the hero a new knowledge about human nature than to posit a physical menace that must be destroyed through physical combat. The narrative interest, moreover, lies explicitly in the mental and moral framework of character, and the action gives us a direct view of the inner working of Gawain's mind. With Sir Gawain, then, we obviously move closer to *The Faerie Queene* where the Heroic Plot becomes a vehicle for moral and psychological allegory.
CHAPTER V

THE METAMORPHOSIS IN THE FAERIE QUEENE

The shift in interest from the physical world to the internal world of psychological reality is realized in The Faerie Queene. The Heroic Plot is of crucial significance in the narrative of Book One, for the hero's combats against his monstrous antagonists in themselves delineate the nature of the heroism extolled and are thus integral to our understanding of character, plot and theme. The conflicts, however, are clearly allegorical representations of strife and strain within the human psyche. The sustained level of the action is here pointed explicitly towards what Janet Spens calls "the apprehension, description and organization of the inner world,"\(^1\) and heroism is now defined in specifically moral terms.

On the literal level, Book One reads as a typical chivalric romance. Redcrosse is an untried, youthful knight who sets out to prove himself by undertaking the task of slaying a mighty dragon; after many trials and adventures, he brings his quest to a successful conclusion and obtains the hand of his lady in marriage. Ostensibly, then, the

structure and theme of the narrative appear no different from those of a hundred other romances and are indeed quite similar to those of \textit{Yvain}. The main body of the action comprises a series of seemingly episodic encounters with a variety of foes, both human and monstrous, and it is through these encounters that Redcrosse's moral growth and development in character is traced. However, as Spenser himself makes plain in the \textit{Letter to Raleigh}, the poem is not a chivalric romance but is rather used as a means of depicting the inner life, and we may well argue that Book One deals not so much with the career and growth of an individual knight as with the general nature and pattern of moral, Christian experience. As Kathleen Williams observes: "A solitary knight riding on a quest only dimly discerned, meeting with adventures only half-understood, can readily seem to picture our own journey through the wilderness of this world with its adventures as apparently arbitrary, and yet as momentous, as the encounters of chivalry. The knightly quest can come close to the soul's journey of moral allegory, and Spenser draws them gently and easily together." \footnote{See The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, Charles Grosvenor Osgood, and Frederick Morgan Padelford, Vol. I (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1932), 67-70. All quotations from Book One of \textit{The Faerie Queene} are from this edition.}
The moral allegory predominates in the narrative, both in structure and theme. It is obvious, as Leicester Bradner comments, that the "characters and incidents have all been chosen for the specific purpose of enacting the drama of man's spiritual life." In the epistolary introduction to the poem, Spenser tells us explicitly that Redcrosse represents "Holynes," his armour being that "of a Christian man specified by Saint Paul v. Ephes." The hero is thus something of an Everyman figure. He is the miles Christi girded in the armour of righteousness and protected by the shield of faith whose quest is to destroy the power of Sin. His adventures are representations of the internal, psychological conflicts that take place within the minds of all human beings. His adversaries are personifications of the

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4 For a general view of the moral allegory developed in Book One, see the Variorum Edition, I, 422-48. A reading of the narrative as moral allegory, however, does not of itself exclude the possibility of interpreting the action in terms of historical allegory (see the Variorum Edition, I, 449-95). Of the two, however, the former is the more acceptable. It is difficult to see the story of Redcrosse as constituting a sustained historical or political allegory dealing with the events of the Reformation in England. As Josephine Bennett points out: "If he [Spenser] had in mind specific historical events, that allegory has been subordinated to the moral and narrative requirements of the plot, and therefore makes its appearance in the foreground only occasionally by way of allusion rather than as continued topical allegory. . . . The Cave of Despair and the House of Holiness belong to the moral development of Everyman, and the attempt to equate them with phases of the Reformation results in distortion of both history and the poem" (The Evolution of "The Faerie Queene" 1942; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1960), pp. 17-18).

moral dangers that operate to deflect him from his goal, evils of the mind and spirit that must be vanquished if true holiness is to be attained. The career of Redcrosse is clearly designed to depict the experiences of an individual as he struggles against various aspects and forms of sin.

Redcrosse's adventures, like those of Gawain, serve primarily to enlighten the hero about the nature and quality of his own inner fibre, to drive home the limitations of his moral strength and to cleanse him of his moral blindness. As Isabel MacCaffrey notes: "Righteousness, or Holiness, is grown into by the Red Cross Knight as his life gradually assumes its destined form within "the post-lapsarian generative universe" . . . Coming to know is a major aspect of the theme in Book I." 6 Before Redcrosse can manifest his full potential, there is much that he must learn. He has yet to appreciate the full power of the forces ranged against him, to understand the necessity for constant vigilance against their attacks, and to realize the extent of his own weakness. Through his adventures, the knight loses the innocence born of inexperience and gains in its place the knowledge and strength to face and defeat evil with conscious intent on its own terms. 7 Redcrosse's task is to know and


7Spenser's attitude towards the nature of moral virtue is indeed very similar to that of Milton who remarks: "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered vertue, unexercis'
conquer the evil within himself, to overcome his own proclivity to sin rather than to gain or preserve his worldly honour and renown like Beowulf or Gawain.

The shift in perspective from objective to subjective reality with regard to the presentation and use of the Heroic Plot is thus crystallized in The Faerie Queene. We noted in Sir Gawain that the action which serves as the primary basis for the assessment of Gawain's heroic stature takes place more in the mind of the hero than in the external world. The courageous response to a physical threat is here

and unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortall garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into this world, we bring impurity much rather; that which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary" (Areopagitica, in The Prose of John Milton, The Stuart Edition, series ed. J. Max Patrick, Vol.I. (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 227-28). The Redcrosse Knight anticipates Milton's "true warfaring Christian" (p. 287) whose moral steel is tempered in the fires of experience, and who gains mastery over the evil within himself through the knowledge and heightened perception inculcated by his many trials. It is no wonder, then, that Milton should speak of Spenser in glowing terms as that "sage and serious poet . . . whom I dare to be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas" (p. 288).

The similarity in temper between Spenser and Milton should not, however, blind us to the difference in their respective treatments of the subject of human heroism in The Faerie Queene and Paradise Lost. As Paul Alpers points out: "Spenser does not attempt to redefine heroism as Milton does when he rejects "the wrath Of stern Achilles" and the "rage Of Turnus for Lavinia disespous'd" for "the better fortitude Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom" . . . . The interest and complexity of Spenser's treatment of heroism lie not in the way it is represented in itself, but in Spenser's willingness to examine it from every perspective--to ask as fully as possible what it tells us about human nature" (The Poetry of "The Faerie Queene" (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 339).
of less significance than the hero's behaviour under situations of mental and moral stress. Though the hero-monster conflict is depicted in physical terms, it is not the actual confrontation between Gawain and the Green Knight that determines the nature and extent of the knight's heroism but rather the psychological assault mounted upon the hero during his stay at Bercilak's castle. In Book One, however, the monster-fight becomes in itself a visualization of the psychological conflict that occurs within the human psyche. The narrative presents an allegorical view of the Christian struggle to gain moral virtue and remains unconcerned with the realistic portrayal of action in the external world. Physical heroism in battle, a secondary issue in Sir Gawain, is here no longer dealt with on its own level, but is instead used directly as a means of delineating the extent of Redcrosse's moral strength and the quality of his moral fibre.

The change in the nature of the Heroic Plot reflects the increasing interest in the moral framework of human beings and the inner working of the human psyche. The Gawain-Green Knight confrontation resolves itself at the end into a test not of the flesh but of the spirit. It has, moreover, a far greater and more explicit impact upon the hero's own personality than upon his physical environment: rather than overcoming his monstrous foe, Gawain is himself ultimately overcome with the bitter realization of his personal failure to live up to his own moral ideals. In Sir Gawain, however, the action yet occurs within the external world, and it is
the convoluted battle of wit and words between Gawain and Lady Bercilak that serves to reveal the hero's mental vacillation and expose the limitations of his moral character. In *The Faerie Queene*, on the other hand, the allegorical mode enables Spenser to record directly and with vivid detail the psychology of the human quest for moral perfection. The Redcrosse Knight is less an individual in his own right than he is the embodiment of the individual spirit being educated about the nature of moral virtue, and his adventures render the "many perils [that] doe enfold / The righteous man, to make him daily fall" (viii, 1).

As the Heroic Plot becomes more explicitly the delineation of the psychological testing of the human spirit, so the nature of the adversary becomes more clearly defined as a threat to the hero's moral well-being. Redcrosse's struggle is against the evil which effects man's moral degeneration and spiritual downfall rather than a physical menace to life and land. His monstrous adversaries, as indicated by the names Errour, Orgoglio (Pride), and Sin, are primarily externalizations of the human psyche. They are direct representations of the common weaknesses and faults to which Christian commentators believe human beings are prone and whose force must be crushed if moral standing is to be attained. Unlike the Green Knight, these supernatural creatures involve the hero in desperate life-and-death situations where they show no hesitation in using all
their fearsome might. Unlike Gawain, the only way Redcrosse can come to terms with the enemy is by slaying it in combat. Interestingly enough, however, though the superior force displayed by the adversaries in Sir Gawain and The Faerie Queene functions to inculcate in both heroes a conscious awareness of the limits of their moral strength, Book One goes on to show how human beings can withstand and vanquish even the gravest of dangers and the most terrifying of evils with the aid of God and the power of His divine grace. The final note here remains indeed one of Christian hope and expectation, rather than one of heroic or realistic acceptance of the limits of human strength as in Beowulf and Sir Gawain.

Though Redcrosse's adventures are all depictions of moral conflicts, not all of them are delineated in terms of actual battle. The various adversaries pose different kinds of threats, and the nature of each encounter is determined by the nature of the danger so confronted. Against the overt attacks of the monsters or the "paynim" knights Sansfoy and Sansjoy, armed force is obviously required. These adversaries behave as the hostile forces they are; their appearance and their aggressive acts proclaim their intentions. Others, like the hypocrite Archimago or the representative of false faith Duessa, present themselves in friendly guise, masking their fell purpose and working harm by devious means. Though seemingly less powerful as opponents, they are—like the genial Bercilaks in Sir Gawain—much more dangerous and more difficult to withstand. They do not act to cause sudden
defeat, but rather seek to pervert good and enslave it to serve their ends. They induce moral corruption. Their insidious wiles suborn the unwary Christian to the extent that he loses all sense of moral purpose and is unable to retaliate with force even when he knows he must.

Redcrosse fights against three specific monsters: the serpent Error, the giant Orgoglio, and the dragon Sin. These monster-fights, though widely separated from each other in terms of the sequence of events, function as key points in the narrative. They denote the beginning and end of each stage of the hero's moral career. The action of Book One falls into two distinct parts, the first dealing with Redcrosse's degeneration and fall (Cantos I-VIII) and the second with his regeneration and triumph (Cantos IX-XII). The battle against Error (Canto I) marks the start of the entire action: it is the very first situation of moral stress in which the hero is involved. The first phase culminates with Redcrosse's defeat at the hands of Orgoglio (Canto VII) and his subsequent incarceration in a dungeon. The second is initiated again with a battle against Orgoglio (Canto VIII). This time, however, it is Arthur—the embodiment of all virtue and here most probably representing "heavenly grace" (viii, 1)—who fights against the giant, killing the creature and setting Redcrosse free from bondage. The hero next undergoes a period of moral recuperation and spiritual strengthening which climaxes with his decisive victory over the Dragon of Sin (Canto XI).
Spenser uses the motif of the hero-monster conflict in the narrative to the same dramatic effect as does the Beowulf-poet. The battles, signposts in the allegory of moral progression, are presented as taking place between two physical entities. The monsters are as much serpent, giant and dragon as they are typifications of error, pride and sin respectively. They fight back with animal ferocity, bleed when wounded, and die at the thrust of a sword. Unlike the creatures in Tristan and Yvain, these are mighty adversaries with powers of action that make them truly formidable opponents in battle. The interaction between hero and monster, while serving as in Sir Gawain to induce moral self-awareness in the hero, is delineated explicitly as a power struggle for supremacy which is resolved in terms of physical combat.

Though the Heroic Plot is presented in a manner reflecting back to its archetypal form, it now functions as the expression of a code far removed from that of the heroic world and is incorporated in the narrative towards ends diametrically opposed. Whereas the heroic legend exalts human self-sufficiency in the face of an aloof and impersonal Fate, the legend of the Knight of Holiness stresses human dependency on an omniscient and benevolent Deity. Unlike the Germanic hero who wins through to victory by the sheer force of his natural strength and ability, the Christian hero cannot triumph over his enemies without divine aid. The focus here remains on the frailty of human strength as
pitted against the monstrous adversaries and on the need for human beings to rely upon God to sustain them against harm. The hero-monster conflicts in Book One serve indeed to illustrate and emphasize the fact that true glory is attained not by human effort but only through the grace of God.

The hero's intrinsic worth is no longer contingent upon physical superiority as manifested in combat. In each of the monster-fights, the balance of power tips obviously, and at times overwhelmingly, in favour of the adversary. The monsters here, however, are not built up to seem more powerful than the hero as in Beowulf in order to make the champion's use of his strength and prowess the more glorious and commendable. The monsters are more powerful, for they embody the forces of Satanic evil in the struggle against which the Christian is incapacitated without assistance from God. Redcrosse thus remains always at a disadvantage in terms of physical might and even Arthur, the image of human perfection, is felled to the ground and brought to the point of defeat by a stroke from the giant for, as Spenser makes clear, no "mortall wight could euer bear so monstrous blow" (viii, 18). Redcrosse and Arthur emerge triumphant from combat not because of their own strength but in spite of their own weakness. In each case, the victory is engineered by God--

whether implicitly as in the Redcrosse-Errour conflict or explicitly as in the Arthur-Orgoglio and Redcrosse-Dragon confrontations—rather than by the hero's own unaided efforts.

An examination of the monster-fights in Book One brings sharply into focus the importance placed upon "a virtue built of clear-sighted realization of man's dependence on and grateful faith in his divine Lord." Redcrosse's fight with the serpent Error (i, 11-27) demonstrates the inadequacy of human strength when applied against the enemy without faith in God. The knight confronts the creature with heroic courage and determination, but he is almost immediately trapped within the serpent's sinuous coils and is incapable of extricating himself or even defending himself in any way:

. . . her huge traine
   All suddenly about his body wound,
   That hand or foot to stirre he stroue in vaine:
   God helpe the man so wrapt in Error's endlesse traine.

(i, 18)

Redcrosse is obviously in desperate need of assistance, and this is delivered in the form of Una's exhortation to "Add faith vnto . . . [his] force" (i, 19). Only when inspired by this call to faith does the knight manage to break free of the monster's stranglehold and eventually prevail by

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decapitating the creature. Again, Redcrosse's ineffectiveness against Orgoglio (vii, 7-14) is clearly symptomatic of his moral deterioration, and his ignominious defeat at the hands of the giant reveals the utter helplessness of one who has estranged himself from his faith. There is nothing even remotely heroic about the figure of Redcrosse as he faces the mighty giant. He is a man without armour or shield

Who haplesse, and eke hopelesse, all in vaine
Did to him pace, sad battaile to darrayne,
Disarmd, disgrast, and inwardly dismayde,
And eke so faint in every ioynt and vaine,
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That scarsely could he weeld his bootlesse single blade.

(vii, 11)

The most telling aspect of this conflict is the fact that the knight is overcome not by an actual blow from Orgoglio but by the mere rush of wind that is generated by the thrust:

Yet so exceeding was the villeins powre,
That with the wind it did him ouerthrow,
And all his sences stound, that still he lay full low.

(vii, 12)

Redcrosse is incapable of presenting even a token resistance to the giant's assault and is quickly defeated. The fight is over indeed almost as soon as it begins, and the course of this entire confrontation is encompassed within a single stanza (12).

Faith in God, then, obviously strengthens the human against the onslaught of the enemy but, as Spenser goes on to explicate in the next monster-fight, faith alone cannot prevent the miles Christi from succumbing to the force
of evil. The Arthur-Orgoglio conflict (viii, 2-24), which defines the nature of the virtue extolled in Book One, establishes the utter necessity for reliance upon God by showing that not even the greatest of heroes and worthiest of men can prevail in battle without the active working of God's grace. Arthur's stature as the pre-eminent knight in the Spenserian world is indisputable. Spenser himself informs us in the Letter to Raleigh that the Prince is presented as "the image of a brave knight, perfected in the twelve private morall vertues." Arthur's wondrous shield made of "Diamond perfect pure and cleene" (vii, 33) is explicitly emblematic of his perfect faith in God. It is so hard that nothing can pierce or damage it, and so dazzlingly bright when uncovered that with it "monsters huge he would dismay, / Or daunt vnequall armes of his foes" (vii, 34). Significantly enough, however, possession of the shield does not in itself ensure Arthur's victory in the fight against Orgoglio. Nor indeed is it the Prince who activates and directs the power of this formidable weapon against the opposition. Though Arthur dominates in the initial stage of the battle, his control of the situation slips when Duessa's draconic steed, the "dreadful Beast with seuenfold head" (vii, 18), enters the fray and takes its stance at Orgoglio's side. Despite his prowess and skill, Arthur cannot crush this concerted attack and is overset by the giant's mighty blow (viii, 18). It is the invincible power of the shield, now opportunely going into effect, that of itself saves the
champion from certain death by decimating the force of the enemy. Even as Arthur falls, the shield loses its covering "by chaunce" (viii, 19--emphasis mine), and its "blazing brightnesse" (viii, 19) is such that the dragon tumbles down immediately onto the battlefield and "seem'd himselfe as conquered to yield" (viii, 20). Orgoglio, who has already raised his club to strike the death-dealing blow upon the fallen champion, is constrained from following through with the action:

   He downe let fall his arme, and soft withdrew  
   His weapon huge, that heaued was on hye  
   For to haue slaine the man, that on the ground did lye.  

(viii, 19)

For all intents and purposes, the battle is resolved by the fortuitous working of divine grace which causes the shield's unveiling, by the divine power which operates through the weapon to eliminate the dragon and reduce the giant to a helpless hulk with "no powre to hurt, nor to defend" (viii, 21). The action makes plain that the victory is attributable to a force other than that of the champion, a force that of itself vanquishes the enemy even as the knight lies on the ground in apparent defeat.

The slaying of the mighty Dragon (xi, 15-55) that marks the triumphant conclusion of Redcrosse's active moral career in Book One is again occasioned explicitly by fortunate happenstance, by God's grace rather than the hero's own strength or merit. Perfected in faith at the House of Holiness (Canto X), the knight is now distinctly "the man
of God" (xi, 7), and at the start of the confrontation he is a truly heroic figure in his "glistening armes, that heauen with light did fill" (xi, 4). Redcrosse's display of courage and martial prowess on the first day of this long-drawn battle provides a direct contrast to his weakness and ineffectiveness against Orgoglio. Though completely dwarfed by this most fearsome of adversaries, whose enormous size and awesome power are described in hair-raising detail (xi, 8-15), Redcrosse nonetheless stands his ground with firm intent and wields his blade with "rigorous might" (xi, 16). He strikes blows "so furious and so fell, / That nothing seemd the puissance could withstand" (xi, 24). Though the knight's thrusts bounce harmlessly off the creature's impenetrable hide, the Dragon is fully aware of his opponent's extraordinary strength:

For neuer felt his imperceable brest
So wondrous force, from hand of liuing wight;
Yet had he prou'd the powre of many a puissant knight.

(xi, 17)

Redcrosse's performance, though magnificent, is obviously inadequate in itself to destroy this "hell-bred beast" (xi, 40), and the extent of the hero's personal ability is indicated by the single wound inflicted upon the creature's massive wing before he is himself overset by a searing blast of flame.

It is clearly the Almighty God who empowers Redcrosse to continue the fight and eventually defeat the mighty Dragon. Just as Arthur's shield is uncovered "by chaunce" at an
extremely crucial moment in his battle against Orgoglio, so we see Redcrosse being saved from death by fortuitous happenstance at two significant points in the action against the Dragon. Here, however, Spenser makes plain that the force which directs these occurrences is that of God, "eternall God that chaunce did guide" (xi, 45). When Redcrosse falls in defeat at the end of the first day's fighting, he happens to fall into "the sacred waues" of the Well of Life (xi, 29) whence he rises on the morrow as "new-borne" (xi, 34) to renew the assault with the increased vigour of "his baptized hands" (xi, 36). During the second day of battle, Redcrosse performs truly prodigious feats of strength and endurance, but remains yet incapable of quelling the Dragon's vicious might. At the close of the day, it is the monster--albeit badly mutilated--that still prevails. This time, Redcrosse "chaunst" (xi, 45) to fall near the Tree of Life on ground permeated with its "gratious ointment . . . which did from death him saue" (xi, 48). The "vertuous might" of this "pretious Balme" (xi, 50) heals the knight of all "his hurts and woundes wide" (xi, 52) and enables him to spring up again the next morning ready for action. It is this ability of the hero to rise each morning with "renewed might" (xi, 35), an ability bestowed by the working of God's grace, that finally daunts the Dragon. When the monster sees this occur for the second time, he "woxe dismayed, and gan his fate to feare" (xi, 52). And his fears are well justified on the
third day of this prolonged conflict. On this final day of battle, the Dragon has no opportunity to hurt Redcrosse in any way. As the monster rushes forward to swallow the hero, Redcrosse's sword enters the creature's open mouth and so "deepe emperst his darksome hollow maw" (xi, 53) that the Dragon immediately falls dead upon the battlefield.

It is informative to note that in this confrontation the hero's sword takes on an increasingly dynamic function in the action and ultimately appears to operate on its own to slay the Dragon in a manner strongly reminiscent of Arthur's shield. The increased effectiveness of the "bright deaw-burning blade" (xi, 35) on the second day after its immersion in the "holy water dew" of the Well of Life (xi, 36) becomes indeed a direct extension of the hero's similarly increased physical force. Imbued as they are with the divine power of God, both hero and weapon become as one in working to avenge the previous day's defeat. Redcrosse's desire for revenge is taken up by "the reuenging steele" (xi, 36) which inflicts "a yawning wound" (xi, 35) upon the Dragon's skull; the knight's pain and "wrath" (xi, 39) at the "mortall sting" embedded in his shoulder (xi, 38) is reflected in "his raging blade" which hacks off a large part of the monster's tail (xi, 39); and when it seems that nothing can loosen the Dragon's grip on Redcrosse's shield, the hero calls his "trustie sword . . . to his last aid" (xi, 42) and severs one of the creature's paws with "the lucky steele" (xi, 43). On the third day, however, there is no actual physical
fighting between hero and monster. Even as the Dragon rushes upon Redcrosse, his mouth "gaping wide . . . attonce him to have swallowd quight" (xi, 53), the monster comes to his well-deserved end:

The weapon bright
Taking aduantage of his open iaw,
Ran through his mouth with so importune might,
That deepe emperst his darksome hollow maw,
And back retyrd, his life bloud forth with all did draw.

(xi, 53)

Like Arthur's shield, the sword here of itself appears to take over the action and, though wielded by Redcrosse, seems to operate of its own volition to draw the conflict to a close.

Spenser indeed leaves us in no doubt as to the significantly active role of God's grace in the Christian life but, as Paul Alpers points out, his perspective on the subject of human strength and human ability is not as intransigent as it may at times appear. In the opening stanza of Canto X, Spenser highlights the patent incapacity of man to do good of his own volition and overcome his enemies by virtue of his own merit:

What man is he, that boasts of fleshly might,
And vaine assurance of mortality,
Which all so soone, as it doth come to fight,
Against spirituall foes, yeelds by and by,
Or from the field most cowardly doth fly?
Ne let the man ascribe it to his skill,
That thorough grace hath gained victory.
If any strength we haue, it is to ill,
But all the good is Gods, both power and eke will.

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The primacy of grace over the performance of good works as stressed in this stanza is clearly indicative of Spenser's fundamentally Protestant view of the religious life.\(^{11}\) Contrary to the assertion of A. S. P. Woodhouse, however, this doctrinal insistence on "the bankruptcy of the natural man and his utter dependence for spiritual virtue upon the grace of God"\(^{12}\) does not extend to cover every action in the poem. The portrait of Satyrane, for instance, gives a glowing account of human nature and human capacity, as Paul Alpers remarks.\(^{13}\) Satyrane's descent from the "woody kind" of satyrs (vi, 18) and his close kinship by birth and breeding with the "woodborne people" (vi, 16) of the "forrest wyld" (vi, 21) mark him distinctly as moving within the realm of nature, and yet he is presented as "a noble warlike knight" of "well deserued name" who

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\begin{align*}
&\text{had in armes abroad wonne muchell fame,} \\
&\text{And fild far landes with glorie of his might,} \\
&\text{Plaine, faithfull, true, and enmy of shame,} \\
&\text{And euer lou'd to fight for Ladies right,} \\
&\text{But in vaine glorious frayes he litle did delight.}
\end{align*}
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(vi, 20)

\(^{11}\)Virgil K. Whitaker discusses the question of Spenser's evident Protestantism most fully in his monograph *The Religious Basis of Spenser's Thought* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1950).


"In almost every canto of Book I," observes Alpers, "there
is a criticism of human strength as it is expressed by
heroism; yet in each of these cantos, the claims and values
of heroism are in some way re-established."\(^{14}\) In Canto V,
where we find a condemnation of all purely human achievement
as belonging to Lucifer's realm, we also see Redcrosse's
defeat of Sansjoy and his subsequent escape from the House
of Pride "because of his human moral capacities"\(^{15}\) as repre-
sented by the "wary Dwarf" (v, 45). In Canto VII, Red-
crosse's pathetic stance against Orgoglio is set against the
glorious and heroic figure of Arthur. Again, though Canto X
opens with an indictment of human strength and human ability,
it ends with an explicit reassertion of the value of heroic
knighthood within the world (x, 63).\(^{16}\) The "double per-
spective"\(^{17}\) maintained in the narrative, as Alpers argues,
enables Spenser to discuss most fully the "inherently


\(^{15}\) Poetry of "The Faerie Queene," p. 247.

\(^{16}\) As Ronald Horton observes: "The vacillation of Red Cross
between the New Jerusalem and Cleopolis is not between duties
or between felicities but between duty and felicity; and
felicity, in the words of Contemplation himself, must give
way to duty, contemplation to action, until duty is fulfilled
and action is consummated in the completion of the earthly
mission. . . . The presence of evil in the world requires a
life of virtuous action if the enemies of virtue are not to
prevail" (The Unity of "The Faerie Queene" (Athens, Ga.:

\(^{17}\) Poetry of "The Faerie Queene," p. 337.
problematic"\(^{18}\) nature of human strength, and indicates his awareness of the fact that though "natural strengths by themselves seem insufficient and potentially disastrous . . . yet they also seem to be essential sources of spiritual energy and moral value."\(^{19}\)

The Heroic Plot, however, cannot support a definition of heroism that depreciates individual achievement. It cannot maintain the essentially dynamic nature of the one-to-one combat and simultaneously establish that the task at hand is beyond the hero's capacity to accomplish. This fact becomes strikingly evident in the Arthur-Orgoglio conflict, in which the religious basis of Spenser's thought is too clearly defined to allow any ambiguity of the kind discussed by Alpers.\(^{20}\) And it is the power and glory of God that is exalted in this battle rather than any strength attributable to the Prince. The champion is here reduced almost to the level of an observer as a force above and beyond his control takes over and operates/fights on his behalf to draw the conflict to a close. Beowulf, exhausted as he is when he stumbles and falls in the fight against the Dam, must yet dredge up the ultimate reserves of his strength and spirit

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\(^{19}\) Poetry of "The Faerie Queene," p. 361.

\(^{20}\) Significantly enough, the Arthur-Orgoglio battle is the only one which Alpers does not deal with at all in his discussion of heroism and human strength.
to rise to his feet again, grasp the huge and unfamiliar ealdsweord, and wield it so as to decapitate the monster. Here, it is the intrinsic power of the shield that operates directly to vanquish the enemy. All that is required of Arthur is to spring to his feet and deliver the coup de grace with his sword. The decapitation of Orgoglio comes indeed as an anticlimax, for the fight is resolved even as the champion himself lies hors de combat. The battle is obviously designed to explicate the nature of the moral allegory worked out in the narrative, and the Heroic Plot sags under the strain.

With the Spenserian metamorphosis in the ideal of heroism, we have reached the limits of what the Heroic Plot can bear. The focus shifts from an exaltation of the hero to an exaltation of the Prime Mover and Source whence comes the aid indispensable to the hero in the fight against the Enemy. The Redcrosse-Dragon confrontation shows clearly that the paradox which makes for good moral allegory—an undefeatable adversary being overcome by a hero patently much weaker in strength and less powerful in action—does not lend itself to a direct representation in terms of actual physical conflict. The antagonists here are too unevenly matched for the course of the battle and its resolution to be contained within the bounds of one-to-one combat. In light of the Dragon's mountainous size and truly fearsome might, it is inconceivable that Redcrosse should be able to fight against this creature incessantly for over two days, let alone slay the monster in single combat. It is hard to accept, moreover
that the same knight who extricates himself from the clutches of the serpent only with the greatest of difficulty, who succumbs ignominiously to the giant and cannot free himself from bondage, prevails over this most dangerous and deadly of monsters without ever shedding a drop of blood or sustaining a single lasting physical injury. The crucial nature of the aid rendered by God is here again, as in the Arthur-Orgoglio conflict, too precisely defined towards allegorical effect for the action to maintain its dynamism on the literal, physical level.

The Redcrosse-Dragon battle is plainly a dramatization of the process by which the human attains moral virtue. 21 The Well of Life and the Tree of Life, which play a crucial role in the defeat of the Dragon, distinctly image the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist which cleanse the human of sin and empower him to nullify and destroy the hold of Satan. The final confrontation thus recapitulates the action of the entire narrative. The first day of the conflict, as Mark Rose observes, is "an extended allusion to the Knight's adventures through canto IX, that is, to the period before his introduction to Christianity in the House of Holiness;" 22


the second day suggests that "even a Christian falls repeatedly in the struggle against Satan and, to preserve life, more than baptism into the faith is required;" while on the third day, Redcrosse definitively "ceases to be a questing soul and becomes the perfected knight, becomes, in other words, an image of Christ himself triumphing over Satan."  

There can be little doubt, then, that the action of Book One develops our perspective of the hero as the miles Christi. This view is established at the very start of the poem, where the emphasis remains pointedly on the arms borne by Redcrosse rather than his personal appearance or physical might. It is no accident that Redcrosse's "mightie armes and siluer shielde" (i, 1) are emblazoned with the sign of the Cross:

But on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore,
The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,
For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he wore,
And dead as liuing euer him ador'd:
Vpon his shield the like was also scor'd,
For soueraine hope, which in his helpe he had.

(i, 2)

For this armour is that which every Christian bears and with the aid of which alone he "may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Ephesians VI). It is indeed only when armed with true faith and steadfast belief in the Lord that human beings can overcome the power of Satan. Spenser

\[ \text{Rose, p. 143.} \]

\[ \text{Rose, p. 144.} \]
explicates this idea in the Letter to Raleigh when he stresses the fact that though Redcrosse "earnestly importuned his desire" to undertake the quest of slaying the Dragon, "the Lady [Una] told him that vnlesse that armour which she brought, would serve him . . . he could not succeed in that enterprise." It is significant, again, that only when armed is Redcrosse's potential visible to all; only then is the "clownishe younge man" transformed into one who "seemed the goodliest man in al that company" at the court of the Faery Queen.

As in Sir Gawain, then, the emblem on the hero's martial equipment denotes the moral ideal by which he lives and which he strives to incorporate in his character and actions. In Gawain's case, however, the "pentangel" is symbolic of the moral stature attained by the hero even before he sets off in quest of the Green Knight. Redcrosse, on the other hand, though "faithfull true . . . in deede and word" (i, 2), is an unknown quantity both to himself and to us as he begins his journey, for "armes till that time did he neuer wield" (i, 1). Unlike Gawain or Beowulf, who have already proved their heroic worth before the action begins, Redcrosse has yet to distinguish himself in any way. Once accoutred in his new armour, however, Redcrosse is a daunting figure and looks a most worthy champion "for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fitt" (i, 1). He also possesses the inner qualities and motivating drive of the traditional hero. Redcrosse's courage and determination are such that he fears nothing but
rather "euer was ydrad" (i, 2), and he is bent upon winning honour from the "great aduenture" on which he is bound by defeating the mighty Dragon:

And euer as he rode, his hart did earne To prowe his puissance in battell braue Vpon his foe, and his new force to learne; Vpon his foe, a Dragon horrible and stearne.

(i, 3)

Redcrosse's stature as the "unproued knight" (vii, 47) who must yet struggle to attain moral perfection is brought home when we look at the manner in which the figure of Arthur is presented in the action (vii, 29-36). Like Redcrosse, Arthur is described mainly in terms of his warlike accoutrements. The impression created here, however, is one of dazzling splendour rather than functional serviceability. Whereas Redcrosse figures the Everychristian, Arthur is the "Champion" (viii, 38) who images the standard of perfection extolled in the narrative. His "glitterand armour shined farre away;" his "bauldrick braue" shines with the gleaming radiance of the "stons most pretious rare" embedded therein; his "mortall blade" is clasped in an "yuory sheath" with hilts of "burnisht gold, and handle strong / Of mother pearle;" his "haughtie helmet" is "horrid all with gold;" and his shield is made of a single enormous diamond so bright that it cannot by "mortall eye be euer seene."

Arthur's equipment, moreover, is as effective in action as it is splendid in appearance. His armour explicitly covers him from "top to toe" so that no "deadly dint of steele [him]
endanger may;" his helmet both "glorious brightnesse, and
great terour bred," for the hideous dragon emblazoned
thereon strikes "suddeine horror to faint harts;" while his
shield is a truly formidable weapon and an indispensable
adjunct to the champion's might in routing "monsters huge"
and "vnequall armies of his foes" (vii, 34). Unlike Red-
crosse's "siluer shielde" which displays the "cruell markes
of many a bloudie fielde" (i, 1), Arthur's shield is not
made of any "earthly mettal" nor can it be damaged in any way, for

all of Diamond perfect pure and cleene
It framed was, one massie entire mould,
Hewen out of Adamant rocke with engines keene,
That point of speare it neuer percen could,
Ne dint of direfull sword diuide the substance would.

(vii, 33)

Again, where Redcrosse is seduced by Archimago's magic wiles
and remains incapable of seeing through Duessa's false exte-
rior to the hideous horror beneath, the "noble Pere" (viii,
38) is proof against all corruption by virtue of his shield:

No magicke arts hereof had any might,
Nor bloudie wordes of bold Enchaunters call,
But all that was not such, as seemd in sight,
Before that shield did fade, and suddeine fall.

(vii, 35)

The correlation between the arms and the man is indeed care-
fully brought out in the narrative through the contrast in
the quality of the equipment borne by Redcrosse and Arthur,
a contrast which clearly projects the qualitative difference
in their respective positions as men of virtue.
Redcrosse may be the principal figure with whom we are concerned in Book One, but it is Arthur who is the real hero of The Faerie Queene, as Spenser explicates in his Letter to Raleigh. It is Arthur who is set forth with deliberate intent as an "ensample" for the education and edification of the reader. It is Arthur who is presented throughout the entire poem as the ideal of perfect manhood, worthy of admiration and emulation in all his actions—a claim which cannot be put forth for any other hero we have seen in this study except Beowulf. Arthur is, like Beowulf, the image of perfection and the embodiment of all virtue. As Spenser informs us in the Letter, Arthur represents "magnificence . . . which vertue for that (according to Aristotle and all the rest), it is the perfection of all the rest, and containeth in it them all."^25 In Book One, then, we see only one aspect of Arthur's character, only one facet of the many that in totality comprise perfection. He reappears at crucial moments in the action of each of the other Books, manifesting the same pre-eminent stature but revealing other aspects of his character, such as his temperance (Book II), his chastity (Book III), his capacity for friendship (Book IV), his sense of justice (Book V), and his courtesy (Book VI). The Faerie

Queene thus appears to be structured along lines similar to Beowulf. Like the three successive monster-fights of Beowulf, each Book serves directly to deepen and strengthen our view of Arthur as the representation of the exalted ideal.

The structural similarity in the presentation of the hero is not really surprising. Spenser draws much of his inspiration directly from the Classical epic tradition of "the antique Poets historicall" (Letter to Raleigh), and the close ties between the Classical and the Germanic epic have already been noted in Chapter I. In so fashioning his poem and the figure of its hero to inculcate and propagate virtue, however, Spenser remains in direct line with contemporary sixteenth century poetic theory. According to Sidney, whose Defence of Poesie provided what A. C. Hamilton calls "a manifesto for the major Elizabethan writers," the specific and all-important function of poetry is to inspire virtuous action in the reader. The best means of implementing this purpose, Sidney asserts, is by presenting "perfect patternes[.]" of virtue such as are to be found in the works


of the Greek and Latin poets. Depicting the praiseworthy actions of eminently worthy figures cannot fail to direct and guide the reader towards virtue, for "as the Image of each Action stirreth and instructeth the minde, so the loftie Image of such woorthies, moste enflameth the mind with desire to bee woorthie: and enforms with counsaile how to bee woorthie." Sidney's profound consciousness of the doctrine of the Fall precludes his acceptance of human perfection in the world such as the "Heroicall" tradition he praises so highly primarily serves to acknowledge and commemorate. For Sidney, the world of nature--including humans--is fallen and imperfect, is "brasen." The poet who deals with natural phenomena, then, merely imitates and perpetuates imperfection. The inspiration to be derived from the best poetry springs from the creative power of the "right" poet, who "with the force of a divine breath . . . bringeth things foorth surpassing her [Nature's] doings" and delivers a "golden" world in which such images of perfection as Aeneas or Odysseus may be depicted. The greatest poetry, then, is that which labours "not . . . to tel you what is, or is not, but what should, or should not be," and wherein the poet "worketh, not onely to make a Cyrus . . . but to bestow a Cyrus upon

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28 Sidney, p. 25.

29 Sidney, pp. 8-9.

30 Sidney, p. 29.
the worlde, to make many Cyrusses."  

It is obvious, then, that the figure of Arthur is displayed in the narrative of The Faerie Queene as a "speaking Picture" of virtue. The character of the Prince is fashioned so as to set forth the excellence in virtue that all must strive to attain; his admirable conduct and awesome feats are detailed in order to impel the reader towards emulating his commendable behaviour and praiseworthy actions. Spenser, however, does not appear to share Sidney's unqualified faith in the practical efficacy of inspiring virtuous-action by implanting an exemplar upon the mind. He seems to have realized that pointing out a worthy goal does not necessarily ensure that it will be attained by the average human who is weak, vulnerable, and easily swayed from the path of virtue. Spenser uses the "heroicke" mode so admired by Sidney for the characterization of the Prince, but Arthur's part in the action of the poem--though highly significant--remains relatively small. Even in Book One, it is contained within two of the twelve Cantos. Our attention is focused for the most part not on Arthur but on Redcrosse, not on perfection itself but on the struggle to

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31 Sidney, p. 8.  
32 Sidney, p. 9.  
achieve perfection. And it is to the developmental motif of romance that Spenser turns for the characterization of the principal figure involved in the action of each Book. The poet is thus enabled to delineate the actual process of trial and error that must be undergone by the ordinary mortal, who cannot ever match the suprahuman excellence of Arthur and who is not gifted, as Arthur is, with the magically perfected "shield, and sword, and armour" (vii, 36). Spenser's consummate artistry is such that he goes beyond Sidney's dictum to give us a perspective not only of "what should be" but also of "what is." As Maurice Evans observes: "Arthur provides the touchstone of virtue throughout the poem, but the heroes of the separate books start in imperfection and, in discovering the true nature of virtue as they proceed on their quests, educate both themselves and their readers. Such a method makes possible a much fuller anatomy of all the aspects of virtue than would be possible with a single hero, and Spenser makes the fullest use of the variety which the romance form offers him to explore virtue in all its ramifications."34

The virtue explored in Book One is Christian holiness, and the career of Redcrosse, as A. C. Hamilton remarks, depicts the "myth of man's fall and restoration which is developed throughout the Old and New Testaments."35 The plot line


of Book One is derived from the Book of Revelation, and the apocalyptic nature of the plot and action becomes a dynamic part of the narrative, a part that is sustained and emphasized in the two hero-monster conflicts that initiate and terminate the regenerative phase of Redcrosse's moral life. Both Arthur and Redcrosse at their moments of greatest triumph function explicitly as images of the Saviour. This fact is not surprising, as for the Christian the figure of human perfection cannot be other than an image of Christ. In battling Orgoglio on Redcrosse's behalf and effecting his release, Arthur takes on truly Christ-like dimensions. Josephine Bennett points out that Arthur "performs the service, in the destruction of Duessa's beast and the redemption of the Christian man, which is performed by the Savior in the Revelation of John" where Christ overcomes the seven-headed Dragon, the Babylonian harlot, and the False Prophet or Antichrist. Moreover, as Hamilton notes, the "'long paines and labours manifold' through which 'this good Prince redeemd the Redcrosse knight from bands' (l.ix.1) reveal Him who, when mankind 'in bands


37 Arthur is Christ-like, but is not Christ himself. As A. C. Hamilton notes, "Arthur is not displayed as an allegory of Christ but rather as the image of a brave knight in whom we see the perfection of all the virtues" (Structure of Allegory in "The Faerie Queene," p. 78).

were layd . . . harrowd hell with heauie stowre, / The faultie soules from thence brought to his heavenly bowre' (l.x.40)." The Arthur-Orgoglio episode thus encapsulates in itself the action of the entire narrative. It renders the apocalyptic vision of the ultimate and yet-to-come physical victory in the world of the Powers of Good over the Forces of Evil, and it also anticipates the inner, moral victory of Redcrosse over the Dragon of Sin. In that final conflict, the hero fulfills his quest and, in doing so, takes on a stature similar to that of Arthur as the Redeemer who delivers suffering humanity from the yoke of Sin. The knight's victory over the evil within himself is presented as an archetypal victory for all the world as Redcrosse slays the Dragon and restores the land of Eden to Una's parents.

It is clear, then, that the old spirit of belief in the actual existence of monsters is here totally absent. The action in Book One is "not Affirmatively, but Allegorically and figuratively written," and though the creatures are presented in the narrative as physical adversaries, they remain explicitly creations of the poetic imagination. "Allegory," as C. S. Lewis remarks, "consists in giving an imagined body to the immaterial," and the monsters in Book

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40 Sidney, Defence of Poesie, p. 29.

One remain essentially projections of the inner psyche fashioned to image the evils that cause the spiritual down-fall of human beings. Error, Orgoglio [Pride], and Sin are shaped to embody the moral vices indicated by their names, and the wealth of detail with which they are delineated is pointed towards allegorical effect. Spenser makes very plain at times that the monsters are primarily concretions of moral abstractions. The serpent vomits out "bookes and papers" (i, 20), instruments that give rise to erroneous thought and action; the giant is quite literally inflated with a sense of self-esteem and, when decapitated, his huge frame collapses to appear no more substantial than "an emptie bladder" (viii, 24); while the Dragon, with his jaws that gape "like the griesly mouth of hell" (xi, 12), is the embodiment of the Satanic principle and is referred to even at the very start of the narrative as "that infernall feend" (i, 5). The shapes we see and the events in which they are involved have no distinct objective reality. They remain chiefly imaginative reconstructions of internal, psychological states of mind.

Though the monstrous shapes of these hideous creatures serve to portray in palpable form the intrinsically revolting and hostile aspect of evil, each figure projects a specific moral danger or vice to which human beings are prone. The monsters are carefully differentiated in terms of the individual threats they pose to the spiritual quest for holiness,
and each monster is delineated with special emphasis on those distinguishing features which best identify the character of the particular human weakness or spiritual menace it represents. Error is half-woman and half-serpent in shape. "The combination," as Virgil Whitaker notes, "is remarkably like that which proved too much for poor Adam in the Garden of Eden and is doubtless intended to suggest Red Cross's liability to error as a son of Adam."\textsuperscript{42} As Original Sin was engendered fundamentally by a seduction of the intellect with specious arguments, so Error is distinctly the materialization of subversive intellectual energies. Her figure realizes the spiritually destructive power of false doctrine as generally disseminated by the poisonous flow of "bookes and papers" (i, 20) which emerge from "her hellish sinke" (i, 22). Her "endlesse traine" (i, 18) is appropriately sufficient in itself to place the human "in great perplexitie" (i, 29) and constrain his will to action within the stranglehold of

\textsuperscript{42}"The Theological Structure of The Faerie Queene, Book I," ELH, XIX (1952), 155. A historical perspective on the use of this image is presented by Roland Mushat Frye in Milton's Imagery and the Visual Arts: Iconographic Tradition in the Epic Poems (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978). Frye notes: "In the late twelfth century, we encounter for the first time what was to become an immensely popular and persistent representation [of the devil]--the combination of a serpent's body with a woman's head or torso. . . . The first extant literary reference to it occurred in Peter Comestor's commentary on Genesis, where the Venerable Bede is credited with explaining the appearance of the serpent with a woman's face as a reflection of the appeal of like to like in the Temptation of Eve. . . . The serpent with a "lady visage" was vastly popular, so much so that it may be said to have dominated artistic conceptions of the Fall for three hundred years" (pp. 103-4).
its "wicked bands" (i, 29). Again, the evil generated by such treacherously misleading forms of error "full of filthie sin" (i, 24) is explicitly identified as being intellectual in nature. Errour, the "danger hid" (i, 12) which lurks within her "darksome hole" (i, 14), breeds "dreadfull doubts" about virtue (i, 12) as imaged in her "fruitfull cursed spawne" (i, 22) which, though incapable of inflicting bodily harm, yet incapacitate movement by the "noyance" of their numbers and "their murmurings" (i, 23). The action, moreover, demonstrates that the morally inhibiting power of Errour and her noxious progeny can be crushed only through conscious "faith" in God (i, 19), through resoluteness of mind as reinforced by an infusion of His divine force. It is only when Redcrosse

Resolv'd in minde all suddenly to win,  
Or soone to lose, before he once would lin;  
And strooke at her with more then manly force,  
That from her body full of filthie sin  
He raft her hatefull head without remorse.  

(i, 24—emphasis mine)

43 Roland Frye points out that there was a "long-standing tradition which visually associated insects with the devils" (p. 97). He observes: "Based in part upon the Biblical symbol of swarming locusts, this tradition developed in such a way as to include a broad range of stinging insects, sometimes seen as hornets, wasps, or bees, and sometimes as conglomerates of various insect forms. . . . [As] the illustrations continue through the Middle Ages various features are added, especially stinging tails" (p. 97). Redcrosse's difficulties when attacked by Errour's spawn, which crowds around him like a "cloud of combrous gnattes" (i, 23), is reflected in Milton's Paradise Regained where, as Frye remarks (p. 321), another "brief and genrelike image conveys the nagging persistence of Satan when Milton describes how "a swarm of flies in vintage-time, / About the wine-press where sweet must is poured, / Beat off, returns as oft with humming sound" (PR iv, 15-18)."
Where the serpent is the manifestation of perverted and perverting mental capacities whose activity is confined within the limits of a "hollow caue" (i, 11), the giant is rather the representation of free-ranging physical energies whose impellingly destructive power recognizes no worldly restraint. For this "Geant horrible and hye" (vii, 8) is carnality incarnate. His figure suggests the "deadly stowre" (vii, 12) or mortal peril occasioned by the influences of the World and the impulses of the Flesh, which can utterly overwhelm human beings and them "to dust . . . have battred quight" (vii, 14). Born directly of the "vncouth" Earth and "blustring" Wind "which through the world doth pas" (vii, 9), the giant is a "monstrous masse of earthly slime, / Puft vp with emptie wind, and fild with sinfull crime" (vii, 9). This "monstrous enimy" (vii, 8) is the incorporation in physical form of the natural, elemental forces from which he is generated, and his figure is rendered as a walking concentrate of uncontrolled and uncontrollable physical passion. His "mercilesse" might "could have ouerthrowne a stony towre" with a single blow (vii, 12), and his "huge force and insupportable mayne" (vii, 11) cannot be withstood by any mortal without the intervention of "heauenly grace, that did him blesse" (vii, 12).

In terms of the moral allegory developed in the action, moreover, the giant Orgoglio functions quite explicitly as the personification of that "foolish pride, / Or weakenesse" which makes the human "thrall" to "sinfull bands" (viii, 1).
The giant's name in itself provides a direct indication for the reading of his character as the embodiment of Pride, the very deadliest of the Seven Deadly Sins. Orgoglio, as S. K. Heninger notes, becomes "most immediately meaningful as the Italian word for "pride, disdaine, haughtines," closely related to Spanish orgullo and French orgueil." This extremely "haughtie" giant (vii, 16), whose predominant characteristic is his overweening self-conceit, and who acts always with arrogant fury and "high disdaine" (viii, 7), figures that sinful carnal pride which joys in worldly state and holds all else as unworthy of consideration:

So growen great through arrogant delight
Of th'high descent, whereof he was yborne,
And through presumption of his matchlesse might
All other powres and knighthood he did scorne.

(vii, 10)

The figure of Orgoglio, however, also images the strong sexual drives of human beings, the fleshly "weaknesse" to which mortals are all too susceptible. John Schroeder points out that "'pride' bore archaically among its meanings that of sexual excitement," and shows that Orgoglio is rendered in

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44 "The Orgoglio Episode in The Faerie Queene," ELH, XXVI (1959), 172. Heninger, however, does not subscribe to the commonly-held view of Orgoglio as the embodiment of pride, and suggests that the figure of the giant may be better seen as the "mythical embodiment of an earthquake" (p. 172).

the narrative as "the penis erectus." As Schroeder remarks, Spenser extends the nature of his moral allegory by exploiting the Elizabethan consciousness of "a resemblance between the proud man, puffed up with self-conceit, and the proud penis." This view of the giant as a representation of the phallus, as what Mark Rose calls "an ambulatory male member," comes through most clearly in the account of Orgoglio's death, which has distinctly sexual overtones:

But soone as breath out of his breast did pas,
That huge great body, which the Gyaunt bore,
Was vanisht quite, and of that monstrous mas
Was nothing left, but like an emptie bladder was.

(viii, 24)

As the distinct manifestation of pride and rampant male sexuality, Orgoglio demonstrates the "dreaded powre" (viii, 5) of that worldly evil which can quickly overwhelm the moral consciousness of human beings and leave them in "caytiue thrall" (vii, 19) to the "hatefull tyrannie" (viii, 2) of earthly influences and earthy desires.

The serpent and the giant, then, represent kinds of sin to which human beings are disposed. The Dragon, however, is the embodiment of Sin itself, the ultimate foe of the virtuous and the holy. As such, he is presented in the narrative as the conceptualized reconstruct of the Evil

48 Spenser's Art, p. 91.
Principality, of the Archenemy himself. The Dragon is that "damned feend" (xi, 35) and "euer damned beast" (xi, 49) who annihilates his "pitteous pray" (viii, 45) with his "deououring might" (viii, 44) and sends to eternal perdition all those who "for want of faith, or guilt of sin" (viii, 45) come within his pitiless grasp:

Dead was it sure, as sure as death in deed,  
What euer thing does touch his rauenous pawes,  
Or what within his reach he euer drawes.  
. . . his deepe deououring iawes  
Wide gaped, like the griesly mouth of hell,  
Through which into his darke abisse all rauin fell.  
(xii, 12)

The common association of the devil with fire and brimstone^49 is imaged in the Dragon's "most hideous head" (xi, 12), from which issues

A cloud of smoothinger smoke and sulphur seare  
Out of his stinking gorge ...  
That all the ayre about with smoke and stench did fill.  
(xii, 13)

Again, the Dragon's despoiling of a "happie land" (xi, 29) and his imprisonment of those who rightfully "all the world in their subjection held" (i, 5) shadow forth the actions of the Archfiend, who disrupted the abiding peace of Paradise and caused the ejection of mankind from the Garden into a world

^49 Roland Frye discusses another popular tradition of long standing, that of "the association of the devil with gunpowder and cannon" (p. 49). Interestingly enough, however, it is not the Dragon but the giant that is here rendered quite explicitly as the image of a cannon. The giant's force is likened to that of a "diuelish yron Engin wrought / In deepest Hell" (vii, 13), and the correspondence serves to heighten our perception of the monsters as being in themselves various aspects of the same Satanic power or principle.
subject to his might. The defeat of the Dragon, moreover, not only renders a vision of personal fulfillment as effected by an individual's triumph over the power of Sin, that "cruell cursed enemy" (viii, 44), but intimates the Scriptural prophecy of deliverance from the "mightie brasen wall" (viii, 44) of the natural world and the return to the golden age of pre-lapsarian perfection after the Satanic force is finally and eternally crushed out of existence.

As A. C. Hamilton observes, however, Spenser "labours to render the fiction in its own right," and the reader is well advised to "respect the primacy and integrity of the poem's literal level." Each of these monsters, like the creatures in Beowulf, has a definite physical stature and vitality of its own in keeping with its form and appearance, and each is presented in turn with increasing emphasis on its strength and power. Errorr, though quite dangerous when goaded into action, is the least impressive of the three and the most restricted in physical mobility. She is a creature of the darkness who lurks within her lair and attacks only when disturbed. Again, though she is half-woman and half-serpent, the stress within the narrative remains on her serpentine aspect and the effectiveness of her "huge long taile" (i, 15) in battle. The giant is a much more powerful adversary whose immense stature is matched by his immense

strength, and his "huge force and insupportable mayne" (vii, 11) make him, like Grendel or the Green Knight, well-nigh invincible in combat. The Dragon is the most dreadful creature of all. Like the awesome Wyrm in Beowulf, he holds dominion over both earth and air, and demolishes all opposition with his fearsome might and scorching flames.

Spenser's imagery clearly suggests how these adversaries are to be viewed. The description of Errour arouses horrified disgust rather than awe or fearful respect. The least powerful of the monsters is also the most repugnant in appearance. She, as well as everything related to her, exudes ugliness and filth. She is an "ugly monster . . . / Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine" (i, 14). She lies upon "durtie ground" (i, 15) which she defiles yet further by the "filthy parbreake" she spews forth from her "filthy maw" (i, 20). Her brood is "all ill faoured" (i, 15) and, like their dam, have "ugly monstrous shapes" (i, 21). Even her obviously powerful tail is explicitly referred to as being "hideous" (i, 16). As an adversary, Errour has no dignity at all, and the emphasis remains throughout on her unsightly and revolting physical characteristics.

Orgoglio, on the other hand, impresses with his size and strength. The imagery here is channelled towards describing his powers of action rather than his physical appearance. He is an "hideous Geant" but one so horrible and hye,

That with his talnesse seemd to threat the skye,
The ground eke groned vnder him for dread;
His liuing like saw neuer liuing eye,
Ne durst behold: his stature did exceed
The hight of three the tallest sonnes of mortall seed.
(vii, 8)

The giant is the only adversary that carries a weapon, "a snaggy Oke" forcibly uprooted from the "bowelles" of the earth and wielded in combat as a "mortall mace" (vii, 10). The nature of the weapon and the manner in which it is procured and handled, again, provide a clear indication of Orgoglio's physical might. Monster and club together indeed constitute a formidable combination. A single blow of this huge projectile as directed by the giant's "monstrous maine" (viii, 7) could have completely "ouerthrowne a stony towre" (vii, 12) for the strokes land with the annihilating force of Jove's thunderbolts (viii, 9). Orgoglio is in action as violently destructive as unleashed raw energy and, unlike the serpent, he inspires a real sense of dread as an adversary to be faces in battle.

Orgoglio's size and power, however, pale into insignificance as compared to those of the Dragon. Where the giant has the height of three tall men, the Dragon is as a "mountaine" (xi, 8), and where Orgoglio merely seems to threaten the skies, the Dragon actually does so:

. . . whenas him list the ayre to beat,
   And there by force vnwonted passage find,
   The cloudes before him fled for terrour great,
   And all the heauens stood still amazed with his threat.
(xi, 10)

It takes eight full stanzas (xi, 8-15) for the Dragon to be adequately described, and the martial imagery employed here
serves to extend our view of this creature as a veritable army in itself. The Dragon is indeed the ultimate foe. He is a monster which can scarcely be looked at without paralyzing dread, let alone be defeated in physical combat by human might or skill. More terrifying even than the sight of the Dragon's "wondrous greatnesse" (xi, 8) is a glance at his "most hideous head" (xi, 12) and his "deepe deuouring iawes" (xi, 12) with the "three ranckes of yron teeth enraunged" on each side

In which yet trickling bloud and gobbets raw
Of late deuoured bodies did appeare,
That sight thereof bred cold congealed feare:
Which to increase, and all atonce to kill,
A cloud of smoothening smoke and sulphur seare
Out of his stinking gorge forth stemmed still,
That all the ayre about with smoke and stench did fill.

(xi, 13)

The devastation wrought when the Dragon implements his "infernall fournace" is truly volcanic in proportions, for then appear

Huge flames, that dimmed all the heauens light,
Enrold in duskish smoke and brimstone blew;
As burning Aetna from his boyling stew
Doth belch out flames, and rockes in pieces broke,
And ragged ribs of mountaines molten new,
Enwrapt in coleblacke clouds and filthy smoke,
That all the land with stench, and heauen with horror choke.

(xi, 44)

The Dragon's body, moreover, is perfectly designed for the accomplishment of his vicious ends. It affords him the greatest protection against attack while it simultaneously enables him to inflict the greatest harm upon those who dare to oppose him. The "brasen scales" that cover his entire body form a "plated coate of steele" which cannot be penetrated
by "dint of sword, nor push of pointed speare" (xi, 10); his "huge long tayle" which "sweepeth all the land behind him farre, / And of three furlongs does but litle lacke" is not only a weapon in itself but is pointed with two "deadly sharpe" stings (xi, 11); while the piercing and tearing force of his "cruell rending clawes" is so overpoweringly lethal that "Dead was it sure . . . what within his reach he euer drawes" (xi, 12).

With regard to the physical action in which the monsters are involved, however, the Dragon is the least effectively rendered of the three. The extreme hyperbole with which he is presented as an overpowering and deadly foe cannot be reinforced or sustained within the bounds of the one-to-one combat which details his defeat and death. The hero's stature is built up here at a definite cost to that of the adversary. Instead of being squashed in seconds like an annoying insect, Redcrosse holds his own against this mountainous creature during two full days of fighting and inflicts severe injuries with a blade that is in relation to the monster's accredited bulk clearly no larger than a needle. Again, disconcertingly enough, while the Dragon suffers terrible physical mutilation during combat, the hero himself appears scarcely discommoded by the creature's apparently overwhelming might and power. The beast's hide, though "imperceable" (xi, 17), is pierced and torn open (xi, 20) even before Redcrosse's sword is "hardned" by the "secret vertue" of the Well of Life (xi, 36); the knight fights on
despite the "mortall sting" embedded in his shoulder (xi, 38) and proceeds with undiminished vigour to hack off the monster's tail and paw (xi, 39; 43); while even the volcanic outpouring of flames from the Dragon's "hellish entrailes," rather than burning the hero to a crisp, merely "forst him to retire / A little backward for his best defence" (xi, 45). Though described in minute detail as an indestructible and unconquerable enemy, the Dragon's force is not as crushing in action as it is made out to be, nor does his striking advantage in terms of physical size stand up in any way to the test of battle.

It is the giant rather than the Dragon that comes through in the action most forcefully as a powerful antagonist whose physical might is to be dreaded. This is due primarily to the fact that with respect to the giant Spenser does not merely state that "no mortall wight could euer beare ... [his] monstrous blow" (viii, 18), but he goes on to highlight the validity of this observation through the course of the action itself. The giant's physical force, so uncontrollable and unrestrained that it can dominate the very environment, is made apparent right from the start. His appearance in the narrative is heralded by

\[
\text{a dreadfull sownd,}
\text{Which through the wood loud bellowing, did rebownd,}
\text{That all the earth for terrour seemd to shake,}
\text{And trees did tremble.}
\]

(vii, 7)

Orgoglio is already in motion even as the hero perceives his danger, and the giant's advance has all the dire inevitability
of a juggernaut sweeping onto the field. His quick and easy victory over Redcrosse demonstrates most clearly the overwhelming nature of his "matchlesse might" (vii, 10):

The Geaunt strooke so maynly merciless,
That could haue ouerthrowne a stony towre,

But he was wary of that deadly stowre,
And lightly lept from vnderneath the blow:
Yet so exceeding was the villeins powre,
That with the wind it did him ouerthrow,
And all his scences stound, that still he lay full low.

(vii, 12)

Orgoglio's superiority in terms of physical strength and power is no less evident in the fight against Arthur. Even that "noble Pere" (viii, 7) does not attempt to deflect or parry the giant's blow but dodges the thrust, for "Ne shame he thoughout to shunne so hideous might" (viii, 8). Orgoglio throws his "dreadfull club" (viii, 7) with such force that as it lands on the ground, it

So deeply dinted in the driuen clay,
That three yardees deepe a furrow vp did throw:
The sad earth wounded with so sore assay,
Did grone full grievous vnderneath the blow,
And trembling with strange feare, did like an earthquake show.

(viii, 8)

Despite Arthur's courage and ability, he remains incapable of withstanding the giant's "monstrous maine" (viii, 7) through his own efforts. Though the Prince manages to cut off the creature's "left arme" (viii, 10), the sorely wounded giant strikes out again with such "furious rigour" that "to the ground it doubleth him [the champion] full low" (viii, 18). It is only the supernatural power of Arthur's magical shield that saves him from certain death by destroying the
force of Orgoglio, even as the monster stands with his "weapon huge" held high "For to haue slaine the man, that on the ground did lye" (viii, 19).

Interestingly enough, however, of the three monsters presented in the narrative as extremely dangerous physical adversaries, it is the Dragon alone which, like the Wyrm in Beowulf, retains its physical stature even in death. The serpent is certainly not a creature to be discounted or trifled with. She works with the deadly purpose of a boa constrictor, using her "huge long taile . . . in knots and many boughtes vpwound" (i, 15) to immobilize her victims and squeeze them to death, and Redcrosse is indeed hard pressed to withstand the monster. But the serpent remains more a loathsome creature than an awe-inspiring opponent, and she is given short shrift once she is slain. The focus shifts immediately to the "detestable sight" (i, 26) of her spawn greedily sucking up the "cole black bloud [that] forth gushed from her corse" (i, 24) until their "swolne bellies . . . with fulnesse burst" and they too reach their "well worthy end" (i, 26). The giant, huge and strong, falls on the ground with earth-shattering impact and shakes the "stedfast globe of earth, as it for feare did quake" (viii, 23). Orgoglio is indeed as disturbing to the environment in death as he is in life. The narrative dwells for a moment on the nature of this fall as analogous to that of "an aged tree" which is cut and lands "with fearefull drift" (viii, 22), or that of
"a Castle reared high" which is "vndermined from the lowest ground" (viii, 23). The awe generated at first, nevertheless, is immediately undercut with the direct reminder that this monster is a creature filled primarily "with emptie wind" (vii, 9). The giant indeed presents a rather ignominious figure at the end as his body deflates when decapitated like a punctured balloon, so "of that monstrous mas / Was nothing left, but like an emptie bladder was" (viii, 24). Only the Dragon is accorded a measure of the respect due a worthy adversary slain in battle. The emphasis here remains on the monster's physical might and grandeur:

So downe he fell, and forth his life did breath,
That vanish't into smoke and cloudes swift;
So downe he fell, that th'earth him vnderneath
Did grone, as feeble so great load to lift;
So downe he fell, as an huge rockie clift,
Whose false foundation waues haue washt away,
With dreadfu l poysie is from the mayneland riyf.
And rolling downe, great Neptune doth dismay;
So downe he fell, and like a heaped mountaine lay.

(xi, 54)

In death, the Dragon regains the stature undermined by the view of his figure in action. The hyperbole here serves directly to reinforce the awesome nature of Redcrosse's accomplishment and to augment the glory he has won thereby. The monster in fact continues to inspire fear and dread in others even as he lies still on the ground. The people of the liberated land, in the midst of their rejoicing, give him wide berth:

But when they came, where that dead Dragon lay,
Stretcht on the ground in monstrous large extent,
The sight with idle feare did them dismay,
Ne durst approch him nigh, to touch, or once assay.

(xii, 9)
The Dragon does not merit the respectful admiration bestowed upon the Wyrm. He is after all an evil creature, the "hell-bred beast" (xi, 40), and in terms of the Christian ethic that operates in the poem there is nothing admirable about this monster. But he is nonetheless presented in the heroic manner to a significant degree, and he receives in death less cursory and more dignified treatment than the other monsters.

Though presented in the narrative as separate creatures, each of whom must be slain in separate battles, the three monsters are obviously related aspects of the same diabolic force against which human beings must be ever on guard. It is at this point most informative to note that through the character of Duessa a direct link is forged between the monstrous and the human adversaries as being all of a kind. She is the most dangerous and the most "wylie" (xii, 32) of the opponents. Her "magicke might" (ii, 42) is more extensive than Archimago's "duelish arts" (ii, 9), and her "harmefull guile" (v, 18) is more difficult to deal with than "guilefull" Despair's "subtill tongue" (ix, 31). Her figure, however, is not only connected closely in the action with the monsters, but is in itself physically "monstruous" (ii, 41). Duessa's association with Orgoglio is plainly an active one, and this association extends from the bed to the battlefield. It is at her own suggestion that the giant takes her as his "Leman" (vii, 14), and it is of her own volition that in the fight against Arthur she comes to Orgoglio's aid mounted on her draconic steed, that "dreadfull Beast with
seuenfold head" (vii, 18). Her actual physical shape, moreover, clearly establishes her kinship with both Errour and the mighty Dragon. When stripped of her rich clothes and ornaments, Duessa stands exposed in her nakedness as being not fully human in form. She is a "filthy foule old woman" (ii, 40) whose "neather parts" are obviously bestial:

at her rompe she growing had behind
A foxes taile, with dong all fowly dight;
And eke her feete most monstrous were in sight;
For one of them was like an Eagles claw,
With griping talaunts armd to greedy fight,
The other like a Beares vneuen paw:
More vgly shape yet neuer liuving creature saw.

(viii, 48)

Duessa's real appearance, a conjunction of the haggish and the monstrous, distinctly reflects that of Errour, the "vgly monster" whose lower half is "like a serpent" but whose upper half does yet "womans shape retaine, / Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine" (i, 14). The unusual features of Duessa's anatomy, again, not only indicate her own crafty and rapacious disposition, but points directly to the great Dragon who is himself explicitly likened to "an Eagle" (xi, 9) with "cruell rending clawes"51 as well as "rauenous pawes" (xi, 12). The striking correspondence between the monsters and the "diuelish hag" (ii, 42), whose "subtill sleights" (vii, 50) must be contended with even after the

51 Roland Frye points out that right up to the seventeenth century "devils were more often represented with the taloned feet of harpies than with the cloven hooves which have in succeeding centuries become more popular" (p. 75).
Dragon lies slain, illuminates the generic similitude discernible in the antagonists as imaging various guises of the same fiendish power or agency that "workes ... wofull ruth" (ii, arg.).

Though Redcrosse's human opponents, like the monsters, are clearly identifiable as the representations of individual threats to the spiritual well-being of human beings, the action in which these figures are involved highlights the efficacy of a means other than the use of coercive force in effecting moral downfall. An open display of hostility and deadly intent like that of the fierce Saracen knights Sansfoy and Sansjoy, who indicate respectively the perils of Faithlessness and Joylessness (ii, 12; v, 38), is quickly quashed in physical conflict and brought to naught. A direct assault mounted by adversaries obviously lacking in the overwhelming physical might of the monsters can be quelled without undue difficulty by one who bears the "charmed shield, And eke enchaunted armes" (iv, 50) of the miles Christi. However, the devious approach of Archimago and Duessa, the representations of "Hypocrisie" (i, arg.) and "falshood" (ii, arg.) respectively, proves much more successful. These crafty opponents eschew the mode of frontal attack, and each works rather as a "secret ill, or hidden foe" (i, 49), to effect the misdirection and corruption of the individual's own natural intellectual and physical energies. Neither armour nor bodily strength is of much avail against the "subtile
trains" of Hypocrisy (xii, 36) or the "subtill sleights" of Falsehood (vii, 51) which poison the mind and infect the will to virtue, weaning the unsuspecting soul away from the path of righteousness onto "other bywaies" (vii, 50).

Spenser thus extends his treatment of the nature and power of Evil by giving us a view not only of its inherently revolting and overpowering force through the monsters, but also of its guileful cunning and misleading attractiveness through the more dangerous human adversaries. Redcrosse overcomes Error and Doubt when confronted by them in direct physical form. When his faith and strength of purpose are tested in more "subtill" ways by the seemingly harmless characters, however, the knight succumbs to the power of the enemy. Archimago initiates the hero's moral degeneration by causing the separation of the knight from his faithful companion Una. This "pure vsnpotted Maid" (vi, 46) functions in the narrative as the embodiment of that religious "Truth" (ii, arg.; viii, 1) which guides the human towards the achievement of his destined goal. The evil necromancer, who presents himself as an holy hermit "voyle of malice bad" (i,

52 Roland Frye comments on the "Christian understanding" of the nature of evil, pointing out that "the demonic is essentially hideous and destructive, but perennially appeals to a man under appearances which are both attractive and tempting" (p. 65). Spenser depicts these two aspects of evil through the monstrous and the human adversaries respectively. Nevertheless, the figure of Duessa can be taken in itself as a single image rendering the composite nature of the Satanic principle, an image which projects the tempting attractiveness as well as the soul-shattering destructive-ness of demonic evil.
29), sows doubts in Redcrosse's mind about the character of his lady by conjuring up "false shewes" (i, 46) that portray her as "a loose Leman to vile service bound" (i, 48). Completely deceived thereby, Redcrosse's "reason was with rage yblent" (ii, 5), and he forsakes Una under the erroneous belief that both she and her cause are unworthy of his service. This rejection of Truth at the intellectual level is followed almost immediately by a physical betrayal with the advent of Duessa, who "with her witchcraft and misseeming sweete, / Inueigled him to follow her desires vnmeete" (vii, 50). Still unwary and unsuspecting as to the nature of his foes, Redcrosse falls an easy victim to the spurious charms of Duessa, and he transfers his allegiance to her whom "his falsed fancy" perceives to be "the fairest wight, that liued yit" (ii, 30). Duessa's morally corrupting influence seduces the knight from the proper pursuit of holiness to the "carelesse" (vii, 7) enjoyment of worldly pleasure. This association culminates with Redcrosse's sinful indulgence in venery and leads directly to his imprisonment by the giant Orgoglio, the embodiment of carnal sin.

Redcrosse's encounter with Despair (ix, 33-54), which takes place immediately after his deliverance from the giant's tyranny and his reunion with Una, is of particular importance in demonstrating how utterly and completely human beings may be overcome by the "secret stealth" of "idle speach" (ix, 31). This time, significantly enough, the hero is no unwary and
unsuspecting dupe. Nor does the adversary present himself as other than he is. The knight here appears to hold both the psychological and physical advantage as, fully aware of the deadly nature of Despair's "cunning" persuasiveness (ix, 29), he confronts the "man of hell" (ix, 28). Redcrosse's "firie zeale" and "courage bold" (ix, 37), however, dissipate under the power of Despair's "suddeine wit" (ix, 41). Unable to confute Despair's theological sophistry or to refute the validity of his reproachful tirade, the hero turns "weake and fraile" (ix, 49):

The knight was much enmoued with his speach,
That as a swords point through his hart did perse,
And in his conscience made a secret breach,
Well knowing true all, that he did reherse,
And to his fresh remembrance did reuere
The ugly vew of his deformed crimes,
That all his manly powres it did disperse,
As he were charmed with inchaunted rimes,
That oftentimes he quakt, and fainted oftentimes.

(ix, 48)

Affected to the very depths of his being, Redcrosse stands defenceless before the enemy as "trembling horror did his conscience dant, / And hellish anguish did his soule assaile" (ix, 49). The "painted" picture of hellish torment shown him by Despair (ix, 49) comes as the final turn of the screw. So painfully is the knight now afflicted with the despairing consciousness of his own guilt and sin that "nought but death before his eyes he saw" (ix, 50). He accepts with hopeless resignation that "death was due to him, that had prouokt Gods ire" (ix, 50), and he "resolu'd to worke his finall smart" (ix, 51) with the knife that Despair helpfully
presses into his hand. Once again, Redcrosse is patently and adversely influenced by his opponent's "guilefull traine" (ix, 31). The "treachours art" (ix, 32) proves indeed too strong for the hero to withstand, let alone destroy. Rather than following through with his original intention of killing the villain, the hero is at the very point of killing himself. It is only Una's intervention that prevents the knight from carrying out his suicidal intentions. "Enraged rife" (ix, 52) at Redcrosse's despair of averting the dreadful doom decreed for all sinners, Una forcibly snatches away the "cursed knife" (ix, 52). With trenchant words, she brings the knight to the realization that the "righteous sentence of th' Almightyes law" (ix, 50) is yet tempered with "heauenly mercies," that God's "iustice" is offset by His "greater grace" which can efface the mark of sin (ix, 53). Shaken loose from the thrall of Despair by his companion, the hero departs "safe" (ix, 54) from that "cursed place" (ix, 53).

The Despair episode, which reveals Redcrosse most clearly as a "fraile, feeble, fleshly wight" (ix, 52), is also the last trial of moral strength in which the hero appears "weake and fraile" (ix, 49) when confronting the force of the enemy. In his next battle, the ultimate fight against the awesome Dragon, Redcrosse projects the confident courage and ability that is generated by his perfect faith in God and in His power to "quench the brond of hellish smart" (ix, 53). The transformation of Redcrosse from the "man of sin" (ix, 46) to the "man of God" (xi, 7), however,
does not take place immediately or spontaneously. It is rather the end-product of the entire regenerative phase of the hero's moral life as detailed in Cantos VIII-X. Redcrosse's moral regeneration is initiated with his release from bondage to carnal appetite by the working of heavenly grace (Orgoglio's defeat by Arthur), proceeds apace with the knight's agonized realization of his own "huge iniquitie" (ix, 47) and sinfulness (the Despair episode), and ends with that "soule-diseased knight" (x, 24) being cleansed and purged of his "Inward corruption, and infected sin" (x, 25) through heart-felt repentance and prayer (the sojourn at the House of Holiness). Only after his moral consciousness has been raised and his spiritual fibre strengthened by his education at the House of Holiness is Redcrosse cured of his "fraile infirmity" (x, 52). Only after having faced and overcome the effects of his own inward sin is Redcrosse ready to confront the outward threat of the Dragon of Sin and crush its destructive hold. The Redcrosse-Dragon confrontation, then, serves to establish the extent of the hero's moral growth and to display his achievement of the true heroic stature to which all human beings must aspire.

The narrative makes clear, however, that though the Dragon may be slain, the principle he embodies lives on. The struggle between active virtue and vicious evil is an unremitting conflict that finds no easy or permanent solution in this world. Even at the very end of Book One, we remain conscious of the fact that the knight's labours have not
ceased, for he must yet journey back to the court and serve the Faery Queen "in warlike wize, / Gainst that proud Paynim king" (xii, 18). Redcrosse will obviously be involved in more adventures and more battles. As he fought to attain virtue so must he fight to maintain it, for there is no such fulfillment in this life as brings rest to the miles Christi. It is indeed only after "labours long, and sad delay" that human beings may enjoy the "endlesse blis" ordained for them in the afterlife (x, 52). The betrothal ceremony that unites the figures of Redcrosse and Una, the Christian and his religious Truth, may then well be regarded as denoting the actual start of Redcrosse's life as the true Christian hero rather than as the triumphant conclusion of his entire earthly career.

The wider implications of the action here are thus analogous to those underlying the action of Beowulf. Despite the obvious and manifold differences in the two poems, there is a fundamental similarity in the heroic and the Christian world views. Both narratives view life as an incessant series of battles. The Christian hero, like the Germanic warrior, remains always in a state of war, for life itself is seen to be fraught with dangers, recurrent and unavoidable. The narratives make equally clear the impermanence of any resolution than an individual may achieve by his own efforts, as the successful conclusion of one battle or one quest in no way implies the end of the war itself. There is never any
indication in either work that the hostile forces have been routed in toto from the world. Beowulf may have slain his Dragon, but we are told explicitly that we have not seen the demise of the last evil creature or tyrannous power that will inflict itself upon society. So too in Book One. Duessa yet remains alive to work her "wicked arts, and wylie skill, / Too false and strong for earthly skill or might" (xii, 32), as does the evil Archimago who appears again in Book Two as Guyon's powerful antagonist. Moreover, in Book Six we learn of the giant Disdain who is "sib to great Orgoglio" (vii, 41), and about the Blatant Beast that "raungeth through the worlde againe" (xii, 40), a monstrous dragon with "yron teeth" and massive jaws "like the mouth of Orcus grisly grim" (xii, 24). As Hamilton points out, the Blatant Beast "realizes completely the Dragon figure of earlier books combined with that symbol of the enemy whom no force can defeat."53 And Book Six remains the last one written by Spenser of the twelve originally intended. The poem, as Isabel MacCaffrey observes, "ends on a peculiarly unhappy note" as though the poet had finally realized that "all restorations or recreations of golden worlds must be [invariably incomplete], until time ends."54 The stress remains here, as in Beowulf, on the ephemeral nature of the victory gained—which is no less glorious

54 Spenser's Allegory, p. 423.
because of that—in a world where the forces of good and evil are perpetually and irreconcilably in conflict. There is always another monster to confront, another battle to fight, for such is the ineluctable and unalterable pattern of life on earth.

*The Faerie Queene* may project a temper of spirit similar to that of *Beowulf*, but the cultural framework to which it appertains is nonetheless vastly different. Heroic song relates to an ethic of war within the external world, whereas Spenser's poem adheres to a tradition that postulates conflict within the human psyche. The epic bard focuses on "life's visible facts," whereas Spenser elucidates "the veiled truths of life."55 The societal ethos has changed with the passage of time, and an emphasis on moral quality has displaced the significance of physical heroism in determining human worth. Nevertheless, the Heroic Plot survives in literary tradition. It is the motif of the monster-fight that is yet incorporated here as the means of explicating the thematic intent. Belief in the physical existence of supernatural creatures such as giants and dragons may be dead, but with *The Faerie Queene* the Heroic Plot lives on in the human imagination.

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