

PATRICK, ARIEL A., M.A. Negotiating Normativity: The Disruptive Wonder of Subversive Giants. (2020)

Directed by Dr. Amy Vines. 27 pp.

This paper confronts the traditionally held motif of the violent, lewd giant in medieval literature to explore giants that resist the normative behavior of their nomenclature. The relationship these nonnormative giants have with humans is innocuous and startlingly philosophical, for the interactions often raise existential questions about humanity and society. Yet encounters with these other giants are brief and their presence is seemingly unimportant both to the characters they engage with and the trajectory of the narrative in which they are found. This paper will explore how this broader spectrum of atypical giants from their stories of origin to their appearances in *Aucassin and Nicolette*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, and *Yvain: Le Chevalier au Lion* complicates the inherent binaries between man and beast and provokes questions about the limitations of socially-constructed ideologies. The narrative function of these creatures is tied to their expansive bodies, much like their violent brethren, but I propose that they offer more than mere spectacle. Instead, they offer a sense of wonder, and wonder, while akin to spectacle, provides a lasting impact on the onlooker and forces them to reevaluate their systems of codification and processes of meaning-making. Their interactions force an evaluation of entrenched constructs of identity and reconstitute the boundaries of humanity.

PATRICK, ARIEL A., M.A. Embracing Ambiguity: Shifting Symbols in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. (2020)

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This paper will examine the connections between ambiguity and symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The poem's greatest points of ambiguity: Gawain's confessionals, the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the knight's shame, and the fluidity of the girdle's meaning emphasize the inherently flawed, dual nature of humanity. Scholarship often focuses on these ambiguities without factoring the role of the poem's two primary symbols, the pentangle and the girdle, in demonstrating that Gawain's failing as the result of his inherent human imperfection is not as grave an infraction as he perceives. This paper will focus on how the meaning of these two symbols evolves throughout Gawain's journey, examine critical responses to these symbols, and contrast how the shift of focus from the pentangle shield to the girdle impacts the overall reading of the poem. I propose that these emphatic shifts and the use of symbolism reveal the duality of human nature—one that is suspended between the spheres of social constructs and inherent, uninhibited human behavior. The root of Gawain's turmoil, even if he is unaware of the source, is this ambivalence, for not even a knight perceived as infallible as he is capable of upholding the values and expectations of two conflicting spheres.

NEGOTIATING NORMATIVITY: THE DISRUPTIVE WONDER
OF SUBVERSIVE GIANTS
AND
EMBRACING AMBIGUITY: SHIFTING SYMBOLS IN *SIR GAWAIN*
AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by

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NEGOTIATING NORMALITY: THE DISRUPTIVE WONDER OF SUBVERSIVE GIANTS

Of all of the strange and mysterious creatures that grace the pages of medieval manuscripts, the giant is one of the most prevalent. The giant's distorted dimensions and grotesque features demarcate this being as other despite its physical similarities to humans. Because the giant is situated somewhere between man and beast, it raises questions about the boundaries of humanity, poses a threat to social order, and, consequently, has served as a pinnacle symbol to be conquered by men in order to re-establish their place in the perceived natural hierarchy¹. However, the giant figure is problematic for readers, for its bipedalism, speech, and use of weapons and clothing situates this being closer to human than monster. The uncomfortable truth about the giant does not lie in its strength or enormity but in the similarities it bears to humankind. The common trope of the giant that lacks restraint over sexual, violent, and gluttonous urges reveals the less savory aspects of human behavior. Safeguarded by the blanket of otherness, this figure and its behavior seem to be outside of the realm of human possibility, but this is a thinly-veiled misdirection. The giant's closeness to humans reveals the fragility of socially-constructed standards of behavior and serves as a reminder to the medieval reader that their own primal urges lurk beneath the guise of

¹ See Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 71-74. Brutus embodies this hierarchical ideology as he cleanses Albion of its native giants.

normativity; that reflection of human corruption is why it must be slain. An uncomfortable truth dies along with the vile giant, as is the case with the Mont St. Michele Giant or Harpin de la Montagne. This recurring motif establishes the giant as an oppositional figure but ironically leaves no room for otherness within the giant category. In various texts, there exist creatures that share the giant's dimensions and humanoid appearance but defy the norm of the uncouth, dangerous behaviors of their savage brethren. The relationship these nonnormative giants have with humans is innocuous and startlingly philosophical, for the interactions often raise existential questions about humanity and society. Yet encounters with these other giants in medieval texts are brief and their presence is seemingly unimportant both to the characters with whom they engage and the trajectory of the narrative in which they are found. Consequently, this figure's narrative purpose is obscured, and often overlooked in medievalist criticism.

This paper will explore the subtleties of how this broader spectrum of atypical giants complicates the inherent binaries between man and beast and provokes questions about the limitations of behavioral standards, taxonomies, and humanity in medieval French and English romances. The narrative function of these creatures is tied to their expansive bodies, much like their violent brethren, but I propose that they offer more than mere spectacle. Instead, they offer a sense of wonder, and wonder, while akin to spectacle, provides a lasting impact on the onlooker and forces them to reevaluate their systems of codification and processes of meaning-making. Following Nicola McDonald's theory of wonder in Middle English romances, I propose that by calling attention to "rifts in individual knowledge," these nonnormative giant figures suggest a flaw in the systems

of belief and understanding used to measure the world (7). Because wonders force the onlooker to consider alternative modes of thinking or being outside of the norm, the spaces in which these interactions take place become sights of negotiation. I will examine how Yvain, Aucassin, and Sir Eglamour's encounters with these other giants challenge perceptions of the "moral and epistemological certainties" both they and the reader have previously accepted (7). Their interactions force an evaluation of entrenched constructs of identity and reconstitute the boundaries of humanity.

Occasionally, these nonnormative giants appear in criticism, although they are, in my assessment, mistakenly taken as wild men. Their physical description, however, does not coincide with the traditional wild man. The wild man and the giant both appear in similar settings in many medieval romances, far removed from civilization in the wilderness or forest, and both use rudimentary weapons like clubs and wear animal skins. However, these shared traits are not enough to classify these figures as wild men. One of the most notable aspects of the wild man (or in the rare occasion, woman) is the excess of hair, generally covering the entire body, "giving them a hide like a bear or a wolf" (Bartra 88).² Beneath their animal-like hide, the features of the wild man are far more similar to European humans, as they were often "thought of as being white and bearded, with an abundant head of hair, pale skin, thick lips, and narrow nose" (Bartra 88). Whereas wild men were described as distinctly European, Sylvia Huot notes that the giant's exaggerated features exude "an implicit identification of racial alterity"(44). The figures

² Bartra, *Wild Men in the Looking Glass*, 88-90.

outlined in this paper do not physically align with the wild man but are described more closely to other giants: grotesque humanoids whose physical attributes are akin to animals. Unlike the giants that indulge in excess and violence and wild men, these figures are not described taxonomically. The giant nomenclature carries with it associations of violence, exorbitance, and disgust, thus reserving use of the title exclusively for figures that adhere to those prescribed behaviors. Part of what makes the giant such an unsettling figure is that it cannot be classified in terms of standard taxonomy, and ironically the use of the label *giant* overlooks members of this species whose behaviors deviate. Despite the markedly unfrontational behavior of these nonnormative giants, the members of this group, however, are all subject to the same physical marginalization and stigmatization as their more uncouth brethren.

Evidence of variation in the giant species can be traced back to their origin stories in many early medieval texts. In the twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britannia*, Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts the discovery of the island that would become Britain as an event innately tied to conquering and colonizing otherness. The colonial narrative emphasizes Brutus' systematic takeover of the land with limited reference to the native giants. Even before Brutus and his men colonize, they first must drive "the giants whom they had discovered into the caves in the mountains" (Monmouth 72).³ Monmouth's use of the relative pronoun "whom" in reference to the giants suggests that even despite their marginalized status they are to be viewed in a similar light to humans rather than beasts.

³ Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, 72.

This kinship to humans, however, is limited as the giants are denied ownership of their own native lands. Though they pose no physical threat to the Trojan invaders, the giants must be removed in order for the seeds of the British nation to be planted. With the giants out of sight, Brutus and his men divided and cultivated the land in a way “you would have thought the land had always been inhabited” (72). The giants’ way of life before colonization is dismissed, and Britain is born from their erasure.

As the Britons expand their reach, develop language, and establish territories on the isle, the giants become objects entangled in the establishment of a fledgling national, masculine identity. Initially, they serve as wrestling partners for Corineus, who “experienced great pleasure from” the interaction (75). Though wrestling does not necessitate violence, it implies a struggle for dominance, and the close physical proximity hints at the sordid relationship between human and animal that the giant threatens. If the man can dominate the giant, then surely he can conquer his own inherent animality. The giants, who have remained passive up to this point, do not share Corineus’ pleasure and initiate an attack on Brutus and his men. Unlike the savage giants that overshadow later narratives such as the Mont Saint Michel giant, these beings are nonviolent in nature and only resort to violence after being threatened. Their acquiescence to the human invasion ironically demonstrates greater restraint than their oppressors, yet this is overlooked in criticism. Instead, the narrative shifts the attention to the giants’ retaliation and frames it to warrant their deaths.

The giants’ “repulsive” appearance appears only to be of significance after they have demonstrated a capacity for violence, even if it is the result of the Britons’

provocation (72). Because they are a threat to Brutus and his men, the giants' physical otherness is accentuated, and their marginalized status makes them expendable. The largest of these threats is Gogmagog, the strongest of the giants, who stands twelve feet tall and is "particularly repulsive" (72). Monmouth does not elaborate on Gogmagog's appearance, which suggests the primary concern is that his body differs from human dimensions and the specifics of how are unimportant. In addition to being a physical threat, Gogmagog threatens the understanding of what it means to be human. Possession of a name bestows a creature with an identity, but for Gogmagog his identity becomes associated with violence and horror despite his placid nature. A giant "so strong, that once he had given it a shake, he could tear up an oak-tree as though it were a hazel wand," Gogmagog is a formidable adversary, but this description suggests that he has no interest in directing his strength towards any living creature; he only has the potential for human destruction (72). However, Gogmagog's inherent monstrous nature cannot overcome the behavioral expectations that are thrust upon him, and it is inconceivable to the Britons that he poses no threat. It is perhaps the capability of treading the line between man and beast he demonstrates by controlling his strength and impulses against the invaders that seals his fate. Brutus dispatches Corineus, "who enjoyed [wrestling the giants] beyond all reason" to fight Gogmagog on his behalf (73). Brutus and the nation born from his namesake must remain distanced from the giants at all costs. This David and Goliath fantasy draws on the supernatural, as the outmatched Corineus displays unnatural strength by lifting Gogmagog over his head and throwing him off a cliff to a "sharp reef of rocks, where he was dashed into a thousand fragments" (73). Corineus,

however, plays a passive role in the giant's death, for the rocks ultimately kill Gogmagog after he is tossed over the cliff, and another layer of distance is created between Brutus and Gogmagog. This same distancing between human and nonnormative giants reappears in later texts, whereas the vile, violent giants meet their demise at the hands of humans in most histories and romances. In Monmouth's account, nature—in the form of a rocky shoreline—appears to play a role in the destruction of these beings, implying a return to a perceived natural order, one where men are at the top of the hierarchy. Monmouth's account promotes the destruction of giants without taking into consideration if the actions were warranted, thus overlooking the possibility for variance within the species.

The prologue of the thirteenth-century Middle English *Prose Brut Chronicle* expands on Monmouth's account of the Trojans' colonization of Britain and provides a creation story for the giants. While the giants in this account are as innocuous as those in the *Historia Regum Britannia*, they are born out of the bodily excess and physical desire that would become quintessential traits of their species. The "Albina Prologue" notes that Albyne and her thirty-two sisters arrived on the island long before Brutus and the Trojans, and they are responsible for birthing the race of giants. Once on land and free of outside influence, the women name the province Albion in honor of the eldest sister and survive the wilderness by living "as þei beste might" (18). The distance from society's rigid expectations allows the women to submit to their own desires without regard for moderation, but the prologue makes clear the folly of their indulgence. After the women feed on animal flesh, their bodies become engorged and disfigured by their excess, thus triggering an unexplained, intense sexual desire. Desperate to fulfill their lust, they

copulate with the devils who are but a brief imitation of men. These devils “schad the natures vpon hem,” and the women gave birth to giants (26).

In addition to the *Prologue's* assertion that Albina and her sisters' fail to establish a true nation before Brutus' arrival, it also offers insight into the giant's conception and provides evidence for the existence of nonviolent giants. In this version of Brutus' invasion, the giants are short-lived, slaughtered by the Trojans upon their arrival to Albion, but, unlike in the *Historia Regum Britannia*, the struggle between man and beast is not emphasized. The single paragraph dedicated to the creation and destruction of the giants does not provide any rationale behind Brutus' attack. The limited description and narration speaks only of the giants as “horrible,” but whether this is in reference to their behavior or appearance remains unmentioned (30). In the absence of these specifics, greater emphasis is placed on the giants' similarities to their human mothers. The giants' civilization emphasizes individual identities and the use of names, for all of the giants “were nompned by divers names,” such as “Gogmagog, and anoþer Laughherigan, ” (27-28, 29). With most of their lives shrouded in secrecy, the Albion giants are, at the very least, nonconfrontational. Nonetheless, Brutus “conqueryd & scomfyted these geauntes abouseyd” in the caves they called home (32-33). The location of Brutus' attack—the giants' caves—suggests that the giants were operating defensively or were taken by surprise. In either case, Albina and her sister' offspring serve as objects to be acted upon rather than entities capable of action. However, the purpose of this narrative is to situate the giants as objects to be eradicated even despite their nonconfrontational behavior. Tamar Drukker notes that “In many tales of origin, giants figure as the first traces of

human presence in unpopulated regions,” and they must be overcome before the land can be claimed regardless of their nature (461). “Keeping the giants away from the borders of the land,” Drukker suggests further, “is a feat in the establishment of human civilization” and an essential aspect of an origin narrative (462). In medieval origin stories, the only driving factor in the slaughter of these creatures is to conquer and establish civilized, human communities in their wake, but the narrative function of the giant shifts in other genres. When these giants are seen through the eyes of exploration rather than colonization, their threat fades away, and there is room for spectacle.

Medieval travel narratives, even fictional ones, transgress cultural and social boundaries by offering a glimpse into foreign cultures and societies. Sir John Mandeville’s account of his travels beyond the borders of medieval Christian lands blends fact and myth with preexisting narratives, and as the number of extant copies suggests *Travels* was influential in shaping European opinions about cultural, theological, and racial difference, even outside of the human realm. Sebastian Sobecki summarizes the philosophical workings of Mandeville’s *Travels*: “The imaginary journey of transgression is paralleled by the process of reading through which the reader confronts the ‘Other’” (331). The discrepancies between the medieval reader’s limited worldview and the one Mandeville offers, Sobecki suggests, are alleviated by Mandeville’s and the reader’s belief in a concrete delineation between humanity and other creatures. The reader is assured that whatever lies beyond the reaches of their established limit is the Other. While Sobecki’s Foucauldian ideology of transgression refers to the intersection of human cultures, the same applies to interspecies interaction. Mandeville speaks in one of

his narratives of an island inhabited by giants. While it is only in later romances and in parallel with traditional giants that nonnormative giants serve as a sense of wonder and amazement, Mandeville's account establishes them as spectacles. The language he uses to describe these figures raises questions about the distinction between human and giant. Mandeville describes the inhabitants of this island as "people as big as giants twenty-eight or thirty feet tall" (169). Is Mandeville describing people as giants or giants as people? This seemingly minor discrepancy expands the species parameters and allows room for complexity within the giant population. Within the same sentence, Mandeville situates the giants as Other by discussing their enormous height, which destabilizes any similarity that may have been derived from the reference to people as giants. When speaking of foreign religions, Mandeville begins by establishing his Christian sameness with the reader in order to emphasize the otherness of a new religion, but when referencing giants in his travels he continuously alternates similarities and differences between human and giant culture. Mandeville's technique suggests that the line between the two species may not be as explicit it appears. The giant culture he writes of reflects many of the perpetuated characteristics such as animal skin attire and eating only raw flesh, though these individuals possess a particular affinity for human meat. The desire for human flesh is so intense that the giants wade into waters to capture approaching ships, so that "No one willingly enters there or approaches the island" (169). Though these giants are a direct threat to approaching humans, their isolated location does not make them a threat to behavioral and taxonomic normativity or human civilization. It

seems that so long as they do not encroach on society or on land ripe for colonization giants are allowed to survive.

Mandeville's objective observation of their way of life emphasizes the novelty of particular social practices instead of focusing on abhorrent or deviant physical features. The narrative places as much emphasis on the creatures' pastoral lifestyle as it does their cannibalism, establishing these creatures as a means of spectacle. The giants live a life not defined by their unsavory appetites but one that bears some semblance to that of a medieval reader, as they "drink milk, for they have enough animals" (169). Mandeville's narrative suggests that this is a practice distinctive of giant culture, citing an island of larger giants, who tend to sheep as large as oxen. Despite the giants' practice of animal husbandry, "they have no houses," living exposed to the elements among the other creatures, wild or domesticated (169). While they may be like us, they are not us. Mandeville's observations of these giants ask the reader to engage with the Other but only passively. While these other kind of giants act as a spectacle in Mandeville's *Travels*, their presence only incites wonder and questions of identity and philosophy through direct engagement.

Giant tropes that "subvert the expectations of both genus and genre" are most prevalent in texts, like romances, that deal with the construction of male identity where encounters with nonnormative giants force the protagonists to reconsider their knowledge of the world (McDonald 10). The thirteenth-century chantefable *Aucassin and Nicolette* is one such text that provides a developed perspective of this figure, and the protagonist's interaction with a nonnormative giant compels him to evaluate his epistemology. The

circumstances that lead Aucassin to stumble upon the “bizarre, ugly and hideous” figure in the forest differ from the traditional romances, making his quest one of intellectual prowess rather than chivalric (55). For a protagonist like Aucassin, who has renounced his chivalric identity for his Saracen lover, he must “win the wit required of a man; indeed, defeating the bafflement that a wonder gives rise to is integral to his education” (McDonald 9).⁴ The term “defeat” expands beyond physical altercation and refer to a conquering of logic or social ideals. Amidst the text’s comic reversals and parodies, Aucassin’s encounter with the giant forces him to address his own privilege and question his reality. The poet establishes that the interaction between human and giant is meant to destabilize the reader’s concept of humanness by referring to the giant as a “young man” (55). In the lines following, the figure’s features are described as exaggerated, exorbitant human ones, as is the case with most giants. The character’s “big head, blacker than a lump of coal...gigantic flat nose and a pair of big, wide nostrils, and thick pair of lips” not only delineates the divide between human and beast but also between class and race (55). However, I will not unpack this (albeit important) quagmire and instead look to the figure’s interactions with Aucassin as they relate to wonderment.

The being’s appearance catches Aucassin so off guard that he is filled with fear to look the “bizarre, ugly and hideous” face of otherness (55). The figure appears unphased and perhaps accustomed to such negative reception, as he meets Aucassin’s terror with the blessing, “Fair, friend, God save you!” (55). The giant’s decision not to acknowledge

⁴ McDonald proposes that encounters with wonders in medieval romances expand young knights’ knowledge of themselves and world, ushering them into an intellectual maturity from which there can be no return.

his off-putting appearance indicates a high level of self-restraint and self-awareness. Rather than frame the difference between Aucassin and the giant negatively, the poet uses this interaction to highlight their difference as the key to enable Aucassin to broaden his understanding of the world beyond his own troubles. It is because the giant lives remotely and this interaction takes place far beyond civilization that Aucassin is able to shift his perspective of suffering and hardship. Experiences with the monstrous in medieval literature occurred commonly beyond the reaches of civilization because “the city conferred humanity, for it gave its citizens a shared setting in which to exercise their human faculties in the practice of law, social, intercourse, worship, philosophy, and art” (Friedman 30). Beings who lived outside of cities and events that took place beyond their borders were not subject to societal norms. This is often taken to extremes in medieval romances and travel narratives in which the giants are depicted as living in mountains, caves, and distant forests. Unlike the green man, who is a similar figure, the nonnormative giant’s place in the wild is not to demonstrate a harmony with nature but to highlight the giant’s separation from society. Even the “noble savages among the monstrous races were regarded with salutary reflection and perhaps a certain amount of awe, but they were kept always at the margins of the European imagination” (Friedman 164). The use of spacial marginality as gatekeeping in the case nonnormative giants is precisely what grants interactions with these figures the ability to provoke philosophical reflection. Roxanne Mountford comments on the nature of rhetorical spaces, proposing that they “have heuristic power over their inhabitants and spectators by forcing them to change both their behavior...and, sometimes, their view of themselves” (50). In the same

way the walls of a city and the proximity of buildings discourage inhabitants from straying beyond the norm, so too does the openness of nature loosen normative boundaries.

Aucassin is able to interact freely when he encounters the giant in the wilderness because the physical distance from civilization allows him to operate outside of its restrictions. He questions why the giant is in the forest in an attempt to gain further insight into the strange creature, but he is again taken by surprise when his question is returned with a brusque “What’s it to you?”(55). The giant shows no regard for Aucassin’s noble standing or the distinction between classes. Further dismantling the social constructs entangled in Aucassin’s noble birth, he slights the young knight for his excessive weeping. He says in response to Aucassin’s false claim that a lost dog is the source of his grief:

Bad luck to anyone who respects you, because no man in this land is so rich that if your father asked for ten or fifteen or twenty hounds, he wouldn’t give them very willingly and be only too happy about it. But I’m the one who has a reason to weep. (55)

Whatever the nature of Aucassin’s problem, the giant makes it clear that is a medieval first-world problem, but he, on the other hand, is experiencing true hardship. After losing the best of his employer’s oxen, the giant has been searching for the animals for three days, neither drinking or eating during this time. Worse, he is so impoverished that he could not dream of repaying the rich peasant for his livestock, so he must live on the lam to avoid being imprisoned on his return to town. He refuses to be reduced to tears, and

shifting the attention back to Aucassin he asks, “And you’re crying over some shitty dog? To hell with anyone who respects you!” (56). Critiquing the medieval social system, he points out the folly of those placing their faith in Aucassin simply because of his status as the son of a count. The most interesting aspect of this exchange is that Aucassin not only accepts the giant’s feedback and gives him the money to pay off his debt but does not perceive his comments as a slight. The giant’s marginalized status is utilized as a tool for the young knight’s paradigm shift. The innocuous Other exists at a safe enough distance that enables his commentary to be taken seriously without being perceived as a threat.

The wonder of the giant in *Aucassin and Nicolette* is predicated on the figure’s human similarities. The text is clear that this giant, although physically inhuman, shares very human emotional and social struggles. While his candor suggests he cares little for social graces, the problems the giant faces are relatable to the medieval reader, even if they are not ones to which Aucassin can relate. After Aucassin shows compassion for the giant’s woes, the giant’s tone shifts. Here for the first time he refers to Aucassin as “sire.” The giant’s acknowledgment of Aucassin’s social standing demonstrates a newfound respect for the young man. His behavioral shift serves as a mirror and a vehicle for Aucassin to utilize to better himself. For a scene that bears no influence on the major plot of *Aucassin and Nicolette*, the unknown author dedicated several lines to this exchange. Returning to the overt issue of class distinction at play, this character and his interaction with Aucassin appears to be an attempt to humanize the lower, peasant class, and bridge the gap between the classes through universal human experiences. McDonald recognizes the inherent dangers of exploring wonders and the “very real risk that the knowledge-

making process will be disrupted, that the knight (or the reader who doggedly tails his progress) will not be able to come back from—beyond—the brink, from the dizzying experience of unknowing” (9). Yet the very nature of wonders incites an itch that cannot be scratched, and the insistence to dig deeper into the world of the unknown becomes compulsion for the reader.

Because of the formulaic structure and prevalence of the supernatural within medieval romances, the genre highlights the provocative nature of the wonder of nonnormative giants. The giant’s obvious similarities to the romantic hero intended to slay him serve as a constant reminder of the protagonist’s fallibility.⁵ These heroes, even despite their inhuman displays of abstinence and chivalry, are subject to the same excess the typical giant displays. Giants become essential to constructing masculine identity, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes: “The giant appears in romance because the *instance* (agency, insistence) of the monster precipitates full heroic identity, and he recurs because he threatens constantly to ingest this thing he helps to produce” (81).⁶ While the chivalric hero slays giants such as the giant of Mont Saint Michele and Harpin de la Montagne to solidify a hypermasculine ideal, the perpetuation of a knight’s interaction with nonviolent, pastoral giants shifts the attention away from the body and gendered identity to disrupt the protagonists’ notions about human identity. Cohen states that a large number of giant-centric romances, particularly those that situate a battle between man and giant as an initiation into manhood, raise questions about what constitutes humanity.

⁵ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes that the power of both giants and knights is tied to their physical strength, and each pose a threat to order if they cannot be contained by chivalry.

⁶ The giant perpetually reminds the knight of his inherent, paradoxical fragility and animality.

Of these “identity romances,” the interaction between knight and giant in *Sir Eglamour of Artois* and *Le Chevalier au lion* offer more than the standard David and Goliath trope (Cohen 73). The spectacular manner in which Yvain and Eglamour slay their giant foes and desecrate their bodies serves as a visual representation of the transfer of power, but these displays overshadow the presence of nonnormative giants within the texts.

While its medieval popularity diminished throughout the ages, and it remains largely overlooked by scholars, *Sir Eglamour of Artois* broadens the scope of nonnormative giants. Eglamour, in following the “identity romance” formula is required to accomplish three tasks in order to win the hand of his would-be wife Cristabell. Cristabell’s father, the earl of Artois, first demands that Eglamour enter the forest guarded by the giant Arrok and hunt one of the giant’s harts. The earl does not request that Eglamour kill Arrok or explicitly suggest that the task require the knight to engage with him:

Her by weste
Ther wones a gyaunt in the forest,
Syche on thou sawe nevyr ere.
Cypré treyes grow ether fayre and longe,
Grete hertys walken him amonge,
The fairest that on fote may fare.
Wend thedur and fett me on away
And then dar I savely say
That thou haste ben thare. (223-31)

The quest the earl pitches to Eglamour is a search for wonder rather than chivalric glory. Arrok does not represent any threat, as he walks among the harts as any other creature of the forest may. The only purpose he serves to Eglamour is as a wonder; the opportunity

to marvel at the giant becomes a part of the knight's quest to attain Cristabell's hand and crystalize his heroic identity.

Once Eglamour enters the forest and begins his hunt, an altercation with the giant becomes inescapable. Arrok, like the bull-herder in *Yvain*, acts as guardian of the deer, and as their protector he must eliminate any threat. Sensing his harts are in danger, he calls out to Eglamour:

Me thynkes howndes that I here,
Some thefe ys come to stele my dere—
Hym were well bettyr sese.
Be heme that me gette and borne,
In wers tyme blewe he never horne,
Nor derrere bowghth he flesch! (289-94)

While Arrok's reaction to an intruder in the wood appears violent and vindictive, his frustration is grounded in his duty to protect his herd. That he views the harts as his own property suggests that Arrok's role as guardian is enmeshed in his identity. Unlike other giants in romances whose violence and excess is the result of depravity or over-indulgence, Arrok behaves according to a clearly defined set of rules. Much in the same way the initially peaceful giants attack Brutus and his men after they are forced to wrestle with them in Monmouth's *Historia*, Arrok's behavior can be traced to an act of provocation by the knight. Eglamour's attack on the deer becomes a personal affront to Arrok and threatens to disrupt the harmony of his forest. In a subversion of the traditional trope of identity romances, it is Eglamour rather than his giant opponent who becomes a threat to order.

Although Arrook and his brother Marras (who later battles Eglamour for vengeance) become violent only after provocation, their gigantic proportions are what makes their defeats chivalrically worthwhile. Eglamour, oblivious that his actions are what spurred the battle between Arrook and himself, only sees the now violent giant as a threat to be neutralized to further bolster his heroic prowess. The culmination of Eglamour's first task then becomes entangled with a visual transfer of power from the deceased Arrook to the mighty Eglamour as the knight beheads the giant and presents it to the earl. Mention of Arrook's height of "fifty fote and mare" is made only after Eglamour has defeated him. Thanking God as he surveys the giant's lifeless body, Eglamour marvels in his conquest of such an enormous foe. Cohen notes that this ritual giant beheading in identity romances is "in its simplest terms part of the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, from mistakes and potential ambiguity into the certainties of a stable masculinity" (73). The beheaded giants Cohen references are belligerent, unruly creatures that represent a threat to safety and the stability of conventionality; and, consequently, safeguarding cultural normativity becomes a facet of the young knights' recently established identity. The impact of Arrook's beheading reaches beyond masculinity and the agreement between Eglamour and the earl. Country folk flock to Eglamour as he carries the decapitated head back to the castle to see "siche an hed, as they seny,/ They saw nevir non" (338-39). The wonder of the giant's head exposes these people to the vastness of the world beyond their countryside and suggests that their system of belief and physical measure are inadequate, but it does not seem to do any explicit work within the text. Though Eglamour remains apparently unchanged after his

giant encounters, McDonald proposes that the function of wonder extends beyond the text to the reader. “Wonders, in short, are sites of resistance,” and their presence forces the reader to question their own “moral and epistemological certainties, the things that pass for knowledge,” even if it is not explicit in the text (7). Though the giants of *Sir Eglamour* are unfulfilled wonders by McDonald’s definition, their presence nonetheless demonstrates a shift in narrative function for the variant form of giants.

Chrétien de Troyes’ twelfth-century romance *Yvain: Le Chevalier au Lion* most overtly emphasizes the wonder of the gentler giants. Following the common narrative arc of medieval romance, the hero Yvain’s resolve is tested, his fallibility proven, and his honor and courtesy restored at the conclusion. Much of the scholarship on this text fails to acknowledge the philosophical negotiations of Yvain and Calgrenant’s encounters with the bull-herding giant force readers because their interactions are overshadowed by Yvain’s duel with Harpin de la Montagne. The knight’s battle with Harpin follows the inherited narrative structure of passage into stable masculinity, yet his interaction with the bull herding giant delves deeper into questions of masculine, chivalric identity.

Harpin is the epitome of a standard giant behavior, and it is easy to see how claims such as his declaration to give the baron’s daughter “to his scum, as a slut,” take critical precedence over encounters with the bull-herding giant earlier in the text (4116). In juxtaposition with Harpin, the unnamed bull-herder appears only to serve as a spectacle for Calgrenant and Yvain, who each view him with a voyeuristic gaze, astounded by his immense stature and grotesque physicality. Yet the allure of encountering such an oddity becomes the catalyst for Yvain’s transformative journey, as

his willingness to take up the quest to avenge his cousin's honor is rooted in part in a desire to gawk at this "half-real, half-imagined" creature (712). Yvain's excitement over "the giant creature who guarded" the wild bulls made it "hard for him to delay" his departure from Arthur's court after hearing Calgrenant recount his trek to the wellspring (709-10). The wellspring and the opposing knight Yvain must face there, however, are afterthoughts, as Yvain would only "if he could," visit "the stone and the spring and the bowl" (714-15). His primary concern appears to be experiencing the wonder of the bull herder. Contained within a mere eight lines of dialogue-less text, Yvain's interaction with the bull herder is disproportionate to his initial excitement. The giant simply fulfills his role as guardian of both the bulls and the location of the well spring and directs Yvain to his quest, but his role in the narrative is more valuable than it appears. He simultaneously relays information, elicits excitement, and raises philosophical questions. At the sight "Of that monster," Yvain seems to have satisfied his desire to see a spectacle as he contemplates "how Nature/ Could make such ugliness, such horror" (796-99). These lines aside, Yvain does not appear moved by his encounter with the bull herder, and the figure is forgotten as he continues on with his quest. It is in Calgrenant's initial meeting with the figure that the wonder is accentuated.

Calgrenant spares no detail of the bull herder when recounting his own trek to the wellspring. Upon arriving in the clearing, he makes note of the bulls before their caretaker, referring to them as beasts so fearsome that "even the sight of them would make you / Afraid" (285-86). As he retreats in fear, he notices the "huge, and hideously ugly" bull herder (290). The grotesqueness of the bull herders features are accentuated,

and he is described as “black as a Moor,/ Huge, and hideously ugly/Indeed, so incredibly awful/ That there are no words to describe him” (289-92). Despite his claim that no words can describe the creature, Calgrentant likens him to a packhorse, elephant, owl, cat, wolf and boar—anything but human. McDonald notes that the bull herder’s appearance “is complemented by an equally marvelous refusal to fetter or cage the ‘wilde bestes’ in his charge” (6). The insistence on the bull herder’s beastly qualities and his association with fearsome animals overlooks his mild behavior and inverts conventional representations of giants that link deviant behavior to animality or otherness. The line between human and animal is a fragile one based on anthropocentric ideology. Likening the bull herder to animals uphold the fallacy that humans are distinguishable from the rest of the animal kingdom.

It is, however, the bull herder’s mental faculties that complicate the man and beast binary. He does not have the desire to intervene with human society like the standard giant but rather resists the society and its constructs. As he recounts his journey to the well spring, it is Calgrentant, not the narrator, who raises the pervading question of what it means to be human. The significance of this philosophical query is made apparent in that the dialogue between Calgrentant and the bull herder survives translation from their actual meeting and the details of it are deemed significant enough for Calgrentant to share with his fellow knights. The bull herder, whose only narrative function appears to be as a spectacle, forces Calgrentant to question his system of understanding, albeit briefly. With the features of many fearsome beasts, the bull herder resists any standard biological classification. Unable to identify the creature before him, Calgrentant asks the bull herder

to explain himself since his own knowledge fails to do so. “You, tell me, what are you, / Good, or evil, or what?” he questions (328). The ‘or what’ implies that there is an unnamed intermediary space between good and evil, one that perhaps possesses qualities of both extremes. The bull herder ignores Calgrenant’s binaries and situates himself as neither, responding simply “I am a man”(329). Though he is the one who welcomed the potential for ambiguity, Calgrenant is dissatisfied with the bull herder’s vagueness and presses him to explain “What kind of man?” to which the bull herder replies, “The kind/ You see. I’m nothing but myself” (330-31). The bull herder, unconcerned by his own broad classification and whatever worth may be ascribed to it, puts the onus back on Calgrenant to decide his value, presumably as it relates to his physicality.

Part of the prevalence of the giant figure its ability to complicate inherent binaries and capacity to disrupt dogmatic principles. The twelfth-century romance *Bevis of Hampton*, for example, utilizes an interaction between knight and giant to expose the instability of the codification process. Ascopard explains to Bevis that he has been exiled from his home because at thirty feet tall, he is a dwarf amongst giants. McDonald notes that “His response to Bevis acknowledges, however, that neither dwarf nor giant is immutable: both are the product of perspective, as is the standard against which they are measured” (10). Ascopard forces Bevis to evaluate the effectiveness of his classification process and, consequently, the system of knowledge from which he learned it. The giant’s comment reveals that “the differential categories into which knowledge is organized and on which meaning is conventionally predicated...[are] volatile and provisional, not fixed or absolute” (McDonald 10). Ascopard, like the bull herder, uses

the resistance of classification in order to establish his identity. The giant's liminal nature invites questions on the validity of taxonomy, and because the nonnormative figures do not pose a direct threat these questions can be explored more fully.

Eugene Vance and Wlad Godzich expand on the bull herder's liminal status, commenting that his capacity for speech is a distinctly human trait. However, they note that in conjecture with his distinct animal likeness, the bull herder's "portrait, in its aggregate, adds up only to generic animality and not to specific humanness" (56).⁷ This figure's ability to speak, though markedly human, is overshadowed by his animal-like qualities and the sheer quantity of different animals to which he bears similarity. The bull herder's resistance of categorization forces the reader to contemplate "the fundamental difference between man-as-human and man-as animal" (56). So is there a clear distinction between Vance and Godzich's two alternatives? Do the two coexist? At least in *Yvain*, they are so intimately entwined that they cannot be distinguished from one another. Part of the wonder of this gigantic figure is the ability to interact with him safely. For obvious reasons, Harpin cannot be safely studied (at least not alive), nor do his vile actions denote him worthy of admiration, but the bull herder provokes no fear that Yvain or Calgrenant may see any of their knightly identities mirrored in him. The giant's uncategorizable, grotesque appearance, which is precisely what makes him awe-inspiring, is stable and cannot be transmitted to the viewer.

⁷ Vance and Godzich argue that Chrétien de Troy's *Le Chevalier au Lion* expands on twelfth-century notions of humanism by complicating notions of socially-accepted behavior and humans' "generic animality" (54). They cite Calgrenant's encounter with the bull herder and the figure's muddled taxonomy as one such example.

Experiences with the confounding do not necessitate understanding, but rather the process of questioning that spurs the reader to further explore their own notions of life. Literature, even in its earlier stages, serves as a format to explore and express personal identity, society, and the individual's place within society. Despite hundreds of years between the composition of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannia*, the *Midde English Prose Brut*, Mandeville's *Travels*, *Aucassin and Nicolette*, *Yvain*, *Sir Elgamour of Artois*, and now, modern readers (and viewers) are searching for answers to the very questions these texts posed. The giant, in its various forms has survived the ages, and while the face of the tradition has changed the giant's performative function has remained intact. The passage of time, however, has expanded on tradition to include nonnormative giants, which suggests a cultural willingness to rethink the inherent human and animal binary. In the imaginary we are granted the safety to explore the reaches of taxonomies and codifications. An innate aspect of humanity seems to be the desire to question, to seek out information, and expand one's perspective, and so we turn to the monstrous wonders we continue to create.

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EMBRACING AMBIGUITY: SHIFTING SYMBOLS IN
SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has for centuries perplexed readers who attempt to find meaning in the poem's many ambiguities. The narrative structure is clear and familiar to any reader of medieval romance, yet the work's incongruities and parallels work against any overt reading of the poem. The lack of thematic clarity is not uncommon in literary works, but what is it about *Sir Gawain* that continues to provoke generations of critics to tease out meaning from the lines? Gawain's failings raise questions about the very essence of human nature and the extent to which our inherent humanity can be contained by our social constructs; exposing truth in the poem is as much about scholarship as it is existentialism. Critics often cite Gawain's confessions to the priest and Bertilak, the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the knight's shame, and the meaning of the girdle after it has been adopted as part of the attire for the Arthurian knights as sources of evidence for the poet's intended message. While the details of their claims vary, many critics propose that the Gawain poet's emphasis on the aforementioned details in addition to other ambiguities is meant to demonstrate the inherently flawed, dual nature of humanity.

Morton Bloomfield proposed that *Sir Gawain* scholarship falls into five distinct methods of criticism: those that take a mythological approach, emphasize the poem's Christian overtones, address the comedy, analyze the distinction between courtly and improper behavior, and apply genre theory. Contemporary scholarship has moved away

from Bloomfield's first three forms of critiques and focuses predominately on *Gawain's* ambiguity, raising questions such as: Is Bertilak the Green Knight?, Was beheading part of the Green Knight's agreement?, and was the girdle magical after all? Derek Pearsall calls this lean towards ambiguity "very different from uncertainty, which is more the character of one's response to the poem," and the road to accepting ambiguity is complex, requiring the reader to evaluate the facts (I use the term here loosely) of the poem and determine how best to proceed with their argument (250). Pearsall proposes that the reader must "simultaneously [negotiate] two kinds of reading: one in which we pick up all of the clues to meaning...and put them together into some sort of coherent pattern" and one that ignores the glaring incongruities and offers an explanation "according to literary convention" (252). Reading a romance requires a suspension in belief and oftentimes common sense or logic. Applying these same conventional genre rules to *Sir Gawain* is reductive because the poem does not adhere to convention. The events of Sir Gawain's adventure happen in "an uncanny reality" (253). The poem's inhabitants readily accept the supernatural events that transpire—Gawain, after all, is willing to place his faith in the supposed saving power of Lady Bertilak's girdle. Questions of his naivety aside, the knight's willingness to entertain the girdle's magical potential suggests that the supernatural exists organically as part the poem's reality. For the reader who also accepts this "uncanny reality," and hopes to answer questions about the poem's meanings, they must play the game alongside Gawain, as they are forced to evaluate which systems of belief they want to adhere to and down which rabbit hole they choose to proceed.

There is, however, debate over the validity of sifting through *Sir Gawain's* enigmatic aspects. The issue with ambiguousness, as Pearsall sees it, is that "it leaves you with no choice but two" (250). Pearsall is correct to challenge the binary implications of ambiguity, but he fails to acknowledge the systems of parallels present throughout the poem, which suggest reading the ambiguities is the only viable way to derive meaning. Scholars have utilized the paired scenes, such as the Green Knight and Gawain's strokes, the bedroom and the hunting scenes, and Gawain's confession with the priest and with Bertilak as the primary evidence for their arguments, oftentimes overlooking the work's most prevalent couplet: Gawain's pentangle shield and Lady Bertilak's girdle. This paper will focus on how the meaning of these two symbols evolves throughout Gawain's journey, examine critical responses to these symbols, and contrast how the shift of focus from the pentangle shield to the girdle impacts the overall reading of the poem. I propose that these emphatic shifts and the use of symbolism reveal the duality of human nature—one that is suspended between the spheres of social constructs and inherent, uninhibited human behavior. Much of Gawain's turmoil is rooted in this ambivalence, for not even a knight perceived as infallible as he is capable of upholding the values and expectations of two conflicting spheres.

As the text focuses heavily on Sir Gawain as a member of the Arthurian court and his desire to uphold chivalric code at all costs, many critical analyses are centered around the social implications of the work and focus on the role that chivalry plays in creating a gendered reading of the poem. While such a reading of the of the text is not unwarranted, as the poem's ambiguity lends itself for open-ended interpretation, these readings limit

the poem's meaning, often focusing on how Gawain operates within the confines of chivalric code and the degree to which female characters hold influence over the events of the narrative. The first few lines of the poem suggest that the work's central focus instead is human fallibility. By establishing the background on the creation of Arthur's kingdom in the introduction, the poet provides a framework for the possible avenues the tale may take. We are to expect typical Arthurian lore and chivalry, but the poet quickly informs the reader of the plot's central concern. Many critics have questioned the pertinence of this historical reference, claiming that it is disjointed from the poem's plot. Clark and Wasserman, however, argue that "The fourteenth-century poet not only knows that Camelot has fallen but also fears that his own society is likewise unravelling," thus linking the fall of Troy with Camelot's (8). Assuming the poet is indeed utilizing the events of the past for perspective of their present suggests that fallibility is inherent in human civilizations. To demonstrate this, the poet utilizes the "knight that has knotted the nets of deceit/ [and] Was impeached for his perfidy, proven most true" and his fourteenth-century counterpart, Gawain (3-4). The Trojan knight's disloyalty hints at Gawain's mistakes to come, and immediately calls the reader's attention to the shortcomings of even the most noble of knights.

In order to demonstrate Gawain's imperfection, the poet first establishes the fallacy of his perfection. Both Gawain and the reader rely on the pentangle shield as the primary means by which to measure the knight's morality, but reliance on this symbol is problematic, as the very origin of the pentangle and what it represents is confused. The pentangle's once pagan symbolism became the representation of the values of the

chivalric code, but the code itself was created with innate depravity in mind. Gordon M. Shedd notes this irony, stating that the “original motivation for the creation of a knightly code was just this recognition of man’s essential nature, coupled with a desire to channel that nature towards behavior most productive of a fruitful life” (11). By design, the virtues Gawain strives so hard to uphold account for the inherent fallibility of his own human nature. Yet over time “through the process of codification,” the code’s intended purpose was lost, and the pentangle became “worshipped as an end in itself” (Shedd 11). The chivalric code, Shedd notes, signaled a dangerous digression that led both knights and laypersons to believe that perfection was attainable to those who blindly abided to the pentangle’s values. The rigidity of the chivalric code works two-fold: it curbs humanity’s destructive nature while simultaneously depending on the existence of the traits it encourages its followers to repress. In an incestuous cycle, the knight attempts to mold himself into an ideal that, because of this fallibility, is ultimately unobtainable. Even for Gawain, a “pearl” amongst other knights, who goes to greater lengths than the rest to uphold the pentangle, his nature condemned him to failure.

The poet expounds (at times exasperatedly) on Gawain’s perfection, which raises the question if we are to take it seriously. Romances that require a knightly protagonist to reevaluate their identity emphasize the character’s decency or prowess in order to demonstrate their fall and eventual redemption, but the lengths to which the Gawain poet does so is atypical. Richard H. Godden suggests, too, that the poet’s description of Gawain is outside of the Arthurian narrative tradition, where “He is often represented as an exemplary knight, but not as a moral paragon” (160). The myth of Gawain supersedes

the actual man, as his reputation situates the knight above the rest of humanity. Gawain remains in anonymity briefly upon his arrival to Bertilak's castle, but once his identity is revealed both the poet and Bertilak mythologize him. The knight is beyond comparison, for "so comely a mortal never Christ made/ as he [who is]...without a peer on earth in martial rivalry" (868-74). In what appears an embarrassing moment for the humble knight, Bertilak calls out to his castle upon realizing he is speaking with the infamous Gawain. He is moved to be in the presence of one with "courage ever constant, and customs pure/ Is pattern and paragon praised without end" (911-13). Bertilak calls attention to Gawain's otherworldliness, proclaiming that "Of all knights on earth most honored is he" (914). With the knowledge of the knight's impending tests in mind and perhaps his failure as well, Bertilak exaggerates his accomplishments and in situating him above other mortals blurs the lines between Gawain's true character and the one thrust upon him. The knight's perfection extends pathogenically beyond his person and control to the space he inhabits. Praises of God ring throughout the castle as word of Sir Gawain's arrival spreads, and Bertilak reflects that the knight's very presence "embellished his abode with his inborn grace" (1034). Gawain inhabits the castle not as a man but as a marvel whose only option is to accept the performative role. Though he responds humbly to his host's boasts, Gawain's appearance only bolsters claims of his preternatural perfection.

The prevalence of gold in Gawain's attire has been the subject of many analyses and for good reason. The poet utilizes the color gold, most notably on Gawain's armor and the pentangle on his shield, to outwardly demonstrate Gawain's perceived

perfection, as “gold...[serves as] a mark of excellence, both to the exterior and interior man” (Burrow 40). In the arming scene, the features of Gawain’s “golden bright” gear are detailed from his body armor to his horse’s bridle (569). The symbolic value of his golden armor, however, is deeper than the obvious allusion to the precious metal.

Mildred Leake Day discusses the historical significance of Gawain’s armor within Arthurian lore, claiming that “The armor represents Gawain’s triumph over the pirate king [in *De ortu Waluuani*] by means of help of his queen, whose aid Gawain enlists while ignoring her amorous advances...and the first triumph of his courage and prowess on the field of battle” (55). Day notes that despite the similarity of the two accounts, Gawain’s accomplishments in *De ortu Waluuani* are confined to martial prowess. The trickery and deceit in *Sir Gawain* presents the knight with a new type of conquest. The Gawain poet comments on the knight’s perfection only superficially, and while Day’s observations suggest that the knight’s failings are the result of improper preparation, attributing his performance solely to this would be an oversight. Gawain’s failure is the result of his humanity, which his glittering armor and the associated accomplishments cannot conceal. William Goldhurst proposes that *Sir Gawain*’s primary purpose is to explore the relationship between inherent humanity and civilized, courtly behavior, as demonstrated by the juxtaposition of Gawain and the Green Knight. His assertion that Gawain ultimately rejects his innate humanity aside, I find Goldhurst’s overall assertion correct and agree that the gold of Gawain’s armor and the pentangle are representative of performative behaviors.

It appears that the poet links the pentangle to Gawain's golden appearance in order to create a seemingly impenetrable vision of perfection, but upon closer examination of the arming scene it is evident that the pentangle's symbolic perfection is merely associated with Gawain and not necessarily indicative of the knight's character. Yes, the pentangle on the shield "was meant for the man and matched him well," but could not the same be said for all knights who vowed to uphold the pentangle's values (622)? Association does not necessitate inherent perfection; the pentangle on Gawain's shield serves as a behavioral guide rather than an indication that he has achieved the inhuman level of perfection that he is attributed. The poet emphasizes Gawain's emotional connection to the pentangle in order to demonstrate the disconnect between the symbol and he who bears it:

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. (645-50)

Gawain's greatest concern is to uphold the virtues of the pentangle no matter the cost. His only thought is to meet the standard of the "peerless pentangle," but his faith in the immutable symbol fails to account for his inherent human capacity for error (664). Albert B. Friedman & Richard H. Osberg note that "the poet spends forty-three verses carefully, almost pedantically, expounding the symbolism of the pentangle" in order to create distance between the pentangle's inherent meaning and Gawain's interpretation of

it (301). The pentangle's value, both as a standalone symbol and in relation to Gawain, needed to be explicit in order to demonstrate that Gawain's failing is the result of his own inherent humanity and not of the chivalric code.

Clare R. Kinney argues that Gawain's shield, along with many other aspects of his character are described in such explicit detail in order to demonstrate Gawain as an example of superficial perfection. Kinney claims that the poet constructs this ideal of perfection only to dismantle it throughout the narrative in order to highlight the "gap between the imperfections of the fallible human being and the seamless moral geometry of the "pure pentangle"'s endless knot of independent virtues" (50). Gawain's virtue is never presented in human terms, only in relation to the symbol, which is "self-contained". The symbol is unchanging and is not designed to account for the complexity of human interactions and the malleable human psyche. "What distinguishes Gawain as a knight, apart from the degree of his virtuousness, is that his virtue is presented the form of an immutable and self-contained geometrical symbol," Stephanie J. Hollis claims (273). In the world of *Sir Gawain*, the knight's virtue is predicated on his relationship with the pentangle rather than definitive actions.

The pentangle serves as a constant reminder for Gawain of the behavioral expectations he must uphold. Emblazoned on his shield "that shone all red,/ With the pentangle portrayed in purest gold," Gawain carries the heavy weight of the symbol into his quest (619-20). However, the shield, and subsequently the pentangle, provide protection only in combat. As Mildred Leake Day notes, all of Gawain's experience of up until this point and his implementation of the pentangle values cannot prepare him for

the intellectual game he must play. Gawain finds that when he attempts to uphold the chivalric code in what modern readers might refer to as a “real world” scenario, he is confined by rules that fail to account for the complexity of human interactions. In his book *The Knight on His Quest: Symbolic Transitions in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Piotr Sadowski comments on the irony of such symbolism, claiming, “In the Christian world absolute perfection, symbolized here by gold, is basically unobtainable to man,” and the closest an individual can become to this perfection is by “exploring one’s innate sinfulness” (104). This may be obvious to the modern reader, but to Gawain and the medieval audience it may not have been as intuitive. Gawain’s failing, in part, is due to his naivety and his inability to acknowledge his innate fallibility.

In addition to his desire to remain true to chivalric code, Gawain’s turmoil in part stems from his lofty reputation. Most knights of medieval romance seek out notoriety as a means to establish their name and construct their identity, but Godden suggests that *Sir Gawain* subverts this standard. He says, “Gawain’s reputation, both as invoked by other characters and invoked by intertextual moments, deprives him of any stable sort of individual identity” (163). The process of establishing identity for Gawain is tied solely to the pentangle he wears. His adhesion to the five points of the pentangle: courtesy; friendship; generosity; piety; and chastity, eliminates the option of choice or free will. Bertilak’s game, however, is not a test for Sir Gawain the knight but rather of Gawain the man. When the values of the pentangle are pitted against one another the bedroom scenes, Gawain is forced to act on his own accord.

Part of Gawain's difficulty relates to the space where his exchanges with Lady Bertilak occur. As I noted earlier, this is new territory for the knight, and his previous accolades do not translate to the intimate nature of the bedroom scenes. Bedrooms are inherently associated with safety, privacy, and, of course, sex. The sequestered nature of these quarters promises its inhabitants a space where they may be free to act autonomously, unfettered by the pressures and constraints of outside social obligations and expectations. Lady Bertilak inverts the function of Gawain's sleeping chambers during his time at the castle. The space that was meant to serve as the knight's sanctum becomes a place of anxiety and confinement. After his first and only night's true respite, Gawain lies in bed basking in the glow of the morning sun, only to be intruded upon. Lady Bertilak defies the sanctity of his bedchamber and pulls "the door behind her deftly" to both lock the couple inside and prevent any further intrusion (1188). What was once a space of freedom and relaxation becomes one of confinement, and though he remains courteous in their forced exchange Gawain acknowledges the shift that has taken place. In an attempt to regain some of the leverage the lady has exerted over him, he asks her "to permit your prisoner to rise," to which she obliges (1219). His efforts, however, prove fruitless.

Lady Bertilak is conscious of the power the bedroom space has to deconstruct Gawain's performative behavior, while the knight himself is unaware. She notes that outside of the walls that surround him, he is the one "Whom all the world worships," but they "are alone here, and left to" their own devices (1227, 1230). Her distinction between the two spheres hints that Gawain's superficial perfection exists only publicly. The

privacy of which she speaks and that the barred door suggests is illusory, for Gawain has obliged to share with his host any winnings he may acquire. Without the weight of his golden armor and pentangle shield to serve as reminders, Gawain must formulate his own responses to the lady's advances. The space both literally and metaphorically is new territory for the knight. Gawain has relied on his physical prowess in previous experiences, but his interactions with Lady Bertilak force him to engage in verbal battle. His previous accomplishments and ability to uphold the values of the pentangle are noteworthy, but they are limited. To test the knight in an area in which he has readily excelled would hardly be a test at all. To truly gain experience, Yi-Fu Tuan notes, "requires that one venture forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and the uncertain" (9). In this way, The Green Knight's test is the truest Gawain has been forced to face. The very nature of human experience is predicated on encounters with the elusive and uncertain, and Gawain is deeply troubled as he attempts to navigate these uncharted waters.

His trouble arises when he is must be in both the presence of Bertilak and Lady Bertilak. The convergence of private and public spheres presents the knight with physical manifestations of his desire and duty. Sitting at Bertilak's table, the lady's gaze

stirred his stout heart,
That he was at wits' end, and wondrous vexed;
But he could not in all conscience her courtship repay,
Yet took pains to please her, though the plan might
go wrong. (1659-63)

The only difference in Lady Bertilak and Gawain's exchange is the location it takes place, but just as with the bedroom scenes the transition to a public sphere impacts behavior. The stakes are higher for Gawain in part because of Bertilak's presence but also because the feast is a shared space, and in that shared space Gawain is reminded of the heavy burden of his reputation. Yi-Fu Tuan discusses the nature of architectural spaces in relation to human behavior and notes that "the built environment clarifies social roles and relations" (102). A space such as the hall in which the feast takes place informs people to recall "who they are and how they ought to behave" (102). Sharing a table with Bertilak and his wife is a reminder of the covenant Gawain forged with his host while he is simultaneously plagued by his own desire. This shared space "has the power to heighten the awareness and accentuate, as it were, the difference in emotional temperature between 'inside' and 'outside,'" and this proves too much for Gawain (107).

Despite his attempt to leave the castle early and forfeit the test, Bertilak insists that the game must continue, and Gawain must see it through. Two days after the knight attempts to take his leave, Lady Bertilak makes her final attempt to woo Gawain. He must

Either take her tendered love or distastefully refuse.
His courtesy concerned him, lest crass he appear,
But more his soul's mischief, should he commit sin
And belie his loyal oath to the lord of that house. (1773-75)

Gawain's quandary is clear, but the moral implications of how he chooses to disentangle himself are ambiguous. J.A. Burrows unpacks the potential meaning of the final lines of

this passage, proposing that the sin the poet speaks of references Gawain's potential betrayal of his host. The sin here doesn't refer to lechery or "sin in the Sunday papers' sense," Burrow notes (100). The issue is not that Gawain would be an adulterer, it is that sexually engaging Lady Bertilak would be a direct affront to his host and, in turn, his courtesy.

Gawain gently refuses the lady's final proposition on the supposition that he is engaged on a quest and, therefore, must abstain. Because of his grounds for refusal, Burrow notes that Lady Bertilak must respect his wishes and in relinquishing her pursuit she requests a token by which to remember Gawain. The pair's disagreement over the exchange of tokens demonstrates the knight's humility and disinterest in worldly effects, but Gawain's perfection proves superficial when "the lady suddenly shifts her ground and makes a direct appeal to a passion which, under the circumstances, must be stronger than sexual desire—the passion for life" (Burrow 104). Her simple claim that for "the man who wears this belt, there is no hand under heaven that could hew him down,/ For he could not be killed by any craft on earth" is enough for Gawain to renounce his previous concerns of discourtesy (1853-54). The possibility of the girdle's supernatural powers leads the knight "to muse,/ and mainly he thought/ It was a pearl for his plight, the peril to come" (1855-56). The girdle, unlike the shield, is not a proven line of defense, yet Gawain accepts this as truth, thus placing concern for his own life above the virtues of the pentangle. "The exemplary knight, the mirror of Christian chivalry...gives way here, for the first time, to human weakness" (Burrow 104). The girdle, not from any inherent

value but of the value the lady ascribes to it becomes the antithesis of the pentangle. It becomes symbolic of the chink in Gawain's moral armor.

In contrast to the exhaustive detail the poet uses to describe the pentangle's symbolic value and Gawain's relationship to it, few lines are devoted to the girdle's description. The value of the girdle "of gay green silk, with gold overwrought/ And the borders all bound with embroidery fine" (1832-33). The poet notes the convergence of the green and gold in passing and refrains from expounding on the colors' symbolic values, as he has done previously. The two juxtaposing colors are often cited as symbols of the conflict between inherent, "natural" humanity and the trappings of courtly life. William Goldhurst suggests that the girdle "tells us of man's struggle against tendencies which would draw him back to the state of nature, and of his uncertain efforts to maintain a hold on the comforts and codes of civilization" (64). His claim that girdle's golden tones are representative of the illusory quality of the comforts of civilization fails to consider the frequency at which gold was associated with Gawain's armor and persona, but Goldhurst is correct to note the conflict between inherent human behavior and socially-created codes of conduct. Gawain, however, is unaware of any distinction between the innate aspects of his human identity and the performative aspects of his chivalric identity. Upon accepting the girdle, Gawain's faith transfers to the object in hopes, "to keep himself safe when consent he must/ To endure a deadly blow," (2040-41). The girdle's supposed supernatural power supersedes the pentangle's symbolic value and becomes Gawain's principal concern, as the knight's concern shifts to his own welfare. Unlike the pentangle, the girdle's meaning is fluid, as it continues to shift as

Gawain becomes more self-aware. What was initially a defense to bodily harm becomes a source of shame when Gawain faces the Green Knight to fulfill their agreement.

There is a definitive symbolic shift before Gawain has fulfilled the terms of the agreement and received the nick from the Green Knight. The girdle, though originally intended to be concealed to prevent Bertilak from knowing of the exchange, becomes a part of Gawain's attire, further complicating the meaning of the two opposing symbols. As Gawain takes his leave to find the chapel, he puts the girdle on over his armor:

When the bright sword was belted and round on his haunches,
Then twice with that token [the girdle] he twined him about.
Sweetly did he swathe him in that swatch of silk,
That girdle of green so goodly to see,
That against the gay red showed gorgeous bright. (2032-36)

The poet again returns to the contrasting colors. He goes to great lengths to accentuate the contrast of the green girdle against the other facets of Gawain's armor. However, the various pieces of his apparel are not battling for attention but seem to work together to create a cohesive image—a literal knight in shining armor. The gold, which initially symbolized the Christian ideal of perfection, is not forgotten though is not held in the same esteem. Although the girdle is adorned with pendants “though glittering gold gleamed at the ends,” their sole purpose is “to keep himself safe when consent he must/ to endure a deadly blow” (2039-41). No longer does the gold symbolize a perfect ideal but instead the Gawain poet seems to suggest that Gawain's life, not blindly upholding chivalric virtues, is what is of true value. If Gawain was the “pearl” amongst knights, then it makes sense that only he can (partially) grasp the infallible nature of man. Even

before Gawain is fully aware of his own shortcomings, he has displayed them for all to see, and if the pentangle and the values it represents are rigid, the girdle is conversely soft and devoid of any strict meaning. Therefore, it is only when the girdle is paired with the pentangle that the meaning becomes clear. Human beings cannot escape their nature, but instead must acknowledge it, allowing it to exist in unison with their codes of belief.

The moral implications of Gawain's decision to accept and conceal the girdle are two-fold: he is guilty of covetousness and infidelity. Though the girdle lacks monetary value, its supposed magical properties would prove beneficial for anyone, in particular, "Bertilak...in his counters with wild boars" (Foley 74). The knight's decision for self-preservation does break his agreement with his host, but the conditions of their agreement were not sworn. Foley notes that "Gawain is not guilty of the mortal sin of forswearing an oath, but rather of cheating a *layk* or game. His honor as a gentleman is slightly besmirched, but his soul is *clene*" (74). Gawain in realizing the extent of his folly reacts disproportionately to the scale of his mistake. After receiving his nick and realizing the extent of the game, Gawain rips off the girdle and expresses his outrage to Bertilak:

Behold there my falsehood, ill hap betide it!
Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life
And coveting game after, contrary both
To largesse and loyalty belonging to knights. (2378-81)

For the first time, Gawain exists separate from the influence of either symbol. In this moment, he achieves mental clarity and realizes his failures, and we as readers are able to see Gawain for who he truly is—a man conflicted. Torn between his duty to uphold the

pentangle and to save his own life, Gawain embodies the duality of strength and weakness in human nature. His claim of his failure as a knight, demonstrates the knight's naivety. For Gawain, placing his livelihood before his chivalric identity is unforgivable, and though he does not physically remove the pentangle from his body, his words and the disheveled state of his armor demonstrate a separation from the symbol and what it represents. Gawain gains clarity on the ambivalence he has been battling throughout the poem and is distraught that his primitive desire for self-preservation overrides his chivalric oath.

This moment of perceived weakness provides a glimpse into Gawain's feelings, which the poet deftly masked for most of the poem. Shedd discusses how "in typically human short-sighted fashion Gawain curses his faults and the Girdle as though they were animate hostile powers that had betrayed him" (12). His outburst exposes his imperfect humanity, shattering the perfect persona the poet established, but the Green Knight doesn't perceive his weakness as failure. The arrogance and bravado that characterized the Green Knight in the blank scene are absent as he passes his judgement on Gawain. He dismisses the knight's failure, commenting only that he "lacked... a little in loyalty there" to his host (2366). Considering the gravity of the situation Gawain faced, the Green Knight absolves his transgression and proclaims, "But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame" (2368). By widening the scope of judgement beyond the confines of chivalric code, the Green Knight demonstrates the relative inconsequentiality of Gawain's actions. Shedd claims that the Green Knight "puts the hero's behavior in a positive light as love of life" to demonstrate the inevitable shortcomings of Gawain's

attempt to rigidly adhere to the values of the pentangle (10). Gawain's previous actions have represented the collective successes and failures of the chivalric code, but his knightly persona represents only one aspect of his character. Measuring his behavior solely by those standards would fail to acknowledge that the entirety of Gawain's character is made up of multiple, intersecting identities.

Gawain in part seems to comprehend that his nature is conflicted, but his reliance on symbols to create his persona and guide his behavior persists beyond his failing. His continued usage of symbols suggests that Gawain does not comprehend the Green Knight's lesson. After his confession, Gawain's relationship with the girdle shifts yet again. He wears it to demonstrate "The faults and the frailty of the flesh perverse," and in keeping the garment close it serves as a constant reminder of his failure and propensity to do so again (2434). There is a distinction between Gawain's interpretation of the girdle and what we as readers are able to discern. "In betokening of the blame he had borne for his fault," Gawain continues to wear the "badge of false faith" (2488,2509). The girdle's "symbolic value is simply what Gawain assigns it: a memento of his humiliation at the Green Knight's castle and chapel" (Friedman 301-2). If the reader should have learned anything from *Sir Gawain*, it is that Gawain's judgement is not to be trusted. Therefore, his interpretation of the girdle may not coincide with the poet's.

While it appears that Gawain has emerged from his journey a changed man, humbled and with regard for his own life, the Gawain poet casts the ending in ambiguity, thus muddying any meaning that has been derived previously. Gawain returns to court and tells his brethren of his shortcomings, proclaiming that he shall wear his badge of

“false faith” until his final days, yet they do not seem to grasp the gravity of his words (2509). Instead, “the king comforts the knight, and the court all together/ Agree with gay laughter and gracious intent” to wear a girdle akin to Gawain’s own (2513-14).

Notoriously, this scene is the most perplexing of the entire work. Is the court disregarding the severity of Gawain’s anguish and poking fun at him as laughter may suggest? Or does their laughter imply that they have long been aware of Gawain’s recent revelations—that to perfectly uphold the pentangle is impossible because of humanity’s innate depravity? Perhaps the court’s inability to acknowledge the gravity of what Gawain has experienced and what the girdle represents is precisely the point. The ambiguity surrounding the Gawain’s perception of the girdle and the court’s suggests “that self-knowledge is essentially an individual, incommunicable experience” (Shedd 13). Gawain’s newfound awareness cannot be translated to those who have not experienced his journey. Even if the court fails to understand the gravity of Gawain’s revelation and the girdle’s symbolism, they are not immune to the duality their newly-adopted garb represents. Aware or not, all of the members of the court, just like Gawain, are subject to their own innate humanity no matter how deeply committed they are to a standard of behavior.

The poem’s climactic ending offers little resolution, and has, consequently, been the subject of much conflicting conjecture. How to interpret the court’s reception of Gawain is moot. After all, it is Gawain, not the court, who has been the vehicle of connotation throughout the work. In her article “The Pentangle Knight ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,’” Stephanie J. Hollis comments on this ending, claiming that “The ultimate irony of the poem is that Gawain never really comes to terms with the cause of

his failing; he is too busy defending his knightly integrity to acknowledge, more than passingly and somewhat distortedly, that it is an incomplete definition of his nature” (279). It is easy to interpret Gawain’s inability to fully comprehend the root of his failure as a commentary on the chivalric code but to do so would fail to acknowledge the distinction the poet has so artfully crafted between Gawain the knight and Gawain the man as knight. Gawain’s turmoil and consequent failure are the result of his inability to acknowledge that his human impulses coexist with his dedication to the values of the pentangle. Using Gawain as an avatar for the reader, “The poem suggests that at best life is but a truce between natural impulses and allegiances to the virtues which civilized creatures are pledged to uphold” (Goldhurst 64). To be human is to be flawed, regardless of one’s allegiance to systems predicated on perfection. It is inevitable that we will, in some form or another, fail to uphold all of the values of any rigid system. The danger, as the Gawain poet demonstrates, is the failure to acknowledge our own fallibility—a mistake we appear to be doomed to repeat.

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