

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Fitt 4

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OVERVIEW

Fitt 4 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* [SGGK] can be divided into three episodes:

1. The arming, the departure, and the journey to the Green Chapel, including the temptation by the guide;
2. Gawain's arrival at the Green Chapel and meeting with the Green Knight, and the completion of the Beheading Game. The Green Knight's explanation of the adventure and Gawain's response;
3. Gawain's journey home, including the healing of his wound; the recounting of his adventure at Camelot and the adoption of the baldric by the court.²

Fitt 4 contains many echoes of events from earlier in the poem. In Fitt 2, the hero prepared himself to set out from Camelot; in Fitt 4, he again prepares to set out into the bitter cold of winter.

¹ To reference notes taken during the lecture, rather than this version:

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Slide numbers shown in the present document refer to the unannotated file 'SGGK Fitt 4 - online slides.pdf', available from the same source as this document. A list of illustrations is appended to the Bibliography.

² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. A. Burrow. Penguin Classics: Penguin English Poets (1972; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987).

In Fitt 3, Gawain faced temptation in the wooing of his host's wife; in Fitt 4, Gawain is again tempted, as his guide offers him the chance to avoid meeting the Green Knight, and instead to go home secretly. In Fitt 4, Gawain's confession of his faults to the Green Knight at the Green Chapel is a reminder of his confession to the priest at Hautdesert in Fitt 3. Even the more minor details contain reverberations. Gawain's journey home holds echoes of his earlier travels since again there are adventures which the narrator mentions but does not describe (lines 2479–83). The celebrations at Camelot [SLIDE 1] over Gawain's safe return are a reminder of the feasting there at the start of the poem; and where the text began by alluding to the fall of Troy ('Sithen the sege and the assaut was sesed at Troye' (line 1)), the end returns to this theme, its final long line ('After the sege and the assaut was sesed at Troye' (line 2525)) repeating the poem's first line almost verbatim, and thus providing a sense of conclusion and closure.

These echoes are poetically pleasing and they underline the sense of carefully planned narrative. Yet they also tend – deliberately or not – to obscure one of the more interesting aspects of Fitt 4: in many ways, the final part of the poem provides the audience with more questions than answers. Modern audiences tend to expect that the conclusion of a medieval story will tie up the loose ends, provide answers to issues or problems posed earlier; and indeed many medieval narratives do this; but – as *The Canterbury Tales* will show, in the links forged between the tales and in the discussions between the pilgrims – medieval audiences were actively encouraged to think and debate about stories and the meaning and morality of the issues presented; and a similar process is at work here. In medieval quest-romances, such as *SGGK*, the adventure is the crucial factor; its background, meaning and outcome may be explained with a casual brevity that leaves many issues unaddressed and even opens up new questions. For instance, in romance the meaning and purpose of supernatural – or apparently supernatural – events are often glossed over or ignored as though not explanation were possible; and this is something that happens in *SGGK*. When, in Fitt 2, Gawain prays that he might find somewhere to celebrate mass at Christmas, a castle suddenly looms out of the murky winter day as if in response; but it looks somehow unreal, as if made out of paper (line 802), which seems to mark it as a supernatural place; and whether its appearance is due to magic or miracle – and there is, of course, a huge difference morally, even if none can be detected visually – is never explained. This part of the story depends on the audience's acceptance of a series of coincidences, of which the first is the sudden manifestation of the castle apparently in response to Gawain's prayer, thus apparently a miracle, a gift of God; but further coincidences – that Hautdesert is bound up closely with Gawain's quest; that it is the very place Gawain needs to find in order to complete his search for the Green Chapel; that his

host will later turn out also to be (also) the Green Knight; that one of the occupants is Gawain's aunt, Morgan le Fay – seem, in the light of Fitt 4's explanations, to link the castle less closely to miracle than to magic, a magic that seems to be of a dark nature.

The final fitt of *SGGK* seems to supply answers: the dual identity of the Green Knight is made known, as is the purpose of his mission to Camelot. The denouement explains how both the hospitality Gawain accepts at Hautdesert and the hunts and temptations fit into the story; but does Bertilak's explanation answer all the open questions? And how is the audience to interpret the Gawain of Fitt 4, who seems so different from the Gawain of the earlier fitts? The main issues arising in, or left open by, Fitt 4 can be placed into one of two broad groups: those relating to the construction of the adventure, and those connected with the character of the hero.

I: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ADVENTURE

Some representative questions

1. Bertilak tells Gawain that the adventure of the Green Knight has been planned by Morgan le Fay. She has two purposes: to test the pride of the Round Table and to make Guenore die of fright. What are we to make of this?
2. How do the attempted seductions by Bertilak's wife fit into the whole plan?
3. Since the poet has gone to great lengths to make the host and even the Green Knight, positive figures, what, in the final analysis, is the audience to think of Sir Bertilak, especially given his active role in Morgan's plan?

Morgan le Fay

The Gawain-poet makes very few missteps, but the part of the narrative relating to Morgan le Fay seems clumsily handled. The audience and Gawain discover simultaneously from Bertilak that the older lady at Hautdesert is Morgan; and this mutual surprise is tenable. Far less plausible is that Gawain has apparently never heard of her, although Morgan and her history would have been well known to most contemporary listeners; but Bertilak has to explain to Gawain that Morgan is his aunt, half-sister to King Arthur (lines 2464–66). Even to an audience who has had to suspend its disbelief to accommodate a green horse ridden by a green half-knight who can maintain a conversation with his amputated head dangling from his hand [SLIDE 2], it seems astonishing that Gawain would not know all about his aunt, given she is a notorious enemy of Camelot; it

seems scarcely likely that her existence, and kinship to Arthur and thus to Gawain, has never been mentioned. Yet, as Helen Cooper observes, the information is a shock to Gawain, who, at Camelot, had insisted that his blood-kinship to Arthur was the root of his virtue;³ now he learns that other, less virtuous, blood-relationships may also have shaped him.

In the wider Arthurian tradition, Morgan is famous for her necromantic skills, having learned from magic's most powerful practitioner, Merlin. In the earliest Celtic traditions, Morgan is a kind of fairy – which is the meaning of *fay*, from Old French *fée* – and her powers are benevolent. However, when the Arthurian tales were later put into a Christian framework, Morgan's magic became problematic and was reinterpreted as evil. Instead of being Arthur's ally, Morgan was recast as his implacable enemy. Her hatred for Arthur's queen is explained elsewhere in the Arthurian cycle: Morgan had an affair with a knight which was exposed by Guenevere, resulting in Morgan having to leave Arthur's court.

The medieval audience would have been aware of Morgan's antipathy to the Arthurian court, and Bertilak's explanation of Morgan's involvement in the plan of the Green Knight is based on this knowledge; yet how important is Morgan's plan within this poem? On one level, of course, it is the driving force of the whole plot; but as the Green Knight explains what has happened and why, Morgan's plan gradually seems to lose its importance. For one matter, the explanation of her involvement and purposes takes up only seven lines, fewer than the Green Knight takes to explain that the older lady at the castle is Morgan, where she learned her sorcery, and what her relationship is to Arthur and Gawain. In a text of 2,530 lines, a seven-line summing-up of the main plot seems over-concise. If the audience knows that Morgan is an evil creature who hates Camelot and all it stands for, it is obvious why she would plot against Arthur and his court, why she would want them to look foolish and fearful. Yet, even so, Bertilak's – or the Gawain-poet's – explanation of the plan is somehow facile. The Green Knight tells Gawain that Morgan

‘[...] wayned me upon this wise to your wyne halle
For to assay the surquidry, if hit soth were
That rennes of the grete renoun of the Rounde Table.’ (lines 2456–58)

Surquidry is pride, in the sense of renown, reputation, fame; and the same term is used in Fitt 1 when the Green Knight mocks the Round Table for its silent response to his challenge:

‘Where is now your surquidry and your conquestes,
Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?’ (lines 311–12)

³ ‘The Supernatural’, in *A Companion to the Gawain-poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson. *Arthurian Studies* 38 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997) pp. 269–91 (p. 289).

Morgan, then, seeks to undermine the fame of the Round Table by exposing it to a dreadful challenge; and, indeed, Gawain's flinching at the first attempted axe-stroke hardly exemplifies the courage for which Round Table knights are renowned, as the Green Knight's jeers make plain: "Thou art not Gawayn [...] | Such cowardise of that knight couth I never here" (lines 2270–73). Morgan's plan, however, is undermined by Gawain's acceptance, and eventual fulfilment, of the quest: he does leave Camelot in search of the Green Chapel, he does meet the Green Knight and prepare to accept the return blow demanded by the Beheading Game. As for Morgan's other intention, to make Guenore die of fright, it seems that Morgan has misjudged her target and that the Gawain-poet has missed a trick: Fitt 1 does not record Guenore's reaction to the decapitation and resurrection of the Green Knight, and the Green Knight's explanation turns this into a glaring and curious omission.

While the audience is undoubtedly surprised by the discovery of the old lady's identity and Morgan's part in the affair, Bertilak's explanation of her plan remains unsatisfying: we never learn her reaction to her failures; and, since her intention to disgrace the Round Table and kill the queen has been thwarted, Bertilak's repeated offers of further hospitality to Gawain and his wish that Gawain return to Hautdesert in order to spend quality time with his newfound aunt are bizarre. Given the careful planning of the majority of the narrative, Bertilak's account here seems glossed-over, too reliant on the audience's acceptance of Morgan's hatred for Camelot, too easy an explanation of an otherwise sophisticated plot.

Bertilak's character and role

Bertilak states that it was he who set his wife to seduce Gawain, apparently in a separate plan from Morgan's. Bertilak tells Gawain:

'Now know I wel thy cosses, and thy costes als,
And the wowyng of my wyf, I wroght hit myselven.
I sende hir to assay the [...]' (lines 2360–62)

Like Morgan's plot to *assay* ('test') the Round Table, Bertilak's plan is based on the idea of testing reputation; and he tests two elements of Gawain's chivalric identity: Gawain's reputation as an honourable knight, guided by the principles of *trauthe*, and his fame as a lover. In sending his wife to tempt Gawain, Bertilak's plan certainly seems more concrete than Morgan's. The parallels between the wife's hunting in the bedroom and Bertilak's hunting in the forest are made clear; and the symbolic connections between the temptations and the axe-strokes are explained in detail by the Green Knight, the two misses representing the two days' kisses honourably

provided according to the covenant of the Exchange of Winnings, and the third stroke, which wounds Gawain's neck, representing the hero's failure to hand over the girdle, as the covenant demanded (lines 2345–57). All is thus made plain by Bertilak and there are no real loose ends from this part of the plot; yet there are still unanswered key questions. Why should Bertilak want to test Gawain at all? Why should he risk his wife's, and his own, honour to do so? Had Gawain been successfully seduced, the reputation of Bertilak's wife would have been irrevocably sullied and Bertilak would have become that derided figure of the Middle Ages, the cuckold: what man, what knight, would willingly risk this, much less repeatedly provide the opportunity to be adult-erously betrayed?

At this point in the Green Knight's explanations, Morgan's identity and involvement have yet to be mentioned, and everything seems to be purely Bertilak's design. When the master plan, Morgan's plan, is revealed, it also becomes clear that Bertilak's own scheme is merely subsidiary; yet it seems crucial to the adventure of the Green Knight, both because of the role of the girdle in testing Gawain's *trauthe* and because of the focus on the attempted seductions and parallel hunts in Fitt 3. As Ad Putter points out, Bertilak now 'makes it clear that the Beheading Game has *no* significance other than as a reflection of Gawain's performance in a parlour game which he had earlier played at Castle Hautdesert. It was there, in the Exchange of Winnings, that the crucial testing of Gawain's honour took place'.⁴

The realization that there are two plans and two planners only leads to more questions. Does Morgan know about Bertilak's plan to test Gawain (cf. Cooper, p. 289)? Who is Bertilak? Is he really the Green Knight as well as the lord of Hautdesert, or has he – have they – been created magically by Morgan for this adventure alone? What the guide tells Gawain suggests not, and there is little room in the text to doubt him, unless he too is in on Morgan's plan. (While it is certainly not implied by the narrator, perhaps he is: Israel Gollancz long ago suggested that the guide was Bertilak in yet another disguise).⁵

Whoever he is, the guide tells Gawain that the Green Knight is a well-known, violent figure in the locality:

‘The place that ye prese to ful perelous is holden.
There wones a wye in that waste the worst upon erthe,
For he is stif and sturn and to strike lovies [...]
He cheves that chaunce at the Chapel Grene,

⁴ *An Introduction to the Gawain-poet*. Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library (London and New York: Longman, 1996), p. 43; original emphasis.

⁵ See J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 119.

There passes none by that place so proud in his armes
 That he ne dynges him to dethe with dint of his hande,
 For he is a mon methles, and mercy none uses.
 For be hit chorle auther chaplayn that by the chapel rides,
 Monk auther masseprest auther any mon elles,
 Him think as queme him to quelle as quik go himselven.’ (lines 2097–2109)

Cooper points out that here the Green Knight is made to sound ‘very like a periphrasis for death’ (p. 288; cf. Burrow, pp. 120–21; also cf. Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*), killing men of every estate. Yet this characterization itself is problematic: what with all the hunting, carousing and running the castle, how would Bertilak fit in a busy second career as Death? Ultimately, as Cooper states, it is not clear whether Bertilak or the Green Knight is the ‘natural’ personage (p. 289). The guide says that the Green Knight “‘has woned here ful yore” (line 2114); and the last view of the Green Knight, as he and Gawain go their separate ways, in no way answers the question:

Gawayn on blonk ful bene
 To the kynges burgh buskes bolde,
 And the knight in the enker grene
 Whiderwarde-so-ever he wolde. (lines 2475–78)

The most perplexing problem is why an apparently worthy knight like Bertilak is consorting with the evil Morgan at all, why he is willing to accept the role of Green Knight. There is no suggestion in his words that he is being forced to do so. His reasons are never made clear (cf. Burrow, p. 124). Bertilak’s chivalric worthiness is implied both by his generous hospitality and by his courage in single-handedly killing the boar (lines 1580–95); but is this, in fact, to misread his position and his nature? The textual evidence is inconclusive. There is a chapel with priests at Hautdesert, and Bertilak attends mass, but so does Morgan, and both have been involved in a plot with the potential to kill a knight and a queen. Even as Green Knight, Bertilak greets Gawain in God’s name (line 2239), and when the two part they commend each other into God’s care (‘bikennen ayther other | To the prynce of paradise’ (lines 2473–74)).

On the other hand, as Gawain muses on the bleak, forbidding appearance of the Green Chapel, he twice considers that the place seems suitable for the Devil (lines 2185–88, 2189–96; [SLIDE 3]). The nature of the place makes Gawain believe that the Devil is the guiding force of both the adventure and the Green Knight:

‘Now iwis,’ quoth Wawayn, ‘wysty is here.
 This oritore is ugly, with erbes overgrown;
 Wel bisemes the wye wruxled in grene
 Dele here his devocioun on the Develes wyse.
 Now I fele hit is the fende, in my fyve wyttes,
 That has stoken me this steven to strye me here.
 This is a chapel of meschaunce, that chek hit bytyde!
 Hit is the corsesdest kyrk that ever I come inne.’ (lines 2189–96)

Here it seems that the Gawain-poet wants his audience to view the Green Knight as an evil figure; yet as both Bertilak and the Green Knight, in both the Beheading Game and the Exchange of Winnings, he has kept to the agreed rules precisely, as he says: ““No mon here [...] | Ne kyd bot as covenant at kynges court schaped”” (lines 2339–40). Bertilak’s *trauthe*, unlike Gawain’s, seems uncompromised. Unlike the poet, he offers judgement on Gawain’s actions in accepting and keeping the girdle, and Gawain accepts without question his right to judge him, as well as his explanation of the various plans (cf. Putter, p. 98). Surely, then, Bertilak is not to be seen as evil; yet the narrator never clearly explains how to understand him and his various roles.

II. THE CHARACTER OF GAWAIN

The key issue of Fitt 4 concerns the nature and necessity of Gawain’s confession to the Green Knight, and understanding that requires a backtrack to Fitt 3 and the confession he makes immediately after accepting the girdle. The confession to the priest is clearly important, since the process is described at some length. The narrator is at pains to make it absolutely clear that the confession Gawain makes to the priest is complete:

Sithen chefly to the chapel chos he the way,
 Previly aproched to a prest and prayed him there
 That he wolde lyste his lif and lern him better,
 How his saule schulde be saved when he schulde seye hethen.
 There he schrof him schyrly and schewed his misdedes,
 Of the more and the mynne, and mercy beseches,
 And of absolucioun he on the segge calles;
 And he asoyled him surely and sette him so clene
 As domesday schulde have bene dight on the morn. (lines 1876–84)

However, this supposedly full confession is undermined by the way that both the hero and the Green Knight later treat Gawain’s retention of the girdle Bertilak’s wife has given him, which is explicitly in terms of confession. Gawain accuses himself of ““cowardise”” (line 2379) and ““covetyse”” (line 2380); he declares himself to be ““fauty and falce”” (line 2382). The Green Knight even alludes to the confessional in his response:

‘Thou art confessed so clene, beknowen of thy mysses,
 And has the penaunce apert of the poynt of myne egge.
 I holde the polysed of that plyght and pured as clene
 As thou hades never forfeget sithen thou was first born.’ (lines 2391–94)

The idea of spiritual purity and the relationship of the two confessions are underlined by the use of the word *clene* in both passages, and in the same position in the line each time. Where Christian confession left Gawain *clene* enough to face doomsday, his confession to the Green

Knight seems to leave him cleaner still, *pured as clene* ('refined so clean') as if he had never committed a sin in his life. Both episodes are thus to be viewed as formal confessions and, as Burrow points out, Gawain's confession to the Green Knight 'follows closely the actual order of the confessional' (p. 127): contrition, restitution, verbal confession, request for penance and the promise to be better in future (see pp. 127–30).

There is, in fact, much critical contention about the nature of the first confession, based around a central question: does Gawain confess fully to the priest or not? The problem is emphasized by the fact that Gawain fails to attend mass before setting out the next day, when he expects to die. The poet seems to offer one possible solution: Gawain does confess fully *to the sins he has already committed at that time*. The final Exchange of Winnings, when Gawain breaks his covenant by keeping back the girdle, has yet to occur when he goes to confession and so there is no need to confess it. This leads to a new, and equally inconclusive, issue: the intention to sin; yet the poet does not suggest that Gawain has made a final decision as to whether or not he plans to keep the girdle, even though he is concealing it (literally) during his confession; and his failure to attend mass the next morning offers some supporting evidence, since by then, having broken his covenant to his host, he is no longer *clene* and thus no longer in a position to take communion (cf. Burrow, pp. 117–18). Even if this interpretation were arguable, P. J. C. Field points out that any sin here would be venial (slight) rather than mortal (grave): the poet clearly does not place Gawain in a condition of mortal sin, which 'would seriously affect the end of the poem'.⁶

Yet, throughout Fitt 4, Gawain's character still seems compromised. This is apparent from the arming scene. In Fitt 2, Gawain's preparations peak in the symbolism of the pentangle and his faith in the Virgin Mary, depicted on the inside of his shield. In his second arming the shield is only briefly mentioned; and instead the focus is on the girdle. The poet has explained in Fitt 3 that Gawain's acceptance of the lady's gift is not based on its material or amatory value, but is because of its magical properties; and the same value judgement is reiterated in Fitt 4:

Bot wered not this ilk wye for wele this girdel,
For pryde of the pendauntes, thagh polysed thay were,
And thagh the glyterande gold glent upon endes,
Bot for to saven hymself when suffer him behoved,
To bide bale withoute debate, of bronde him to were
Auther knyve.

(lines 2037–42)

The repeated emphasis on the girdle's valuable adornments is a reminder that, like Bertilak, the girdle has a dual role. This can be seen clearly in Gawain's confession to the Green Knight:

⁶ 'A Rereading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Studies in Philology* 68 (1961), 255–69 (p. 259).

“Corsed worth cowardise and covetyse both! | In yow is vilany and vyse that vertue disstryes” (lines 2373–74). The charge of cowardice is easy to understand: Gawain has accepted the girdle in the hope that it will save his life. The charge of covetousness needs more explanation, because in Modern English, covetousness relates to avarice and greed; yet, if Gawain accepts the girdle only for its magical properties, not for its gold and gems, how does this make him covetous? As Burrow explains, in medieval penitential literature, all theft falls under the heading of ‘covetise’: Gawain is characterising his keeping of the girdle as theft; by retaining it during the final Exchange of Winnings, Gawain has in effect stolen it from his host (p. 136).

The narrator’s emphasis on the girdle’s magical properties opens still more questions. Derek Pearsall states that generally in romance the wearing of magical tokens is not frowned upon; they are seen as ‘accessories’ and do not conflict with Christian faith.⁷ Given that the Green Knight uses magic, Gawain’s wearing of a talisman with life-saving properties might be seen as fair enough. As Gawain says, when the Green Knight rebukes him for flinching from the first axe-stroke, “thagh my hed falle on the stones, | I con not hit restore” (lines 2282–83). Yet the fact of the girdle as a life-saving device remains unproved, and thus ambiguous. Pearsall argues that Gawain, although ‘dutiful and pious’, ‘has no inward sense of religion’ and his adoption of the pentangle is less to do with faith than sentimentality or superstition; and it is this same reasoning that causes him to replace the pentangle with the girdle (p. 352). Yet, does Gawain really believe that it can save him? Commentators disagree about this, yet Gawain’s belief – or otherwise – in the girdle’s powers seems crucial to the audience’s understanding of what happens in Fitts 3 and 4. Most critics are concerned with the negative effect that Gawain’s belief in the girdle’s power would have on the suspense of the narrative, although one might argue that, since Gawain is the hero and the hero tends to survive in Arthurian or quest romances, the suspense is undermined throughout the poem: even if Gawain expects to die at the Green Chapel (see e.g. lines 2210, 2307–08), the audience expects him to survive. Pearsall accepts Gawain’s belief in the girdle’s power and uses this belief to ask whether Gawain’s ‘courage [is] compromised by his belief in the life-saving properties of the girdle’ (p. 355). Conversely, Donald R. Howard suggests that Gawain’s flinch at the first axe-stroke shows that his faith in the girdle’s powers is dubious.⁸ Cooper goes further, arguing that the girdle is not really a talisman and that Gawain does not really believe in its powers, for the poem ‘would be much less exciting if the girdle were indeed

⁷ ‘Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment’, in Brewer and Gibson, pp. 351–62 (p. 356).

⁸ ‘Structure and Symmetry in *Sir Gawain*’, *Speculum* 39 (1964), 425–33 (p. 429).

what the lady says it is, a talisman of invulnerability. It is true that Gawain is not killed while he is wearing it; but if he, and we, really believed in its magical powers, his bravery in finally facing the Green Knight would dissolve, and the episode would lose both its suspense and its significance' (p. 278). Yet Gawain has cheated in the Exchange of Winnings, lied to his host, betrayed his *trauthe*: why would he do this if he does not believe in the girdle's powers to protect him? Why does the narrator explain more than once that Gawain's acceptance of the girdle is in order to save himself if this is not the case? Ultimately, as Patricia Martin points out, the girdle does not protect Gawain, but is the *cause* of his injury;⁹ in Fitt 4, the girdle represents, and eventually comes to stand as the symbol of, Gawain's failure to uphold his chivalric *trauthe*. Gawain's *trauthe*, then, is undercut from the very moment he accepts the girdle and agrees to the lady's insistence on secrecy; his trust in God, symbolized by the pentangle, has been replaced by an apparent trust in the girdle, whose magical properties are unproven and whose provenance – is it good magic or evil? – is unknown.

Gawain's reaction to the guide's temptation in Fitt 4 offers further evidence of his compromised chivalric nature. The episode's importance is underlined by its unusual features: this is the only occasion in the poem when a minor character has a lengthy role – the only other one to be singled out is Hautdesert's porter – and the guide is given two lengthy speeches (cf. Burrow, pp. 118–19). Clearly, the audience is supposed to pay attention, but what is being underlined here: the guide's words or Gawain's reaction to them? The narrator says that Gawain's response is 'gruchyng' (line 2126) at his guide's offer to let him go home secretly without meeting the Green Knight. The interpretation of this exchange seems to depend on the precise meaning of *gruchyng*. Middle English *gruch*, an antecedent of Modern English *grudge*, comes from Old French *grouchier*, meaning 'to grumble'. Some editors (such as A. C. Cawley) interpret *gruchyng* here as 'reluctantly';¹⁰ others see *gruchyng* as a stronger response: 'with displeasure' (for example, Tolkien et al., Burrow) or 'ill-humouredly' (for instance, Andrew and Waldron).¹¹ The word occurs in only one other place in the poem, where Gawain says to the Green Knight "I schal gruch the no grue" (line 2251). Here *gruch* obviously means 'grudge', but this does not help with the correct interpretation at line 2126. To interpret *gruchyng* as 'reluctantly' implies that

⁹ 'Allegory and Symbolism', in Brewer and Gibson, pp. 315–28 (p. 326).

¹⁰ In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, ed. by A. C. Cawley and J. J. Anderson. Everyman's Library (1976; London: Dent, 1991).

¹¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon. 2nd edn, rev. by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967); *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: 'Pearl', 'Cleanness', 'Patience' and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron. 5th edn. Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007).

Gawain wishes he could do as the guide suggests – hardly the attitude of any Round Table knight, let alone Gawain; and would Gawain really make his reluctance visible to the guide, his social inferior? Both the other translations offered suggest that Gawain is displeased *with the guide*, that he is angry with the guide for making the offer to cover for him; but that would be an uncourtly response – the guide, after all, is not a knight and could hardly be expected to appreciate the nuances of chivalric virtue – and Gawain’s reply, thanking the guide for his consideration and explaining why he cannot accept – is courteously phrased and does not display any displeasure.

Neither of these interpretations – Gawain’s reluctance at refusing the guide’s offer nor his displeasure at the guide for making the offer – seems to fit well into the narrative nor into the medieval idea of chivalry. In his speech to the guide, Gawain – who expects to die, but has *not* taken communion in preparation for the event – twice professes his trust in God to keep him safe (lines 2137, 2158–59). He declares that to escape in the manner the guide suggests would be a craven act: “I were a knight cowarde, I myght not be excused” (line 2131). Yet his declarations of trust in God must be read in the context of the girdle: Gawain’s wearing of the girdle in his appointment with the Green Knight and his (apparent) belief in its life-saving properties undermine his declared, and chivalric, faith in God’s power to keep him safe. Gawain’s displeasure must, therefore, be directed at himself and arise from his guilt at his betrayal of his chivalric, and Christian, principles. He knows that he has not behaved appropriately.

Gawain’s reaction to the Green Knight’s declaration that he owns the girdle is curious. He does, to a certain extent, reproach himself, but he also launches into a heated diatribe against women. Misogyny in medieval texts is hardly rare, but it is comparatively infrequent in romance, and the speech sits uncomfortably in the context: such antifeminism seems strange in the mouth of the famous lover Gawain, and hardly demonstrates a chivalric attitude towards the lady. Gawain deploys an exemplary list of great figures brought low by women’s wiles to justify his own folly – “Thagh I be now bigyled, | Me think me burde be excused” (lines 2427–28) – and the impression this speech leaves behind is one of wounded pride: Gawain does not like having been used, and fooled, by the lady, whose attraction to him now proves to have been contrived. The tone and terms of the speech suggest that Gawain can cope better with attacks on his reputation for courage than on his amorous fame.

Gawain’s self-denunciation is phrased in much stronger terms than Bertilak’s judgement on him. Gawain lists his faults as cowardice, covetousness and falseness, and seems unable to accept the Green Knight’s gentler interpretation that Gawain is “One the fautlest freke that ever on fote

yede” (2363) and that he “lakked a lyttel [...] and lewty [...] wonted” (line 2366). The description of Gawain’s physical reaction to the Green Knight’s judgement is striking, as he

in study stode a grete whyle,
So agreved for greme he gryed withinne;
All the blode of his brest blent in his face,
That al he schrank for schame that the schalk talked. (lines 2369–72)

When he recounts his adventure back at Camelot, Gawain demonstrates a similar physical response:

He tened when he schulde telle,
He gromed for gref and grame;
The blode in his face con melle,
When he hit schulde schewe for schame. (2501–04)

Here, *schame* equates to ‘embarrassment’ and ‘humiliation’ (Pearsall, p. 361), demonstrating a mortification which, as Pearsall suggests, is connected with the idea of being ‘found out’: ‘His shame is not in the act but in the making public of what he thought was private. That is what he can never live down’ (p. 357). Nicholas Watson thinks Gawain’s continued stance of mortification is wrong, erroneous; Gawain should ‘realise that, having confessed his sin to Bertilak and been forgiven [...], he cannot continue to treat his sin as unforgivable’;¹² yet this seems to miss the point of what is happening, for Gawain’s adventure is not concluded until he retells his story at Camelot, enacting his third and final confession, and hears his peers’ judgement; thus his continued shame as he recounts his tale is not inappropriate. Gawain narrates his adventure faithfully, although, as Burrow observes (p. 153), he reorders the details as he retells ‘The chauce of the chapel, the chere of the knight, | The luf of the lady, the lace at the last’ (lines 2496–97; note that there’s no mention of Morgan here). Gawain’s recounting of his story ends with a reiteration of his faults: “cowardise”, “covetyse”, “untrauthe” (lines 2508–09).

The court’s reaction is kind – ‘The kyng comfortes the knight, and alle the court als’ (line 2513) – although there is laughter too (line 2514). Contrary to some critical views, this amusement seems to be not mocking, but sympathetic, a response underlined by the knights’ agreement that they will all adopt the green girdle as a baldric: Gawain is not to be publicly and solely marked as a possessor of faults and failures; the Round Table knights will share in his failures, as they share in his successful homecoming. The poem may leave many questions open for debate, but ultimately, Gawain’s heroic status is not one of them: as Derek Brewer points out,

¹² ‘The Gawain-poet as Vernacular Theologian’, in Brewer and Gibson, pp. 293–313 (pp. 293–94).

Gawain's baldric might be the symbol of his failure, but this failure is still greater than the successes most men might hope to achieve (p. 14).

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