

tirety, which as a secular institution based on the secular code of chivalry also operates without the aid of divine grace. As one knows from the tradition as a whole, many of the knights, like Perceval in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*, forget God and pay a price for that forgetfulness. The institution, as well as its members, is flawed and mortal.

Gawain stands more as type, as the principle representative of Arthur's court and its guiding chivalric code, than as individual. As such, his recollection of the postlapsarian state as the source of his own failings, followed by the Green Knight's point that the entire Round Table suffers from pride, emphasizes the temporal, fallen character of any human kingdom, as well as of any human. The nick, then, marks not only retribution for the sin of pride but also a visible sign of the invisible blemish of original sin. Gawain's culpability is not the issue. Though the greatest knight, he remains only human. Arthur's court, though the highest realm of chivalric perfection, remains only secular. Both need to bow their heads before a higher power and to recognize that in the postlapsarian world they are at the mercy of demonic as well as angelic powers.

We can extend this argument to state that Gawain himself stands for the neck of King Arthur's court. Thus when Gawain is nicked in the neck the court's neck is also nicked. Each receives the blade in order to be relieved of stiff-necked pride. Gawain is the neck of the court and, with Arthur, its head: he is Arthur's most steadfast supporter, he is the court's greatest source of chivalric pride, and he is the finest knight of the courtly body in prowess and courtesy. My criticism, then, is aimed not at Reichardt's anatomical observations but at his tendency to cut off the interpretation of nick and neck a bit too soon.

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To the Editor:

It seems a shame that in so erudite and persuasive an article Paul Reichardt should nod when he discusses the poem itself. On page 157 he writes, "The girdle Gawain has concealed under his armor in the vain hope that it will save him from his fate can in no way mitigate the implied psychic disorder within the knight's own soul." There is an error of fact here. The poem states that Gawain wears the girdle, not under his armor, but wrapped twice about him over his surcoat, the love lace cutting a green swath across the golden "endless knot" (see lines 2025–40 and Tolkien's note).

That Gawain wears the girdle with this difference is no mere cavil. First, if readers "expect" Gawain to conceal the girdle, as Tolkien's note suggests, then it is perhaps because they remember that Bercilak's wife has made Gawain promise to "disceuer hit neuer / Bot to

lley layne fro hir lorde" (1862–63). But Gawain takes his leave of Bercilak at line 1960 before going to bed; because he doesn't expect to meet him again next morning, any reason for concealing the girdle in keeping with his promise disappears. Readers assume Gawain continues to conceal the girdle, I suspect, because they read it as an inherently shameful object, one Gawain *should* conceal, and so miss an important point—it is not until the Green Knight reveals his true identity as Gawain's host, with whom the covenant of exchange was made, that Gawain himself sees the girdle as an object of shame ("Lo! þer þe falssyng, foule mot hit falle!"). Because Gawain fails to exchange the green lace ("trwe mon trwe restore"), it acquires symbolic significance. What is at stake is Gawain's "vntrawþe": "Larges and lewte þat longez to knyȝtez" would require him to present to Bercilak in the exchange of winnings (*lewte*) even that which could have saved his life (*larges*).

Second, Gawain's reaction to the Green Knight's discovery, so excessive, so overblown, has also puzzled readers. The poet reminds us, however, at the beginning of the encounter with the Green Knight that Gawain is wearing the girdle (the ax was "no lasse bi þat lace þat lemed ful bryȝt—"). If we remember, that is, that throughout his ordeal Gawain has been wearing in full view the symbol of his "vntrawþe," both to the lady, to whose lord he has now revealed the girdle, and to the lord, whose covenant he has abrogated, then we understand better the intensity of his embarrassment, an embarrassment heightened by the feeling of having been made a fool and, in some sense, of having advertised his failures of both courage and loyalty.

Lastly, it seems to me that Reichardt's contention that the "pentagonal design" of Gawain's soul is "marked at exactly that point at which the faculties of sensation and growth are linked to the superior faculty of the intellect through the psychic mechanism of the will" (159) would be strengthened by discovering in the poem the visible symbol of that marking. The green girdle, which twice cleaves the pentangle on Gawain's surcoat (once for "cowardyse" and once for "couetyse") in its first appearance, becomes the bend dexter of "þe fayntyse of þe fleshe crabbed" in Gawain's differencing of it as a baldric (now a single faulting of the pentangle "in tokenyng he watz tane in tech of a faute"). Ultimately, for Gawain and the court, it is transformed into a symbol of the wound itself: "'Lo! lorde,' quoth þe leude, and þe lace hondeled, / 'þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek.'" The pentangle and the girdle are the heraldic characters of the ideal of chivalric behavior on the one hand and of the human inability to live up to that high ideal on the other; unlike the wound on his neck, which has healed, the wound slashing across Gawain's pentangle is still green.

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