

# 'Idle and Extravagant Stories in Verse': 400 Years of Narrative Poetry from *Sir Gawain* to Wordsworth

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## Introduction

Simply defined, narrative poetry is poetry that tells a story, that is, a series of events linked by a cause-and-effect relationship. Narrative (from the Latin 'to relate' or 'to recount') represents one of the four rhetorical 'modes' — the others being argumentation, description, and exposition.<sup>1)</sup> Narrative poetry is a broad category, and includes specific types of poetry including various ballad forms, the fable, the fabliau, and the epic. These forms of poetry have formed the foundation of English literature since *Beowulf*. At the end of the eighteenth century, several poets, including William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, began using the forms of popular ballads to write serious poetry. Initially, they did this to write a purer, more powerful poetry, as a response to what they saw as the outmoded and overly ornate poetical diction of the neoclassical tradition.<sup>2)</sup> This lecture examines Wordsworth's argument against one kind of poetry

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1) See the entries 'narration' and 'narrative poem' in Jack Myers and Michael Simms, *The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms* (New York and London, 1989), 206.

2) Wordsworth warns his reader in the second edition of his *Preface* in 1802: 'They who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to inquire by which species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.' In *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1984), 596. Hereafter OW.

in favour of another, and reveals a paradox that persists in English poetry: the communication of social themes, and the encouragement to improved morality, through 'idle and extravagant' narrative verse.

In 1800, at the age of 30, William Wordsworth published the second edition of his first collection of poems, the *Lyrical Ballads*. The second edition doubled the size of *Lyrical Ballads* by adding a whole new volume of poems. But more importantly, it added a critical preface that laid out Wordsworth's poetic philosophy. In one section of the preface, Wordsworth criticizes the state of contemporary European society. He writes:

a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. (OW 599)

The human mind has become dull; and human society idle. What has caused this? Wordsworth explains:

The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. (OW 599)

In 1800, Europe had been in crisis for a decade, following the French Revolution in 1789 and the start of war between England and France in 1793. The continuing first phase of the Industrial Revolution was causing mass migrations from the countryside to the cities in search of work. Print publication had become increasingly cheap over the past hundred years, and literacy rates had risen rapidly. Newspapers, pamphlets, novels, and poetry such as popular ballads had become widespread. But according to Wordsworth, these changes have had terrible consequences for literature:

To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespear and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. (OW 599-600)

Wordsworth's grievances with modern society and city life have a factual basis in his own experiences of late-eighteenth-century life. But in his preface, Wordsworth also repeats an argument that has existed in poetry and criticism since classical times: countryside life is pure and innocent; city life is idle and corrupting. As Raymond Williams shows in his classic study *The Country and the City*, pastoral poetry has embodied a conflict between the country and the city since the writing of Virgil. In the first century B.C., Virgil charged his pastoral poetry with the tension between the pleasure of rural life, and the shepherd's fear of eviction from his land by 'ex-soldiers... resettled by large-scale confiscation'.<sup>3)</sup> In later literature, this tension developed into a contrast between a generally peaceful countryside, and a city that was the centre of troubles including politics, civil unrest, and war.

Wordsworth's complaint may not be a new one, but in the middle of the Industrial Revolution, it certainly seemed justified. As war with France loomed, and industrialization concentrated 25% of English farmland into the hands of only 400 families, English society seemed to be in crisis.<sup>4)</sup> Wordsworth believed society needed inspiration and moral guidance. As a poet, he felt that the most popular literature of the day was not

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3) See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973), 16-17.

4) 'By the eighteenth century, nearly half of the cultivated land was owned by some five thousand families. As a central form of this predominance, four hundred families, in a population of some seven or eight million people, owned nearly a quarter of the cultivated land' (Williams 60).

improving society. Since Wordsworth believed that poetry had a serious moral purpose, we could assume that Wordsworth's own poetry would shy away from these 'idle and extravagant stories in verse'.

Ironically, when Wordsworth published the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, critics applied similar expressions to Wordsworth's work. Wordsworth was accused of writing in a childish and pedantic style. The poems in *Lyrical Ballads* describe the experiences of simple country people; these people speak in plain language. The poems brim with strong end-rhymes and repeated words and phrases. Francis Jeffrey, Wordsworth's most notorious opponent, attacked Wordsworth as an educated man trying to imitate the style of uneducated country poets. He wrote that Wordsworth had a 'perverse taste for simplicity', and that

It is absurd to suppose that an author should make use of the language of the vulgar, to express the sentiments of the refined.... The love, or grief, or indignation of a refined character, is not only expressed in a different language, but is in itself a different emotion from the love, or grief, or anger of a clown, a tradesman, or a market-wench.<sup>5)</sup>

Here Jeffrey makes an argument against universal feeling in poetry, in direct opposition to Wordsworth's belief 'That we have all of us one human heart.'<sup>6)</sup> Jeffrey suggests that refined characters use refined language, and that therefore their feelings are also more refined.

In his 1800 *Preface*— which he further revised and expanded in 1802— Wordsworth defended his style of ballad poetry as embodying the exact opposite of Jeffrey's accusation. In one of the 1802 revisions, he writes that his principal goal is

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5) Francis Jeffrey, review of Robert Southey's *Thalaba*, quoted in *Robert Southey: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lionel Madden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 70-71. See also the review of *Lyrical Ballads* in *New London Review*, 1 (1799), 34.

6) 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', *OW* 53, l.146.

to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them... the primary laws of our nature: chiefly... the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. (*OW* 596-7)

In summary, Wordsworth wanted to write poems about common people in 'rustic life', who found themselves in exciting situations that aroused a 'colouring of imagination'.

With this philosophy in mind, we can examine the two long narrative poems which Wordsworth produced from 1798 – 1800. The shorter of these, 'The Idiot Boy' was published in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). The second, *Peter Bell*, was begun around June 1798, probably for inclusion in *Lyrical Ballads*, but remained fragmentary until the summer of 1800, and was not actually published until 1819. Both poems received criticism similar to Wordsworth's own accusations in his *Preface* against 'idle and extravagant stories in verse'.

But in order to understand the value of Wordsworth's poems, and whether they can be accused of being the kinds of verse he himself opposed, we should put them in the context of the narrative poetry that came before Wordsworth, and influenced the development of his own philosophy and style, as well as the larger context of narrative poetry in English society. The simple question is, did Wordsworth read and appreciate poetry that could fall under his own definition of 'idle and extravagant stories in verse'? And if so, what is the difference between these poems and the mass of poetry which Wordsworth feared was corrupting the taste of the English nation in 1800? In short, what makes an 'idle and extravagant' narrative poem a great poem — and how did these poems influence Wordsworth? This lecture suggests that Wordsworth's two narrative ballads are indeed 'idle and extravagant', but that this does

not diminish their poetic and philosophical value. I contend that Wordsworth's narrative poetry follows a tradition of narrative poetry in English that is both 'light' in content and style, and has a serious moral purpose. While Wordsworth remained blind to the idea that there was a place for extravagance and humour in serious poetry, he instinctively followed this tradition in writing 'The Idiot Boy' and *Peter Bell*.

This lecture will examine the stylistic and thematic role of idleness and extravagance in three important narrative poems in the English canon: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. The lecture will conclude by considering how Wordsworth's narrative ballads fit into this tradition in English poetry.

### **What are 'idle and extravagant stories in verse'?**

In order to consider whether Wordsworth adheres to his own poetic philosophy in this particular case, we need to define specifically what he meant by 'idle and extravagant stories in verse'. Wordsworth's Preface was his first sustained work of literary criticism, but Wordsworth was a careful reader and an even more careful writer. Although the phrase 'idle and extravagant' may seem offhand, it carries several ambiguous meanings. The word 'idle', while applied as an adjective to the text, could imply the idleness of the author: that is, these popular verse narratives are poorly written. But it seems more likely that Wordsworth is attacking their moral content, and the readers' response. 'Idle' is a linguistically loaded word, with a number of overlapping definitions. If Wordsworth is writing of the poetry itself, he probably means 'idle' in the sense of 'without worth, usefulness, or significance', and by extension, vain and frivolous.<sup>7)</sup>

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7) This is the *OED* definition of 'idle' (adj.), 2.a.: 'Of actions, feelings, thoughts, words, etc.: Void of any real worth, usefulness, or significance; leading to no solid result; hence, ineffective, worthless, of no value, vain, frivolous, trifling. Also said of persons in respect of their actions, etc.'

Wordsworth might simply mean that these popular poems are worthless; more likely, he means specifically that they exert no useful effect on the reader. They are poems written to divert the reader: to excite a broad emotional response, and then be forgotten. But by choosing the word 'idle', Wordsworth might be making a dual attack, with the second prong aimed at the reader rather than the text itself. In this case, he means 'idle' in its social and economic sense, synonymous with inactivity and unemployment.<sup>8)</sup> He is suggesting that these verse narratives foment idleness in the reader. In other words, he is attacking narrative poetry that does not stimulate thought and action, but breeds its opposite: a lack of concern with social realities.

'Extravagant' is a somewhat simpler criticism to pin down, although it contains its own ambiguities. Applied to the narrative itself, this adjective suggests both excessive amounts of plot, and excessive actions or expressions by characters.<sup>9)</sup> Here Wordsworth is likely attacking the sensationalism of gothic narratives, which aimed to shock the reader through graphic descriptions and the socially abnormal thoughts and actions of their antagonists. 'Extravagant' narrative poetry, in other words, manipulates the reader through a lack of social and psychological realism.

But Wordsworth might also be making a stylistic criticism in his use of the word 'extravagant'; in this case, he means that the author describes a socially realistic subject, character, or setting—but using inappropriate or excessive language. With this interpretation, Wordsworth reinforces his own decision to write ballad narrative in plain, 'low' language: the traditional language of pastoral.

Therefore, we can read Wordsworth's attack on extravagance, as in his attack on idleness, as encompassing multiple targets with a single epithet.

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8) In this case, the apposite *OED* definition is 4.a.: 'Of persons: Not engaged in work, doing nothing, unemployed.'

9) This follows the most popular modern usage of the word, as defined in the *OED*, definition 6.: 'Roving beyond just limits or prescribed methods' (J.); exceeding the bounds of reason or propriety; excessive, irregular, fantastically absurd.'

In criticizing 'idle and extravagant' verse narrative, he attacks a number of problems in late-eighteenth-century poetry writing, publishing, and reading, including over-hasty writing and sloppy publication for market consumption; narrative written to divert rather than edify; stories that encourage idleness and social disconnection in their readers; the narrative and psychological excesses of literary gothicism; and the stylistic over-description and lack of social realism in neoclassical poetry.

However, for the purposes of this lecture, let us focus on the aspects of Wordsworth's criticism which transcend his historical moment, and might be applied to earlier narrative poetry. Let us limit the criticism of 'idle and extravagant' narrative poetry to the question of whether the poem in question (a) has a 'worth' or 'significance' to the reader and their society, beyond mere entertainment and diversion; (b) encourages social and moral action in the reader, rather than idleness or the pursuit of pleasure; (c) is narratively and psychologically realistic; and (d) is written in simple, clear language, and free of excessive description or digression. The first two points constitute this lecture's conception of poetic 'idleness'; the second two, our concept of poetic 'extravagance'. Can we, in this context, call some of the great early narratives of English poetry 'idle and extravagant', and can we, using Wordsworth's own definition, apply the same criticism to his own ballad narratives? If so, what does this tell us about the applicability of Wordsworth's poetic philosophy to four hundred years of English narrative poetry?

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:*

**Chivalric Education or Christmas Romp?**

Let us begin by examining the role of idleness and extravagance in a poem which Wordsworth almost certainly never read: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *Sir Gawain* is one of the most important surviving poems from the English 'Alliterative Revival' of the mid- to late-fourteenth

century.<sup>10)</sup> Although *Sir Gawain* is now considered one of the most important poems of the English Middle Ages, it remained unknown to the public until 1824, when it was described and quoted in the second edition of Thomas Warton's *The History of English Poetry* (1774–81).<sup>11)</sup> The poem was not published in full until 1839, at the encouragement of Wordsworth's friend Sir Walter Scott.<sup>12)</sup> However, Wordsworth would have known similar tales from the Midlands and North of England, tales of chivalric knights recorded in alliterative Middle English — especially as Scott was compiling his own antiquarian collection, the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish*

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- 10) 'The first datable poem of the so-called Alliterative Revival, which saw the re-emergence of alliterative poems in English, is *Winner and Waster*, which is dated in the period 1352-3. However, the confidence with which the poet handles the metre and style indicate that he was not the first alliterative poet of the Revival.' In *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. 2 (1066-1476), ed. Norman Blake (Cambridge, 1992-2001), 520-1. John Anthony Burrow cautions against considering the Alliterative Revival as a monolithic period or movement: 'The age had... no organs of critical opinion, and it produced no cardinal critical document — no *Deffence et Illustration* or Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. The Alliterative Revival, whatever else it may have been, was not a literary 'movement' in the modern sense; and the 'London School' (comprising chiefly Chaucer and Gower) is little more than a convenient fiction of the literary historian.' In J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* (London, 1971), 3.
- 11) Thomas Warton published the first critical account of the Alliterative Revival in his *History of English Poetry*; the first volume was published in 1774. While working on a subsequent volume, Warton discovered the 'MS. Cotton Nero A.x' (the Gawain manuscript) from the library of Sir Robert Cotton, then in the British Museum. Richard Price, revising Warton's *History* for the second edition of 1824, first printed quotations from *Gawain*; Price's 'promise to edit the poem was never fulfilled.' See Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge, 1977), 126-7. See also Burrow 4-5.
- 12) As Turville-Petre writes, 'the masterpiece of alliterative romance had to wait until 1839 for an edition, when, prompted by the enthusiasm of Sir Walter Scott, Sir Frederick Madden edited *Gawain*, along with other Arthurian poems, for the Bannatyne Club' (Turville-Petre 127).

*Border* (1802-3).<sup>13)</sup> Wordsworth and his friends (particularly Coleridge and Scott) were interested in antiquarian literature such as old English and Scottish ballads. Renewed English interest in antiquarian ballads followed the publication of the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* by Thomas Percy in 1765. Some of the traditions that appear in Wordsworth's work can be traced to works like *Sir Gawain*, if not allusions to this poem itself.

The basic story of *Sir Gawain* is straightforward: on New Year's Day, a strange knight rides into King Arthur's court at Camelot, interrupting the feast. He challenges any knight present to strike him with a single blow from his huge *gisarme* — on the condition that the knight allows him to return the blow one year later. Sir Gawain cuts off the Green Knight's head; the knight does not die, but picks up his head and tells Gawain to come to the Green Chapel on the next New Year's morning. One year later, Gawain fulfills his promise, and rides in search of the Green Knight. He has many adventures, and almost gives up hope of finding the Green Chapel.

But after praying to God and Mary, a castle appears, and Gawain is welcomed by the castle's lord, Sir Bertilak, and his beautiful wife, Lady Bertilak. Gawain rests with his hosts over Christmas. For the last three days of December, he agrees to play a game with Bertilak. Each day, Bertilak will go hunting, while Gawain rests in bed. The two men agree that at the end of each day, they will give each other anything they win that day. Each day, while Bertilak hunts, Gawain is tempted by Lady Bertilak, who tries to seduce him. He successfully resists her advances,

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13) For example, in a letter to Richard Ellis of 27 March 1801, Scott writes: 'Permit me to state a query to you about Sir Gawaine. *Our* Traditions & father Chaucer himself represent him as the flower of Courtesy. On the contrary the Morte Arthur & other French Romances & translations stigmatize him as a foul Murderer of Women & of disarmd knights — a worthy Brother in short of the Traitor Modred. How comes this?' Cited in Roland M. Smith, 'Chaucer Allusions in the Letters of Walter Scott', *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 65, No. 7 (November 1950), pp.448-55, 448-9. Smith notes that Scott may be thinking of Gawain 'with his olde curteisy' in *The Squire's Tale*, 1.95, and the knight of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, 1.114, or even the *Romance of the Rose*, ll.2209-10.

apart from giving her one kiss on the first day, two kisses on the second, and three on the third. Each evening, Bertilak gives Gawain the spoils of his hunt: deer on the first day, a giant boar on the second, and a fox on the third. However, on the last day, Sir Gawain cheats in the game; in addition to three kisses, Lady Bertilak gives him a magical girdle, or belt, which she says can protect him from all harm:

For the man that possesses this piece of silk,  
If he bore it on his body, belted about,  
There is no hand under heaven that could hew him down,  
For he could not be killed by any craft on earth. (1851-4)<sup>14</sup>

Gawain does not give this girdle to Bertilak, believing that it will protect him from the Green Knight's axe-blow.

At last, Gawain finds the Green Chapel, and meets the Green Knight once again. The Green Knight teases Sir Gawain, first by grinding his axe on a grinding wheel. Then he stops in the middle of his first strike when he sees that Gawain 'shrank a little from the sharp iron' (2267). On his second stroke, Gawain does not move, and the Green Knight compliments him on his courage—but still stops in the middle of the stroke. Finally, on the third stroke, the Green Knight just nicks Sir Gawain's neck:

He hammered down hard, yet harmed him no whit  
Save a scratch on one side, that severed the skin;  
The end of the hooked edge entered the flesh,  
And a little blood lightly leapt to the earth. (2311-4)

Gawain leaps up, saying that the contract is fulfilled, and prepares to fight the Green Knight. The Green Knight reveals himself as Sir Bertilak,

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14) All quotations from *Gawain* are taken from the modernized English of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Eighth Edition, general ed. Stephen Greenblatt, vol. 1 (New York and London, 2006), 160-213.

transformed by the magic of the witch Queen Morgan Le Faye, Gawain's aunt, for the purpose of testing the honour of King Arthur's knights. Laughing, the Green Knight forgives Gawain for his act of cowardice, and tells him to keep the green girdle as a symbol of chivalric responsibility.

This is the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in brief. Summarized thus, it appears to match Wordsworth's expectations of culturally and socially ennobling literature. *Gawain* contains no gratuitous violence, no unworthy knights. The poem has a clear theme of chivalric moral education; Gawain is good (resisting Lady Bertilak's attempts at seduction) but not perfect. Gawain embodies not only the chivalric code, but its Christian foundations; his shield shows the pentangle, representing five times five virtues, including the 'five joys' (619-65).<sup>15)</sup> Correspondingly, Gawain carries an image of the Virgin Mary on the inside of his shield, and it is to her (and Christ) that he prays when lost on Christmas Eve (647-50, 753-68). In this way, the poem passes the first test of idleness; that is, the poem has a moral purpose. Similarly, *Gawain* at first appears to avoid the charge of narrative extravagance. Compared to later English prose 'histories' of the Arthurian legends, such as Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the anonymous *Gawain* is concise: narratively complex, but elegant. The poem also displays psychological realism; although it includes fantastical elements, such as the unkillable Green Knight, and references to giant animals and magical creatures including actual giants, all of the poem's characters think and act with logic and deliberation. The beheading scene itself, although gruesome as an idea, is recounted succinctly, if vividly, in only seven lines (423-9).

Therefore, how can we consider this, one of the great works of early English literature (but disconnected from the canon between the early sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries), an 'idle and extravagant [story] in verse'?<sup>16)</sup> I would contend, in many ways. Its narrative and stylistic

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15) In Middle English literature, the 'five joy's are commonly given as the Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and Assumption of Christ.

16) On the dating of the influence of *Gawain* on other English poetry, see Burrows 4.

extravagance is obvious; the poet may be telling a moral tale, but his eyes are fixed on the treasures of earth, where moth and rust corrupt. Typically for narrative poetry of the Middle Ages—though not for religious verse—the poet focuses on descriptions of material goods, such as clothing, armour, weapons and food. When the Green Knight rides into King Arthur's court, the Gawain poet spends almost a hundred lines describing the knight, his horse, and his axe. The knight is completely green, seems 'Half a giant', and carries a giant axe; nevertheless, the poet describes him as a chivalric character: noble, clean, and richly dressed.<sup>17)</sup> The Green Knight is:

in guise all of green, the gear and the man:

[.....]

Both the bosses on his belt and other bright gems

That were richly ranged on his raiment noble

About himself and his saddle, set upon silk

That to tell half the trifles would tax my wits,

The butterflies and birds embroidered thereon

In green of the gayest, with many a gold thread. (151-67)

Similarly, the poet spends almost as much time describing Gawain's appearance throughout the poem. For example, on the morning of New Year's Day, Sir Gawain dresses to ride to the Green Chapel:

In his richest raiment he robed himself then:

His crested coat-armor, close-stiched with craft,

With stones of strange virtue on silk velvet set;

All bound with embroidery on borders and seams

And lined warmly and well with furs of the best. (2025-9)

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17) On the recurring 'alternation between the beautiful and the grotesque' in the description of the Green Knight, see Larry D. Benson, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1965), 58-62.

The poet also dwells on the details of other temporal things, such as food. He describes Gawain's first meal at the castle of Hautdesert in rich detail:

Then attendants set a table upon trestles broad,  
 And lustrous white linen they laid thereupon,  
 A saltcellar of silver, spoons of the same.  
 He washed himself well and went to his place,  
 Men set his fare before him in fashion most fit.  
 There were soups of all sorts, seasoned with skill,  
 Double-sized servings, and sundry fish,  
 Some baked, some breaded, some broiled on the coals,  
 Some simmered, some in stews, steaming with spice,  
 And with sauces to sup that suited his taste. (884-93)

Four hundred years later, these lines would have seemed nothing but 'extravagant' to Wordsworth, a poet living on a narrow income, often without enough money to afford wine, or even meat. In this way, Gawain fails Wordsworth's test of stylistic extravagance; its language, while socially realistic, both digresses into description, and dwells on the idealized luxury of the medieval court.

As for idleness, the poem fails the test of discouraging idleness and social disconnection in the reader, in favour of moral fortitude and social action. *Gawain*, as a Christmas poem, embodies a spirit of relaxation and festivity. The mood and energy of this poem is not the warlike grimness of *Beowulf*, or the constant fighting and questing of Malory's *Morte Darthur*. In fact, the poem does not contain a single battle, or even an account of a past battle. The two confrontations between Sir Gawain and his green challenger emphasize psychological rather than physical conflict. This is a festive poem, and it bubbles over with a mood of idleness and good cheer. Even King Arthur —normally one of the most short-tempered characters in Arthurian literature —is relaxed and playful. The poet represents Arthur's court in its early days; even Arthur himself is young:

Arthur would not eat till all were served;  
 So light was his lordly heart, and a little boyish;  
 His life he liked lively—the less he cared  
 To be lying for long, or long to sit,  
 So busy his young blood, his brain so wild. (85-9)

In the same way, Bertilak acts playfully when he hosts Gawain at his castle. The poet writes that during the feast,

The lord leaps about in light-hearted mood;  
 Contrives entertainments and timely sports;  
 Takes his hood from his head and hangs it on a spear,  
 And offers him openly the honour thereof  
 Who should promote the most mirth at that Christmas feast... (981-5)

Furthermore, the narrative of the poem is itself 'idle'. This line of criticism brings together Wordsworth's concepts of idleness and extravagance by suggesting that when a poem's narrative itself becomes idle, that is, fails to progress, because it is hampered by excessive description and digression, extravagance creates idleness. This question of technical idleness and extravagance prompts the further question of whether action in a 'stimulating' narrative (that is, a narrative that discourages idleness, and encourages moral thought and social action in the reader) requires a corresponding display of action and vigour among its characters and its narrative style. We will return to this question when examining Wordsworth's own poetry.

How does *Gawain* embody a spirit of idleness? After the Green Knight's challenge, Sir Gawain lingers at King Arthur's court for almost the whole year. The poet describes the changing of the seasons in a beautiful passage, compressing a whole year into less than 40 lines (498-535). Gawain sets out on his quest to find the Green Chapel on 'All-Hallows' Day', that is, All Saints' Day, November 1. In the vein of 'extravagance' described above, the poet gives a long account of Gawain dressing for his

journey—again, almost 100 lines (566-639).

Gawain travels for almost two months, encountering many dangers including serpents, ‘savage wolves’, ‘wild men’, bulls, bears, boars, and ‘giants that came gibbering from the jagged steeps’ (720-3). However, these two months of adventure and danger take up only 22 lines of the whole poem of over 2500 lines (713-35). In a fit of anti-Homeric laziness, the poet glosses over these months, saying:

So many were the wonders he wandered among  
That to tell but the tenth part would tax my wits. (718-9)

This specific kind of idleness returns to the first fleeting definition of idleness considered above: that is, the idleness of the author, who writes hastily or sloppily, and without respect for his audience. Of course, in this case, the Gawain poet is not idle; he constructs his narrative carefully. He shows an excellent grasp of his poem’s structure and pace; Gawain’s questing adventures are not the focus of the poem, and so the poet mentions them only briefly. Nevertheless, to the audience, this aspect of the narrative might suggest that the poet is idle, and that *Sir Gawain* is an ‘idle’ poem. Is the Gawain poet teasing his audience by glossing over the episodes they would most enjoy—tales of a knight fighting serpents and giants—in order to proceed directly to the moral centre of the tale? If so, then the poem’s narrative is paradoxically, in its structural idleness, opposed to the intellectual idleness of its audience.

Finally, we can class this poem as an ‘idle and extravagant’ story for two other structural reasons. Firstly, during the three-day game at Bertilak’s castle, Gawain does not participate in the hunt, but lies in bed for most of the day, flirting with Lady Bertilak in the morning, and feasting in the evening after prayers. His encounters with Lady Bertilak—contrasted cinematically with Lord Bertilak’s hunts—make up the whole of Part 3 of the poem, almost a thousand lines (1126-1997). For a large part of the poem, therefore, the poet represents his protagonist as an idle character, susceptible to external influence. Gawain agrees to linger at Hautdesert,

even though time is running out for him to fulfil his promise to find the Green Chapel. He has only Bertilak's promise that the castle's lord knows the location of the chapel and will take him there. The Gawain poet playfully represents Gawain's idleness as the better part of his pact with his host; Gawain enjoys the spoils of two days' hunting without expending any effort. With such a protagonist, the poem fails the test of idleness in its second definition above, that is, it does not 'encourage social and moral action in the reader, rather than idleness or the pursuit of pleasure.'

Secondly, the narrative of the poem is itself a kind of trick, since Gawain is never in any real danger. By withholding the Green Knight's identity and history until the last hundred lines of the poem, the poet creates an exciting mystery, and allows the audience to think that Gawain cannot escape death without the help of magic, nor without breaking the chivalric code of honour. But in the end, the Green Knight's challenge turns out to be as much a game as the 'game within the game' arranged by Lord Bertilak and his wife in a test of Gawain's chastity. Surely this must be one of the few great narrative poems in English literature in which neither the hero's life or his soul faces mortal peril. Wordsworth, as we shall see below, follows this practice.

### **More Apologia than Narrative: Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale***

Unlike *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we know that Wordsworth read and loved Chaucer — so much so that he translated some of Chaucer's poetry into modern English.<sup>18)</sup> However, as modern critics have pointed out, Wordsworth's personality did not suit either the playful spirit of

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18) Wordsworth began translating Chaucer in late 1801: 'using the text found in Robert Anderson's *Work of the British Poets*. Wordsworth began his most important encounter with the poetry of Chaucer: his translation into modern English verse of the tales of the Prioress and Manciple, a selection from *Troilus and Cresida*, and *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, then believed to be Chaucer's.' In William Wordsworth, *Translations of Chaucer and Virgil*, ed. Bruce E. Graver (Ithaca, 1998), 3. Hereafter TC. W's translation of *The Prioress's Tale* was published in *The River Duddon, A Series of Sonnets; Vaudracour and Julia: and Other Poems* (1820) (TC 13, 33).

Chaucer's work, or Chaucer's liberal use of sexual imagery. The middle-aged Wordsworth provided translations of the less licentious and more innocent parts of Chaucer's work including *The Prioress' Tale* from *The Canterbury Tales*. Did Wordsworth consider Chaucer's poetry to be 'idle and extravagant stories in verse'? Perhaps not, but Wordsworth still found much in Chaucer that he believed should be improved, or cut.

Ironically, Wordsworth's attempts to modernize some of Chaucer's more innocent and sympathetic tales prompted further attacks by his own critics. The *Eclectic Review* accused Wordsworth of misunderstanding Chaucer's satire, and taking his narratives at face value. This is the same kind of attack that critics levelled against Wordsworth's own narrative poetry including *Peter Bell* and *The Waggoner*; to some extent these attacks fit the accusation of 'idleness and extravagance'—particularly childishness (encouraging a childlike, and hence idle, response from the reader) and pathos (the emotional extravagance of character) (TC 18). The reviewer writes:

To Mr. Wordsworth, indeed, we can conceive that such tales would recommend themselves by their puerility; that he would be even melted into tears by the affected solemnity of a sly old humorist like Chaucer; and that what was meant by him for satire might be mistaken by our Author for pathos.<sup>19)</sup>

This lecture will not look for evidence that Wordsworth's translations of Chaucer are 'idle and extravagant stories in verse'—though this might be all too easy to demonstrate. Instead, it will consider Wordsworth's accusation applied to one of the greatest of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a tale which Wordsworth read but did not choose to translate. As with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, if Wordsworth's accusations against the worst examples of contemporary poetry can likewise be applied to some of the

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19) *Eclectic Review*, n.s. 14 (August 1820), 18. Quoted in TC 18.

greatest narrative poems in earlier historical periods, we must re-evaluate the specific meaning of Wordsworth's criticism in the Preface.

In relation to Wordsworth's own ballad tales, one of the most significant, and potentially 'idle and extravagant', stories in *The Canterbury Tales* is that of Alisoun, the Wife of Bath. Wordsworth certainly knew it, as one of the most famous of *The Canterbury Tales*. Like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is set in the days of King Arthur. Also like *Sir Gawain*, Chaucer's tale has a moral lesson at its heart, but this lesson is preceded by an extensive Prologue (at 862 lines, more than twice as long as the actual tale's 407 lines). In this sense, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, taken as a whole, is an exercise in delay. Before she tells her tale, Alisoun describes how she has been married five times, and goes into detail about problems of love and sex between men and women. Alisoun is an educated woman, and uses her knowledge of the Bible to defend her own behaviour as Christian. She points out that many Biblical characters had more than one wife:

I woot wel Abraham was an holy man,  
 And Jacob eek, as fer as evere I can,  
 And eech of hem hadde wives mo than two,  
 And many another holy man also. (61-4)<sup>20</sup>

Alisoun is not shy about discussing sex and human anatomy in great detail; after discussing why she believes human sexual organs were made for pleasure as well as for procreation, she states:

In wifhood wol I use myn instrument  
 As freely as my Makere hath it sent.  
 If I be dangerous, God yive me sorwe:

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20) All quotations from *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* are taken from the Middle English of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Eighth Edition, general ed. Stephen Greenblatt, vol. 1 (New York and London, 2006), 256-284. Hereafter *Norton*.

Myn housbonde shal it han both eve and morwe... (155-8)

We cannot imagine a sixty-year-old Wordsworth — at this point in his life deeply conservative and increasingly pious — chuckling over these lines (at least not in public). Based on Alisoun's frank opinions and unrestrained language, this pillar of English literature might seem to Wordsworth one of the 'idle and extravagant' stories whose descendants were corrupting, rather than purifying, the taste of the English reading public. Nevertheless, Wordsworth counted Chaucer as one of the four pillars supporting his own writing:

When I began to give myself up to the profession of a poet for life, I was impressed with the conviction, that there were four English poets whom I must have continually before me as examples—Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. These I must study, and equal if I could; and I need not think of the rest.<sup>21)</sup>

More evidence against Chaucer's narrative poetry seems to appear in Alisoun's tale. The Wife of Bath's tale is an Arthurian fable — that is, a short tale with a moral lesson, set in the time of King Arthur. But it is also somewhat of a *fabliau* — that is, a short crude or sexual medieval tale that 'satirized... the foibles of the Church, the station of women, and the values of the middle and lower classes' (Myers and Simms 110). Although the tale has a moral ending (which prevents it from being a true *fabliau*), it exposes the illusion of chivalry in Arthur's court, and satirizes the male knights' concern for their own power and status.

In the tale, an unnamed knight rapes a maiden in a field. King Arthur orders the knight to be killed, but the queen and the other women of the court beg Arthur to spare his life. Arthur gives the knight to the queen and allows her to pronounce sentence. The queen gives the knight a

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21) *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (3 vols.; London, 1876), vol. 3, 459-60. Quoted in TC 3.

riddle, and a year to solve it:

I graunte thee lif if thou canst tellen me  
 What thing it is that wommen most desiren:  
 Be war and keep thy nekke boon from iren.  
 And if thou canst nat tellen me anoon,  
 Yit wol I give thee leve for to goon  
 A twelfmonth and a day to seeche and lere  
 An answeere suffisant in this matere... (910-6)

The knight journeys for a year, and hears many possible answers. He is about to give up hope, when an ugly old fairy woman gives him the correct answer, in exchange for granting her next wish. He agrees, and takes the answer to the queen:

Wommen desire to have soverinetee  
 As wel over hir housbonde as hir love,  
 And for to been in maistrye him above. (1044-6)

That is, women desire power and control in love and marriage. The answer is correct; the queen spares the knight's life. The old fairy woman, however, collects her debt in front of the queen; she demands that the knight marry her. The knight begs her not to ask this, offering all his goods in exchange for his freedom, but the hag will not let him go. Although the knight marries her, he treats her badly, calling her his damnation; on their wedding night, he insults her appearance and her low birth. The woman proudly replies that appearance is not important, and that gentility 'cometh fro God allone' (1168). She gives the knight a choice: she will remain old and ugly, but be faithful to him; or she will become young and beautiful, but unfaithful. At last, the knight answers that his wife should choose whatever will give her the most pleasure. With this, he gives her 'soverinetee' in their marriage—as a result, the curse on him is lifted, and his wife becomes young, beautiful, and faithful.

In this sense, Alisoun's tale contains a fine social moral, opposing class divisions on the grounds of inherent spiritual worth. Despite the fact that the tale restores normative male-female relations at the end of the poem ('she obeyed him in every thing'), Chaucer was ahead of his time as a feminist writer (1261). On the other hand, the moral lesson of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* illuminates the worst qualities of medieval society. Chaucer's tale anticipates the false chivalry and corruption of the companionship of the Round Table in the 'end times' of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, as opposed to the youthfulness and purity of Camelot in *Sir Gawain*. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, Arthur's knights lack chivalry and even basic discipline. Even worse, when the knight protagonist makes a promise, he attempts to escape from his word, and insults the old woman who saved his life. From this perspective, the morality of Chaucer's tale is even more limited than the moral lesson of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; at least in that poem, Gawain's crime was negligible, and throughout the tale he and every other character (even the 'villain'), demonstrate the highest qualities of purity and honour.

This comparison between *Sir Gawain* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* becomes even more complex when we consider that two other versions of Chaucer's tale exist; in both of these, the hero is Sir Gawain. Unlike the unnamed knight in Alisoun's tale, Sir Gawain's character remains pure in these other versions of the tale. In the most popular version of the tale, titled *The Marriage of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, the story follows a pattern similar to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. A mysterious supernatural challenger named Gromer Somer Joure arrives in King Arthur's court, and demands that Arthur discover what women most desire. As in the *Green Knight*, Gawain volunteers to answer the challenge in Arthur's place. He receives the correct answer from Gromer's sister, a hag named Ragnelle, in exchange for marrying her. Unlike in Alisoun's tale, Gawain selflessly agrees to the marriage with Ragnelle, and treats his betrothed with courtesy. On their wedding night, Ragnelle transforms back into a beautiful woman (she had been transformed by a magic spell). After Gawain gives her *sovereignty* in their marriage, Ragnelle becomes a faithful

wife, whom Gawain loves for the rest of his life, even after her untimely death.

Chaucer's Alisoun could have told this version of the tale, but Chaucer's version of the story is more suited to Alisoun's character, with her experienced, pragmatic view of male-female relationships and the economic value of marriage and sex. Chaucer's 'idle and extravagant' tale, set in the context of Alisoun's extensive prologue, favours psychological and narrative realism over moral instruction. Wordsworth would not have approved, but Wordsworth's own ballad characters display similar characteristics. Therefore, although the *Wife of Bath's Tale* escapes one charge of idleness on the grounds that it has a clear moral purpose, Wordsworth would condemn it for failing in the second respect of idleness: its narrator (Alisoun) and its protagonist are morally ambiguous, and their actions and language do not encourage corresponding moral or social action in the reader. Similarly, while the prologue and tale avoid the charge of narrative or psychological extravagance through their realism (although Wordsworth might contend that the rape of a maiden by a knight smacked of gothic excess), the prologue falls foul of stylistic extravagance through digression. Wordsworth would also find fault with both prologue and tale for their linguistic extravagance in the form of licentious language—what the reviewer of his own Chaucer translation in the *British Review* called 'disgusting... narration, and odiously profane... language.'<sup>22</sup>

### **The Great Influences: 'Sweetest' Shakespeare and 'Majestic' Milton**

We must now leap forward 300 years to pursue Wordsworth's accusations of idleness and extravagance in narrative poetry. The intervening years did not lack poems of this type, but the two authors who exerted the greatest influence over Wordsworth and the development of

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22) *British Review* 16 (September 1820), 51. Quoted in TC 18.

his idea of the social purpose of poetry were special cases.

The first is, of course, Shakespeare. Shakespeare's two dramatic poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, were largely ignored in the eighteenth century, until Romantic writers and scholars such as Coleridge revived an interest in them. We can assume from Coleridge's advocacy that Wordsworth knew both of these poems. *Venus and Adonis* could certainly be considered an 'idle and extravagant' story in verse, disliked by contemporary moralists and rejected again after the Romantic period by the more prudish Victorian critics. Regarding its genre, the poem is classed as an 'erotic epyllion', that is, a miniature epic with an erotic theme.<sup>23)</sup>

The latter poem is a tragic narrative with a serious moral theme. *The Rape of Lucrece* was 'praised by Thomas Freeman in 1614 ('Who loves chaste life, there's Lucrece for a teacher')' and other writers for its moral purpose.<sup>24)</sup> It would be interesting to contrast these two works in terms of the thematic and structural roles of idleness and extravagance in Shakespeare's own narrative poetry; the Roman poet Ovid, with his reputation for licentiousness, provides the main source material for both of these poems, with their dramatically opposed moods. Furthermore, in rewriting Ovid's tragedy of Lucrece, Shakespeare was revisiting a theme

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23) 'Shakespeare's alterations to his material are influenced in part by other stories in Ovid (principally those of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, and Echo and Narcissus, the latter cited by Venus at l. 161), and in part by a growing fashion for the Ovidian 'erotic epyllion' (miniature epic on an amorous theme) which had begun with the publication of Thomas Lodge's *Scilla's Metamorphosis* in 1589 (written in the same six-line stanzaic form Shakespeare adopts here, rhyming *ababcc*). This vogue would find its most famous expression in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, not published until 1598 but composed at around the same time as *Venus and Adonis* (shortly before Marlowe's murder in May 1593). Shakespeare's poem shares with these other examples of its genre the combination of passionate and sensual subject matter with a wry and urbane narrative voice.' Michael Dobson, "Venus and Adonis" in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Michael Dobson and Stanley Wells (Oxford: OUP, 2001), *Oxford Reference Online*.

24) Michael Dobson, "Rape of Lucrece, The" in *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Michael Dobson and Stanley Wells (Oxford: OUP, 2001), *Oxford Reference Online*.

which earlier English poets had also used, most notably Chaucer in his *Legend of Good Women* (perhaps, like *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, written in continued penance for his own sin of rape or attempted rape). Nevertheless, while Wordsworth read both of these poems, they exerted far less influence on his poetic development than did Shakespeare's plays.

The second narrative poet whom we must mention briefly before reaching the eighteenth century is John Milton. Milton was, perhaps even more than Shakespeare, the greatest modern writer to influence Wordsworth's poetic development. It is easy to understand why, when we consider Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* in the context of Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. Both poets believed in the divine power of poetry to shape human history and society, and both poets saw their poetic work as a key component of reforming or restoring British society during two periods of crisis.

It would be a fascinating exercise to look for examples of idleness and extravagance in Milton's narrative poetry. A critic could certainly make the argument that Milton's love for the richness of language, and his extensive reading of (in Puritan eyes) morally questionable poetry and drama including Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson opened his own work to the possibility of communicating social consciousness through idleness and extravagance. If we could show that Milton pursued this more Chaucerian or Renaissance approach to social education through literature—that is, encouraging moral behaviour by showing it in the context of an uncensored portrait of the spectrum of human behaviour—such evidence would raise questions about the limitations of Wordsworth's more puritanical criticism.

Milton did consider the entirety of Chaucer and Shakespeare as one of the foundations of his own poetic development. For example, his two early non-narrative poems, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, both describe the luxurious experience of enjoying literature. In *L'Allegro*, a poem of sunshine and happiness, Milton writes:

Then to the well-trod stage anon,

If Jonson's learned sock be on,  
 Or sweetest Shakespeare, fancy's child,  
 Warble his native woodnotes wild. (131-4)

Here Milton describes the joy of watching Renaissance drama — not only Jonson and Shakespeare, but in particular, their comedies. Similarly, in his evening meditation *Il Penseroso*, Milton turns to Chaucer. Here he specifically mentions not the chivalry of *The Knight's Tale* or the moral meditation of *The Parson's Tale*, but the most idle and fanciful of Chaucer's stories, the fragmentary *Squire's Tale*:

Or call up him that left half told  
 The story of Cambuscan bold,  
 Of Camball and of Algarsife,  
 And who had Canacee to wife,  
 That owned the virtuous ring and glass,  
 And of the wondrous horse of brass,  
 On which the Tartar king did ride... (109-15)<sup>25)</sup>

However, Milton wrote these two poems when he was only twenty-three years old. His great epic, *Paradise Lost* reflects a life of struggle and loss, including the deaths of two wives, a son, and a daughter; total blindness; and political persecution and imprisonment. Wordsworth, whose own youth was cut short by the death of his parents, and who similarly struggled his whole life with poverty, family death, and ridicule from critics, found in Milton a powerful figure to admire and imitate. *Paradise Lost* and Milton's other late poetry show their presence repeatedly in Wordsworth's work, but these poems do not clash with the idea in Wordsworth's Preface that the best in poetry must not be 'idle and extravagant' works.

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25) Wordsworth used the first two lines of this quotation to introduce his own translation of Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale* when he published it in 1820. See *TC* 37.

### Pope's *Rape of the Lock*: Frivolity and Magical Spirits

One more poet, however, bears mention in his influence on Wordsworth's narrative verse. This is Alexander Pope (1688 – 1744), whose precise, flexible style Wordsworth imitated throughout his life, and particularly in his first published poems, written in heroic couplets.<sup>26)</sup> Pope—like the other great Augustan wits of the Scriblerus Club, including Jonathan Swift, Dr. John Arbuthnot, John Gay, and Thomas Parnell—did not take questions of moral weakness lightly, despite the explicit nature of his writing. Eighteenth-century satire developed in parallel with scientific empiricism; Swift and Pope sought to maintain the balance between history and progress by exposing the danger of indifference in a new world of atoms, electricity, economics, and statistics. They would have agreed with the cautious sentiment expressed by John Locke in the opening pages of his revolutionary *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), under the heading 'Useful to know the extent of our comprehension':

it may be of use, to... be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension; to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether...<sup>27)</sup>

As human understanding of the wider universe raised questions of humanity's place in this universe, poets like Swift and Pope, and philosophers like Berkeley and Hume, reiterated the value of ancient learning and the worth of experiential knowledge.

What, then, can we make of Pope's most popular narrative poem, the

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26) For Wordsworth's first published poems, see William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk* (The Cornell Wordsworth), ed. James Averill (Ithaca and London, 1984), and William Wordsworth, *Descriptive Sketches* (The Cornell Wordsworth), ed. Eric Birdsall with Paul M. Zall (Ithaca and London, 1984).

27) John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1849), 2.

miniature mock epic *The Rape of the Lock*? Stylistically, the poem is a near-perfect epic in miniature, built on Pope's extensive knowledge of classical and modern literature including the Homeric epics, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Pope was translating Homer's *Iliad* at the same time that he published the first two versions of *The Rape of the Lock* (1712 and 1714). Yet the poem is a parody; Pope refers to it as 'An Heroi-Comical Poem', and writes in an introductory letter to Arabella Fermor that it is not intended to be taken seriously:

...you may bear me witness, it was intended only to divert a few young ladies, who have good sense and good humour enough to laugh not only at their sex's little unguarded follies, but at their own.<sup>28)</sup>

Like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Pope's poem reflects contemporary society, dwelling on descriptions of all of the idle things fashionable young ladies consider important: make-up, clothes, lapdogs, card games, and coffee. For example, at the end of Canto 1 of *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope spends almost 25 lines describing the young Belinda dressing and putting on her makeup. Like *Sir Gawain* and Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the final version of *The Rape of the Lock* contains supernatural elements, in this case elemental spirits who take the place of classical Greek or Roman gods. But in contrast to the medieval poems, the supernatural forces in Pope's mock epic spend their energies grooming, rather than testing, human beings. Pope writes:

First, robed in white, the nymph intent adores,  
 With head uncovered, the cosmetic powers.  
 A heavenly image in the glass appears...  
 Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms;  
 The fair each moment rises in her charms,

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28) Quoted in *Norton* 2514.

Repairs her smiles, awakens every grace,  
 And calls forth all the wonders of her face;  
 Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,  
 And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.  
 The busy Sylphs surround their darling care,  
 These set the head, and those divide the hair... (ll.123-4, 139-46)

Belinda's Sylphs (elemental air spirits) assist her maid in putting on Belinda's makeup, arranging her hair, and dressing her. In terms of the role of the supernatural, the sylphs of *The Rape of the Lock* are a far cry from the monstrous green form of Lord Bertilak transformed by Morgan le Faye, or the mischievous crone of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Wordsworth would have questioned the blatant presence of the supernatural in these two poems as a danger to their psychological realism; in *The Rape of the Lock*, he would likely read Pope's revised edition, in which he introduces the supernatural 'machinery' of the poem, as completely unnecessary, excessive, and frivolous—'idle' by definition. Furthermore, the idleness of Belinda and her friends, as characters without employment or benefit to society, would seem to Wordsworth completely unworthy of imitation. In short, idleness and extravagance, as Wordsworth defines above, pervade the poem: in its lack of moral purpose; in the behaviour of its characters; in its unnecessary supernatural machinery; and finally, in the excesses of its description of frivolous things.

Unlike the two medieval poems we have examined, *The Rape of the Lock* seems to communicate no clear moral outcome. Of course, Pope is a satirist—but so was Chaucer. While Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* contain some of the best early satirical verse in English literature, they also offer honest portraits of human life, and express a hopeful, humanistic philosophy of regarding humanity's struggle for prosperity and goodness.

In contrast, while Pope praises the beauty of his main character, Belinda, this beauty is external rather than moral or intellectual. *The Rape of the Lock* is a small, idle entertainment, offering no overarching philosophy or moral design. In fact, Pope deliberately avoids polemic in

the poem. He wrote the poem as a peace offering to defuse a conflict between two prominent Catholic families. The real-life dispute contributes the basic plot of the poem: Lord Petre, a fashionable rake, had cut off a lock of Arabella Fermor's hair. In the poem, the character of Belinda represents Arabella. While Pope describes her as incredibly beautiful and innocent, he does not comment on her moral virtue. Similarly, while the Baron, the poem's villain, represents Lord Petre, the character is not described as particularly evil, merely vain and ambitious.

No poem could better fit the description of the type of narrative poetry looked down on by Wordsworth than *The Rape of the Lock*. The poem is a paragon of eighteenth-century middle-class idleness and extravagance. As Pope intended, its satire is too light to hurt the feelings of any of the real people represented by its characters. Pope spends an entire canto describing a card game between Belinda and the Baron, pausing only to go into detail about a coffee break. In this sequence, the poet simultaneously satirizes and advertises eighteenth-century luxury, in the same way that a modern television advertisement might carefully mock a product in such a way that convinces you that the product is stylish, and therefore worth buying. Pope describes the young women and men enjoying coffee:

For lo! the board with cups and spoons is crowned,  
 The berries crackle, and the mill turns round;  
 On shining altars of Japan they raise  
 The silver lamp; the fiery spirits blaze:  
 From silver spouts the grateful liquors glide,  
 While China's earth receives the smoking tide.  
 At once they gratify their scent and taste,  
 And frequent cups prolong the rich repast.  
 [.....]  
 Coffee (which makes the politicians wise,  
 And see through all things with his half-shut eyes)  
 Sent up in vapours to the Baron's brain  
 New stratagems, the radiant Lock to gain. (ll.105-12, 117-20)

Into these ten lines of verse, Pope compresses a detailed description of eighteenth-century commerce and its importance to the growing British Empire. He describes the extent of foreign trade, with images of Japanese lacquer-ware (*urushi-nuri*, 漆塗) and Chinese porcelain in British salons. The young guests' addiction to 'frequent cups' of coffee and tea suggest, to the modern reader, and from a post-colonial perspective, the origins of imbalanced colonial trading and exploitation that accompanied the international tea trade in India and China, and coffee in the Americas. Finally, Pope delights in showing the dual power of coffee as a stimulant, and as a stimulant to immoral behaviour, as it keeps politicians 'wise' (meaning cunning), and helps the Baron devise new strategies for cutting off a lock of Belinda's hair.

If we could hear Wordsworth's thoughts on this poem in 1800, we could imagine that he might consider Pope's *Rape of the Lock* to epitomize the problem of 'idle and extravagant stories in verse' in late-eighteenth-century English society: Pope satirizes, but he does not encourage frugality or responsibility. The purpose of satire has always been to mock failures in human behaviour as a way to repair or improve society. But in this poem written to 'divert a few young ladies', Pope has lost sight of satire's ultimate goal. His miniature epic has become complicit in the society it mocks.

Yet, despite this imagined critique, we know that Wordsworth admired this poem, and adapted some of the images of its supernatural 'machinery' for his own epic poem, *The Prelude*. For example, in Canto 2, when the Sylph Ariel summons the other good spirits of air to protect Belinda from harm, Pope writes:

Ye Sylphs and Sylphids, to your chief give ear!  
 Fays, Fairies, Genii, Elves, and Daemons, hear!  
 Ye know the spheres and various tasks assigned  
 By laws eternal to the aërial kind. (ll.73-6)

Here Pope imitates classical literature (the invocation to nature spirits in Ovid's version of the Medea tale). Shakespeare also imitates these famous

lines from Ovid in his last play, *The Tempest*. When Wordsworth uses these lines in the first version of *The Prelude*, he is aware that he is making an allusion to three different periods of English literature. In a well-known passage of the 1799 *Prelude*, now referred to as the 'second apostrophe' to nature, Wordsworth writes:

Ye powers of earth, ye genii of the springs,  
 And ye that have your voices in the clouds,  
 And ye that are familiars of the lakes  
 And of the standing pools, I may not think  
 A vulgar home was yours when ye employed  
 Such ministry...<sup>29)</sup>

Searching his childhood memories for his earliest experiences of the power of nature, Wordsworth verbalizes his feelings of wonder using the language of a well-read child. The images that come to him as an adult are the images that linger in his mind from his childhood reading in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Pope. Not surprisingly for a young boy, these are supernatural images of genii and fairy-like 'familiars'.

Yet, although he consciously alludes to Pope, Wordsworth elevates the mood of his allusion. The mood of his own nascent epic is far more serious than *The Rape of the Lock*, in which elemental spirits help young ladies dress, instead of awakening the human mind to a love of nature. In concluding our reading of Pope, we can return to Wordsworth's conundrum of idleness and extravagance: if Wordsworth would have found Pope's mock-epic 'idle and extravagant', he still considered it worth imitating. Why is this so?

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29) William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1798-1799* (The Cornell Wordsworth), ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca, 1977), I, 186-91.

**Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy' and *Peter Bell*:****Idle, Extravagant, and Moral Tales**

I do not have enough time to give you detailed readings of Wordsworth's two main narrative poems from the 1798-1800 period, the period in which Wordsworth published *Lyrical Ballads*, and its second edition with the critical Preface. But in conclusion, I hope I can show you, briefly, that Wordsworth's work falls into a continuum of 'idle and extravagant' poetry which, at the same time as it entertains us, serves the very moral purpose which Wordsworth feared he would not find in it.

Take, for example, Wordsworth's long lyrical ballad, the tale of *Peter Bell*. As with *Sir Gawain*, the plot of the poem is quite simple. Peter Bell is a potter, a travelling salesman and a rogue. Although he spends his whole life travelling the length and breadth of the British Isles, his heart remains unaffected by nature:

In vain through every changeful year  
Did Nature lead him as before;  
A primrose by a river's brim  
A yellow primrose was to him,  
And it was nothing more. (ll.216-20)<sup>30)</sup>

Peter is a villain and a criminal, although his crimes do not compare to those of the unnamed knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. In the first part of the poem, while travelling alone at night through Swaledale in Yorkshire, he finds a dead man's body in a river. The dead man's donkey continues to wait faithfully by the drowned man's body. Peter steals the ass, and beats it until it obeys him. He rides the ass through the woods, and the poor beast naturally returns to the home of its owner. The dead man's daughter runs towards the ass, thinking her father has come home at last.

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30) All quotations from *Peter Bell* are taken from OW, 91-129.

The dead man's son, who was out looking for his father, soon returns, and also thinks his father is alive. Peter's heart is overwhelmed by guilt and sorrow, both for stealing and beating the ass, and for all his past crimes. His transformation has both a Biblical suddenness, and, after 1250 lines of 'idle' narrative, convincing psychological realism:

And now does Peter deeply feel  
The heart of man's a holy thing;  
And nature, through a world of death,  
Breathes into him a second breath  
Just like the breath of spring. (ll.1251-5)

After a long narrative, with plenty of supernatural suggestions, but without any real supernatural intervention, and hardly any incident, Wordsworth ends the poem suddenly and powerfully. He writes that the donkey returns to the dead man's family, and with its humble labour helps support them. And as for Peter:

Peter Bell, who till that night  
Had been the wildest of his clan,  
Forsook his crimes, forsook his folly,  
And after ten months' melancholy  
Became a good and honest man. (ll.1316-20)

In short, the ballad narrative of *Peter Bell* is without question a moral tale written in simple, beautiful language. It is exactly the kind of poetry that Wordsworth argued, in his Preface, would revive the spirit of the English people and save them from vanity and corruption.

Yet at the same time, *Peter Bell* is, by Wordsworth's own definition, an 'idle and extravagant' poem. Firstly it is idle: although the poem is clearly written to instruct its reader in morality and good social behaviour, its protagonist is a rogue. Peter's conversion, as powerful as it is, comes too late in the poem to show a balanced portrait of his repentance.

Wordsworth constructs his narrative for dramatic effect, and his intuition for the briefness of the poem's climax is poetically keen. Nevertheless, he does not hesitate to make the poem's hero an idle, insensitive character, almost immune to the Romantic-period experiences of the power of nature, and human sympathy.

Secondly, the poem is extravagant, both in its use of description without incident, and in its characters' excesses of emotion (Peter's fear, anger, and eventual sorrow) without correspondingly significant impetus for these emotions. As with *Gawain*, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, and *The Rape of the Lock*, *Peter Bell* is, narratively speaking, extravagant, simply because very little happens in it, although the poem is over 1300 lines long. As a narrative poem, both of Wordsworth's long ballads ('The Idiot Boy' and *Peter Bell*) break one of the traditional rules of the popular or folk ballad genre: such a ballad must tell an interesting story, in order to keep a general audience excited and listening. Wordsworth never winks at his audience in the way that the *Gawain* poet does when he glosses over the twelve months of *Gawain's* quest for the Green Chapel. Wordsworth demands attention from his audience without the reward of regular incident to hold their interest.

The poem's extravagance also lies in its offhand use of the supernatural, as in Pope. Although no supernatural incident occurs within the narrative boundaries of Peter's tale, Wordsworth begins the 1800 version of the poem with a prologue, in which he, the poet, explores the world in a flying boat, 'In shape just like the crescent moon' (5). After travelling to Saturn and Jupiter, and viewing the distant parts of the Earth from above, Wordsworth rejects his supernatural barge in favour of more pedestrian movement:

Go creep along the dirt and pick  
Your way with your good walking stick,  
Just three good miles an hour. (73-5)

In this Prologue, Wordsworth asserts the superior value of domestic, moral narratives in the place of traditional English narrative poems, set, like

*Gawain* and Chaucer's tales, 'in the land of Fairy' (111). Yet in doing so, Wordsworth cannot resist writing thirty-one stanzas of fancy and magic before returning to Earth to begin his more mundane tale of Peter's moral transformation. While rejecting extravagance, Wordsworth indulges — and the effect is a more 'magical' poem in the best sense of the word. The supernatural prologue heightens the reader's sensitivity to differences in perspective, and the wonder of nature, in preparation for a narrative in which a change of perspective and an opening to wonder occur in the mind of a single human being.

Finally, Wordsworth's poem is extravagant because it luxuriates in description, both external and internal. Wordsworth spends most of the poem describing the minute details of the landscape through which Peter walks and rides, and describing Peter's changing psychological reactions to this landscape. Reading the poem for the first time, many readers will think that Wordsworth does not care about his audience; the poem is told entirely as a self-indulgent exercise in writing in 'the real language of men'. This is an extravagance which few eighteenth-century readers would have forgiven. It helps explain why Wordsworth withheld the publication of *Peter Bell* for almost 20 years—and why the poem was ridiculed by most critics when it was finally published in 1819. Even now, few readers of English literature study this poem in detail, although I contend that it is a more powerful, and more important, poem than its companion piece, Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

In the end, we must accept that Wordsworth was both right and wrong about his critical project; or, that while he had a clear understanding of his philosophical purpose for writing narrative poetry, he failed to concede in his Preface that the greatest narrative poems in English literature satisfied the conditions he set for 'idle and extravagant stories in verse'. His own ballad narratives, written as demonstrations of, or experiments in, his poetic philosophy, succeed in achieving an elevated moral tone which is not clearly present in *Sir Gawain* or *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and certainly not in *The Rape of the Lock*. If *Sir Gawain* communicates a theme of the importance of perfect virtue, the moral lesson is somewhat abstract from

the lives of the poem's listeners, since Gawain's failing is so small. Peter Bell, in contrast, is a through-and-through villain, although his specific crimes are also minor (apart from the fact that he is a dedicated bigamist, illegally married many times: 'He had a dozen wedded wives' (250)). But Peter's transformation is deeply personal and psychological — the results of an internal quest that parallels Gawain's chivalric quest.

Yet at the same time, the idleness and extravagance of previous canonical works of English literature make their presence felt in Wordsworth's narrative poems. Great literature is a continuum, and no poet can create a lasting legacy without a deep understanding of what has come before. Although Wordsworth rejected some of his precursors' poetic philosophies, in attempting to formulate a critical idea of eighteenth-century social poetry, he could not reject the extravagance of their language and their styles. The frivolous, glorious excesses of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Pope and others had worked their way into Wordsworth's own poetic expression from his earliest reading.

I will conclude with a parallel between *Sir Gawain* and *Peter Bell* that demonstrates this point. This point is easier to prove, in fact, on the grounds that Wordsworth could not have read *Sir Gawain*, only heard tales of poems like it. Recall the final stanzas of *Peter Bell* which I quoted above, then consider the climax of *Sir Gawain*. Gawain stands ready to fight Bertilak for his deception, and exposing the shame of Gawain's crime, but Bertilak laughs off the contest, and forgives him his small failing. The Gawain poet writes:

Then the other [Bertilak] laughed aloud, and lightly he said,  
 Such harm as I have had, I hold it quite healed.  
 You are so fully confessed, your failings made known,  
 And bear the plain penance of the point of my blade,  
 I hold you polished as a pearl, as pure and as bright  
 As you had lived free of fault since first you were born. (ll.2389-94)

These beautiful lines clearly evoke the mood of Christian forgiveness

which permeates this medieval poem; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a Christian celebration of the midwinter spiritual renewal that comes with the birth of Christ and the turning of the New Year. The metaphor of the human soul as a polished pearl recurs in Middle English poetry, and in the other poems in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, perhaps by the same author as *Sir Gawain*.

But on another level, these lines demonstrate what we might call the moral beauty of idleness. The reader can never feel quite relaxed at the end of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*; a knight of Arthur's court has committed the terrible crime of rape. Although the poem describes a kind of justice, enacted by the Queen and the old woman, in the end, the knight is rewarded for his year of questing, and subsequent verbal penance, with a beautiful and faithful wife. The maiden whom he assaulted is not present at the poem's climax. At the other extreme, *Sir Gawain* is a morality game, a test of conscience and virtue with no life-or-death consequences, despite the illusion of such consequences. This poem is a beautiful entertainment, but without the power to impact the harsh social realities of Britain in the Industrial Revolution: problems like land enclosure, mechanization, rising unemployment, population migration, and a catastrophic foreign war.

Wordsworth, in contrast, masters the power of 'idleness and extravagance' in the tradition of narrative poetry, by balancing these two extremes. The action of *Peter Bell* takes place in the social reality of northern England in the late eighteenth century, where terrible things happen, seemingly without reason or divine justice. We never find out who exactly the dead man in the river is, or how he died. But in this sense, Wordsworth's careful restraint and limited narrative eye demonstrate the genius of his poetic skill. The tale is serious, yet not oppressive; the sin is real, yet not mortal; the language and narrative are extravagant (that is, we see more than is strictly necessary to the poem's plot), yet this extravagance serves the goal of psychological realism and hence moral elevation. Because we feel with Peter, at the poem's climax, we enact a sympathetic parallel to his restoration to the love of nature and human society. Because he endures the dark journey instead of us, we benefit from the catharsis of

his deliverance. The idleness of Peter's story is the idleness of our own lives. The small effects of night-time nature, which Peter's guilt and fear magnify into terrors, represent an experience of fear with which readers of any historical period can identify. In short, our own lives are 'idle and extravagant', in the poetic definition above, in that they often appear to lack moral purpose or direction, and at the same time, manifest extremes of emotion through minimal incident.

Wordsworth's achievement, ultimately, pinpoints a key difference between the enlightenment provided by literature, and that provided by philosophy and religion: the minutiae are, in the end, the whole. God is literally in the details. Wordsworth's reaction against 'idle and extravagant stories in verse' is not a reaction against the poets he admired who wrote this way, but those who wrote this way without feeling or skill. None of the poets in this lecture—representatives of the body of English literature Wordsworth knew and loved—could be considered guilty of such a crime. If Chaucer, Pope, and even Shakespeare lacked Wordsworth's ambitions for a moral revolution, then they communicated this lack transparently, through the purity of language itself. By revealing human life as it is—frequently idle and extravagant—they allowed their readers, including Wordsworth, to clearly establish the demands of their own narratives, both poetic and personal, on society. And by doing so, the significance of these idle and extravagant poets endured in Wordsworth's poetry—just as they, and Wordsworth, continue to endure in the work of narrative poets who followed him. Poets and critics since Wordsworth may agree or disagree with the particulars of his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, but most will agree that the majority of work published and consumed by each generation of readers is 'idle and extravagant' in the spirit, rather than the letter, of Wordsworth's accusation. Yet, ultimately, as the poems in this lecture have shown, there is room for idleness and extravagance in the work of poets who resist the 'savage torpor' of modern society.

## Abstract

In the Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), his first sustained piece of literary criticism, William Wordsworth establishes both stylistic and social objectives for English poetry. Wordsworth rails against the poor literary taste of his times, including 'frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.' This paper considers the specific meaning of Wordsworth's attack on 'idle and extravagant stories in verse,' in the context of the history of narrative poetry in English literature, and Wordsworth's own narrative ballads. The paper begins by considering how to evaluate Wordsworth's criticisms of idleness and extravagance on a poetic level, and subsequently develops four criteria by which a narrative poem can be judged as idle or extravagant: if it lacks 'worth' to the reader and society beyond mere diversion and entertainment; if its characters and action encourage idleness in the reader by imitation; if the poem lacks narrative and psychological realism; and if it contains excesses of language, description, and digression. The paper then applies this critical model to four narratives from four periods of English poetry: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*; Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*; and finally, Wordsworth's *Peter Bell*. The paper demonstrates that each of these poems fails Wordsworth's critical test and is 'idle and extravagant' to some degree, usually through the explicit design of the poet. The paper concludes that while carefully constructing his own poetical and social aims for narrative poetry in the Preface, Wordsworth fails to concede that many of the greatest narrative poems in English literature meet his conditions for 'idle and extravagant stories in verse.' Yet Wordsworth's own narrative poems achieve a balance between the festive morality of *Gawain*, and Chaucer's salacious language in *The Canterbury Tales*, by using stylistic extravagance to create a portrait of everyday human life which heightens the psychological realism, and hence the moral impact, of his ballad narratives.