

Mission impossible – The pentangle breaks

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Abstract

The poet's complex and ambiguous treatment of Gawain's adventure leaves the nature of the heroic role continually in doubt, and the ending of the poem is designed to make us wonder whether Gawain has fulfilled such a role or not.

This article attempts to advocate a sympathetic reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, hereafter referred to as *SGGK*. I propose to show that Gawain, despite failing in his mission, is indeed a hero and that the circumstances he finds himself in, make it impossible for him to succeed.

Introduction

There is no doubt in my mind that Gawain has failed in his mission, broken important aspects comprising the pentangle he stands for and has emerged a sad and disillusioned man from his whole adventure with the Green Knight. In this regard he is similar to the wedding guest in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1857).

Like the wedding guest he emerges from his encounter "...like one that hath been stunned/ And is of sense forlorn..." However, he does not have the good fortune of departing from the Green Knight "A sadder and a wiser man" as the wedding guest departs from the Ancient Mariner (Coleridge, 1857, p. 51).

There can be no doubt that Gawain is a hero and emerges as a hero, albeit flawed, from this adventure. We can not use, as the measure of a hero, success alone. It is important to remember this in any assessment of Gawain's character and performance. As Baron de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic games said: "The most important thing is not to have won, but to have taken part honorably". Although Gawain does not succeed ultimately (in his opinion) it can definitely be said that he takes part honorably. All heroes do not succeed in their missions and quests. We need only to think of the heroes of Greek mythology to remind us of this truth.

As I have mentioned before, the aim of this article is not to "hyperanalyse" *SGGK* and dissect Gawain, laying his frailties and inconsistencies bare to the readers eye, but to understand his quest and its outcome as medieval listeners probably would have. Although there is a definite place for deep psychological analysis of Gawain and his relationship to the Bertilaks, I am not sure that this is how the *Pearl* poet intended the poem to be experienced. Two critics responses to the poem are most unusual in respect of analysing the poem from what I believe to be a modern psychological/sexual perspective. In his article *Befriending the Medieval Queer: A Pedagogy for Literature Classes*, Zeikowitz (2002) concentrates on the homosexual references and meanings in medieval texts. In his section on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Zeikowitz, 2002, p. 73), he cites numerous references to show homoeroticism in *SGGK*

The Green Knight in the guise of Bertilak, the lord of the manor, is appealing to Gawain's eyes. He finds him "a lusty fellow," "[a]man of massive mold," and adds

“strong, steady his stance, upon stalwart shanks”, and “[Well] suited he seemed[...]/ To be a master of men in a mighty keep. (843,844,846,848-849)

In her article *Trying Sir Gawain: The Shape-shifting Desire of Ragnelle and Bertilak*, Carter (2005) also focuses on the sexuality of the text. She states that; “Gawain’s tests are more acute because the testers are superhuman, the reader’s voyeuristic pleasure more acute because of the weird sexuality at work” (2005, p. 32). Later in the article she states that “Since Bertilak has contrived the sexual entrapment as part of the test, his trade of kisses with Gawain is less innocent than it seems on first reading. The moment is an excessive one: laden with homosexual possibilities...” (2005, p. 44).

These are two excellent articles, and they are very comprehensive and convincing in the arguments they put forward, however I wish to examine *SGGK* from a less “unusual” perspective, as I believe going this route spoils the poem and misses the poet’s intention with the poem.

In his article *Sin, Psychology, and the Structure of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Blenkner (1977, p. 357). mentions that the poet incorporated theological elements into the poem. Gawain’s three tests, from a theological perspective, “are tests of (1) *fortitudo*, or courage, in the face of death, (2) *sapientia*, or soundness of mind, and (3) chastity...”

Gawain’s tests suggest “man’s confrontation with mortality, ignorance of mind, and concupiscence of the flesh- the three punishments imposed on mankind for the sin of Adam” (Blenkner 1977, p. 357).

Many other articles have been written concentrating on various aspects the poet emphasizes in the poem however, from a study of the literature on *SGGK*, it would seem as if there has been little if any comment on the fact that Gawain is unable to succeed in his quest due to his own belief system and the fact that the poet is conspiring against him.

This is the aspect this article will attempt to examine.

Sir Gawain - A True Hero

Throughout the poem we are constantly reminded of Gawain’s heroic stature and behaviour. The poet is telling us about Sir Gawain and the Green Knight without explaining who Gawain is. There is no introduction to Gawain or king Arthur. The poet presumes that the listener (this poem was written to be heard, not read) will know all about the Arthurian legend, and that one of the main heroes in it is Gawain. He now embroiders on this knowledge his audience has of the hero of his poem. We are told that of all the knights present it is only Gawain who accepts the challenge insultingly thrown in front of his king and queen. By taking the axe from Arthur he restores normality to their feast and accepts the responsibility of protecting the honour of the court. We are clearly made to see this as an extremely heroic deed. After striking the blow that severs the Green Knight’s head from his body Gawain knows he must keep his word and seek out the Green Knight and receive the return blow. When the Green Knight gallops off, head under arm, Gawain’s resolve does

not falter. He keeps his chin up and does not let the unreality of the situation break his resolve. He sees the seasons change and spring approaching yet he knows the winter of his own life is approaching. The poet adds a subtle and ominous warning here to tell us of the brief and tragic nature of life:

*After, the sesoun of somer with the soft windes,
When Zeferus sifles himself on sedes and erbes;
Wela wine is the wort that waxes theroute,
When the donkande dewe dropes of the leaves,
To bide a blishful blush of the bright sunne. 520
Bot then highes hervest, and hardenes him sone,
Warnes him for the winter to wax ful ripe;
He drives with droght the dust for to rise,
Fro the face of the folde to flighe ful high;
Wrothe winde of the welkin wrasteles with the sunne, 525
The leves lancen fro the linde and lighten on the grounde,
And al grayes and gres that grene was ere:
Then al ripes and rotes that ros upon first,
And thus yirnes the yere in yisterdayes mony...*

Gawain sees the march of the seasons and knows that this is not just the passing of the year but a movement towards death for him. Once again we are shown the makings of a hero. Any lesser man would have broken down and given up long ago, yet despite this severe emotional strain Gawain gets himself ready and leaves the court, not only as a knight responding to a personal challenge, and in so doing defending his honour, but as the representative of Arthur's court and the ideals of the round table. As a result of this the court can not escape the consequences of Gawain's success or failure and they are therefore morally implicated. This burden is also placed on Gawain's shoulders, yet he accepts it without complaint.

It is important to remember that the Green Knight is not a "barfighter" looking for individual combat to prove his manhood and superiority over other fighters, but is challenging the whole system of values as embodied by Arthur's court.

Any knight willing to take on the burden of responding to such a terrible challenge must be a superman indeed!

Gawain accepts. Even when the guide offers him a means of escaping from his destiny with dignity he refuses. He does not hesitate for a moment in rejecting the

guide's proposal that he should simply ride away without meeting the Green Knight, while the guide for his part will keep the secret:

Bot helde thou hit never so holde, and I here passed,

Founded for ferde for to fle, in forme that thou telles, 2130

I were a knight cowarde, I might not be excused.

On meeting the Green Knight he even stands ready to receive the lethal blow. What a hero! Despite all those truly heroic actions Gawain fails. Why?

In order to answer this question certain aspects of the poem have to be studied.

The Poet and Circumstances Conspire Against Sir Gawain

There are two main reasons why Gawain fails in his quest to find the Green Knight and save the reputation of the court and himself. Due to his failure he also does not emerge from his adventure as the conventional victorious hero.

Firstly, the poet (or fate) conspires against him. The poet treats his adventure in an extremely ambiguous and complex way, casting doubt on Gawain's heroic stature. After meeting the Green Knight to receive the return blow promised him in Arthur's court, it appears that Gawain has been conspired against not just by the Green Knight but, in a sense, by the plot of the poem and by the poet who contrived it. He learns that the Green Knight was the lord of the castle; that he knew of all Gawain's dealings with his wife including his secret acceptance of the girdle; and that the beheading game functioned not as the supreme test Gawain had to face, but as a symbolic representation of a test which had already taken place (the temptation Scene) and which Gawain had already failed. (Spearing 1964, p. 190) The poem even starts with a hidden pointer to Gawain's failure .

We see the civilisation of Troy and its destruction by treason being described. In the Temptation Scene Gawain fails by committing a kind of treason against his host by accepting the girdle.

Blenkner says in his article that "Gawain did not make a sinful choice when he accepted the girdle "with a goud wylle", but he did place himself in a position where he will be compelled to be false either to his covenant with the host or to his promise of secrecy to the lady. He is in a position where he cannot *not* sin" (1977, p. 370-371).

Carter points out that Gawain is "...tested and tried by figures who are monstrous, magically-aided and multiple-shaped" (2005, p. 29).

The monstrous aspect is the Green Knight's ability to survive his beheading and Lady Bertilak's sexually predatory nature. Her active sexuality is an obvious threat to Gawain and is portrayed as unnatural and monstrous. At the end of the tale the Green Knight tells Sir Gawain that the tests were designed by Morgan le Fey. (Twomey, 2001, p. 103-19). That Gawain is up against the supernatural is seen in the Green Knight's ability to survive a beheading as well as assume the personae

of a Green giant (literally) and also be Gawain's host, Bertilak de Hautdesert. As Professor Berry states "Gawain indeed is eminently a "knight", but in the poem he encounters something other than, and larger than, himself" (Berry, 1954, p. 155).

From these factors the poet has built into the plot of the poem we can see that no mortal can succeed.

Gawain's Impossibly Harsh Belief System

Secondly, the very nature of Gawain's belief system, although admirable, is flawed and must, by its very nature, leave him in the lurch. Here I am referring to the pentangle. The pentangle is Gawain's symbol by which he *lives*.

The pentangle has five points, each representing five different and interlinked qualities.

www.ithaca.edu/faculty/twomey/sggk/pentangle.htm/

These five corners are always closed. The pentangle should be looked at in a clockwise direction. The first point represents the five *wittes* or senses of the mind. They are sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. Gawain is a perfect mental specimen in all these qualities. The second point of the pentangle represents the five fingers, i.e. completeness of the body. Gawain is physically complete and perfect. The third point represents Christ's wounds and is symbolic of Gawain's faith. Here too he is complete. There are numerous references in the poem to show us his strong faith. When he leaves Arthur's court on his quest we are told it is "...on Godes halve..." (692)

The fourth point of the star represents the five joys of Mary or fortitude, viz.

- i) annunciation
- ii) maturity
- iii) resurrection
- iv) ascension
- v) assumption

Gawain is complete here too. We are told that he has the picture of the virgin Mary painted on the back of his shield

At this cause the knight comliche had

In the more half of his shelde hir image depainted,

That when he blushed thereto his belde never paired. 650

The fifth point represents the five knightly qualities nl.

- I) *Fraunchyse* (generosity)

- li) *Felawschyp* (love of one's fellow man)
- lii) *Clannes* (purity)
- lv) *Cortaysye* (courtesy)
- v) *Pite*(pity)

Initially Gawain is complete in all five of these qualities. He leaves Arthur's court as the best and most worthy representative of the round table. By the end of the poem he has broken aspects of the pentangle where it hurts him most, i.e. the knightly qualities. Despite his failure here one can not help but admire a man who has such a complex symbol as his guiding star through life.

As I have said, Gawain leaves Arthur's court on his quest as the representative of "a delicate complex of civilized and religious values" (Spearing, 1964, p. 175).

The pentangle also represents the interlocking of Gawain's virtues. The poet tells us in ll 625-9

Hit [the pentangle] is a signe that Salamon set sumwhile

In betokning of trauthe, by title that hit habbes,

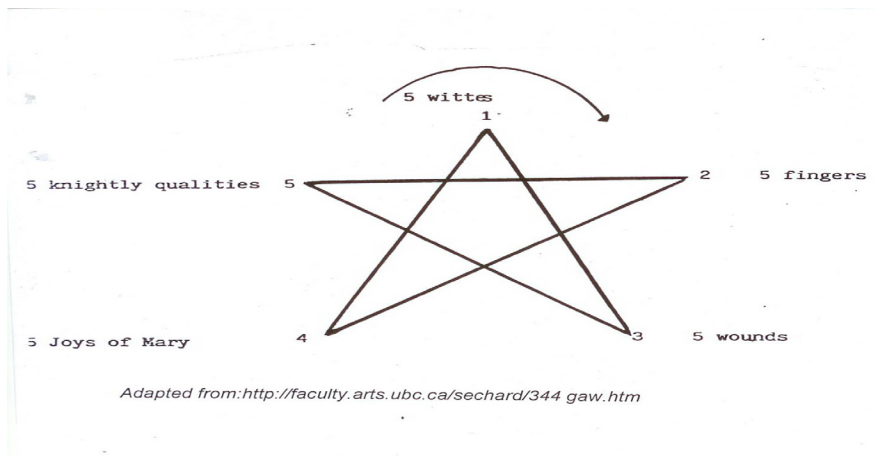
For hit is a figure that haldes five pointes,

And uche line umbelappes and loukes in other,

And aywhere hit is endeles...

It is for exactly this reason that it is such a "dangerous" symbol and will inevitably lead to Gawain's "failure".

The testing of Gawain consists of three sections namely the Beheading Game, the Temptation Scene and the Exchange of Winnings. Gawain passes the Beheading



Game with flying colours. The poet leads him and the listener to see this as his ultimate test, only to reveal later that this was the easiest test. His next test is the Temptation Scene where he is tempted by his host's wife. This test he fails, breaking numerous aspects of the pentangle's knightly qualities. His last test, the Exchange of Winnings he also passes although by it he is humiliated and disillusioned.

Let us now examine how and why Gawain breaks the pentangle during the temptation scene. During this scene he is being sexually tempted by his host's beautiful wife. The poet describes her to us vividly:

With chin and cheke ful swete,

Both quit and red in blande,

Ful lufly con ho lete

With lippes smal laghande (1207)

He also lets us understand that she makes the most of her charms:

Kerhofes of that one, with many clere perles,

Hir brest and hir bright throte bare displayed,

Schon schirer then snaw that schedes on hilles (954-6)

Although she makes definite sexual advances to him he does not succumb to the temptations of the flesh. Giving in would have been easy, since his host was out hunting. The lady makes herself available to him in many ways. She makes him aware of her physically by imprisoning him in her arms as she sits down on his bed,

...and caches him in armes,

Loutes luflich adoun and the leudes kisses.(1305-6)

Now we see one of the knightly qualities, *clannes* (purity), coming under attack. There is a persistent contrast between the outward claims of the lady's conversation with Gawain (and his replies) and the actual suggestiveness of her behaviour. Her "teasing" behaviour is far more seductive than any direct openness or outspokenness. It is important to remember that Gawain had a reputation as a philanderer and an expert in love-talking and love-making in Arthurian romance in general (Spearing, 1964, p. 198).

This reputation, we see, is known to the lady who uses it to goad Gawain to make love to her (1525-8)

And ye, that are so cortais and quaint of your hetes,

Oghe to a yong thing yern to shewe

And teche sum tokenes of trueluf craftes.

Why, are ye lewed that alle the los weldes?

When she sees she is not succeeding as readily as she planned she even reproaches Gawain directly for his coldness saying: "*Blame ye deserve/If ye luf not that lif that ye lie nexte...*" (1779-80)

She combines her attack on his *clannes* with an attack on his *cortaysye*. This is highly effective because Gawain's *Cortaysye* is perfectly compatible with his *clannes*. We see that these two virtues are even alliteratively paired in the same line

His clannes and his cortaisie croked were never (653)

Should he fail in either, the pentangle breaks. He barely manages to remain "pure" (most men would have failed) but unfortunately he fails at the point of courtesy.

After the lady's persistent attacks on his purity he is finally sufficiently softened up and accepts the gift of the girdle she gives him.

The reason he does this is that he cannot refuse. He must either accept her love, and in so doing break the pentangle at the point of *clannes* (purity) or refuse it "lody" thereby breaking it at the point of *cortaysye*. The poet tells us, almost as if in defense of Gawain, that the lady

...depressed him so thik,

Nurned him so negh the thred, that nede him behoved

Other lach there hir luf, other lodly refuse.

He cared for his cortaisie, lest crathain he were,

And more for his meschef, if he shulde make sinne

And be traitor to that tulk that that telde aght. (1775)

If he gives in to her charms he will also be disloyal to his host who is out hunting.

In doing so he will offend against *fellawschyp*. As mentioned before, "he is in a position where he cannot *not* sin" (Blenkner, 1977, p. 370-371).

When he accepts the girdle he symbolically takes his host's wife as his mistress and offends against *fraunchyse*. It is for keeping his promise to her and breaking his promise of exchanging all his winnings with his host that he receives the cut in his neck from the Green Knight. He accepts the girdle because the lady says it will protect him. Gawain knows he must meet the Green Knight soon to receive the return blow and he is obviously scared of his fate. We are told that he accepts the girdle not for its material value, "*Bot for to saven himself, when suffer him behoved*". (2040)

In accepting the girdle he does not *consciously* commit a sin. We are given an insight into his thoughts and feelings on accepting the girdle in // 1855-8,

Then cast the knight, and hit come to his hert,

Hit were a juel for the jopardy that him jugged were

When he acheved to the chapel his chek to fech;

Might he have slipped to be unslain, the sleight were noble.

His attitude to the lady even changes from one of coldness and irritation to thankfulness when he agrees to conceal the girdle from her husband

He thonked hir oft ful swithe,

Ful thro with hert and thought. (1866-7)

The lady has won! Gawain could not escape her wiles.

As I have mentioned Gawain keeps his word to the Green Knight and meets him at the Green Chapel, despite the guide's offer. Here Gawain comes to an unexpected insight about his whole adventure.

It is here too that the poet confuses the listener/reader of the poem. Has Gawain indeed completed his "quest" and emerged having fulfilled the heroic role or not?

To answer this question we need to examine what Gawain learns about his quest and we also need to see how he is evaluated by both the Green Knight and himself.

Gawain only starts to feel guilty once he has been found out. When he discovers that the lord of the castle and his wife were in agreement all along, and that his conduct has been under scrutiny all along, he is filled with impotent anger. He does not fully grasp the meaning of the test he undergoes. He does not see what the issues are and then acts wrongly but he fails to see what the issues are.

Gawain believed the Beheading Game to be the supreme test of his honour and worth but refused to see that his stay at his host's castle (the Temptation Scene) was actually the test. Added to this, his view of his situation is also unbalanced. Before he is told everything by the Green Knight his conscience is quite clear (ll 2320-1)

Never sin that he was burn born of his moder

Was he never in this worlde wighe half so blithe...

On learning of the truth of his situation from the Green Knight he accuses himself of all kinds of sins. The reason for this is that he has set his sights on perfection, the endless knot of virtues symbolized by the pentangle. He is not satisfied with the fact that the Green Knight assures him,

One the fautlest freke that ever on fote yede;

As perle by the white pese is of pris more,

So is Gawain, in good faith, by other gay knightes. (2363-5)

He has measured himself not “by other gay knightes” but by a humanly unattainable standard of perfection.

He decides to accept the girdle from the Green Knight and wear it publicly as a token of his failing. Although this is a noble gesture it is also absurd.

He is forgiven by the Green Knight, yet he decides to punish himself publicly by calling other people's, as well as his own, attention to his imperfection. He decides to wear the baldric

In tokening he was tan in tech of a faut. (2488)

When he returns the whole court decides to wear the baldric. This is intended to show Gawain that he is not alone in his imperfection. He has the whole court's support yet he still feels shame in telling of his adventure

He tened when he should telle, 2501

He goned for gref and grame;

The blod in his face con melle,

When he hit schulde shewe, for shame.

Here we are shown a sense of misguided pride he has in his own virtues. What is the listener to make of this?

We can take two views of Gawain and his fulfillment of the heroic role. *Firstly* we can accept Gawain's harsh view of himself as having failed. This will imply that Camelot is mistaken in him, the Green Knight is misleading and that he has failed miserably. This view then means that he is not at all a hero and has failed in his quest. *Secondly* we can see Gawain as a hero who has in a sense fulfilled his quest admirably, although he has “failed”. This second view is the one I have been at pains to expound. Trask states that though Gawain might think evil of his adventure “the poet, as the concluding motto shows (HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE) does not wish us to do so (1979, p. 9).

Spearing states that “the conception of the poem seems to require that we should perceptively watch Gawain being entangled in the situation to which his acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge leads him, and we should see more clearly than he does the nature of his strengths and weaknesses (which means, too, those of Camelot and, by an easy extension, those of any civilized society); and yet, we must also ourselves be entangled in and rebuked by the mystery he has to face” (Spearing, 1964, p. 4)

I believe Camelot to be correct in its assessment of Gawain. As Barron states “Their response[seems to be] mature acceptance of human limitations...” (1987, p. 172) Since the Green Knight understands and forgives Gawain why shouldn't we?

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