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Faith and Cloth

Objects are used to express one's beliefs. This concept is at the forefront of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in which our chivalrous hero goes on a quest to meet his fate.

Throughout the story, Gawain's loyalty to the code of knights is tested and his golden reputation falls under scrutiny. At the poem's climax, Gawain is given two different explanations for how he managed to survive the Green Knight's three blows, the first of which focuses on a particular article of clothing he's wearing. This particular elucidation illuminates how objects that Gawain dons define his allegiance to his religion. At the narrative peak of this poem, our hero's wavering faith is laid bare via the absence of his shield and the presence of the green girdle.

First, we must discuss Gawain's most prized possession, which our protagonist does not use while the Green Knight enacts his end of the deal. Gawain's shield, described in careful detail in Fitt 2, has various connections to Christianity, as documented by the footnotes accompanying the object's description. These religious ties are rooted in the pentangle symbol found upon the shield. The shape is illustrated as an "endeles knot" (2.630), a figure with no definite beginning or end. The pentangle is a perfect, continuous formation meant to represent the endurance of both the code of knights as well as a knight's fidelity to Christian beliefs. Some of the religious connotations linked to this infinite shape include the five wounds of Christ (2.642), the five joys of Mary (2.646), and the five fingers (2.641). Each of these associations are interconnected with references to chivalry, all of which work together to create a seemingly

impenetrable network of shared beliefs. Through the decoration of one's body with symbols, said person's social role is indicated to the rest of the world (Chiglintsev 85). In the medieval society that Gawain is a part of, what he places on his person defines his identity to all those who see him. By wearing the shield, Gawain is asserting himself as a believer in the ideological nexus that he carries with him. Through the sporting of this object, he himself becomes an emblem of his religious faith. The shield is an affirmation of his identity as a true knight, one who adheres to the laws of knighthood and, more importantly, the teachings of his Christian God.

Gawain's inability to use the shield in his final encounter with the Green Knight helps communicate his faltering trust in Christianity. Without this object to offer him protection, our protagonist is left without a physical barrier to ensure his safety. The absence of the shield becomes a key component in Gawain's test of faith. At first, the knight voices his agreement to the rules of the deal. He even insists that he won't resist anything that the Green Knight chooses to do (4.2253-4). At this point in the climax, it appears that Gawain will fully abide by the deal. He will allow the supernatural being to swing his axe at his neck, just as the Green Knight permitted him to do previously. However, as the weapon comes down for the first time, Gawain visibly flinches, halting the incoming attack (4.2265-8). Here, our hero's fears are revealed. Despite being a believer in Christianity, he is afraid of the possibility of death. In this moment, he doubts that he will be protected by his God and thus winces when he's first swung at. The deprivation of his shield strips Gawain to only his trust in his religion. He cannot use an accessory to reaffirm his faith. Instead, he is forced to simply believe that his God will protect him in this time of need. Gawain's moment of wariness is even more damning considering that he received absolution of his sins after going to confession (3.1883-4). He should, by all means, have no worries over his fate at the Green Knight's hands. If he is free from all sin, then he shouldn't be entertaining the

notion that he will die at the end of the deal. Gawain's moment of weakness brings the knight great shame and subsequently leads to him insisting the Green Knight swing his axe again.

While Gawain is not wielding his glorious shield during the events at the green chapel, he is wearing a different object: the green girdle. This belt was gifted to our protagonist in Fitt 3 by Lady Bertilak, who tried to seduce the knight multiple times while her husband was away hunting. It's an article of clothing that doesn't seem remarkable compared to the aforementioned shield. There aren't a multitude of footnotes listing the various religious connections between the girdle and Christianity nor does it appear holy in any sense. Instead, the accessory is simply a gift that Gawain chooses to accept before heading out to finally find the Green Knight. Despite the seemingly uncomplicated nature of the belt, the meaning that this item receives during the climax of the story completely dismantles this notion.

As we come to learn, the green girdle is more than what it seems. In the first explanation that the Green Knight gives Gawain for surviving his axe, the belt is revealed to be connected to the mysterious entity. "For hit is my wede that thou weres, that ilke woven girdel/ Myn own wyf hit thee weved, I wot wel for sothe" (4.2358-9). Not only does Gawain learn that the Green Knight is actually his previous host, Lord Bertilak, but his failure to fulfill the game between him and the lord is disclosed. In the end, our hero did not share all of his winnings with his benefactor, making Gawain a liar. He has broken the code of interconnected chivalric virtues and, in doing so, has also wavered in his religious faith. Gawain failed to bring up the green girdle during his confession in Fitt 3 and was thus never truly free from all of his wrongdoings when he departed Lord Bertilak's castle. He went to his fate not as a perfect embodiment of his beliefs, but as one who had strayed away from them. Indeed, the Green Knight tells Gawain that he has shown cowardice in the face of death. Despite first describing Gawain as "the faultlest

freke that ever on fote yede” (4.2363), the Green Knight goes on to say that “here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wonted” (4.2366). Although our hero’s reputation heralded him as the epitome of a perfect knight, his actions at the green chapel have proven otherwise. Gawain did not remain loyal to Lord Bertilak’s wishes, breaking the man’s trust and, in doing so, has damaged his previously spotless image.

As the Green Knight continues to explain, we are given the reason as to why Gawain took the belt in the first place. The figure says that the protagonist did not take the green girdle because it was precious in any way or because it symbolized love-making, but because he valued his life (4.2367-8). This statement ends with a word of understanding by the Green Knight, who tells Gawain “the lasse I yow blame” (4.2368). Here, the mysterious entity expresses sympathy for his challenger. Our hero had no evil motivations for taking Lady Bertilak’s gift. Instead, Gawain feared death at the end of his journey and wore the belt to the green chapel as a way to comfort himself. The Green Knight’s recognition of the protagonist’s fear paints Gawain as a regular man, not as the brave, chivalrous person his reputation illustrates him as. He was scared of dying, just like anyone else who would have had to embark on a similar journey. In short, Gawain isn’t special. He’s just like every other mortal soul: a sinner.

This first elucidation details how Gawain has drifted away from his religious faith. We see him express his frustration over the Green Knight’s words when he takes off the green girdle. Gawain first curses cowardice and covetousness, declaring that villainy and vice reside within him before flinging the belt to the ground (4.2374-6). He realizes that the Green Knight is right about him and it infuriates Gawain. He then goes on to describe the belt as a “falssyng” (4.2378) and chastises himself for wearing it instead of abiding by the code of knights (4.2379-81). This explosion of anger shows how our hero has faltered in his trust in the Christian God. Not only

did Gawain commit a sin by breaking Lord Bertilak's trust, but the Green Knight appears to imply that the protagonist chose to place his faith in the belt over his religion. As mentioned before, Gawain does not have his shield to save him from his fate. The green girdle, however, is on his person while the poem's climax unfolds. By wearing this accessory, our hero has presented himself as a liar before the Green Knight. Gawain's survival did not occur because his God saved him from death, but because his attacker took pity on his sins. The new association between the protagonist and the green girdle mars the reputation that was shown to the world via his shield. Just like any other man, Gawain has communed with vices in failing to believe that he would survive the Green Knight's trial. He is no perfect knight, which paints the pentangle shield as the true "falssyng" of this story.

Of course, there are various ways that the religious connotations of the shield and the green girdle respectively could be challenged. One reasoning is that Gawain's shield does not only depict connections to Christianity. In fact, the text suggests that the infinite shape is a reference to humanity by mentioning man's five senses (2.640). This interpretation suggests that the pentangle was already a symbol of mortal souls, not of a holy knight. This idea would then make both the shield and the green girdle representative of Gawain's inability to live up to his faultless reputation and to fully believe in his God. However, as stated on the same page, there is another way to explain the "five wyttes." In footnote 1, Whiteford contends that the poem's author is not talking about Gawain's outer senses, but is instead alluding to his inner ones: will, reason, mind, imagination, and thought" (2.640). This viewpoint takes a religious perspective on these senses, which in turn supports the argument that the shield is a Christian symbol. These five abilities, according to Whiteford, are different ways Gawain could perceive his God. His position upholds the pentangle shield as a representation of piety that knights strive to exemplify.

This idea helps maintain that there exists a stark contrast between the sanctity of this object and the human sin tied to the green girdle.

Gawain, like the other knights of Arthur's court, decorated his body with Christian symbols. During his journey, our hero is revealed not to be the paragon of knighthood that he is thought to be. Without his shield, Gawain is left without a religious emblem, and the green girdle he sports becomes a symbol of his sins. By the end of the poem, our protagonist realizes that he has failed to be a true, pious knight. He doubted that his God would save him from death and exhibits his true nature: a regular man who partakes in vice just like anyone else. You aren't always what you wear. For Gawain, a decorative shield was not enough to uphold his seemingly flawless reputation as a devout follower of Christ.

Works Cited

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