

Slightly modified from publication in *Philological Quarterly* 70 (1991) U of Iowa.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: To Behead or Not to Behead—That is a Question

Sheri Ann Strite

The traditional reading of the exchange of blows in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a conventional "Beheading Game" is supported by a variety of surviving analogues in which a hero is challenged to chop off an adversary's head [1]. That there are a great many parallels between *Gawain* and these works suggests that the *Gawain*-poet drew upon the conventional "Beheading Game" for the Green Knight's challenge [2]. There is, however, a crucial difference between these analogues and *Gawain* upon which few critics have remarked: explicit in the terms of the challenge in each analogue is a stipulation that the hero decapitate his challenger. Not only is there no such requirement in *Gawain*, but the poet has gone to some length to make clear no such requirement is a condition for satisfying the Green Knight's challenge [3]. The poet may have framed the poem's exchange of blows episode using a well-known motif like the "Beheading Game," wishing to draw on readers' conventional responses. That does not mean, however, that the poet intended that the challenge be read as a conventional "Beheading Game."

[Not as published: When those features of the poem which support the traditional reading are considered in concert with the evidence that speaks against such a reading, it is more likely that what the poet intended was that the challenge be ambiguous—a possibility which is entirely consistent with many other features of this complex work and with the poem as a whole. Reading the challenge as an ambiguous one gives Gawain a choice in determining how he will meet the challenge, suggesting that Gawain is being tested by the choices he makes. Such a reading contributes significantly to the richness of the poem and thematically supports other episodes within the poem, most notably, "The Exchange of Winnings" and the "Temptation."]

In an episode which has been routinely categorized as a "Beheading Game," the Green Knight's challenge is remarkable for its absence of specific references to "beheading," particularly when we take into account the poem's insistence upon its characters' repeatedly enunciating the challenge's terms. The Green Knight's challenge is directly presented as an invitation to an exchange of blows, the emphasis for which is on "exchange:"

If any so hardy in this house holdes hymselfen,
Be so bolde in his blode, brayn in hys hed,
That dar stifly *strike a stroke for an other*,
I schal gif him of my gyft thys giserne rich,
This ax, that is hevy, innogh, to hondele as hym lykes,
And I schal bide the fyrst bur as bare as I sitte. (285-90) [4]

Three times the poem's characters repeat the challenge, and in no instance do the terms indicate that a beheading is the sole means, or even the expected or implied means, by which the challenge is to be satisfied. Immediately following his initial invitation, the Green Knight restates his terms: "...I schal stonde *hym a strok*, stif on this flet, / Elles thou wil dight me the dome to dele him *an other* ..." (294-5). Shortly thereafter, the Green Knight requests that Gawain repeat the terms of the challenge. Gawain says:

`In god fayth,' quoth the goode kny3t, `Gawayn I hat
That bede the *this buffet*, whatso befaller after,
And at this tyme twelmonyth take at the *an other*

With what weppen so thou wylt, and wyth no wye ellez
On live' (381-5)

Significantly, upon Gawain's reciting the terms of their agreement, the Green Knight affirms that Gawain has "...redily rehersed by resoun ful true / *Clanly al* the covaunant that I the kynge asked..." (392-3). The terms of the "covenant" as they are literally stated do not mention beheading: it is only by addressing what choice Gawain eventually makes and by comparing *Gawain* with its analogues that one can refer to the episode as a "Beheading Game."

That the language of the challenge is to be attended to literally is supported by the poem. The challenge, or "covenant" as the Green Knight calls it, is a contract, and, importantly, the poem shows concern for contracts, demonstrating attentiveness both to the language of contracts and to characters' meeting the express terms of contracts [5]. For example, during the "Exchange of Winnings," Bertilak questions how Gawain came by the kiss he has just given him as part of their bargain. Bertilak points out that the kiss "...may be such hit is the better, and ye me breve wolde / Where ye wan this ilk wele by wyt of yorselven" (1392-4). Gawain's immediate response illustrates his, and the poem's, attention to contract terms: "that was not forward..." Gawain states, "...ye have tan that yow tydes, trowe ye none other / ye mowe" (1396-7). The poet's obvious sensitivity to the literal nature of contract terms suggests that the Green Knight's challenge should be taken literally, and a careful literal reading must render the challenge far more ambiguous than that insisted upon by the traditional reading. The Green Knight's challenge is not a challenge to a "Beheading Game" as beheading is "not forward" [6] in the Green Knight's challenge nor in Gawain's recitation of the challenge.

The poem is also concerned with the obligations, or debts, created by contracts. This is significant because the "debt" the Green Knight "owes" Gawain in return for Gawain's blow is an indicator of how the challenge should be read. Prior to taking his stroke, Gawain is advised by the Green Knight that in accepting the challenge, Gawain should expect to "...foch the such wages / *as thou deles...*" (397). Immediately following his beheading, the Green Knight says, "I charge the, to fotte / Such a dint *as thou has dalt...*" (451-2). When the knight's turn comes to reciprocate, he says, "...have here thy pay" (2247) [7], which he ultimately follows with a blow, not a beheading. Just as is the case in the "Exchange of Winnings," what is central to the Green Knight's remarks concerning the debt created by the agreement and what is supported by his subsequent action is the equality of exchange, the adherence to the strict reciprocity of the contract's terms, and not the specific definition of the items or actions exchanged [8].

Importantly, the Green Knight follows his having nicked Gawain on the neck with a recapitulation of the debt owed to Gawain based on their original agreement. In this passage, the knight emphasizes blows owed and in no way suggests he owes Gawain a beheading. He says, "*I hyght the a stroke* and thou hit has, halde the wel payed" (2341). Gawain demonstrates his awareness that "beheading" is not insisted upon by the terms of their agreement when, after having "Hent hetterly his helme, and on his hed cast" (2317), he claims, "...bede me no mo! / *I have a stroke...*" (2322-3). What the Green Knight owed Gawain was a stroke, and Gawain knows it. The critics, alone, seem to expect an exchange of beheadings.

Possibly the strongest evidence that the Green Knight has challenged Gawain to a "Beheading Game" occurs when the knight seems to prepare himself for a beheading when with, "A littel lutte with the hed, the lyre he discoveres, / His long lovely lokkes he layd over his croun, / Let the naked nek to the note schewe" (418-20). Rather than being seen as conforming to the terms of his challenge, however, the knight's action can more satisfactorily be interpreted as *inviting* a particular conventional response from Gawain as a kind of test: given an open-ended challenge and an outward act that may be interpreted as inviting a specific response, how will Gawain choose to act?

Reading the Green Knight's action as an invitation is consistent with the open-ended nature of the challenge. It also satisfies the poem's tendency to set up conventional expectations and then disappoint them: the knight's gesture points to the poem's possible self-consciousness about its analogues and simultaneously underscores its deviations from them by not making "beheading" an express condition of the challenge. Further, it is consistent with other key episodes in the poem where Gawain is tested by being invited to act in specific ways which, if followed, will result in his failing the test. In the "Temptation" episode, the Lady invites Gawain to behave in a way that would betray his host. Just as the language of the knight's challenge is ambiguous, so too is the Lady's language in the bedroom, as evinced by the debate over the line, "ye ar welcom to my cors..." (1237). Just as the knight provides support by his actions for a specific interpretation of his words, so too does the Lady by how she dresses and by visiting Gawain while he is in bed. Thus, in a "temptation" constructed similarly to the Green Knight's, the Lady invites Gawain to read the situation she presents to him through her ambiguous language, directs his attention to a possible interpretation by her actions, and then encourages him to act upon his interpretation. Also parallel to the Green Knight's challenge is the "temptation" by the guide who invites Gawain to break his oath to the Green Knight. The guide too attempts his indirection of Gawain by both words and deeds. He encourages Gawain to flee and, when the guide, himself, is unwilling to go "one fote fyrrer," his actions serve as an example for Gawain when he spurs his horse on "...as hard as he myght, / Lepes him ouer the launde..." (2153-5). Thus, the poem's apparent concern with the potential for actions to influence other actions strongly supports reading the Green Knight's "lutte" and neck-baring as testing Gawain by inviting from him a specific response [9].

When we consider the poem's attentiveness to the literal nature of contracts along with the ambiguities surrounding the specific nature of the Green Knight's challenge and his subsequent actions, we may fairly conclude that the knight's challenge is ambiguous, alluding, but not conforming, to the conventional "Beheading Game." The careful statement and restatement of the open-ended terms of the challenge strongly indicate that it rests with Gawain to make a choice in determining *how* he will execute the terms of the agreement. A "stroke" is amenable to a wide range of definitions. It is up to Gawain to define and shape those terms by the actions he takes.

That Gawain is responsible for defining the terms of the challenge supports the idea that he is being tested by the choice he makes, and the poem works in several ways to ensure that Gawain, and Gawain alone, must read the situation before him when the Green Knight seemingly prepares himself for a decapitation. For example, there are instances in the challenge episode in which Gawain is invited by others to attend to how he manages the challenge, indicating, perhaps, the poem's acknowledgement that there is more than one way for Gawain to read the challenge. Arthur advises Gawain: "...if thou redes him right, redily I trowe / that thou schal bide the bur that he schal bede after" (373-74) [10]. The Green Knight says, "If I the telle truly, when I the tappe have / And thou me smothely has smyten, smartly I the teche / Of my house and my home and myn owen nome..." (406-8) [11]. It is of significance that each of these two statements is subject to a variety of meanings, demanding further interpretation on Gawain's part. Their inherently ambiguous nature places direct responsibility on Gawain for how he interprets the situation before him and how he chooses to act. Of further importance in establishing Gawain's responsibility in shaping the challenge is the fact that the Green Knight has not proposed a "jeu parti" in which Gawain can determine who strikes the first blow. In setting up the challenge so that Gawain is required to strike first, the poem places Gawain in a situation in which he must make a choice in how he meets the challenge: he cannot defer the decisive act to his opponent. By his actions, Gawain demonstrates his reading of the situation: when the Green Knight bares his neck, Gawain responds in accordance with romance conventions and chops off the knight's head.

There is a problem central to reading the challenge as an ambiguous one, however, and that is whether Gawain truly has any reasonable choice at all but to attempt to strike off the knight's head

once he has accepted the challenge. Should Gawain not attempt to kill the knight? If Gawain agrees to the challenge and doesn't kill the knight, isn't his own life at risk by having agreed to take a return blow? Certainly, the poem raises doubts that the challenge should have been accepted at all. Arthur, himself, calls the challenge "nys" (323) and says it is "foly" (324). The poem also implies criticism of Gawain's decision to accept the challenge on a couple of occasions: once when the narrator suggests it was accepted because the Knights of the Round Table were drunk (495-8); and, again when the knights criticize Arthur for having allowed Gawain to take on the challenge (673-81). The challenge, however, is accepted, and once accepted, the challenge must be met.

In considering alternative actions available to Gawain, it is worthwhile to give consideration to the different value systems offered in the poem: chivalry and Christianity. In the context of romance conventions, Gawain's actions are perfectly appropriate: one knight makes a challenge, another accepts it. In conventional romance, as in Arthur's court, the ritual outcome is a one-to-one correspondence—"lif for lif" (98), as the poem says. However, reading the challenge and Gawain's response to it solely as a romance convention ignores a major concern of the poem for Christian ideals and how those ideals are upheld by Gawain. Significantly, the Green Knight's challenge to Gawain comes during the Christmas season, directly setting the challenge into a Christian framework. Gawain's actions must, therefore, be considered in this light.

The poem presents several suggestions that romance ideals may, at times, be out of concordance with the Christian ideals offered in the poem. "Bretayn" is the home of "Bold bredden...baret that loveden" (20-1), and yet, the poem tells us, on Christmas night "a burde was borne oure baret to quelle" (752). Derek W. Hughes points out that "Christmas is an opportunity for parodies of the Church service and for a homicidal game which, in the most violent inversion of Christianity in the poem, contrasts utterly with the implications of line 752..." [12] Furthermore, conventional views of the one-to-one correspondence of strict justice that the phrase "lif for lyf" evokes would never have produced the Incarnation, the significance of which figures so importantly at the poem's close [13]. Gawain's response to the Green Knight's challenge is in accord with the violent romance conventions of the poem which are placed in opposition with the poem's Christian ideals. Therefore, Gawain's actions can, within the context of the poem, be read as being in opposition to Christian action. This suggests that a Christian response may be available to Gawain as an alternative.

Importantly, the poem, itself, points to a specific alternate action Gawain could have taken which is decidedly Christian. Ironically, that alternative comes from the Green Knight, a possibly pagan, vegetative monster described as "a mon methles and mercy non uses" (2106), who takes a merciful stroke at Gawain. In contrast, Gawain, the ideal Christian knight, never appears to consider such a response—he operates *solely* from romance conventions [14]. This limited ability to read his circumstances [15] and his resulting inability to perceive other possibilities for action, indeed possibilities in keeping with the highest values posited in the poem, point to a failure on Gawain's part [16]. It is a failure which could have cost him his life, if not his very soul, for, once Gawain has beheaded the Green Knight, the stroke due Gawain could legitimately and unambiguously be defined by the Green Knight as a beheading stroke [17]. Therefore, in the literally ambiguous nature of the challenge, Gawain is responsible for defining the exact terms, the nature, of his own test: as Gawain chooses to sow, so Gawain should expect to "foch...such wages / As [he] deles..." (397). It is reasonable to expect, then, that had Gawain been a more attentive reader to certain underlying cues, he could have legitimately seen, as an alternative, that a merciful stroke might have warranted a merciful stroke in return (and would have been a more appropriate choice for a Christmas game). Whether Gawain could *expect* a merciful blow in return is another question entirely, but in delivering a merciful stroke Gawain would have acted in accord with the poem's Christian values, and he would have acted courageously in upholding and demonstrating those values of which he is purportedly a defender. That the challenge is expressed in ambiguous terms is truly what creates Gawain's test: having accepted the challenge,

Gawain is free to choose his next act, and through his choice he reveals with which set of values he is aligned.

As pointed out before, the test Gawain undergoes as a result of his temptation by the Lady appears to work together with the Green Knight's challenge in support of the notion that Gawain is tested by the choices he makes; therefore, it is of interest to compare both similarities and differences in these two episodes. Gawain accepts the knight's challenge and, in having done so, he is then required to make a choice which reveals something about his character. Having accepted the girdle, Gawain is again required to make a revealing choice. The problems posed by the two situations are very different, however. The knight's challenge is structured so that it gives Gawain freedom in interpreting the challenge and in deciding the choice of action he takes. In eliciting Gawain's agreement that he will not reveal the girdle, the Lady creates a conflict of choice for Gawain that eliminates any such ambiguity: because concealing the girdle is literally opposed to the terms of the "Exchange of Winnings" pact, Gawain cannot keep faith both with the Lord and with the Lady. Gawain, therefore, fails not only when he is faced with an indirect test, as is the case in the instance of the knight's challenge, he fails even when faced with a direct test in which his choice of action should be clear. Gawain is shamed when his decision to retain the girdle is revealed to him by the Green Knight. That this occurs at the same time that Bertilak states he is satisfied at his having returned his stroke might well point to a link between the two episodes, possibly serving as one more indication that the knight's challenge is a test of Gawain's choices.

In making the challenge an ambiguous one, the poem gives Gawain freedom to act but, at the same time, the poem seems to point to the extraordinary difficulty in making choices when human perspective is inherently limited and is further narrowed by our interpretations which we may find affected by such influences as the individuals around us or societal conventions. The poem suggests, however, that despite these obstacles to our judgment, we bear personal responsibility for our actions, and we should attend to our actions as they shape our destiny [18]. The narrator says:

Now thenk wel, Sir Gawayn,
For wothe that thou ne wonde
This aventure for to frayn
That thou has tan on honde. (486-90)

That Gawain is responsible for his own test and a shaper of his destiny creates significant irony in that Gawain fails the "Exchange of Winnings" test because of his instinct for self-preservation (2368), an instinct consistent with that which led Gawain to chop off the Green Knight's head in the first place [19]. Importantly, the threat of Gawain's own death is the direct result of the definition *he* gave to the contract, not of its terms as enunciated by the Green Knight. It is by trying to take the life of the knight in the first place that Gawain is put at risk for his own. It is by the application of Christian values that Gawain is "saved," not by following his own instincts for self-preservation.

Thus, the poem moves from Gawain's violent action in responding to the challenge to the Green Knight's merciful stroke at its conclusion, creating a sense of movement in the poem from romance values toward the poem's Christian values which are obscured at the poem's beginning and so prominent at its end where we are reminded of the true significance of the incarnation in which "[Christ]...that bere the croun of thorne, / ...bryng us to his blysse" (2529-30). Did the poet intend that Gawain's choice of action be seen as pointing to the inadequacy and falseness of the values of Arthur's court? Certainly, a major Christian precept, "The Golden Rule," has been violated by the court. Also, in a court that values the valor of conventional romance over and above Christian ideals of mercy, it seems of no little significance that Gawain's apparent courage in having accepted the Green Knight's challenge is seriously undercut both by his having been given the first blow by the knight and, later, by his cowardice when he accepts and retains the girdle. Therefore, as the structure of the poem has a

circularity to it, it seems appropriate to revisit the poem, carrying forward its movement toward Christian precepts: in doing so, a re-reading of the values of the court delivers grim ironic force to the words "lif for lif."

What all this points to is that the challenge to the "Exchange of Blows" in I should not be taken for a simple convention of medieval romance. Rather, it should be appreciated as being yet one more complex and ambiguous aspect of this remarkable work and, like the "greenness" of the Green Knight, should be explored for the possible meanings of the poem it may suggest or support. A reading of this poem that presents Gawain with a choice in determining what kind of blow he may strike in accepting the knight's challenge contributes greatly to the possibilities for interpretation it offers. It also ties in with and supports other key elements of the poem, and adds to varying critical interpretations. Much of the strength of poetry lies in its suggestive power. In remarking on the "striking freedom of choice [this poem] grants us," A. C. Spearing says:

In telling of this adventure of Gawain's, the poet has given us a richly suggestive concretion of material. That material does not fall of itself into a single pattern of organization and significance, but into a number of alternative patterns. The choice and the adjustment are ours [20].

The Green Knight's challenge read as an ambiguous one gives us yet one more choice. As it was for Gawain, the choice is a crucial one.

University of Washington

NOTES

1. The traditionally accepted analogues for the "Beheading Game" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are listed and translated in *From Cuchulainn to Gawain: Sources and Analogues of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, selected and trans. Elisabeth Brewer (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973).
2. Parallels have been demonstrated by such critics as Larry D. Benson in *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Rutgers U Press, 1965) 57-95; Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (U of Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 7-13; and, G. L. Kittredge, *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight* (Harvard U Press, 1916) 9.
3. Victoria L. Weiss, in "Gawain's First Failure: The Beheading Scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1976): 361-6, disagrees with critics who "...read the Green Knight's challenge for someone to exchange blows with him as if he were asking someone to chop his head off in exchange for the privilege of doing the same," and argues that "Gawain's aggressive response to the stranger's challenge provides an important clue to the development of the hero's character in [the] poem" (361). Ross G. Arthur states, in "A Head for a Head: A Testamental Template for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *Florilegium* 6 (1984): 178-94, "...it seems to be up to Gawain as to how hard or how deadly a blow he strikes so that his decision to decapitate his visitor is questionable" (184). Weiss points out (361) that "As early as 1888 Gaston Paris noted that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* differed from its earlier analogues in that the stranger's challenge is presented only as an exchange of blows rather than as an invitation to chop off his head...Paris found his observation significant only in so far as it allowed him to argue in favor of a lost French source for the poem" (Gaston Paris, "Roman en vers du cycle de la table Ronde," *Histoire Litteraire de la France*, 30 (1888): 76-7).

4. Excepting quotations in footnotes, all quotations of the poem are taken from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. A. Burrow (London: Penguin, 1972, Yale U Press, 1982). All italics are mine.
5. Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, in "Medieval Contracts and Covenants: The Legal Coloring of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Neophilologus* 68 (1984): 598-610, provide an analysis of how the Green Knight's challenge is in conformance to medieval contract law.
6. Blanch and Wasserman point out that in medieval contract law the word "forward" refers to the "enforceable part of the contract" (601).
7. Blanch and Wasserman state that "pay" refers to "...the remuneration offered in a debt contract" (606); thus, the Green Knight is making it explicit that he is about to fulfill the terms of his agreement with Gawain.
8. Ross G. Arthur, too, points to the poem's emphasis on reciprocity (184).
9. The Green Knight's preparation for the blow is worth further consideration as invitation, or "temptation," in light of the ambiguous nature of the Green Knight, whose color suggests, among other possibilities, the Devil (Benson 91).
10. Basing her interpretation of the word, "redes" or "redez," on the *OED* definitions, ('to bring, deliver' or 'to direct [oneself] to a place'), Weiss says, "There is a suggestion here that Gawain is free to choose how he will wield the ax, and a hint that there may be more to the acceptance of the challenge than simply demonstrating one's strength" (364). Ross G. Arthur says that King Arthur's "...suggestion [is] that if Gawain strikes in the proper manner, he will not have any trouble with the return blow" (184). Elizabeth Simmons-O'Neill, in "Reader and Audience in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (Paper delivered at the Medieval Association of the Pacific 1989), interprets "redez" as "reads," identifying King Arthur as a "reader" of the challenge. King Arthur's statement may simply mean, "Do a good job," and its conclusion may be an intentionally ironic one meaning, "If you do a good job, you'll manage the return blow all right—there won't be one." Another definition of "redez" in the *MED* is "to make red with blood," which could be interpreted to mean that King Arthur is saying Gawain should make the knight bloody. Thus, King Arthur's advice to Gawain is highly ambiguous.
11. Ross G. Arthur suggests that this is "...a hint of what is to come ..." (184), and Weiss asks, "If Gawain assumes 'smothely... smyten' to mean a death blow, then how would it be possible for the Green Knight to identify himself after the blow has been delivered" (364)? M. Vaughan has suggested to me that as "spende" (410) is an active verb, it would seem to indicate that the Green Knight will be alive after the blow and may elect not to speak. Such a reading would imply that if Gawain takes a merciful stroke at the knight, the knight may remain silent, thereby releasing Gawain from the debt due the Green Knight in return. Blanch and Wasserman read this speech as one which establishes a conditional for meeting the contract (602). They describe this language as "part of a 'formal agreement'...If the Knight reveals 'trwly' (406) his name and the location of his home, then Gawain is enjoined to keep the 'forwardez' (409)." Therefore, this speech, too, can be seen as ambiguous.
12. Derek W. Hughes, "The Problem of Reality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40 (1971): 225.
13. Ross G. Arthur says "The phrase 'lif for lyf' does no more than hint at the rule of law, since in this case it refers to a risky encounter in which one man bets his life against another's, not an equal recompense for loss" (183). However, in that his article addresses Old Testament justice,

I believe Arthur would agree that while "lif for lyf" may only be a hint, it is a "hint" in literal terms only: the phrase, in fact, is a powerful allusion to Old Testament values.

14. Ironically, included in the catalogue of the virtues attributable to the Pentangle Knight is "pit," (654); however, there is no apparent demonstration of Gawain's pity or genuine piety at any time in the poem.
15. Simmons-O'Neill supports the notion that Gawain is a limited reader, citing Gawain's univocal reading of the pentangle and his misogynist tirade as examples. Also supporting this idea are the descriptive techniques used in the poem as analyzed by Benson. Benson points out how, "Once Gawain enters the poem, the viewpoint is narrowed...In such scenes we share rather than judge Gawain's experience" (187 and 193). He goes on to state that "...shifts in the dramatic viewpoint, which remind us that Gawain has judged experience only from its outward appearance, lend metaphoric force to the narrative technique, linking it with the theme of appearance and reality that hovers over the entire poem" (197). Considering this, it might appear that the poet wished to implicate us by our responses to Gawain's actions. If we "read" the challenge as a conventional "Beheading Game," is it not the case that we too are judging the challenge from its outward appearance and ignoring the internal content, the "reality," of the challenge itself?
16. In arguing against a reading that Gawain has "failed" by having beheaded the knight, one could point out that Gawain is never directly criticized in the poem for chopping off the Green Knight's head. This poem is curious, however, in its selectivity of those instances in which it directly or even implicitly offers criticism. There is overt criticism over acceptance of the challenge and Gawain's acceptance of the girdle. The poem does not criticize, however, Gawain's confession, the questionable behavior of characters during the church service at Bertilak's castle, or Gawain's displacement of responsibility in his having accepted and retained the girdle. This supports the legitimacy of interpreting a failure in the poem without the poem's providing supporting critical commentary.
17. Although Ross G. Arthur supports the notion that the challenge insists upon "exact equivalence," "a stroke for a stroke" (184), he agrees that "The Green Knight would be completely within his rights under the covenant to decapitate Gawain in turn..." (187).
18. W. R. J. Barron, in *Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered* (Manchester U Press, 1980), points out that free will and taking responsibility for one's actions was a contemporary concern: "The echo of Adam's accusation against Eve and his inclusion amongst the deluded patriarchs typifies the confused logic of Gawain's argument, since for the medieval moralists Adam was the type of those who, by blaming others for misleading them, attempt to throw their sin upon God and their lack of free will" (130).
19. This also suggests yet another link between the challenge and the "Exchange of Winnings."
20. A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge U Press, 1970) 236.

The author wishes to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of M. Vaughan and C. Galusha in preparing this paper.