

# Celibacy and Salvation in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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## Introduction

In the late 14th century, an anonymous contemporary of the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer composed four long poems in an obscure Midlands dialect of Medieval English. All four poems survive in a single manuscript, the *Cotton Nero A x*, which is housed in the British Library. Three of the poems — *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness* — treat explicitly religious themes that demonstrate the poet's familiarity with Medieval piety and suggest some knowledge of Medieval learning. The fourth poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, tells the story of one of King Arthur's knights, Sir Gawain, who sets out from the Arthurian court to seek *not* the Holy Grail but, rather, an almost certain death under the keen

blade of a mysterious Green Knight. Gawain's quest will lead him through the paradox of Christian salvation wherein his *very failure itself* prepares him properly for redemption.

## The Pentangle and the Virgin

The Pearl Poet, as the author of this Gawain poem is usually called, tells a complex tale, but understanding the point entails knowing the story, so I will attempt to summarize the ongoing plot as I move from point to point.

On a New Year's Day during the Christmas celebrations at the royal court of a still-young King Arthur, the knights and ladies have just at down to tables heavily laden with food when a large, mysterious knight suddenly gallops on horseback into the large dining hall. Even more astonishing, the large knight's shirtless torso, the trousers stretching from his waist to his knees, the horse in its trappings proudly bearing up under him, and an enormous axe carried in his hands are all, aside from some gold trimming, *entirely green*. By literary convention, he is called "the Green Knight." This bold Green Knight announces a "game," but a very odd game it is. He offers to allow one of assembled knights to borrow his axe and chop off his head. If the Green Knight survives, then the other knight must seek out the Green Knight one year later at a certain Green Chapel and allow his own head to be chopped off by the Green Knight. The young knight Sir Gawain volunteers, perhaps thinking, like King Arthur in lines 372-374, that no dire consequences would follow if he aimed his blow true. Surprisingly, the Green Knight survives the beheading, picks up his head, reminds Gawain of the agreement, jumps

upon his horse, and gallops away.

Gawain is an honorable man and keeps his word, setting out 10 months later, on November 2, to find the Green Knight. On the day that he sets forth, Gawain is first brilliantly arrayed, with special attention being given to two images upon his shield ? a pentangle upon the side facing away from him (as well as upon his surcoat (ll 636-637)) and the Virgin Mary upon the side facing him. The pentangle is intricately described in terms that imply Gawain's perfection and, indeed, lead into a description of his perfection that includes his devotion to the Virgin:

Then they showed forth the shield, that shone all red,  
 With the pentangle portrayed in purest gold,  
 About his broad neck by the baldric he casts it,  
 That was meet for the man, and matched him well,  
 And why the pentangle is proper to that peerless prince  
 I intend now to tell, though detain me it must,  
 It is a sign by Solomon sagely devised  
 To be a token of truth, by its title of old,  
 For it is a figure formed of five points,  
 And each line is linked and locked with the next  
 For ever and ever, and hence it is called  
 In all England, as I hear, the endless knot.  
 And well may he wear it on his worthy arms,  
 For ever faithful five-fold in five-fold fashion  
 Was Gawain in good works, as gold unalloyed,  
 Devoid of all villainy with virtues adomed

in sight,  
 On shield and coat in view  
 He bore that emblem bright,  
 As to his word most true  
 And in speech most courteous knight.

And first, he was faultless in his five senses,  
 Nor found ever to fail in his five fingers,  
 And all his fealty was fixed upon the five wounds  
 That Christ got on the cross, as the creed tells;  
 And wherever this man in melee took part,  
 His one thought was of this, past all things else,  
 That all his force was founded on the five joys  
 That the high Queen of heaven had in her child.  
 And therefore, as I find, he fittingly had  
 On the inner part of his shield her image portrayed,  
 That when his look on it lighted, he never lost heart.  
 The fifth of the five fives followed by this knight  
 Were beneficence boundless and brotherly love  
 And pure mind and manners, that none might impeach,  
 And compassion most precious ? these peerless five  
 Were forged and made fast in him, foremost of men,  
 Now all these five fives were confined in this knight,  
 And each linked in other, that end there was none,  
 And fixed to five points, whose force never failed,  
 Nor assembled all on a side, nor asunder either,



That all his force was founded on the five joys  
 That the high Queen of heaven had in her child,  
 And therefore, as I find, he fittingly had  
 On the inner part of his shield her image portrayed,  
 That when his look on it lighted, he never lost heart. (ll 644-650)

In effect, Gawain is a knight dedicated to the “high Queen of heaven.” This emphasis upon the Virgin’s royal status strongly suggests that we are to understand that she is the lady whom Gawain as knight serves in much the same chivalrous manner that other knights would serve their unattainable ladies.

### The Problem of Courtly Love

In the Medieval context, however, this chivalrous courtly love would ordinarily entail some problematic elements. In the ideal case, a knight devoted himself to service not only to his liege lord but also to his lord’s wife, whom he was bound to protect, honor, and love. But what sort of love? Although perhaps modeled on the paradigm of the Christian’s devotion to the Virgin Mary, in which case the ideal courtly love would be a highly sublimated sort of love similar to Christian *caritas* (Reiss, “*Fin’ amors*”), the reality is that courtly love was an unstable complex of sexual desire and spiritual aims. Francis Newman noted that courtly love was “a love at once illicit and morally elevating, passionate and self-disciplined, humiliating and exalting, human and transcendent” (Newman, vii). Similarly, C.S. Lewis described it as “love of a highly specialized sort,

whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love” (Lewis, 2). From a rigorously Christian perspective, courtly love is inherently adulterous, for its practice entails that mature men express their love for an already married lady in language that powerfully emphasizes her physical beauty and sensual charms. From the explicit teaching of Christ as given in Matthew 5:27-28:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. (*King James Bible*, Matthew 5:27-28)

The operative word here in this King James Bible, obviously, is “lust,” but we should dig a bit deeper into the past and look at the earlier, Wycliffe English translation, for John Wycliffe was a contemporary of the Pearl Poet:

Ye han herd that it was seid to elde men, Thou schalt do no letcherie. But Y seie to you, that euery man that seeth a womman for to coueite hir, hath now do letcherie bi hir in his herte. (*Wycliffe Bible*, Matheu 5:27-28:)

But we should also check the Latin *Vulgate*, which the Pearl Poet would surely have known:

Audistis quia dictum est antiques: non moechaberis. Ego autem dico vobis: quoniam omnis qui viderit mulierem ad concupiscendum eam iam

moechatus est eam in corde suo. (*Vulgate*, Matthaëus 5:27-28)

The Middle English and Latin words are thus *coueite* (covet) and *concupiscendum* (ardent desire), respectively, and they are even related etymologically. The former derives from the Latin word *cupere*, meaning “to desire, covet,” and in the 14th century, the time of both Wycliffe and the Pearl Poet, the word *coueite* meant “To desire with concupiscence or with fleshly appetite” (*OED* I, 1106, 2), hence demonstrating why Wycliffe (or one of the Wycliffe ‘team’) rendered the Latin *Vulgate’s* *concupiscendum* by the Middle English *coueite*. As for the latter term, *concupiscendum*, it derives from the Latin *concupere* (the intensive prefix *con-* plus *cupere*, thus “to long for, desire”). The related Latin term *concupiscentia* was taken over into English as “concupiscence” as early as the 14th century, appearing in Chaucer, *The Parson’s Tale* (c. 1386), with the meaning of “libidinous desire, sexual appetite, lust” (*OED* I, 777, 2). Given the Pearl Poet’s theological interests and scriptural knowledge, he would surely be aware of Christ’s teaching on adultery as a matter of lusting in one’s heart.

Clearly, this sexual aspect does not characterize the courtly love that Gawain has for the Virgin Mary, the high Queen of Heaven. Indeed, immediately after the description of his devotion to Mary, which he partly expresses by bearing her image on the inside of his shield, we read of Gawain’s excellent character as signified by the fifth point of the pentangle:

The fifth of the five fives followed by this knight

Were beneficence boundless and brotherly love  
 And pure mind and manners, that none might impeach,  
 And compassion most precious — these peerless five  
 Were forged and made fast in him, foremost of men. (ll 651-655)

What Marie Borroff has rendered as “pure mind” comes from the Middle English word *clannes* (line 653), which can have a variety of meanings. Mayhew and Skeat define it in their *Concise Dictionary* as “purity” (Mayhew and Skeat, “Clennes”). Scholars have debated whether or not the term conveys a strong implication of sexual purity. Gerald Morgan notes that while “*clannes* does not necessarily imply celibacy … it does imply celibacy or rather virginity outside marriage.” Morgan also insists that “there can be no doubt that the meaning which the poet intends is ‘chastity’ … [for the] use of the word *clannes* in this specific manner is … well attested in the late fourteenth century” (Morgan, 777). Morgan is referring to the Pearl Poet’s specific use of *clannes* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but the poet realizes that the word has a broader range of meanings. In his poem titled *Cleanness*, the use of the word *clannes* depends upon that rather broad range of meanings. Worthy to note even here, however, is that the Pearl Poet places emphasis upon a particular sort of impurity, “lechery” (*harlotrye*), as the one sin that the Savior hates most of all:

Bot non nuyez Hym on naȝt ne neuer vpon dayez  
 As harlotrye vn honest, hepyng of seluen:  
 Pat schamez for no schrewedschyp, schent mot he worpe.

(Lancashire, *Cleanness*, lines 578-580)

But at night or at noon there is nothing He hates  
 More than lechery, lustful and loathsome and gross!  
 Of such deeds evildoers shall die without hope,

(Finch, *Cleanness*, lines 578-580)

As already noted, the Middle English term here is *harlottyre*, which in the 14th century (1377: William Langland, *Piers Plowman* B, 13,353 c. 1386: Geoffrey Chaucer, *Merchant's Tale* 1018) included the meaning "profligacy or vice in sexual relations, unchastity" (*OED* I, "harlotry," 95, 3). Similarly, the Pearl Poet specifies, among the sins that bar one from experiencing heavenly bliss, the sin of "marring good marriages," which surely refers to adultery (Finch, *Cleanness*, line 186). In his cleanness, which especially includes celibacy (due to his unmarried state), Gawain avoids sexual impurity and focuses his pure devotion upon the Virgin Queen of Heaven.

### Lord Bertilak's Castle and the Testing of Gawain

Let us return to our tale. Gawain has left King Arthur's court on November 2, the day following All Saints' Day. After about seven weeks of wandering in fruitless search of the Green Knight and his Green Chapel, Gawain finds himself frustrated on the morning of Christmas Eve (or perhaps the day before) at his lack of success and prays to the Virgin Mary that he might find a dwelling (ll 733-739). Later that morning (or

perhaps the next day), he prays again, this time to both the Lord Christ and to the Virgin Mary, for the chance to find a haven where he can attend mass and pray his matins (ll 753-762):

... “I beseech of Thee, Lord,  
 And Mary, thou mildest mother so dear,  
 Some harborage where haply I might hear mass  
 And Thy matins tomorrow — meekly I ask it,  
 And thereto proffer and pray my pater and ave  
 and creed.”

He said this prayer with sighs,  
 Lamenting his misdeed;  
 He crosses himself, and cries  
 On Christ in his great need. (ll 753-762)

Immediately, Gawain glimpses a great castle, which he enters, and finds himself courteously treated there by all, especially by the lord and lady of the place, the Lord and Lady Bertilak, who request that he remain several days, to which he agrees after learning privately, from conversing confidentially with Lord Bertilak, that the Green Chapel of his quest lies within two miles of the castle (ll 1168-1078). The gallant Lord Bertilak, a manly and vigorous hunter, then proposes a game for diversion during Gawain's stay:

“And Gawain,” said the good host, “agree now to this:  
 Whatever I win in the woods, I will give you at eve,

And all you have earned you must offer to me;  
 Swear now, sweet friend, to swap as I say,  
 Whether hands, in the end, be empty or better.”  
 “By God,” said Sir Gawain, “I grant it forthwith!  
 If you find the game good, I shall gladly take part.” (ll 1105-1111)

There follow three days of hunting in which Lord Bertilak leaves his castle early to return late, coincident with three days of temptation in which Lady Bertilak enters Gawain’s guest room to entice him toward a sexual liaison:

A little din at his door, and the latch lifted,  
 And he holds up his heavy head out of the clothes;  
 A corner of the curtain he caught back a little  
 And waited there warily, to see what befell.  
 Lo! it was the lady, loveliest to behold,  
 That drew the door behind her deftly and still  
 And was bound for his bed ? abashed was the knight,  
 And laid his head low again in likeness of sleep;  
 And she stepped stealthily, and stole to his bed,  
 Cast aside the curtain and came within,  
 And set herself softly on the bedside there,  
 And lingered at her leisure, to look on his waking. (ll 1183-1194)

After feigning a bit more sleep, Gawain pretends as if to be just awakening and offers to dress and leave his bed, but Lady Bertilak refuses



respectively. Gawain, in turn, bestows upon Lord Bertilak first two, then three kisses (ll 1639-1640; ll 1936), which Gawain himself has received from Lady Bertilak on the second and third occasions of her visits to his bedroom (cf. ll 1505, 1555; ll 1758, 1796, 1868-1869). The three occasions of kissing are described by the narrator in terms that allow us to understand them as courteously given, implying that they are chaste (cf. ll 1300, 1486), but one might have doubts, given the seductive context. Moreover, Gawain seems rather powerfully attracted to the lovely lady, as we learn during dinner of the second day as Gawain sits beside her and is swayed by her charms:

So uncommonly kind and complaisant was she,  
 With sweet stolen glances, that stirred his stout heart,  
 That he was at wits' end, and wondrous vexed; (ll 1658-1660)

Gawain is surely close to committing that adultery of the heart that Christ warned against. By Lady Bertilak's third visit to his room, Gawain's heart seems thoroughly captivated with her physical charms:

He accords her fair welcome in courtliest style;  
 He sees her so glorious, so gaily attired,  
 So faultless her features, so fair and so bright,  
 His heart swelled swiftly with surging joys,  
 They melt into mirth with many a fond smile,  
 Nor was fair language lacking, to further that hour's  
 delight.

Good were their words of greeting;  
 Each joyed in other' s sight;  
 Great peril attends that meeting  
 Should Mary forget her knight. (ll 1759-1769)

The danger for Gawain is clear and present, but he seems to understand this danger in the purely *physical* sense of betraying Lord Bertilak by committing the act of adultery with that lord' s wife, and he resolves not to commit that sinful act (cf. ll 1770-1776). From a rigorously Christian perspective, however, Gawain is flirting with an adultery of the heart, and his resolution not to commit the physical act itself may imply that he is already guilty in his heart. Moreover, he accepts from Lady Bertilak on the third day something that goes beyond kissing, and this involves him in an even more dangerous connection to the lady.

### An Excursus Through *Don Quixote*

First, however, allow me to take a clarifying excursus through another great literary work. In Part 1, Chapter 13 of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes has the great Knight of the Woeful Countenance describe to a fellow traveler the ennobling sufferings of a knight errant, comparing them to the rigors of a monk' s life and suggesting that it is a divine calling because:

[C]hurchmen in peace and quiet pray to Heaven for the welfare of the world, but we soldiers and knights carry into effect what they pray for, defending it with the might of our arms and the edge of our swords, not

under shelter but in the open air, a target for the intolerable rays of the sun in summer and the piercing frosts of winter. Thus are we God's ministers on earth and the arms by which his justice is done therein. (Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Part 1, Chapter 13)

The traveler listens carefully to the great Don's words and courteously agrees, but with a significant caveat:

"That is my own opinion," replied the traveller; "but one thing among many others seems to me very wrong in knights-errant, and that is that when they find themselves about to engage in some mighty and perilous adventure in which there is manifest danger of losing their lives, they never at the moment of engaging in it think of commending themselves to God, as is the duty of every good Christian in like peril; instead of which they commend themselves to their ladies with as much devotion as if these were their gods, a thing which seems to me to savour somewhat of heathenism." (Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Part 1, Chapter 13)

In effect, the traveller is politely calling into question the very thing that he had courteously agreed to. Knights errant may believe that they are carrying out God's work in this world, but in fact, they fall into something like the pagan practice of worshipping goddesses.

Don Quixote responds by appeal to the custom among knights errant:

"Sir," answered Don Quixote, "that cannot be on any account omitted, and the knight-errant would be disgraced who acted otherwise: for it is

usual and customary in knight-errantry that the knight-errant, who on engaging in any great feat of arms has his lady before him, should turn his eyes towards her softly and lovingly, as though with them entreating her to favour and protect him in the hazardous venture he is about to undertake, and even though no one hear him, he is bound to say certain words between his teeth, commending himself to her with all his heart, and of this we have innumerable instances in the histories. Nor is it to be supposed from this that they are to omit commending themselves to God, for there will be time and opportunity for doing so while they are engaged in their task.” (Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Part 1, Chapter 13)

The great Don has not, of course, truly responded to the traveler’s criticism of the knight errant’s heathen devotion to his lady, for by re-emphasizing the knight errant’s practice of “entreating her to favour and protect him in the hazardous venture he is about to undertake, and … commending himself to her with all his heart,” Quixote merely restates what the traveler finds troubling.

So, naturally, the traveler politely maintains his difference of opinion:

“For all that,” answered the traveller, “I feel some doubt still, because often I have read how words will arise between two knights-errant, and from one thing to another it comes about that their anger kindles and they wheel their horses round and take a good stretch of field, and then without any more ado at the top of their speed they come to the charge, and in mid-career they are wont to commend themselves to their ladies; and what commonly comes of the encounter is that one falls over the haunches of his

horse pierced through and through by his antagonist's lance, and as for the other, it is only by holding on to the mane of his horse that he can help falling to the ground; but I know not how the dead man had time to commend himself to God in the course of such rapid work as this; it would have been better if those words which he spent in commending himself to his lady in the midst of his career had been devoted to his duty and obligation as a Christian." (Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Part 1, Chapter 13)

Cervantes, perhaps writing these words around 1600, was not the first to note the problem posed to the Christian knight by the practice of courtly love. In the latter 14th century, the Pearl Poet implicitly sets up the problem in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by first presenting Gawain as a good Christian knight:

And all his fealty was fixed upon the five wounds  
 That Christ got on the cross, as the creed tells;  
 And wherever this man in melee took part,  
 His one thought was of this, past all things else,  
 That all his force was founded on the five joys  
 That the high Queen of heaven had in her child.  
 And therefore, as I find, he fittingly had  
 On the inner part of his shield her image portrayed,  
 That when his look on it lighted, he never lost heart. (ll 642-650)

Gawain, a good Christian knight, maintains devotion to the Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven, which therefore makes him Mary's knight (cf. line

1769) and thus protected against falling into what the traveler in *Don Quixote* calls the heathen practice of courtly devotion to a mortal woman,

## The Compromising Gift

Yet Gawain's courtesy and concern for his own life — as well as something called “covetise,” but more on that later — move him to accept from the beautiful Lady Bertilak the gift of a purportedly magical green belt interlaced with threads of gold that will supposedly protect him from an otherwise certain death:

She released a knot lightly, and loosened a belt  
That was caught about her kirtle, the bright cloak beneath,  
Of a gay green silk, with gold overwrought,  
And the borders all bound with embroidery fine,  
And this she presses upon him, and pleads with a smile,  
Unworthy though it were, that it would not be scorned.  
But the man still maintains that he means to accept  
Neither gold nor any gift, till by God's grace  
The fate that lay before him was fully achieved.  
“And be not offended, fair lady, I beg,  
And give over your offer, for ever I must  
decline.  
I am grateful for favor shown  
Past all deserts of mine,  
And ever shall be your own

True servant, rain or shine.”

“Now does my present displease you,” she promptly inquired,

“Because it seems in your sight so simple a thing?

And belike, as it is little, it is less to praise,

But if the virtue that invests it were verily known,

It would be held, I hope, in higher esteem,

For the man that possesses this piece of silk,

If he bore it on his body, belted about,

There is no hand under heaven that could hew him down,

For he could not be killed by any craft on earth.”

Then the man began to muse, and mainly he thought

It was a pearl for his plight, the peril to come

When he gains the Green Chapel to get his reward:

Could he escape unscathed, the scheme were noble!

The he bore with her words and withstood them no more.

And she repeated her petition and pleaded anew,

And he granted it, and gladly she gave him the belt,

And besought him for her sake to conceal it well,

Lest the noble lord should know — and the knight agrees

That not a soul save themselves shall see it thenceforth

with sight,

He thanked her with fervent heart,

As often as ever he might;

Three times, before they part,

She has kissed the stalwart knight. (ll 1830-1869)

Up until this moment, Gawain has courteously refused to accept any gift from the lady, for in the act of accepting a parting gift from a lady, a knight setting off on a quest is implicitly accepting the lady herself as *his* lady. By accepting the magical belt, Gawain has exchanged the higher Queen of Heaven for the lower Lady Bertilak and thus relinquished the Virgin's protection from harm in return for Lady Bertilak's protection.

In this manner does Gawain lose his status as Mary's knight and adopt the practice of other knights errant, who "commend themselves to their ladies with as much devotion as if these were their gods, a thing which seems ... to savour somewhat of heathenism," and by accepting Lady Bertilak, he does, as do other knights with their ladies, "turn his eyes towards her softly and lovingly, as though ... entreating her to favour and protect him in the hazardous venture he is about to undertake," as both the traveller and Don Quixote, respectively, have already noted.

By means of this excursus through Cervantes, we can now draw together two sorts of *infidelity* (cf. ll 2383, 2509: *vntrawpe*) that Gawain falls into through his acceptance of Lady Bertilak's gift, namely, religious infidelity and marital infidelity. First, as just demonstrated, by accepting the 'magical' belt, Gawain *objectively* accepts Lady Bertilak as the object of his devotion, thereby displacing his devotion to the Virgin Mary and no longer relying upon the Virgin as his protectress. Second, by accepting Lady Bertilak's gift, Gawain makes himself her knight rather than Mary's knight and thus places himself in a relation of courtly lover to Lady Bertilak, a problematic connection since this sort of love can scarcely be distinguished from an adultery of the heart. The narrator emphasizes this latter point by two terms used in referring to this gift. After Lady Bertilak

has given her ‘magical’ belt as a gift and left the bedroom, Gawain:

Tucked away the token the temptress had left,  
Laid it reliably where he looked for it after. (ll 1874-1875)

The Middle English word translated as “token” is actually *luf-lace*, literally, “love-belt.” The belt is thus a love-token, a sign of Gawain’s ‘love’ for the lady. The other term referring to Lady Bertilak’s gift occurs in the passage in which Gawain puts the belt on just prior to leaving for his encounter with the Green Knight:

Yet he left not his love-gift, the lady’s girdle;  
Gawain, for his own good, forgot not that:  
When the bright sword was belted and bound on his haunches,  
Then twice with that token he twined him about. (ll 2030-2033)

The Middle English word translated as “token” is actually *drurye*, which means “love-token” (or even “love-making”!). If we recall now that Gawain had also responded to Lady Bertilak’s amorous glances at him during supper on the second day (cf. ll 1658-1660) and to her seductive appearance during the temptation on the third day (cf. ll 1759-1769), then Gawain has likely fallen into an adultery of the heart so common to courtly love, and we will see still more on this point in the next section.

## Judgement Upon Gawain

Gawain's acceptance of the belt has set up a further problem. Recall that Gawain has confirmed an agreement with Lord Bertilak to exchange their winnings each day, and as already noted, Gawain does give to Bertilak the three kisses received from Lady Bertilak when she last parted from him. He does not, however, hand over the belt. Of course, he cannot do so without losing the magical protection that it supposedly offers, but by keeping it for himself rather than giving it to Lord Bertilak, Gawain breaks an agreement and thereby proves himself less than perfectly honest, as the Green Knight informs him when they meet at the Green Chapel on New Year's Day to finish their beheading game. The Green Knight has just made two feints to test Gawain before finally bearing down hard, yet only just nicking Gawain's neck, but nevertheless fulfilling the game started one year before in Arthur's court. As the Green Knight tells Gawain:

“I owed you a hit and you have it; be happy therewith!  
 The rest of my rights here I freely resign,  
 Had I been a bit busier, a buffet, perhaps,  
 I could have dealt more directly, and done you some harm,  
 First I flourished with a feint, in frolicsome mood,  
 And left your hide unhurt — and here I did well  
 By the fair terms we fixed on the first night;  
 And fully and faithfully you followed accord:  
 Gave over all your gains as a good man should.



So uncommonly kind and complaisant was she,  
With sweet stolen glances, that stirred his stout heart,  
That he was at wits' end, and wondrous vexed; (ll 1658-1660)

Nor should we forget lines 1760 through 1762:

He sees her so glorious, so gaily attired,  
So faultless her features, so fair and so bright,  
His heart swelled swiftly with surging joys. (ll 1760-1762)

Moreover, Gawain himself proceeds to suggest that Lady Bertilak's seductive charms have succeeded with him, for in a somewhat misogynist monologue, he compares himself to other men seduced by women:

But if a dullard should dote, deem it no wonder,  
And through the wiles of a woman be wooed into sorrow,  
For so was Adam by one, when the world began,  
And Solomon by many more, and Samson the mighty ?  
Delilah was his doom, and David thereafter  
Was beguiled by Bathsheba, and bore much distress;  
Now these were vexed by their devices ?' twere a very joy  
Could one but learn to love, and believe them not,  
For these were proud princes, most prosperous of old,  
Past all lovers lucky, that languished under heaven,  
bemused,  
And one and all fell prey

To women that they had used;  
 If I be led astray,  
 Methinks I may be excused. (ll 2414-2428)

Traditionally, all these men had been seduced by the sensual, physical charms of the women. Gawain is thus claiming the same thing in his case, tantamount to a confession of having committed an adultery of the heart. Moreover, Gawain accepts the Green Knight's offer of the belt as a gift:

But your girdle, God love you! I gladly shall take  
 And be pleased to possess, not for the pure gold,  
 Nor the bright belt itself, nor the beauteous pendants,  
 Nor for wealth, nor worldly state, nor workmanship fine,  
 But a sign of excess it shall seem oftentimes  
 When I ride in renown, and remember with shame  
 The faults and the frailty of the flesh perverse,  
 How its tenderness entices the foul taint of sin;  
 And so when praise and high prowess have pleased my heart,  
 A look at this love-lace will lower my pride. (ll 2429-2438)

Note that Gawain emphasizes the weakness of his "flesh perverse" (*flesche crabbed*), which can have a sexual connotation, and he does refer again to the belt as a "love-lace" (*luf-lace*). Also, one should note the perhaps not too remote possibility of still other sexual innuendo in the Middle English original of lines 2437-2438:

And þus, quen pryde schal me pryk for prowes of armes,  
 Pe loke to pis luf-lace schal lepe my hert. (Finch, *Sir Gawain*, lines 2437-2438)

Translated more closely to the original:

And thus, when pride shall prick me for prowess of arms,  
 A look at this love-belt shall humble my heart. (My Translation)

The word “pride” (*pryde*) has the connotation of “sexual desire” in Middle English, albeit only recorded in writing about 100 years after the Pearl Poet (*OED* 2, “pride,” 1351, 11). The word “prick” (*pryk*) is a notorious wordplay in Middle English, as noted by Stephen Knight in his discussion of the Pearl Poet’s contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer, who uses the word “priketh” in line 13 of the “General Prologue” to his *Canterbury Tales*, playing on its vulgar meaning, for “the sexual pun on ‘prick’ operates in Middle as well as Modern English” (Knight, 12). If “prowess of arms” could also be taken as sexual innuendo (cf. “prowes” line 1249(-1251) and line 1305 (cf. line 1541), “*cachez hym in armez*”), then the significance of the luf-lace for Gawain’s probable adultery of the heart is further enhanced.

Gawain’s confession to King Arthur in the presence of his fellow knights after returning to that royal court seems to distinguish two sins:

“Behold, sir,” said he, and handles the belt,  
 “This is the blazon of the blemish that I bear on my neck;

This is the sign of sore loss that I have suffered there  
 For the cowardice and coveting that I came to there;  
 This is the badge of false faith that I was found in there,  
 And I must bear it on my body till I breathe my last,  
 For one may keep a deed dark, but undo it no whit,  
 For where a fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore." (ll 2505-2512)

Gawain accuses himself of "cowardice" (*cowardise*) and "coveting" (*couetyse*). Both contribute to his "false faith" (*vntrawpe*, "unfaithfulness" (marital) or "unbelief" (religious), *OED* II, 382 "untruth" (i.e., "infidelity")), a self-reproach by which Gawain confesses his unworthiness to wear the pentangle, that "endless knot" (*endeles knot*) that stands for *trawpe* — the Middle English of "troth" — which combined the meanings "truth" and "loyalty." Gawain's sin has loosened that endless knot, and the baldric crossing over the shoulder where the shield with pentangle had been hung (line 621) has been replaced with the belt as a substitute baldriccutting across the pentangle upon his surcoat and tied with a knot at his left side (line 2486). In Gawain's confession, the fault that he has committed will stain him as long as he lives, but what precisely does Gawain confess to? His *cowardiseis* clear enough: fear for his life partly led him to accept the belt offered by Lady Bertilak. But what was the object of his *couetyse*? This recalls the earlier discussion of Matthew 5:27-28:

Ye han herd that it was seid to elde men, Thou schalt do no letcherie,  
 But Y seie to you, that euery man that seeth a womman for to coueite hir,  
 hath now do letcherie bi hir in his herte. (*Wycliffe Bible*, Matheu 5:27-28)

In that earlier discussion, we learned that in the 14th century, the time of both Wycliffe and the Pearl Poet, the word “covet” (*coueite*) meant “to desire with concupiscence or with fleshly appetite” (*OED* I, 1106, 2). The term here, however, is the noun “covetise” (*couetyse*), so what did it mean? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “covetise” had a sexual connotation in the 14th century (*OED* I, “covetise,” 1106, 1). In Daniel 13:7 of the 1382 *Wycliffe Bible*, we read these words concerning the men who saw the beautiful Susanne bathing:

Thei brennyden in the couetise of hir. (*OED* I, “covetise,” 1106, 1)

They burned with covetise for her. (My Translation)

And Chaucer uses the noun “covetise” to warn against lechery in his Parson’s Tale, written about 1386 (*OED* I, “covetise,” 1106, 1). Speaking of the sin of lechery worked by the devil’s hand, Chaucer identifies the specific work of the devil’s first finger:

This is that other hand of the devel, with five fynGRES to cachethe peple to his vileynye. / The firste finger is the fool lookynge of the fool woman and of the foolman, that sleeth right as the basilicok sleeth folk by the venom of his sighte, for the coveitise of eyen folweth the coveitise of the herte. (Fisher, page 385, Lines 851-852)

This is the other hand of the devil, with five fingers to draw people to his villainy. / The first finger is the foolish glancing of the foolish woman and of

the foolish man, which slays [people] exactly as the basilicok slays people by the venom of its glance, for the covetise of the eyes follows the covetise of the heart. (My Translation)

Chaucer's parson thus identifies "covetise" with lechery and emphasizes that "the covetise of the eyes follows the covetise of the heart," which fits rather nicely with the view that Gawain has fallen into an adultery of the heart, given his confession of "coveting" (*couetyse*). Gawain takes rather hard his self-knowledge as one guilty of breaking faith for the low motives of cowardice and lechery. Indeed, he tells us in line 2512 that "where a fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore," as though he believes that his sin has brought him into a fallen state as low as original sin brought Adam. While Gawain's self-reproach might seem excessive, it represents an important stage in his development as a Christian knight, for he has previously been held in thrall to pride, as the Green Knight tells us in revealing that Morgan le Faye sent him:

She guided me in this guise to your glorious hall,  
To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride  
That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table. (ll 2456-2458)

The Middle English word translated by Borroff as the phrase "surfeit of pride" is *surquidre* (cf. *sourquydrye*, line 311) which the *OED* traces to as early as 1225 and renders as "arrogance, haughty pride, presumption" (*OED* II, "surquidry," 243). Gawain does, in fact, recognize his fault of pride, for in the punning passage of lines 2437-2438, Gawain has already

agreed to keep the belt, saying that it will remind him of his pride and humble his heart. Although the Green Knight assures Gawain that his confession of all his failings has left him as pure as if he had never sinned (lines 2391-2394), Gawain remains troubled over his fall and considers himself stained for life, as we have already seen. Indeed, Gawain needed to fail for this story to be a Christian one, for such is the Christian view of human nature, that it is fallen and must therefore fail due to its innate sin. Moreover, through being brought to an awareness of his sins, be they pride or infidelity, Gawain is humbled and thereby better prepared to accept God's grace.

### An Aside on Buddhism

Sir Gawain's encounter with Lady Bertilak and his subsequent entrapment in an adultery of the heart thus works as a type of *felix culpa* — a fortunate fall — that leads him to deeper knowledge of himself and thereby to the possibility of salvation. There exists something perhaps like a *felix culpa* within a major Buddhist text. In the "Gandavyuha Sutra," the last chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, one of East Asian Buddhism's most important Mahayana texts, we can read the story of the young Buddhist Sudhana as he seeks enlightenment on a pilgrimage that leads him through a sequence of 52 different masters. The twenty-fifth of these is the courtesan bodhisattva Vasumitra, from whose seductive powers, Sudhana must learn a lesson. In Thomas Cleary's translation of this encounter in *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, we read:

People there [in Ratnavyuha, the city of Vasumitra,] who did not know of Vasumitra's virtues or the scope of her knowledge, said to Sudhana, "What has someone like you — with senses so calm and subdued, so aware, so clear, without confusion or distraction, your gaze focused discreetly right before you, your mind not overwhelmed by sensations, not clinging to appearances, your eyes averted from involvement in all forms, your mind so cool and steady, your way of life profound, wise, oceanic, your mind free from agitation or despondency — what have you to do with Vasumitra? You should not have any lust for her, your head should not be turned by her, you should not have any such impure thoughts, you should not be ravaged by such desires, you should not be under the power of a woman, you should not be so bewitched, you should not enter the realm of temptation, you should not sink into the mire of sensuality, you should not be bound by the snares of the devil, you should not do what should not be done." (Cleary 1270-1271)

Others, however, urging Sudhana to seek out Vasumitra, provide directions to a house that in its greatness resembles a castle. There, he sees her:

There he saw Vasumitra, who was beautiful, with golden skin and black hair, her limbs and body well-proportioned, more beautiful in form than all celestial and human beings in the realm of desire, her voice finer even than that of the god Brahma, (Cleary, 1271)

Vasumitra tells Sudhana:

“[All who come to me with minds full of passion, I teach them so that they become free of passion.” (Cleary, 1272)

She then adds:

“Some attain dispassion just by embracing me, and achieve an enlightening concentration called ‘womb receiving all sentient beings without rejection.’ Some attain dispassion just by kissing me, and attain an enlightening concentration called ‘contact with the treasury of virtue of all beings.’” (Cleary, 1272)

From a commentary on Sudhana’s encounter with Vasumitra, we learn:

This woman was settled in a polluted, fearsome realm, making it hard for people to believe in her; so the land was called Danger. By means of meditation, she entered into defiled realms and turned them all into spheres of knowledge; by virtue of great compassion, she remained in the ordinary world, and by virtue of knowledge she remained unaffected, so her city was called City of Jewel Arrays. (Cleary, 1599)

Her compassion and decision to remain in the ordinary world and lead others to enlightenment is, of course, characteristic of the bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism. The commentary tells us how she leads others to enlightenment:

Vasumitra went on to speak of holding her hand, getting up on her

couch, gazing at her, embracing her, and kissing her. Holding her hand means seeking salvation. Getting up on her couch means ascendancy of formless knowledge. Gazing at her means seeing truth, embracing her means not departing from it. Kissing her means receiving instruction. (Cleary, 1600)

The commentary then explains:

This illustrates how all who come near enter a door of total knowledge, unlike those who only seek to get out of bondage and do not arrive at the ultimate dispassion — supreme knowledge of the real universe that remains in the polluted world without being defiled, freely helping the living, neither bound nor freed. (Cleary, 1600)

The commentary does not clearly state whether or not Sudhana actually has sex with Vasumitra, but many have interpreted the sutra as meaning this. At any rate, the sutra teaches that one can achieve dispassion by an encounter with passion and thereby attain fuller enlightenment. As a sufficiently general level ? and allowing for differences in the two religions ?this might be what is happening to Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

## Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this paper, Gawain's quest has led him through the paradox of Christian salvation wherein his very *failure itself*

has prepared him properly for redemption. Although a pious Christian devoted to the Virgin Mary, Gawain is too proud in his virtues despite his courteous air of humility. As with the others at the court of Arthur, Gawain suffers a surfeit of pride, and his faith must be tested through the various games set up by the Green Knight. Specifically, he is tested in his courage, his troth, and his celibacy. Readers see clearly that he fails in his faith by placing his trust in the green belt rather than the Virgin Mary. This reliance upon the ‘magical’ belt calls his courage into doubt as well. Retaining the belt rather than handing it over to Lord Bertilak shows that he fails in his troth. The Green Knight observes that Gawain fails in his courage and his troth, so this is also quite clear to readers. Readers might miss the way in which Gawain falls into a lecherous adultery of the heart, for he seems to have displayed remarkable restraint in resisting the advances of an extraordinarily beautiful, charming, and seductive lady, and the Green Knight himself states that Gawain has not failed due to “wooyng” (*wowynge*, line 2367 (cf. 2361)). However, from Gawain’s self-condemnation, one sees that he focuses upon two failings, his cowardice and his sexual coveting (*couetyse*, line 2374) of Lord Bertilak’s wife. Gawain may have satisfied the Green Knight on this point, but the falseness of his own heart condemns him, for he has failed to remain chaste within ? he has failed to stay celibate and true to the Virgin Mary. His fall, however, can become a *felix culpa*, a happy fault, if the blow dealt his pride leads him to true repentance. Concerning this final stage of redemption, the text remains silent. Perhaps, then, Gawain has yet a few more quests to undertake in his path toward self-knowledge. ■

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