

A HEAD FOR A HEAD: A TESTAMENTAL TEMPLATE FOR *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT* AND *THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE*

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He that giveth a blemish to any of his neighbours: as he
hath done, so shall it be done to him: /Breach for breach,
eye for eye, tooth for tooth, shall he restore.

(Leviticus 24:19-20)

But if her death ensue thereupon, he shall render life for
life. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for
foot, / Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

(Exodus 21:23-25)

Thou shalt not pity him, but shalt require life for life, eye
for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

(Deuteronomy 19:21)

You have heard that it hath been said: An eye for an eye,
and a tooth for a tooth. / But I say to you not to resist
evil: but if one strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him
also the other. (Matthew 5:38-39)¹

Readers who compare these passages according to the light of human
reason could perhaps be forgiven for finding more differences than
similarities between the Old and New Testaments. Even St Jerome stresses
the contrast in his *Commentary on Matthew*, when he declares: "In the
Law, there is punishment, in the Gospel, grace. There, the fault is

chastised, here the roots of sins are removed."² But Jerome implies no criticism of the Law or the God who proclaimed it: "He who says 'an eye for an eye' does not wish to remove the second eye, but to preserve both." That is, Jerome recognizes and accepts the justification for the law in Deuteronomy, that its purpose is to assure that no such evil will be committed. We now know through an examination of the historical context, by comparing other, more severe, Near Eastern law codes, what the early fathers knew from the spiritual context, that the Old Testament injunction "an eye for an eye" is not the vengeful command it is often taken to be by believers and non-believers alike.³

There were, nevertheless, other early thinkers who concentrated on the differences between the two Testaments and saw Christ as abolishing and replacing the rules of the Old Law. Though their writings have not survived, the details of the arguments of Tertullian's *Adversus Marcionem*⁴ and Augustine's *Contra Faustum*⁵ and *Contra Adimantum*⁶ show that such arguments were made by the Marcionites and the Manichaeans. These heretics were able to succeed in their arguments as much as they did only by quoting scripture out of context: the orthodox commentator could not overlook the fact that the words from Matthew come shortly after this statement:

Do not think that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets. I am come not to destroy, but to fulfil. For amen I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall not pass of the law, till all be fulfilled. He therefore that shall break one of these least commandments and shall so teach men shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. But he that shall do and teach, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, that unless your justice abound more than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5: 17-20)

The orthodox task, then, is to explain in what manner Christ's injunction is a fulfilment, and not an abolition of the law, and how those who follow it are more righteous than those who follow the law.

It is a fairly simple matter to justify the dictum of the Old Law as intending to restrain immoderate natural impulses. As Augustine says

in *Contra Faustum* (XIX. xxv):

The old precept as well as the new is intended to check the vehemence of hatred, and to curb the impetuosity of angry passion. For who will of his own accord be satisfied with a revenge equal to the injury? Do we not see men, only slightly hurt, eager for slaughter, thirsting for blood, as if they could never make their enemy suffer enough? If a man receives a blow, does he not summon his assailant, that he may be condemned in the court of law? Or if he prefers to return the blow, does he not fall upon the man with hand and heel, or perhaps with a weapon, if he can get hold of one? . . . So the precept, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," instead of being a brand to kindle a fire that was quenched, was rather a covering to prevent the fire already kindled from spreading.⁷

That this is a law to be fulfilled, and not abolished, is argued in a better-known work by Augustine, his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*:

Not to exceed due measure in inflicting punishment, lest the requital be greater than the injury -- that is the lesser justice of the Pharisees. And it is a high degree of justice, for it would not be easy to find a man who, on receiving a fisticuff, would be content to give only one in return "An eye for an eye" and "A tooth for a tooth." Moderation is signified by these words, so that the penalty may not be greater than the injury. And this is the beginning of peace. But to have absolutely no wish for any such retribution -- that is perfect peace. Through the maxim that requital must be equal to the injury, a transition has been made from the sheerest discord to the greatest concord -- made gradually, in accordance with the orderly succession of eras. And that maxim holds, as it were, a middle position between the first dictum -- which is not within the Law -- and the principle which the Lord prescribed for the perfecting of His followers; that is to say, it stands midway between the rule of inflicting

a penalty greater than the injury committed, and the principle that no evil is to be returned for evil Therefore, this preparatory justice -- which is not a severe justice, but a merciful one -- has been brought to perfection by Him who came, not to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it.⁸

Augustine sees, therefore, a three-stage process of development of man's moral sense with respect to the question of vengeance, with the Old Testament law as the middle term. Man is raised from the state of nature, in which he responds to an evil action by a still greater evil, by the agency of the law of equal retribution. The letter of the law is "a life for a life," but the spirit is an attempt to moderate the desire for vengeance so that both lives may be preserved. The fulfilment, the perfection of this spirit, is Christ's injunction not to resist evil, and it is a fulfilment which seems to contradict the letter, at least in the view of a fallen nature. Under the new dispensation, an injured man will not exercise his legal, contractual right to a precisely equivalent retribution.

This developmental pattern can be used as a replacement for some of the attempts of past critics to account for the actions of the antagonist in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁹ He is frequently referred to as "enigmatic," and there is indeed something about him which suggests that he is other than he seems, that he needs to be explained by reference to some extra-textual material. Earlier critics used to make the effort to associate him with some real historical individual of fourteenth-century England;¹⁰ such attempts seem to have been generally abandoned, probably because, although the critics all used similar methods and were equally diligent in their search, there were too many candidates and no grounds for deciding between them. In more recent years, comparisons have been drawn also with Satan,¹¹ Christ,¹² and Merlin,¹³ but again there has been no critical unity and little changing of minds through argument. It must be recognized by now that the *Gawain*-poet was not an author like the creators of the *Gesta Romanorum*, who could take a reasonably complex story, put it through the allegory machine, and come up with a moral such as "The emperor is God; the pauper, man. The forest is the world, which is full of pits. The lion is the Son of God, who assumed humanity; the monkey is conscience; and the serpent is a prelate or confessor. The cord is Christ's passion; the loaded asses are the divine precepts."¹⁴

Some fourteen years ago, Judson Boyce Allen expressed a similar disappointment with such an approach, and suggested as a remedy that we interpret the poem figurally, instead of allegorically, and treat the relationship expressed *within* the text rather than looking outside it. "Within the poem," he says,

there are two courts, the two ends of the beheading game, the parallel between flirtation and hunting, and, most important of all, the identity of Sir Bercilak and the Green Knight. This identity, between an "aghlich mayster" and the charming host of the cut-paper castle, is one which the tradition of the spiritual sense of exegesis does much to define. Bercilak and the Green Knight are doubles; they exist over against one another, in parallel. As such they exist as the two halves of an identity which can best be understood as figural. This is the reason why they, and the poem which they dominate, seem mistreated by Schnyder's allegorizing. The allegory, the spiritual sense, is not outside the poem but within it, personified by a Green Knight who already is Sir Bercilak.¹⁵

Allen's suggestion has remained, to the best of my knowledge, just a tantalizing germ of an idea. The reason it has gone no farther is, I would suggest, that he concentrates on the definition of what the Green Knight and Bercilak "are," and on which one of them "is" the spiritual sense of the other. I do not believe that the *Gawain*-poet is especially interested in what any of his characters "are," or even with what the poem's obvious symbols such as the pentangle and the girdle "are," but rather with how they function in the poem. I do not mean to suggest that we can understand these things without reference to extra-textual material; we are, after all, at a great disadvantage in dealing with material from such an alien culture, and must therefore make use of all available materials. I would like to suggest that we therefore look to the poem's manner of patterning the scenes of vengeance, justice, contracts, and mercy in the light of Augustine's fully developed views on the *talio* and Allen's insight about a figural reading.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight opens with a reference to the Trojan War, in which, in order to punish those who accepted a Trojan prince and his paramour, an errant Greek woman, the Greeks destroyed the entire

city, and left it "brittened and brent to brondez and askez" (line 2). This action was recognized as a violent "over-kill" as early as Aeschylus' *Oresteia*,¹⁶ and the description in Vergil's *Aeneid* stresses that it included such brutal behaviour as Neoptolemus' slaughtering of the aged Priam at an altar to the gods, after making him watch the death of his son Polites.¹⁷ By the third stanza of the poem, we have reached the court of King Arthur, a group of knights "in her first age" (line 54), ruled by a king who is "sumquat childgered" (line 86), on a day when "Nw 3er wat3 so 3ep pat hit wat3 nwe cummen" (line 60). King Arthur will not participate fully in the feast, however, because of his rather quaint custom of refusing to eat on a holy day until some "adventure" or "marvel" has occurred. Unlike the author of *La Queste del Saint Graal*,¹⁸ however, the *Gawain*-poet describes in detail what kind of adventures he expects his knights to provide for him:

he wolde neuer ete

-- > Vpon such a dere day er hym deuised were
 Of sum auenturus pyng an vncoupe tale,
 Of sum mayn meruayle, pat he my3t trawe,
 Of alderes, of armes, of oper auenturus,
 Oper sum segg hym bisozt of sum siker kny3t
 To joyne wyth hym in iustyng, in jopardé to lay,
 Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oper,
 As fortune wolde fulsun hom, pe fayrer to haue. (lines 91-99)

Arthur and his courtiers are in the first of Augustine's "orderly succession of ages," still in the period in which individual desire, rather than the rule of law, determines the extent of retaliation for injury. Arthur looks forward to a battle between one of his followers and some strange knight, in which the outcome will be decided by Fortune, a goddess notoriously free from the government of statutes. 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. The aim of this "life for life" is that one life should be lost, not that both should be preserved. These are the courtiers who, when the Green Knight has been decapitated and lies bleeding on the ground, kick his head about like a football.

Rule-governed behaviour enters the poem with the Green Knight and his challenge. The game he suggests is that one of Arthur's knights will deal him a blow, and, after a respite of a year and a day, he will repay him in kind, a stroke for a stroke. This is exact retaliation, like the "breach for breach" of Leviticus, the "stripe for stripe" of Exodus, or the "pugno accepto pugnum reddere" of Augustine. This concern with exact equivalence persists throughout the entire story of the agreement; a year later, when the Green Knight strikes Gawain and does no more than scratch his neck, Gawain insists that the contract is fulfilled since he has taken the one stroke that he gave:

"I haf a stroke in pis sted withoute stryf hent,
 And if þow rechez me any mo, I redyly shal quyte,
 And 3elde 3ederly a3ayn -- and þerto 3e tryst --
 and foo.

Bot on stroke here me fallez --
 Þe couenaunt schop ry3t so,
 Fermed in Arpurez hallez --
 And perfore, hende, now hoo!" (lines 2323-30)

Gawain does not seem to have much of an understanding of the spirit of this covenant, either at the beginning or the end of his fateful year. The Green Knight offers a buffeting contest, and it seems to be up to Gawain as to how hard or how deadly a blow he strikes,¹⁹ so that his decision to decapitate his visitor is questionable. Further, as Julian Wasserman and Robert Blanch have recently argued, Gawain is not obliged to use the axe as the buffeting weapon; the Green Knight's arrival, with an axe in one hand and a holly bough in the other, is an example of an "iconography of the two hands," a favourite technique of the poet's for narratizing a moment of crucial choice.²⁰ The Green Knight tempts him to go to the limit and chop off his head, in that he stretches out his neck and moves aside his long hair (line 419-20), but he has already given Gawain a hint of what is to come by saying that he will tell Gawain how to find his dwelling after he has received the blow (lines 405 ff.). Gawain is further tempted by Arthur's suggestion that if he strikes in the proper manner, he will not have any trouble with the return blow a year later:

"Kepe þe, cosyn," quop þe kyng, "þat þou on kyrf sette,
 And if þou redez hym ryzt, redly I trowe
 Þat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after."

(lines 372-74)

The immediate audience response to Gawain's choice to decapitate the Green Knight is perhaps sympathetic; it appears to be within the rules of the bargain to strike with the battle-axe, and the Green Knight has specified that he should do so "stifly" (line 287). But in our approval we have been "surprised by sin." If Christ has bidden us not to resist violence, a *fortiori* we should not initiate it. The dictum that Gawain lives by seems to be "Do it to them before they do it to you," not "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and he beheads the Green Knight, only to learn that he must still submit to an equivalent stroke next year.

When the game is ending, Gawain's conduct also leaves much to be desired. He is open to the charge of violating both the rules of the contract and the norms of knightly behaviour by appearing armed with a protective talisman.²¹ He shows that he considers the rule of equivalence of actions to be merely a temporary necessity by declaring so forcefully that he is no longer bound by it once he has received the nick in the neck. Finally, he insults the Green Knight by suggesting that he may go beyond the rules by striking again. As the Green Knight so merrily points out, it is Gawain who should be suspected of being a breaker of covenants, since he still carries the green girdle, the evidence that he has broken the second contract between the two men, the exchange of winnings.

This is not the only parallel between the two bargains the men make, since they are structurally analogous as well. In the first instance, the basic agreement may be stated "I will do something to you and you will do something to me"; in the second, it is "I will give something to you and you will give something to me." In both cases, it is an agreement between equals which has strong similarities to an Old Testament law, either the rule of *talio* or the covenant between God and Israel. Significantly, it is the second which Gawain violates most obviously. The obligation which is placed on him is to "Pay what you owe," the same injunction which caused so much trouble to the unjust servant in Matthew

18, part of Christ's parabolic explanation of the need to forgive one's neighbour.²² For Gawain, an apparently simple requirement to return what he wins is transformed when "paying what he owes" means abandoning his own earthly life. When one owes one's life, paying up is the most difficult challenge of all, and both Old Testament and early Christian history are full of examples of backsliders and failed martyrs who could not meet it.

The net educational effect of Gawain's experiences is really not all that great. Once he has been caught out in a violation of the covenant, he feels ashamed, and denounces his own weakness. Significantly, he condemns himself for two sins, and the poet has him repeat himself to ensure that the point is not missed:

"Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetyse bope!
 In yow is vylany and vyse þat vertue disstryez."

 For care of þy knokke cowardyse me tʒʒt
 To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake,
 Þat is larges and lewté þat longez to knyʒtez.

(lines 2374-81)

Gawain explains to himself why his actions may be seen as cowardice, since they diverge from acceptable knightly behaviour even under the first dispensation of Arthur's court, but his reference to covetousness has struck critics as curious, since he clearly did not value the green girdle for its own substance or worth. The explanation, I believe, is to be found in the scriptural *locus classicus* for the idea expressed here, namely that the law, though good, is a necessary precondition for sin and for the consciousness of sin:

But now we are loosed from the law of death, wherein we were detained; so that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? God forbid! But I do not know sin, but by the law. For I had not known concupiscence, if the law did not say: *Thou shalt not covet*. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead. (Romans 7:6-8)

The importance of this knowledge of sin and of man's sinfulness which arises through sin's use of the law can be seen also from its efficacy in preventing Gawain from properly understanding the third stage of the process, the fulfilment of law in mercy. The Green Knight would be completely within his rights under the covenant to decapitate Gawain in turn, but instead he spares him. True, he does not avoid retaliation completely, for he does cut Gawain's neck, but this is an absolute necessity for the author's symbolic purpose. He needs it to activate the metaphor of healed wound as forgiven sin,²³ so important to the ending of the poem, and to remind us that contrition is only one part of the process of purging sin, needing to be combined with confession, restitution, and absolution.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, then, begins in the world of the state of nature, in which strife between men is resolved by individual cunning and strength, and success depends on the favour of Fortune. The society progresses a step when it accepts the law of equal retribution in the bargain with the Green Knight. The realm of contractual law is expanded by the "exchange of winnings" covenant, which Gawain, like so many others before him, violates in order to save his own earthly life. Just as the Green Knight's original covenant can be seen as an "Old Testament" prefiguration of the "New Testament" mercy he displays on the day of judgment, his restraint and his choice not to inflict the legally permissible penalty signal the fulfilment of the spirit of the law. Gawain's discourteous response demonstrates a dangerous and regressive concern with the letter of the law. He does not see mercy in the Green Knight's actions, but only a literal completion of the terms of the original contract which lets him return to the rough and tumble world of mortal combat ruled by Fortune. When he is reminded that he has violated the "exchange of winnings" contract in order to control the outcome of the "exchange of blows" contract, he proves Paul's point that the effect of the Law is to create a consciousness of sin.

By choosing to examine the notion of the fulfilment of the law in a particular human situation, rather than in general or theoretical terms like Augustine, and by being more resolutely Pauline in his view of the efficacy of the law than Augustine, the *Gawain*-poet is at once both less optimistic concerning his characters and more challenging to his audience. The story world of the literature to which his readers

are apparently addicted, with its tales of Round Table adventures, is assimilated to a state of nature in need of drastic reformation. The powers of law may momentarily lead to some progress -- Gawain is, for example, most nearly pious when he is required by the covenant to set out through the wilderness and face his destiny alone²⁴ -- but the net effect of an experience of the law is simply an overwhelming sense of sin and a (doctrinally incorrect) feeling that "þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer" (line 2512). Not even this awareness may be transmitted to others who have not shared in the experience, as the court's incomprehension in the last stanza reveals. Gawain's "audience" of knights and ladies in Camelot is not able to meet the challenge which the *Gawain*-poet optimistically offers to his audience of ordinary people.

The connection between the tale of the Green Knight and the tale of the Loathly Lady may seem, at first glance, to be rather tenuous. The only generally acknowledged connection is that in some versions of the latter, it is Gawain who winds up married to the Lady and in others there is a threatening male who imposes the task for the errant knight to fulfill.²⁵ But in the light of the previous discussion it may be seen that there are strong plot analogies between the two basic patterns, and that the bare narrative lines of the stories may be seen as different "grammatical" transformations of the same deep structure. Gower's *Tale of Florent*,²⁶ for example, begins in the "state of nature" world of medieval chivalry, but once Florent has killed Branchus he is subject to the law of equal retribution, and seems doomed to die. Because of the scruples of his prosecutors, he is given a temporary reprieve, according to a *covenant* (the word is used at I.1450) whereby he undertakes to return with the answer to the question of what women most desire. Thrown back on his own resources, he is at a loss until he meets the Loathly Lady and makes a *covenant* (I.1590) with her that he will marry her if the answer she gives him saves his life. After they are married, she gives him the choice as to whether he would have her beautiful by day and ugly by night or the opposite. He abandons any right to choose between these equal and opposite alternatives, and receives as his reward a wife who will be beautiful all the time. The overarching motion is from natural law, through the constraints of a covenant, to deliverance and peace ever after.

The contrasts between *The Wife of Bath's Tale*²⁷ and this version or their presumed common source have been quite thoroughly examined over the years by a number of scholars. The knight is a rapist, not a murderer, and the choice at the end is between fair and faithless or foul and faithful, so that Chaucer may further highlight the seriousness of the question about what women want. The year of searching is a kind of temporal reformatory for the knight who had previously paid no attention to a woman's wants at all, and the introduction of fidelity at the end deepens the moral level of the whole enterprise. The law commands him to learn what women want, and he satisfies not only the letter, when he quotes the Loathly Lady's answer, but also the spirit, when he allows his wife the freedom to choose what she wants to be.

What has not been so widely recognized, however, is that Chaucer cared enough for the original pattern to strengthen it at a key point in the narrative, and to preserve it by an especially imaginative literary device at another point where his thematic choices led to a loss of clarity in this underlying structure. There are, of course, many different standards of explanation for the differences between Gower's version and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, not the least of which is Chaucer's desire to fit the tale to the character he had established for the Wife herself. But at the end of the stories, there is a contrast which suggests that the triple pattern "state of nature / rule of law / granting of mercy" was an important consideration. *The Tale of Florent* ends with the Loathly Lady's explanation of her transformation. She had been a beautiful princess, but was cursed by her stepmother to be ugly until she had won sovereignty over a knight who "Alle othre passeth of good name" (I.1849). She is, in effect, rescued by the knight, and her beauty both by day and by night is a reward to him for his actions as much as it is a free and undeserved gift. By omitting any explanation for the Lady's transformation, whether natural or supernatural, Chaucer effectively removes it from the realm of reward for services and leaves it to be seen as a free and unconditional gift -- an act of true mercy rather than wages earned by good behaviour.

The importance of the underlying pattern can also be seen in an alteration to the beginning of the story, to compensate for the side effects of his interest in the knight as violator of women. When he chose rape rather than murder as the knight's offence, Chaucer lost the

indication of a legal punishment exactly equivalent to the crime. But what was lost in the plot is preserved in the language, by a technique which I think few other authors could have devised. The knight's sin and the court's judgement are expressed in the following words:

He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,
 Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,
 By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed;
 For which oppressioun was swich clamour
 And swich pursute unto the kyng Arthour,
 That dampned was this knyght for to be deed,
 By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed --
 Paraventure swich was the statut tho -- (III.886-93)

The conspicuous rhyming of "maugre hir heed" and "maydenhed," and "deed" and "heed," and the choice of this particular method of execution all show that this story, which begins with a lawless, violent rape and ends with the free gift of fairness and fidelity, progresses by the efficiency of a statute, a law, of "a head for a head."

Discussions of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* have for too long been sidetracked by arguments over whether the poems' basically pagan and Celtic structures are sufficiently counter-balanced by references to Christianity to make them "Christian" poems. In light of the pattern I have demonstrated, it seems clear that, whether or not these basic patterns belong to folklore, they also belong in the best traditions of mediaeval Christianity, and that, in structure as well as in surface, "all is written for our doctrine."

NOTES

¹ Biblical translations are taken from the Douay-Rheims version, as closest to the sense of the Vulgate.

² Jerome, *Commentaire sur S. Matthieu*, ed. E. Bonnard (Paris 1977) 122 (my translation): "In lege retributio est, in evangelio gratia; ibi culpa emendatur, hic peccatorum auferuntur exordia. . . . Qui dicit: *Oculum pro oculo, non et alterum vult auferre sed utrumque servare.*"

³ *The Code of Hammurabi*, in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, ed. J.B. Pritchard, (Princeton 1958) I, 138-67, for example, includes not only "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (paragraphs 196 and 200), but also "If a seignior has struck the cheek of a seignior who is superior to him, he shall be beaten sixty times with an oxtail whip in the assembly" (paragraph 202).

⁴ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, IV.xvi.

⁵ Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, in *Collectio Selecta SS. Ecclesiae Patrum*, ed. D.A.B. Caillau (Paris 1839), vol. 135.

⁶ Augustine, *Contra Adimantum*, VIII.

⁷ The translation from *Contra Faustum XIX.xxv* is from *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean*, tr. Rev. R. Stothert, p. 248, in *St. Augustine: The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists*, vol. IV of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st ser.ed. Philip Schaff (New York 1887; rpt. Grand Rapids 1956) as follows: "Quandoquidem et illud antiquum ad reprimendas flammam odiorum, saevientiumque immoderatos animos refrenandos, ita praeceptum est. Quis enim tantumdem facile contentus est reponere vindictae, quantum accepit injuriae? Nonne videmus homines leviter laesos moliri caedem, sitire sanguinem, vixque invenire in malis inimici unde satientur? Quis pugno percussus, non aut judicia concitat in damnationem ejus qui percusserit, aut si ipse repercutere velit, totum hominem, si non etiam telo aliquo arrepto, pugnis calcibusque contendit? . . . Proinde, "Oculum pro oculo, dentem pro dente" non

fomes, sed limes furoris est, non ut id quod sopitum erat, hinc accendere-
tur, sed ne id quod ardebat, ultra extenderetur, impositus." (*Contra*
Faustum XIX.xxv).

⁸ Augustine, *De Sermone Domini in Monte*, ed. A. Mutzenbecher
(Turnholt 1967), trans. as *Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount*
with Seventeen Related Sermons, tr. Denis J. Kavanagh, vol. 11 of *The*
Fathers of the Church (Washington 1951) 80: "Pharisaeorum iustitia
minor est non excedere in vindicta modum, ne plus rependat quisque
quam accepit; et magnus hic gradus est. Nemo enim facile invenitur
qui pugno accepto pugnum reddere velit . . . OCULUM PRO OCULO ET
DENTEM PRO DENTE; quibus nominibus significatur modus, ut iniuriam
vindicta non transeat. Et haec est pacis inchoatio; perfecta autem
pax est talem penitus nolle vindictam. Inter illud ergo primum quod
praeter legem est, ut maius malum pro minore malo reddatur, et hoc quod
dominus perficiendis discipulis dicit, ne pro malo ullum reddatur malum,
medium quendam locum tenet, ut tantum reddatur quantum acceptum est,
per quod a summa discordia ad summam concordiam pro temporum distributione
transitus factus est . . . Hanc ergo inchoatam non severam sed
misericordem iustitiam ille perfecit qui legem venit implere non soluere"
(I, 19.56-7).

⁹ Quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien
and E.V. Gordon; 2nd ed. N. Davis (Oxford 1967).

¹⁰ J.R.L. Highfield, "The Green Squire," *Medium AEvum* 22 (1953) 18-
23; Haldeen Braddy, "Sir Gawain and Ralph Holmes the Green Knight,"
Modern Language Notes, 67 (1952) 240-42; H.L. Savage, *The Gawain-Poet:*
Studies in His Personality and Background (Chapel Hill, N.C. 1956).

¹¹ A.H. Krappe, "Who Was the Green Knight?" *Speculum* 13 (1938) 206-15.

¹² Hans Schnyder, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Essay in*
Interpretation, Cooper Monographs on English and American Literature, 6
(Bern 1961).

¹³ Charles Long, "Was the Green Knight Really Merlin?" *Interpretations*
7 (1975) 1-7.

¹⁴ *Gesta Romanorum*, tr. C. Swan and W. Hooper (Bohn Library 1876;
rpt. New York 1959) 215-16.

¹⁵ Judson Boyce Allen, *The Friar as Critic: Literary Attitudes in the*
Later Middle Ages, (Nashville, Tenn. 1971) 146.

¹⁶ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, lines 527-37.

¹⁷ Vergil, *Aeneid* II.500ff.

¹⁸ "Sire," objected Kay the steward. . . . "On high feast-days we have never seen you seat yourself at table before some adventure has befallen the court in the presence of all the barons of your household." *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, tr. P.M. Matarasso (Harmondsworth 1969) 34.

¹⁹ As the analogues collected by Elisabeth Brewer in *From Cuchulainn to Gawain* (Totowa, N.J. 1973) show, mediaeval authors who wanted to describe a "beheading game" were always quite explicit: "I have an axe, and the man into whose hands it shall be put is to cut off my head to-day, I to cut off his to-morrow." (*Bricriu's Feast*, p. 9); "if there is a knight here who can cut my head off with a single blow with the sword, and I can after the blow recover my health and strength, he can be sure to have without fail, a year from today, a similar blow in exchange, if he dares to wait for it." (*Carados*, p. 15); cf. pp. 18, 22-23, 35, 43, 78, and 85. See also Gaston Paris, "Roman en vers du cycle de la table Ronde," *Histoire Litteraire de la France* 30 (1888) 76-77, and Victoria L. Weiss, "Gawain's First Failure: The Beheading Scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1976) 361-66.

²⁰ Forthcoming article, based in part on a paper delivered at the Twentieth International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo in May 1984.

²¹ Laila Gross, "Gawain's Acceptance of the Girdle," *American Notes and Queries* 12 (1974) 154-55.

²² Compare *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. G. Kane and E.T. Donaldson (London 1975), Passus XIX, 191-97:

Anoon after an heigh vp into heuene
 He wente, and wonyep pere, and wol come at þe laste
 And rewarde hym ryght wel þat *reddit quod debet*,
 Paieþ þarfityly as pure truþe wolde.
 And what persone paieþ it nouzt punysshē he þenkep,
 And demen hem at domsday, boþe quyke and dede,
 The goode to godhede and to greet loye,
 And wikkede to wonye in wo wipouten ende.

²³ See, for example, *The Pricke of Conscience*, ed. R. Morris (Berlin 1863) lines 8317-62; *Piers Plowman*, XIV.95-7; *Mirk's Festial*,

ed. T. Erbe, EETS, E.S. 96, p. 2.

24 Lines 740 ff.

25 See S. Eisner, *A Tale of Wonder* (Folcroft 1957).

26 John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, I. 1407-1861.

27 *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston 1957).