

# The Severing of the Pentangle: Gender and Sexuality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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The symbols that define Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* represent not only his identity as a knight, but also his gender and sexuality. Although he begins the poem with a stable vision of himself as a good, masculine, and heterosexual knight, the various games and challenges that Gawain encounters shift each category. Therefore, the knight must replace his old symbols with ones that more accurately represent himself at the end of his adventure. The first of these symbols, the pentangle, represents perfection and the stable identity that Gawain will be unable to maintain. The second, the image of the Virgin Mary, begins as a protective icon that reverses gender roles but fails to shield Gawain from sexual advances. As the Green Knight slices Gawain's neck and reveals his faults, the pentangle's perfection is also severed, leaving the imperfect and unstable girdle to take its place. Finally, the scar signifies the moment that the pentangle is severed. This symbol also can be read as various types of nonnormative change in gender and sexual expression. The shift of these symbols emphasizes the instability of Gawain's identity, gender, and sexuality.

Many scholars have previously investigated the queer aspects of this poem while using the symbols as a touchstone for analysis. Gail Ashton notes that in looking at sexuality, it is imperative to "also take into account notions of gender."<sup>1</sup> These two aspects of identity often impact each other, meaning that acknowledging both concepts will broaden the scope of analysis. However, it is also important to stress that both gender and sexuality, as well as many other forms of

identity, are performative rather than inherent.<sup>2</sup> David Boyd emphasizes this, writing, “medieval gender and sexuality are as much about positionality—active/passive, top/bottom—as they are about genitivity.”<sup>3</sup> Since taking a position is a continual choice rather than a biological trait, sexuality and gender are subject to change depending on a person’s choices. Jeffrey Cohen agrees, noting “that masculinity is adoptable, performable, transmutable.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Gawain’s gender must be proven through his actions or it will shift to fit how he expresses himself. This instability extends to his identity as a whole, meaning that as Gawain’s actions pull him further from his original identity, he simultaneously creates a new identity. Therefore, the symbols depicting Gawain’s gender and sexuality must also change with him, or else they will falsely represent him.

The first symbol to appear prominently is the pentangle which is painted on the forward-facing side of Gawain’s shield. This interconnected, five-pointed star depicts perfection and unchanging identity, but it will ultimately be replaced. This analysis focuses on two of the five points. The fifth point of the pentangle represents five different virtues, including “clannes” and “cortayse,” or cleanliness and courtesy.<sup>5</sup> The latter constantly appears throughout the poem and is treated as a core part of Gawain’s personality. The former trait, cleanliness, is equally important to this analysis, given its connection to Gawain’s sexuality. Boyd suggests that this trait be read as “sexual and spiritual clanness’ (chastity or purity).”<sup>6</sup> If this is the case, then Gawain’s virginity and heterosexuality are integral to his identity with the pentangle.

At the same time, one of this symbol’s most important aspects is the interconnected nature of the pentangle. The pentangle’s perfection appears to derive from the fact it has “fyue poyntez þat fayld neuer.”<sup>7</sup> Given that the pentangle is specifically described as having characteristics that do not fail or change, Gawain must also not fail, or he will not be able to epitomize the pentangle. The symbol is also commonly referred to as “þe endeles knot” due to the interconnected nature of each point making up the star.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the wholeness of the lines creating the pentangle is essential to the pentangle’s perfection. The importance of these points linking without even a seam is further explained by the line that the pentangle is “ne sundred nouþer,” meaning that every point has equal importance and none can be taken away.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, if Gawain

fails to exhibit even one of the pentangle's points, then he would symbolically sever the pentangle and be unable to claim it as his central symbol. Geraldine Heng highlights this point: "the pentangle is the ultimate guarantee, on the symbolic level, for the existence of fixed and stable identity."<sup>10</sup> However, identity, especially when centered around gender and sexuality, cannot be stable because it is performative. Given that gender and sexuality are materialized through actions, they are inherently unstable concepts and can shift based on the choices a person makes. Therefore, the pentangle's stable perfection is destined to come undone when put under the strain of reality.

Despite the impossibility of an unchanging identity, Gawain's speech at the beginning of Fitt 1 illustrates his ability to maintain the various traits of the pentangle by reframing his actions so that he remains perfect. This scene establishes Gawain's identity partially because the poet quickly characterizes the Green Knight's entrance as an evaluation of the Round Table. When the giant green man enters, the poet writes, "To knyȝtez he kest his yȝe."<sup>11</sup> Richard Zeikowitz argues that at this moment, he is already watching the court "to see which one conforms with his idea of leader."<sup>12</sup> Although the emphasis is on Arthur, because the Green Knight is trying to speak to the leader, his judgmental eye still falls across the knights, suggesting that they are under scrutiny. This judgment continues as the Green Knight asks if any will play his game.

However, the Round Table falls short of the Green Knight's expectations of Arthur's renowned court. When the knights, including Gawain, remain silent, the Green Knight responds by asking, "What, is þis Arþures hous...?"<sup>13</sup> Notably, before insulting the knights for their cowardice outright, the Green Knight challenges their identity as Arthur's court. This highlights the performability of identity and suggests that Gawain's sense of self is already unstable and unable to be maintained. Furthermore, the knights are insulted for their passivity, not even managing to respond to the question. As suggested previously, passivity is often a highly gendered trait assigned to femininity. Therefore, the knights' inability to respond to the Green Knight emasculates them, further threatening Gawain's stable, heterosexual, masculine identity. In fact, the Green Knight also insults the court by calling them "berdlez chylder," explicitly challenging the manhood of these knights and thus emphasizing the

connection between their actions and their masculinity.<sup>14</sup> This also establishes a link between Gawain's gender or sexual identity and the traits connected to the pentangle, such as courage. In places where Gawain fails to uphold the pentangle's perfection, he will often fail to maintain a stable masculine and heterosexual identity.

Despite being emasculated by the Green Knight, Gawain only steps forward when Arthur puts himself in danger before he reestablishes his actions. Gawain is the first knight who steps forward, which inadvertently characterizes him as more courageous than the other knights that remain quiet, implying Gawain is one of the best knights. Furthermore, the beginning of Gawain's speech emphasizes various aspects of the pentangle and his identity. Gawain addresses Arthur, saying:

Bid me boȝe fro þis benche and stonde by yow þere,  
þat without vylanye myȝt voyde þis table,  
And þat my legge lady lyked not ille,<sup>15</sup>

Notably, Arthur does not order that the knights remain seated at this point. Therefore, Gawain actively yields his autonomy to Arthur by asking for permission to stand. This deference affirms the power dynamic between Gawain and Arthur, where Gawain submits to his king. Although this places Gawain in a more feminine position of submission, it also reestablishes Arthur's masculinity.

This moment also connects Gawain's actions back to the pentangle. Gawain suggests that he needs Arthur's permission in order to leave the table "without vylanye."<sup>16</sup> Later on, the narration explains that Gawain can be connected to the pentangle because he is "Voyded of vche vylany."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Gawain's request demonstrates the concentration needed to uphold all the points of the pentangle. If even leaving his seat is truly something that could be villainous, then every action has the danger of jeopardizing Gawain's connection to the pentangle. By suggesting that he needs permission to leave the table, Gawain also provides a possible excuse for his lack of an earlier response. If it is villainous to even leave the table without asking, then it could be argued Gawain was waiting for Arthur to permit him to stand before he asked. Instead of being cowardly, he establishes himself as exceptionally courteous and aware of his king's needs.

At the same time, the beginning of Gawain's first speech also establishes his characteristic courtesy towards women. Gawain asks

not only for Arthur's permission, but he also makes sure that his "legge lady lyked not ille."<sup>18</sup> By also ensuring Guinevere will allow him to leave her presence, Gawain yields control of himself to a woman. This characteristic submission to women highlights his reputation for pleasing the women he encounters, which establishes him as concerned with the desires of women, linking him to a heterosexual characterization. Therefore, Gawain's entrance shows the knight's ability to alter the perception of his actions through speech in order to remain a faithful depiction of the pentangle.

Although Gawain navigates this situation, the fact he can reestablish his actions reveals the instability of the traits that make up his identity. The rules of these chivalric ideals are malleable and, in this case, can be molded to fit what Gawain sees as most helpful for himself. This means the very definitions of the pentangle's five points are not stable, and so Gawain could never maintain them for every situation. This is especially an issue when external forces can define what each trait entails. The pentangle, therefore, cannot remain a symbol of unchanging perfection, and so the endless knot that symbolizes Gawain must be severed in order to be accurate to Gawain and the world he lives in. As Tison Pugh eloquently writes, "perfection is a principle that can never be maintained in a fallen world."<sup>19</sup> I argue that in a world where gender and sexuality are performed, as they are in medieval romances, no identity or symbol can remain stable. The pentangle, in all its interwoven glory, can only be realistic when it is severed.

On the back of the same shield where the pentangle is found, there is the painted icon of the Virgin Mary. This image reveals Gawain's underlying dynamics and traits that defy the normative gender roles. At the same time, the Virgin Mary will fail to protect Gawain from Lady Bertilak's advances, so she, too, will be lost as a symbol for Gawain. Notably, the Virgin Mary is continually established as a motherly protector for the young knight. As Heng describes, the icon is "blazoned on the inner surface of Gawain's shield like a talisman."<sup>20</sup> This emphasizes a magical ability that should protect the protagonist throughout his adventure. Beyond this symbolic implication, the image painted on the shields adds a physical dimension to Mary's protective nature. The canvas that she is painted on is a shield, meaning it is supposed to literally defend Gawain from the blow of a sword. Furthermore, the poet attributes

Gawain's courage to Mary: "Þat quen he blusched þereto his belde neuer payred."<sup>21</sup> Gawain's courage, a trait often gendered as masculine, is therefore derived from a feminine source, meaning that Mary's image offers Gawain an emotional, religious, and spiritual form of protection.

Mary's influence is further emphasized by how she is also featured in one of the points of the pentangle. The poet once again writes that she assists Gawain because "alle his forsnes" or courage, "he fong at þe fyue joyez / Þat þe Heuen Quene had of hir Chylde."<sup>22</sup> While the "Chylde" here references Jesus, this moment nevertheless highlights Mary's role as both an influential figure of religion and a mother to Jesus. This description mirrors the role she takes over for Gawain, as a motherly figure that protects him and has charge over him as well.

The Virgin Mary's role as protector inverts common gender roles and tropes within medieval romances. In this case, a virgin is the one depicted as protecting the knight from harm in battle, although she does this through an image on a shield rather than through direct combat. The Virgin Mary is also depicted as the one who needs to protect Gawain's chastity instead of the common trope of the knight protecting the maiden's virginity. As mentioned earlier, spiritual purity is a trait tied to the pentangle, and so the Virgin Mary's ability to protect Gawain's purity is essential to the knight's ability to retain his claim on the first symbol. As a figure of both virginity and motherhood, Mary seems to be the perfect patron to guide Gawain through the maze of contradictory standards that will appear in the castle of Lady Bertilak and her husband.

Navigating these contradictions is critical for Gawain, as the threat is not only a loss of Gawain's virginity but also possible acts of sodomy. Given the setup of the exchange of gifts between Bertilak and Gawain, various scholars note the added danger of sodomy to Lady Bertilak's advances. After all, Boyd points out that "if Gawain had intercourse with Lady Bertilak, who would serve as his receptacle for sexual activity (his gain), he would be required to give to Bertilak what he had received."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, there is a threat to Gawain's sexual purity, both as a loss of his virginity and as the Christian sin of sodomy.

Even the positioning of the first of these scenes threatens Gawain's masculine and heterosexual identity. Given that sexuality is

largely about the position of the involved parties, the way the Lady advances on Gawain places him in a feminine space. Gail Ashton argues that the Lady “entraps and physically dominates him to challenge the security of gender categories.”<sup>24</sup> This idea of entrapment is not subtle either. With the cross-cutting scenes of her husband’s hunting of animals, the Lady is described as having “creped withinne” while Gawain pretends to be sleeping.<sup>25</sup> The predatory nature of her sneaking into Gawain’s room is further emphasized by the Lady openly commenting on Gawain’s vulnerability before she says to him, “I schal bynde yow in your bedde.”<sup>26</sup> The image of her capturing Gawain is made explicit at this moment, emphasizing Gawain’s lack of consent before he responds.

Lady Bertilak further challenges Gawain by questioning his identity as a knight and his heterosexuality before he ever kisses Bertilak. In order to convince Gawain to kiss her, Lady Bertilak begins by declaring, “bot þat 3e be Gawan hit gotz in mynde!”<sup>27</sup> Not unlike the Green Knight in the feast scene, she actively attacks the identity of the knight in an effort to coerce him. Furthermore, she claims that according to what she had heard about Gawain, he “couth not ly3tly haf lenged so long wyth a lady / Bot had he craued a cosse bi his courtaysye.”<sup>28</sup> Notably, Gawain’s courteousness is specifically called out, and because this is not just a part of the pentangle but often cited as a key trait of Gawain’s identity, her challenge threatens Gawain’s ability to uphold the pentangle and his ability to be himself. At the same time, she explicitly says that he should have “craued a cosse,” not just given it to her.<sup>29</sup> His failure is attributed to a lack of desire, linking back to Gawain’s expression of his sexuality. Lady Bertilak defines Gawain’s lack of action as a lack of desire for her as a whole while linking this type of desire to the trait of courtesy. Thus, Lady Bertilak entangles a trait from the pentangle with heterosexual desire in order to convince Gawain.

Finally, when she does kiss Gawain, it is clear that Lady Bertilak takes an active role. Where Gawain finally submits, saying, “I schal kysse at your comaundement,” Lady Bertilak “cachez hym in armez / Loutez luflych adoun and þe leude kyssez.”<sup>30</sup> Firstly, Gawain purposely yields his power to Lady Bertilak, making the choice as to whether or not to kiss her decision to make. Furthermore, the theme of being captured is reiterated in Lady Bertilak catching Gawain in her arms, and her dominant position is

emphasized as she leans down to Gawain to kiss him instead of the opposite scene. The summation of these scenes establishes Lady Bertilak's advances as predatory and a real threat to Gawain's masculinity and sexual purity.

Although absent during this first scene, the Virgin Mary does reappear during one of the bedroom scenes, where the responsibility for Gawain's virginity is placed onto her actions. During the last of the bedroom scenes, the poet suddenly turns from the action and comments, "Grete perile bitwene hem stod / Nif Maré of hir knyȝt mynne."<sup>31</sup> This brief comment evokes the image on Gawain's shield after some time of Mary not being mentioned, but more importantly, it stresses that Mary must intercede to ensure this danger does not come to pass. Furthermore, Gawain is called "hir knyȝt," which suggests that Gawain is Mary's object. Heng echoes this, arguing that the Virgin Mary "and the Lady are momentarily shown to contend explicitly for Gawain as their desired prize."<sup>32</sup> This inverts the typical image of a pair of knights fighting for a virgin's honor or safety and places Gawain in a feminine space, which is so often characterized by objectification.

Despite the emphasis on Gawain's earlier trust for Mary, she appears unable to assist him, and sometimes even seems to do the opposite. In the first of the bedroom scenes, the Lady and Gawain have a brief argument about who will be whose servant. In this argument, Gawain exclaims, "Mary yow ȝelde," before saying he is unworthy of the Lady's offer to him.<sup>33</sup> Although this line appears to be a simple exclamation rather than specific attribution, the moment still suggests that Lady Bertilak's appearance was something brought on by Mary. Therefore, the subsequent temptations would also have been caused by Mary's influence.

Furthermore, Mary's name is once again exclaimed during the last exchange of gifts, where an explicitly queer kiss takes place. After Gawain kisses him, Bertilak exclaims, "Mary," before claiming that his gift of a fox "is ful pore for to pay for suche prys þinges."<sup>34</sup> Mary is evoked again, even if only by name in passing. Even so, this kiss cannot be easily written off as social. According to Carolyn Dinshaw, the difference between a kiss with homosexual desire and one meant as a homosocial greeting or goodbye is that a homosexual kiss is "intended to arouse, to incite venereal pleasure."<sup>35</sup> Applying this ideology, the kiss Bertilak speaks about is imbued with a sexual



desire. Gawain is said to have kissed Bertilak “as sauerly and sadly as he hem sette coupe.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Gawain kissed Bertilak the way that Lady Bertilak kissed him, meaning Gawain emulates her sexual desire. Looking back to the kiss that Gawain received, the poet writes, “Ho hatz kyst þe kny3t so to3t” or that she kissed him “hardy.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, this kiss is sexual, which means that Gawain must, at the very least, act desirous of Bertilak, which would contrast the possibility of a stable heterosexual identity. However, even though Gawain takes part in a homosexual act, Mary’s name is only evoked after it is too late for the heavenly mother to stop the interaction. In this way, even though the Virgin Mary symbolizes some of the underlying, non-normative gender dynamics, this supposedly protective figure fails to shield Gawain from the Lady forcing him into a feminine, and then homosexual, position.

In the place of the perfect pentangle, Gawain takes up the girdle, which signifies his flaws and the instability of his gender and sexuality. The girdle carries inherent connotations of femininity, which destabilizes Gawain’s gender identity. According to the scholars Friedman and Osberg, girdles are such an intimate feminine symbol for those receiving this girdle “that these intimations must be carefully veiled or dissembled when the object is presented.”<sup>38</sup> However, Gawain’s girdle is not dissembled; instead, the girdle dissembles Gawain’s belief that his gender is stable. Jeffrey Cohen echoes this interpretation, arguing that Gawain is “like the initiate in the coming-of-age rituals...preliminarily dressed in the habiliments of another gender.”<sup>39</sup> Notably, Cohen highlights the girdle’s connection to change in his discussion about Gawain’s journey as a coming-of-age story, suggesting Gawain will grow during the poem. The changeability of the girdle also appears in Heng’s description of the girdle as “an imperfect knot” that “situates identity as more tenuous and incomplete.”<sup>40</sup> Unlike the pentangle, which Gawain works hard to remain worthy of, the girdle allows for a shift of identity.

In fact, the way Gawain wears the girdle emphasizes a shift in both his gender expression and his larger identity. Although the Lady offers the girdle a few times, Gawain accepts it only when she says that the girdle is special because, “While he hit hade hemely haltched aboute / Þer is no hapel vnder heuen tohewe hym.”<sup>41</sup> Gawain takes the girdle because it will ensure that no one can harm him, suggesting

that Gawain has gained a fear of death. The Green Knight solidifies this claim, saying to Gawain that he might have returned the girdle “Bot for 3e lufed your lyf.”<sup>42</sup> This fear contrasts Gawain’s earlier indifference to the journey’s dangers, where he says, “Of Destinés derf and dere / What may mon do bot fonde?”<sup>43</sup> Here, Gawain demonstrates a lack of concern for the trials he is about to face and a willingness to meet these dangers head-on. The fact that Gawain keeps the girdle to protect himself from the Green Knight’s axe shows a movement from courage to a fear of death that is stronger than his efforts to remain courteous. Furthermore, Lady Bertilak specifies that the girdle must be worn “hemely” (or closely) tied around someone’s waist for it to protect the person wearing it.<sup>44</sup> Wearing it this way would accentuate Gawain’s waist, making his silhouette appear more traditionally feminine. Therefore, even the act of wearing this girdle makes visible the disruption of Gawain’s initial identity, which appears to have been envisioned as more masculine than feminine.

While the girdle destabilizes Gawain’s gender identity, it also appears to represent how a heterosexual relationship would protect him. Like the Virgin Mary, however, this symbol fails to protect Gawain when he needs it most. Dinshaw argues that Gawain’s trust in the girdle’s magic demonstrates how “heterosexuality is being naturalized-or renaturalized-as the salvation from disaggregation.”<sup>45</sup> This would seem to make sense, as the girdle, often called a “luf-lace,” is a gift from Lady Bertilak to Gawain, which is supposedly imbued with this magic to protect him.<sup>46</sup> Much like the image of the Virgin Mary, the girdle symbolizes a feminine source of protection from literal harm in battle. However, this heterosexual symbol will fail and even cause Gawain’s injury. When the Green Knight explains why he slices open Gawain’s neck at the end, he says that despite having been honest on the first two nights of the exchange, “At þe þird þou fayled þore / And þerefor þat tappe ta þe.”<sup>47</sup> The Green Knight reveals that he sliced Gawain’s neck because Gawain failed to return the girdle to Bertilak on the third night. Gawain also acknowledges this interpretation, describing the girdle as “þe token of vntrawpe,” which shows his failure to remain perfect.<sup>48</sup> Gawain recognizes that he has failed to stay honest and courteous, thus severing his connection to the pentangle, since his gender identity has shifted away from traditionally masculine expressions. Therefore,

if this symbol epitomizes a heterosexual relationship, it would represent a deceitful and destructive relationship rather than a protective one.

The girdle also carries the implication of a homosexual relationship, further suggesting a shift in Gawain's identity. Boyd highlights the homoeroticism of the exchange of blows: "Feminized—the girdle is wrapped around his waist—Gawain must kneel before the Green Knight and accept a blow from his massive weapon."<sup>49</sup> The wearing of the girdle exaggerates Gawain's already submissive position beneath the phallic symbol of an axe. He is portrayed as vulnerable through his bare neck and feminine attire. In addition, Bertilak claims that "hit is my wede þat þou werez."<sup>50</sup> Bertilak inserts himself into the narrative of the girdle, complicating the simplistic passing of the gift from a lady to a knight. Furthermore, Bertilak claims that his wife's wooing was his own design, entangling their relationships more: "þe wowyng of my wyf, I wro3t hit myseluen / I sende hir to asay þe."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, even Lady Bertilak's motivation to offer the girdle is linked to her husband rather than herself, making the "luf-lace" a less simple symbol of heterosexuality.<sup>52</sup> Heng argues that by claiming the girdle as his, "the Green Knight is able also to lay claim to rightful ownership of the seduction game after the fact."<sup>53</sup> This argument suggests that it is through the girdle that a claim to wooing Gawain can be made in the first place, solidifying the girdle's connection to sexuality. Bertilak's claim of his wife's advances also reconstitutes Lady Bertilak's actions throughout the bedroom scenes, all her predatory sexual desire, as the desires of Bertilak himself. Thus, the girdle more accurately portrays a complex entanglement of sexual relationships between Gawain, Bertilak, and Lady Bertilak, which cannot be easily defined by labels of sexuality.

Furthermore, various characters ascribe new meaning to the girdle, showing its capacity as a symbol that can change in meaning. Before Gawain leaves, Bertilak offers the girdle because "hit is grene as my goune" and that Gawain should "þenk vpon þis ilke" as "a pure token / Of þe chaunce of þe Grene Chapel."<sup>54</sup> Bertilak emphasizes the girdle's connection to the Green Knight, establishing his persona, and in effect, himself, as central to the meaning of the girdle. Furthermore, he suggests Gawain use it to remember the events at the Green Chapel, a space where he and Gawain were

alone. Thus, Bertilak shifts the significance of the girdle to focus on himself again, showing the capacity for change in the girdle's meaning. As previously mentioned, Gawain then takes this symbol and shifts it once more, focusing it instead as "þe token of vntrawpe."<sup>55</sup> He abhors himself over his failure to succeed in the exchange of gifts, thus characterizing the girdle as much more shameful than Bertilak suggests. At the same time, even this characterization does not remain static as Arthur's court hears Gawain's lamentation. In an effort to comfort their friend, Arthur and his knights take up a "bauderyk" or belt, "A bende abelfe hym about, of a bryzt grene."<sup>56</sup> This time, the girdle's meaning is shifted in two ways— not only is it reestablished as a sign of masculine brotherhood, but also, as Heng notes, "Arthur overturns the girdle's signification once again by quite literally turning the sign over on its side."<sup>57</sup> While the implications of how it is worn will be discussed later on, it is important to note that the girdle's symbolism is once again changed in the poem.

The girdle's ability to be adapted is also embodied in the fact that, unlike the pentangle, it is not endless. Instead, it is like a pentangle that has been severed, leaving a rope that, while still able to be tied into a knot, will never be entirely complete or perfect. At the same time, this means that the girdle can be tied and retied, adjusting to Gawain's waist—and his identity—as it shifts and changes throughout his life. Therefore, when Gawain fails to live up to his symbol of the unchanging pentangle, he must replace it with the girdle, which links his chivalric imperfections with his unstable gender and sexuality.

The final symbol, the scar, memorializes the moment Gawain's neck was nicked and his connection to the pentangle was severed. As Boyd previously noted, Gawain is wounded in a particularly vulnerable position.<sup>58</sup> Gawain's vulnerability is emphasized by the repeated reference to his neck and how he "schewed þat schyre al bare."<sup>59</sup> Not only does his bowing show submission to the Green Knight's will, but his neck is also depicted as bare and even has connotations of whiteness as displayed by the word "schyer," or "white flesh."<sup>60</sup> Ashton highlights the femininity suggested by Gawain's bare neck because "the feminine is signed through the exposure and display of flesh and skin."<sup>61</sup> Therefore, Gawain's position not only reflects a homoerotic interaction but it

also emasculates him. Furthermore, after Gawain first flinches from the swing of the Green Knight's phallic axe, he is forced to endure a second and third strike. Cohen argues that this moment depicts how Gawain "learns... to submit to the proper adoption of the Christian chivalric code that passes for an adult male identity."<sup>62</sup> Although Gawain has submitted before in interactions with Lady Bertilak and King Arthur, this particular instance emphasizes passivity rather than merely yielding power. Gawain is berated for having "schranke a lytel with þe schulderes," and so Gawain vows, "I schal stonde þe a strok and start no more."<sup>63</sup> Unlike before, he is asked not to react at all to the axe that will supposedly hit him, whereas before Gawain was meant to allow Lady Bertilak to kiss him or Arthur to exercise control over his movements. This time, Gawain must withhold reaction and act utterly passive rather than actively submissive, emphasizing a greater lack of autonomy. Therefore, Gawain becomes the objectified receiver of the Green Knight's phallic weapon, placing him in a precarious position that is often gendered feminine. The scar, therefore, is the result of Gawain's adoption of this new identity that has more feminine and queer connotations.

Furthermore, the cut on Gawain's neck also signifies a shift away from the sexual purity that was meant to be protected by Mary. Given the highly feminine connotations of Gawain's position, some argue that the "coming-of-age" aspect could be seen more as a loss of feminine virginity. Ashton argues that the blood spilled depicts when "Gawain's untested 'virginity' (metaphorical and physical) is breached."<sup>64</sup> Notably, if this is the case, then Gawain would be losing his metaphorical virginity to a dominant male figure. Therefore, not only would Gawain no longer be symbolically virginal, but he would have lost his virginity in a homosexual interaction. Boyd highlights this possibility, arguing that "the axe's symbolization as phallus replaces that of the penis much as a violent exchange of blows replaces more explicit homosexual contact."<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the scar can symbolize Gawain's loss of sexual innocence, both in terms of feminine-coded virginity and his heteronormative identity.

At the same time, this scene could be read as an emotional or symbolic castration. Many scholars bring up how the final exchange of blows occurs on Circumcision Day, and that this can lead to connotations of castration.<sup>66</sup> However, circumcision and castration are two different concepts with separate implications. For example,

Norman Simms argues that the wound on Gawain's neck symbolizes circumcision, where the scar serves as "a mark of culture and spiritual brotherhood."<sup>67</sup> There is evidence that Gawain's experience at the Green Chapel helped him foster brotherhood, as seen by how Arthur's court took up the girdle as a symbol of their brotherhood. Simms' reading also allows for a return to parts of the pentangle since reestablishing Gawain into a "brotherhood" could relate to the pentangle's trait of "fela3schyp."<sup>68</sup>

While the ending would appear to emphasize the scar as a symbol of circumcision, this ignores the fact that the symbol taken on by the court is the girdle and not the scar. In contrast, this wound is not shared by the crowd, and the physical and emotional pain of it does not connect Gawain to the rest of the court. Although the members of Round Table attempt to comfort Gawain, their first response is to, "La3en loude," when he depicts the girdle as a sign of his failure and imperfection.<sup>69</sup> The court does not take Gawain's pain seriously, despite the knight's physical harm. Furthermore, Arthur changes the girdle's meaning and how it is worn, tying it across the body and not tightly around the waist.<sup>70</sup> The other knights in Arthur's court do not have to wear the girdle in a feminine way to try and save themselves from the queer blow of a phallic axe. They do not have their blood spilled onto the ground, nor do they share queer kisses with Bertilak. Furthermore, Simms notes the connection between decapitation and castration in that Gawain is "more woman and less a man after his nick on the neck." Unlike the still-masculine knights who never wore the girdle in the same way, Gawain has been repeatedly described as increasingly feminine throughout the poem. This symbolic emasculation could therefore lead to a symbolic castration, where he would lose the genitalia that would associate him with masculinity, which exists in contrast to his positionality. Thus, Gawain may be rallied around, but he is still somewhat separated from the group. If he is initiated, it is not into a brotherhood that Arthur's court is part of.

Gawain's infamously misogynistic speech, and the reasons for which it occurs, also allow for the possibility of reading this moment as castration. After revealing himself to be both the host and the Green Knight, Bertilak asks Gawain to return to his house and suggests, "With my wyf, I wene, / We schal yow wel acorde."<sup>71</sup> Bertilak appears to try and repair the relationship between Gawain

and his wife after the events of the exchange of blows. Gawain, however, responds with a misogynistic speech comparing Lady Bertilak's role in the game with various untruthful women from mostly biblical sources, before he decides that it is better "to luf hom wel and leue hem not."<sup>72</sup> By suggesting that a person should not "leue" or "believe" women, Gawain breaks down the possibility of a relationship where he would experience emotional intimacy.<sup>73</sup> This suggests a lack of desire for the emotional aspects of a romantic relationship, and while not a physical castration, this could depict a symbolic one, deterring Gawain from a healthy relationship.

Furthermore, Gawain repeats this same denial of rebuilding a relationship with women, as Bertilak offers his home once again to Gawain. The host asks Gawain, "to com to þyn aunt," after explaining the woman's orchestration of the entire game. Once again, Gawain denies this chance to make amends with these women and instead returns home to Arthur's court. Gawain shares a final kiss with Bertilak, although this time, the kiss is given no description and has no connection to Lady Bertilak, making it non-sexual.<sup>74</sup> This suggests a shift away from even a homosexual relationship with Bertilak, further implying a lack of the sexual desire previously exhibited. Therefore, there is an apparent and sudden shift away from sexual relationships with women and at least this one man in the wake of the nicking of Gawain's neck.

Regardless of the specific signification in terms of sexuality, Gawain's reaction to receiving the scar shows how he fails to uphold the pentangle. Through his misogynistic speech, Gawain acts uncharacteristically aggressive towards women, especially given his previous efforts to be courteous to them. Ashton points to this speech as Gawain attempting to separate himself from blame but describes it as, "an entirely unconvincing (and ungallant) performance."<sup>75</sup> This mirrors the way that Gawain managed to talk his way through his apparent cowardice in the feast scene. However, because Gawain's current attempt makes him act discourteously, he only sabotages his attempt to reclaim the truthfulness he failed to maintain. Therefore, Gawain further distances himself from the pentangle's perfect traits by not only failing to remain truthful, but also by going against one of his more well-known traits of courtesy. In this way, Gawain's actions after receiving the scar demonstrate his break away from the pentangle.

The scar also emphasizes the permanence of this change in Gawain's identity. As scars often do, the wound on Gawain's neck is a physical sign of the moment Gawain's skin was sliced open. The poet writes that the Green Knight, "snyrt hym on þat on syd, þat seuered þe hyde."<sup>76</sup> Notably, this image of Gawain's neck being severed directly contrasts with the description of the pentangle, which is, "ne sundred nouþer."<sup>77</sup> Gawain's flesh has literally been sundered, and so on a physical level, he cannot be the endless pentangle. Heng echoes this sentiment: "this cut may be read there as... the trace of a symbolic beheading... vestigially symbolic of, castration."<sup>78</sup> The scar captures the moment of this irreversible blow. It is the physical trace of the actual nicking of Gawain's neck, which will remain permanently after the action takes place. Each of the various interpretations, be it coming-of-age, loss of virginity, beheading, or castration, is an irreversible and life-changing moment, meaning that the shift in a person's identity will remain. Therefore, regardless of the interpretation, the impact of his experiences will have long-term implications for Gawain.

This symbol is also unlike the girdle in that its meaning cannot be reinscribed so easily. As previously mentioned, Bertilak clarifies to Gawain that the scar was given to him due to his failure on the third night.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Gawain repeats this explanation as he tells the court that the girdle, and therefore the blame he assigns the girdle, is "of þis blame I bere in my nek."<sup>80</sup> Because Gawain verbally solidified the cause with the Green Knight, changing the meaning of the girdle would go against the agreed narrative negotiated by Gawain and Bertilak. Therefore, reconstituting the importance of the scar distances Gawain from the trait of honesty, which he already has broken. Finally, given that the scar represents the instant Gawain's neck is severed, it is not a symbol of his current identity but rather the loss of his old identity. This means that the scar signifies the moment that Gawain's neck, and the pentangle that symbolized him, were severed. Therefore, the girdle is able to shift and change to represent Gawain's identity as it shifts, but the scar depicts the moment that Gawain's identity was revealed to be unstable. Thus, it is permanent where the girdle is adaptable, but it still offers a space for change in its permanence.

Together, each of these symbols help tell the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gawain begins with the pentangle, which



is the epitome of his perceived perfection, his masculinity, and his heterosexual desire. He trusts in the Virgin Mary, who protects his virginity like a knight protects a maiden. Ultimately, these two symbols must be replaced, as Gawain cannot live up to the impossible standards of perfection, and the Virgin Mary fails to defend him from the sexual advances of Bertilak and his wife. So, he turns to the girdle, which shows the shifts in his gender and sexuality. Finally, he cannot ignore the scar on his neck, which memorializes the loss of his virginity, his symbolic castration, and the severing of the pentangle.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ashton, 52.

<sup>2</sup> If interested in this concept applied to other works, see Glenn Burger, "Kissing the Pardoner," *PMLA* 107, no. 5 (Cambridge University Press, 1992): 1143-56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/462870>.

<sup>3</sup> Boyd, 79. At the same time, it is important to note the differences between being passive and being submissive. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, passivity is the "Absence of activity, involvement, participation, or exertion" whereas submissive is "characterized by or displaying submission; yielding to power or authority" Therefore this analysis will use passivity to refer to a lack of action, and submission will be seen as the active yielding of power. See "passivity, n.". OED Online. March 2023. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138544?redirectedFrom=passivity> (accessed April 08, 2023). See also "submissive, adj. and n.". OED Online. March 2023. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/192826?redirectedFrom=submissive> (accessed April 08, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, 149.

<sup>5</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," line 653. For translation of Middle English, see Andrew and Waldron, 301-62.

<sup>6</sup> Boyd, 82.

<sup>7</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," lines 658-9.

<sup>8</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," line 630.

<sup>9</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," line 659.

<sup>10</sup> Heng, 504.

<sup>11</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," line 228.

<sup>12</sup> Zeikowitz, 95.

<sup>13</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," line 309.

<sup>14</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," line 280.

<sup>15</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," lines 344-6.

<sup>16</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," line 345.

<sup>17</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," line 634.

<sup>18</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," line 345.

<sup>19</sup> Pugh, 115.

<sup>20</sup> Heng, 502.

- <sup>21</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 650. The text translates roughly into “that when he looked thereto [at the image] his courage never wasted.” For translation of Middle English, see Andrew and Waldron, “Glossary,” 301-62.
- <sup>22</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 646-7.
- <sup>23</sup> Boyd, 79.
- <sup>24</sup> Ashton, 63.
- <sup>25</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 1192.
- <sup>26</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 1211.
- <sup>27</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 1293.
- <sup>28</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 1299-300.
- <sup>29</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 1300.
- <sup>30</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 1303, 1305-6.
- <sup>31</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 1768-9.
- <sup>32</sup> Heng, 502.
- <sup>33</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 1263.
- <sup>34</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 1942-5.
- <sup>35</sup> Dinshaw, 210.
- <sup>36</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 1937.
- <sup>37</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 1869. For translation of “to3t” see Andrew and Waldron, “Glossary,” 352.
- <sup>38</sup> Friedman and Osberg, 506.
- <sup>39</sup> Cohen, 149.
- <sup>40</sup> Heng, 504.
- <sup>41</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 1852-3.
- <sup>42</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2368.
- <sup>43</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 564-5.
- <sup>44</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 1852.
- <sup>45</sup> Dinshaw, 216.
- <sup>46</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 1874.
- <sup>47</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 2356-7.
- <sup>48</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2509.
- <sup>49</sup> Boyd, 90.
- <sup>50</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2358.
- <sup>51</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 2361-2.
- <sup>52</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 1874.
- <sup>53</sup> Heng, 507-8.
- <sup>54</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 2396-9.
- <sup>55</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2509.
- <sup>56</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 2515-6.

- <sup>57</sup> Heng, 508.
- <sup>58</sup> Boyd, 90.
- <sup>59</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2256.
- <sup>60</sup> Andrew and Waldron, 345.
- <sup>61</sup> Ashton, 58.
- <sup>62</sup> Cohen, 149.
- <sup>63</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 2267, 2286.
- <sup>64</sup> Ashton, 67.
- <sup>65</sup> Boyd, 87.
- <sup>66</sup> See Ashton, 65. See also Boyd, 86.
- <sup>67</sup> Simms, 314.
- <sup>68</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 652.
- <sup>69</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2513.
- <sup>70</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 2515-6.
- <sup>71</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 2404-5.
- <sup>72</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2421.
- <sup>73</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2421. For translation of “leue” see Andrew and Waldron, 295.
- <sup>74</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2472.
- <sup>75</sup> Ashton, 68.
- <sup>76</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2312.
- <sup>77</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 659.
- <sup>78</sup> Heng, 505-6.
- <sup>79</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” lines 2356-7.
- <sup>80</sup> “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” line 2506.

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