Pre-Texts: Essential Ambiguities
in Textuality

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The word *pre-text* is ambiguous. There is, first, the *pretexta* worn in Rome by those who had not yet advanced to the *toga virilis*. Secondly, the word means "pretence," spelt *pretense* in the United States, and so confusable with *pre-tense* (if there is such a word), perhaps part of the verbal paradigm. Thirdly, a *pre-text* may be a text before the text; if so, there may be also a *post-text*, a text after the text. Some medieval texts may show pre-textual and post-textual complexity, and in this paper *Sir Gowther* and *Gregorius* are used to exemplify such textualities.

The Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford when I was an undergraduate almost 60 years ago was C. L. Wrenn. He used to quote with some frequency the lines from Goethe's *Faust*,

> Grau, theurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,
> Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum. (100, *Studirzimmer* [lines 2038-9]

> [Grey, dear friend, is all theory, and green the golden tree of life.]

But Wrenn never told us that the speaker of these colourful words is Mephistopheles, and the person he is addressing is one of Dr Faust's intellectually limited but eager pupils. Though I am not well up in theory,

I have never dismissed it wholly in accord with this Mephistophelean generalization. I was wondering what a pre-text might be; what text, if the word describes a textual state, had one of these textual antecedents? Is there such a thing as post-textuality; should there not be?

Is it best to begin at the beginning of recorded English literature or at the end of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance? Is it wise to stray into some language other than English where textualities may have been better exemplified and understood in all their theoretical complexities? Answers to such questions are often best solved *ambulando*. *Pretext*, understood textually, shall be a guide. Modern linguists, post-structural and post-poststructural, invent their diction as heirs to a literary tradition well established by 1871, when Lewis Carroll published his *Jabberwocky*, that is *Looking Glass* nonsense poetry, now much discussed by theorists. The tradition took a serious turn in Franz Kafka's German. With him the technicality of being a *Landvermesser*, "surveyor," is crossed with *Vermessenheit*, "arrogance, presumption." The Dadaists similarly play with words that seem to have no ancestry, unless one is an etymologist. Thus *ausmerzen*, "to eliminate, eradicate," may have suggested to Kurt Schwitters the title of his magazine, *Merz*. This sounds like the linguistic parallel of the visual, optimistic playfulness of Paul Klee or Joan Miró. Dadaism, however, was gloomily pessimistic: at the beginning of the twentieth century, the first half of it perhaps, there was every reason to be gloomy. The Post-Poststructuralists in the second half of the twentieth century caught the manner, a mannerism, and some caught the gloom.

Now the word *pretext*. Two uses of this word, both Latin in origin, have come into English in the Renaissance. The dictionaries keep them strictly separated. Etymologically, they are one, however, distinguished only by their inflexional ending, so that etymologists (thus Walde and Hofmann II 678-9) take them together s.v. *texō*, "to weave, plait, construct with skill." A specialized use comes in historical writings, preeminently in Livy, and therefore in translations of Livy, as, in 1600 by Philemon Holland (*Roman Historie* 467D):

> At Rome, by vertue of the authoritie of the Senatours, M[arcius] *Iunius* was created Dictatour, and *T. Sempronius* [Publius Septronius Tuditanus] Generall of the horse, who proclaimed a muster, and enrolled all the younger sort above 17 yeares old, yea and some also under that age, that yet were in their **Pretexta*, and were not come to **Toga virilis*.

Two side-notes explain the Latin terms: *Pretexta*: "It was the upper garment that the Romanes children used untill they were fully 16 yeares of age, embrodred with purple." And *Toga virilis*: "Otherwise called *Pura*, and ἀπόρφυρος, because it was all white, and without any purple, which

they put on at 17." Holland explains the term more fully in his Second Index:

> *Prætexta toga*, a robe embrodered of purple, common to men and women, *Ingenuitatis insigne, & ornamentum.* [. . .] Whereby it appeareth, that it was allowed but to certain persons; and as *P*[aulus]s *Manutius* writeth, to 6 sorts.
> 1. The children of the *Patritij*, until 17 yeares age. 2. All Senators upon festival daies.Wardens at the games or plaies called *Compitalitij*. 4. Al magistrates, as well in the citie, as in the colonies or bourrough townes incorporate, called *Municipia*, and Maisters of *Confraternites*. 5. All priests, and among them, the Augurs. 6. They that triumph. And this differed from the rest, being wrought with gold and damask worke.   (sig. [6Ev^{rovo}])

This ancient sense of *pretexts* is highly relevant to a literary understanding of texts: it teaches class-distinctions, a lesson difficult for us in an age that Vice-President Henry Wallace in the middle of the Second World War hoped would be, thought should be, "the century of the common man." "A cat may look at a king," said Alice (Carroll ch. 8); and so it may, but if we are to understand Ancient, Medieval, and Renaissance literature we must remember that kings, dukes, earls, and patricians are, we may regret it, not best looked at from the democratic gutter.

Pretext has and had other senses, from Latin *praetextum* onwards, among them conspicuously "pretence." The inhabitants of the United States have been taught to spell it *pretense*, confusingly as if it were a tense before any existing past tense, or perhaps a past tense used for something that lies in the future. The Anglo-Saxons were imprecise (by Classical standards) in their use of tenses; and English is still less precise than, for example, French in expressing futurity, for which a present is often used; thus "I am going to the theatre next Thursday," for "I shall be going to the theatre . . ." An Old English poetic example of the use of the pre-tense, discussed by Bruce Mitchell (*Old English Syntax* § 2768), is *The Ruin*, lines 6-9 (Krapp and Dobbie 227):[1]

> Eorðgrap hafað
> waldendwyrhtan forweorone, geleorene,
> heardgripe hrusan, oþ hund cnea
> werþeoda gewitan.

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[1] Throughout this paper, in quoting older texts I have not always followed editorial details. It is to be noted that none of the editions I have consulted comment on the problem of tense that disturbs the syntacticians, and the translators glide over the problem by using an auxiliary plus past participle.

[The grasp of the grave, the earth's strong grip, retains the master build-
ers, perished, lost, until a hundred generations of manly peoples died.]

The text is difficult because of spellings. There must have been a pre-
text, a *Vorlage* or exemplar, probably not the poet's ur-text, because it is
not in his presumed dialect, and like every *pre*-anything, not of the date of
the thing we have. The pre-text might have had **forworene*, **gelorene*, much
like in vocalic stem to *scorene*, *gedrorene* "destroyed, collapsed," in the line
preceding this quotation; and *gewitan* shows late Old English merging of
the preterite ending *-on* with the infinitive ending *-an*, the pre-text might
have had *gewiton*. The tense is odd when retained in translation: "until a
hundred generations [in the future] . . . died" for "shall have died;" a pre-
tense, in other words.

Poems, literary texts in general, are not usually written by syntacti-
cians, who may well say, the more's the pity. A modern use of a pre-
tense occurs in John Keats's *Isabella or, The Pot of Basil*. This is not the
occasion to expound the intertextuality of Keats's gruesome poem and
the story as told by Boccaccio in the *Decameron*, nor the bibliographical
problem whether he read the English translation of the *Decameron* in the
translation or adaptation (via the French perhaps) of 1804 or 1812, nor
why basil may be significant. It must suffice here to tell in a sentence or
two the tale, told by Keats in "dewy rhyme," just to explain why my quo-
tation contains a pre-tense. Isabella, a lady of Florence, and Lorenzo, a
young palmer, entertained tender love for each other, but Isabella's two
rich, proud brothers disapproved, and murdered Lorenzo, telling her that
he had gone abroad. In a vision she saw where they had buried his
corpse, with the result that she went, dug up his severed head, put it in a
flower-pot, covered it and planted basil on it. Now my quotation (Gar-
rod 224), *Isabella*, stanza XXVII: "So the two brothers and their murder'd
man / Rode past fair Florence." But Lorenzo is not yet murdered, and
he was riding with the brothers past Florence to the spot where they
were to slay him, "their murder'd man" means "the man to be murdered
by them." Every syntactician will argue that the past participle *murder'd*
has no tense, unlike the verb in *The Ruin*: it has no tense, but is expres-
sive of the past, not a grammarian's tense, but here a pre-tense.

My neologism *pre-tense* has been laboured enough. Now I wish to dis-
cuss pre-texts. I have found no English or Latin dictionary that records
for **pre-text*, **prae-textum*, a sense "a text before the text is formed," nor
*post-text, **post-textum*, a word unknown to these languages; and rightly so,
for **post-textuality* is silent, and so is **pre-textuality*, for when it ceases to be
silent it ceases to be a pre-textuality and becomes a textuality. An exam-
ple might be *Paradise Lost* before Milton had dictated it, as a bibliographi-
cal myth relates, to his daughters for them to turn the dictated words

into textuality. Or was he talking to himself, an activity which some theorists might wish to consign to another myth, orality?

For Old English literature, pre-textuality comes in the guise of mythical, mystical, heathen orality, and some contemplating *Beowulf* have found confirmation of that myth in the genuine orality of the Serbs, thought by them comparable to the manner of that skilful *littérateur*, the thoughtful Christian poet of *Beowulf*. Among the many approaches to the pre-textuality of *Beowulf* there is one that persists. The stories within the poem, formerly known as "episodes and digressions," may go back to something oral, perhaps less polished than the metrically strict poem. Alistair Campbell, my immediate predecessor in the Oxford professorship of Anglo-Saxon, and my strict, greatly admired, and liked tutor when I was an undergraduate, in a festschrift article for J. R. R. Tolkien, made it seem that there were technical reasons for believing that there had been a pre-text, now lost of course (Campbell 13-26). Campbell thought he had found metrical proof for the pre-textual existence of at least some of the "episodes and digressions." He believed that Old English epic was built up from earlier lays, a theory much in vogue then, and perhaps still in vogue; and Campbell stated, "Here we have definite evidence that ancient lays, thought to have arisen in heathen times, were known in monasteries" (14). He believed in variable formulas, he related *Beowulf* (Fulk, Bjork, and Niles 50) line 1441b *gyrede hine Beowulf* ("Beowulf got himself ready") to the superficially similar line 5 of the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* (Steinmeyer 1), *gurtun sih iro suert ana* ("girded their swords on themselves"), though, of course, Old English *gyrwan* "to get (oneself) ready" is not the same as OE *gyrdan*, Old High German *gurten*, "to gird (oneself)." It is unusual in Old English verse for the alliteration in a second half-line to fall on a verb, *gyrede*, instead of a noun, especially on a name, here Beowulf. Campbell regarded the *Beowulf* line one of the inherited formulas in which the rule governing alliteration was broken, but

> Apart from these formulae, second half-lines of this type occur once or twice in most long poems [a footnote gives two examples], but it is an astonishingly high proportion when we find two, 1128b *wunode mid Finne* ["remained with Finn"], and 1137b *fundode wrecca* ["the hero was eager to go"], in the ninety lines of *Beowulf* dealing with the story of Finn, and there can be little doubt that these come from the lays which the poet is following. Another, 2980b *þa gebeah cyning* ["then the king fell"], occurs in the account of Ongentheow's last battle, an obvious theme for a lay. (16-17)

Once scholars had concluded to their own satisfaction that *Beowulf* is an epic, once they had swallowed the theory that epics are constructed by

drawing on pre-texts, known archaizingly as "lays," it did not take long
to fit such non-existing pre-texts of *Beowulf* with metrical details allowed
to stand in the "episode" or "digression" based on just such a pre-text. I
leave to statisticians whether it is significant that two occurrences of a
relatively rare metrical phenomenon, a second half-line with verb fol-
lowed by noun alliterating on the verb, occur within a few lines of each
other in a passage that has been thought to be based on a lay. Many
themes touched on in the poem might be suitable for lays, if only we had
a few more such lays to substantiate that myth.

Pre-texts of Middle English are no less mythical than those of Old
English texts. The literary quality, however assessed, influences the
amount of published scholarly or critical work to which it has been sub-
jected. My impression is that *Sir Gowther*, a saintly romance of the fif-
teenth century, has not been much in the eyes and minds of English me-
dieval scholars. The standard works give an outline of the plot, thus H.
L. D. Ward (419-21), Mortimer J. Donovan in a chapter on Breton Lays
(in Severs I 141-2), and J. A. W. Bennett in his posthumous volume
(*Middle English Literature* 153-4) in the Oxford History of English Litera-
ture. They say little about *Sir Gowther* as a poetic creation other than con-
sidering it to be popular, that is, for the common people and of the
common people, but not necessarily by one of the common people. In-
stead they focus on its pre-textual – or do I mean intertextual? – rela-
tionship with narratives about Robert the Devil, a relationship copiously
explored by Karl Breul, in his full edition (*Sir Gowther*) more than 120
years old. What is that relationship? Breul (45-134) covers the matter
exhaustively in that part of the introduction that goes under the title *Lit-
terarhistorische untersuchung*, "Literary historical investigation," of the entire
range of secular and religious legends that have a bearing on the legend
of Sir Gowther, together with the legend of Robert the Devil on which
Sir Gowther is based. Opposite p. 107, he has an elaborate stemma
showing the distribution of this legendary material, where issuing forth
from the putative *ur*-text U one step leads to the putative religious *ur*-
legend L within which, like a fly in a spider's web, R is enmeshed, Robert
the Devil. There are not quite fifty landing-places, and ballet and opera
have not been forgotten in this wilderness of intertextualities. At the end
of the edition (198-207) there is a bibliography of 106 supposed intertex-
tual relations of the poem, and he prints (208-41) some of this Robert
the Devil material. This stemma excels in complexity most stemmas
showing the relationship of manuscript and printed witnesses. We might
have missed our poem, *Sir Gowther*, if it had not been boldly underlined,
just under the putative Breton Lay to which the poet himself refers both
at lines 753 near the end, and near the beginning at 25-30 (Breul 136):

Iesu Cryst, þat barne blyþe,
Gyff hom ioy þat loues to lyþe
    Of ferlys þat befell.
A law of Breyten long y so3ht,
And owt þerof a tale haue bro3ht
    Þat lufly is to tell.

[Jesu Christ, that blessed child, give joy to them that delight to hear of
marvels that befell. For a long time I looked for a lay of Brittany, and out
of that I have brought a tale which it is enjoyable to relate.]

In the first edition (1817), E. V. Utterson (*Early Popular Poetry* I 157-90),
who connected *Sir Gowther* with stories of Robert the Devil, called it "a
spirited little romance ballad;" and, comparing it with a sixteenth-century
English romance of Robert the Devil, published in 1798 by I[saac] Her-
bert,[2] he praised it further without considering its poetic art – if any:
"The ballad before us however is not only much more valuable from its
greater antiquity, but the compression of the story renders it less weari-
some, and it is also more curious from the introduction of the incident
producing the hero's birth." The long account of tail-rhyme romances by
A. McInytre Trounce (III 38-40) does not appraise this poem as litera-
ture. Breul (44) himself, in his *Würdigung* ("appreciation") says of *Sir Gow-
ther*:[3] "If we consider our romance without regard merely to this relation-
ship [the relationship to the wide range of legendary material], we have
to pass this judgement on it, that it is distinguished above the many
products of the same kind by the interesting material worked into it, that,
however, the poet in his poetic ability by no means rises above his con-
temporaries." To those old-fashioned enough to attach importance to
what used to be considered the value of a poetic text as literature, this
will seem not just faint praise, but condemnation expressed by compar-
ing the poet's ability with that of his contemporaries, and finding it want-
ing. To those who raise intertextuality above mere textuality Breul's ap-
praisal may be regarded as having raised *Sir Gowther* above the idle no-
tions of literary value-judgements. Be that as it may, it justifies the
amount of space accorded to the analogues in his edition, an edition
which started life as a Berlin doctoral dissertation of the 1880s, a time of
German academic excellence. Maldwyn Mills (xviii-xix), does not stoop

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[2] Robin Flower, "Roberte the Deuyll," identified the editor as probably Isaac Herbert,
and the manuscript as, now, British Library MS Egerton 3132.
[3] "[B]etrachten wir sie [unsere romanze] aber ohne rücksicht auf diese beziehung, an
sich, so müssen wir das urteil über sie fällen, dass sie sich vor vielen produkten gleicher
art auszeichnet durch den interessanten in ihr verarbeiteten stoff, dass aber der dichter in
seinem poetischen können sich keineswegs über seine zeitgenossen erhebt."

to idle praise or censure, and he is good at placing the text in what he calls "the no-man's-land that lies between the edifying romance and the saint's life."

Robert the Devil is not mentioned in *Sir Gowther*, which is a simple tale of demonic birth, violent youth, a terrorist expiated through penance. If we may consider the poem, in a way somewhat reminiscent of the New Criticism, as a *Ding an sich*, cut free from its burdensome intertextuality, the food of doctoral study; it is a saint's life rather than the Breton lay, *law of Breyten* (lines 28 and 753), that it purports to be. In fact, the version in British Library MS Royal 17 B. 43 ends (as Breul tells us [165]) with the words *Explicit Vita Sancti*. It is to be classed with the Oedipal legend of Pope Gregory, *Gregoriuslegende*, which still had post-textual life in it as late as the twentieth century when Thomas Mann (in *Der Erwählte*) took it in hand, via Hartmann von Aue's *Gregorius* (Mertens, *Hartmann*), but of course not via the Middle English version (Keller, *Mittelenglische Gregoriuslegende*).

Hartmann von Aue's poem is a major work by a major poet. He gives his name in an envoy, in which he invites his readers to pray for him in the hope that Gregorius, the holy sinner, may be his advocate to find divine mercy. Before the envoy, the poem proper ends in six lines of which the last four share in a single rhyme, strikingly so in a poem in couplets:

> dâ sol der sündige man
> ein sælic bilde nemen an,
> swie vil er gesündet hât,
> daz sîn doch wirt guot rât
> ob er die riuwe begât
> und rehte buoze bestât.   (3983-8)

> [Thus the sinful man shall take from this a salutary example, however much he has sinned, that good help shall be his if he repents and undertakes true penance.]

In Ernst Schwarz's edition of Hartmann's poem a *Nacherzählung* by the editor follows the text, a Modern German post-narration, not a translation, an abridgement in prose, a retelling in brief form: English has no word that fully represents the German term *Nacherzählung* which allows the reader to feel that the retelling is a recreation, which it is not. Far from it: the poetry has evaporated, and with it much of the difficult subtlety of the poet's art. Thomas Mann's post-narration, *Nacherzählung*, errs in the opposite direction. His *Der Erwählte* is an amplification, he calls it a *Roman* "a novel." It invites admiration for his skill with technicalities,

conceptual and lexical, perhaps – dare one say it? – inviting an over-whelmment by *longueur*, such as those may feel who, having read *Budden-brooks* and *Zauberberg*, and one or more of his *Novellen*, embark on *Joseph und seine Brüder*, and sink rather than swim in the volumes of that amplifi-cation of some chapters of Genesis.

Thomas Mann gets some of Hartmann von Aue's poem right in modern prose. At the beginning of the long book he recaptures the miracle (Hartmann line 3757) of how the great bell of old St Peter's rings out, as it still does in the Renaissance church, to the cry of *Habetis Papam*; but for St Gregory, behold, no hands pull the bell-ropes at his sacred election; for three days the bells ring miraculously, even before Gregory has arrived in Rome, and according to Ulrich Mölk (46-7) this is an early account of the bell miracle. In the middle of the amplification Mann's medical training and interest in such matters leads him to dilate (234-6) on how Mother Earth, our *magna parens*, miraculously nurses Gregorius in his penitence, as a mother breastfeeds her new-born child. We may compare that with the seventeen years which in Hartmann's poem the penitent Gregorius was sustained (lines 3122-36); for with God nothing is impossible.

As we have seen, those who have written on *Sir Gowther* have come short of a full and generous appreciation of that poem. There is even less on the Middle English *Pope Gregory*, which sometimes goes under the name of *Saint Gregory*; indeed the poet calls his hero (line V 339) *Seint Gregori* at his birth. Its intertextual *Vie de Saint Grégoire* now usually goes under the name of *Vie du Pape Grégoire*. It appears from the information given by H. B. Sol in his great modern edition (*Pape Grégoire*) that none of the manuscript titles refers to *Le Pape Grégoire*, though the point of the poem is that the penitent, holy sinner becomes pope. Victor Luzarche, the first editor, 1857, in his enthusiasm for the French poem, identified Grégoire, the doubly incestuous sinner, with Pope Gregory the First, an identification based on nothing, and formed in spite of the ready avail-ability of three lives of Gregory the First in the standard Maurist edition of his works in 1705, tracing his patrician origins and Christian commit-ment (*Sancti Gregorii opera* IV/1).

Early in the critical history of the Middle English poem, Sir Walter Scott (V 109), in his account of the Auchinleck MS, characterized *The Legend of Pope Gregory* as a "story more horrible than that of Œdipus. He is the offspring of an incestuous connexion betwixt a brother and a sis-ter; and is afterwards unwittingly married to his own mother." One would hardly expect Scott to share in the joyous celebration of all Rome that by his penance so great a sinner was worthy to be elected Pope. The poem is an extravagant saint's life. Its pre-text, the remarkably similar *vita* of St Metro of Verona, though he did not achieve election to the papacy,

is discussed by Ulrich Mölk (45-8), whose account seems to imply that St Metro is well known to historians of medieval Italy. His bones were stolen in January 962 from the now demolished church of St Vitalis in Verona (Manitius II 43).

In both *Sir Gowther* and *Pope Gregory* there are features not to the taste of the last two centuries. As a demonic infant, provided with three, then six more, gentlewomen to be his wet-nurses, young Gowther sucked them so roughly that they died (lines 109-20) in the first year of his life. His violence combined with his size make him the terror of the land. Gowther's love of hunting and, more particularly, his anti-clericalism and anti-fraternalism might have endeared him to some modern critics, but, after inheriting the dukedom, he overdoes it:

> Now is he duke of greyt renown,
> And men of holy Kyrke dyngges down
>   Where he my3t hom mete.
> Masse ne matens wold he non here,
> Nor no prechyng of no frere,
>   Þat dar I heyly hette.
> [. . .]
> Hontyng lufde he alder best,
> In parke, wodd, and wylde forest,
>   Bothe be weyes and strete.
> He went to honte apon a day,
> He see a nonry by þe way,
>   And þeder con he ryde.
> Tho pryorys and hur covent
> With prosescion ageyn hym went
>   Full hastely þat tyde
> Þei wer full ferd of his body,
> For he and is men boþe leyn hom by,
>   Þo sothe why schuld y hyde?
> And syþyn he spard hom in hor kyrke,
> And brend hom up. Þus con he werke:
>   Þen went his name full wyde.
> [. . .]
> Meydyns maryages wolde he spyll,
> And take wyffes agayen hor wyll,
>   And sley hor husbondes too,
> And make freres to leype at kragges
> And parsons for to heng on knagges
>   And oder prestys sloo.
> To bren armettys was is dyssyre,
> A powre wedow to seyt on fyre
>   And werke hom mykyll woo.   (169-204)

[Now he is duke of mighty fame, and he knocks down men of Holy Church wherever he could find them. He would hear neither mass nor matins, nor the preaching of any friar, I dare promise you that solemnly. [. . .] He loved hunting best of all, in enclosures, woods, and wild forests, both along paths and highroads. One day he went hunting, he saw a nunnery by the wayside, and he rode there. The prioress and her convent at once went in procession to meet him hastily. They were frightened of his person, for he and his men too had raped them – why should I conceal the truth? And then he locked them up in their church, and incinerated them, that is what he did. His name then went far and wide [. . .] He would destroy the marriages of virgins, and rape wives against their will, and furthermore slay their husbands, and make friars leap down from crags, and hang up parish priests on hooks, and kill other clergymen too. He longed to burn up hermits, to set fire to a poor widow, and to cause them great misery.]

An earl told Gowther that he was never of Christian progeny, but some fiend's son (line 209), and Gowther, after threatening him if he had told him a lie, rode to see his mother to confirm what the earl had told him, vowing to pierce her with his falchion unless she told him the truth:

"Son, syþon y schall þe soþe say,
In owre orcharde apon a day
    A fende gat þe þare
As lyk my lorde as he my3t be,
Underneyth a cheston tre."
    Þen weppyd þei boþe full sare.
"Go schryfe þe, moder, and do þy best,
For y wyll to Rome, or þat y rest,
    To lerne anoder lare." (229-36)

["Son, since I must speak the truth, one day in our orchard under a chestnut tree a fiend, as like to my lord and husband as could be, begot you there." Then both of them wept grievously. "Go, mother, confess, and do what is best, for I will go to Rome to learn another way of behaving, rather than that I should stay here."]

Gowther's self-imposed penance was severe. He inflicted silence on himself, ate no appetizing food, but shared the bones from the dog's mouth. After expiation he does well in chivalric battles against Saracenic enemies, including the emperor's. There is in the story a strong love element, introduced by a miracle: the emperor's daughter, having fallen from a tower, is brought back to life, from heaven back to earth, her

muteness is healed, and she is able to transmit to Gowther a message of
divine grace:

> Ho seyd: "My Lord of heyuon gretys þe well,
> And forgyffes þe þi syn yche a dell,
> And grantes þe þe blys,
> And byddes þe speyke on hardely,
> Eyte and drynke and make mery:
> Þou schallt be won of his."
> Scho seyd to hur fader: "Þis is he
> Þat faȝt for you deys thre
> In strong batell ywys."
> Þe pope had schryuon Syr Gother:
> He louyd God and Mare þer,
> And radly hym con kys,
> And seyd: "Now art þou Goddes chyld;
> Þe þar not dowt þe warlocke wylde
> Þer waryd mot he bee."   (661-74)

[She said, "My Lord of heaven salutes you gladly, and forgives you your
sins one and all, and grants you bliss, and bids you to speak right on
boldly, to eat and to drink, and to be of good cheer: you shall be one of
his (chosen)." To her father she said, "This is he who fought for you for
three days in fierce battle, truly." The pope had shriven Sir Gowther; and
he loved God and Mary then, and she [the emperor's daughter] readily
kissed him, saying, "Now you are God's child; there is no cause for you
to fear the wild demon; may he be cursed there."]

It is satisfactory within the story that Gowther is now God's child, no
longer the demon's, the warlock's child. There is more to that resolution,
that closure in fashionable jargon. It rises above secular romance, for it is
a tale of sin, of penance, and of *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, in
the words of Bunyan's title for a very different religious text.

Sir Gowther, in its narrative line, is not unlike *Pope Gregory*: double in-
cest worst of sins, expiation, and grace abounding, leading in the end to
Saint Gregory's papacy. There is hope for all sinners. No pre-text, no
intertextuality helps us to understand these texts aright, though the ana-
logues may by their similar story-line likewise purvey hope to the peni-
tent.

I doubt if such holy teaching was and is much to the liking of Ro-
mantic and post-Romantic critics. I quote Hazlitt's praise of Chaucer's
descriptions as an example of misguided praise. He compares Chaucer's
with Spenser's descriptions in which he says he has found "a deal of ter-
rible beauty" (*English Poets* 53; *gusto* probably means "style of execution"):

Chaucer's descriptions of natural scenery possess the same sort of character-istic excellence [as Spenser's], or what might be termed *gusto*. They have a lo-cal truth and freshness, which gives the very feeling of the air, the coolness or moisture of the ground. Inanimate objects are thus made to have a fel-low-feeling in the interest of the story; and render back the sentiment of the speaker's mind.

Sir Gowther and *Pope Gregory* have no descriptions comparable with Spen-ser's. Gowther's mother was impregnated by the demon in an orchard (line 67), and when she reveals to Gowther who his father was, and where he was conceived, he is told that it was under a chestnut tree (line 233): but that setting has nothing of "a local truth and freshness." Gow-ther's falchion, mentioned several times in the poem, is not at all "made to have a fellow-feeling in the interest of the story, and render back the sentiment of the speaker's mind." The castle and all its towers near the beginning of *Pope Gregory* (line V 60) are merely the setting for the inces-tuous conception of Gregory, and the incestuous love between him and his sister is shown (lines V 97-8) by their sharing one knife at mealtime, drinking from one cup, (line V 109-10), sharing one bedroom, and the bed of each not far from the other. The expanse of water (*brumme*, line V 359) is what, without "local truth and freshness," the infant is exposed on. It would be easy to show by further examples how things are mere tools in the interest of the story, sometimes wholly or slightly symbolic. No wonder then that loyal critics of Middle English verse texts have broken no lances with detractors of *Sir Gowther*, and that the English *Pope Gregory* has met with all but universal neglect, neglect even when incest in medieval story is pursued learnedly, as it is by Elizabeth Archibald.[4] Whenever textuality meets with silence, pre-textuality and intertextuality may be observed to flourish. They have engaged the energies of doctoral students and academics from the 1880s onwards.

In character the *légende française* of *La Vie du Pape Grégoire* is a tale of wonder leading from sin to penance to divine grace; and similarly *Sir Gowther* invites wonder, never mind Robert the Devil, never mind Breton lays and romances. The greater the sins, the harsher the penance, the more glorious is God's grace. Both *Sir Gowther* and the versions of *Grego-rius*, full of faith, are religious, neither is historical truth. Did they believe either story in the Middle Ages? All story exists to be believed. Medieval-ists need not believe what they believed, but must believe that they be-lieved, and that what lacks historical truth may be rich in spiritual and

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[4] Archibald does not so much as mention even in her bibliography the Middle English version of the legend edited by Keller, though she provides details (124-5, 194) of the legend in the English version of the *Gesta Romanorum*. The reason for this silence may lie in the fact that the Middle English version rests entirely on its Old French pre-text.

moral truth, even for us, worldly readers of the twenty-first century not much given to pious thoughts. Religious thought is in many medieval secular works not an irrelevant intrusion. It shapes the work. It shapes *Beowulf* from first mention of Beowulf the Dane (not Beowulf the Geat), lines 16b-17 (Fulk, Bjork, and Niles 3): "*Him þæs Liffrea, / wuldres Wealdend, woroldare forgeaf*," in Seamus Heaney's translation (3), "[S]o the Lord of Life, / the glorious Almighty, made this man renowned." Near the end of the poem, the imperfectly transmitted account of the lament sung by the Geatish woman for Beowulf the Geat may be of heaven (Heaney 98):

> A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
> with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
> of her worst fears, a wild litany
> of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
> enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
> slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

"Heaven swallowed the smoke," *Heofon rece swealg* (line 3155), clearly transmitted except for the <a> of *swealg*, but there is no knowing if this *heofon* is religious or secular, just the sky.

As at the beginning of April people are called to go on pilgrimage, so we are called to read *The Canterbury Tales* right to the end, grappling with "The Parson's Tale" and on to the "Retractation." In this post-Christian age we may strive to understand the devout literature of the Christian Middle Ages. Listen! The church bells ring out. Look, no hands!

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