

*"[Sir Gawain and the Green Knight] was invented by and for men who felt the real world, in its rather different way, to be also cryptic, significant, full of voices and 'the mystery of all life.'"*¹

INTRODUCTION

The green girdle, and so Sir Gawain's failure, stands at the center of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.² Without the girdle and its failure, Sir Gawain no longer embodies his finite character, but instead becomes some sort of divinity. Other readings which focus on other passages³ do not fully grasp this pivoting point of the main character, and so also the poem itself. Thus I propose a brief, coherent reading of the girdle, as well as those themes, implications, and applications that hang from it. But dealing with the girdle is a tricky task. The characters themselves attempt to nail the girdle's meaning down six different times. When compared to the knight's pentangle, Martin agrees that "It is harder to say what the girdle symbolizes."⁴

To read the girdle is to read it as it is seen and used in the poem, and so to read it as a symbol or sign.⁵ In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine informs us that "signs" are "things used to signify something."⁶ He gives the example of the

¹ C.S. Lewis, "The Anthropological Approach," In *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed., Donald R. Howard and Christian K. Zacher (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1968), 70.

² It is interesting to note that textual criticism becomes almost null and void when studying *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. So far, only one manuscript (Cotton Nero A.x) has survived. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, ed., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 15. Thus, the majority of scholarly ink which has been spilt has been over interpretive issues, as well as a few translation issues.

³ Such passages would include the pentangle description, the hunting scenes, the temptation scenes, Sir Gawain's confession after the beheading, his seemingly misogynistic ravings after the confession, or the beheading scene in and of itself.

⁴ Priscilla Martin, "Allegory and Symbolism," In *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed., Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1997), 326.

⁵ "The individual and the symbolic meet in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." Ibid, 316.

⁶ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. by D.W. Robertson (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1958), 8.

beast which Abraham sacrificed in the place of his son. In this case we would say the beast or thing signifies Christ. And so the beast, in some way, means Christ. Such a meaning would not be random, but rather warranted and even imposed by some other relevant passage in the text. From this two types of meaning may be seen: evident meaning and implied meaning. While evident meaning is presented in the thing itself, the implied meaning is the sign which is placed onto a thing by an instructor.⁷ Our study will be concerned with implied meaning. We seek the meaning which the text assigns to the girdle, whether it be assigned by characters or by the narrator, using dialogue, inner monologue, or action.

SIGN, SIGN, EVERYWHERE A SIGN

If we are to make any sense of the poem's complexity, we must consider the various significations or meanings given to the girdle. The first and second signs were both made by the Lady Bercilak. She was the original owner of the girdle.

Lady Bercilak's girdle was initially, along with the rest of her clothing, an aesthetic wonder with one purpose. When she fails to seduce Sir Gawain in this way, she changes the girdle's significance to a second sign. She presents it as a kind of tool for mortal victory, knowing that Gawain's secret concerns must be at the Green Chapel and on the ax that awaits him there.⁸

Gawain accepts this girdle, and so accepts its significance. But to this he adds, giving the girdle its third meaning. The girdle becomes a sign of divine

⁷ "If this poem and Gawain's experience . . . teach anything, it is that all instruments and all actions are both what they are and also signs." John Plummer, "Signifying the Self: Language and Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," In *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, ed., Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (New York: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1991), 205.

⁸ William Vantuono, ed., *The Pearl Poems: An Omnibus Edition*, vol. 2, *Patience and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), lines 1733-1854.

grace or provision, as well as a tool of triumph. Furthermore, for Gawain the girdle's significance acquired an element of secret shame. In shame he hides it, and in an effort to overcome this shame he wears it in public.⁹

The fourth assignment belongs to the Green Knight. At his Green Chapel he and his ax deny all that the girdle once stood for. In their place, the knight proposes the girdle as a sign of remembrance. As his gift to Sir Gawain, the girdle's green luster would remind him of the Green Knight and his role in the trial.¹⁰

Gawain receives the girdle, but on his own terms. He neither keeps his old notion of the girdle as tool, nor adapts the Green Knight's notion of the girdle as strict remembrance. Rather, he opts for a humble meaning which would serve to prevent his greatest fear: future failure.¹¹ The Green Knight finds these concerns humorous.¹²

Arthur's Court gladly greets their long lost Sir Gawain. But they also find his thoughts about the girdle humorous. Nevertheless they initially seek to offer sympathy for his shame, and so Arthur's knights adopt the green girdle for his sake. Over time the girdle becomes the sign of honor. Thus, in their efforts to comfort Gawain, they overcome his own lowly notion of the girdle, and eventually even contradict it.¹³

⁹ Ibid., lines 1836-1879.

¹⁰ Ibid., lines 2336-2399.

¹¹ "Gawain, the sinner, naturally sees his fault in its full moral complexity, as something which threatens the whole of his knightly being . . . Gawain thus sees his sin in the orthodox manner . . . One sin leads to another, unless real penitence and penance follow." Brian Stone, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1985), 136.

¹² Vantuono, lines 2369-2438.

¹³ Ibid., lines 2485-2523.

MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

To grant validity to all these signs is to tear Gawain's girdle into six tattered pieces. Each sign *overcomes* the other. So, if the poem is to be of any clear benefit, one sign must take a tighter hold than all the others.

It has often been claimed that the final sign is the only one left with a grip on the girdle.¹⁴ As such it is maintained that in this way the court's girdle achieves the poet's endorsement, and therefore validity, as well as emphasis. But for numerous reasons this cannot be so. For example, the entire development of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is wrapped up with Sir Gawain and his personal development. A final emphasis on honor and mirth would show all his suffering development to be of little value. Furthermore, this outlook would then be seen as the emphasis of the poem. Such an emphasis would find little of the poem to rely on. The overwhelming majority of its lines do something else: namely develop Sir Gawain's suffering and humility. Finally, if this be the case Sir Gawain is overcome in his assessment of the girdle. Yet he is given no chance to respond, develop himself further, or be responded to. He, his efforts, and so the center of the poem, are then merely done away with.

This leaves us with Gawain's girdle, which I will maintain is the true and final sign for the following reasons. First, each girdle except for Sir Gawain's is *defeated* by the one that follows it. And though it may sound as if the court

¹⁴ For instance, Plummer states that in reference to the girdle's sign "Gawain is denied (by the court)." Plummer, 207. Likewise, Finley insists that with the court's humor "the Gawain poet defeats the closure" Sir Gawain offers by means of his presentation. C. Stephen Finley, "'Endless Knot': Closure and Indeterminacy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Papers on Language and Literature 26 (September 1990): 4.

defeats Sir Gawain, they do not do so outright. Rather, their rhetoric of humor and their notion of the girdle initially attempts to offer comfort to a crazed man. As a result they merely doubt his accountability and assume his outrageous position needs no examination. He is *overcome*—not *defeated*. So, Sir Gawain stands as a sermonizer whose message is ignored and cast aside not only by the Green Knight, but by Arthur's court.

Secondly, Sir Gawain is a character consumed with both humility and the figure of Christ.¹⁵ Taking this into consideration, along with the poem's closing (a benediction-like display of Christ as the author of humility), leads us to believe two things. First, the poet's final words place a commanding emphasis on the humility of Christ as the primary thought in closing. It is this thought which the poet desires to leave his readers with. Secondly, the only place the poet makes such an element central to the poem is in Sir Gawain and his final notion of the girdle. Thus, Sir Gawain's girdle must stand at the center of the poet's emphasis, and so the poem's.

Finally, we would do well to consider an item which others typically do not:¹⁶ the poem's final gloss: "Evil be to him who evil thinks." Though by no means authorial, it does bring the modern reader closest to the mind of the early audience. Furthermore, the gloss stands in support of Sir Gawain's final development as seen in his vigilant and so humble thoughts on the girdle.

¹⁵ Vantuono, lines 640-7, 748-62, 2067-8, 2369-88, 2429-38, and 2484-512.

¹⁶ Finley chooses "one accepted critical position—that the tag is a later addition to the manuscript and has no necessary systematic relationship with the poem, although it has clearly had great interpretive consequences for some readers." Finley, 7.

THEMES AND THEMATIC ISSUES

The girdle is received in many ways throughout the poem, but based on our findings we may make a distinction between two major types of significance: Sir Gawain's two assignments, and those assigned by others. Both of his signs entail elements of divine grace,¹⁷ while those belonging to the Lord, the Lady, and the court may be likened to some sort of everyday tool. It may then be said that in the poem the girdle is assigned as either being a sacred thing (that which is concerned with the divine) or a secular thing (that which is concerned with things beyond the divine).¹⁸ Such themes are the currency which the mystery of life is dealt in.

So, thematically, we see both sacred and secular girdles. And yet, it is one and the same girdle that we see being signified and used throughout. We may then say that the main thematic issues in the poem deal with finite characters altering the spiritual quality of a thing.

In the poem one character imposes his or her desires or intentions upon the girdle. But it is evident that all desires in the poem are either of God or beyond Him. The girdle signifies the user's desire accordingly, and so based on this the sign either does or does not contain elements of the divine.

¹⁷ Sir Gawain's second girdle is especially gracious for numerous reasons. It is actually of the divine while his first girdle was only thought to be. Of course this is made evident by its significance. But, this is reinforced by the circumstance which reveals the second girdle: the beheading scene. Sir Gawain constantly looks forward to this scene as being his divinely ordained fate (Vantuono, lines 1965-8, 2132-9, and 2156-9), and so anything resulting from this episode would truly be divine.

¹⁸ Donald R. Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in *Sir Gawain*," In *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian K. Zacher (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1968), 166.

Also, the issue of application becomes important. As we have said, assignment may take place by both word and deed. But as we consider Sir Gawain's initial intention and his actual use of the girdle, we see a sharper distinction arise. At the Green Chapel he intends to use the grace God has given, however, he ends up using the secular means of man.¹⁹ Though use comes from the intention placed upon a sign, in our poem it is the actual use which becomes the sign's definitive judge and jury.²⁰

IMPLICATIONS AND ISSUES OF LIMITATION

We have mentioned the girdle's specific cases of transition. But what does it mean to be able to change a thing's significance? This question is too big for us to treat here. However, we may briefly deal with the girdle's specific transition, namely between the themes of sacred and secular.

By labeling things with various spiritual qualities man acts, in a way, very much like his Creator. "The Green Knight and the court's reinterpretations of the lace assert man's power over the process of signification."²¹ Each girdle becomes a different girdle, and so a new girdle. And, as we have said, the thing's spiritual value depends on the one who creates it.

But, just as the Creator has limitations on His creating, so also the characters have limitations on their assigning. While God is only accountable to

¹⁹ "[Sir Gawain] is guilty not because he desires 'to sauen himself,' but because in order to do so he uses worldly means to do so in the wrong way." Ibid., 165.

²⁰ Hardman's article on Gawain's piety focuses on the concept of use as being definitive for both the pentangle and the girdle. See Phillipa Hardman, "Gawain's Practice of Piety in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medium Aevum* 68 (September 1999): 1-9.

²¹ Kathleen M. Ashley, "Bonding and Signification in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," In *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (New York: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1991), 218.

Himself (in avoiding contradiction), the characters are held accountable to Him by the narrator. All significations bear the proper consequences which follow from within God's defined spiritual order. The girdle, as it was initially received and used, could not rightly save Sir Gawain. Its first use was intended to be a sacred use. However, its actual use was improper according to the given traditional guidelines. In the Christian tradition pride is the original sin. It is strongly opposed as a vice which sets concerns beyond God and His spiritual order.²² The girdle's first meaning and use is identical to this vice, and is therefore secular rather than sacred.

This brings up the issue of a sign's acceptance. The assignment of a sign has to stand undefeated in order to receive a recognized validity. Individual, or an even greater communal approval then becomes important. Signs only work when someone comes around and receives them. Such outside approval is either based on tradition (as with the Arthur's Court) or the individual rising above their cultural tradition (as with Sir Gawain).²³

Also, within this realm of order there are obvious limitations placed upon the act of assigning itself. No character rightly assigns a good and proper meaning improperly. For example, Sir Gawain never assigns the significance of divine grace to the lady's unmentionables. Also, we never see a poor or improper

²² Pride has many facets, a few of which include 1) the false assumption of means which are not proper by natural right, 2) the act of placing a dependence on means which are not divine, and 3) the act of placing man's pleasure ahead of God's, as an end to man's efforts. Such vice may be seen in Sir Gawain's acquisition of what is not his, as well as his placement of faith in ill-gotten means for the pleasure of his own life. See the whole of David Farley Hills, "Gawain's Fault in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," In *Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian K. Zacher (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1968), 311-324.

²³ Ross G. Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 14.

meaning blatantly assigned. For example, Sir Gawain never attributes the significance of three one-night stands to the girdle. And, if characters do make such violations (as with the lady's 'true' girdle, or with Gawain's initial girdle of 'divine grace'), they are written as being poor, incorrect signs.²⁴

AN APPRAISAL AND APPLICATION

But do any of these implications really cross over into our reality? Is Lewis correct in saying that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* carries within it "the mystery of all life?" The greatest link between the realms of Camelot and Dallas is perhaps the element of Christianity which may be seen in both. This being the case, we should look no further than this common factor. Only here will we be able to see if the poem will bring us any of the wealth offered above.

I suppose the real question is then whether the Gawain poet's conception of assignment is in fact Christian. Though we cannot answer this question here, we may begin to ponder the question by mentioning a relevant component of the faith. Though the idea and act of sacramental living is no doubt shunned by some traditions within the faith, it is alive and well in others. Father Schmemmann offers a thought which may loosely define the views of such living: "All that exists is God's gift to man, and it all exists to make God known to man, to make man's life communion with God."²⁵ These words are illuminating. However, if we read a bit farther, we see an interesting similarity arise in a passage about sustenance:

²⁴ "Signs such as the pentangle and the green girdle are capable of being 'read' in a variety of ways, but instead of leaving us in a relativistic quandary, the poet has succeeded in building a properly orthodox hierarchy of such readings." *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 14.

“But the unique position of man in the universe is that he alone is to *bless* [(his italics)] God for the food and the life he receives from Him. He alone is to respond to God’s blessing with his blessing. The significant fact about the life in the Garden is that man is to *name* [(his italics)] things . . . Now, in the bible a name is infinitely more than a means to distinguish one thing from another. It reveals the very essence of a thing, or rather its essence as God’s gift. To name a thing is to manifest the meaning and value God gave to it, to know it as coming from God and to know its place and function within the cosmos created by God.”²⁶

The terms “name” and “blessed” are used, one with the other. Though their enhanced usage harmonizes with our conception of assignment, the way in which they come about varies slightly. While we found man (or specifically characters) actively assigning meaning onto things, here we see man manifesting “the meaning and value God gave to [things].” Is our idea of sign theory at odds with Father Schmemmann, or are we talking about two different circumstances? Perhaps man *assigns* meaning when he receives a thing falsely, and *reveals* a thing’s meaning when he receives it properly. If we look back at *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this distinction suddenly seems familiar to us. Such a reading naturally unfolds and accounts for the failure of one sign and the success of the other.

²⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

CONCLUSION

The characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are “having to be trained to read the real world they inhabit.” Furthermore, “in that process, the central character also serves as a surrogate for the reader of the poem.” Each Christian is then to act as our good knight did. But the reader must first learn to read the ‘text’ properly.²⁷ They may then reveal sacred value for things in appropriate ways. But this is no luxury. Rather, if we continue to read Father Schmemmann we will see that such assigning is a duty which all Christian’s should take part in. It should not be done rarely, but often, noting that all things should be both received and used properly. If this be the case, the Christian’s primary responsibility becomes one of sign reading; seeing and stating what things truly are. They must read out loud even when, as with Sir Gawain, all ignore and attempt to laugh their truth away.

²⁷ Helen Cooper, “The Supernatural,” In *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Suffolk: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1997), 278-9.

APPENDIX: FIVE ANTICIPATED OBJECTIONS TO THE APPLIATION

1) The first anticipated objection: 'Such an informal (non-institutional) use of sacrament would be individually subjective, and yet demand an objective communal acceptance. Thus such a sacramentalism is logically inconsistent.'

I would respond by maintaining that such a sacramental view of life carries with it a defining set of requirements which brings about an element of objectivity. St. Thomas' basic sacramental requirements (outside his concerns for institutional mandate) would certainly meet such needs. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas asserts that sacraments must merely sanctify man and glorify God.²⁸ With these fundamentals in mind, each subject may go about assigning gracious significance as they please. And, within the likeminded community such significance would be embraced with open arms. Even when multiple subjects view a single thing, a multiplicity of subjective meaning may arise. Yet, each valid or accepted meaning would be grounded in the sign's traditional requirements. Furthermore, assignment would be grounded in the objectivity of the thing itself.

2) The second anticipated objection: 'Non sacramentalists (both Christian and non-Christian alike) would reject signs which were read sacramentally, and so demolish any such sign by a lack of communal support.'

I would respond by maintaining that communal approval need not include the voices of these. Of course this answer was alluded to in the previous appendix, and perhaps throughout the entire paper. The covenant community of

²⁸ Saint Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947), Third Part, Question 60, Article 5.

Christ exists among many other communities. It, like all others, views the world ('Weltanschauung') from its own set of presuppositions. Though this is neither the time or place to elaborate, I will nevertheless maintain that such predisposed worldviews cannot be self-denied by any community.²⁹ Nor should they ever want to do so merely for the sake of objective clarity—a classical motive. Such views should rather be acknowledged and lived from because, as I have assumed, they would be lived out anyway. However, this is not to say that communities are to go about the public square deafly and dogmatically, or not participate at all. On the contrary, each should bring their views to bear on the other; Christianity included. But, Christianity should be allowed its fundamental right to view the world, just as any other community is.

3) The third anticipated objection: 'In the Christian tradition, the sensible is seen as being in a lesser class of existence than that of the non-sensible. Thus, such a sacramentalism would raise the sensible to an improper height.'

I would respond by maintaining that, though such a topic merits a volume unto itself, erecting such a dualistic economy is improper according to many authorities.³⁰ Here I will only mention one. In his thought on sacrament, Aquinas faces this same question of economy. For him, the objection was 'raised' by a contrary reading of Augustine: "Further, Augustine says (De Lib. Arb. ii) that 'sensible things are goods of least account, since without them man can live

²⁹ For further considerations along this vein of thought, see David K. Naugle's foundational work: Worldview: The History of a Concept (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

³⁰ For example, there are many scriptural passages referring to God's sacred interest in all things. Specifically, note the role of Christ as the cosmic redeemer of Colossians 1:15-23. New American Standard Bible (Anaheim: Foundation Publishing, 1999).

aright.’ But the sacraments are necessary for man’s salvation . . . so that man cannot live aright without them. Therefore sensible things are not required for the sacraments.”³¹ Aquinas replies by asserting that “Augustine speaks there of sensible things, considered in their nature; but not as employed to signify spiritual things, which are the highest goods.”³² Now, whether Aquinas is being too charitable or not, it makes little difference. For, in his reading we see at the very least Thomas’ awareness of the role played by the sensible. Its importance is directly tied to man’s need for a tangible sacrament, and so he finds its high (and so sacred) value to be necessary. Of course such value may only be appropriately attributed to those sensible things which are assigned as being properly sacrificial. However, as I mentioned at the end of the paper, man comes by such an assignment by revealing what is natural rather than assigning a synthetic significance. In other words, I would maintain a much broader spectrum of sacrament by claiming an inherently high/sacred value for all sensible things; a position which must then confront the institutional limits traditionally placed onto the number of sacraments.

4) The fourth anticipated objection: ‘The institution of the Christian Church has often limited the number of sacraments to a small number of formal practices. Thus, a virtually limitless Christian sacramentalism could not be acceptable.’

I would respond by maintaining, as Aquinas did, that if a sacrament is ‘the sign of a sacred thing’ . . . it seems that every sign of a sacred thing is a

³¹ Saint Thomas, Third Part, Question 60, Article 4.

³² Ibid.

sacrament.” But, unlike the saint I do not feel the need to nevertheless limit them. Perhaps his position may be expressed differently, and so more fully. He no doubt draws a distinction, and so sees two types of sacraments; one being various implicit signs seen throughout creation, and another type set down explicitly in scripture. But what else would such a distinction be based on? Would it not again draw on an insistence of spiritual superiority?

5) The fifth anticipated objection: ‘Though all things may be sacred, the institutional sacraments are even more so. And so any practice of sacramentalism would then be dealing with the “semi-sacred”.’

I would respond by maintaining that such a finding appears to be unfounded. Though the claims are no doubt numerous, we must consider no more than one at this time. According to Lombard,³³ the distinction between the official sacraments and mere signs of the sacred is one of “efficacy.” For him, an official sacrament “brings about what it signifies and resembles.”³⁴ Specifically, these sacraments offer, as they may, elements such as remedy for sin, assisting grace, and strength through grace and virtue. But, to me, these characteristics of “efficacy” seem to be well represented in the requirements for sacred signs laid down by Aquinas. Sanctification and glorification certainly include the elements of remedy, grace, and strength. As for the “Sacrament of the Godhead”, I recognize it as a further distinction to consider, realizing that he sees it “not [as] a sacred

³³ I must confess that my knowledge of Peter Lombard is limited to the many helpful incites of Phillip Rosemann; specifically, as rendered in his Peter Lombard, Great Medieval Thinkers Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Ibid, 146.

sign but the signified Godhead Himself.”³⁵ It is needless to say this doctrine is traditionally charged with complexity, as well as conflict. It is for these reasons pointless to say much about it here and now. It must then suffice for me to say that if pressed I would present more of a Protestant perspective on the Lord’s supper, and thus come at odds with Lombard’s classical view of literal presence.

³⁵ Ibid.

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