

GAWAIN'S PRACTICE OF PIETY IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

It has become a critical commonplace that an important element in the ingenious symmetry of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the pairing of the pentangle and the girdle, the two tokens or signs that the hero carries on his journey to the Green Chapel. In a recent study the poet's design is epitomized thus: 'Gawain leaves Camelot armed with the golden pentangle. He leaves Hautdesert armed with the green girdle'; the girdle is read as placed in opposition to the pentangle, a 'symbolic contrast' seen as 'obvious'.¹ Interpretation often focuses on the contrast between Gawain's true faith as expressed in the pentangle and the superstitious trust he places in the girdle. However, the contrast may be more obvious to twentieth-century readers than it would have been to the *Gawain*-poet's contemporaries, for whom many details in the poem would have resonated with echoes of popular pious practices that blur what may seem to modern judgement a clear distinction between Christian faith and superstitious beliefs.

I

Following tradition, the poet attributes the figure of the pentangle to Solomon, and, as Richard Hamilton Green long ago observed, documentary evidence for Solomon's pentangle in the Middle Ages concerns its use in magical practices that were systematically condemned by the Church.² Green reads the poet's 'wholly original' appropriation of the pentangle for 'a token of inner virtue' as a master-stroke of ambiguity: 'the poet transforms a suspect magical sign into an emblem of perfection to achieve the simultaneous suggestion of greatness and potential failure' (p. 186). Recent scholarship, on the other hand, stresses the philosophical and mathematical uses of the number five and five-sided figures in scholastic Aristotelian thought, hence inferring a medieval understanding of the pentangle as a symbol of rational perfection; and on the strength of this argument, Helen Cooper excludes any association of the pentangle on Gawain's shield with magic.³ But are these opposed meanings necessarily exclusive? A shield, after all, has the double function of declaring the bearer's identity and of warding off attack; thus it would seem in principle quite appropriate for the pentangle to be seen both as the cognizance of Gawain, the perfect knight, and as a magical symbol used to ward off evil. This is not to suggest that Gawain's pentangle actually functions as magic: as Cooper points out, 'it does nothing within the poem

that Gawain himself does not do in his own person' (p. 279); but if the pentangle was understood by the poet's contemporaries to be a symbol with magical associations outside the poem, it might indeed have been meant to be seen as having the potential for double meaning on Gawain's shield.⁴

It is hard to recover the pentangle's accepted meaning in fourteenth-century England, for there is very little discussion outside *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but an examination of what evidence there is permits some conclusions to be drawn. William of Auvergne had described the design of Solomon's pentangle in great detail in his *De legibus* (c.1240) as he used scholastic argument to expose the irrationality of attributing supernatural power to any such device:

Exempli autem causa ponemus pentagonum, quem dicunt Salomonis: necesse igitur est, ut iste pentagonus habeat hanc virtutem mirificam ex ista lineatione, qua intus habet quinque angulos obtusos, et extra quinque acutos quinque [*ed. cit.* acutos, quinque] triangulorum exagorum [*ed. cit.* exagonorum], quibus circumdatur interior pentagonus. Vt autem, vel angulis, vel angulo attribuitur diuinitas, nullus patitur intellectus.⁵

(Now, for instance, let us cite the pentagon, which they call Solomon's: it is inevitable, then, that that pentagon possess this marvellous power by reason of that very diagram, by which it has five obtuse angles within, and outside the five acute [angles] of the five triangular enclosed spaces by which the interior pentagon is surrounded. But no understanding allows that the faculty of divining be attributed either to angles or to an angle.)

Whether William was attacking the use of the pentangle for divination only, or in other magic too, it may well have been his emphasis on its five angles in his denial of its 'virtus' that suggested to the *Gawain*-poet the daring idea of rehabilitating this derided figure by imposing on its intricate lines and angles his own new virtuous signification, symbolically associating the angles with the virtues through the repeated play on the two meanings of the word *poynter* (lines 627, 654, 658) noted by Andrew and Waldron.

English medieval examples of the figure of the pentangle survive in several different media: in an illuminated missal, in seal design, and as a motif of church sculpture.⁶ The pentangle in such contexts must be assumed to have had meaning for the *Gawain*-poet's contemporaries (as T. A. Heslop points out, the design of a seal had to be conventional: 'Patrons wanted an image that was readily understandable in terms of a pre-existing vocabulary'),⁷ and there is some evidence in condemnations of the pentangle by writers of the time to show how it was actually understood and used. Homiletic manuals and moral treatises routinely condemn all kinds of sorcery and necromancy as aspects of the sin of idolatry, but some writers give specific examples that shed light on popular beliefs and practices. Ranulph Higden, in his *Speculum curatorum* (1340), reuses a good deal of William of Auvergne's celebrated denunciation of superstition, but he rearranges it to suit his more practical purpose. William dealt in one place with irrational belief as exemplified in the power of Solomon's pentangle, and in another with the detestable practice of

imbuing seals, rings, and so on with astrological magic, including 'quatuor figurae, quae anuli Salomonis, et quinta, quae vocatur sigillum Salomonis' (p. 87), while elsewhere he discussed the orthodox Christian use of blessed objects such as Candlemas tapers to avert evils, stressing that Christians rely not on the object itself but on God to ward off evil spirits ('vt fuget daemones', p. 84). Higden amalgamates all this material, but omitting William's scholastic discussions. He declares that no faith is to be put in Solomon's ring, pentacle, or seal:

anulus salamonis pentagulum salomonis sigillum salomonis necnon et sigilla apollinis [*MS* appolonii] et sibille et omnia consimilia sunt suspecta et discredenda

but immediately afterwards he excepts from doubt the Agnus Dei talismans that were in long and widespread use for various apotropaic purposes:

verumptamen forma agni quam dominus papa benedicat in die cene: creditur virtutem habere contra lesionem fulguris.⁸

(The ring of Solomon, the pentacle of Solomon, the seal of Solomon, and also the seals of Apollo and the sibyl and all similar things are suspect and not to be believed in. Nevertheless, the figure of the lamb which the lord Pope blesses on Maundy Thursday is believed to have power against injury from lightning.)

The clear implication from Higden's rearrangement of his source material is that the magical signs associated with Solomon, including the pentangle, were also being used as apotropaic talismans: here, as elsewhere in his discussion of types of magic, Higden's particular concern is to differentiate a superstitious and discredited practice from an outwardly similar but pious and sanctioned usage. Similarly, he denounces as superstitious protective rituals involving midsummer bonfires, but accepts that cattle may be protected by being scorched with blessed wax tapers from Candlemas ceremonies: 'verumptamen cerei et candeled benedicte in purificatione beate marie creduntur tutari [*MS* tutaris] animalia quae perurentur' (fol. 17').⁹ Higden's tone throughout is markedly milder than William's passionate condemnation and execration of all forms of superstition.

An Agnus Dei was indeed used to protect the abbey church of St Albans from lightning, and the failure of its 'magic' is noted in Thomas Walsingham's *Gesta*:

Et sicut non prodest sanctorum inniti privilegiis aut indulgentiis, sic non obstitit fulguri impressio Papalis cerea, in qua Agnus Dei figuratur, quae in summitate turris nostri collocatur; quae, ut dicitur, contra tales procillas abigendas virtutem habet, et potestatem.¹⁰

No doubt many other such talismans went unrecorded as people took for granted their efficacy in averting lightning and other evils from their buildings. The Agnus Dei is, after the cross, the commonest motif to appear on the tympana of Romanesque church doorways, and the protective purpose of the symbols in this situation is made clear by the inscription on a tympanum at

Farleigh Hungerford, Somerset: 'Muniat hoc templum cruce gloricans microcosmum.' The twelfth-century parish church at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, has an Agnus Dei figure carved in the corbel table above the main door.¹¹ The same function can perhaps be attributed to the pentangle within a circle carved in the fourteenth-century stone cornice at the parish church, Adderbury, Oxfordshire, where it is prominently placed between two grotesque hybrid figures by the entrance door.¹²

There is some comparative evidence to suggest that the pentangle as used on seals and in the Tiptoft Missal could also have been regarded as a protective magical symbol. The seal of the Carmelite priory at Aberdeen was not unique: Walter de Gray Birch lists the 'pentacle, or five-pointed star, of Solomon' as a common design in seals from the thirteenth century on,¹³ and comparison may be made with a number of medieval English personal and local seals featuring an eight-pointed star formed of two interlaced squares, another device credited with apotropaic powers.¹⁴ The use of apotropaic motifs in the decoration of liturgical manuscripts from the early Middle Ages is also well attested.¹⁵ Although none of this artefactual evidence is conclusive, together with Higden's testimony it makes a reasonable case for assuming that the pentangle sign could be understood by the poet's contemporaries to have apotropaic power. On Gawain's shield, besides representing his fivefold virtue as expounded by the poet, it would also have the potential to remind the reader of popular magical practices.

The presence of the pentangle device on artefacts produced for ecclesiastical use, however, sits oddly with the condemnation levelled against it by Christian writers. It seems to point to a distinction between different magical practices involving the pentangle, of different degrees of offensiveness. The vehemence of repeated denunciations, from William of Auvergne in the thirteenth century to Athanasius Kircher in the seventeenth, is directed at necromancy, at the use of magical names and signs to invoke and control evil spirits.¹⁶ Reginald Scot, in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), reproduces numerous medieval charms and magical conjurations, including figures to be drawn for conjuring spirits in which magical names are arranged between crosses and pentangles; such practices were used for purposes of divination from at least the fourteenth century until long after Scot's day.¹⁷ But the manuscript contexts in which such magical material is preserved, typically long narrow rolls or large single sheets, both of which could be rolled or folded down into small, easily portable shape and size, were evidently regarded as having apotropaic powers of their own, and the Church's attitude towards this kind of magical practice seems to have been less uniform.¹⁸ John of Bromyard, in his *Summa predicantium* (c.1350), describes as witchcraft 'certain articles or strange writings' containing 'the great names of God' or 'mysterious characters', to be 'carried round the neck or in the purse, or fastened or stitched into the cap or on the clothing'; but he permits the wearing of holy equivalents, 'a cross or unadulterated Gospel words', provided no 'magical' observances were used in producing them.¹⁹ As shown above, Higden

differentiates between condemned magic charms and others that are permitted because their virtue can be said to derive from the blessing they have received, such as the *Agnus Dei* talismans and the use of Candlemas wax. Chaucer's Parson utters the usual condemnation of all divination and 'nigromancie', but allows that God may permit the successful effect of 'Charmes for woundes or maladie of men or of beestes' for the increasing of faith.²⁰ This is the heart of the distinction: magical practices involving communication with spirits were always anathema, but protective or therapeutic amulets and charms were allowed within limits, and this toleration no doubt led to considerable variation of practice.

Gawain never invokes any power of the pentangle: its apotropaic potential is a red herring, one of many in the poem, that diverts attention from the real occasion of danger and testing. Nevertheless, it is significant that the pentangle device shares the ambivalence already signalled by the reputation of Solomon himself, who was the epitome of wisdom, but also a byword for folly and weakness. Just so, the pentangle cognizance is explicated by the poet to signal Gawain's complete Christian perfection, but for the reader aware of contemporary concerns about magical protective practices, it also hints at his human frailty: for it was the deep and fearful sense of ever-present danger from the devil which lay behind the widespread use of apotropaic signs and charms. As I hope to show, the poem repeatedly provides opportunities for this kind of reminiscence.

II

As Gawain nears the end of his year's journey, praying that he may arrive at some lodging in time to celebrate Christmas appropriately, he recites the three prayers that were required to be known by all the faithful, Pater, Ave, and Creed, and follows them with a further devotional practice:

He sayned hym in syþes sere
And sayde, 'Cros Kryst me spede.' (lines 761-2)

The combination of the three prayers and the pious ejaculation is related by J. J. Anderson to the early education of medieval children, learning their alphabet and the standard prayers.²¹ But reciting these prayers was also an integral part of everyday Christian devotion at all levels, and the ejaculation as voiced by Gawain differs in small but interesting ways from that associated with the alphabet ('Christ's cross me speed'): Gawain accompanies his prayer with many signs of the cross, and he reverses the normal word order. The Oxford editors and Andrew and Waldron note that the word order of 'Cros Kryst', unusual in English, may be patterned on standard French usage; it is, however, significant that it is also regular in Latin, for what Gawain utters sounds like a version in English of the common 'magical' prayer that usually begins: 'Crux Christi + sit mecum'. The prayer continues with numerous invocations repeating the phrase 'Crux Christi' and the sign of the cross to be

made by the user of the prayer either on himself (as Gawain does) or in the air, calling on the power of Christ's cross to banish all evil, bestow all good, and save one, and particularly to drive away the devil.

The text is one variant of the so-called 'Letter to Charlemagne'. It often occurs in the 'magical' manuscripts mentioned above, where it is usually prefaced with an extravagant legend introducing the 'letter' and guaranteeing to secure one from every kind of bodily and spiritual harm by one's pronouncing or reading it, or just carrying it in written form (the purpose of the rolled and folded parchments, and the explanation for many missing folios in manuscripts originally containing these texts). Although some contemporary writers condemned the use of written charms for protection and modern historians have seen it as a sign of superstitious folk religion, the practice was permitted in principle by no less a theologian than St Thomas Aquinas;²² indeed, as Eamon Duffy argues, much apparently 'magical' religious belief and practice was in fact no more than lay appropriation of orthodox liturgical usage, and the use of invocations and charms by pious lay people was cautiously approved.²³ Moreover, they were used not only by simple, unlettered villagers but by devout, educated members of the gentry and aristocracy.²⁴

There is considerable variation from one copy of the text to another; Robert Thornton's, for example, begins: 'Crux Christi + es arma invincibilis + Crux Christi + sit semper mecum ... + Crux Christi + superat gladium' (fol. 176^v). A version in Bodleian Library, MS Lyell 30, modelled on the related prayer 'Deus propicius esto', begins: 'Crux Christi + protege me. Crux Christi + defende me. Crux Christi + salva me hodie cotidie et omnibus diebus vite mee' (fol. 57).²⁵ In both these manuscripts, the context provided by other contents is ambiguous: on the one hand, religious texts of unimpeachable orthodoxy, and on the other, charms that are clearly inadmissible superstitions. Similar ambiguity attaches to the 'Crux Christi' prayer charm itself: while the veneration of the cross is an integral part of the liturgy of Holy Week, and the prayer might thus be seen as an extension of standard devotions, the repeated invocations and manual signs of the cross were also used in the condemned practice of divination by spirits.

The prescription in the legend attached to the 'Crux Christi' prayer often requires that in order to benefit from its promised powers, the person using it should have made a good confession. This may explain Gawain's expression of sorrow for his sins: '[He] cryed for his mysdede' (line 760), for in the absence of a priest, an act of perfect contrition is sufficient to ensure absolution. The rubrics accompanying similar prayer charms and indulgenced devotional practices also sometimes demand the recitation of the Pater, Ave, and Creed. Gawain thus fulfils every possible requirement of the charm, and he has got no further than the first three invocations when his prayer is apparently answered:

Nade he sayned hymself, segge, bot pryce
Er he watz war in þe wod of a won in a mote,

and he thanks both Christ and St Julian for this blessing (lines 763-4, 773-5).

Prayer charms such as the so-called 'Letter to Charlemagne' texts promise protection from all kinds of life-threatening harm: from thieves and enemies in battle; from pestilence and fevers, poison and hanging; from thunder, fire, and water; from the operations of evil spirits. It is interesting in this light to read, in the few stanzas between the description of Gawain's pentangle and the account of his 'Cros Kryst' prayer, the poet's brief listing of the dangers that Gawain passes unscathed on his journey, as he goes through the Wirral, notorious haunt of outlaws, and through 'contrayez straunge', battling against enemies, dragons, wild beasts, woodwoses, and giants (lines 700-25). His escaping death is attributed to his virtues of courage and endurance and to his serving God; yet the proximity of the two reminders of popular 'magical' protective devices and formulae invites an awareness of additional means by which sudden or violent death might be evaded. It is noteworthy that in the *ordinatio* of the manuscript special prominence is given to these two passages: both the stanza introducing the pentangle and the stanza noting the effect of Gawain's 'Cros Kryst' prayer are marked with a three-line decorated initial (lines 619, 763).²⁶

It is not easy to gauge the contemporary reputation of prayer charms such as the 'Crux Christi' prayer. The context in which Gawain prays, after the poet's assurance of the orthodoxy of the knight's faith through his total trust in Christ's Five Wounds and Mary's Five Joys, seems conventional enough. However, the comical, unlettered shepherds in the Towneley *Prima pastorum* play utter related prayers for protection that seem less orthodox. III Pastor wards off the demons of the night by 'casting a cross' with a garbled prayer charm or night-spell that begins and ends with almost exactly the words used by Gawain:

Cryst crosse, benedyght eest and west –
For drede.
Ihesus onazorus,
Crucyefixus,
Morcus, Andreus,
God be oure spede! (lines 290-5)²⁷

Jumbled together here with the invocation of the cross and the closing prayer are the 'Titulus triumphalis' (Ihesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum) and two holy names selected from the names of the four evangelists and the twelve apostles, all of which occur frequently in magical charms and formulae of exorcism.²⁸ Even mainstream devotions such as the Five Wounds could be appropriated to magical use; Sparrow Simpson describes a fifteenth-century ring bearing the five wounds on the outside, and inside a pious charm:

+ Wulnera quinque dei sunt medicina mei. pia + crux et passio χρϋ sunt medicina michi. jaspar + Melchior Balthasar Ananyzapta tetragrammaton + ²⁹

Again, the unexceptionable prayer is associated with magical names, here those of the Three Kings and one of the so-called names of God, and the

magic word 'Anazapta'. This seems to be a level of devotion at a significant remove from Gawain's. Yet the motive behind the use of powerful magic names and the sign of the cross in such charms is to ward off evil spirits, as in John the carpenter's use of the night-spell and the sign of the cross in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*: 'I crouche thee from elves and fro wightes' (line 3479), and this is precisely the purpose for which Christians authoritatively used the sign of the cross as well as the holy name of Jesus from the fourth century. Gawain himself performs a manual sign of the cross as if to use it as a protective device in just this way as he attempts to counterfeit surprise and fear at the lady's appearance in his chamber:

And sayned hym, as bi his saze þe sauer to worthe,
With hande. (lines 1202-3)

There is clearly no simple dividing line between orthodox devotions on the one hand and ignorant superstitions on the other. As Duffy argues, even these 'magical' prayers are not to be seen 'as standing altogether outside the framework of the official worship and teaching of the Church',³⁰ and this understanding of what he calls the 'symbiotic relationship' between the Church's official liturgy, orthodox devotional cults, and seemingly superstitious magical practices can help the modern reader better to appreciate the representation in the poem of human relations with the supernatural. Gawain's religious belief, as signified by his faith in Christ's Five Wounds and his reliance on Mary's Five Joys but symbolized in the pentangle with its reminder of apotropaic magic, and his devotional practice, as shown in his inclusive use of both standard and possibly suspect prayers, point to a complex but by no means untypical representation of late medieval pious consciousness. This complexity is further hinted at in what seems the least problematic aspect of Gawain's practice of piety: his devotion to Our Lady.

III

Gawain's dedication to the Virgin Mary, whose knight he is said to be (line 1769), is shown in his devotion to her Five Joys and particularly in his having her image painted on the inside of his shield (as did King Arthur, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth), as sole source of his 'forsnes' in battle:

(At þis cause þe knyzt comlyche hade
In the inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,
þat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer payred.) (lines 648-50)

The connection between Gawain's looking at the image of the Queen of Heaven and his unflinching valour is more than a boost to his morale such as a knight might gain from glancing at a picture of his lady before going into battle. The word *belde* has a range of associated meanings: 'courage', 'power', 'aid', 'support', 'help', 'comfort', 'defence', 'protection', which suggests a more active role for the image of the Virgin in relation to her knight.³¹ It recalls the

promises frequently attached to Marian devotions, assuring the faithful of her help, especially at the hour of death, a number of which stipulate that the devotion is to be practised while looking at an image of the Blessed Virgin. For example, an invocation of the titles of Mary is said to ensure that she will appear to predict the time of death, comfort the dying person, and conduct the soul into heaven, if it is said 'coram ymagi[n]e sua'.³²

A Marian legend copied in the late fourteenth century concludes with a less physical expression of such devotional 'seeing': 'w^t a glad sprete caste vp oure ye of oure herte to þ^t quene of heuen & worschyp her as we may w^t her fyue gaudes. & þan say a nantym of her w^t a deuoute orison syche as we þynke most helpyng to oure sowle.'³³ Gawain, however, seems to derive benefit directly from contemplating the actual painted image, as in the rubric quoted above, or as in the case of devotional images to which specific indulgences were attached for saying a prayer in front of the image.³⁴ English manuscripts from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries contain groups of devotional images and accompanying prayers with rubrics promising additional benefits from the devout contemplation of the image. One typically reads: 'Hanc cum scripturam legis inspiciendo figuram ... non formidabis hostes tutusque meabis, nec facies aliqua te contristabit iniqua.'³⁵ Gawain's looking at the image of the Virgin for help against his enemies in battle also recalls those versions of the 'Letter to Charlemagne' where the 'letter'/prayer is replaced by a holy image (the wound in Christ's side, for example, or the nails of the crucifixion) that grants the same protection from death in battle and other evils to anyone who looks at it.³⁶

The Virgin Mary's protection of her knight in this romance is not, of course, required on the battlefield but in the encounters in the bedroom. As the lady presses Gawain harder, the poet warns: 'Gret perile bitwene hem stod, / Nif Maré of hir knyzt mynne' (lines 1768-9). Modern critics read the reference to Mary as an indicator of the severity of Gawain's spiritual peril, but there is also the question of Mary's power of action to protect her knight: might a contemporary audience have expected her to do anything more than strengthen his resolve with her prayers? Although the orthodox doctrinal position remained that Mary's role is that of intercessory mediatrix, the popular image of the Virgin, as portrayed in the cycles of miracle stories, attributed to her virtually limitless power to protect and save her faithful and to punish her enemies; and as Carol Meale points out, like the charms discussed above, the miracles had universal appeal: 'Circulating in Latin and the vernaculars, they were read, copied, and listened to by all levels of society, ecclesiastical and lay.'³⁷ There is a narrative precedent for the Virgin's intervening in a situation where a knight vowed to her is in danger of compromising his allegiance to her and his chastity, in the miracle story type known as 'Mary and the bridegroom', where the Virgin appears on the wedding night to claim the bridegroom as her own;³⁸ and while the poem hardly invites the reader to expect such a materialization, it does perhaps invite a reminiscence of the celebrated power of the Virgin of the miracles in

popular imagination to protect her favourites from every kind of physical and spiritual harm, and thus provides another red herring for the reader, cunningly placed just where it can create a diversion before the real testing of the hero.

IV

The girdle that Gawain accepts from the lady of the castle, as she is the first to claim, is not as 'symple' as it seems (line 1847). It is worth considering the range of associations the gift of the girdle might have had for fourteenth-century readers. As Helen Cooper points out, a magic girdle features in one of the Charlemagne romances, lent by the heroine to the French knights to save them from starvation, raising 'romance expectations' of supernatural assistance for the hero.³⁹ Different associations for the gift of a girdle might be raised by the well-known legend attached to the tradition of the bodily assumption of the Virgin, in which St Thomas is cured of his doubts on the subject when Mary leans down from heaven to give him her girdle.⁴⁰ This theme was popular in English art in the fourteenth century, appearing in manuscript illumination, wall painting, embroidery, sculpture, and stained glass (despite the advice given in *The Golden Legend* that the story was not to be believed).⁴¹ A striking representation in a window at Beckley, Oxfordshire (1325-50), shows the Virgin handing St Thomas an intricately woven or decorated green girdle with a conspicuous golden clasp.⁴² Here, the association of the gift of a girdle would be with ideas of manifesting truth and strengthening faith, ideas entirely in keeping with the symbolism of Gawain's pentangle shield, but of teasingly oblique significance in relation to the meaning of the lady's girdle.

A third contemporary analogue, however, relates more precisely to the purpose of the girdle, offered and taken as an apparently magical protection against being hacked to death. Examining the details of the giving, acceptance, and wearing of the girdle in the light of some of the peripheral religious devotions discussed above may recall a variant of the common practice of carrying written amulets bearing the names of God for protection from harm, a 'magical' belief not necessarily at odds with conventional Christian piety.

Indulged prayers and other efficacious writings were regularly copied on manuscript rolls, long narrow strips of parchment for personal use. Toshiyuki Takamiya suggests that the contemporary audience would have thought of Gawain's green girdle in just this way, as a portable prayer roll, 'a charm against the Devil', and he compares it with fifteenth-century examples commonly 'carried around in purses suspended from a belt together with a pair of beads'.⁴³ A closer parallel is noted by Richard Firth Green in the prayer rolls concealed in his attire by a knight who had intended to use them to unfair advantage in a judicial combat in 1355.⁴⁴ But this is not the only way in which such prayer rolls were used. As Takamiya observes, in size and shape a prayer roll is 'not unlike a girdle',⁴⁵ and indeed the similarity is not surprising. Prayer charms such as those associated with the 'Letter to

Charlemagne', written on rolls, could be worn wrapped around the waist of persons in danger: most often women in labour, but others too. There was clearly some ecclesiastical support for the use of protective girdles, for those held in churches and religious houses were regularly lent out to local women in childbirth;⁴⁶ on the other hand, there were also stern clerical attacks on such 'superstitious' practices. For example, Raymundus of Pennafort (c.1180–1275) distinguishes the acceptable use of written prayers laid upon a sick person from the unacceptable use of the same prayers to infuse with power an object such as a girdle ('cingulum'),⁴⁷ and the fifteenth-century *Doctrinal of Sapience* condemns the use of 'wrytynges and bryvettes full of crosses' and the belief that 'alle they that bere suche brevettys on them may not perysshe in fyre ne in water ne in other peryllous place', mentioning particularly 'somme brevettis ... whyche they doo bynde upon certeyn persones'.⁴⁸ As with the pentangle, however, such denunciations serve to indicate the prevalence of these charms and provide valuable evidence of customary usage.

Benefits promised by these prayers, as described above, characteristically include an assurance that the wearer will not perish with sudden or violent death; the stipulation is simply that he or she wear the written prayer and be clean shaven and out of deadly sin. One fourteenth-century example states: 'who-so berit þis letter wyth hym he þar not drede hym of hys emny to be ouercome. ne he schal not be dampned ... ne in no nede schal mysfare. ne in no batel to be ouercome.' In another, the promise is more specific: 'nor yn batell be ouercome noþer dey of no wonde noþer of no stroke'. One typically claims that 'whoso ... beyres hit wryttyn apon hym and he were put in a fyr to be breynt or hongud on a tre he schould not dey wyll hit is apon hym'.⁴⁹

The lady's description of the true value of the girdle she offers Gawain thus echoes not only the promises that conventionally accompany talismanic gifts in romances but also the formulaic assurances of these protective prayer charms:

For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,
While he hit hade hemely halched aboute
þer is no hapel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myzt,
For he myzt not be slayn for slyzt vpon erþe. (lines 1851–4)

There is the same general formula: 'Whoso beareth upon him ...'; the same promise of protection from violent death; the same absolute guarantee that the wearer cannot be killed while he has the talisman upon his person.

I am not suggesting of course that Gawain's 'luf-lace' is a prayer-charm girdle: simply that in the lady's description of its protective power and the prescribed manner of wearing it, and in Gawain's behaviour relating to it, the poet has provided for the reader familiar with popular pious practices a series of parallel details so that there is a recognizable framework of customary usage into which the representation of the girdle fits. For example, it may hint at an additional context for Gawain's much-debated confession to the priest directly after his acceptance of the girdle. Many critics have seen a

connection between the two events and have sought to interpret the fact that he does not confess his intention to retain the girdle either as a deliberate omission invalidating his confession or as a sign of his naive complacency about the game in which he is involved. But it may be that to contemporary readers a further connection with the girdle would seem a practical and causal one. Gawain first hides the girdle, ready to be taken out when he will need it, then goes immediately to find the priest and seek absolution from all his sins: the normal thing to do to ensure that he is in a fit state to profit from the lifesaving power of the girdle – if it be regarded as an analogue of the quasi-magical prayer-charm girdles.

When Gawain puts the finishing touches to his attire on the dread morning he is careful to wrap the girdle right around his waist. The poet spells out again exactly what Gawain's motivation is in wearing it: 'to sauen hymself when suffer hym byhoued', and specifically to defend him from strokes 'of bronde ... oþer knyffe' (lines 2040–2). Again, this formulation has echoes of the promises attached to the Charlemagne prayers with their guarantees of safety from death in battle or by the sword or other violent means. The version in the Thornton manuscript states 'ferro non occidit', and Robert Reynes of Acle copied into his commonplace book a similar prayer promising that 'he schal not be slayn with swerd nor knyff'.⁵⁰

Such a promise would no doubt carry great weight with Gawain, remembering the Green Knight's massive battle-axe and his remark that he has at home 'oþer weppenes to welde' (lines 208, 268–70). The poet stresses the size of the axe in both encounters: 'Þe hede of an elnþerde þe large lenkþe hade' (line 210); 'With a borelych bytte ... fowre fote large – / Hit watz no lasse, bi þat lace þat lemed ful bryzt!' (lines 2224–6). There have been different interpretations of the last phrase: perhaps an estimate of the size of the blade measured by the 'lace' attached to the first axe (line 217); maybe an oath on the green girdle sworn by Gawain under his breath. Neither of these alone seems entirely appropriate: although the sense of the passage invites the idea of measurement, no lace is mentioned on this second axe and if there were, it is not clear how it could be used; on the other hand, while the suggestion by Andrew and Waldron that Gawain's thoughts naturally 'fly to his magic charm' is attractive,⁵¹ the phrase seems to be in the narrator's voice, not Gawain's.

However, if the 'lace' is taken to be the girdle, and if it is understood to call to mind protective prayer-charm girdles, then the idea of measurement has a particular aptness, for such girdles were often claimed to represent the authentic length of Christ's body.⁵² Presenting the girdle as a kind of tape-measure, a lace whose length is known, the poet can imagine its use to estimate the size of the blade. The association of Gawain's girdle through the idea of measurement with the size of the axe-blade thus links the apparent instrument of his death with his hope of protection in one economical allusion.

The emphasis in prayer-charm promises on surviving mortal danger is often explicitly connected to the very prevalent concern with dying a good death. John Northwood's text, for instance, states that the bearer of the letter

will not 'w'owt schryfte dye',⁵³ and pious anecdotes of people miraculously preserved or returned to life in order to make a saving last confession abound in collections of miracle tales. Again, there is an echo in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gawain's last experience of shrift, unlike his solitary act of contrition as he rides (line 760) or his elaborately detailed sacramental confession at Hautdesert (lines 1876–84), is not in his own control. Amazed to be still alive after the Green Knight's third stroke, when he 'hoped of no rescowe' (line 2308), his joy is described in terms that suggest rebirth or sudden renewal of life:

Neuer syn þat he watz barne borne of his moder
Watz he neuer in þis worlde wyze half so blyþe (lines 2320–1)

and the Green Knight picks up this topos in his judgement and exoneration of Gawain after his self-condemnatory outburst:

'Pou art confessed so clene, beknowen of þy mysses,
And hatz þe penaunce apert of þe poynt of myn egge,
I halde þe polysed of þat plyȝt and pured as clene
As þou hadez neuer forfeȝet syþen þou watz fyrst borne.' (lines 2391–4)

As has often been observed, the Green Knight's formula of exculpation here is patterned closely on the priest's absolution of Gawain in the castle chapel, and despite his laughter and lightness of tone, has serious moral import in the poem. But at the same time, the whole episode can be seen on another level as inviting playful comparison with the pattern of a miracle story, in which Gawain is apparently preserved from certain death by the charm he bears on his body and is thereby granted the opportunity of 'confession' and 'absolution'. It gives a further example of the way in which the *Gawain*-poet seems to have planted a series of red herrings throughout the poem for readers accustomed to the 'magical' use of words and things in contemporary pious practices, inviting them to expect a different kind of test with a different outcome.

The poem repeatedly allows the reader to be aware of popular 'magical' pious practices using charms, invocations, images, and other material objects, alongside approved conventional religious observances. This pointing towards the inclusive nature of traditional religion thus provides an interesting contemporary context for a reading of both the pentangle and the girdle not simply as signs of faith *or* superstition but as ambiguous expressions of a human desire for supernatural aid and protection in a life continually beset with the snares of the evil one.

V

As a recent critic has said, the *Gawain*-poet 'was well aware of the spiritual perils lurking in the everyday world'.⁵⁴ Modern readers have tended to concentrate on the spiritual perils lying in wait for Gawain in the seemingly

familiar world of courtly society: the dangerous choices where it appears he has to weigh social offence against potential sin. But the poet presents Gawain himself as aware of his spiritual peril in terms of a personal conflict with the devil. When he finally arrives at the Green Chapel he discerns in it, through the virtue of his perfected five wits, the operation of the old enemy:

'Now I fele hit is þe Fende, in my fyue wyttez,
 Pat hatz stoken me þis steuen to strye me here.' (lines 2193-4)

The Green Knight is cast as a follower of Satan who performs 'his deuocioun on þe Deuelez wyse', patterned on Gawain's imaginatively picturing Satan's midnight recitation of his 'matynnes' (lines 2187-8, 2191-2). Gawain sees himself as the devil's intended prey, rather like the beleaguered soul in the deathbed drama of late medieval arts of dying. Although sustained by his faith in God's protection and his obedience to God's will (lines 2138-9, 2156-9, 2208), Gawain nevertheless takes care to secure the protection of the 'magical' girdle; for it is precisely this awareness of the ever-present threat of the devil 'lurking in the everyday world', seeking the ruin of each individual soul, that provoked the *Gawain*-poet's contemporaries to protect themselves not only with the sacraments, prayers, and the sign of the cross but with an armoury of sanctified everyday objects: blessed candles, salt, water, bread, and girdles, and to enlist the help of holy figures made familiar by devotion to local cults and by domestically owned religious images. In gazing on the image of the Virgin on the inside of his pentangle shield, uttering and signing his 'Cros Kryst' prayer, and fastening the girdle round his waist, Gawain seems to belong to the same part-orthodox, part-'superstitious' world of sacramental things and powerful words and signs.

The question is how far this world is to be taken as presumptively shared by the poet and reader also. Is Gawain presented as an exemplar of devout Christian practice, or is he held up for scrutiny and criticism in this respect? Some recent studies of the poem have questioned the assumption underlying a good deal of modern *Gawain* scholarship (especially in connection with the pentangle passage), that the moral significance of Gawain's adventure is deeply informed by explicitly Christian spiritual values and learned theology. Derek Pearsall, for example, bluntly declares such assumptions 'misplaced' and characterizes Gawain's Christian faith as 'little more for him than a sentimental or even superstitious attachment to *objets de foi*', typical, in his view, of the religion of contemporary upper-class life.⁵⁵ This seems a possible, if provocatively simplistic interpretation of the evidence shown here for Gawain's practice of piety: the poet would be presenting Gawain in this respect as neither exemplary nor blameworthy, but merely typical. David Aers takes a similar argument somewhat further, seeing the Christian life represented in the poem as 'thin and depoliticized', a 'thoroughly courtly Christianity', but suggesting that the treatment in the poem of the sacrament of penance indicates that the poet might have entertained 'critical views on the late medieval church and its sacramental powers' not inconsistent with Wyclifism,

although not making them explicit: 'Whatever the critical potential some of his poem's perspectives could have held for some late fourteenth-century readers brooding about the church, its alignments with the wealthy, its pastoral activities and its administration of penance, the poet himself chose not to actualize them.⁵⁶ If the poem is taken in fact to date from the end of the fourteenth century, 'as has been generally supposed for the last seventy years' (though without decisive evidence),⁵⁷ then there could be a case for considering Gawain's pious practices from a similar perspective.

His powerful expression of disgust towards the girdle once he has understood its role in his failure gives a possible opening for a critical reading; and with similar hindsight, Gawain might have questioned whether his 'Cros Kryst' prayer was indeed answered by Christ, or whether the castle was not rather an apparition conjured up to the peril of his soul. Characteristic Lollard views on the worship of images and other widespread pious customs might easily provoke questioning of the courtly Gawain's religious practices. The early Lollard preacher who denied the need of faithful Christians for images or for miracles, for example, and the 'learned Wycliffite [who] was said to have taught that "whoever hangs any writing about his neck, thereby takes away the honour due only to God, and bestows it on the devil"', were clearly opposed to the pious temper with which Gawain's observances can be associated.⁵⁸ The danger of superstition in relation to images had been cause for anxiety throughout the Christian centuries; however, in late fourteenth-century England, opposition to images came to be seen as the distinguishing mark of Lollard heretics, and readiness to venerate images as the corresponding proof of orthodoxy.⁵⁹ In this charged context, then, Gawain's dependence on seeing the image of Our Lady in his hour of need, like his urgent recourse to the 'Crux Christi' prayer, his acceptance of the pentangle as his device, and his reliance on the girdle, could remind a late fourteenth-century reader of contemporary tensions between orthodox teachings and 'irregular' beliefs and practices. It is thus not impossible that, through the text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet tacitly allows an awareness of critical contemporary attitudes towards traditional pious practices, but politely avoids direct criticism of customs used by 'courtly subjects' as well as simple folk.

However, whatever the precise date in the fourteenth century of the poem's composition, the poet's careful positioning of the details relating to Gawain's traditional practice of piety, to provide a series of red herrings raising various false expectations of how the development of the romance plot might involve 'magical' outcomes less challenging to both hero and reader than the eventual resolution, can be seen as one more element of the poem's justly celebrated narrative artistry.

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NOTES

All quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 2nd edn (London, 1987).

¹ Priscilla Martin, 'Allegory and symbolism', in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 315–28 (p. 326).

² Richard Hamilton Green, 'Gawain's shield and the quest for perfection', *ELH*, 29 (1962), 121–39; repr. in *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert J. Blanch (Bloomington, Ind., 1966), pp. 176–94. Earlier twentieth-century scholars writing on *Sir Gawain* tended to assume that the pentangle had currency in the later Middle Ages as a magical and apotropaic symbol, but without adducing much supporting evidence.

³ 'The pentangle is not an apotropaic symbol' ('The supernatural', in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, pp. 277–91 (p. 279)). See Gerald Morgan, 'The perfection of the pentangle and of Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Essays on Ricardian Literature in Honour of J. A. Burrow*, ed. A. J. Minnis, Charlotte C. Morse, and Thorlac Turville-Petre (Oxford, 1997), pp. 252–75; N. M. Davis, 'Gawain's rationalist pentangle', in *Arthurian Literature XII*, ed. James P. Carley and Felicity Riddy (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 37–61. Davis's examples of the pentangle figure do not bear scrutiny; it is not the case that 'the star pentagon is constructed at *Elements* 4.11' in Euclid (p. 52): the standard edition notes that the lines drawn in constructing a regular pentagon within a circle include all but one of the lines that would produce a 'star pentagram', but it is not drawn and Euclid does not refer to such a figure. Davis's other example, a figure from Villard de Honnecourt's handbook apparently 'showing the relationship between a regular Pentangle and a rather complicated pinnacled tower in "good" architectural proportion' (p. 56), occurs in a section not on architectural theory but on the art of drawing: sketches based on geometrical shapes and lines of symmetry (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. f. fr. 19093, fols 18^r–19^v). Regular pentangles are used in sketches of a face, a flower, and a pair of trumpeters, but for this tower only two lines are drawn to accentuate its symmetry.

⁴ Warriors bearing shields with obviously apotropaic designs – an eye and a pentangle – appear on an ancient Greek amphora illustrated in J. Schouten, *The Pentagram as a Medical Symbol: An Iconological Study* (Nieuwkoop, 1968), p. 25. Schouten distinguishes the Pythagorean figure of the pentagram as a sign of health, known in antiquity and rediscovered in the Renaissance, from the pentagram used as a magic charm or apotropaic sign, a tradition that he argues descended from the ancient Middle East to medieval Europe. He presents valuable evidence for the use of the pentangle as an apotropaic symbol in late medieval and early modern Germany and Holland. I am indebted to the anonymous reader for *Medium Ævum* who drew this monograph to my attention.

⁵ William of Auvergne, *Opera omnia* (Venice, 1591), p. 86. Green cites Lynn Thorndike on William of Auvergne 'who declares that there is no divinity in the angles of Solomon's pentagon' (p. 265; see below, n. 18), but neither scholar mentions William's description of what is clearly the same figure as Gawain's pentangle.

⁶ See the carved motif in the cornice at St Mary's church, Adderbury, Oxfordshire (mid-fourteenth century), cited in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn, rev. Norman Davis (Oxford, 1967), p. 93; the Tiptoft Missal (c.1325), New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.107, fol. 141^r, cited by R. S. Loomis, 'More Celtic elements in *Gawain and the Green Knight*', *JEGP*, 42 (1943), 149–84 (p. 168); and the common seal of the Carmelite Priory, Aberdeen (fifteenth

century), cited by J. R. Hulbert, 'Syr Gawayne and the Grene Knyzt – concluded', *MP*, 13 (1915–16), 689–730 (p. 724). More informally, pentangles occur apparently as doodles in manuscripts (e.g. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Arch. Selden B.24, fol. 231^r; in Villard's handbook, fol. 9^r) and frequently among graffiti in English churches, often as a mason's mark (see V. Pritchard, *English Medieval Graffiti* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 53, 88).

⁷ 'English seals in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries', in *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200–1400*, ed. Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski (London, 1987), pp. 114–17 (p. 116).

⁸ Oxford, Balliol College Library, MS 77, fol. 17^r. See G. R. Owst, 'Sortilegium in English homiletic literature of the fourteenth century', in *Studies Presented to Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, ed. J. Conway Davies (London, 1957), pp. 272–303.

⁹ Higden is replacing illicit magic with exact Christian substitutes: pagan midsummer bonfires with holy Candlemas flames; the fashioning of Solomonic talismans at a particular time to ensure the virtue of an appropriate constellation with the blessing of the Agnus Dei on Maundy Thursday.

¹⁰ *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi scriptores*, 3 vols (London, 1867–69), I, 313; see Owst, 'Sortilegium in English homiletic literature'.

¹¹ See C. E. Keyser, *A List of Norman Tympana and Lintels* (London, 1904). A second Agnus Dei figure in the corbel table at Kilpeck stands at the east end, while another apotropaic symbol stands by the priest's door: an exhibitionist carving known as a sheila-na-gig, widely found in England, Ireland, France, and Spain (for its apotropaic purpose, see Anthony Weir and James Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London, 1986), p. 146). See Michael Camille on the apotropaic function of grotesque sculptures in such situations: 'the entrances, doorways and windows at Aulnay are those most entrusted with the protective gaze of deformed forms' (*Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London, 1992), p. 75).

¹² Schouten records a pentangle to which he attributes an apotropaic purpose on a capital in the porch of the Romanesque church at Knauthain near Leipzig, and another, carved within a circle, on the tower of the Marktkirche in Hanover, begun in 1350. He also documents the use of the pentangle to protect secular buildings, painted or sculpted on the walls of houses, at the entrance to cowsheds, and on castle gates; and further, 'on household articles like cradles and bedsteads' (*The Pentagram*, pp. 31–3).

¹³ Walter de Gray Birch, *Seals* (London, 1907), pp. 191, 227. An early pentangle appears on the second seal of Richard, Bishop of Winchester (1174–88). Schouten notes a series of seals from Gouda in the fourteenth century bearing the pentangle (*The Pentagram*, pp. 35, 45).

¹⁴ See R. H. Ellis, *Catalogue of Seals in the Public Record Office: Personal Seals*, 2 vols (London, 1978–81), I, pl. 22: P827; II, pl. 1: P947, P949; II, pl. 2: P966, P985; Birch, *Seals*, p. 242. For the apotropaic sign, see Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, 'Deux carrés entrelacés inscrits dans un cercle: de la signification d'un ornement géométrique', in *Textiles d'Égypte de la collection Bowvier*, ed. Annemarie Stauffer (Fribourg, 1991), pp. 21–34.

¹⁵ Pritchard discusses the interlaced motif known as Solomon's knot, a symbol widespread in Roman and medieval culture, found in graffiti, on a tympanum at Rowston, Lincolnshire, and in liturgical manuscripts (*English Medieval Graffiti*, pp. 32–7), and described as 'un motif à valeur prophylactique' (C. Courtois, quoted by Pritchard, p. 34). Henry Maguire discusses apotropaic 'imitation coins' in Carolingian and Ottonian art, 'particularly in the decoration of biblical and liturgical manuscripts',

citing the case of the Bamberg Bible where nine such 'coins' have been 'carefully snipped out ... for use as amulets' ('Magic and money in the early Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 72 (1997), 1037-54 (pp. 1052-3)). Schouten notes that 'coins with pentagrams were in circulation throughout the Graeco-Roman world' and were 'freely copied' in Gaul, arguing that such coins were largely responsible for the widespread use of the pentangle as an apotropaic sign (*The Pentagram*, pp. 24, 26-7). For the view that monstrous beasts in manuscript borders, like grotesque gargoyles on churches, were 'exercising their traditional apotropaic function of warding off evil', see Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World* (London, 1996), p. 151.

¹⁶ William of Auvergne, *De legibus*, cap. 27 (*Opera omnia*, p. 87); Athanasius Kircher, *Arithmologia* (Rome, 1665), p. 216 (quoted in the Oxford edition, p. 93).

¹⁷ E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), p. 276.

¹⁸ Flora Lewis discussed these manuscripts in 'Form and content: the letter of Leo and the length of Christ', a paper given to the Seminar in the History of the Book to 1500 at Cambridge in March 1995. For magical manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (BL, MS Sloane 3854; BL, MS Royal 17 A.xlii), see Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science: The First Thirteen Centuries of our Era*, rev. edn, 2 vols (New York, 1929), II, 279-89; see also the series of articles on magical rolls by W. Sparrow Simpson in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 30 (1874), 357-74; 40 (1884), 297-332; 48 (1892), 38-54.

¹⁹ British Library, MS Royal 7 E.iv, fols 559-563, trans. Owst, 'Sortilegium in English homiletic literature', pp. 291-2.

²⁰ *Canterbury Tales*, X.605 (*The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987), p. 308).

²¹ 'Gawain and the hornbook', *Notes and Queries*, NS 37 (1990), 160-3. Anderson argues that the suggestion of underdeveloped religious knowledge in Gawain accords with his later, perhaps ignorantly imperfect confession.

²² 'To attach holy words about the neck, provided they contain nothing false or suspect, is certainly not unlawful', quoted by R. H. Robbins, *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York, 1959; repr. 1981), p. 86. See also Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 1991), on magical practices in Anglo-Saxon England (incantations, charms, amulets incorporating liturgical or scriptural elements) as 'deliberately Christianized' devices adopted and encouraged by Christian pastors as powerful and attractive alternatives to condemned, non-Christian magic (pp. 311-20).

²³ See Henry Krämer and James Sprenger, *Malleus maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (London, 1930), pp. 381-7; cited in Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 285-6. See Francesco Guazzo, *Compendium maleficarum*, trans. Summers (London, 1929), for sanctioned practices, including 'amulets ... much used of old' (p. 180).

²⁴ For example, Robert Thornton, gentleman-amateur book-compiler, one of whose manuscripts contains a number of charms (Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91, now in Nottingham University Library); Lady Margaret Beaufort, whose prayerbook (Westminster Abbey, MS 39) contains 'four distinct versions of the Charlemagne legend and its accompanying invocation' (Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 278).

²⁵ MS Lyell 30 is an extensive collection of such prayers, 'compiled and copied by [J.] Grasel and completed in 1441' (Albinia De La Mare, *Catalogue of the Collection of Medieval Manuscripts Bequeathed to the Bodleian Library Oxford by James P. R. Lyell* (Oxford, 1971), p. 73). I am indebted to Professor De La Mare for the opinion that the manuscript was compiled from a number of earlier exemplars and that Grasel probably collected the material over some time, arranged the texts in groups, and

made a meticulous fair copy. She identifies many cognate 'Crux +' texts, some dating back to the eleventh century, in manuscripts from the thirteenth century onwards (pp. 63-4). W. Sparrow Simpson transcribes numerous examples from manuscripts of the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries (*Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 30 (1874); 40 (1884); 48 (1892)).

²⁶ The five three-line decorated initials in the romance (besides the four larger initials marking the major narrative divisions) show further interest in Gawain's 'charms' and their purpose. In Fitt 3, the manuscript marks the beginning of the first two hunts (lines 1126, 1421), but the placing of the third, small initial (line 1893) marks the transition from the scene in which Gawain accepts the girdle to the finale of the third hunt, thus drawing attention to the third of Gawain's 'magical' devices. The last three-line initial (line 2259) marks the apparent denouement as the Green Knight makes ready to strike the death-blow for which Gawain has been preparing himself.

²⁷ *English Mystery Plays: A Selection*, ed. Peter Happé (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 256. Earlier, II Pastor calls for a blessing on his companions, seemingly with a cross made in the air 'overthwart and endlang', and for safety from thieves, enemies, and all other evils (lines 50-4).

²⁸ Compare MS Lyell 30: 'I C nazarene rex iudeorum crucifixe miserere mei' (fol. 56). 'Morcus, Andreus' may be a muddled recollection of the traditional night-spell, 'Matthew, Mark, Luke and John' (see Iona and Peter Opie, *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 303-5). For Anglo-Saxon charms using the names of the evangelists with signs of the cross, see *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine, Illustrated Specially from the Semi-Pagan Text 'Lacnunga'*, ed. and trans. J. H. G. Grattan and C. Singer (London, 1952), pp. 106, 172.

²⁹ See Sparrow Simpson, in *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 40 (1884), 311-12. A similar formula without magical elements occurs in MS Lyell 30, fol. 55'.

³⁰ *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 279.

³¹ See the *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. 'belde (n)'. Glossers and translators usually give the meaning simply as 'courage'; but see Arthur Lindley's argument for a flexible approach to complexity of meaning in the poem, in 'Pinning Gawain down: the misediting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *JEGP*, 96 (1997), 26-42.

³² Other rubrics make similar conditions, for example: 'Quicumque istam oracionem sequentem cum v Ave Maria devote cotidie dixerit ante ymaginem b. M. genuflectando per eam salvus erit' (MS Lyell 30, fols 160'-161; fols 123-5).

³³ *A Worcestershire Miscellany Compiled by John Northwood, c. 1400* (BL, MS Add. 37,787), ed. Nita Scudder Baugh (Philadelphia, 1956), p. 152.

³⁴ Devotion to the Holy Face, for example, centred on the indulgence of ten days granted by Pope Innocent III in 1216 to anyone reciting the prayer 'Salve sancta facies' while looking at a representation of the Holy Face as imprinted on the Vernicle; see Flora Lewis, 'The Veronica: image, legend and viewer', in *England in the Thirteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1984 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. W. M. Ormrod (Woodbridge, 1986), pp. 100-6.

³⁵ 'When you read this writing while looking at the image ... you will not fear enemies and you will pass in safety, nor will any hostile aspect distress you.' See Kathleen L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts 1390-1490*, Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles VI, 2 vols (London, 1996): catalogue no. 7, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 93, fol. 6; catalogue no. 32, Cambridge, Trinity College, MS o.3.10, fol. 11'.

³⁶ A late fourteenth-century rubric accompanying a diagram of the cross and nails promises safety to 'what man woman or chyldre þat daye lokyng hyt a poun or bles

hym þer w" (Bodleian Library, MS Bodl. 177, fol. 61"; see C. T. Onions, 'A devotion to the Cross written in the south-west of England', *MLR*, 13 (1918), 228–30).

³⁷ 'The miracles of Our Lady: context and interpretation', in *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 115–36 (p. 115).

³⁸ See Johannes Herolt, *Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. C. C. Swinton Bland (London, 1928), pp. 137–8. Examples occur in the collection of Caesarius of Heisterbach (c.1180–c.1240) and in Jacobus de Voragine (c.1230–1298), *The Golden Legend; Or Lives of the Saints as Englished by William Caxton*, ed. F. S. Ellis, 7 vols (London, 1900), II, 128; V, 108.

³⁹ 'The supernatural', p. 290.

⁴⁰ For an interpretation of the girdle in the poem in the light of this tradition, see Richard Firth Green, 'Sir Gawain and the *sacra cintola*', *English Studies in Canada*, 11 (1985), 1–11.

⁴¹ See the De Lisle Hours (1320–30), New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS G 50, fol. 161"; the Carmelite Missal (late fourteenth century), London, British Library, MS Add. 29704, fol. 132"; wall paintings in St Mary's Church, Chalgrove, Oxfordshire (c.1330) and St Mary's Church, Broughton, Oxfordshire (fourteenth century); the Syon cope (1300–20), London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 83–1864; the Pienza cope (1315–35), Pienza, Capitolo della Cattedrale; roof boss at Peterborough Cathedral (late fourteenth century); stained glass in All Saints' church, North Moreton, Oxfordshire (c.1300) and the Church of the Assumption, Beckley, Oxfordshire (1325–50). See *The Golden Legend*, IV, 242.

⁴² See P. A. Newton, *The County of Oxford: A Catalogue of Medieval Stained Glass*, Corpus vitrearum Medii Aevi, Great Britain: I (1979), p. 30, pl. I(c). Newton suggests that the popularity of the theme might be connected with the acquisition of a relic of the girdle by Westminster Abbey.

⁴³ 'Gawain's green girdle as a medieval talisman', in *Chaucer to Shakespeare: Essays in Honour of Shinsuke Ando* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 75–9 (p. 77). Takamiya describes a fifteenth-century prayer-roll manuscript in his collection containing 'a curious inscription to the effect that the roll was as long as the Virgin Mary was tall', concluding that for the contemporary audience, 'the green girdle wrapped around Gawain's waist ... intensifies the meaning of his devotion to the Virgin Mary' (p. 79).

⁴⁴ 'Gawain's five fingers', *ELN*, 27 (1989–90), 14–18 (p. 16). Green quotes the report of the case of the Bishop of Salisbury v. the Earl of Salisbury: 'dicebatur que les justices avoient trope in le cote Shawel qui fuit le champion l'Evesque plusors rolls des orizons & sortileges.'

⁴⁵ 'Gawain's green girdle', p. 77.

⁴⁶ See P. Saintyves, 'Les Ceintures magiques et processions enveloppantes', *Revue des traditions populaires*, 25 (1910), 113–23 (pp. 116–17). For evidence that this practice persisted until the sixteenth century, see Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 384. For the suggestion that there might be a connection between Gawain's girdle and the allegedly miraculous belt of the 'almost-sainted' Thomas, Earl of Lancaster (c.1278–c.1322), kept in the chapel at Pontefract Castle, see W. G. Cooke and D'A. J. D. Boulton, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: a poem for Henry of Grosmont?', *MÆ*, 68 (1999), 42–54 (p. 49).

⁴⁷ Quoted in *Fasciculus morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, ed. and trans. Siegfried Wenzel (University Park, Pa., 1989), p. 576.

⁴⁸ *The Doctrinal of Sapyence* (Caxton, 1489), fol. 4"; quoted in Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 277. This condemnation of girdle charms may be due to their resembling traditional curative ligatures in medical magic (see Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, pp. 243–50).

The ambivalent attitude of church authorities towards such prayer charms compares interestingly with Gawain's double attitude to the girdle: at first a jewel of a life-preserver (line 1856), and in the end a hated cause of deadly sins, vehemently denounced as a 'falssyng' leading him into 'fylþe' (lines 2378, 2436).

⁴⁹ *A Worcestershire Miscellany*, p. 154; Bodleian Library, MS Bodl. 177, fol. 61^v; Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1, fol. 96^v.

⁵⁰ Bodleian Library, MS Tanner 407, fol. 99^f.

⁵¹ *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, p. 288.

⁵² See Lewis, 'Form and content: the letter of Leo and the length of Christ'; see also Owst, 'Sortilegium in English homiletic literature', p. 292 n. 3; Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 275. See n. 43 above for a comparable example of the measurement of the length of the Virgin. A late example may be seen in BL, Add. MS 25,311, a seventeenth-century vellum roll (10'11" × 1½") which near the middle is marked 'Longitudo + Christi', enabling users to measure off the length of Christ. Flint associates Anglo-Saxon examples of such a 'protective and health charm ... meant probably to be worn upon the person, and based upon the measurement of Christ's body' with the practice of 'condemned measuring witchcraft' (*The Rise of Magic*, p. 314).

⁵³ *A Worcestershire Miscellany*, p. 154.

⁵⁴ Dee Dyas, *Images of Faith in English Literature 700-1500* (London, 1997), p. 195.

⁵⁵ 'Courtesy and chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the order of shame and the invention of embarrassment', in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, pp. 351-62 (pp. 352-3). See also C. D. Benson, 'The lost honor of Sir Gawain', in *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, ed. J. M. Foley (New York, 1992), pp. 30-9.

⁵⁶ 'Christianity for courtly subjects: reflections on the *Gawain-Poet*', in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, pp. 91-101.

⁵⁷ Cooke and Boulton, 'Sir Gawain', p. 44; the authors make a case for dating the poem between 1353 and 1361.

⁵⁸ Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London, 1984), pp. 166, 113; see *Register of Henry Chichele*, ed. E. F. Jacob, 3 vols (Canterbury and York Society, 1943-47), III, 67-8, 160.

⁵⁹ See Aston: 'Opposition to images ... was one of the points which the chronicler Henry Knighton commented on as characterizing followers of the sect at the end of the fourteenth century' (*Lollards*, p. 136); Jeffrey Denton cites an oath imposed by Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, on suspected Lollards in 1395: 'Fro this day forthward, I shall worship images, with praying and offering unto them in the worschop of the saintes, that thay be made after' ('Image and history', in *Age of Chivalry*, pp. 20-5 (p. 23)).