Foxy Lady, Foxy Knight

Animals and Chivalric Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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BA Thesis

15.484 words

Utrecht University

27 January 2017

BA Literary Studies (PART ONE)

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the interconnection between chivalric identity and conceptualisations of the animal in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It discusses medieval thinking about the animal, fourteenth-century socio-economic developments in chivalric culture and attitudes to non-human nature in late-medieval theology and philosophy. In the light of this context emerge two different notions of chivalric identity that are coupled with different attitudes to the animal in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gawain upholds an absolutist understanding of chivalric identity, a hostile attitude to the natural environment and cannot deal constructively with his own animalistic nature. Gawain's point of view is grounded in High-Medieval concepts of divine order in society and the natural world, which had begun to lose credibility in the fourteenth century. For Bertilak chivalry is not an essentialist account of the aristocracy but rather an ideal for all to aspire to. This notion emerged in the context of late-fourteenth-century upward social mobility, and for Bertilak it goes hand in hand with a respectful attitude to animals and the natural environment. Bertilak is also lenient towards human "animal" inclinations: that even the greatest knights fall short of the chivalric ideal is cause for forgiveness rather than despair. Drawing on contemporary theological debates on human nature and the will, the *Gawain*-poet reinforces his argument for Bertilak's understanding of chivalry by showing how Gawain's archaic ideology is spiritually crippling, while Bertilak's chivalric ideal emulates the Christian core values of love, forgiveness and spiritual regeneration.

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Preface

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the bachelor degrees of

both Comparative Literature and English Language and Culture. It is the result of 420

working hours, or 15 ECTS. With 15.484 words it is roughly twice as long as a "regular" 7,5-

ECTS BA thesis (6.000-8.000 words). The text has a twofold structure: the first part is

submitted for evaluation by the Department of Comparative Literature; the second part has

been evaluated by the Department of English. The first part is theoretical and comparative. It

situates the thesis in the field of ecocriticism, and identifies a niche by indicating three

lacunae in the ecocritical reception of chivalric romance in general, and *Sir Gawain and the*

Green Knight (*SGGK*) in particular. Issues overlooked by ecocritical studies of *SGGK* are

medieval conceptualisations of the animal, the genre of chivalric romance and late medieval

philosophical and religious discourses on humanness and animality. The theoretical

framework compares medieval and modern theorisations of the human-animal binary, and is

followed by discussions that establish connections between chivalric romance and relevant

concepts from late-medieval aristocratic culture philosophy and theology. The concepts

drawn from these three fields come together in the second part, where they serve to identify

and analyse the interconnection of chivalric identity and conceptualisations of the animal in a

close reading of *SGGK*. The thesis ends with a conclusion that brings together parts one and

two in a summary of the main findings, indicates the limitations of the present study, offers

suggestions for future research and reflects on the wider significance and implications of the

thesis. Although the text is written as a unified whole, it is structured in such a way as to

satisfy the criteria for a Comparative-Literature BA thesis with part one, and the criteria for

an English-Language-and-Culture BA thesis with part two. Although all evaluators have been

asked to read the entire thesis in order to gain a deeper understanding of the part they

evaluate, the grades for Comparative Literature and English Language and Culture are based

on part one and two, respectively.

PART ONE

Introduction

> You know you're a cute little heartbreaker
>
> …………………………………………
>
> You know you're a sweet little love maker
>
> …………………………………………
>
> You've got to be all mine, all mine
>
> Oh, foxy lady (Hendrix 3-10).

Jimi Hendrix's foxy lady is irresistible, and she knows it. In "Foxy Lady" we hear the voice of a man yearning to possess a woman who skilfully employs her attractiveness to increase his desire almost beyond endurance. The lady's clever manipulation makes her foxy like Reynard, the cunning trickster familiar from fable and folklore (*OED* "foxy, adj. 1."). Since the early twentieth century "foxy" has also been used to refer to a sexually attractive woman (*OED* "foxy, adj. 6."). Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan explain that

> the expression's origins lie in humans' exploitation and abuse of foxes themselves. Hunters and trappers view the fox as an object of pursuit—a future trophy or pelt. To the extent that the vixen eludes capture, she piques their desire to possess her and arouses their admiration. Even as she frustrates their goal, she prolongs their 'sport' and proves 'worthy' of pursuit. Hence, the ambivalence of *foxy lady*. A man who labels a woman 'foxy' admires her as stylish and attractive yet sees her largely as a sex object worth possessing (15; emphasis in the original).

From a feminist perspective the expression is problematic because it relegates the female to the rank of animal, a category from which human beings have traditionally made every effort to dissociate themselves. Because the animal is viewed as driven by unthinking instinct, animal-human similarity is a threat to the human self-conception as rational and civilised.

One strategy to keep the categories of human and animal distinct is the hunt: rarely are human and animal more clearly opposed than as hunter and prey. The animal body is disassembled, literally, into objects for human consumption. Treating a fellow human being in that way is inconceivable. No one wants to be on the side of the animals. "Foxy lady" is an ambiguous compliment.

The *OED* first records the use of foxy as "attractive, desirable, pretty, sexy" in 1913, and illustrative quotations are drawn exclusively from American texts (*OED* "foxy, adj. 6."). Therefore, to introduce the concept in a reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*) might seem peculiar if not unsound. However, the foxy lady is a familiar presence in medieval literature. The body of Chaucer's Alison is *gent and smal* "shapely and small" like a *wezele* "weasel" (3234).[1] In the *Miller's Tale* she devises a series of cunning (and hilarious) tricks to indulge her sexual desire and expose her cuckolded husband to ridicule. In giving free rein to her passions, Alison not only offers a welcome antidote to the stiff chivalric dignity of the *Knight's Tale*, her promiscuity also testifies to her animalistic nature. Thomas Aquinas posits self-restraint as the essential quality that distinguishes humans from animals: "man is said to be master of his own acts. But brute animals have no mastery over their acts, they do not act, but rather are acted upon" by their passions (*Summa* 1-2.6.2). Lascivious Alison would seem to blur Aquinas's neat distinction. Similarly, in Chrétien de Troye's *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion* Laudine poses a problem for Yvain's status as a knight: he takes years to establish a healthy balance between marriage and chivalric duties. In this romance it is Gawain who describes marriage in foxy terms: "pleasures grow sweeter when delayed, and a small pleasure postponed is more delightful than a great one enjoyed today" (327; trans. Kibler). For Chrétien's Gawain the male-female relationship is characterised by the delayed

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[1] Translations from Middle English, Anglo-Norman, Middle Dutch and Latin are my own, unless specified otherwise.

gratification that Adams and Donovan associate with the fox hunt.

In *SGGK* it is Gawain who casts the feminine as an animalistic hazard to chivalric self-control. After Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay *her knight with her cast have coyntly bigyled* "have slyly beguiled their knight with their trick" (2413),[2] Gawain comforts himself with the thought that four biblical heroes were equally *wrathed* "devastated" by women: Adam, Salomon, Samson and David were brought low by female charms (2416-20). These great men were *forne the freest* "formerly the freest" (2422). Middle English *fre* denotes the freeman's position of liberty that contrasts with the servitude that subjected medieval villeins to the absolute authority of their lord (Mortimer 48). It also indicates the character traits associated with high social standing: the freeman is "noble, gracious, generous and frank (*MED* "fre, adj. 2."). The nobleman is free in yet another way: he is his own master, while the peasant is tossed about by his passions like Aquinas's "brute animals." Andreas Capellanus writes "that farmers … are impelled to acts of love in the natural way like a horse or a mule, just as nature's pressure directs them" (223; trans. Walsh). According to Gawain, the foxy lady is a threat to even the most chivalric man. Her guile might rob him of his noble nature and reduce him to the status of an oaf, or worse still, of a horse or mule.

From these examples emerges the image of a strict distinction between the knight and the animal. The foxy lady occupies an intermediate position that challenges a neat human-animal dichotomy. This thesis examines how chivalric identity is constructed in relation to the animal in *SGGK*.[3] The world of late-fourteenth-century England was an unstable one: socio-economic change and scientific developments had turned traditional notions of chivalry

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[2] This and subsequent quotations of the texts in MS Cotton Nero A.x. are taken from Putter, Ad and Myra Stokes. *The Works of the Gawain Poet: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*. London, Penguin: 2014.

[3] Identity is a much-contested notion in contemporary scholarship. A discussion of the concept lies beyond the scope of the present study. Here 'identity' and 'self' are understood as the intuitive self-understanding of an individual or group. For introductory overviews cf. Olsen; Noonan and Curtis.

and the natural world upside down. In *SGGK* the poet responds to these changes with a new understanding of chivalric identity that is grounded in a different attitude to the animal. In the figure of Gawain we witness the failure of the traditional chivalric self-understanding as pristinely non-animal on the basis of inherent nobility. Bertilak embodies a new conception of chivalry as an ideal that entails acknowledgment of unruly "animal" inclinations and appeals to divine assistance in the continuous attempt to overcome them.

This enquiry draws on different disciplines. The focus on attitudes to the natural world is characteristic of ecocriticism. Therefore, the first chapter situates the present study in the ecocritical debate on *SGGK*. However, this analysis pays more attention to animals and sociohistorical context than most ecocritical scholarship. Therefore, it draws part of its theoretical framework from animal studies; chapter two discusses relevant research and concepts from this field. With a discussion of late-medieval chivalric ideology, chapter three sketches the background against which the *Gawain*-poet shaped his ideas about chivalric identity. Many have suggested that the poet has a clerical background (e.g. Stanbury 149-50), but even if that were not the case, religion was such a powerful presence in late-medieval England that chivalric identity and the natural world would in all probability have been conceived of in predominantly Christian terms even by a lay author. Therefore, the fourth chapter provides a discussion of late-medieval theological and philosophical thought about the relationship between human virtue and nature. Chapter five offers a close reading of the formation of chivalric identity in relation to the animal in *SGGK*. The textual analysis refers back to the preceding chapters by reading passages of the poem in the light of discussed aspects of animal theory and late-medieval chivalric culture, theology and philosophy. The conclusion summarises the main findings, points out a number of shortcomings of the present study and offers suggestions for future research.

Something remains to be said about the relevance of studying a fourteenth-century

poem that to all appearances received little circulation in its own day (Stanbury 149; Putter and Stokes 239), and is at present read by few outside of academia. The focus of this study is both literary and historical: it aims to open up new layers of poetic meaning as well as add to our understanding of the cultural-historical configurations of the late-medieval period. In addition, the enquiry takes as guiding principle Louis Dupré's notion that "[a]ny interpretation of the past aims at understanding the present" (10). The reflections of a late-medieval poet on chivalric identity and the natural world in a time of social upheaval may do more than satisfy our historical curiosity. They may help us shape our own understanding of dignified living in a time of social and ecological crisis.

1. Critical Debate: Nature and Culture in *SGGK*

As Gillian Rudd notes, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a text which apparently cries out for 'green reading'" ("Wilderness" 52). Many studies that offer an interpretation of the poem's natural world have read *SGGK* in terms of a binary opposition between nature and culture. William Goldhurst, who was the first to read *SGGK* in terms of a nature-culture opposition, concludes that for the knight "the primitive forces of nature represent a factor that must be reckoned with, contended against somehow, and if possible mastered" (65). For Goldhurst, writing in the late 1950s, violent suppression of the forces of nature constitutes a laudable attitude to the natural world, and he considers this theme key to "the poem's greatness and perennial appeal" (65). By contrast, recent readings of *SGGK* that engage with the poem's attitude to nature often explicitly identify with the discipline of ecocriticism. Scholars in this field analyse literary attitudes to the natural environment, and challenge the "mainstream assumption that the natural world be seen primarily as a resource for human beings" (Clark 2). From an ecocritical perspective, violent suppression of nature is a problem. Ecocritical readings of *SGGK* can be divided into those that read the poem as affirming a nature-culture dichotomy (Rudd, *Greenery*; Twomey; Yamamoto), and those that maintain that the poem mitigates or undermines such a polarity (George; Riddy, respectively).

Rudd condemns the *Gawain*-poet for presenting the natural world in terms of an anthropocentric nature-culture contrast, which she considers a form of ideological violence:

> the neatest trick pulled off by this poem is that it both gives us direct encounters with the natural world and leads us to overlook them. Nature is just regarded as mere setting, or as correlative of Gawain's state of mind rather than as an active force within the text, still less as an autonomous entity (*Greenery* 115).

Like Goldhurst, Rudd considers the poem's presentation of the natural world key to its

contemporary relevance. *SGGK* "illustrate[s] a continuing challenge for humans in the face of wilderness: the difficulty of abiding in patience before it without succumbing to the temptation to impose human meaning on it" (Rudd, *Greenery* 126). Valid though Rudd's concern about the ideological foundations of the present-day environmental crisis may be, her argument undermines itself. If the *Gawain*-poet's presentation of nature imposes human meaning on the natural world, the same may be said of all conceptualisations of nature. Just like the poet's view of the natural world, Rudd's concept of an untouched wilderness that should be protected from human influence is a product of the human imagination, of human culture. Her heavy reliance on a binary opposition between human culture and the natural world implicates her in the anthropocentric assimilation of nature she criticises in *SGGK*.

It would seem impossible, then, to adopt a biocentric perspective and condemn cultural assimilation of the natural world per se. However, within a necessarily anthropocentric point of view it is still possible to analyse the specific strategies that reinforce or mitigate the nature-culture binary in *SGGK*. Michael Twomey, for example, contrasts Gawain's antagonistic attitude to nature with what he identifies as the Green Knight's ecological stewardship (30, 44). He draws a meaningful distinction between two attitudes to the natural world that are contained within an anthropocentric perspective (53). Michael George takes a similar stance: for "Gawain, the natural world is an opponent to be conquered. For Bertilak, the natural world, although existing to serve humans, should be respected" (39).

Felicity Riddy takes a contrasting standpoint and argues that *SGGK* as a whole undermines the nature-culture boundary. She maintains that the poem is organised "around shifting evaluations of the contrast between humans and animals, as well as of the contrast between male and female" ("Nature" 218). Riddy attributes this boundary reconfiguration to the late-medieval reception of Aristotle's scientific writings, which produced, she claims, "a matter-of-fact acceptance of the body's physicality" ("Speaking" 151). For Riddy, this new-

found naturalism, combined with the experience of death on unprecedented scale as a result of the Plague, is sufficient contextual evidence for her conclusion that in *SGGK* "the narrative rests on, and never moves very far away from, the view that humans are a species of animal" ("Speaking" 151). Riddy would seem to suggest that the later Middle Ages abolished any and all distinction between the human and the animal, which according to others was universally accepted far into the eighteenth century at least (e.g. Lovejoy 208).

I suggest that this peculiar conclusion results from a failure to pay attention to three important factors, which corresponds to three lacunae in the existent ecocritical scholarship on *SGGK*. Firstly, although Riddy reads *SGGK* as confirming what she takes to be the "lesson of Aristotelian science—that humans are animals" ("Nature" 225), she offers no account of medieval conceptualisations of the animal. This omission corresponds to the ecocritical tendency to focus on the natural world as an abstract concept or on geographical features of the landscape (cf. Rudd, "Wilderness"; George; Twomey). Even though they are arguably the most prominent aspect of the natural world in *SGGK*, the animals in the poem have received relatively little ecocritical attention. Scholars working outside the field of ecocriticism often interpret the birds, deer, boar and fox by discovering the "true"—that is, anthropocentric—significance behind the animal figure, which is thus reduced to a replaceable trope in the author's poetic arsenal (e.g. Gallant; cf. Driscoll 18). The present study discusses medieval theories of the animal and analyses not only how the animals in *SGGK* function as metaphorical vehicles for human experience, but also how they operate as autonomous living beings and textual presences potentially subversive to anthropocentric meaning.

Secondly, ecocritical studies of *SGGK* categorically ignore the poem's embeddedness in the chivalric culture of late-fourteenth century England. *SGGK* belongs to the genre of chivalric romance, and there is sufficient evidence to presume that the poet was a cleric

intimately familiar with chivalric culture and wrote the poem for an aristocratic audience (Stanbury 149; Barrett 133-70). Therefore, any poetic treatment of chivalric identity in relation to the natural world is likely to be a response to, and to be formulated in terms of the contemporary debate on chivalric identity. However, only Twomey and Yamamoto pay marginal attention to elements of chivalric ideology in the poem. Twomey is not concerned with identity, and Yamamoto discusses chivalric identity only with reference to other texts (75-98). The present study addresses the relationship between the poem's sociohistorical context and its treatment of the chivalric ideal and the animal.

Thirdly, Riddy (misre)presents medieval Aristotelianism as viewing human life exclusively in terms of "sex and death" ("Nature" 218). Late-medieval empiricism, with its renewed interest in the materiality of the natural world and the human body, originated in the context of intellectualist and voluntarist debates on the relation between the human will and nature. It certainly reflected a theological crisis, but did not feature an understanding of the human, or, for that matter, of the animal, as a mortal sex machine. So far, no one has explored the theological dimension of *SGGK* from an ecocritical perspective. This is surprising, since any late-medieval conception of a nature-culture dichotomy would have been deeply influenced by Christian doctrine. The later Middle Ages saw a gradual disintegration of the High-Medieval understanding of divine order in nature and human society, resulting, by the mid fourteenth century, in a variety of contrasting views and intense theological and philosophical debates on the relation between nature and culture. Against this background the *Gawain*-poet formulated his understanding of what distinguishes the knight from the beast, and it is in this context that the ecocritical stance of *SGGK* is best understood.

2. Theoretical Framework: Animals in Medieval Literature

Literary animals are the object of literary animal studies, a discipline that is closely related to ecocriticism. Zoopoetics is a concept from this field that is particularly useful in analysing the relationship between chivalric identity and the animal. The term was first introduced by Derrida (6) and suggests, in the broadest sense, the presence of animals within a text. Kári Driscoll adds that zoopoetics is always a matter of zoo*poeiesis*, "of the creation *of* the animal as much as the creation *by means of* the animal" (14; emphasis in the original).[4] Zoopoetics studies the animal as a literary construct *and* as a formative factor of other concepts. Therefore, the constitution of chivalric identity in relation to the animal is a quintessentially zoopoetic question. If, as I have suggested above and demonstrate below, Gawain and Bertilak's notions of chivalric identity pivot on their respective rejection and acknowledgement of human-animal likeness, then an analysis of characters' attitudes to the animals in the poem is essential for understanding its stance on what constitutes true chivalry.

It is important to note that "the animal" itself is a conceptual category that exists solely within language. It is a generalisation of a multiplicity of living beings that defies objectification (Derrida 399). An actual animal is always an "insubstitutable singularity" that never manifests itself as the exemplar of an abstract category (Derrida 378). The literary animal is a product of the human imagination, an expression of anthropocentric meaning. Consequently, zoopoetics cannot and does not claim to take up Rudd's challenge to represent nature without imposing human meaning on it (*Greenery* 126; cf. Derrida 398-99; Yamamoto 13). Rather, zoopoetics examines the way in which animals constitute a (possibly disruptive) presence *within* a necessarily anthropocentric literary text. For Jacques Derrida animals are subversive, whether in the form of a literary trope or not: "Les animaux me regardent. Avec ou sans figure" (403).

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[4] From the Greek πoιέω "to make, create, produce," from which "poetry" is derived.

The animal is "the reference point by means of which" man seeks to identify himself (Derrida 416). However, the human-animal distinction "doesn't describe two edges, a unilinear and indivisible line having two edges, Man and Animal in general" (Derrida 399). Driscoll explains that the "dividing line separating 'man' from 'animal' is … not of the order of a differentiation between species—since there is no species called simply 'animal'—but rather runs through man himself" (9). The animal is a problematic foil for the human, since any human self-definition in opposition to the animal implies partial self-rejection. Derrida recognises this problem as the "terrible (and always possible) perversion by means of which the immune becomes auto-immunizing" (415). In the attempt to define a pristinely non-animal self, human identity is split.

Dual notions of human identity are by no means new, and exhibit an increasing antagonism between man's physical "animal" self and his rational "human" self. "Do you not see," writes John Scotus in the ninth century, "that man is in all the animals and they are in him, but that man is above them all? Hence one can speak correctly of him both affirmatively and negatively by saying: 'Man is an animal; man is not an animal'" (220; trans. Uhlfelder). Similarly, Thomas Aquinas affirms physical human-animal similarity but, following Aristotle (1.1253a), distinguishes the human from the animal on the basis of rationality (*Summa* 1-2.6.2). By the end of the thirteenth century Duns Scotus defines man's "human" self as radically opposed to his "animal" self: rationality constitutes precisely the capacity to resist a natural inclination, which animals cannot (Boler 117). Karl Steel maintains that medieval writers identify the human by (mis)recognising it as non-animal, and then subjecting the human to the impossible demands of this ideal self (Steel 5). Because at the same time there is an understanding of the human as partly animal in nature, the authority of the rational will over the body requires constant reaffirmation in order to keep the human conceptually distinct from the animal. Steel defines this process as a "self-forming dynamic of comparison

and rejection" (43).

Derrida identifies language as the essential quality held to distinguish the human from the animal: "the unique and indivisible limit held to separate man from animal, [is] the word, the nominal language of the word, the voice that names and that names the thing *as such*" (416; emphasis in the original). Language is the ability to make distinctions, to identify *this* as other than *that*. As such, language in itself is a kind of taxonomy. Adam's first words constituted the divinely ordained classification of the animals (Gen. 2.19-20). This divine taxonomy is reflected in the Bestiary, which classifies the weird and wonderful creatures of the medieval world. From its earliest beginnings at the end of the third or in the fourth century BC (Scott passim), the Bestiary tradition presents animals as illustrating points of Christian doctrine (c.f. *Physiologus*). This has occasioned some scholars to scoff at the tradition for being unscientific (e.g. George and Yapp), but I think it demonstrates how inextricably medieval taxonomy was intertwined with religious belief in cosmic order (c.f. Cronin for a similar view). The Bestiary testifies to the medieval faith in a divine order in the natural world and the human ability to comprehend that order through naming and categorisation.

Dorothy Yamamoto feels that the Bestiary's "model of total orderliness" betrays anxiety over creatures that breach taxonomic boundaries (29-30). An animal that does not conform to its character description in the Bestiary refutes divine taxonomic authority and generates uncertainty about the presence of divine order in the natural world. Such doubts, in turn, challenge the status of language. Linguistic distinctions might not be a receptive registration of divine order in nature, but an arbitrary human construct that may or may not bear a relation to an incoherent and unknowable world. As such, language no longer necessarily distinguishes the human from the animal: rather than a God-given and uniquely human insight into the nature of reality, it might have no more meaning than the chirping of

birds or the howling of wolves.

The remainder of this chapter discusses three examples of creatures that play across categories between species. They challenge medieval taxonomy and therewith notions of a divinely ordered natural world in which humans are inherently distinct from the animals. The first example is the dog, a familiar and cherished presence in medieval aristocratic circles and chivalric romance. In *The Master of the Game* Edward of Norwich emphasises its intelligence: *an hounde is of greet vndirstondynge and of greet knowynge … for he wil lerne* as a man *al that a man wil teche him* "a hound has a great capacity for understanding and knowledge … for he will learn *as a man* all that a man will teach him" (44; my emphasis). Moreover, the hound learns *through language* (cf. Yamamoto 117). Turbevile describes how dogs are trained with an entire repertoire of calls: *Then shall he speke and say hiw howndes till: / "Hors de couple! Avaunt, ay, avaunt!"* "then shall he speak and say to his hounds: "Disperse! Off you go, yes, go!" (246-47). Dogs' participation in human language appears to blur a strict dividing line between the animal and the human.

That the woman challenges a neat animal-human distinction has already been noted above. Traditionally marginalised in patriarchal societies, women were often seen as closer to nature than culture (Ortner 67-87; Crane 117). John of Salisbury observes a rise of references to an interchangeable nature between women and animals in the twelfth century (137). The snake was blended with the woman, and the lady-headed serpent became a commonplace in artistic depictions of the fall. "Just as the serpent became more human, Eve became more bestial. Her exterior form might be human, but the implication was that her nature was bestial" (Salisbury 137). On the other hand, one needs only to think of the elegant Guinevere in *SGGK*, lavishly decked out in luxury cloth and jewels and situated right at the centre of Arthur's court (74-84), to realise that women could also represent the pinnacle of chivalric culture. With one foot in the wilderness and the other in the civilised court, medieval women

would seem to straddle the nature-culture binary.

A third example of boundary-crossers is the fox. No animal is as profoundly humanised as Reynard. Arguably this personification should be dismissed on account of the "[u]ralte Gewohnheit der Fabel vom Tiere zu reden und den Menschen zu meinen" (Walzel 53, qtd. in Driscoll 1). Reynard may be so thoroughly humanised that his animal nature is completely wiped out. By contrast, I suggest that Reynard as literary figure poses a radical threat to animal-human distinction. Reynard can *bywrappe and couere his falshede, that his wordes seme as trewe as the gospel* "veil and cover up his falsehood so that his words seem as true as the gospel" (Varty 67; my translation). In contrast to Adam's divinely ordained naming of the animals, this foxy manipulation of language does not reflect divine order, but makes use of the *absence* of order to gain personal profit: Reynard is never punished by God. Other animals that rely on religious doctrine and learned clichés are unmasked as hypocrites who equally subscribe to the Reynardian credo of 'take what you can, whenever you can,' albeit unbeknown to themselves. For example, the bear in *Reynard the Fox*, urged by Reynard not to eat too greedily, responds with a complacent cliché which his behaviour—he is stuffing his face with honey—immediately contradicts: *wene ye that I were a fole: mesure is good in alle mete* "you mistake me for a fool: one must always eat with moderation" (15). At the end of the tale the bear is trapped in a tree and Reynard walks off laughing. How can one defend oneself against Reynard? By avoiding unthinking passions and appetites: all who fall victim to the fox do so because of a vice of their own (cf. Yamamoto 64; Janssens 94; *Physiologus* 27-28).

There is no divine order in Reynard's world. To think so is foolish: *mesure* is an illusion and it is those who skilfully manipulate language that carry the day. If *wordes* that *seme as trewe as the gospel* are only a means to gain profit at the expense of others, language is no longer a credible dividing line between what is "humane" and "inhuman." Reynard is

not simply a human being trapped in the body of a fox. He embodies the conflation of language with unbridled desire. In Reynard the medieval concepts of the human and the animal merge. Language becomes a skilful means of manipulation in a world inherently devoid of divine harmony, goodness and justice. Reynard's chivalric equivalent is Shakespeare's Falstaff. In his famous soliloquy on honour he displays a Reynardian attitude to language and embodies the crisis of chivalric identity that was beginning to be felt in the mid fourteenth century: "What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air" (5.1.133-35).

The next chapter discusses the socio-economic changes that contributed to the emergence of this foxy crisis of chivalric identity. This cultural context is crucial for understanding the relationship between animals and chivalric identity in *SGGK* because what produces Gawain's identity crisis is his realisation of his Reynardian manipulation of the chivalric code: Gawain is confronted with his own animal nature.

3. Sociohistorical Context: Chivalric Ideology

The scholarly debate on chivalric ideology has, for the last century or so, paid particular attention to the question of to what extent late-medieval chivalric ideology reflected a genuine ideal. Johan Huizinga maintained that chivalric ideology was an empty veneer: "In order to forget the painful imperfection of reality, the nobles turn to the continual illusion of a high and heroic life. They wear the mask of Lancelot and of Tristram. It is an amazing self-deception" (69). Lee Patterson summarises that "for Huizinga chivalry had always been essentially cosmetic; but what distinguished its late-medieval form was that the fraudulence could no longer be disguised" (*Chaucer* 171). Later scholars have increasingly viewed chivalry as a genuine ideal. Both Raymond Kilgour and Arthur Ferguson maintain that the late Middle Ages saw a decline of what had once been an authentic chivalric ideal. More recently Maurice Keen and Richard Kaeuper have argued that chivalry remained a genuine ideal throughout the Middle Ages. Kaeuper maintains that "it was largely through a chivalric lens that the medieval lay, male elite viewed and made sense of formative elements in their lives … chivalry formed a veritable template for understanding the social world and for living within it" (*Chivalry* 22).

In their focus on chivalry as a political and military force, both historians underestimate the extent to which chivalric ideology functioned as the central form of aristocratic self-definition. Patterson discusses this aspect of chivalric culture to some extent, but draws a picture of a social class fanatically concerned with self-legitimisation: "by understanding itself only in its own terms, it [chivalry] pre-empted the critical thought that a more strategically self-ware engagement with the world might have prompted" (*Chaucer* 175). His reading of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Colleen Donnelly's study of the popular *Weddinge of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* and *Gamelyn* would seem to suggest that questions about the validity of chivalric ideology were raised only outside aristocratic circles. *SGGK* shows that

criticism of traditional chivalry also prevailed in aristocratic circles. That a poet working in the 1370s felt that chivalric ideology required a reorientation is hardly surprising, since, as the next section shows, mid-fourteenth-century socio-economic developments had rendered the traditional chivalric ideal untenable.

3.1 Socioeconomic Changes and Chivalric Identity

Chivalry was never a profession elected by aspiring knights, but a vocation and mode of being ordained by God. Knights were "one of the socio-professional groups derived from the divine plan for the proper functioning of the world. Such men were not citizen soldiers who leave a peacetime profession temporarily for the exigency of war; their function defines them lifelong. They are answering a divine call, not recruiting a poster or draft notice" (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 43; cf. Patterson, *Chaucer* 176). If for Falstaff honour is an empty word, it constituted the very essence of traditional chivalric identity. At birth the knight knew himself placed in his proper station in the divinely ordained social hierarchy, and endowed with the qualities befitting that position. Middle English vocabulary testifies to the inextricable connection between social status and identity: words that indicate both high social status and corresponding character traits occur over a hundred times in *SGGK*.[5]

The legitimacy of the chivalric class came under pressure in the late fourteenth century. England was in the middle of the Hundred Years' War, which caused an increase in aspiring knights with a history of military achievement but without noble lineage (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 132). A strengthening of centralised state power did the same for knight-aspirants in administrative rather than military professions (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 130, 146). This growth of state power also eroded the independence of local knights and fostered a critical attitude to

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[5] Variations of *ryche* occur 44 times, *gentyl* 5, *fre* 6, *mensk* 11, *cortays* 26, and *noble* 11 times.

the royal court, to which the extravagance of Richard II's court added clerical reproach (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 129; Horrox 4; Jaeger 176-94). The influx of non-aristocratic and non-military aspirants to formal knighthood led to a twofold development in chivalric culture. On the one hand noble families strove to delimit entry into formal knightly status (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 124-26; Yamamoto 77). On the other hand there appeared a more informal conception of knighthood that did not require formal dubbing (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 140). Fourteenth-century writers like Geoffrey de Charny and Christine de Pizan address men in general, and present chivalry as an ideology for all classes (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 138). By the late fourteenth century the result is uncertainty about the status and necessity of formal knighthood and a new interest in the chivalric ideal as a model for noble-minded living in general (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 149).

The developments in chivalric culture were accompanied by the rise of a mercantile class and the upward social mobility caused by the labour shortage after the mid-century Plague. While those at the top of the social pyramid issued sumptuary laws to guard their exclusive rights to markers of social distinction (Muzzarelli), social climbers of humble origin enthusiastically continued to adopt aristocratic clothing styles, buy coats of arms and marry nobility in financial distress (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 127). In traditional society, divided by God into labourers, clergy and nobility, fulfilment and salvation lay in the fulfilment of one's God-given task (cf. Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 43). The falling apart of the traditional social order indicates that happiness had come to entail movement up the social ladder. We recognise a change in mentality from that of the bear to Reynard's attitude: from *mesure is good in alle mete* to "take what you can, whenever you can."

In the twelfth century chivalric ideals "are often assumed to be clear, almost as if they were a part of the natural order" (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 9). Two centuries later Richard II shows himself a strategic manipulator of chivalric identity in his assumption of the ancient arms of

Edward the Confessor instead of the English leopards and fleurs-de-lis in an attempt to solicit Irish sympathies. According to Froissart *it was said the yrisshmen were well pleased, and the soner they enclyned to him* "it was said that the Irish were very pleased, and therefore yielded sooner" (6.155). Heraldry developed in the first half of the twelfth century, when knights started to bear motifs on their shields to identify themselves in tournaments (Yamamoto 76). Patterson emphasises the "material sense of selfhood that it [chivalric culture] presupposed" (*Chaucer* 185): the correspondence between outward appearance and identity is uncontested. Because knights "simply *are* the devices that they bear," "any kind of misreading would impugn the integrity of its bearer" (Yamamoto 83, 82; emphasis in the original). This self-conception stands in diametrical opposition to Falstaff's reasoning that honour should be dismissed *because* it "is a mere scutcheon", in other words, a meaningless symbol (5.1.140). Richard's heraldry policy testifies to a gap between chivalric appearance and identity. The fourteenth century is the turning point between the confident chivalric identity discourse of the twelfth century and the scepticism of the sixteenth. It is a century of profound change in which the aristocracy seek to redefine "their sense of themselves and their place in the world" (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 23).

3.2 Core Components of Chivalric Identity

Because we look back to the Middle Ages through the filter of Romanticism, it can be difficult to distinguish medieval conceptions of knighthood from later ideas about chivalry. An examination of two core components of chivalric identity that were felt to be in need of redefinition in the fourteenth century brings into focus the chivalric identity discourse as it prevailed in the later Middle Ages. Kaeuper proposes two fundamental components of chivalric identity: the concept of the *prudhomme* and the knight as model Christian. He observes that the "constant and ideal goal was to produce the worthy man (*prudhomme*) who

achieved a *balanced set* of desirable traits" (*Chivalry* 45; second emphasis mine). William of Marshall rhapsodises: "My God! What magnificent things are prowess, nobility of heart, generosity and wisdom, *when they are gathered together*" (7; trans. Gregory; my emphasis). Kaeuper describes a passage in John Barbour's *Bruce* where the author goes to great lengths to square his protagonist's ignoble attack on the unsuspecting sleeping English with his professed chivalry, and concludes that for Barbour "Bruce's chivalry remains beyond question: 'mycht' and 'slycht' are not stark alternatives, but two trump cards in a winning chivalric hand well played by his hero" (*Chivalry* 50). Kaeuper argues that knights could retain chivalric "core values only by being flexible and finding balance", compensating with one virtue for the lack of another (*Chivalry* 56, 53). However, rather than pragmatism and moral relativism, Marshall's twelfth-century eulogy and Barbour's late-fourteenth-century anxious attempts to reconcile sleight with chivalry suggest a growing awareness of friction between *slycht* and chivalric identity but also an unwavering dedication to the chivalric ideal. In the later fourteenth century chivalric identity struggled to come to terms with a new mentality of Reynardian cunning.

The second fundamental component of the chivalric ideal is the knight as model Christian in his readiness to die. Kaeuper shows that chivalry was a thoroughly Christian discourse: knights did not grudgingly submit to clerical constraints but understood themselves in Christian terms (*Holy Warriors* passim; *Chivalry* 264-310). Arnold Angenendt and Theo Riches quote a medieval hymn to illustrate the intense experience of death in the medieval world: "[i]n the midst of life we are in death" (290). Death contained both the threat of eternal punishment and the promise of salvation, and the medieval Christian anticipated it with fear and hope: to "the just man death brings glory, to the sinner eternal punishment" (Monmouth 5.128-30). Because death comes unannounced, it was important to prepare for it. In the later Middle Ages, "[d]ying was to be learnt and became a discipline (*ars*)"

(Angenendt and Riches 300). One should not flee death but face it courageously, and, according to Benedict, "keep [it] daily before one's eyes" (qtd. in Angenendt and Riches 300). As model human with an especially dangerous profession, courageous readiness for death is an essential component of the chivalric ideal (Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 45). Charny continuously emphasises it: knights must fight "without fearing any peril and without sparing your wretched body, which you should hold to be of little account, caring only for your soul and for living an honourable life" (175; cf. 122-23, 132-33, 175, 194; Barbour 2646). Other writers stress that knights must strive to imitate Christ in their readiness to die (Eschenbach 154; *Chanson* 81; *Perlesvaus* 238). In the High-Medieval world of *mesure*, where God determined your lifespan, this was a relatively unproblematic ideal. Christian and chivalric ideologies were oriented to dutiful compliance with the divine plan. However, the turbulent fourteenth century is the midpoint between the High Middle Ages and the Elizabethan Era of Falstaff. The Falstaff type of knight will not submit to an early death, however honourable it may be. The fourteenth century needs to reform the traditional chivalric ideal to come to terms with this new mentality.

4. Religious Context: Nature in Late-Medieval Theology and Philosophy

So far, ecocritical studies of *SGGK* have paid little attention to medieval conceptualisations of the natural world. Jozef Janssens shows that natural imagery was used principally for stylistic and structural purposes, and argues that literary descriptions of nature give little information about people's lived experience of the natural world (Janssens 176). Therefore, the relevance of speculation on people's lived experience of the wilderness is open to question (e.g. Rudd, "Wilderness" takes this approach). *SGGK* is more likely informed by theoretical ideas about nature than real-life experiences (cf. Janssens 188). This chapter provides a cursory overview of the later medieval theological and philosophical debates that shaped ideas about nature that a fourteenth-century poet would have encountered.

Dupré characterises the High-Medieval worldview as an ontotheological synthesis (42). He uses Martin Heidegger's term "ontotheology" to refer to an account of reality that combines two forms of metaphysical explanation that, taken together, aim to make the entirety of reality intelligible to human understanding. "These are an *ontology* that accounts for that which all beings have in common, and a *theology* that accounts for that which causes and renders intelligible the system of beings as a whole" (Halteman, n.p.; emphasis in the original). The High-Medieval ontotheology was synthetic in that it combined an Aristotelian notion of divine order in the natural world with the Christian belief in a transcendent God (Dupré passim; cf. Mostert's "Carolingian synthesis" [53]).

For Aristotle the cosmos is a single, ordered totality of being that includes the divinities (Dupré 16-18). Its ordering principle is λογος, which does not denote reason as an attribute of the human intellect but rather the divine order intrinsic to the natural world. Human intelligence is not the capacity to generate ideas but indicates the mind's ability to recognise the order present in nature: reality and the mind participate in the same intelligibility (Dupré 23). Aristotle conceives of the natural world as a self-sufficient unity. All things in nature

have a τελος or ultimate goal, but this is not on grounds of their being created by a divine agent (Shields, n.p.). The natural world in itself contains both its ultimate goal and the potential for the realisation of that goal (Dupré 26).

By contrast, in the Christian view the Creation is not a self-sufficient and inherently divine unity but created *ex nihilo* by a transcendent God (Gen. 1.1-24). The natural world depends for its existence and ultimate meaning on an external divine agent. The ultimate goal of all beings lies outside nature, namely in God's salvation. In contrast to the Greek gods, who were subject to the ordering principle of λογος just like the rest of the natural world, the omnipotent Christian God is subject to no higher order of any kind. Because in the Christian ontotheology God and nature are not subject to the same ordering principle, the course of the universe cannot be assumed to reflect divine qualities like harmony, reason and goodness (Dupré 124). Even if the natural world retains some traces of its divine origin (cf. Rom. 2.14), nature is essentially a physical structure that is not divine in itself.

The Christian tradition has been in dialogue with Greek philosophy since its earliest beginnings. For example, the Gospel of John assimilates the Greek λογος into a Christian framework (1:1-4), and Plotinus incorporates Aristotelian concepts into his Christian theology (Dupré 22). Aquinas's notion of natural law mirrors Aristotle's concept of a rational order inherent in nature (*Summa* 1-2.94.4), and his theory of cognition builds on Aristotle's trust in the mind's ability to recognise that order (*De Anima* 3.4; *Summa* 1-1.85.1). According to Aquinas "man has by his nature an inclination toward virtue" (*Summa* 1-2.85.1; cf. 60.1, 63.1). Nature—i.e. human nature and the non-human natural world—is intrinsically rational and good because it is directed toward the divine. This High-Medieval sense of cosmic order is also reflected in a return of ancient astronomy and macrocosm-microcosm analogies that stressed the harmonious interconnection of the natural world and the human body and mind (cf. Tracy 35; Hutton 138; Dupré 33-34).

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw a gradual disintegration of the High-Medieval ontotheological synthesis. God and the natural world are seen as increasingly separate. For Aquinas the two were indistinguishable—nature did not constitute a concrete reality independent of its divine τέλος (Rahner 302)—but thirteenth-century scholastics begin to consider the natural world an adequate object for rational investigation independently of its divine destiny (Dupré 170).[6] The rise of nominalism reflects the perceived loss of the mind's access to a divine order in nature: words and concepts no longer reflect cosmic harmony but are understood as constructions of the human mind (Dupré 41). In the 1380s Honoré Bonet writes:

> Aristotle says that, of necessity, in this world earthly bodies derive their condition and nature from the disposition of the stars. But it is plain that among the stars there is by nature rebellion and contrariety, for one engenders heat, another cold; one love, another dissensions; one luxury, another chastity; one blood, another melancholy. Then since there is contradiction between these heavenly bodies it most certainly exists among earthly bodies, which are governed by their movements (118).

Aristotle's notion of divine immanence is discarded in favour of a transcendent God, and the natural world becomes a meaningless and irrational mechanical structure. As a result, the human self is experienced as split into the physical body and the divine soul, which needs to suppress the degenerate passions of the lower self. Later-medieval interpretations of Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings contribute to the mind-body duality (cf. Ruud 71-73; Dupré 32-33). "There is a double spring of action," maintains Albertus Magnus, "namely,

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[6] This is what Riddy identifies as Aristotelian science ("Speaking" 150). Scholastics did indeed appropriate Aristotelian empiricism, but the loss of Aristotle's notion of cosmic order is more significant: empirical observation in itself was not new (cf. Janssens 194; Varty 147-50).

nature and the will; and nature for its parts is ruled by the stars, while the will is free; but unless it resists, it is swept along by nature and becomes mechanized" (qtd. in Thorndike 2:584).[7] By the end of the thirteenth century voluntarists like Duns Scotus and William of Ockham reach an understanding of the relationship between nature and the human will that is diametrically opposed to the High-Medieval concept of cosmic order. For Aquinas sin was "unnatural" and natural inclinations were rational and good, but according to Scotus virtue and reason require precisely the capability to act "beyond the natural in some sense, even beyond one's 'nature'" (qtd. in Boler 117).

The disintegration of the High-Medieval ontotheological synthesis produced a variety of contrasting attitudes to the natural world in the fourteenth century. Aquinas was still considered a great authority and intellectualist theologians like Eckhart maintained concepts of a divinely ordered natural world into the fourteenth century. Contrasting voluntarist notions of a mind-body duality were widespread: somehow the feeble human will had to live virtuously in a sinful body and a corrupted world from which God seemed absent. Patterson shows that Saint Francis felt that the natural world stood in a more direct and authentic relation to God ("Brother Fire" 251), and the popularity of the Franciscan order in England might indicate that positive attitudes to the natural world were also current (Moorman). Many thinkers combined elements of intellectualist and voluntarist thought. Julian of Norwich, for example, attempted to realign nature with virtue but shared the voluntarist belief that the highest Christian ideal is love rather than contemplation (Ruud).

A fourteenth-century poet would have encountered different theological and philosophical perspectives on nature. In all likelihood, he would have juggled concepts from different discourses in the formulation of his own stance. A thorough treatment of the topic is

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[7] Thorndike's translation of *induratur*—literally "hardened"—as "mechanized" is anachronistic (cf. Patterson, *Chaucer* 220), but warranted because it conveys accurately Magnus's view of the natural world as an essentially physical structure.

likely to include a stance on the presence or absence of a divine order in nature. It can also

be expected to address whether virtuous action is antithetical to one's natural inclinations,

and if so, whether virtue is attained through an assertion of the will or an act of love.

PART TWO

5. Textual Analysis: Animals and Chivalric Identity in *SGGK*

The following reading of *SGGK* suggests that the poet blurs the animal-human distinction to show that Gawain's essentialist and pristinely non-animal chivalric self-understanding is untenable. Gawain's unilateral rejection of all things animal, including his own carnal desires, is problematic because it fails to respond in an ethically constructive manner to the physicality of the human body, and Gawain's identity crisis remains unresolved. Bertilak embodies a contrasting understanding of chivalric identity centred on a loving care that entails respect for the natural environment, alliance with animals and a compassionate attitude to human natural impulses. Bertilak's concept of chivalric identity is a reorientation of the traditional notion that chivalry reflects inherent aristocratic nobility because it presents chivalry as an ideal for all to aspire to in spite of one's conflicting natural impulses. The poet reinforces his argument for a more informal understanding of chivalry by demonstrating that Gawain's traditional chivalric ideal is spiritually deconstructive while Bertilak's notion of chivalric identity integrates the Christian values of love for God and one's neighbour.

5.1 Wily Fox, Foxy Lady: Blurring the Animal-Human Boundary

Animals in *SGGK* operate as autonomous living beings to various degrees. The poet draws attention to birds' capacity for suffering: *they piteously there piped for pine of the colde* "they chirped piteously because of their suffering from the cold" (747). The poem provides a personal history for the boar: *the sellokest swyn* [had *l*]*ong sithen fro the sounder that soght was for olde; / For he was borlych and brod, bor althergrattest* "the most remarkable swine had long ago left the sounder because of his great age; / Because he was handsome and big, the greatest boar of his kind" (1439-41). This passage characterises the boar as an autonomous individual that determines the course of his own life; *sellokest*—meaning "most remarkable, uncommon, marvellous"—emphasises his individuality (*MED* "selly, adj. 1.").

The fox is more strikingly personified than any other animal in the poem. He has a name: *Reynarde* (1728), the hunters call him *thef* "thief" (1725), and the narrator briefly enters Reynard's mind as he darts away [*w*]*ith all the wo on lyve* "with all the woe in the world" (1717). At the close of the hunt the poet imbues the fox with a soul, typically reserved for human characters, and the hunters blow their bugles seemingly in tribute: the glorious noise *there was raysed for Reynarde saule* "there was raised for Reynard's soul" (1916; also noted by George 38). The scene ends when the fox is stripped of his *cote* "coat" (1921), which reinforces the blurring of categories: while animal hides began to be referred to as *cotes* at the end of the fourteenth century (*OED* "coat, n. 7a"), the fact that Reynard is *stripped* of his coat reinstates it as a garment, another typically human characteristic.

Reynard's zigzag course to shake off the hounds demonstrates a capacity to devise strategies to counter those of his adversaries that seems to differ only in degree from the strategic foresight with which Bertilak's hunting party drove the deer to pre-set stations two days before (1699-1700, 1704, 1707-8, 1727-28; 1146-73). For the hunters their skill is a marker of chivalry, as the hunt is presented as an aristocratic art and discipline: *the ledes were so lerned* "the men were so cultivated" (1170; cf. 1139, 1143; Rooney 13). The fox's cleverness has less positive connotations: *Reynarde was wyly* "Reynard was wily" (1728). Variations of the corresponding noun *wyle* occur five times in the poem. Twice it refers to the hounds in the fox hunt (1700, 1711), and Gawain uses it three times to describe the wily schemes employed by women to ruin his biblical heroes (2415, 2420, 2425). Hounds, foxes and women would seem to share a capacity for cunning from which the knight is anxious to dissociate himself. Even if their behaviour *looks* the same, the text insists we keep the noble knight distinct from the category of wily women, hounds and foxes.

George argues that the personification of the fox indicates that Bertilak "exists in relative harmony with" the natural environment: the personification of the animal contributes

to the poet's representation of Bertilak's interactions with the natural world "as respectful"
(38). By contrast, Yamamoto maintains that the fox is constructed as a person only to be
unmasked as a mock human (129). According to her, the mention of Reynard's 'soul' "only
serves to emphasize that he really has *none*" (Yamamoto 129; emphasis in the original).
Yamamoto's interpretation suggests that with Reynard's ultimate reduction to an object for
human consumption—the *foule fox felle* "foul fox pelt" (1944)—his assimilation into a
violently anthropocentric system of meaning is absolute.

I suggest that both readings are valid but incomplete. If George is perhaps too uncritical
of the violent assimilation of the fox into a human-centred utility discourse, Yamamoto
overlooks that the personification of Reynard leaves traces. Even if the fox is ultimately
disassembled, literally, into an object for human use, its similarity to the human in its
cleverness and its capacity for *wo* is not obliterated from the reader's memory. Steel's
concept of a "self-forming dynamic of comparison and rejection" accommodates this
duplicity (43): animal-human likeness may be suggested only in order to reject it, but this
approach undermines itself by raising the possibility of animal-human likeness. Even if the
personification of the fox in *SGGK* is an attempt to distinguish chivalric identity from the
animal, it simultaneously suggests animal-human likeness.

Textually encircled by the personification of the fox, Lady Bertilak blurs the animal-
human distinction with her corruption of language in the manner of Reynard. If speech in
general is a marker of human distinction, courtly speech makes the lady. Andreas Capellanus
shows that traditionally noble speech was considered the natural behaviour of the noble lady.

Your kind and gentle reply abundantly reveals your moral worth, for you

sought to indulge your nature and to fit your words to your noble birth.

Nothing can be more conducive to the praise of a noble woman than her

employment of gentle language when she speaks (65; trans. Walsh).[8]

The lady's noble speech is praiseworthy because it reveals her nature; her noble birth defines her noble character and justifies her place in God's divine plan. With her foxy corruption of courtly speech Lady Bertilak overthrows this entire line of thought: language functions to conceal rather than reveal truth.

The reader has been set up to recognise a corruption of the ideal of courtly speech. If in Capellanus' view it functions to *reveal* the speaker's true nature, Arthur employs *cortays speche* "courtly speech" to *let no semblaunt be sene* "let no appearance be seen" of his true feelings (469, 468). Similarly, Bertilak's household are excited to learn from Gawain *sleghtes of thewes* "etiquette expedients" (1916). *Sleghte* could simply mean cleverness or skill, but the *MED* includes "stratagem," "clever device," "trick" "and sorcery" in its primary meaning ("sleight, n. 1."). *Sleghte* could be synonymous with "cunning," "deceit," "wile" (*MED* "sleight, n. 2."). If traditionally courtliness was the spontaneous and natural evidence that the social world was organised according to God's plan, the *Gawain*-poet's description of *luf-talkyng* as a social trick anyone can learn presents courtly conduct and chivalric identity as open to Reynardian deception. Bertilak's household significantly focus on outward appearance only; they are not interested in chivalric virtue *an sich* but in what one can *achieve* with skilful talk: they want to learn which *sped is in speche* "success can be attained with speech" (918).

Like Reynard, Lady Bertilak effortlessly appropriates different discourses in the pursuit of her goal. In the first bedroom scene she employs a military register in her reference to martial situations in which sleepers are vulnerable to surprise attacks. *Ye are a sleper unslye,*

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[8] Some have read *De Amore* as a satirical subversion of the courtly love tradition. Andersen-Wyman calls it a "medieval Derridean performance" (28). However, Monson argues convincingly that Capellanus is "generally successful" in establishing a genuine ideal of courtliness (285).

that man may slyde hider "you are a naive sleeper, that one can creep hither" (1209). She

reveals not a trace of Barbour's unease about the discourtesy of attacking an unwary

opponent: [*n*]*ow are ye tan as tite! … / I schal bynde yow in your bed, that be ye ful trayste*

"now are you taken [prisoner] without hesitation! … / I shall imprison you in your bed, of

that you may be certain" (1210-11; cf. 1291). When a military attack does not win the knight

over, Lady Bertilak adopts an (utterly uncourtly) mercantile register and bluntly puts a price

on his head (1268-75). If the strategic warrior and merchant openly pursue personal profit,

for Lady Bertilak courtly speech is simply another means to get what she wants: *courtaysye*

"courtesy" is a method to gain as many kisses as possible (1489-90).

In her discursive jumps Lady Bertilak is similar not only to Reynard as literary

character, but also to the Bestiary fox. The fox was thought to adopt a zigzag motion in the

hunt (Steele n.p.; cf. 1700, 1704, 1706, 1727-28; *Cleanness* 534). With similar twists and

turns, the lady first "attacks" Gawain with overt seduction, then with scolding, feigned

heartbreak, the request of a love-token, and the offers of a golden ring and the green girdle

(1770-72, 1779-80, 1792-96, 1799-1800, 1817-20, 1829-66). Lady Bertilak is also foxy in

that with feigned heartbreak and resignation she pretends to give up her attack, after which

her "prey" relaxes before she delivers the final blow in the shape of the girdle (1829-66). The

fox was thought to employ a similar strategy: he "throws himself down and rolls over as

though dead … Now the birds, thinking the fox dead, descend upon him to devour him. But

he stretches out and seizes them, and the birds themselves die a miserable death"

(*Physiologus* 27; trans. Curley).

5.2 Foxy Knight: Gawain's Identity Crisis

Gawain's knightly identity is spelled out in the poet's description of the pentagram on his

shield (623-66). In view of traditional chivalry's material selfhood, in which knights *are* the

heraldic images they bear, the fact that the poet feels the need to explain in such detail *why the pentangel apendes to that prince* "why the pentagram suits that prince" might suggest that the knight's identification with his coat of arms is no longer a given (623). Gawain's virtues are inseparably connected and *endeles* "infinite" (628-30; cf. Aquinas, *Summa* 1-2.65 "On the Connectedness of the Virtues"; Beauregard 146-47). The pentagram is a claim of absolute virtue: Gawain is *as gold pured / Voyded of uch vilany* "pure as gold / devoid of all villainy" (633-34). Like refined gold *that* fyne *fader of nurture* "that *refined* father of good breeding" is devoid of faults (919; my emphasis; cf. 912; Putter and Stokes 316; *MED* "fin, adj. 3"; *Cleanness* 794, 1122).

If he were free of sin, Gawain would be immune to any foxy lady. As observed on page 17, the bear falls prey to Reynard through his lust for honey. In a similar vein the *Physiologus* observes that the fox only succeeds in deceiving "those who live according to the flesh … Although he may hold sinners within his gullet, to spiritual men and those perfected in faith, however, he is dead and reduced to nothing" (27). If the pentangle truly *accordes to this knight* "suits this knight" Gawain is safe (631). However, he has to face the lady's seduction and Bertilak's blow without his escutcheon. The poem reveals behind the painted shield a man as tortured by desire and fear as any medieval beast. Gawain's pristinely non-animal self-understanding cannot hold. That Gawain is no sexless Galahad is clear from his first encounter with the ladies of Hautdesert. The knight examines breasts *bare displayed* "displayed bare", *nakede lyppes* "naked lips", body *schort and thick* "short and stout," and buttocks *balwe and brode* "round and broad" to conclude that the younger lady is [*m*]*ore lykkerwys on to lik* "tastier to lick" (955, 962, 966, 967, 968). Even if he resists the lady's advances, his sexual gaze contradicts the pentangle claim. The same is true for the girdle *sleghte* "trick" (1858). *For care of thy knokke* "for fear of your blow" Gawain sacrificed his virtue (2379, 2381). The pentagram as a symbol of absolute virtue may be an ideal Gawain

aspires to, but it is not emblematic of his identity.

The harshness of Gawain's self-reproach has puzzled and intrigued many (e.g. Hills 130; De Roo; Burrow; Beauregard 149). However, given Gawain's allegedly endless and inseparable virtues, for the knight to have been found wanting at all invalidates the entire pentangle claim that underpins his sense of identity. Bertilak's assurance that he only *lakked a little* "was hardly found wanting" is not much of a consolation (2366). From a traditional chivalric perspective Gawain's self-castigation might not be excessive; the ideal of the *prudhomme* with a balanced set of desired qualities and the knight as model Christian in his readiness to die were core components of chivalric identity. It is precisely the loss of his chivalric identity that Gawain laments: *cowardise me taghte / To acorde me with covetyse,* my kinde *to forsake, / That is largesse and leaute that longes to knightes* "cowardice taught me / to go along with covetousness, to forsake *my nature*, / which is generosity and loyalty that belongs to knights" (2379-81; my emphasis). Until the sixteenth century "kind" in general meant "the inherent and inseparable combination of properties giving any object, event, quality, etc., its fundamental character"; with reference to a living being it signified the "natural disposition, character, or temperament of a person or animal; innate character; nature" (*OED* "kind, n."). The key terms are "inherent," "fundamental," "natural," "innate" and "nature." Gawain's identity crisis consists of the discovery that virtue is not inherent and natural to the knight, but diametrically opposed to his natural inclinations. Like the parrots embroidered on his headband, beneath his courtliness and pretty talk Gawain is subject to the animal's passions (612; cf. McMunn 70). With the firm belief in his innate chivalric identity, Gawain was only armed against external attacks. However, the girdle trick shows that the real challenge are the knight's own natural inclinations. If anything, the pentangle is a shield against his own nature. Gawain's discovery that he shares the animal's unthinking desire and fear implies that the High-Medieval notion of divine order in the world, the ontotheological

ground for the knight's inherent nobility, has vanished. The pentangle was not just a claim about Gawain's personal identity, but also a claim about the world:

> the twelfth-century Renaissance … put the pentagram at the centre of its
>
> interplay between scripture, divine harmony, and mathematics. In that
>
> century both Honorius of Autun and Hildegard von Bingen asserted that the
>
> human body is constructed upon the basis of the number five, having five
>
> senses, five members, and five figures. This made the five-pointed star the
>
> symbol of the microcosmos, the earthly reflection of the divine plan and the
>
> divine image (Hutton 67).

Gawain's five-times-five identity formula implies divine harmony in the world. The loss of this belief is reflected in the *Gawain*-poet's description of nature.

5.3 The God-Forsaken World of *SGGK*

The passage of seasons at the beginning of the second fit presents the natural world as devoid of divine agency. Nature is radically autonomous, and syntactic subject positions are occupied by *cloudes* "clouds," *flowres* "flowers," *the donkande dew* "the moistening dew" and the *blysful blusch of the bryght sunne* "blissful blush of the bright sun" (505, 507, 519, 520). There is no mention of a Christian divine agent: it is the mutable *yere* "year" itself that determines its outcome (498). Nowhere is God's will mentioned as a directing force. The passage brings together the *solace of the softe somer* "solace of the soft summer" and the [*w*]*roth wynd* "angry wind" of winter in a dynamic physical cycle of life and death characterised by opposition and change (510; 525):

> *Then all rypes and rotes that ros upon firste,*
>
> *And thus yernes the yere in yisterdayes mony,*
>
> *And wynter wyndes agayn, as the world askes*

> *No fage*
>
> "Then all that first rose up ripens and rots,
>
> And thus the year runs by in many yesterdays,
>
> And winter comes around again, as the world requires
>
> Truly" (528-31).

The relative isolation of the passage and its stylistic finesse testify to the influence of the High-Medieval latinate literary tradition of *descriptio* (cf. Janssens 182). A comparison with Matthew of Vendôme's textbook example of this tradition shows how unorthodox the *Gawain*-poet's passage is. Vendôme's *descriptio* revolves around the *natura formatrix* motif: it presents nature as a harmonious totality animated by the classical figure of Natura (1-14). All natural phenomena are instrumental in the rational order of the universe; plants, animals and weather conditions are ordered according to their specific merits (15-62, 119-150, 113-116). If, from a Christian perspective, this literary trope is potentially problematic in itself because it implicitly places God one step removed from his operations within a more mechanistically conceived universe (Thomas 12), the *Gawain*-poet goes one step further in omitting *any* Christian divine agent in his presentation of nature as a self-sustaining mechanism. Moreover, to a medieval Christian reader Vendôme's ordered and benign natural world in itself might have been indicative of an omnibeneficient Creator. By contrast, the *Gawain*-poet's natural world full of chaos, strife and decay makes it difficult to conceive of a direct relationship between nature and the divine. How, and even whether, God is involved with the natural world is not clear.

Putter and Stokes gloss *as the world askes* as "in accordance with the rules governing life in this world" (530; 640). Similar phrases appear elsewhere in the poem and in other alliterative poetry: *wele other wo, as the wyrde likes* "good fortune or sorrow, as fate would have it", *as the world askes* "as the world requires" and *efter wele comes wa, for so the werd*

askis "after happiness comes sorrow, for that is what fate requires" (2134; *Morte Arture* 2187; *Wars of Alexander* 4750). These parallels encourage a reading of the passage as indicative of *wyrde* as the governing principle of nature. This notion is similar to Fortune, or the Wheel of Fortune, and signifies not so much God's will but destiny as an arbitrary force that wreaks havoc on innocent individuals. In a similar vein, Gawain asks [*o*]*f destines derf and dere / What may man do bot fonde?* "what can man do but patiently bear bad and good fortune?" (564-65). Chaucer's work features a similarly fickle notion of destiny: [*t*]*hus kan Fortune hir wheel governe and gye, / And out of joye brynge men to sorwe* "thus can Fortune govern and guide her wheel, / and throw men from joy into sorrow" (*Monk's Tale* 2396-97).

The term "fortune" only occurs once in *SGGK*, but it is significant. The narrator describes how Arthur will not eat before enjoying a story or a joust, in which *fortune wolde fylsen hem* [the fighters] "fortune will assist them" (99). The notion of fortune as the power that determines the outcome of a joust contrasts with the tradition of trial by combat, in which the outcome of a fight was believed to reflect the judgment of God (Reed 46; cf. e.g. *Beowulf* 440-41). The preceding lines, where Arthur is described as *sumwhat child-gered* "having somewhat childish ways" (86), show that this passage is narrator text, not focalised by Arthur (cf. 89). The *Gawain*-poet suggests that the extent to which God directs human affairs is uncertain. Gawain's later claim that his faith saves his life in the battles in the wilderness might seem to contradict this. However, Gawain's faith is named last in a list of three. *Nade he ben doghty and drye and Dryhtyn had served, / Douteles he had ben ded and dreped ful ofte* "had he not been strong and brave and served God, / doubtless he would have been dead and killed" (724-25). Whether belief without valour and strength would have saved him from the *wormes* "serpents", *wolves* and *wodwos* "wild men" is still unclear (720, 721).

The third reference to the question of divine presence in the natural world reinforces the sense of God's distance. *The day drives to the derk, as the Dryhtyn biddes*. / Bot *wylde*

wederes of the worlde wakened thereoute "the day drives out the dark, as God commands. / *Except for* the wild weather of the world that batters outside" (1999-2000; my emphasis). The rhythm of day and night follows a divine pattern (cf. Gen. 1:4-5), but [*b*]*ot* signals a relationship of contrast between the lines. The quoted lines are followed by a description of the storm in terms of autonomy and violent strife similar to the passage of seasons discussed above (2001-5, 501-30). *Bot* seems to suggest that this storm is not subject to divine intervention. God laid out the initial pattern of Creation, but He is no longer present in the natural world.

An implication of the *Gawain*-poet's presentation of the natural world likely to elude the modern reader is the association between seasonal change and the Fall. The medieval understanding of nature was not evolutionary but eschatological: change in the natural world does not describe progressive stages of development but reflects the corruption of the cosmos resulting from original sin. Before the Fall Adam and Eve lived in God's intimate presence and in harmony with nature. Paradise "was a blissful place were the change of seasons, decay and death had no place: all life existed in a state of permanent bloom" (Janssens 186; my translation). After the Fall the natural world became a corrupted maze subject to change and decay, where natural inclinations became divorced from reason (Janssens 187). In *SGGK* the emphasis on the passage of seasons and death and decay in nature carries connotations of the Fall: man no longer experiences God's nearness and the Creation is a source of temptation and danger.

For the medieval reader, thoroughly versed in Christian doctrine, flashes of harmony in nature in all probability connoted the paradisal state of cosmic harmony (Janssens 186). The brooks in medieval gardens and parks alluded to the four rivers of paradise (Hugenholtz 13). If we read the brook in Bertilak's park in this way (1591), the rivers that Gawain encounters in uncultivated and sinister natural settings might suggest that echoes of paradise can be

found even in the most inhospitable wilderness (715; 2173). Another sign of divine presence

in the to all other appearances so godforsaken natural world of *SGGK* is the apparent

fulfilment of Gawain's prayer. Anxious to perform his Christmas devotions, Gawain asks

Mary to direct him to some suitable dwelling (736-39). The poet does not spell it out, but the

emphasis on the immediacy of the fulfilment of the knight's appeal suggests that the prayer is

effective (763-64). It would seem that divine aid is available provided it is deliberately asked

for. This reading finds support in an earlier passage. In the desolate realm of Logres Gawain

has *no gome bot God by gate with to carpe* "no man but God to talk with on the road" (696),

which suggests that even in the most barren wilderness God is present to provide comfort

when the traveller addresses him.

I have been reluctant to illustrate points of argument with biblical citations because

with its many cryptic passages, virtually anyone can cite scripture for their purpose.

However, Christ's teaching of "seek, and ye shall find" is relatively uncontroversial. It

appears toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount, and immediately precedes the Golden

Rule of charity (Matt. 7.12). The passage reads as follows. "Ask, and it shall be given you:

seek, and you shall find: knock, and it shall be opened to you" (Matt. 7.7).[9] Significantly, the

discussed passage is Gawain's only prayer. Immediately before the girdle passage, the

narrator emphasises the hero's need of divine aid. *Gret preil betwene hem stode / Nif Mary of

her knight mynne* "great peril loomed / if Mary should not look after her knight" (1768-69).

Less than a hundred lines later Gawain has accepted the green girdle that will undo him: in

his reliance on a Lady Bertilak's theory that *knights bring blisse into bour with* bountees her

owne "knights bring home bliss with *their own deeds* of prowess" he has forfeited to ask for

divine help (1519; my emphasis). Gawain's subsequent claims to the contrary are

questionable. Given that he is wearing a magical device that he hopes will save his life,

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[9] All Bible quotations are taken from the Douay-Rheims translation.

Gawain's professed faith that [*f*]*ul wel con Dryhtyn schape* / *His servauntes for to save* "certainly God can save his servants" is not very convincing (2138-39; cf. 2158-59, 2208).

Gawain's costly reliance on his own skills rather than God's help corresponds to David Hills's analysis of the hero's fault. Hills argues convincingly that Gawain's *covetyse* "covetousness" (*SGGK* 2380) indicates a turning away from God in the understandable but theologically misguided attempt to save his life through a trick of his own rather than put himself in God's hands, which Joseph Longo identifies as the deadly sin of pride (69-70). Less convincing is Hills's argument that Gawain's harsh self-reproach is "only fitting and in keeping with his moral scrupulousness" (130). Rather than courtly humbleness, Gawain's claim that the stain of sin never goes away, for *there hit ones is tached twynne wil hit never* "for whence it has once stuck it will never go away" reflects a state of despair (2512; cf. 2436, 2488). In his classification of despair as a mortal sin Aquinas observes that God forgives sinners, because it is not His wish that they should die, but rather that they be converted and live (*Summa* 2-2.20.1; cf. Ezek.18.23). Aquinas maintains that "it is a mistake to think that He denies forgiveness to a repentant sinner, or that He does not turn sinners toward Himself through grace" (*Summa* 2-2.20.1). But Gawain, *that the* grace *hat geten of his live* "who has received the *grace* of his life" (2480; my emphasis), refuses forgiveness in his identification with the girdle. As *the bende of this blame* "the banner of his fault" his sin replaces the pentagram to form Gawain's new identity: *bende* is a heraldic term for a diagonal stripe on a banner or shield (*MED* "bend(e), n. 4").

Gawain's self-reproach is problematic in yet another theological sense. In refusing Bertilak's invitation to be reconciled to his former *enmy kene* "keen enemy" (2404-6), Gawain fails to observe the principle of charity (Matt. 7.12) as well as Christ's teaching that reconciliation comes before all else:

> If therefore thou offer thy gift at the altar, and there thou remember

that thy brother hath any thing against thee; Leave there thy offering

before the altar, and go first to be reconciled to thy brother: and then

coming thou shalt offer thy gift. Be at agreement with thy adversary

(Matt. 5.23-25).

To Bertilak's invitation he responds with a violent outburst of hatred against women (2414-26). As part of a different argument Yamamoto observes that any rejection of women is doomed simply because without them humanity cannot survive (208). Gawain's tirade also entails his spiritual death: in his refusal to receive and give mercy and love he denies himself access to spiritual rebirth through salvation (c.f. Aquinas, *Summa* 1-2.113.1-2).

If initially Gawain relied on a High-Medieval notion of cosmic order, the poet dismantles this belief by showing that Gawain's chivalry is not spontaneous and inherent but opposed to the natural inclinations that he shares with the animal. The knight's subsequent attempt to avoid similar mistakes in the future through an assertion of the will—*Lettes me overtake your wille / And eft I schal be ware* "let me gain your good will / and in future I shall be wary" not to repeat the offense (2387-88)—will not do because it entails a turning away from God and a rejection of the central Christian value of love. The only saint Gawain swears by is John (1788), and the exchange-of-winnings agreement is made on *Saynt Johnes day* "Saint John's day" (1021). In his rigid adherence to the covenant Gawain mirrors the apostle's Old-Testament mentality of harsh punishment for which Jesus rebukes him repeatedly (Luke 9:49-55). By contrast, Bertilak calls on Saint Giles (1645), and his notion of chivalry and his attitude to the natural world contrast with Gawain's views.

5.4 Bertilak's Chivalric Identity

For twelve years Saint Giles lived in the wilderness in the companionship of a doe that, according to some accounts, sustained him on her milk; according to others the saint

maintained a vegetarian diet (Franklin 70, 139). In pursuit of the doe the local king

accidentally wounded Giles instead (Franklin 142, 82). Similarly, Bertilak's relationship to

the natural world is characterised by similarity and alliance rather than violent rejection.

Where Gawain battles with harsh weather and ferocious monsters (715-25), Bertilak

demonstrates his respect for the natural world in his observation of forest law (1156-57). In

the guise of the Green Knight with his *berd as a busk* "beard as a bush" (182), Bertilak even

seems to resemble the forest, and many have interpreted him as a symbol of the natural world

(e.g. Taylor 170; Rudd, *Greenery* 109; Speirs; Benson 162-69; Woods). The present analysis

takes a different approach in examining the relationship between Bertilak's attitude to nature

and his concept of chivalry, rather than reading him as a symbol for something else. I do not

intend to argue that Bertilak is some kind of animal rights activist: as hunter his attitude to

animals is violent enough (cf. George; Twomey). However, his cooperation with the hounds

in the fox hunt suggests an element of alliance as well as subordination. Van Maerlant's late-

thirteenth-century *Rijmbijbel* toys with this idea: in Middle Dutch *beesten* "beasts" and *bi

staen* "stand by" are near homophones. "Beasts—notice the meaning of this little word—they

are called because they stand by us" (287-88). Like its English cognate, *bi staen* can mean "to

assist" and imply a subordinate position of the animal. However, the poet's focus on the

literal meaning of *bi staen* invites the reading that animals and humans physically share the

same position, like Giles, who, in a similarly literal manner, shared the doe's condition of

hunted prey.

In *SGGK* animals and human beings share the same position or condition several times.

Above we noted how Gawain is tossed about by his passions just as the medieval animal was

thought to be. Many critics (too many to note here) have observed that Gawain has the role of

hunted prey in the bedroom scenes. Fewer have noted that within the hunt the distinction

between animal and human roles is blurred: hunters and hounds work together so closely that

they cease to be clearly distinguishable. The hounds' participation is crucial: they detect the prey, communicate their discovery vocally, and are answered by a hunter. *Summe fel in the fuyt there the fox bode* "some caught the scent [that indicated] where the fox was" and a *kenet cryes thereof, the hunt on him calles* "a small hound calls out, [and then] the hunter calls to him" (1699, 1701). Were it not for a hound, Reynard would have eluded Bertilak*: he schunt for the scharp and schulde have arered*; / *A rach rapes him to right ere he myghte* "he flinched for the sharp [sword] and would have escaped; / [but] a hound rushes at him before he could" (1902-3). The hunters' voices and the dogs' barking are juxtaposed, and merge into one *rich rurd* "glorious sound" (1916). *Bertilak halowes faste,* / [*a*]*nd there bayen him bremly mony brothe houndes* "Bertilak halloos loudly, / and many fierce hounds bay to announce [the capture of] him" (1908-9). Elsewhere the barking is explicitly characterised as *yarrande speche* "snarling speech" (1724).

Even if the dogs cannot be said to speak as such, they certainly participate in the hunters' system of vocal communication (cf. page 16); a form of inter-species understanding is implied. Yamamoto reads the intense cooperation between hunters and hounds as a demonstration of the absolute anthropocentric assimilation of pets, which serves to reinforce the animal-human boundary (127-28; cf. Steel 223; Wolfe 104). However, this reading is problematic. The leading role of the hounds in the hunt suggests at least a degree of dependency on the side of the hunters. The hunt is the quintessential boundary-patrolling activity: animals and humans are rarely more clearly distinguished than as prey and hunter. That even here human beings rely on a non-human presence challenges the impregnability of the animal-human boundary. It is porous even when it is most anxiously patrolled.

Jeffrey Cohen analyses medieval monstrous and shapeshifting identities in a way that is relevant to Bertilak's alliance with animals. Through "combinatory movements" the body becomes "nonhuman, transformed via generative and boundary-breaking flux into

unprecedented hybridities" (Cohen xiii). Cohen contrasts this notion of bodies as "sites of possibility [that] are necessarily dispersed into something larger, something mutable and dynamic, a structure of alliance" with the body "considered [as] a finite object … a stability of being … a coherent whole [and an] unchanging ontology" (xiii). Gawain's understanding of the chivalric self as a coherent closed-of entity contrasts with Bertilak's mutable and dispersed subjectivity of alliance. Bertilak is the only character that is occasionally distinguishable in the hunter-hound mass (1900-1, 1906-8). The prime mover of this scene is a "structure of alliance", an ebullient and affectionate dispersed subjectivity (cf. 1919).

Bertilak's second alliance is with the ladies of his household. Lady Bertilak's animal-like behaviour has been discussed above. If Morgan does not display an explicit affinity with animals, in her role as prime mover of Gawain's quest she constitutes the ultimate subversion to Gawain's pristinely non-animal identity (2456-58). Bertilak's chivalric identity is in no way threatened by his alliances; in a similar way to Saint Giles he is sustained by animals and human beings traditionally seen to be closer to the animal, they assist him and he expresses affection for them. Saint Giles was taken for a hunted animal; similarly, the narrator in *SGGK* doubts the Green Knight's human status: [*h*]*alf etayn in erde I hope that he were* "I think he was a half giant" (140). What constitutes the stability of Bertilak's shapeshifting identity? I suggest it is his caring devotion to the living beings around him. Bertilak's hunting is aimed at the sustenance of his household and the testing of Gawain while preserving a balanced ecosystem. Similarly, Gawain's trial is not directed at his ruin but at his moral growth: [*t*]*henk upon this ilke threpe there thou forth thrynges / Among princes of pris* "think of this contest when you go among great princes" (2397-98). Although it involves a threat, the challenge does not aim to destroy the king and his following, but *to assay the sorquydrye* "to test the pride" of Arthur's court (2457). *Sorquydrye* could mean general arrogance, but was also a theological term for the deadly sin of pride manifest in Gawain's reliance on his own

cunning rather than God's will (*MED* "surquidri(e), n. 2"). The birds and butterflies embroidered on the Green Knight's outfit underline his benign attitude, as medieval birds symbolise the soul and butterflies its capacity for rebirth and regeneration (Herman and Burke 40).

Similarly, for Bertilak chivalry is no essentialist identity claim, but rather an ideal to aspire to. Approximation of the ideal is occasion for admiration, affection and joyful gatherings: he invites Gawain to [*m*]*ake merry in my house: my meyny thee loves, / And I wil thee as wel, wye, … for thy grete trauthe!* "make merry in my house: my people love you, / and I like you too, man, for your good faith" (2469-70). But Bertilak's chivalry is never an absolutism. Notice how his superlative use of 'faultless' transforms the absolute claim that is the crux of Gawain's identity crisis into and understanding of chivalry as a relative spectrum: Gawain is *the fautleste freke that ever on fote yede. / As perle by the white pese is of pris more, / So is Gawan, in good fayth, by other gay knightes* "the most faultless man that ever lived. / As a pearls is worth more than white peas, / so is Gawain, in truth, compared to other knights" (2363-65). If such near-perfect chivalry occasions admiration and affection, a "little lack" is cause for whole-hearted forgiveness. Bertilak holds Gawain *polysed of that plyght and pured as clene / As thou hades never forfeted syn thou was first borne* "rubbed clean of that sin and purged so clean / as if you had never sinned since you were born" (2393-94).

The *Gawain*-poet's thought about chivalry is decidedly religious (cf. his many theological terms: 879, 1774, 1876-79, 2391, 2433, 2436, 2488; identified by Hills 130). His conception of chivalric identity, in alliance with rather than opposition to the animal within and without, entails an ontotheological claim. *SGGK* suggests that even in the most desolate wilderness "flow rivers of living water" that remind us of paradise (John 7.38), that half-giants bring peace and beastly seductresses may turn the mind to God. Even if the High-Medieval belief in the divine order of nature is lost, God still answers prayers and divine

harmony is present in this world through the love and forgiveness in divine grace. The tragedy of this poem, then, lies not in Gawain's "little lack" but in his persistent determination to rely on his own will rather than on God's salvation: the sin of pride. If the High-Medieval notion of cosmic order and Gawain's identity claim are formulas of five-times-five, *SGGK* transcends this pattern. In adding a five-line wheel to the 2525 previous lines, the poet suggests that divine bliss is not bound to notions of cosmic order that had come to be seen as empty and mechanical by the late fourteenth century. Rather than an orientation on the human will or the laws of this world, true chivalry is Christ-like love and bliss. The conclusion of the poem, whether original or a clerical addition, reinforces this message by juxtaposing a Christian prayer with what is the motto of Britain's highest order of chivalry to the present day:

> *Now that bere the crowne of thorne,*
>
> *He bryng us to His blisse. Amen*
>
> > *Hony soyt qui mal pence.*
>
> Now He who bears the crown of thorns
>
> May He bring us to His bliss. Amen.
>
> > May he be shamed who thinks badly of it (2529-31).

Conclusion

The preceding analysis of *SGGK* examined how chivalric identity is constructed in relation to the natural world, and specifically to the animal. It contributes a new perspective to the ecocritical debate on the poem, which has been divided over the question whether *SGGK* affirms or undermines a nature-culture boundary. Gawain's chivalric identity is constructed in opposition to the animal, and therewith endorses a strict distinction between chivalric culture and the natural world. The pentangle symbolises Gawain's notion of chivalry as pristinely non-animal and free from natural inclinations. I suggested that the pentangle is also an ontotheological claim: Gawain's chivalric ideal entails a notion of cosmic order that had lost credibility by the late fourteenth century.

SGGK reflects the developments that led to the loss of this belief. Bertilak's household and wife mirror social climbers' strategic manipulation of the chivalric code that caused fourteenth-century aristocracy so much anxiety. Like Reynard the Fox who reveals the hypocrisy of the other animals, Lady Bertilak's corruption of courtly speech reveals Gawain's animalistic lust and fear. *SGGK* takes on late-medieval intellectualist and voluntarist debates on the relationship between nature and culture: chivalric virtue is not spontaneous and natural, as intellectualist thinkers like Aquinas maintained, but requires subjugation of human "animalistic" inclinations. This notion reflects the thought of voluntarists like Ockham and Duns Scotus, but the *Gawain*-poet implicitly rejects their theory that virtue requires an assertion of the will: Gawain's wilful resolution never to sin again constitutes spiritual death.

By contrast, Bertilak's chivalry does not rely on the knight's freedom from animalistic passions. With his observance of forest law, his alliance with animals and women, and his forgiveness of Gawain's fault Bertilak mitigates the nature-culture binary. He maintains the more informal understanding of chivalry that emerged in the late Middle Ages: rather than an

essentialist characterisation of the nobility, chivalry is an ideal for all to aspire to. That imperfection and failure seem to be the human condition is no cause for despair, but for forgiveness, insight and spiritual regeneration. In the figure of Bertilak the *Gawain*-poet responds to the inordinate weight voluntarists placed on the human will. Nature may be wild and godforsaken— in *SGGK* it is manifestly devoid of divine order—and human nature may be partly beastly, but divine aid and salvation are ready to hand. In this *SGGK* puts forward an argument more alike to Julian of Norwich's theology than to voluntarism: in the late-medieval world, where divine order seems a lost dream and the distinction between the noble knight and the brute beast fades, it is all the more important to recognise the need for, and God's generous gift of, salvation and bliss.

The present study has a number of shortcomings, which derive from the fact that a historically contextualising study of the interdependence of chivalric identity and attitudes to the animal in *SGGK* is an ambitious topic for a bachelor dissertation. The interplay between late-medieval chivalric romance, chivalric ideology, socio-economics, theology and environmental philosophy is a subject so large, complex and subtle that only an extensive monograph could hope to do it justice. Practically all components of the present study are sketchy, and its merit lies not so much in conclusiveness but in preparing new ground for subsequent research. The discussion of medieval conceptualisations of the animal omits many relevant literary animals, such as the steeds of chivalric romance and the animals of the Fifteen Signs Tradition (discussed in some detail by Kaeuper, *Chivalry* 47 and Steel 221-45, respectively). The chapter on chivalric ideology discusses what has been the object of study of an entire school of historians for over a century: my overview is fragmentary at best. This is even more true of the discussion of medieval theological and philosophical notions of the relation between nature and culture. For lack of space the analysis of *SGGK* has left out, among other things, a discussion of Gawain's and Bertilak's relationships with their horses.

However, for all its inadequacy, this study opens up a new field of enquiry that future research may build on. Ecocritical readings of medieval literature have paid little if any attention to chivalric ideology, philosophy and religion, while studies of chivalric ideology generally focus on chivalry as a martial force and pay little attention to chivalric identity and to chivalry in relation to attitudes to the natural world. This reading of *SGGK* shows that medieval literature reflects how chivalric, philosophical and religious discourses interacted in the debate on man's place in the natural environment and what constitutes true nobility. It has become clear that ideas about true chivalry and attitudes to nature are intimately connected. What is needed is a thorough discussion of medieval environmental philosophy in relation to chivalric ideology. In the absence of such a work, shorter studies would do well to focus on the formation of chivalric identity in relation to nature in specific texts rather than attempt to chart the discourse on chivalric identity of the late-medieval period as a whole: it is so subtle and closely linked to other discourses that it makes an unwieldy object of study. Future scholarship would also benefit from wariness in making assumptions about medieval attitudes to the natural world. Following White, many ecocritics assume that traditional Christianity entails violent subjection of nature, but the present reading of *SGGK* shows the opposite: for a medieval poet it was possible to regard rejection of all things natural as conducive to sin, and an attitude of care and alliance to the natural world as spiritually constructive.

The last (but not least) point to address is the contemporary significance of a fourteenth-century poem about *knightes* "knights" and *wodwos* "wild men." The 21st-century reader may encounter these in children's stories, but is hardly likely to associate them with debates on ethics or man's place in the natural world. Yet, it is a common complaint that lies and manipulation have eliminated sincerity from politics, and Reynard the Fox would no doubt feel quite at home on the executive board of any major

21st-century corporation. If the High-Medieval faith in divine harmony seems remote from modern times, we share the Late-Medieval sense of disintegrating order as we look back on the period before the World Wars as a time of relative social and environmental stability. With appalling global social and economic inequality, changing environmental policies in the United States and environmental crises all over the world, it seems more difficult than ever to maintain harmonious social structures, live a life of dignity and maintain a non-destructive relationship to the natural environment. However different our world is from fourteenth-century England, the argument of *SGGK* still stands: true nobility and spiritual wellbeing go hand in hand with respect for the natural world. However, fallibility would seem to be the human condition, and harsh perfectionism crushes even the greatest heroes. The only way forward is through forgiveness, alliance and unwavering dedication to an ideal that combines human dignity with respect for animals and the natural environment. The trick is to not curse and ostracise dodgy characters, but to mobilise even the foxiest individuals in a spirit of alliance, if necessary with the help of a little trickery, shapeshifting or good-natured magic of our own.

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