

Hiding the Harm: Revisionism and Marvel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

MANISH SHARMA

A scandalous, but rarely discussed, element of the Christmas “gomen” the Green Knight proposes at Camelot is its openness with regard to the kind of blow that initially can be inflicted and even the implement that can be employed to inflict this blow. Gaston Paris in 1888 was the first to note that the intruder’s challenge is only to exchange blows of an unspecified nature. For Paris, the structure of the Green Knight’s proposal in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* pointed to a lost French source for the poem. Nearly a hundred years later, in 1976, Victoria Weiss became the first critic to incorporate this unexpected narrative element into a reading of the text, in the process chastising the ubiquitous critical tendency to misread this episode.¹ For Weiss, the potential lethality of Gawain’s blow is his first failure, as it demonstrates a patent “lack of Christian concern for human life” (363). The first failure, therefore, ironically anticipates Gawain’s second failure where his concern for his own life outweighs all other considerations. Thus, by the end of the poem, “Gawain’s concern with ‘larges’ and ‘lewté’ reveals a new respect for the life and well-being of others” (366). Hermine van Nuis in 1984 largely concurred with Weiss’s conclusions and remarked upon the incongruity between Gawain’s claim that he is the weakest knight present and the “uncontrolled zest and fierce impetu-

¹Weiss does not note that this misreading is perpetrated by one of the earliest readers of *SGGK*, the fifteenth-century poet of *The Greene Knight*: “I shall lay my head downe— / Strike itt of if he can / With a stroke to garr itt bleed, / For this day twelf monthe another at his” (lines 139-42). Quotation is taken from Hahn 317.

osity” of the chosen blow that manifests an “indifferent regard for another man’s life” (16). Likewise, in 1991, Sheri Ann Strite suggested that the Green Knight’s challenge be interpreted “as *inviting* a particular conventional response from Gawain as a kind of test” (4). While Gawain follows romance conventions and fulfills audience expectations by decapitating the intruder, he ignores the merciful and Christian options available to him. R.A. Shoaf argued in 1988 that “members of the Arthurian court often fail to be adequately critical in their interpretations” of the surfeit of signs that confront them. So Arthur and Gawain “can only interpret the Green Knight’s challenge as implying that the blow is to be struck with the axe, whereas, in fact, the challenge is sufficiently ambiguous to leave open the possibility” of either contestant’s choosing the “holly bob” (158). Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman in 1995 make the same observation (104). For these modern scholars, the testing of Gawain begins with his first act. Each scholar considers Gawain’s performance in the so-called Beheading Game as a failure of some kind: for Weiss, Nuis, and Strite the failure is primarily ethical; for Shoaf, Blanch, and Wasserman, the failure is primarily hermeneutic. And there the matter lies.

Whether or not Gawain’s blow reflects an impetuous and unchristian disregard for life or suggests his interpretive deficiencies, attention must be focused on the seismic disturbances transmitted along the narrative line by the ambiguity in the Green Knight’s proposal. For any reading that treats Gawain’s performance in Camelot as a failure of some kind limits its significance by ignoring a crucial passage from Bertilak’s speech at the Green Chapel subsequent to a series of humiliating revelations for the hero. According to Bertilak, Morgan le Fay

Wayned me upon this wyse to your wynne halle
 For to assay the surquidré, gif hit soth were
 That rennes of the grete renoun of the Rounde Table.
 Ho wayned me this wonder your wyttez to reve,
 For to haf greved Gaynour and gart hir to dyghe

With glopnyng of that ilke gome that gostlych speked
 With his hede in his hond before the hyghe table.
 (*SGGK* 2456-62)²

[Sent me in this wise to your lovely hall to make a trial of your pride, if it were true what circulates about the great renown of the Round Table. She sent me this wonder to take away your wits, in order to have grieved Guinevere and caused her to die with dismay at that same man who spoke like a ghost with his head in his hand before the high table.]

The attentive readings of the Green Knight's proposal supplied by the aforementioned critics are slightly compromised by their failure to take into consideration Bertilak's revelation that the Christmas "gomen" was quite carefully orchestrated by Morgan. More specifically, it is not only the case that Morgan sent the Green Knight to Camelot to test the mettle of the assembled knights and to deprive them of their senses, it is also the case that she planned to kill Guinevere by terrifying her with the sight of the Green Knight speaking through his decapitated head.³ But if Morgan had intended to kill Guinevere in this way all along, why is there any leeway in the terms of the covenant, thrice repeated, that the Green Knight puts forward? Why is Gawain allowed to choose the nature of the blow he will inflict and the implement with which he will inflict it? The aesthetic unease occasioned among earlier critics of the poem by Morgan's seemingly gratuitous intrusion into the storyline finds more tangible justification once we recognize this narrative discrepancy.⁴ It seems clear also that any reading that understands the ambiguo-

²All quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from Tolkien and Gordon. All translations of Middle English are my own.

³It seems incongruous to argue, as do Weiss, van Nuis, and Strite, that Gawain's regard for life, for mercy, and for the well-being of his fellow human-beings is being tested by Morgan or the Green Knight if the Green Knight has been sent to Camelot to scare Guinevere to death.

⁴For negative assessments of Morgan's sudden appearance in the text on aesthetic grounds see, for instance, James R. Hulbert's "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (*Modern Philology* 13 [1915-16]: 433-62 and 689-730) 454 and George L. Kittredge's *A Study of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Gloucester, MA: Smith, 1960) 136.

ity in the Green Knight’s proposal straightforwardly as Gawain’s first test is hamstrung by this incongruity: the Green Knight’s decapitation was (apparently) a part of Morgan’s plan before the fact. The stroke that Gawain aims at the Green Knight’s neck, according to this narrative exigency, is at once voluntary and foreordained.⁵

The fact that the Green Knight’s proposal is so deliberately and precisely rehearsed argues for a peculiar *ad hoc* revisionism on the part of the poet when, near the end of his poem, he attempts to link Morgan to Guinevere.⁶ While the *motivation* behind Morgan’s hatred for Guinevere has been accounted for convincingly via intertextual recourse to the Vulgate *Lancelot* (where she is infuriated by the queen’s meddling in her relationship with Guiomar), it is the *means* by which she plans to enact her vengeance that transgress narrative decorum.⁷ The Green Knight, as he admits, is the agent of Morgan’s design, and her desires (to test the knights, to deprive them of their wits, and to terrify Guinevere to death) find their instrument in his

⁵But Kinney sidesteps the interpretive issues posed by Bertilak’s revelations (although she does not mention the narrative discrepancy I note) by claiming that “the inadequate ‘secondary explanation’ concerning Morgan’s agency in the whole affair seems to be proffered as yet another red herring, to be swallowed only by those readers who wish to reduce the work to the status of banal romance” (469).

⁶For more on the poet’s potential revisionism, see Sheila Fisher’s “Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (*Arthurian Women: A Casebook*. Ed. Thelma S. Fenster. New York: Garland, 1996. 77-95). Fisher argues that Morgan’s role in the text testifies to the deliberate, but uneasy and incomplete, erasure of women in the text as the *Gawain*-poet supplies a revisionary narrative that offers a proleptic cure for Arthurian history in the marginalization of women. See also Walker: “This is a text in which all the key terms are presented in an ongoing process of negotiation and revision, so much is signalled by the Knight himself, whose nature and status are constantly revised and renegotiated by both the narrator and the knights of Camelot” (111).

⁷On the Arthurian intertexts that inform the poet’s deployment of Morgan, see Michael W. Twomey’s “Morgain La Fee in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: From Troy to Camelot” (*Text and Intertext in Medieval Arthurian Literature*. Ed. Norris J. Lacy. New York: Garland, 1996. 91-115).

body; Morgan can only “touch” Guinevere through the Green Knight.⁸ Arguably, the only outcome of the Christmas game at Camelot adequately terrifying would be a decapitation, making the Green Knight’s survival grotesque, shockingly unexpected, and placing the life of one of Arthur’s knights in mortal peril. The entanglement of Guinevere within the skein of an elsewhere attested Morganian intrigue shifts attention away from the poet’s transgression of narrative propriety and allows him to “forget” the initial form of the Green Knight’s challenge.⁹ In other words, he misconstrues the covenant exactly as generations of critics will do after him; he misconstrues it as a “beheading game.” The persistent scholarly misreading, therefore, cannot be mere critical “confusion” (as Weiss calls it) if it is anticipated by the poet himself. The plausibility of Morgan’s homicidal enmity for Guinevere ingeniously masks a narrative fracture. This inconsistency is an instance of metanarrative revisionism that participates in larger patterns of narrative deformation and reformation within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Much has been made of the polyvalence of signs and the processes of interpretation and reinterpretation in *SGGK*.¹⁰ This analysis focuses on the reaction of characters to occur-

⁸On the submerged feminine text in *SGGK* and the hidden links between the female characters, see further Geraldine Heng’s “Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (*Publications of the Modern Languages Association* 106 [1991]: 500-14).

⁹See further, by way of contrast, Scala, who argues that Morgan’s role in the poem creates a “structure organized by a space that produces effects but to which no access can be granted, a place known only through those effects as they mark the workings of what we might call a textual unconscious” (311).

¹⁰The references for this topic in the existing scholarship are numerous. See especially Ross G. Arthur’s *Medieval Sign Theory and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1987). See also Ralph Hanna III’s “Unlocking What’s Locked: Gawain’s Green Girdle” (*Viator* 14 [1983]: 289-302); and John Plummer’s “Signifying the Self: Language and Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (*Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives on the Pearl Poet*. Ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Y. Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman. New York: Whitston, 1991. 195-212).

rences both fantastic and threatening. The desire for narrative recuperation in the poem comes from the trauma of the unprecedented event, initially disrupting the circadian and annual rhythms within which Camelot is pleasantly and rather complacently ensconced during the Christmas holiday. So upon witnessing the Green Knight’s miraculous survival of Gawain’s blow, Arthur attempts to domesticate the episode and thereby assuage Guinevere’s fears:

þaʒ Arþer þe hende kyng at hert hade wonder,
 He let no semblaunt be sene, bot sayde ful hyʒe
 To þe comlych quene wyth cortays speche,
 “Dere dame, to-day demay yow neuer;
 Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse,
 Layking of entreludez, to laʒe and to syng,
 Among þise kynde caroles of knyʒtez and ladyez.” (SGGK 467-73)

[Although Arthur, the courtly king, had wonder in his heart he let no semblance of this be seen, but he said full loudly to the beautiful queen with courteous speech, “My dear lady, do not be dismayed today; such doings well become Christmas, the playing of interludes, laughing and singing, among these pleasant carols of knights and ladies.”]

Arthur’s rhetoric points to a desire to establish a soothing continuity and domesticate the “wonder” witnessed. The singular and disruptive event of the Green Knight’s arrival and decapitation is situated within a linear and continuous narrative: whatever Arthur really thinks, he describes it as an “interlude” that occupies an appropriate space *within* the course of a Christmas celebration “among þise kynde caroles of knyʒtez and ladyez.” Simultaneously, Arthur attempts to divest the event of its threateningly singular status by stressing its repeatability; such an occurrence could occur, he implies, during any Christmas feast: “Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse.” A strategy for narrative recuperation is brought about by Arthur’s words to Guinevere, ironically the very figure who disrupts the logic of the narrative by figuring as the object of Morgan’s plot.

Arthur's attempt to tame the singular event of the Green Knight's intrusion functions to counterpoint his initial desire for an "vncoupe tale":

And also an oþer maner meued him eke
 þat he þurȝ nobelay had nomen, he wolde neuer ete
 Vpon such a dere day er hym deuised were
 Of sum auenturus þyng an vncoupe tale,
 Of sum mayn meruayle, þat he myȝt trawe,
 Of alderes, of armes, of oþer auenturus,
 Oþer sum segg hym bisoȝt of sum siker knyȝt
 To joyne with hym in iustyng, in jopardé to lay,
 Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oþer,
 As fortune wolde fulsun hom, þe fayrer to haue. (*SGGK* 90-99)

[And another custom moved him also, that he as a point of honor would never eat upon such a festive day until he had been told a strange tale of some adventurous thing, of some great marvel, that he could believe, of princes, of arms, or other deeds, or until some man demanded of him a true knight to join with him in jousting, to lie in jeopardy, to set life against life, each one granting the other as fortune would aid him, the better part to have.]

Arthur's wish for a marvellous narrative is qualified, we should note, by an accompanying wish for credibility ("þat he myȝt trawe"); Arthur is a discriminating auditor, and the narrative he calls for must accord with a certain standard of plausibility if it is to be suitable. Nevertheless, he does ruefully acknowledge that his particular fancy has been satisfied: "Neuer þe lece to my mete I may me wel dres, / For I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake" ("Nevertheless, to my meal I may well turn, / For I have seen a marvellous thing, this I cannot deny"; 474-75). And yet it is telling that what transpires is deemed incomprehensible by both Arthur and Gawain while the court is stunned into baffled silence. Enraged by the taunts of the Green Knight, Arthur responds: "Hapel, by heuen, þyn askyng is nys, / And as þou foly hatz frayst, fynde þe behoues" ("Knight, by heaven, your demand is foolish, / And as you have asked for folly, it behoves you to find it"; 323-24). The Green Knight's challenge does not make sense; he has asked for folly and deserves to be rewarded

Carefully coordinating narrativity and chivalric normativity, the text presents us with an articulated set of oppositions: “trawþe” and “untrawþe” with respect to the chivalric code and “trawþe” and “mervayle” or “folly” with respect to narrative propriety. We should recall that the narrative Arthur generates in an attempt to recuperate the astonishing singularity witnessed by Guinevere and the court stresses continuity and repeatability. The Green Knight’s intrusion is cast as a mere interlude that could become any Christmas feast. The *Gawain*-poet describes his own “selly” (28) as an uninterrupted structure (“with lel letteres loken”) capable of repetition (“as I in toun herde [. . .] In londe so hatz ben longe”). As Nick Davis has noted, the poet valorizes the “internal connectedness of a ‘stiff and strong’ narrative, commending itself to attention and memory as a firm, self-consistent pattern,” the narrator of which “presents himself as repeating something already set down and made firm” (341). Arthur and others in the poem, when faced with that which is beyond a certain horizon of expectation, namely the folly or the marvel, fall back on the same narrative principles.

The “marvel,” the “selly,” the “wonder,” and the “ferly” represent a problematic constellation of terms in *SGGK*. In this marvellous narrative, paradoxically, the marvel is systematically domesticated so as to control its disruptive potential. Revision is always a conservative gesture in the poem; the unconstrained marvel, it seems, offends narrative propriety, potentially unlinking the chain of narration and the parallel chain of “trawþe.” And so, just as Arthur domesticates the Green Knight’s bizarre intrusion, Gawain struggles to domesticate and make comprehensible the nearly unbearable event of his failing in his so-called anti-feminist diatribe:

“Bot hit is no ferly þaʒ a fole madde,
 And þurʒ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorʒe,
 For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled,
 And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsonez—
 Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde—and Dauyth þerafter

linking himself to the first man. Furthermore, his story is merely the latest iteration of a mundane narrative the reoccurrence of which is entirely predictable; he is not the first to be so beguiled and, it is implied, will not be the last.¹¹ Two singular events, the miraculous intrusion of the Green Knight at Camelot and Gawain's taking of the girdle, are recuperated in precisely the same way, and both these recuperations partake of the form of the *Gawain*-poet's narrative model.

But Gawain's hyper-refined sense of shame will not permit his "untrauwe" to be effaced by his mundane (non-marvellous) anti-feminist narrative as his anguished "confession" before Arthur and Camelot attests. When asked by the court to relate his adventures, another generic marker indicates a shift in his self-assessment:

and ferlyly he telles,
 Biknowez alle þe costes of care þat he hade,
 Þe chaunce of þe chapel, þe chere of þe knyȝt,
 Þe luf of þe ladi, þe lace at þe last.
 Þe nirt in þe nek he naked hem schewed
 Þat he laȝt for his vnleuté at þe leudes hondes
 for blame. (*SGGK* 2494-500)

[And he tells of marvellous things (or "wondrously tells"), he confesses all the hardships he had, the adventure of the chapel, the manner of the knight, the love of the lady, and finally the belt. The nick in his neck he showed them openly that he received for his lack of loyalty at that man's hands as a rebuke.]

Gawain's recollection and admission to the court of his failing is introduced by the substantive (or adverb) "ferlyly," employed earlier in the poem at line 796 to describe Bertilak's wondrous castle. The story of Gawain's "vnleuté" is here granted the generic status of a marvel, a narrative that abandons the recuperative

¹¹See further Sharon-Zisser: "Thus Gawain's predicament with the Lady later in the poem is, in this view, 'no ferly' or extraordinary event, but merely one of the manifestations of the pattern of men" (89). See also Batt: "In his recourse to the formulaic in the anti-feminist passage, Gawain imposes an unsatisfactory rhetorical patterning on experience, in order to make it intelligible in already-known terms" (137).

rhetorical strategy of temporalization. The disjunctive structure of the “ferly” is reflected in the metonymical arrangement of lines 2496-68: “Þe chaunce . . . þe chere . . . Þe luf . . . þe lace . . . Þe nirt.” The temporal linearity of pentangular narration is also interrupted by the order of this asyndetic sequence, which begins with mention of the “chaunce of þe chapel.” The disintegrative force of this marvellous narrative has powerful ethical implications for the hero:

“Lo! lorde,” quop þe leude, and þe lace hondeled,
 “Þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek,
 Þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laʒt haue
 Of couardise and couetyse þat I haf caʒt þare;
 Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne,
 And I mot nedeʒ hit were wyle I may last;
 For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit,
 For þer hit oneʒ is tachched twynne wil hit neuer.” (SGGK 2505-12)

[“Lo! Lord,” said the knight, as he handled the belt, “this is the band of this blame that I bear on my neck, this is the injury and the loss that I have received, of cowardice and covetousness that I have caught there; this is the token of untruth within which I am held, and I must needs wear it while I may live; for a man may hide his harm, but he may not undo it, for where it is once attached, it will never be separated.”]

The shift in genre as Gawain recounts his narrative accompanies an intensification of focus on his own responsibility, evidenced particularly by the repetition of the first-person pronoun, for his misadventure at Hautdesert. The marvel or the “ferly” must be understood as something unprecedented, a temporal fracture that disrupts the flow of the quotidian and the mundane; Gawain’s implicit acknowledgment that it can be domesticated and temporalized, as in his anti-feminist speech, occurs only with some measure of self-delusion. The marvel is by its nature a “break” in time both non-iterable and disruptive of narrative linearity. The move from denying the marvellous nature of his experience (“Bot hit is no ferly” [2414]) toward self-consciously according his story the genre of “ferly” simultaneously signifies an ethical shift and indicates also Gawain’s capacity at Camelot

to assume more fully the burden of his “untrawþe” instead of dissipating the onus via a linear narrative. After his return from Hautdesert, Gawain incorporates the disjunctive force of the marvel into a more searching self-assessment rather than attempting to revise it out of existence. Martin B. Schichtman has argued for something similar, identifying also a link between ethicality and temporality: Gawain “must consciously and wilfully reject the comforts of eternal returns. Nor is this break necessitated by the fear of death; it is the result of a newly gained perception of the individual’s place in history” (14).¹² Arthur had requested a marvel that he could believe (“þat he myȝt trawe”), indicating the tension between the marvellous and truth. Yet it is by acknowledging the marvellous nature of his own story that Gawain produces a more “truthful” narrative, suggesting the complex interrelationship between these two terms for the poet.

The link between ethicality and narrativity is reiterated in a different form in Gawain’s final two lines. These lines have occasioned considerable scholarly speculation on account of their dubious theological provenance; yet, as recent scholars have noted, the search for a Christian rationale behind Gawain’s conviction seems beside the point. Derek Pearsall, for instance, observes that Gawain “seems not to understand the Christian ritual of forgiveness” whereby the blot of sin is effaced by penitence and satisfaction. Pearsall goes on to argue that Gawain’s certainty of the permanence of this “harme” testifies to a rather superficial adherence to Christianity and a deeper adherence to the fundamental principles of the chivalric identity: honor and shame (352). Once the Green Knight at the Green Chapel demonstrates his knowledge of Gawain’s misstep, Gawain is shamed

¹²For more on the antagonistic modalities of time in the poem, especially linear versus cyclical temporality, see Robert W. Margeson’s “Structure and Meaning in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (*Papers on Language and Literature* 13 [1977]: 16-24); John K. Crane’s “The Four Levels of Time in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (*Annuaire Mediaevale* 10 [1969]: 65-80); and Piotr Sadowski’s “Time Structure in the Narrative Framework of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (*Noble and Joyous Histories: English Romances, 1375-1650*. Ed. Eiléan N. Cuilleánáin and J. D. Pheifer. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1993. 11-26).

into acknowledging a gap between his public, chivalric self and his private self when previous to the Green Knight’s revelations he was blissfully ignorant of any such schism. The public shaming Gawain experiences, according to Pearsall, is internalized and becomes an inseparable component of his private being as “embarrassment”—a permanent motivating force that ensures improved conduct in the future. Arthur Lindley also suspends the problem of Gawain’s theology and instead asserts that his final lines comprise “a refusal of instability” where identity is concerned as his carnivalesque experiences at Hautdesert and the Green Chapel have suggested that the self is a performative construct, irreducibly multiple: “Permanent guilt is at least permanent identity. Otherwise, what are you when you have stopped atoning?” (85). While Pearsall and Lindley stress Gawain’s attempt to forge a new and permanent identity, an additional and complementary reading can emerge from lines 2511-12. It seems also that Gawain is asserting here the futility of revisionism; the event, the rupture in time, cannot be recuperated, and its sheer disjunctive force must be acknowledged. In the process of assuming the burden of responsibility for his failing, Gawain rejects the strategies for domesticating temporalization established by non-marvellous modes of narration; these strategies can only hide (“hyden”) the temporal fracture, not undo (“unhap”) it. Gawain’s ethical shift corresponds to a shift in his comprehension of temporality: what came before in no way resembles what comes after, no matter how the difference may be masked.¹³ The hostility of Gawain’s new perspective to the normative-narrative principles of continuity and iterability established elsewhere by the poet could not be clearer, and the temptation to see a new chivalric subject emerging is nowhere greater.

And yet the final act of revisionism in the text follows directly upon Gawain’s more uncompromising speech:

¹³On the girdle and its link to circumcision as a mark of division, see Richard A. Shoaf’s *The Poem as Green Girdle: Commerce in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. (Gainesville: Florida UP, 1984. 15-30).

þe kyng comfortez þe knyȝt, and alle þe court als
 Laȝen loude þerat, and luflyly acorden
 þat lordes and ladis þat longed to þe Table,
 Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
 A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryȝt grene,
 And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were.
 For þat watz acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table,
 And he honoured þat hit hade euermore after,
 As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce.
 þus in Arthurus day þis aunter bitidde,
 þe Brutus bokez þerof beres wyttenesse. (*SGGK* 2513-23)

[The king and the court comfort the knight and laugh loudly at that; they graciously agree, those lords and ladies that belonged to the Table, that each knight of the brotherhood should have a baldric, a band of bright green slantwise across him, to be worn in the same way for the sake of that man. For that (baldric) was associated with the renown of the Round Table, and he that bore it was honored evermore after, as it is told in the best book of romance. Thus, in Arthur's day this adventure happened, the books of Brutus bear witness thereof.]

Gawain's individuality, as has often been observed, is at least partially effaced by the court's decision to revise the status of the girdle. The modification of the girdle's valence generates a corporate identity established on the basis of revisionist principles witnessed so far. Instead of indexing an absolute rupture with the past, for the denizens of Camelot the girdle serves to reintegrate Gawain into a collectivity, as the mark of shame is transformed effortlessly into a badge of honor. The signifying power of the girdle, moreover, is reoriented dramatically by a displacement from the original context of its institution, much like Solomon's pentangle, so as to ensure its indefinite repeatability: "And he honoured þat hit hade euermore after, / As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce." For Gawain, the prime representative of an integrated chivalric culture, the girdle is a mark of absolute division and disconnection. But Gawain's gesture is complex: he acknowledges the futility of revisionism, but by bringing to the surface the painful inner fracture he relinquishes his isolationism and makes the girdle available for communal

reinterpretation.¹⁴ Immediately thereupon, Arthur and Camelot redefine the girdle so that it can make manifest and reinforce with pleasure the implicit and self-propagating bonds of courtly community, “hiding the harm” that Gawain has suffered, if not removing it. The threat to a coherent chivalric identity posed by Gawain’s reflections on the nature of his wrongdoing is partially effaced in the same way that the ambiguity in the Green Knight’s proposal is ingeniously obscured. Thus, it is the latter function of the girdle along with its affective charge that is “breued in þe best boke of romaunce” as chivalry and narrativity are once again tightly coordinated, and the poet leaves behind without further comment the disjunctive modality of the marvellous and the ironic awareness of Gawain’s introspective turn.

The above analysis of narrative revisionism in the text supplies us with a framework within which to situate certain trends in *Gawain* scholarship. It is still customary to read *SGGK* as a critical interrogation of fractures inherent in masculine, chivalric ideology. By arguing for the homogeneity of Christianity to the poet’s representation of courtly culture, and his immanence to this culture, however, David Aers has attempted to eliminate any standpoint for a putative critique. In other words, Christianity in *SGGK* is not an external standard for chivalric conduct. The poet, according to Aers’s finely historicized reading, offers no alternatives to a harmonized Christian-chivalric ethos (although the ending of the poem, with its scene of interpretive dissonance, disjoins the public and the private, the individual and his community, the coincidence of which is so essential to chivalric culture):

The pursuit of prowess and honour, decisive markers of the lay élite, will continue to constitute [Gawain’s] life. He does not even consider that path which sought to combine the cult of honourmen with the penitential pursuit of salvation—the holy way, the crusades on which Launcelot’s own brother-

¹⁴See Mann: “But Gawain’s inner state must then be externalised once again for the benefit of his fellow knights, and he uses both the scar and the girdle as the means to this externalisation” (310).

hood die in Malory's work, just as did Chaucer's friend Sir John Clanvowe at about the time this poem was written. In fact, Gawain's response to Sir Bertilak displays the continuation of an honourman's "intense and sensitive concern for reputation," while there is not even the most basic consideration of crucial theological categories such as "grace" and "charity," nor of fundamental ecclesiastical teaching on the sacramental economy of Christian regeneration. (172-73)¹⁵

Aers goes on to argue that "it is most implausible that a poem whose representations of the lay élite's forms of life are so immanent to their culture should seek to pull up its own roots without some explicit annunciation, such as a retraction, or a malediction on the bad old days of Arthur" (175). Any reading of *SGGK* as critique of courtly culture must explicitly address Aers's interpretation, and, in the main, I agree with his reading.¹⁶ Indeed, the absence of alternatives for the aristocratic élite is reflected in the poet's articulation of pentangular narrativity and chivalric normativity. But it is possible to argue *contra* Aers that the apparent homogeneity of the text conceals some interesting cross-currents and that there exists a strategically positioned alternative to the text's governing cultural codes. The leeway in the original Christmas "gomen" does supply Gawain with some courses of action at odds with the natural propensity toward violence built into the chivalric code: completely disregarding his open mockery of the court, his shaming of its king, and his charge of cowardice, Gawain could have aimed a non-lethal blow at the Green Knight with his axe or struck him harmlessly with the holly bob. This may be the only site in the text where

¹⁵Aers is citing Spearing 228-29. See also Aers's "Christianity for Courtly Subjects: Reflections on the *Gawain-Poet*" (*A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*. Ed. Derek Brewer and Johathan Gibson. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997. 91-101).

¹⁶The most recent reading of *SGGK* as a critique of courtly, "metropolitan" culture is supplied by Rhonda Knight's "All Dressed Up with Someplace to Go: Regional Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (*Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 [2003]: 259-84). Knight cites Aers's study but does not address his reading of *SGGK* as ideologically homogenous.

the poet manifests some awareness of an inconsistency between the economy of honor and, perhaps, the demands of an ethic of restraint. It is striking, however, how both narrative and extra-narrative elements condition audience expectations at this point. So we are told that

the grene knyght upon grounde graythely he dresses
 a littel lut with the hede the lere he discoverez,
 his longe lovelych lokkez he layd over his croun,
 Let the naked nec to the note schewe. (417-20)

[the Green Knight promptly moves to the ground, with a little bow of the head he exposes the flesh, his long, fair locks he laid over his crown, he let his naked neck show for the blow.]

The Green Knight bows his head before Gawain and sweeps his long hair away from his neck, preparing for decapitation despite the vagueness in the forward so meticulously constructed and reiterated. On the intertextual plane, for Gawain’s counterparts in the textual tradition that includes a likely source for the exchange of blows in *SGGK*, namely the long redaction of the Book of Caradoc in the First Continuation of Chrétien de Troye’s *Perceval*, decapitation is always stipulated as a condition of the agreement.¹⁷ These narrative and extra-narrative elements serve to distract us from the precise form of the contract. Testifying to the danger they pose, there is in the text an urge to obscure certain possibilities even as these possibilities are engendered.

While the scholars noted at the beginning of this essay have perceived the poet’s sleight of hand in the first Fitt, they do not acknowledge that the alternatives so surreptitiously presented to Gawain would have radical, and perhaps destructive, consequences for the narrative’s trajectory, the basic structure of which the poet has inherited from his literary precursors. It is difficult indeed to envisage our Gawain riding through the

¹⁷On the intertextual conditioning of audience expectation in the beheading scene, see further Richard J. Moll’s “Frustrated Readers and Conventional Decapitation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” (*Modern Language Review* 97 [2002]: 793-802).

harsh Midlands winter desperately seeking the Green Chapel in dreadful anticipation of the amputation of a toe or a finger or a return blow from a holly bob.¹⁸ It barely needs mentioning that without the threat of death Gawain's quest loses all significance. The ambiguous contract courts abrupt textual foreclosure. Moreover, narrative necessity is coordinated with ideological necessity in the same way that narration and chivalric norms are coordinated throughout the text. The honor-man will brook no grievous insult to himself or his king: the choice given Gawain, the foremost representative of chivalry and its codes of conduct in the poem, is, within its cultural framework, meaningless. Launcelot would have as soon shown unprompted mercy to the insulting enemy of Camelot, Meleagant, at the conclusion of *Le Chevalier de la Charrete*.¹⁹ We find a more compelling, and culturally proximate, parallel in Thomas

¹⁸A similar problem is posed by the seduction scenes, demonstrating how closely the *Gawain*-poet skirts absurdity and narrative foreclosure. If a more amorously inclined Gawain were to let himself be seduced by the Lady, we would be presented with a bizarre situation indeed: namely, a husband willingly sending his beautiful wife into the arms of another man. What is more, the Lady Bertilak is entirely cognizant of her role as her husband's agent in a test and is only feigning her attraction to Gawain. Compare Fran Diekstra: "The absurdity of the plot of the poem when viewed as naturalistic mimesis is evident" (68).

¹⁹On the duty of a knight to his lord, see, for instance, Honoré Bonet from his *Arbre de Batailles*:

And I tell you that the first and principal thing is that [knights'] should keep the oath which they have made to their lord to whom they belong, and to whom they have sworn and promised to do all that he shall command for the defence of his land, according to what is laid down by the laws. *He is no true knight who, for fear of death, or of what might befall, fails to defend the land of his lord, but in truth he is a traitor and forsworn.* A knight must be obedient to him who is acting in place of his lord as governor of the host, and if he is not obedient to him he is no good knight but is overbearing and insolent. *And knights, especially those who are in the king's service, or in a lord's, should in thought and deed be occupied only with the practice of arms, and with campaigning for the honour of their lord.*

The translation is taken from Coopland 121; my italics.

Chestre’s fourteenth-century Breton lai, *Sir Launfal*. The gigantic Sir Valentyne, wishing to “pleye” (line 514) with Launfal, challenges him to a joust, asserting insultingly that a failure to accept would compromise Launfal’s masculinity: “And elles hys manhod schende” (“And otherwise destroy his manhood”; 528).²⁰ Launfal promptly responds that “he wold with hym play” (“he would play with him”; 543), and the collocation of an affront to chivalric-masculine identity with a characterization of a potentially lethal encounter as “play” should remind us of the first Fitt of *SGGK*. Indeed, after Valentyne succeeds in knocking Launfal’s helmet off, we are told that in mockery he “logh and hadde good game” (“laughed and had good sport”; 577)—much like the Green Knight when the knights at Camelot hesitate to play his “gomen.” Launfal is provoked by Valentyne’s laughter in precisely the same way as is Arthur: “Hadde Launfal neuer so moche shame” (“Launfal never had so much shame”; 578). Notwithstanding the quasi-playful quality of the encounter, the protagonist of the romance is satisfied only when he deals a mortal blow to the giant: “Syr Valentyne he smot so pere / Pat hors and man bope deed were, / Gronyng with grisly wounde” (“Sir Valentyne he struck so there / that both horse and man were dead, / groaning with grisly wounds”; 598-600). Gawain is Arthur’s proxy in the first Fitt of *SGGK*, and implicit in both texts is the notion that shame, or even the threat of shame, despite a “playful” milieu, can be neutralized only by a violent reaction against its source. Of course, the neutralization of the shame generated by Gawain’s misconduct at Hautdesert is not so easily effected as its source is difficult to ascertain or, perhaps, admit.

The combined force of the narrative and ideological necessities in *SGGK* is acknowledged implicitly by the poet’s revisionism. We have already seen that revisionary narratives in the poem originate as responses to threats directed against the integrity

²⁰All quotations from *Sir Launfal* are taken from Bliss.

and resilience of chivalric identity. The disturbing marvel perceived at Camelot when the “appropriate” course of action fails to eliminate the offending presence is nervously domesticated by Arthur; Gawain’s agonized reflections on his compromised “trawpe” generate his non-marvellous anti-feminist diatribe; and the newly introspective and dangerously individualized Gawain standing apart from the court is reintegrated into Camelot’s courtly society by a collective reinterpretation of the girdle. If the disruptive power of the marvel or the “ferly” threatens the integrity of aristocratic identity (and narrative itself), the ambiguous contract that superintends the exchange of blows poses exactly such a threat as it opens a virtual narrative space incompatible with the text’s dominant ideological orientation and its elaboration. The intensity of the poet’s anxiety about (or fascination with) these virtual alternatives is indicated both by the distractions initially obfuscating the nature of the challenge Gawain accepts and the poet’s later revisionism. Once recognized, this virtual narrative space forces us to consider the unsettling prospect of an “other Gawain” and an “other text” produced by a different initial choice on the part of the hero, a choice not prescribed by, and even unintelligible under, the dictates of the code of conduct that govern his cultural universe. Extending the poem’s narrative dimensionality, the virtual field would then coexist with *SGGK*’s intertextual field by means of which Gawain is confronted with his “other” romance-selves through the repeated accusations of the Lady and Bertilak that “he is not Gawain.”²¹ I suggest that, in part on account of its unintelligibility within its cultural and generic milieu, Gawain’s choice is edited out of the narrative in Bertilak’s revelatory speech; the Green Knight, a redoubtable inhabitant of the aristocratic order, will assess only Gawain’s fidelity to the chivalric economy (“Trwe mon trwe restore” [2354]) while the virtual narrative

²¹On Gawain’s history and multiplicity, see further Lindley, and also Bartlett J. Whiting’s “Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy, and His Appearance in Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*” (*Medieval Studies* 9 [1947]: 189-234).

space engendered contains only counter-chivalric possibilities. The critics who have noticed this “hypertextual” space miss the point by describing Gawain’s rejection of his alternatives as an ethical or hermeneutic “failure.” Gawain certainly does not fail according to chivalric norms governing conduct in matters of honor and shame. Rather, what we encounter here is a carefully hidden crack in the ideological sphere within which the poem, as Aers has argued, is encapsulated.

The poet covers over this fracture in his otherwise ideologically homogenous text by employing precisely the same revisionary strategies as do his aristocratic characters when they are confronted by the inexplicable and the marvellous. By eliminating Gawain’s choice in Bertilak’s retrospective account, the poet reconstructs a linear narrative without the potential for detour into problematic territory, much like Gawain’s account of the history of man’s vulnerability to women, which explicitly rejects the inherence of any marvellous element. In this way, the beheading comes to be as necessary and unavoidable as man’s corruption by feminine wiles. Furthermore, the revision of the initial Christmas game allows the poet’s altered version of his story to function as the latest iteration of the well-attested Beheading Game plot-line, a narrative trajectory likely known to his audience, confirming its place in a tradition that he “in toun herde.” The effectiveness of these revisionary strategies is attested to by the persistence of a scholarly misreading still extant. Nevertheless, revision can only be partial in *SGGK*: Arthur’s placating words to Guinevere after the Green Knight’s departure are entirely unconvincing; Gawain’s anti-feminist narrative does not long satisfy him; the question of the efficacy of Gawain’s reintegration into Camelot upon communal reinterpretation of the girdle remains open, a point of contention among critics; and, most importantly for our purposes, it is difficult to interpret the poet’s own revisionism in light of Gawain’s apparent rejection of revisionary strategies. Just as Gawain cannot quite perform to the normative standards of the pentangular ideal and wears

the girdle as a sign of his “surfet” (2433), revisionary narratives in *SGGK* cannot quite bear the onus of closure and always leave a disturbing (but critically fertile) remainder.

The evidence adduced suggests how Aers’s forceful and largely convincing readings of *SGGK* as ideologically homogenous and “immanent to the honourman’s community” can be supplemented by attention to the text’s virtual narrative field, wherein resides some potential for heterogeneity (177). Despite his ideological commitments, the poet demonstrates some awareness of the possibility of an “outside” beyond the sphere of Christian chivalry and its associated economy of honor and shame. It is telling, however, that the very existence of Gawain’s choice in the Green Knight’s game is initially obscured and eventually effaced. The subversive charge of a non-lethal blow, reflected in the potential for a radical disruption of the poet’s narrative line, is marked by his anxious revisionism—collapsing without exploration the threatening narrative space generated in the first Fitt. We have seen that revision within the text always comes as a response to the disruptive force of the marvellous, as characters seek to domesticate a temporal fracture according to the normative-narrative principles of continuity and iterability. But Gawain’s final self-narration comes with the previously disavowed generic marker of “ferly,” and his final two lines acknowledge the possibility of a radical temporal discontinuity that can only be hidden, not erased, by ideologically motivated revisionism. Here we witness the fissured chivalric subject attempting to incorporate the “outside” of his integrated chivalric culture into a new narrative of self-constitution. With characteristic ambivalence and as part of the same gesture, however, the interior fissure is externalized and thereby made available for public revision and courtly domestication—possibilities are covered over even as they are engendered. At the same time, Gawain’s claim that his “harm” can only be hidden and not removed should direct our attention back to the carefully concealed fracture in the poet’s own narrative, where the choice inherent in the game proposed

also leads to a certain counter-chivalric “outside.” Nevertheless, the threat posed both by the ambiguous contract and Gawain’s self-narration is deliberately effaced (the former in Bertilak’s revelatory speech and the latter in the court’s reinterpretation of the girdle) as the poet refuses to interrogate directly the consequences of his fractured text and his fractured knight,²² even as he suggestively takes his leave with the image of the broken body of Christ.²³ Indeed, as noted above, according to the internal logic and inherited structure of the poet’s narrative trajectory, the counter-chivalric alternatives inherent in the Green Knight’s challenge can only generate unintelligible or farcical results. But it is no wonder that *SGGK* is so often read as an historically transcendent critique of the aristocratic world and the processes involved in its constitution and maintenance; the poet has anticipated just such interpretations. In this regard, it is unsurprising that all the scholars who have detected the ambiguity in the Christmas “gomen” have been so ready to interpret Gawain’s beheading of the Green Knight as a “failure” of some kind rather than conduct in accordance with implicit cultural prescriptions and expectations. Conversely, those critics who have missed this ambiguity (and the subsequent revision) ignore the poet’s reflexive awareness of exactly these prescriptions. Even if the poet himself will not engage in critique, his text more properly is “pre-critical” in that, via the disjunctive force of the marvellous, it clandestinely opens virtual loci that critical readings can inhabit. Likely dependent on noble or royal patronage and not himself prepared (or able) to speculate about alternatives to the constitutive elements of chivalric life, a poet living during the troubled reign of Richard II could still seek to open

²²Compare Aers: “The poet’s brevity does, however, involve an abandonment of troublesome issues his poem has introduced” (176).

²³See Ganim: “the poet recalls another action at once penitential and heroic, though its suffering and wounding was more profound than Gawain’s and its ‘blysse’ more profound than the laughter of the court” (70).

an imaginative and experimental space where such speculation could occur—acknowledging, despite his anxious conservatism, that things, at the very least, could be otherwise.²⁴

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