A Pearl Among Peas: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as Post-Homiletic in Retrospective Perspective

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A Pearl Among Peas

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as Post-Homiletic in Retrospective Perspective

Stacy Allura Hostetter
The following pages
are dedicated to:

my beloved father and sister, Robert Hostetter and Amanda Smith,
for their constant patience and support,
my advisor, Dr. Judy Tschann,
for her unswerving and never failing guidance,
and my brilliant tutor, Dr. Francis Leneghan,
for introducing me to the dazzling literature of Arthuriana and inspiring the bold quest.
The MS Cotton Nero A.x. is a late fourteenth-century vellum manuscript that stands roughly 167 millimeters tall and 118 millimeters wide and resides for viewing pleasure, though safely secured from prying fingers, at the British Library in London. Within its pages lie four poems, presumably by the same anonymous author who is variously referred to as either the Pearl-poet or the Gawain-poet in credit to the manuscript's two most famous works respectively. It is the latter, an alliterative poem titled *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, that this paper humbly, yet eagerly, pays court. An Arthurian tale that follows the holiday adventures of King Arthur's nephew, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* constitutes the final of the four poems within the MS Cotton Nero A.x. I have approached this analysis from a stance rooted in the hermeneutics of the sacred, an old-fashioned type of close reading that endeavors to recapture and "make manifest... a meaning, understood as a message, a proclamation, or a kerygma. It tries to make sense of what was once understood but has become obscure because of distantiation" (Ricoeur, 381). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an excellent candidate for such an application of hermeneutics by Paul Ricoeur's standards as an "instance(s) in which there exists a surplus of meaning, or when multi-vocal expressions are employed," as in the use of symbolism which Ricoeur identifies as "any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning that is indirect, secondary, and figurative and can be apprehended only through the first" (381). This "retrieval" of meaning will be accomplished in this paper by considering the language and symbolism of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* within its historical material context- the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript. In this manuscript *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is preceded by three other poems: *Pearl, Purity* and *Patience*. This literary company which it keeps influences the way in which a reader approaches and, most certainly, understands the poem. The understanding a Fourteenth century
reader or a more modern reader would have of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when read as part of an anthology of other tales either medieval, romantic, Arthurian, etc... will be entirely distinct from the understanding a reader may have reading it alone side its manuscript fellows. A reader response approach is also heavily utilized throughout the paper. In addition to the hermeneutic approach, however, as a twenty first-century reader I fully acknowledge that this “surplus of meaning” cannot be nailed down to a singular ‘correct’ interpretation. There are a multitude of valid interpretations surrounding *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, of which, the typological is but one. Furthermore, I posit, that this ‘retrieval’ of meaning occurs through the retrospection that arises from a consideration of reader response in both religious and secular terms.

By using the original manuscript context, this paper aims to uncover a spiritually didactic mode within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that emerges in retrospection. The three preceding poems provide a schema by which to understand the morality and failings of Sir Gawain and his actions. This is not to say that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a sermon per se. Words such as homily, preach, etc., can carry a certain negative connotation for modern readers, most especially when dealing with literature from the stance of art for art’s sake alone. However, it is the belief, in this paper, that a moral education neither consumes nor compromises poetry as an enjoyable art form. A poem can be both a beautiful work of art and a learning opportunity simultaneously. Furthermore, a contemporary medieval audience would arguably have conceived of poetry with similar sentiments. With that in mind, this poem aims to analyze, for the time being, solely *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Therefore, the other poems will, at times, be allocated to the back of our minds with the simple assurance that they shall return. In consideration of such circumstances, a short introduction to each will follow.
The opening poem of the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript, titled *Pearl*, is a hortatory dream vision at once both elegiac and allegorical.¹ The central figure of the poem, referred to as the Dreamer, participates in an intellectual and emotional struggle while under the tutelage of his reincarnated daughter as to the paradoxical nature of heavenly reality and Christian relations between God and man. The development of moral understanding in the poem is typified in the evolving symbol of the pearl: “what begins in the poem’s first line as a purely worldly pearl,” as Casey Finch notes, “becomes by its last line the soul itself, and our growing comprehension of the poem’s mysteries through the course of the reading is in this sense perfectly analogous to the Dreamer’s” (32). While mourning the loss of his child, the Dreamer is made over the course of the poem to come to terms with the notion of Christ’s ineffability as communicated through the final Eucharistic image of Him as bread and wine. Following *Pearl* in the manuscript are two homilies: *Purity* and *Patience* respectively. In 1812 alliterative lines *Purity* illustrates the dangers of defilement and the joys of purity with three biblical exempla: the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the fall of Belshazzar. It also draws upon the parable of the Wedding Guest, the fall of the Lucifer and the Angels and, very briefly, the fall of Man in along with exhortations against filth and impurity. *Patience*, on the other hand, limits itself to the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale to communicate the virtue of patience as well as, more subtly and perhaps more simply, faith in God’s plan. These first three poems edify readers, and the artistry of the poet develops them beyond their function as moral educators into poetry of the highest caliber.

¹ In fact, technically speaking, the MS Cotton Nero A.x. contains no actual titles. *Pearl, Purity, Patience* and even *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are purely editorial titles adopted for convenience and consistency. *Purity* is also frequently titled as *Cleanness*, either are as appropriate as the other.
The congregation of these poems along with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* into a holistic manuscript is not a chance happening but rather a deliberate act that allows the works to inform each other. So it is that, when read in conjunction, the trials and faults of the characters from *Pearl, Purity* and *Patience* have informed the perception of Sir Gawain as more than simply a romantic figure. Jonah, in his biblically notorious adventures with the whale as recreated in *Patience*, and our own hero, Gawain, are not as different as they might initially seem. Jonah in fear of death resists the mission laid out for him by God; similarly the dreamer of *Pearl* also lacks faith in God's plan in his bitter mourning. Gawain accepts his challenge well enough while at Camelot but when offered a seeming escape from his destiny, Gawain too turns from his rightful path in fear of death and places his faith in Godless objects. *Purity*, its name notwithstanding, teaches us more about the many facets of uncleanness than it does about cleanness; inherently fallen, humans are fraught with frailty and faults. The tale of the improperly attired wedding guest teaches us that the outside of a man reflects the inside of a man while Belshazzar's feast teaches us the care with which we should handle vessels, holy or otherwise, of which our bodies are certainly one of the most pertinent. Additionally, the flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah simultaneously deepen and transform for readers the myriad ways in which purity, and impurity, can be conceived.

But the most basic principle gathered from the first three poems is that *something* is to be learned in order to be saved whether it is the straightforward homiletic or the slightly more sophisticated lessons of the Pearl Maiden. And so it is with this same expectation of moral and spiritual education that I entered the romantic setting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, determined not to be misled by the courtly attire of the poem. And so it is that subtle hints of the teacher to be found lurked for the reader even in Camelot. But rather than sinners such as Jonah
or the mournful Dreamer, we are introduced to a hero who is perfect in both his secular and Christian values, the two being intertwined by the sign of Solomon carried upon his shield—the endless knot of the pentangle. But perhaps it was the intention of the poet in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that readers be led by example, as in the homilies and dream vision, in that Gawain will teach us moral fortitude through his unwavering acts of purity and trawthe.² Such is arguably the case throughout the first and second fitt. In all instances Gawain acts with humility and grace while exemplifying the many virtues of his symbol the pentangle. It is not until the third fitt comes to a close that Gawain is truly tempted and it is at the close of this third fitt that Gawain, like all humans, exhibits his inherently fallen nature. It is in the offer of the girdle as a life preserving instrument that Gawain is tempted. Though able to withstand his more traditional literary tests of chastity, Gawain’s fault lies within the taking of the green girdle.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is filled with difficult choices, which straightforward as many of them may seem, are actually layered with significant moral underpinnings reflective of many of the same morals as in the three preceding poems. The first true choice is offered by the Green Knight who arrives with an axe in one hand and a holly bob in the other. His challenge to the court of Camelot is insulting and meant to incite, but the language is deliberate. The Christmas game is stated thus: to “stifly strike a strok for anoPer” [stoutly exchange now one stroke for another] with the understanding that the Green Knight shall “bide Be fyyst bur as bare as (he) sitte(s)” [bide the first blow as bare as (he) sits] and in twelve months and a day the Green

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² For a discussion on the etymology, development and connotations associated with the word trawthe in the fourteenth century see J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), pages 23-24 and 42-50. Additionally, further explication can be found for the term in this paper starting on page 22.
Knight will “dele hym anoDer” [deal him another] (287-296). That is the agreement as it is spoken and in return for playing this game the Green Knight will give as a gift the impressive battleaxe he holds. What is not technically specified is what the stroke is meant to be dealt with. The axe is admittedly the obvious choice and the speech has frequently been translated to reflect such, but the language is careful and no mention of this is actually made. This, I think, is deliberate. When offered the axe and the holly branch, though the court may be oblivious, it is the responsibility of the reader to understand God’s involvement, even when it is subtle. The axe is large and violent, a tool meant only for wreaking death and destruction. A tool of war, the axe is in many ways representative of death. The holly branch, conversely, is a representation of both peace and a sign of life recalling the olive branch brought to Noah by the dove in Purity. But as a sign of peace, and even the Green Knight refers to it as such, the holly branch is an interesting choice considering its prickly physique and poisonous qualities. Many have understood the holly branch as representative of a vegetation myth considering its natural origins in conjunction with the Green Knight’s thorough greenness, thereby making it a choice between that which is natural and that which is contrived (as in the power struggles of society). However, this is, in my opinion, misleading. If a ‘right choice’ did in fact exist between the two options, surely the choice of peace (as represented by the holly branch) is always preferable over that of war (as represented by the axe). Arthur’s hasty actions stemming from pride chose on the side of war and death. Such decisions are consistent with the choices we as readers know he will make later in his famous reign and will eventually conclude with his downfall. Arthur picks up the axe and

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3 Quotations from the Gawain-Poet or the Pearl-Poet, as the mysterious author is variously known, in the original Middle English are taken from Casey Finch’s edition, The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) while the translations are essentially my own though heavily influenced by Finch’s much appreciated work.

prepares to swing, but the medieval world does not hold all life in equal value. The likely death of a king for the sake of a game is unacceptable and it is the duty of his knights to take this challenge out of his hands. The man to step up in time demonstrates his superior quality as a knight while his humility and civility demonstrate his superior quality as a man. Gawain quickly proves himself both secularly and religiously greater. But the choice that faces Gawain after Arthur has taken the axe is not the same choice that existed before the king’s hasty decision. Arthur chose between death in war over life in peace, but as he hands the axe to his nephew, Gawain is no longer allowed to choose the holly bob. To put the axe down at that juncture would be to defy the king and appear both weak and afraid, thereby tarnishing the reputation of the court. This would not have been the case if the bob had been chosen first. That situation, especially in light of the court’s drunken state, would have made the holly strike rather comical. But if Gawain is unable to choose peace over war because of Arthur’s irreconcilable actions, Gawain’s true choice is still between life and death. It is Gawain’s willingness to die in place of his king, however, that demonstrates his true superiority. Death in sacrifice is an honorable death indeed. As Haines says, “Arthur is to be blamed for accepting the challenge as a useless risk to human life... but Gawain is not to be blamed for promising to play since he did it to save the life of his king and uncle” (81). Gawain chose the noble and moral route of martyrdom. This is the action and decision of the true Pentangle Knight.

Gawain is made to make hard choices again at the seeming safety and comfort of Hautdesert. While sleeping in and taking physical rest as his host has ordained, Gawain’s hostess attempts to seduce him. He is strong, though, and while the reader probably expects him to fail his own personal and traditional literary test of chastity, he succeeds in escaping morally intact. The few concessions he makes for the sake of courtesy, a requisite attribute for knights, are
rendered harmless as he forfeits them back to their rightful owner during the exchange of winnings with the host, kisses for kills. It is then that the clever huntress changes tact. Realizing that she cannot overcome his chastity through seduction, she tempts his love of life instead. This is presented in a deceivingly similar guise, the gift of a love token. Sir Gawain at first refuses the green girdle because of this very status as a love token that Gawain knows he ought not to have, but the temptress twists his grasp of covetousness. Gawain knows that he should not covet the girdle as a love token since it properly belongs to the woman's husband. But as a means of preserving life, Gawain is tricked into thinking that he can possess it with the utilization of the greater good/lesser evil principle as he tells himself that to have "slipped to be vnslayn Be slext were noble" [slipped to be not slain then the slight were noble] (1858). But a good Christian, theoretically speaking, has nothing to fear in death since death should take that person to heaven. By accepting the girdle Gawain places his faith not in God where it belongs as a good Christian, but in a magical object. In this respect the girdle represents the choice of life over death once again, but it is not the same choice of life that Arthur should have chosen but the cowardly life that Gawain initially overcame. The girdle as a very feminine object, loose and soft, rich and valuable, may initially seem innocuous enough for none of these attributes in and of itself is necessarily negative. But they stand in stark contrast to the pentangle that is Gawain's symbol. The pentangle, as depicted on Sir Gawain's shield, is a hard object with sharp corners, very closed and very explicit. Each point has a specific meaning which establishes Sir Gawain in secular and religious codes. Nor does the pentangle stand alone. Painted upon the inner half of the shield is the image of Mary, the mother of God "Pat quen he blusched Pertro his belde neuer payred" [that when he blushed towards her image his courage never failed] (650). Rather than placing "alle his alyaunce" [all his faith] and "alle his forsnes" [all his fortitude] in his "pitë," in
his piety, where it belonged, Sir Gawain put it in the soft luxury of the temptress’ girdle (641-654). This soft quality of the silken girdle, with its feminine and flirtatiously forbidden overtones, sharply opposes the concrete and immovable qualities of the pentangle and “requires,” as Mark Miller puts it, “the perpetual movement of retying and thus of resignification” (220). This resignification, so to speak, enables the woman to symbolically redefine the girdle in Gawain’s perspective from a guilt ridden love token to a seemingly innocent life preserver.

Throughout the first seduction scene the lady toys with the public perception of Gawain, “For I wene wel, iwyse, Sir Wowen 3e are, / Þat alle Þe worlde worchipsez; quereso 3e ride, / Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely praysed / With lordez, wyth ladyes, with alle Þat lyf bere” [For I know you’re the knight whose name is Gawain, who is famous for fortitude far and near, for bright courtesy, courage, and kind honor known by ladies and lords, and by all living men] (1226-1229). The lady attempts to create a situation in which Sir Gawain is not who he says he is, but who she says he is. And she says he is the knight of legend, not in arms but in bed. Such is certainly the knight that the court of Hautdesert considers him to be: “Now shal we semlych se sleȝtez of Ȝeweȝ / And teccheles termes of talkyng noble... I hope Þat may hym here / Schallerne of luf-talkyng” [Now we’ll certainly see both the seemliest manners and the phrases and figures of faultless discourse... I hope that he who may hear him speak shall learn of love-talking] (916-927). This is the knight that any woman would give all her gold to have within her reach, but this lady has something more than reach. This lady makes Sir Gawain her prisoner,

5 The word “pite” can be translated as either compassion or piety respectively. Burrow states that in fourteenth-century English the cognate forms were not differentiated in meaning with the result that either modern translation could correspond but concludes that the secular connotation of pity with its relation to the idea of charity “makes rather better sense in the context” (47). While I do not dispute that the terms were likely used interchangeably, considering the thoroughly religious context of the poem and the manuscript as a whole, the only conceivable translation is that of the Christian value of piety. Only piety, understood as a devotion to God, can make sense as that which “passez alle poynitez” [passes all points] (654).
naked beneath the sheets, and offers not gold but power in an offering of her body: “3e ar welcum to my cors, / Yowre awen won to wale, / Me behouez of fyne force / Your seruaunt be, and schale” [My body’s yours to use. I give it gleefully! Do with me what you choose: your servant I shall be] (1237-1240). Sir Gawain resists, though, escaping through humility, and there is a distinct suspicion even at this early stage that the lady is not entirely sincere. Many Arthurian readers would have been less than surprised to find Sir Gawain in bed with his host’s wife, though many may have been surprised at his refusal. This is not the lecherous Sir Gawain some readers might have expected, but the Sir Gawain of earlier heroic traditions (such as Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace and Lajamon) who truly does seem to embody the virtues of the pentangle. A surprise, but a pleasant one I think. Add then that “Pus Pay meled of muchquat til mydmorn paste / And ay pe lady let lyk a hym loued mych” [Thus they chitchatted until midmorning had past and the lady let on as though she loved him very much], and suspicion of the hostess mounts ever higher (1280-1281). Readers are not told that ‘the lady truly loved him very much’ or ‘the lady let him know how much she loved him’ but rather that she ‘let like she loved him much’. The implication, that she does not actually love Gawain, makes her sexual advances that much more suspect, not to mention blatantly inappropriate, while setting readers on their guard.

Something is amiss; this is not the traditional chastity test of Sir Gawain, but an altogether different and as yet unknown test, making the supposed chaste victories of our hero also unknown factors. Regardless of the lady’s suspicious behavior, which is apparently not perceived by Sir Gawain, such chaste victories lead the lady to say that the knight she has caught cannot possibly be Sir Gawain:

“Now He Pat spedez vche spech Pis disport 3elde yow,
Bot Pat 3e be Gawan hit gotz in myndel ...
So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
And cortaysye is closed so clenly in hymphelyn,
Couth not lytly haf lenged so long with a lady
Bot he had craued a cosse bi his cortaysye,
Bi sum tooch of summe tryfle at sum talez ende"
sodomy. God speaks to Abraham and explains the clean and pure way of love by saying “When two true togeder had ty3ed hemselfen, / Bytwene a male and his mate such merbe schulde come, / Welny3e pure paradys mo3t preue no better” (702-704). Casey Finch translates this as “In which two, when together, would take such delight- / And I mean here a man with his mate, his true wife- / That in paradise pleasure would prove hardly more” and while the word ‘wife’ is not specifically mentioned in the original text, the connection between mate and wife is a good one and thoroughly bolstered by the Oxford English Dictionary. A similar situation arises in the story of Belshazzar’s feast occurring later in Purity when the unwise king offers wine to his concubines from the sacred vessels devised by King Solomon in glory to God. In both cases the morals are myriad but involve, at some level or another, the idea that lying with someone who is not your wife is an unclean act. Furthermore, Arthurian readers are, in my opinion, especially sensitive to the sin of adultery considering the notoriously disastrous and havoc-wreaking love affair of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. Readers of Purity will consider the virtue of cleanness in a biblical sense that is more analogous to Gawain’s, as the Pentangle Knight, but the lady of the castle attempts to represent ‘cleanness’ as an attribute that Gawain has because of his reputation as a lady’s man in her effort to seduce him. It is the first, homiletically garnered, understanding of cleanness that should be kept in consideration when judging Gawain’s actions and guilt, but the method the lady uses shall reappear to greater effect later in the poem.

The second seduction scene begins by deploying similar methods as were used in the preceding scene: doubtful identity. Upon entering his chamber, the lady again expresses doubt as to whether he could possibly be Sir Gawain- ‘Courteous knights kiss, remember? I taught you this yesterday. If you are courteous and you are Sir Gawain then kissing becomes you.’ Upon explaining that kisses must be asked for and not taken, Sir Gawain is rebuked for not taking what
he would, since he has strength enough for the task, besides being informed that any who would not give in to Sir Gawain is villainous indeed. The lady here is, by common assent, undoubtedly increasing suspicion with every syllable, considering the advice she gives now is not knightly at any level, secular or religious, and far from any definition of courteous. This brutish behavior's disparity with true knightly courtesy is a point Gawain is quick to use in his defense, though his awareness of danger remains unclear. The lady then changes tactics, asking to be taught, without any veiling of intent, about “trweluf craftes” [the craft of true love] and “dalyaunce” [dalliance] (1527, 1529). And thus he was tested and tempted over and again by the lady “For to haf wonnen hym to wo3e, whatso scho P03t ellez” [Then she tempted him, testing and trying to bring him to woe. (Who can say what she thought in her heart?)] (1550). Though we are not given access to her motivations and thoughts it becomes increasingly clear that the lady’s declared love for Sir Gawain is a fraud devised so as to win him, like her husband’s hunting exploits, to “wo3e”. Finch defines “wo3e” as wrong or harm, and the word bears strong auditory connotations of woe, an ominous sign for Gawain in any event despite their mutual enjoyment during the scene.

The third bedroom temptation scene is marked by the first sign of weakness in Sir Gawain, who is roused by the lady from terrible dreams of mourning, destiny and undeniable buffets. Up to this point he has acted above questioning. He has been chaste, humble, loyal and true to his symbol the pentangle. Despite the fact that he recovers his wits upon the arrival of his hostess, readers worry for him (even perhaps forgetting the possible immediate dangers) in anticipation of the forthcoming battle that cannot be fought, that, in fact, must not be fought. It is in this moment that the woman walks in gaily appareled, young, beautiful and healthy with good-natured cheer and affection that with “wallande joye warmed his hert” [welling joy warmed his heart] (1762). It is at that moment that, despite her suspicious intentions, our hearts as readers
surely go out to her for having eased, even slightly, the pain and fear that Gawain must be experiencing. She is appreciated as a distraction and as a comfort. This is without doubt her trickery at its most cunning. Distraction is a blessing and a curse, and though “Pay lauuced wordes gode, / Much wele Pen watz Perinne. / Gret peril bitwene hem stod, / Nif Maré of hir knyjt mynne” [They sportingly spoke good words, much pleasure was there in it. Great peril between them stood, unless Mary minded her knight!] (1766-1769). The sense that the peril stands between Gawain and the lady, as if the danger exists in their very proximity, heightens the tension of the reader and creates an understanding of danger that subtly implicates the lady’s actions and intentions with our hero.

The lady, sensing her chances thinning with time, resorts to absolute bluntness and forces Sir Gawain to a stalemate: either he must accept her advances and fall into sin while betraying his host or refuse her outright and abandon his knightly courtesy. With a smile, Sir Gawain replies to the lady’s question as to whether there is another that has hold of his heart that “Be Sayn Jon... In faith I welde riot non, / Ne non wil welde Pe quile” [Now, By Saint John! By heaven, I have none, and none will have for quite a while] (1788-1789). While the exact moment of Gawain’s fault is difficult to pinpoint, Lass argues that “if he had been able, in his muddled state, to remember the picture on the other side of his pentangle, he could have answered in all honesty that he did indeed have a ‘leman’ who pleased him better, and to whom he had ‘folden fayth’” (129). Mary was indeed mentioned as protecting Gawain from harm only twenty lines before and if that were not enough, as Lass further notes, the lady’s line “and folden fayth to Pat fre” [and pledged faith to that lady] should have reminded readers of her existence due to the frequent use of the word “fre” to describe the Virgin Mary in courtly religious lyrics (1783). The use of the word “leman” should also alert readers to the presence of the Virgin Mary in the
scene. While “leman” can be glossed as sweetheart, lover or spouse in a romantic sense (as Finch does in this instance), the Oxford English Dictionary also recognizes the word as being often used in religious or devotional language as pertaining to Christ and the Virgin throughout the Middle Ages. The Pearl Maiden describes Christ as her “Lemman” earlier in the manuscript, and while this instance certainly incorporates the concept of a spousal relationship, the religious overlap is still clearly at play (796). It seems quite likely that the very moment in which Gawain forgets to whom he has pledged his faith and loyalty, is the moment that marks the beginning of descent for the Pentangle Knight.

It is here, however, that the lady would have us believe that she has at last given up and requests only some token to remember Sir Gawain by. As this is rendered impossible by the knight’s light traveling circumstances, the lady would have Gawain accept a token of hers instead. The bob and wheels wind us through the poem of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and two consecutive wheels contain Christian figures at this juncture, Mary (Gawain’s personal protector and representative of the highest heights humanity is capable of) and Saint John (who in Revelations describes both the depths to which humanity will fall in the apocalypse and the redemption and grace awaiting the faithful). These are immediately followed by the words of the lady offering a token of her own. Clearly, temptation and covetousness can take many forms. Twice the lady offers the girdle and twice he refuses until Sir Gawain declares that “he nay Pat he nolde neghe in no wyse / NauPER golde ne garysoun, er God hym grace sende / To acheue to Pe chaunce Pat he hade chosen Pere” [But he said he’d receive neither soothing treasure nor gold

6 The final book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelations, describes the bringing together of heaven, earth, and hell in a final confrontation between the forces of good and evil while describing the punishments awaiting the wicked and the rewards awaiting the faithful. The author, who identifies himself as John, has traditionally been identified with John the Apostle, to whom the Gospel of John is also attributed and is recognized by the church as Saint John.
before God sent him grace to achieve his grave task undertaken with true oaths and vows] (1836-1836). There can be no doubt that Sir Gawain not only knew his purpose in that foreign land but understood it well. He was not to approach gold or treasure of any kind or in any manner until God graced him with the achievement of the chance that brought him there in the first place—the stiff and uncontested axe-stroke of the Green Knight. But the poet is already evidently fond of threes, as is typical of mythical stories, and it is in the next stanza, the third time the lady plies her wares, that catches Sir Gawain unsuspecting. Upon being told that the bearer of this lady’s silk cannot be slain by any on Earth, Gawain muses on the unexpected treasure: “Hit were a juel for Pe jopardé Pat hym jugged were” [It was a jewel for the jeopardy that he was committed to] (1856). The Gawain-poet chose these words carefully, Sir Gawain swears, in the name of his Almighty Lord, to avoid all gold and treasure till his appointment at the Green Chapel. But only a few lines later, this ‘jewel’ glitters greedily for the fearful knight. An unconventional covetousness though it is, the offer of even a little more time in life steels through Sir Gawain’s heart.

We know that Sir Gawain is not covetous in the more conventional, material sense as the poet says so specifically more than once, but the word ‘covetous’ takes on new meaning when Sir Gawain is forced to recognize his own failings. Rationalizing the breaking of the pentangle and the breaking of his host’s honor and hospitality, Gawain convinces himself that to have “slypped to be vnslayn Pe slyjt were noble” [slipped to be not slain then the slight were noble] and continues to pledge himself to further lies on behalf of his mischievous instructor (1858). The word “slypped” by Gawain himself recognizes that at the very least there has been a deviation, a slip from what was before. And in Gawain’s case a deviation must move from the perfection of the Pentangle Knight towards the imperfection of the Knight of the Green Girdle.
“Sle3t” also implies a consciousness, at some level or another, that the action which Gawain is contemplating is sinful. As a stratagem, as Finch glosses it, there is a note of deceit prevalent in the act. Oxford English Dictionary also confirms “sle3t” as a craft or cunning employed so as to deceive; a deceitful, subtle, or wily dealing; an artifice, strategy, trickery and such understanding was used commonly down through the Seventeenth century.

The taking of the girdle creates a situation in which Gawain cannot maintain fidelity to both the lady and his host. In fact, it can be argued that less than the act of taking the girdle Sir Gawain sins in agreeing to conceal it from the lord of the castle, to whom he not only owes the girdle by right of the exchange of winnings pact but also, in very simple terms, as a man who should not have love-tokens from the wife of his host. Still these difficulties are by no means insurmountable for a good Christian such as our knight errant. In fact Gawain acts just as a good Christian ought and finds a priest who may “lyste his lyf and lern hym better / How hys sawle schulde be saued” [hear his confession and teach him how best to save his soul] (1878-1879). This scene must be closely examined since much has been made of it academically, and it has strong implications for the argument at hand:

When ho was gon, Sir Gawayn geres hym sone,
Rises and riches hym in araye noble,
Lays up the luf-lace the lady hym raght,
Hid hit ful holdely ther he hit eft fonde.
Sythen chevely to the chapel choses he the waye,
Prevely aproched to a prest, and prayed hym there
That he wolde lyfte his lyf and lern hym better
How hys sawle schulde be saued when he shuld seye hethen.
There he schrofhym schyrly and schewed his mysdedes
Of the more and the mynne, and merci beseches,
And of absolucioun he on the segge calles;
And he asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene
As domesday schulde haf ben dight on the morn

[Thus she's gone. Good Sir Gawain got quickly dressed, he arrayed himself royally, richly in clothes and laid by the love-lace the lady had left; to return to that treasure, he tucked it away. He went on his way to the wide chapel next, where in private he approached the priest to inquire if he’d help him by hearing his heart now confess, help to save his soul when he should pass away. He confessed his sins and was striven at once. For his major and minor sins, mercy he asked. When he prayed of the priest to be piously cleansed, he absolved Gawain certainly; safely he’d face, though it dawned the next day, dreaded doomsday itself] (1872-1884).

The reader well knows that for Gawain, who is to ride for the Green Chapel and submissively stand a stroke, the next morning is doomsday and so the act of going to confession is not merely a convenient opportunity to clear his conscience but a legitimate and pressing need to prepare himself for death. Far from believing that he cleansed his soul with this confession though, Dr. Burrow argues that Sir Gawain has made a false confession and thereby actually committed the first serious sin of the story:

(Gawain) goes to confession, rather than to Mass, because he realizes that he has sinned in agreeing to conceal the gift of the girdle from Bertilak, against his promise; but, though, presumably, he confesses this, he neither makes restitution (“restitutat ablata”) by returning the girdle nor resolves to sin no more (“promittat cessare”). It is, on the contrary, clear from what follows that his intention to conceal the girdle from the host is never in doubt- he has no intention either of returning it to the lady or of giving it up, according to his promise, to the host. This fact is quite enough to invalidate a confession (75).

It seems clear that Sir Gawain did intend to keep the girdle all along, as he endeavored to “Hid hit ful holdely” before even leaving for Mass. It also appears that Gawain has made a full confession to the priest “Of the more and the mynne” which surely would include the taking of the girdle. Gerald Morgan, however, argues that “the assumption that Gawain goes to confession in a state of knowledge is a false assumption. On the contrary he goes in ignorance of the
particular knowledge that it is unlawful for him to retain possession of the girdle” (12). This lack of knowledge that he has sinned, Morgan argues, while not excusing him certainly mitigates Gawain’s culpability— one cannot be expected to confess to a sin they do not know they have committed. A. C. Spearing also adheres to the belief that Gawain does not include the retention of the girdle in his confession because he wrongly fails to recognize it as a sin. Spearing argues somewhat more persuasively that for Gawain as for many chivalric heroes, the criteria of conduct are not fully internalized; what protects him from temptation is not entirely the private sense of guilt but partly the more primitive and public sense of shame... A good case could thus be made for arguing that Gawain does not fully grasp the meaning of the test he undergoes: it is not that he sees what the issues are and deliberately acts wrongly, but that, at one crucial point, he fails to see what the issues are (226-227).

In this interpretation Gawain is considered less than a reliable guide to the meaning of his own adventure and in fact Spearing continues this line of reasoning to make Sir Gawain into a character both “comic” and “absurd” (227, 229). While Spearing repeatedly qualifies these judgments with phrases such as “partly comic... something comic... a little absurd” the concluding argument continually falls back upon the idea of a “petulant” and proud man with an “understanding seriously flawed” who returns to Camelot “sadder without becoming much wiser” (227-230, 231, 235).

This argument, like several others of its kind, relies on a conception of Gawain as “young, idealistic, and a bit overly serious about himself,” making the mirth and laughter at Camelot a “corrective to an extravagance in him” (Foley 77, Burrow 78). Such a view of Gawain’s character seems to be the weak link in such interpretations and leads to unfair oversimplifications, such as when Spearing accuses Gawain of having mischarged himself of covetousness in a material sense of the word rather than the more appropriate spiritual sense of
having coveted his mortal life (227-228). Dr. Burrow concludes that the second confession scene at the Green Chapel is meant to supplement the original confession scene in that each has what the other lacks. Gawain in this second confession displays contrition, seeks a means for restitution, and pledges to sin no more, thus fulfilling the requirements of inner disposition that are supposedly lacking in the original confession. The Green Knight however is not a priest and cannot fulfill the external requirements for confession; taken together then each has what the other lacks. Foley has taken this stance as well, arguing that “in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the two parallel codes of conduct are represented structurally by Gawain’s two confessions. Fittingly the priest hears the offenses against Christianity, while the Green Knight hears those against knighthood” (78). Foley, however, would have readers believe that Gawain’s fault is of the slightest nature and against knighthood alone, leaving his moral and religious values entirely intact. Essentially, Foley argues, Sir Gawain has cheated by having “broken the rules of a courtly game, thereby excusably falling short of the ideals of medieval knighthood” (77). But such interpretations fail to emphasize the interconnected nature of Gawain’s knightly and religious values.

Sir Gawain’s fault is not to be trivialized into the mundane taking of some green cloth or the entirely understandable fear of death. The issue of his invalid confession, and by extension the exactitudes of Christian doctrine concerning confession, are technicalities in the nature of Sir Gawain’s fault. In the most basic sense Sir Gawain stands guilty as charged by the Green Knight when he declares that it was “lewté” [loyalty] Sir Gawain wanted (2366). In taking what he should not have, in keeping what he should have given, Sir Gawain in fear forsakes faith. The true fault of Sir Gawain is that he compromises his belief system at what is arguably the most important junction of his life- the expected leaving of it. It is a personal failing at both a chivalric
and spiritual level. Sir Gawain has lived by an unwavering code of ethics to such a hitherto successful extent as to merit the carrying of the "endeles knot" [endless knot] as his emblem (630). But in fear, which is neither shameful nor sinful in and of itself if properly handled, by taking possession of the green girdle Sir Gawain abandons, in one moment, a lifelong conception of morality and striving for excellence. This stands in sharp contrast to the actions of the Pentangle Knight at Camelot who, in one moment, chose to sacrifice his life for the life of his king and the honor of his court by taking up the challenge proffered by the Green Knight. The idea that Gawain’s sin is no more than cheating in a chivalric duel by using magic is at best a secondary concern, even more so since the duel is theoretically more a “Crystemas gomen” [Christmas game] than anything (283). This is not to say that the actions taken in the course of a game are in any way mitigated by that position. Gawain’s decisions in the course of the poem are serious and result in serious consequences. The ‘game’ that surrounds those decisions is, in fact, a false lure to make Sir Gawain (and perhaps readers as well) take those decisions and consequences lightly. However, it is an opportunity for a reader to choose which side of the metaphorical moral line in the sand they stand on early.

The fault of Sir Gawain is less a sin of action as it is of intention. As the Pentangle Knight, Gawain’s chivalric code was built upon and thoroughly conceived in Christian moral terms. Therefore a failing in one is of necessity an automatic failing in the other; one break in the pentangle’s perfect point forces the entire symbol to collapse. It is no wonder then that Sir Gawain reacts as strongly as he does at the Green Chapel. To discover that in your last moment you were not the man you thought you were, and a far, far cry from the man you had meant to be, is painful indeed- a pain only compounded by the public nature of the discovery in full view
of his adversary, the Green Knight. Consider for example Gawain’s alarm when his clever
huntress expresses doubt as to whether he is who he says he is:

“Now He Pat spedez vche spech His disport yelde yow!
Bot Pat ye be Gawan, hit gotz in mynde.”
“Querfore?” quoP he freke, and freschly he askez,
Ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his castes
[“He Who sanctions all speech for this sport repay you! For you’re not the same knight
who is named Sir Gawain.” “But how so?” Gawain said, of a sudden alarmed, most afraid
he had failed in the forms of his speech] (1292-1295).

The worst that could be feared in this situation is surely some small, technical lapse in courtesy
towards a married woman, who is clearly attempting to seduce him, and yet he responds in a
small state of alarm. In comparison, the realization that Gawain is actually not the Gawain that
he thought he was in terms of the symbols and standards which have defined him is
understandably disconcerting. Not to say that there is no comedy in the poem; Sir Gawain’s
naked captivity and in fact the majority of the bedroom scenes are quite comedic even
withstanding the suspicion and tension also present. But to go so far as to say, as Spearing and
Burrow have, that Gawain is absurdly extravagant to the point of petulance, that “if he cannot be
a perfect knight, he is determined to be the most miserable of sinners. At least the great sinner is
a heroic figure of the stature he has aimed at, and so he can now compare himself with such Old
Testament heroes as Adam, Solomon, Samson and David,” is a harsh judgment indeed (Spearing
228). The man who has been in a state of intense fear for days, compounded with the extreme
tension of the hovering axe, finds himself, against all odds, alive and well to see another day.
Gawain finds himself, against seemingly insurmountable challenges, victorious. Is it any wonder
then that “neuer syn Pat he was borne borne of his moder / Was he never in his worde wy3e half
so blyDe,” [Since the bright day, years back, of his birth, he had not been so grateful or glad or so
gleeful as now] are we as readers not just as happy to see our hero so vigorously alive (2320-2321)? But when we find within moments that alive though he may be, Gawain was far from victorious and in fact has been played for a fool all the time he thought he was most secure inside the friendly and familiar environment of the noble court. Indeed it was not only a chivalric failure, a mere challenge that might have been handled better, but a public discovery that Gawain has been riding under false colors. Gawain is not the perfect Pentangle Knight, but had his reactions been less passionate, less emotional, less consuming then he would be suspect of not taking his calling seriously enough.

Since Sir Gawain’s fault is a compromise of ethics, an abandonment of the pentangle, to understand the depth of such a fault one must consider the pentangle as both the chivalric and Christian moral emblem that it is (“thoftary hyt me schulde” [though tarry me it should]):

Hit is a synge that Salamon set sumquyle
In betoknyng of trawpe, bi title that hit habbez,
For hit is a figure that haldes fyue poyntes,
And uche lyne umbelappes and loukes in oPer,
And ayquere hit is endeles, and Englych hit callen
Overal, as I here, the endeles knot.
ForPy hit acordez to this kny3t and to his cler armez,
For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue syDez,
Gawan was for gode knawen and, as golde pured,
Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertuez ennourned
    In mote.
    ForPy the pentangle nwe
He ber in schelde and cote,
As tulk of tale most trwe
And gentylest kny3t of lote

[That pure star is a sign that King Solomon used to betoken the truth that by title it holds. It's a figure enfolded, with five outward points; each line is well linked with two lines at an angle, passing over and under two others. It's called in English everywhere- as I've heard- “endless knot.” To that prince thus the pentangle’s proper; for he was in fivefold ways faithful to five points of truth. For Sir Gawain was as good as pure gold, unalloyed; for his virtue without villainy that valiant knight was known. That pentangle, painted new, on shield and coat thus shone. Untainted, trusted, true, good Gawain stood alone.] (624-639).

The first two points reflect upon Sir Gawain himself and seem to express his perfection in both thought and action: his faultless “fyue wytttes” [five wits] and his never failing “fyue fyngres” [five fingers] respectively (640-641). The second set of points steep Sir Gawain in the most essential Christian doctrine of faith: “afyaunce upon folde... in the fyue woundes / Bat Cryst ka3t on the croys” [his faith was well founded in the five awful wounds that our Christ on the cross, as the Creed says, received] and the “forsnes he fong at Pe fyue joyez / That the hende Heuen Quene had of hir Chylde” [his fortitude from the five joys was derived, which the high Queen of Heaven had had from her Child] (642-643, 646-647). The fifth and final point consists of five attributes which Sir Gawain is said to possess flawlessly: “fraunchyse... felawschyp... clannes... cortaysye” [franchise... fellowship... cleanness... courtesy] and above all “pité” [piety] (652-654).7 Taken as a whole the endless knot betokens “trawthe,” a word that Dr. Burrow is right to lament the loss of in modern English (626).8 This concept of trawthe translates loosely with truth but also incorporates the ideas of fidelity and integrity. As Burrow notes, “it expresses a powerful, though now largely unacknowledged, complex of ideas, in which the notion of good faith assumes a dignity quite strange to modern thinking” and furthermore trawthe is bound up in the interconnected nature of its symbol the pentangle as each nuance of the moral ideal is dependent upon the presence of the others (24). This pentangle is the symbol of Sir Gawain’s

7 See footnote 5.
8 See footnote 2.
virtue as a knight as built upon and within Christian morality, and a failure in any one aspect destroys the whole. This is why when made aware of his shortcoming, Sir Gawain calls himself a covetous coward who has forsaken his kind. Through fear of death Sir Gawain coveted his life over and above the care he was duty bound to pay to the honor of the Round Table. In his small theft he abandons loyalty not only to his host, his court and to his chivalric code but, more importantly, to the moral standards he has so long striven to represent. It is not the taking of a “luf-lace” so much as a lack of solidarity that constitutes Sir Gawain’s sin, replacing fellowship with cowardice, franchise with a villainous covetousness, cleanness with falsity, courtesy with vice, piety with treachery and trawthe with untrawthe. The intense sorrow of Sir Gawain lies in the fear that this has been his true nature all along: “Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben ever” [Now I’m faulty and false and fear that I have been so forever] (2382). Gawain should not have taken the lace any more than he should have kept it when the time came for exchange but his true sin is made manifest to readers when he looks for strength outside of his sacred symbol and the powers which it represents:

*His Pro Pouʒt watz in Pat, Purʒ alle oPer Pyngez,*

*Pat alle his forsnes he fong at Pe f3ue joyez*

*That the hende Heuen Quene had of hir Chylde*

*At this cause the knyʒt comlyche hade*

*In the inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,*

*Pat quen he blusched Perto his belde neuer payred*

[On this thought, through all things, he was thoroughly fixed: that his fortitude from the Five Joys was derived, which the high Queen of Heaven had had from her Child; appropriately pious, that prince always had inside his shield her face clearly drawn; when he saw it, he stood always stalwart in war] (645-650).

When in fear, the Pentangle Knight ought to look to the Christian belief of the Virgin Mary, her mercy and the eternal paradise that awaits a noble death. But Gawain’s bold courage pales below
the axe and shrinks instead to hide behind the thin green lace. It is almost as if, though Sir Gawain suffers only a nick in the neck, the Pentangle Knight has died and been abruptly replaced by a new figure: the Knight of the Green Girdle.

In fact this transition from Pentangle Knight to Knight of the Green Girdle begins as soon as Gawain takes the troublesome lace from the lady and emerges fully in place during the second arming scene. Haines points out that Gawain does not actually sin until he fails to hand the lace over to Bertilak, the occurrence of which is ironically marked by yet another color:

The poet signals his lack of troth by the unique appearance of the colour blue in the poem. The ‘bleaunt of blwe’ (1928) Gawain wears to meet the lord signifies chastity and loyalty, the traditional true blue of heraldic tradition (e.g. Chaucer’s Troilus III, 885), also used in mediaeval iconography for the colour of the Virgin’s garments. The colour represents Gawain’s great success in the major chastity test. But once the colour is seen this way in the context of Gawain’s moral behavior, it is ironically linked with his present wrong-doing (79).

Though a virginal blue is worthily earned, the loyal blue marks the point of no return for Sir Gawain and foreshadows the Green Knight’s own accusation. When the time comes to arm Gawain once more for his trip to the Green Chapel, no time is spent on the tokens of knighthood and Christianity that have served the Pentangle Knight. Rather readers are told in passing about Gawain’s velvet coat with its “conysaunce of de clere werkez” [his surcoat with its sign of pure spotlessness] (2026) before moving on quickly to the true arming scene:

Yet laft he not pe lace, pe ladiez gifte;
Pat forgat not Gawayn, for gode of hymseluen.
Bi he hade belted pe bronde vpon his balze haunchez,
Penn dressed he his drurye double hym aboute,
SwyPe swcbled vmbe his swange, swetely, Pat knyj3t;
Pe gordel of pe grene silke Pat gay wel bisemed,
Vpon dat ryol red cloke, dat rychewatz to schewe

[And he didn’t forget- for the good it would bring him- the girdle of green which the good lady left; when he belted his broadsword about his smooth hips, Gawain twisted that love-token twice on his waist, thereby wrapping the rich silk around himself well. On Sir Gawain that girdle of green appeared fine! It looked rich on that red cloth, and rightly adorned] (2030-2036).

Little doubt can survive as to who this passage truly describes. It is not the Pentangle Knight that is shown here, but Sir Gawain as the Knight of the Green Girdle. Not only has Gawain put his faith in the green girdle, but seemingly unquestioningly, as it obviously suits him. Neither can there be much doubt as to this man’s motives since the Knight of the Green Girdle remembers his token for explicitly stated reasons, “for gode of hymseluen” [for the good of himself]. It is still Gawain and materially covetous he is not. The poet tells us explicitly that Gawain does not wear the silk for pride of its pendants or the glittering gold glinting throughout the rich lace but simply “for to sauen hymself when suffer hym byhoued, / To byde bale withoute debate, of bronde hym to were / OPer knyffe” [But to save his own skin when he’d suffer, that day, to receive the death stroke, not stopping what might befall] (2040-2042). While the good of Gawain is usually priced with the highest regard, readers must ask- at what expense? Is that which made his well-being so valued, his perfection as the Pentangle Knight, worth sacrifice? Gawain has placed himself in a position that requires sacrificing his old life, his identity as the Pentangle Knight, if he is to preserve any mortal life at all.

Gawain’s personal accusations concerning his slip are by far the harshest voiced throughout the poem. At the Green Chapel, Sir Gawain discovers that the interconnected nature of the pentangle means that a break in any one aspect necessarily affects the others:

“Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetyse bope!
In yow is vylany and vyse, dat vertue disstryez.”
Ienne he kaȝt to Pe knot and Pe kest lawsez,
Brayde broȝely Pe belt to Pe burne seluen:
“Lo! Per Pe falssyng, foule mot hit falle!
For care of Py knacke cowardyse me taȝt
To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake,
Pat is larges and lewte Pat longez to knyȝtes.
Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer;
Of trecherye and vntrawe boȝe bityde sorte
And care!”

[“Cursed with cowardice and covetousness both! In those is villainy and vice that destroys virtue!” Then he grasped the girdle, its great knot untied; and with fierceness it flew at the feet of that knight. “Evil fortune befall that false, wicked belt! I succumbed here to cowardice, cared for my life, and becoming most covetous, keenly fell short of the loyalty and largess that belongs to knights. Now am I faulty and false and fear that I have been so forever. Treachery and untrawthe both bring sorrow and care!” (2374-2388).

By breaking faith with the pentangle the totality of the virtues which it represents crumbles.
Cowardice is likely the best description of Gawain’s fault as far as it can be understood as synonymous with a covetousness of mortal life. These two attributes drove Gawain to his most concrete failing, the abandonment of the pentangle, but also resulted in treachery to his host. Sir Gawain owed his host largess and loyalty on several levels, his status as a fellow knight being the most basic. But the greatest fear for Gawain must surely be that this has been his true nature all along, that the pentangle was never actually his symbol, and that perfection is not humanly attainable.

The Green Knight’s judgment seems focused on the concept of loyalty specifically. He chides Sir Gawain for the taking of the girdle emphasizing the fact that it is his not only by right of their exchange of winnings agreement but by origin as well: “For hit is my wede Pat Dou werenz, Pat ilke wouen girdle. / Myn owen wyf hit Pe weued, I wot wel forsoȝe” [For that girdle
of green that you go with is mine; I’m aware that my wife is the one who gave it] (2358-2359).

The Green Knight considers the fault as not in the realm of material covetousness and definitively mitigated by his fear of death “Pe lasse I yow blame” [the less I blame you] (2368). But while his charge against Gawain is a lack of loyalty, it is in a narrower sense than Sir Gawain accuses himself of. The Green Knight’s charge is spoken without regard for the religious implications inherent in Gawain’s characterization, instead taking into account only the secular considerations. Sir Gawain is held guilty of a personal affront against one man and one man only according to the Green Knight, who calls it “Pe harme Pat I hade” [the harm that I had] and so it is considered easily forgiven by that one man alone (2390, emphasis added). But the Green Knight still considers Sir Gawain to be the “fautelest freke Pat euer on fote yede. / As perle bi Pe quite pese is of prys more, / So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oฐer gay kny3tes” [the most faultless knight that ever walked upon Earth! As pearls are held at higher price than peas, so too is Gawain, in good faith, held higher than other gay knights] (2363-2365).

This is not however the first time readers have encountered a pearl of price. One might argue that the distance between the Pearl poem and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is great enough that the image is coincidental, but it is equally possible that the manuscript is merely coming full circle and ending where it began: with a pearl of great price. In Pearl, readers are told of a “joylez julere” [joyless jeweler] who has lost his “Perle plesaunte, to prynces paye,” [Pearl precious to a prince’s pay] a dear daughter to an early death who he rediscovers in a vision as a bride of God (252, 1). This maiden is reborn to Heaven as a “Perlez py3te of ryal prys” [pearls prepared to royal price] rewarded for her status of innocence while residing on Earth (193). In her enlightened religious state, the Pearl Maiden educates her father who has mourned her death out of measure because of a lack of faith in God’s plan and mercy. The pearl as an
image emerges from the child as a pure object "withouten spot" [without spot], but evolves into a conception of loyalty and faith that all men owe to their creator in the form of the "Prynsez paye" [Prince's pay] by the end of the poem (60, 1188). The parting wisdom shows the mourning father embracing this new found faith with the conclusion that:

To pay Pe Prince oPer sete sayte  
Hit is ful ePe to Pe god Krystyin;  
For I haf founden Hym, boPe day and naȝte,  
A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyn.  
Over Þis hyul Þis lote I laȝte,  
For pyty of my perle enclyin,  
And syPe to God I hit bytaȝte,  
In Krystez dere blessyng and myn,  
Pat in Þe forme of bred and wyn  
Þe preste vus schewez vch a daye.  
He gef vus to be His homly hyne  
Ande precious perlez vnto His pay.  


[To pay the Prince and be properly reconciled it is full easy for the good Christian. For I have found Him, both day and night, a God, a Lord, and a friend full fine. Over this hill I chanced upon a lucky dream while pining in self-pity for my lost pearl but since have been taught that God is with us, in Christ's dear blessing and mine, that in the form of bread and wine, the priest He shows us every day. He gives us to be His homely servants and precious pearls unto his pay] (1201-1213).

Readers are told that it is we, as individuals, who are required in the prince's pay and this payment is accomplished through faith and the sacraments. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to show this same moral in reverse. For Gawain begins the story as a man "withouten spot" [without spot] solidly placed in his perfection as the Pentangle Knight. Had he maintained his faith in God and died in the process then his payment of a pearl (purity) would have been
considered paid. However in his lack of faith Gawain compromises his purity. He may be as priceless as a pearl in comparison to peas but only in comparison to other knights. There is no side-stepping the now blatant fact that the best chivalry has to offer has not the spotlessness requisite for sitting the ultimate judgment. The Green Chapel shows the final stage of transition for Sir Gawain from Pentangle Knight to Knight of the Green Girdle who, for the moment, carries a far stronger resemblance to the "joylez julere" [joyless jeweler] than the "perle of prys" [pearl of price] (252, 272).

Luckily for Gawain though, Doomsday is not now sitting so near on the morning horizon. The story does not end with his severed head at the Green Chapel. Rather, Sir Gawain rides home with the green girdle about him as a baldric in token of a fault. This public shame for the knight acts as penance, and upon arriving back at Camelot he certainly has a story to tell- Arthur shall not be forced to go hungry any time soon. Gawain's remorse is sincere and heartfelt "He tened quen he schulde telle; I he groned for gref and grame, I pe blod in his face con melle, / When he hit schulde schewe, for schame" [He grieved to tell the tale behind that badge of blame, but, blushing, did unveil his scar, that sign of shame] (2500-2503). But Camelot responds in quite another mode:

The king comfortez the kny3t, and alle the court als
La3en loude therat and luflly acorden
Pat lords and ledes Pat longed to the Table,
Vche burne of the broPerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
A bende abelef hym aboute, of a bry3t grene,
And Pat, for sake of Pat segge, in swete to were
[The king and the court brought comfort to him. They laughed right out loud, and at last all agreed- every lady and lord who belonged to the Table- that a baldric be borne by the
brotherhood's men, a silk band wrapped about of bright, glowing green for the sake of that shining knight, showing respect] (2513-2518).

The laughter of Camelot rejoices along with the majority of readers to have Gawain alive among them—e'en if imperfectly. We peas love having our pearls (even with a spot here or there). In so far as "the youthful Gawain is in a state of glorious innocence and is a type of the unfallen and innocent Adam," as Haines argues, the more experienced Gawain is made the more human and the more relatable for his failure (95). When the thoroughly tested knight finds himself once more he is a sadder but nevertheless wiser man. The girdle stands as a constant reminder for Gawain of the "faut and Þe fayntyse of Þe flesche crabbed, / How tender hit is to entyse teches of fyllpe. / And Þus, quen pryde schal me pryk for prowes of armes, / Þe loke to Þis luf-lace schal leþe my hert" [falseness and frailty of flesh, how it tends to invite the most vicious, the vilest, of sins. Thus when pricked onto pride through prowess of arms, I will look on this love-lace to lay that pride low] (2435-2438). If we believe that Sir Gawain begins the poem as a perfect knight, and I believe we do as there is no sign of irony or sarcasm in the narrator's description of the pentangle, then the fall of Gawain at the Green Chapel is heart wrenching, but in his redemption, which I argue can be read in the poem, he is taken to new heights of self-awareness and humility to an extent that was not possible for him as a perfect knight. While sin cannot be good in and of itself from a Judeo-Christian standpoint, in so far as it warrants redemption, sin can become a fortunate event. This idea can be traced to the liturgical phrase "felix culpa" of the Catholic Easter Exsultet which can be literally translated as "happy fault" but is better known as the fortunate fall.

Felix culpa is a doctrine of faith that concerns the fall of man, which states that only through this fall of man could the coming of the Messiah and the resulting salvation be made possible making the unanticipated reward of sin (the incarnation of God as man, redemption,
salvation, etc.) outweigh the consequences of the sin itself: "O certe necessarium Adae peccatum quod Christi morte deletum est! O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem!" [O assuredly necessary sin of Adam, which has been blotted out by the death of Christ! O happy fault, which has merited such and so great a Redeemer!] (Migne 72; quoted in Haines 197, FN1). But as Haines notes, in regards to the felix culpa one is forced into "considering sin after the fact," because "only retrospectively in the light of a hoped-for redemption can it be considered fortunate" (4). Therefore, in a poem or other literary work, the felix culpa appears purely retrospectively. The Middle Ages established the tradition of the felix culpa through a juxtaposition of the fall and the redemption and established this backward perspective linguistically, in the medium of language, and visually, through iconography, that represented the two simultaneously (Haines 14-15). Sir Gawain as the Pentangle Knight acts as a type of the unfallen Adam up to and in his fall while Sir Gawain as the Knight of the Green Girdle acts as the redeemed Adam in his redemption evidenced by the laughter of Camelot and his king. This juxtaposition of sin and redemption is seen in close quarters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well. Gawain's fall from perfection is a gradual descent and while it begins as early as his negative response to the lady's question as to whether he has another "leman," his fall hits rock bottom during the ensuing exchange scene. While this paper has already remarked on the irony of Gawain's virginal and loyal blue dress, his words speak volumes more than even he can possibly realize.

Halfway through the poem, Sir Gawain uses the phrase "bi pe Rode" to great implication, as shall be shown. After receipt of three sober kisses from Gawain, the host replies that his gifted fox (traditional symbol of mischievousness, williness and even treachery) is "ful pore for to pay for suche prys Pinges" [It's a poor price to pay for such precious things] (which read
retrospectively takes on new significances of its own in light of a *Pearl* reader’s understanding of price) to which Gawain quickly replies, “Inoʒ... I Ponek yowe, bi Pe Rode” [“Enough... I thank you, by the Rood”] (1945, 1948-1949). ‘By the rood’ was indeed a common enough oath in the Middle Ages and beyond, but as a reference to the wood used for the cross in Christ’s crucifixion it is an unavoidable symbol for atonement and the redemption of sinners. Haines uses this moment to argue the conclusion of his argument in that the poet

would put here, next to the sole use of the word ‘rode,’ the portrayal of Gawain’s sinful action... At the centre of the poem, just when the noble and pure hero falls, his sinful action and the crucifixion are juxtaposed, the same way a picture of Adam’s fall is juxtaposed to the crucifixion to indicate the Fortunate Fall of Adam (79).

This allusion to the crucifixion acts in harmony with the conclusion of the poem when the narrator ends his tale with a prayer to Jesus on the cross as He “Pat bere Pe croun of Porne” [that bear the crown of thorn], thereby framing the felix culpa within the poem via references to the killing of Christ and his resurrection (2529).

The entire poem is in fact framed by felix culpas with a concentric circles effect that places the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a whole resting in the center, but which also radiates out to encompass the entirety of the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript. The poem begins the narrative with the famous fall of Troy and moving from there to the founding of Britain by Brutus before arriving at King Arthur’s court, and finally into the feast where our story proper begins. Halfway through the story a transition occurs in the character of our hero Sir Gawain from the Pentangle Knight to the Knight of the Green Girdle, at the exact center of which is a point of no return when Gawain swears by the rood, as noted above. From there the story of the Knight of the Green Girdle takes readers back to Camelot before being reminded of

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9 See Figure 1.
the nation's origins in Brutus and finally, the reference that brings it full circle, the fall of Troy without which, no part of this story would have been possible. The prayer that ends the poem links back to the rood reference and demonstrates the original felix culpa but each of the other allusions encapsulates its own felix culpa as well. Sir Gawain's story stands at the center, his time as the Pentangle Knight represents his descent into fault, culpa, while his time as the Knight of the Green Girdle represents his ascent into redemption, felix. The first Camelot of the poem shows a King Arthur that is "so joly of his joyfnes and sumquat childgered" [so jolly in his joyfulness and somewhat childish] that he ends by sending Sir Gawain on a mission that will surely conclude in his death (86). This is, surely, a court of culpa as evidenced by the unrest after Gawain's departure:

Al þat seþ þat semly syked in hert
Ande sayde soply al same segges ti oþer,
Carande for þat comly, 'Bi Kryst, hit is scaþe
þat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!
To fynde hys fere vpon folde, in fayth, is not eþe'

[All who saw that grave scene were sorrowed at heart. With woeful, deep whisperings, one to another, "By Christ, it's a crime!" the court sadly said. "That lord will be lost, whose life is so dear. No peer could replace that prince in our time..."] (672-676).

While upon Gawain's return, however, though their understanding of Gawain's story is questionable, the court of Camelot acts with undoubted courtesy in welcoming the sad knight back amongst their ranks with joy. Camelot ends without question upon a felicitous note, felix, and shows, though perhaps not a thorough typological use of felix culpa, certainly a simple one in that (to put it crudely) a good thing arises from a bad thing. Furthermore, the relationship between the fall of Troy and the founding of Britain is itself an example of felix culpa. While the former was intricately tied with "tricherie" [treachery] and tragedy, culpa, had it not occurred
then Brutus could not have founded Britain, an event that national pride would have held every Brit honor bound to consider fortunate and therefore felix (4).

As the felix culpa does not appear properly until the end of the poem, however, *Pearl*, *Purity* and *Patience* stand as rather strange bedfellows to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* what with the latter two in their slightly more explicit homiletic attire and the first in, at the very least, very explicit didactic garb. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not sermon-like in the way its manuscript siblings are. God does not speak to Gawain as he does to Jonah or Abraham nor does he have a personal holy messenger like the Pearl Maiden, and yet neither is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* pure romance. Sir Gawain’s adventure gradually emerges more along the lines of exemplum within the schema of the manuscript in which the Pearl-poet gives readers the opportunity to teach themselves, to interpret the poem as we would any text and discover the moral in the process. It is not until the end of the poem that the felix culpa becomes readily apparent and the retrospection enables the reader to see the reverse homily embedded in the text since it is not until after Sir Gawain’s redemption and the narrator’s prayer to Jesus Christ is witnessed that the reader can look back upon Gawain’s fall and exclaim “O happy fault!” however, once done the reader is encouraged to look back through the poem with the felix culpa in mind actively looking for the moral lesson, this self education emerges as a form of post-homiletic in context of the holistic manuscript. This reading is an obvious result of considering *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* within the context of its manuscript siblings.

This cyclical aspect of the poem manifests itself in other ways as well. The concentric circles created by the various felix culpa listed above are bisected from the exact center by the

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rood and extends out of the circles to the crown of thorns which, when taken in conjunction, symbolize the original felix culpa through the crucifixion. This plus one behavior is not only thematic (Gawain is to face the Green Knight in one year and a day) but structural (one hundred and one stanzas). This reference from the center to the end propels the reader from the end of the poem back to the beginning with an added awareness this time of the felix culpa. But that is not all. It also sends the reader back to the beginning of the manuscript and eventually out into the real world of the reader. The morals of the first three poems are applied to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight while the moral awareness (and failings) of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are read into Pearl, Purity and Patience. It becomes clear that the first three inform the last in that the morals learned in the first three poems are as applicable for Sir Gawain as they are for Jonah or the Dreamer. One must be pious and have faith in God’s plan as the Pearl Maiden relates, one must maintain purity both within and without as the wedding guest so aptly shows, and one must have patience and trust in God’s plan as Jonah learns. These values are as important and applicable in the secular, romantic world of Gawain as they are in the biblical world of Noah and Belshazzar. Had Sir Gawain embodied these lessons entirely then perhaps he would have died at the Green Knight’s hand, perhaps not; such would have been another story altogether. But more importantly, it is in his fall that Gawain has learned and “O fortunate fall” for us, so too have we as readers. But the preceding poems are as actively affected by Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as it is by them. The concluding image of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight ends of Jesus Christ on the cross links with the only other representation of Jesus Christ in the manuscript within at the beginning of the manuscript in Pearl. In this instance, the Dreamer sees Christ as a lamb with “a wounde ful wyde and weete con wyse / Anende Hys hert, Pur3 hyde torente. / Of His quyte side His blod outsprent” [a wound full wide and wet, below His heart was tore. From

11 See Figure 2.
His side great blood gushed.] (1135-1137), a companion image of Jesus as redeemer of the human race. Read again, with an awareness of the redemptive benefits that Christ provides and the fortunate that can come from a fall, *Pearl, Purity* and *Patience* take on new depth. What you take back into the homilies from Sir Gawain’s adventures is an anticipation of Christ in the same manner that the Old Testament prefigures and anticipates the Christ of the New Testament while the dream vision of *Pearl* appears to act as a kind of transitional stage between the two modes. The implications of which, while fascinating, are unfortunately beyond the scope of the present paper.

This typological reading does not make the poem a sermon per se, the poem as poetry is above being reduced to a moral, or any one interpretation even. But *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a poem with a purpose, it is a moral education for the peas of the world. While the taint of original sin cannot be removed, there is fortune in this fault through the joy of redemption. The retrospective perspective encouraged by the poet allows readers to learn not simply the ways in which a good Christian should act through the homilies of *Patience* and *Purity*, but also kindly reminds readers of the need to implement such Christian virtues in worlds, not merely biblical, but secular, romantic and individual. The inevitability of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is that the reader is led from the end of a poem to the beginning of a manuscript, and from the manuscript to their own individual experience through the lens of felix culpa. As we look back through the poem, back through the manuscript, we are encouraged to look back through our own lives and experiences as well. The scheme of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight sends its reader around and around narrative frames. From the end of a poem the reader is sent to the beginning of it but also beyond it. Diligent readers are sent also to the other poems of the
manuscript before being sent beyond that to examine our own experience with the trials of Gawain.

An original reader response recorded in the poem evidences a kind of this secular application. Probably from the Fourteenth century exists an original reader response to the poem, so to speak, in the anonymous handwritten addition “Hony soyt qui mal pence”. Loosely translated as ‘Shame to him who thinks it,’ this was popularly recognized as the motto of the Order of the Garter as it was instituted by Edward III around 1348. Though not technically part of the text this phrase certainly takes readers beyond the poem while simultaneously evidencing an individual response. Someone somewhere seems to have believed that Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was about chivalry and its interesting relationship to shame. If legend stands true, then the slipped garter of the Duchess of Salisbury which was taken up by Prince Edward is a testament to nothing but courtesy. It is this knightly courtesy that Gawain faltered in the balance of, but to what extent of shame? No direct connection can be argued of course (though that has never stopped some from trying) but it inarguably sends one out to the realm of individual reader experience. It sends us out to real people who had to make real decisions every day of their lives, decisions like Gawain’s perhaps. From there we can move forward through the ages and witness, even here in the preceding pages, yet another reader response– my own based on manuscript context. Such might inspire yet another to pick up the poems and interpret for themselves, and yet another and another as we spiral across the millennia with a holly bob and green axe in hand.

An unknown identity has never been uncommon in the traditions of Arthurian legend; knights are forever to be seen wandering about unsure of their lineage and name. In my pursuit of meaning, though I have found great and awe-inspiring messages within it, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is really no different than these unknown knights. Hermeneutics of the sacred in conjunction with the concept of felix culpa and reader response have provided my analysis with great insight about the poem within its manuscript context as a retrospective homily. But there is, alas, no stone tablet waiting that shall state definitively: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is ‘such and such’ type of poem with ‘such and such’ intention by the poet as Sir Lancelot has in Chrétien de Troyes’ “Knight of the Cart”. But unlike the anonymity of the author, the ambiguity of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* allows for possibilities that are endless, infinite. And it is perhaps this scope of limitless interpretations that makes the poem so enticing as literature. The story has adventure and romance, hardships and redemption, moral education and optimism, breathtaking beauty and vivid pain. The alliteration is concise and rhythmic but not lulling. It is a story that has survived the ages not only in classrooms, but in severely misguided theatrical productions and heroic translations into modern vernacular.13

It is in the vein of, what I consider to be, the most noble of Arthurian lessons that I wish to end this paper. Chrétien de Troyes once told of just such an unknown young man that traveled to King Arthur’s court to be knighted, and with his request granted, continued to great adventures and true love. He once came across an injured fisherman who kindly granted him lodgings for the night, but in the midst of their evening, a strange procession brought the court to a standstill as it passed. In the procession a beautiful young woman carried a great white lance

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13 The silver screen has taken many liberties with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from the animated short sporting the same title from 2002 directed by Tim Fernee to the least recognizable Sword of the Valiant: the Legend of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* directed by Stephen Weeks in 1984 starring Miles O’Keeffe and Sean Connery. Translations are, thankfully, greater in number and range from the literary giant, J.R.R. Tolkien, to the most recent by Simon Armitage.
that bled red from the tip though it had no veins and a grail of gold that shined brighter than the
costliest of gems, of which, it was studded profusely. The young man was curious, but held his
tongue. It was in not asking about this grail, which will soon be identified as the Holy Grail, that
the man failed most grievously. Had he inquired about the mystery then the whole world would
have been healed in the questioning. The man, who later discovered his name to be Perceval,
traveled through many adventures proving himself a worthy knight before finding himself once
again at the Grail Castle asking the question that delves into the mystery of the *Sangreal*. The
answer is, coincidentally, also Judeo-Christian in nature and grapples with ideals of faith and
purity. It is in this Arthurian adventure that we learn that achieving adventures is merely the
beginning of a life-long quest. Readers are called to confront mystery, this mystery is represented
for Perceval by the Holy Grail, but it is as easily found awaiting us in the Green Chapel.
However, witnessing mystery is not enough, we have to ask about it. Confront it and inquire
about it, take up arms and engage it. Perceval teaches us that the ineffable must be approached
with a desire to learn. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, like *Pearl, Purity and Patience*, stands
testament to the ineffably infinite ability to reinterpret. This paper endeavors to stand testament
to the gloriously procreative act of questioning.

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15 The Holy Grail takes on many names as it passes through centuries and cultures. *Sangreal* is the French name
given the famous vessel in the Vulgate Cycle that dedicates its annals primarily to the explication and development
of its mysteries.
Appendices

Figure 1: The Concentric Circles of Felix Culpas that frame *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

![Concentric Circles Diagram]

Figure 2: Within and beyond the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

![Within and Beyond Diagram]
Works Cited


