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Gawain's Departure from the *Peregrinatio*

Sidney E. Berger

The journey that Gawain takes from Arthur's court to Bertilak's castle, then to the Green Chapel, and back to Arthur's court clearly fits the pattern of a medieval *peregrinatio*. Writers of the Middle Ages used the *peregrinatio* or pilgrimage to describe spiritual progress through a worldly metaphor. The motif is used by Dante in the *Divine Comedy* (where the narrator, on his "journey through life," is diverted from the earthly world to a pilgrimage through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise); and Chaucer uses it in the movement of his pilgrimage from London to Canterbury. Dante's journey to Beatrice and Chaucer's from the sinful Tabard Inn to the tomb of St. Thomas Beckett a place where the pilgrims can receive absolution for their sins obviously represent spiritual as well as literal movements in the traditional *peregrinatio*. The *Gawain*-Poet, clearly familiar with the tradition of *peregrinatio* as we can see by his use of it in *Pearl*, uses it here not to demonstrate his hero's movement toward spiritual perfection (which was traditionally the aim of the itinerant), but rather to parody the notion of the possibility of such progress. Gawain is supposedly the purest of Arthur's knights, yet his preoccupation with Christian doctrine and with Mary (both shown in the device on his shield and in his frequent Christian prayers) is undercut by his more urgent concerns retaining his life and his worldly reputation. In the *Gawain*-Poet's handling of the *peregrinatio* motif, Gawain falls

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short of his reputation as a faultless knight and fails in the goal of his journey. Yet as he comes less to embody knightly ideals, he becomes more individual and finally can represent, if anything, only a picture of a solitary human being in a difficult world.

In the disjunction between the conventions of the *peregrinatio* and the actual events of Gawain's journey is revealed a shift away from the pilgrimage fable towards realism, a movement also discernable (as Sacvan Bercovitch shows¹) in the romance elements of the poem.

It will be useful here to sketch briefly the traits and various ramifications of the *peregrinatio* motif in the Middle Ages. Though the motif was used literally, it was more often described in moral terms. Every man's life is a journey from birth to death, from the temptations of the world to one's symbolic reward, from a bodily to a spiritual existence, from sin to salvation (or damnation). Every encounter, day, or decision in a person's life marked another step on the journey. A person faced temptations of the world, the flesh, and the Devil, and he succeeded or failed depending on how well how charitably (in the Christian sense) he met these tests. His success hinged on his ability to choose between the paths of good and evil; this strong emphasis on choice (rather than on fate or chance) shows that the pilgrim's free will leaves his fate solely in his own hands.

The pilgrimage was fraught with dangers throughout, and only through one's maturation, one's coming to spiritual awareness

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and a full understanding of faith, hope, and charity, would one survive the journey. Survival was a spiritual concept, and it depended on one's innermost thoughts, apprehensions, and beliefs. Often a person needed help on his journey from an intercessor a priest, pardoner, or guide, for example and he had to go through a variety of rituals to be successful. Among the rituals were confession, communion, and extreme unction (the three last rites). In fact, the *peregrinatio* entailed a good deal of ritual, for the proper observance of ritual was one of the pilgrim's tests.

Some other traits of the *peregrinatio* are that it is essentially an individual journey; that is, one must take it alone, as Everyman learns. It takes place not only over a spiritual landscape with a movement through space, but it occurs in a temporal world as the pilgrim moves through time. And it is renewing and cyclic. That is why two of the most common temporal symbols of this journey are the changing of the seasons and the movement from one year to the next. In such a temporal movement, human transitoriness is emphasized. Hence, one of the medieval contributions to

the *carpe diem* theme was not "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" (which was how some intentionally misrepresented the idea in order to justify immorality), but since our lives are so fragile, we must always prepare ourselves spiritually for death. Everyman learns this when he says, "O Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind" (119), and he must subsequently get his books in order for the final auditor. Every pilgrimage was difficult, and the traveler often sought

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refuge or harbor, all the while being asked to recognize his spiritual responsibilities, to remain humble, to be contrite, to be aware of his sins, to seek confession, to do penance, and to think foremost on the condition of his soul rather than on his body. Further, the pilgrim was warned that even those traits which may be praiseworthy and spiritually defensible in one situation may be sinful in another. For example, feasting, fellowship, and mirth were within a person's moral bounds, but carried to excess, especially when the person should be contrite, somber, or spiritual, these were sins as damaging to the soul as were the outright sins of lechery or avarice.

The *Gawain*-Poet frequently shows his awareness of the features of the *peregrinatio*, and he uses them often in his poem. He mentions a journey in the opening frame of the story, in which we see Felix Brutus travelling to Britain to establish an *order*, a country "wyth wynne" (13-15).² Though the aim of his journey is to establish order with joy, the poet himself mentions how unsuccessful this attempt is when he says a few lines later, "Where werre and wrake and wonder/ Bi syþes hatz wond þerinne, ! And oft boþe blysse and blunder / Ful skete hatz skytfeð synne" ("Where war and distress and marvels / At times lived therein, / And often both bliss and blunder [turmoil, trouble] / Quite swiftly have alternated since," 16-19) That is, the journeys do not always turn out successfully.³ This provides an important context for the journey that Gawain must take later in the work.

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The poem opens on New Year's day, the traditional symbol of the beginning of a journey. And rather than end on New Year's Eve, the poem's action moves into the new year,⁴ symbolic of the cyclic nature of the events the poem depicts. New Year's day has two symbolic interpretations for readers in the Middle Ages. First, it is a religious holiday, the Feast of the Circumcision,⁵ a holiday marking the first ritual a person goes through in his spiritual cleansing. Second, it is the day of the *festum subdiaconorum* or "Feast of Fools."⁶ The double meaning of New Year's day juxtaposes ritual purity with the innocence or ignorance of inexperience, pointing up a tension in the poem between the demands of the *peregrinatio* and the idiosyncratic moments in Gawain's own growth.

To underscore that Gawain will be on a journey, the Green Knight tells him that he (Gawain) must "seche me þiself" ("seek me yourself," 395). This emphasizes two essential elements of the *peregrinatio*. First, the journey is a seeking, a looking for truth. And second, "þiself" makes it clear that Gawain will be by himself alone. As I have mentioned, every man's journey is necessarily solitary. Further, the Green Knight's words more fully are: "seche me þiself, where-so þou hopes I may be funde vpon folde and foche þe such wages / As þou deles me to-day ..." ("seek me yourself, wherever you hope / I may be found on earth, and fetch such wages / As you deal me today," 395-397). The religious messages here all part of the *peregrinatio* are perfectly spelled out: It will be a seeking; it entails *hope*; the search must be done in the world; and the wages he will

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fetch will be symbolically retributed depending on his actions *today* with the Green Knight. All moral pilgrimages end in symbolic retribution, and that is exactly what the Green Knight suggests here. Yet when Gawain promises to keep his end of the bargain, he says, "I schal ware alle my wyt to tynne me þeder" ("I shall use all my wits to find my way there," 402). It is notable that Gawain intends to rely on his wits his human powers rather than on his religious faith. All along the journey Gawain's actions will draw him towards earthly reality, even within the context of the *peregrinatio*.

One of Gawain's attitudes is succinctly expressed in one of the poem's wheels when the narrator says that Gawain pondered "Of his anious uyage" ("About his troublesome [anxious] voyage," 535). Gawain is in the right frame of mind: he is worried about the trouble he must encounter on his "voyage." But his worry does not stop him from making some mistakes. For example, his keeping of the girdle is dangerous, and his heavily arming to meet the Green

Knight at his Chapel is not in accord with the bargain he struck. The Green Knight even tells him that he (the Green Knight) came unarmed to Arthur's court, and he expects Gawain to come similarly unarmed to the Green Chapel (see 265-271, 448). Such breaches in his pact are caused by his fear of losing his (physical) life, not the attitude a moral wayfarer should have. These examples are representative of the shift away from the conventions of the *peregrinatio* and toward a realism depicting Gawain preoccupied with strictly human concerns.

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When Gawain is leaving Arthur's court to seek the Green Knight, his goodbye captures the dual quality of the spiritual and temporal *peregrinatio*. The poet says, "He gef hem alle goud day, He wende for euermore" ("He gave them all good day, He believed for evermore," 668-669). The phrase "for evermore" rings with the *peregrinatio* spirit, but Gawain may be thinking simply that he will die, a distinct movement away from the journey convention.

At the opening of the passage about Gawain's actual journey from Arthur's court to the court of Bertilak, the narrator says,

He made non abode,

bot wy3tly went hys way;

Mony wylsum way he rode. (687-689)

("He made no stop, But quickly went his way; / Many a bewildering way he rode.") Haste on one's journey is not always safe, especially in a terrain which is *wylsum* (which leads one astray). The *peregrinatio* motif is clear here: the path of life often leads one astray, as Dante says in the opening lines of his *commedia*. And the debate about the actual route that Gawain took⁸ is really irrelevant since the poem aims at showing Gawain on a journey which leads him he knows not where typical of the spiritual view of the *peregrinatio*. This is what the poet suggests when he says that Gawain goes "on Goddez halue" and that he (Gawain) does not take this to be a game (692). And that, like Everyman, he must go "leudlez" ("companionless," 693)

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suggest the possibility of a symbolic reading. The passage also brings up other characteristics of the spiritual *peregrinatio*. He must proceed through woods and hills (695) that is, highs and lows with no man but God on the road to speak with (696); he enters a wilderness (Wirral, 701); he finds himself in strange roads (710) where his mood will change often (711); and that he must ride far from his friends, as a stranger (714), recalls Everyman's journey. Like Dante, Gawain meets beasts; but they are representative of the "beasts" of the world he must defeat on his journey. We see that he would have fallen had he not served God (724-725). And the mention of the frozen land (727 ff.) he must go through is reminiscent of the frozen lake Dante must pass in the *Inferno*. Topographically this is a classical *peregrinatio*. Finally, his prayer for harbor (750 ff.) is answered as soon as he signs himself three times. Symbolically, one is at a safe place a place of harbor for the soul when one prays sincerely to God. But his prayer is for physical comfort only.

When Gawain is discussing with his host what his own plans are concerning the Green Knight, he says that he wants to look on the Green Knight, God willing, more eagerly by God's son than wield any goods. That is, he would rather keep his word than have any worldly wealth (1063-1064). Such sentiment is what Everyman learns after Goods has forsaken him; it is an essential point for the pilgrim to understand, that worldly properties are futile and that one should be more concerned with the spiritual. Gawain's words are right here, but he seems to forget the sentiment when he

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keeps the girdle later in the poem. He even concludes his expression of this sentiment by adding, "nar I now to busy bot bare pre dayez, And me als fayn to falle feye as fayly of myn ernde" ("I now have barely three days to be active [i.e. to get to the Green Chapel], / And I would rather be doomed to death than fail in my mission," 1066-1067). His words would be correct for a *peregrinatio* if he were thinking in that direction. But again, Gawain is more practical; he refers more immediately to success in his encounter with the Green Knight. He is concerned with staying alive and

upholding the reputation of the Round Table.

The relationship between the journey motif and the hunts is too complex to deal with here. Simply, however, the hunt is a quest, symbolic of the seeking for a goal that a pilgrim must do. A few features of the interwoven hunt and bedroom scenes, however, may be instructive in showing how Gawain perceives his duties in his own wayfaring. One of Gawain's more peculiar actions is his pretending to be asleep when Bertilak's wife enters the room during the first hunt (1189-1195). Realistically, it is ridiculous of him to think that feigning sleep will help him avoid an encounter with her. Symbolically, sleeping is what people on their journey in life are warned against; one must always be awake to the temptations of the Devil. And as we see later, Bertilak's wife was sent by her husband specifically as a temptation a test (2358-2362); Bertilak says, "I sende hir to asay þe" (2362). Bertilak has been identified with the Devil by many readers, and even Gawain himself suggested this in his assessment of the Green Chapel (2185-2188).

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So sleeping is what a pilgrim must not do; and feigned sleeping is even worse since as sleeping it makes one vulnerable to sin, and as feigning it is sin outright deceit.

After the kisses Gawain receives on the first two mornings, he immediately goes to mass (1311 ff., 1558 ff.). Each little sin of accepting a kiss is followed directly by a confession. This is as it should be, for Gawain knows that the kisses though correct by courtly standard in keeping his manners with his host are not correct by religious standards in that they are signs of accepting physical pleasure; and since they are with a married woman, they are the early acts of adultery. Yet on the third morning, when the woman leaves him just after they share three kisses he hides the girdle, then he goes to confession and asks for a good life. Here is the passage in full:

When ho watz gon, Sir Gawayn gerez hym sone,

Rises and riches hym in araye noble,

Lays vp þe luf-lace þe lady hym ra3t,

Hid hit ful holdely, þer he hit eft fonde.

Syþen cheuely to þe chapel choses he þe waye,

Preuely aproched to a prest, and prayed hym þere

þat he wolde lyfte his lyf and lern hym better

How his sawle schulde be saued

when he schuld seye helen. (1872-1879)

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("When she was gone, Sir Gawain immediately gets dressed, / Rises and clothes himself in noble array, / Lays up the love-lace the lady gave him, / Hides it quite carefully where he afterwards might find it. / Then quickly he chooses his way to the chapel, / Privately approaches a priest and prayed there / That he would lift [improve] his life and learn better / How his soul might be saved when he would go hence.") This has a direct impact on his *peregrinatio*. First, his initial act after she leaves him and he dresses is to hide the girdle. This is premeditated sin, since he plans already to break his vow to his host by not giving up the love-lace and since he plans to rely on it to save his life when he should be relying on his faith in God. Second, the *peregrinatio* as I have pointed out is symbolically represented by worldly choices. Gawain, the poet clearly says, "choses ... De way" to his confession. Idiomatically it means "goes," but it also stresses that he chooses the way, and that *way* is not with honesty; the way the journey is with deceit. Third, his prayer is just as misdirected as his actions, for he prays to improve his life ("lyfte his lyf," 9 1878), and only then does he conclude with "save his soul." The distinction and the emphasis on worldly matters are Gawain's. And what does he mean by "seye helen" ("go hence")? Does he mean save his soul when he dies or save his skin when he goes to the

Green Chapel? It is ambiguous, and it should not be. Finally, he concludes this confession by calling on the priest for absolution (1882), asking to be cleansed, but without revealing or intending to give up the girdle. Here he is working on the religious level of his journey, and he obviously

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falters. Confession is a necessary part of the *peregrinatio*; and the success of one's confession will determine the disposition of his soul. This tension between his physical and his spiritual concerns points up the larger tension between the *peregrinatio* conventions and the shift away from them in the individuality of Gawain's actions.

Another moment which underscores Gawain's failure is his giving Bertilak only the three kisses and not the girdle; Bertilak receives the kisses and immediately says, "Bi Kryst" (1938), an epithet which reminds us of where Gawain's thoughts out to be. A few lines later (1942) the host uses the epithet "Mary" another and more direct reminder of Gawain's responsibilities since he is Mary's knight. Gawain's mind is in the wrong place a great danger on a *peregrinatio*.

The fourth section of the poem begins with Gawain's leaving Bertilak's castle, being raised from his bed by the crowing of the cock (2008). In the Middle Ages the cock's crowing is a symbol of the voice of the church (Christ) calling all souls to waken the spirit of purity. Here the conventions of the *peregrinatio* are present in full force, but Gawain does not seem to notice the implications of the crowing and thus the crowing does not alter his actions.

When Gawain is readying to leave Bertilak's castle he asks for a guide. One is reminded of the classic pilgrimages I mentioned above (to Beatrice, to Canterbury, or Everyman's to the grave). Gawain's guide speaks with some disrespect to him quite

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uncharacteristic of the normal guide in a *peregrinatio* going so far as to tempt him to run away and scare Gawain by reminding him that the Green Knight is so powerful and foul that no one returns alive from his abode. He also uses the familiar "yow" (2091, 2093 ...) rather than the more respectful "þe." The typical wayfarer on his *peregrinatio* is treated with respect by those he encounters (especially his guide), and is admired by the audience for his perseverance and his spiritual motivation. This guide, however, does not sense that Gawain's motivation is spiritual, and on strictly religious terms we cannot admire his quest which is to defend the pride of the Round Table. The guide even says, "... gotz away sum oþer gate, vpon Goddez halue! / Cayrez bi sum oþer kyth, þer Kryst mot yow spede" ("... go away by some other road, for God's sake! / Ride by some other land, where Christ might [help you prosper] [bless you]," 2119-23120). The suggestion is ripe with meaning, one obvious interpretation being that your present path is wrong not on God's behalf ("vpon Goddez halue"; note that the exclamation point is editorial, leaving the phrase ambiguous in the original) so change your way; take a path in God's name. This is the message that the true guide gives the honest spiritual pilgrim. Gawain takes it on its most literal level, and he descends to the Green Chapel.

Gawain's words a few lines later, when he says he *will* go to the Green Chapel, sound as if they are on the right track: "Ful wel con Dry3ten schape / His seruuantez for to saue" ("Full well can the Lord contrive / To save his servants," 2138-2139); but these words are

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almost ironic since we know he is not fully a servant of God, as he cannot be if he relies on the green girdle to save him. These words to the guide are either to fool him into thinking that Gawain is pure, or are Gawain's way of trying to bolster his courage when he knows he is in sin. Whatever his motives, this little speech seems inappropriate in the mouth of a straying wayfarer. At least he knows where he ought to place his trust. Even when he takes the last leg of his journey, he displays the outward knowledge of the true pilgrim when he says, "To Goddez wylie I am ful bayn / And to hym I haf me tone" ("To God's will I am completely obedient, [And to Him I have committed myself," 2158-2159). His words are right; his reliance on the love-lace is wicked, and no amount of lip service will save him completely from the fate he has earned. His words hearken back to a more religious attitude on one's *peregrinatio*. But his attitude is more casual and formulaic; this speech cannot hide his nervous hope that he will get through his upcoming ordeal safely. Like the poet, Gawain himself employs the conventions of the *peregrinatio* without actually operating within them. In fact, the conventions appear here partly to provide a background of tradition against which to

measure Gawain's individual progress.

Many other details of Gawain's trip to and experiences at the Green Chapel point to the *peregrinatio* nature of Gawain's trial with the Green Knight: the identification of the Chapel as a symbolic hell and the Green Knight with the Devil (2185 ff.) who tests Gawain's mettle, Gawain's confession (2385 ff.), the test he

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undergoes, Gawain's despair (2201 ff.), the locus of the action the mound (2177 ff.), the "absolution" the Green Knight grants Gawain (2391 ff.), and Gawain's humility with the acceptance of the sash as a sign of his spiritual growth (2429 ff.). And Gawain's return to Arthur's castle his place of origin is symbolic of the *peregrinatio's* cyclic nature (dust to dust, the spirit returns to its home ...). He confesses there (2495), baring his scar as a sign of his weakness (2498).

The penultimate wheel in the poem reveals Gawain's attitude toward his whole adventure:

He tened quen he schulde telle,

He groned for gref and grame;

þe blod in his face con melle,

When he hit schulde schewe, for schame. (2501-2504)

("He suffered torment when he told about it, / He groaned for grief and shame; / The blood streamed to his face / When he showed it [the scar] for shame.") This humiliated attitude is not true humility; he still agonizes over his failure and he still speaks of his cowardice and covetousness (2508), his false faith ("vntrawþe," 2509), and he seems to be despairing when he says, "For non may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit, / For þer hit onez is tached twynne wil hit neuer" ("For a man may hide his harm, but he cannot unfasten [get rid of] it, / For where it is once attached, it will never be separated," 2511-2512). This is not the attitude of a true Christian pilgrim at the end of *peregrinatio*.

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It denies hope and faith, the effects of charity, and the efficacy of true confession,¹⁰ but it reaffirms Gawain's humanity.

When the poet returns to the frame story at the end (2525 ff.), he does not merely hearken back to Brutus and the fall of Troy (which is symbolic of what will happen to Arthur), but he also reminds the reader that the fall of the British king was the end of a long series of events which were much earlier begun with Brutus's journey to England (when Brutus "bo3ed hider" "came here," 2524). The journey set it all going. This brings back the idea implicit in the opening frame: that all journeys do not end successfully.

Nevertheless, the last lines of the poem sound like the proper conclusion of the spiritual *peregrinatio*: "Now þat bere þe croun of þorne, / He bryng vus to his blysse. Amen" ("Now he who bore the crown of thorns, / [may] he bring us to his bliss. Amen," 2529-2530). As a prayer it is perfunctory for a literary piece in the Middle Ages, yet because of the nature of Gawain's *peregrinatio* it highlights the distinction between the goals of the *peregrinatio* and the conclusion of Gawain's journey. But as it refers to the story of Christ's human incarnation and suffering, it bears upon Gawain's movement from the perfect knight of fable to the imperfect and all-too-human seeker in the world.

Donald R. Howard¹¹ says that, "By the end of the fifteenth century the pilgrimage was in decline" (104). "Reform and

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counter-reform" and "the complex of medieval institutions to which [Protestantism] was crying out for reform already in Chaucer's time" (104) all signaled a change in attitude toward the pilgrimage. The change appears in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as I have shown, in the disjunction between the *peregrinatio* conventions and their actual use in the literature, with its deemphasis on spiritual things and an emerging realism. In the end, Gawain should not be judged on

his participation in the conventions of the *peregrinatio*, but on what he achieves in his departure from them.

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Richland Community College

Notes

1. Bercovitch's essay is an excellent study of how the *Gawain*-Poet uses parody; he mentions the "comic-realistic spirit" in the poem "which good-naturedly laughs at certain artificial romance conventions and thereby vitalizes and enlarges its affirmation of romance values" (30). This is the same spirit with which the poet uses the conventions of the *peregrinatio*.
2. I use the edition by J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, revised by Norman Davis. The modernizations are my own.
3. The frame story also focuses on treachery, failure, infidelity, internal strife, the loss of a kingdom, and the death of a race, an obvious parallel to and foreshadowing of the fall of the Round Table.
4. This use of "a year and a day" as an indication of the completion of one cycle and the beginning of another is mirrored in the poet's construction of the poem, with its 101 strophes (like the 101 stanzas of *Pearl*.)
5. See Levy for a broad examination of the Feast of the Circumcision in *Sir Gawain*. The Levy article is quite useful as a reading different from mine, for he sees Gawain's progress as pure and perfectly spiritual. And while I disagree with his conclusion that "The whole action of the poem follows the consistent pattern of the Christian knight on his spiritual journey in an imitation of Christ" (105), his overall discussion about the nature of the spiritual *peregrinatio* is provocative.

6. For more on the "Feast of Fools" see Savage, 537-544.
7. See for example the scholarly debate raised by Moorman (330, ll. 691 ff., n.) and Tolkien (97-98).
8. Note that some editors emend "lyfte" to "lyste," but Tolkien says "the form is clearly *lyfte*," and yet he adopts the editorial change. In this instance I follow the manuscript reading *lyfte*.
9. Here I disagree with Levy when he says, "In the development of his character in the poem ... Gawain has completely reversed himself in his spiritual progress from pride to humility and the cyclic nature of the poem may well be a reminder that such a journey is a spiritual one" (76). Though Levy's reading may be sound in some ways, in too many instances the poet 1) shows Gawain to fail, and 2) uses parody (of the romance genre) to indicate that we must not take too seriously what he intended as game. And while I agree that "The whole action of the poem follows the consistent pattern of the Christian knight on his spiritual journey in an imitation of Christ" (105), I add that the poet varies from the pattern in many places, especially in the conclusion, which shows Gawain not repentant for his sin of having kept the girdle, but ashamed and humble that he got tricked by wily women and that he got cut for it. It is more a matter of worldly pride than a matter of spiritual imperfection.

10. This general discussion is brief but is the only book-length historical study of the genre.