CHAPTER 3

Ekphrasis and Courtly Identity

We ought to transform what we read into our very selves, so that when our mind is stirred by what it hears, our life may concur by practicing what has been heard.

GREGORY THE GREAT¹

... 

The courtier himself is a work of art, his appearance a portrait, his experience a narrative. It is more than just a whimsical metaphor to say that court life is literature operating in the medium of reality rather than the written word.

C. STEPHEN JAEGER²

... 

Courtly Identity and Self-representation

Early in Heinrich von dem Türlin’s *Diu crône* (ca. 1220–1230),³ the hero Gâwein is held captive by the princess Amurfina, who has put him under a love-spell that causes him to lose all memory of his identity. One day, Amurfina holds a banquet and shows all her guests a wonderful dish engraved with the image of Gâwein fighting another knight and with a caption labeling the two knights. She proudly has the dish carried from table to table and has the story behind the dish explained individually to each of the knights present. As Gâwein con-


templates the words and images on the dish before him, he repeats to himself the stories he has heard about himself.

Diu schüzzel wart her wider gegeben
Úf den tisch vür sie beide
In beiden ze ougenweide.
Vil dicke sie Gâwein an sach
Und marcte, waz diu schrift sprach;
Er verstuont aber der rede niht,
Niuwen daz er die geschiht
Wol marcte von den bildem,
Wie sie sich mit den schilden
Dacten, und mit den swerten
Ein ander harte gerten,
Und slege vil gewerten.
Den strît sach er so lange an,
Unz er sich só vil versan,
Daz er sînen namen las
Und gedâht: Ich wæn der selbe was,
Der etswenne also was genant.

(vv. 8933–8949)

(The dish was returned and placed before them both [i.e. Amurfina and Gâwein] so that they could look at it. Gâwein looked at it very closely and saw what the writing said, but he didn't understand any of this; rather he followed the story told by the figures: how they protected themselves with their shields and attacked each other eagerly with many blows. He kept gazing at the contest until he had recovered his mind enough to read his name and thought: “I believe that I myself was once called that.”)

When Gâwein recognizes his own name and image, he soon remembers a number of stories that have been told about him. As he repeats his own literary canon to himself, the sense of self-reflection and self-recognition becomes palpable: Is that knight on the dish not he? Does he perhaps know him? Has he only heard about him? No! He has seen him perform deeds of valor! Indeed, he and the knight on the dish are one and the same! This triggers an instantaneous recovery from his stupor, and he then rides forth in search of knightly adventure.4

4 Heinrich von dem Türlin, Diu crône. This entire episode is recounted in verses 8832–9091.