SIGNIFYING THE SELF: LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*[1]

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The subject of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not deeds but words. Love and battle, sex and violence, the traditional matter of romance, hover over the story as potentials but are realized only in symbolic, displaced forms. Neither the battle Arthur expects on seeing the Green Knight at Camelot nor the battering Gawain anticipates at the Green Chapel materializes, and martial prowess is reduced to two blows, both harmless, falling twelve months apart, leading one reader to remark on "the sense of physical activity and of masculine prowess in which Sir Gawain is, in comparison to most romances, ... so conspicuously lacking."[2] The sexual energies gathered into the three temptation scenes are likewise sublimated into a few kisses. Language, on the other hand, is central to all of Gawain's important tasks: he answers the initial challenge of the Green Knight at Camelot with a careful, order-asserting speech; he gives his word to the Green Knight to exchange blows and to Bertilak to exchange winnings; he spends a week in "luf talkynge"; and he makes three separate confessions. Though each of these instances of Gawain's use of language has received individual critical attention, the implications of the poem's evident concern for language and its intimate relationship with identity might be more thoroughly explored. As the poem illustrates, identity—Camelot's corporate and Gawain's individual—is essentially a social construct. We are the "person" (as opposed to the purely biological object) that, simultaneously, we claim to be and our contemporaries accept us as being. The arena for the negotiation of this identity is a linguistic one. The creation, destruction, and modification of identities is a game played according to linguistic rules, and, as both Gawain and Arthur discover, not only words but also actions and objects take on the function of signs in this negotiation.

The knight of the Arthurian romance identifies himself by revealing his name and/or by bearing his coat of arms and other personal signs; the widespread motifs of mistaken identity, of knights who refuse to give their name, or who ride deliberately or haphazardly bearing unknown arms and are not recognized, suggest not only a certain thematic interest among romance writers in the attestation of identity, but also an interest in the problematics of identity. The *Gawain*-Poet in particular seems aware that language and other signs may not only denote an extant identity, but may also modify it, bring

That a "person" can be created or destroyed by symbolic action is, on reflection, an unsurprising notion. While no physical transformation takes place during the wedding ceremony when two people are pronounced "man and wife," we admit that a "wife" now exists who did not before. So too, as writers like J. L. Austin and John Searle[3] have recently reminded us, "hero," "priest," and "lawyer" are created by acts of language and are certainly no less real for being intangible. The "Gawain" about whom there is so much discussion in this romance is such a social entity: he comes into being as his interlocutors accept him at his nominal value. It is Gawain's right to assert, to lay claim to, an identity, and it is the right of others, as Lady Bertilak and the Green Knight demonstrate, to accept or reject his claim, just as one represents a "hero" only insofar as one's group accepts one as such. It may also be important, the poem suggests, to disclaim an identity.

The language most clearly connected to identity is nouns, especially personal names, the public use of which carries implications which go well beyond distinguishing among Tom, Dick, and Harry. Much of the dramatic tension in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* involves Gawain's reputation, the connotations of his name. Medieval writers divided words according to their modes of signifying, *modi significandi* (or *proprietates significationum*); hence the parts of speech differ not in their referents but in their manners of signifying the referent. As is well known, the *modi significandi* assumed greater and greater importance for language theory from the twelfth century on. For the name, or nouns in general, the *modus significandi* was dependent upon the qualities of the referent, thus Priscian's formula for the noun of *substantium cum qualitate*.[4] It was held that the noun signified the substance (*substantium*) by virtue of its quality (*cum qualitate*). Logicians added the parallel terms of *suppositum* and *significatum* and the notion that the noun signifies *quod est* and *quo est*, the former denoting 'that which is,' and the later its manner of being 'that which it is.' In order for a noun to signify an object, that object must therefore have those qualities denoted by that noun. The absence of the qualities leads directly to a failure of meaning. When, near the poem's end, the Green Knight says scornfully to Gawain that he is not Gawain, he is not referring to his physical self, but neither is he being metaphorical. The issue is whether Gawain the physical or biological entity retains (or ever possessed) those qualities whereby he might lay claim to the name "Gawain." Obviously, Gawain is not going to disappear physically if the Green Knight persists in denying him his name, but the character he hoped to be will. The claim to the name rests in turn upon his words and deeds, and the deeds themselves function in this regard as signs.

In addition to words, we readily accept the sign value of acts in creating identity: "Big boys don't cry," and "real men don't eat quiche" are two negative injunctions illustrating this proposition. Medieval people were aware, probably more so than we, of the sign value of objects as well. In part because late medieval culture was organized by estates, patterns of dress and virtually every other form of personal physical sign were very highly codified. Two examples of such codification are the English sumptuary legislation of Edward III, Richard II, and Edward IV, and the heraldic codes. But in fact the codification of the physical personal environment was more complete, and more subtle, than those few laws. Zygmunt Bauman's remarks on the "propensity of estate- and caste-type societies, either slave or feudal, to subject unequivocally all kinds of cultural elements—including attire, houses, furniture, arms, transport, and etiquette—to ascribed statuses"[5] applies perfectly to late medieval England.

Late medieval Europe as a whole was a culture in which signs like a tonsure, a crown, and a tabard unambiguously informed the world at large that their wearers had the status of cleric, monarch, and laborer, respectively. Even objects not specifically addressed by such codes as sumptuary laws and heraldic rolls might act as signs under the influence of Paul's statement in Romans 1:20 that "Invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta, conspiciuntur." Both sacred and secular impulses, then, worked together to make objects significant, especially and most interestingly in relation to their bearers. That is, heraldic and other sanctioned signs of social identity (e.g., sword, miter) allowed their bearers to make themselves known as members of this or that status, and in some cases (heraldic cognizances for example) as this or that particular member of the status. To bear a coat of arms is a complex act of signification, because it both announces and claims an identity. When Edward III claimed France in 1340, he "quartered the arms of France, had the fleur de lys engraved on his seal, and furnished himself with a red and blue surcoat sewn with [both the] leopards [of England] and [the] lilies [of France]."[6] To do so was not merely a colorful way of making a claim on the territory of France; what mattered was not so much what Edward claimed to own, but rather who he claimed to be, viz., both England and France. The claim was not, of course, allowed to go unchallenged. Similarly, the identity Arthur claims through his signs of regal splendor is challenged by the Green Knight.

Heraldic signs specified identity, not merely distinguishing one knight from another, as numbers might do equally well, but in the fuller sense of outlining the qualities—parentage, deeds, and possessions—of the identity in question, as did Edward's surcoat. Gerard Brault's thorough study of heraldic terminology in French Arthurian romance[7] has demonstrated that their authors were keenly conscious of the relationship between the name, coat armor, and identity (in the

fullest sense of the term) of their heroes,[8] a consciousness singularly appropriate in a genre so concerned with the personal growth, testing, and change of its hero. A similar consciousness, as I hope to show, is exhibited by the *Gawain*-Poet. The challenge of the poem is not for Gawain to accomplish something but to become something, and to become aware of what, or who, he is. The same may be said of Camelot corporately, though the corporate is largely embodied in Arthur. A final prefatory remark is that such self awareness may, in part, be gained from a careful scrutiny of the signs of someone else. We model our actions after those of people we admire, people we would like to "be like," and we avoid the actions and objects closely associated with those we dislike. Put simply, a striking character makes us aware of ourselves, and the Green Knight is nothing if not striking.

The Green Knight's appearance (in both senses of the word) at Camelot presents the court with a challenge in beheading and in the correct use of signs, the latter being the more difficult.[9] The Green Knight would ask who Camelot is, check the fit between its reputation ("los") and its actions, between signifier and signified; and he would also have them discover who he is, interpret his complex cognizance. He is "half etayn," but also a man, "and þat þe myriest in his muckel þat myȝt ride" (140-42).[10] He is huge but well proportioned, bushy but also embroidered. He carries the "unmete ax" in one hand, but a holly bob in the other. He is ferocious of demeanor and yet bears no arms save the axe. It is worth noting that the challenge to the beheading game does not require this kind of ambiguity. The axe and a few pointed words from a knight of ordinary color suffice to initiate the contest and challenge where bravery is the only issue, as analogue versions show.[11]

The Green Knight is in sum a lexical knot, combining terms normally opposed to one another: the wild on the one hand and the civil on the other. In so doing, the Green Knight echoes the opening stanzas of the poem, which displayed multiple instances of similar opposed pairs: the splendor of Troy reduced to ashes; bliss and blunder characterizing equally the history of Britain; the image of Camelot, in its first free, green age, set against a background of winter; indeed that youth itself combining positive energy and a probably dangerous, unstructured "childgeredness." The court's response to the Green Knight is, of course, wonder; the poet emphasizes the court's silence, but we should note that during this silence the court is busy "reading" the knight: "Ther watz lokyng on lenþe þe lude to beholde, / For vch mon had meruayle quat hit mene myȝt" (232-33), and "Al studied þat þer stod, and stalked hym nerre / Wyth al þe wonder of þe worlde" (237-38). Arthur's challenge is not merely to be courageous but to read the Green Knight's complex signs, yet for all the study and wonder, in this last task he fails and is rebuked: "Sir

cortays knyȝt, / If þou craue batayl bare, / Here faylez þou not to fyȝt" says Arthur, looking at the axe. But, "Nay, frayst I no fyȝt, in fayth I þe telle" (280), replies the knight, who has only a moment before said "ȝe may be siker by þis braunch þat I bere here / þat I passe as in pes, and no plyȝt seche" (265-66). Further, he has drawn the court's attention to his lack of armor, shield, spear, and armor, adding that "for I wolde no were, my wedez ar softer" (271). That the Green Knight carries no shield, whereon one might find the customary cognizance of a knight, makes it even more incumbent upon Arthur and the court to interpret the remainder of the objects he bears. The number of such scenes of recognition in the romance tradition, thematizing the establishment and adjustment of identity based on the display and interpretation of personal signs, is quite large. One thinks for instance of Chrétien's Perceval, who first comes to court on his hunter, with his javelins and rude skin clothes, an instance particularly instructive in that it shows us the possibility of variant interpretations of the stranger's signs. Other examples would include Lancelot in his cart, the maiden who wears a sword in Malory's story of Balan and Balin, and Tristan before King Mark. It is indeed not unusual for a knight issuing a challenge in Arthur's court to have something mysterious about his appearance. Successful interpretation of such mystery leads typically to a recognition of the knight's identity and an appreciation of his qualities, as in the cases of Yvain, the Knight of the Lion, and Perceval, in Chrétien. What is remarkable in *Sir Gawain*, however, is the dramatization given the (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to read the knight. There has been a good deal of modern critical argument over the symbolic value of the Green Knight, interpretations ranging over a spectrum which includes vegetation deity, death, and Satan; I would argue that the essential point of the Green Knight's ambiguous appearance is the ambiguity itself.

In addition to baffling Arthur and Camelot with his complex self-identification, the Green Knight makes a great show of reading theirs: He has ridden his horse up to the high table, and now looks them over, and says "Wher is ... þe gouernour of þis gyng?" (224-25) blythely ignoring such chivalric signs as Arthur's crown and central placement at the chessboard-like high table between queen and bishop; in fact, he moves up and down the table, stopping, and "studying who might be of most renown" (229-31). Once the Knight has "recognized" Arthur and issued his challenge, he accuses the court of using false signs. Their reputation of bravery, and the splendor of Camelot, is contradicted by their failure to respond to his challenge:

> "What, is þis Arþures hous? ...
> þat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?

Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?
Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of the Rounde Table
Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wy3es speche." (309-14)

"Ouerwalt wyth a worde" is both an accurate characterization of the power of language and the fragility of reputation and at the same time an effective taunt. Arthur responds only to the taunt, misreading the entire text of the knight's appearance and words, and waxing "as wroth as þe wind."

The Green Knight comes to Camelot as a tester, but not only of courage. If the moral question of the poem were simply whether Arthur and Gawain deserved their reputations, whether their actions would conform to their words, then correct action would consist in an angry Arthur himself chopping off the Green Knight's head and Gawain acting upon his apparent reputation and sleeping with Lady Bertilak. Both these actions would clearly be wrong. What in fact is required is restraint from action. Indeed, the Green Knight tests whether Arthur and Gawain can refrain from acting on their reputations, can sublimate action into symbol. Put another way, the Green Knight tests Camelot's ability to qualify, modify, or complicate its identity, and to signify such subtleties. To be brave does not mean to chop off any given head, and to be courteous does not mean to sleep with any given woman.

The social fabric in Troy, Rome, or Camelot depends for its integrity upon the human capacity for complex symbolic action, centered in language. John of Salisbury wrote, in Book I of his *Metalogicon*, that "deprived of their gift of speech, men would degenerate to the condition of brute animals, and cities would seem like corrals for livestock, rather than communities composed of human beings united by a common bond for the purpose of living in society, serving one another, and cooperating as friends."[12] Indeed, in *De vulgari eloquentia* Dante, following Aquinas, shows that language defines man, holding that neither animals, who are without reason and thus have nothing to share with one another, nor angels, who communicate with one another without mediation, use language.[13] Man, the rational animal, needs language to share his ideas: "Oportuit ergo genus humanum ad communicandas inter se conceptiones suas aliquod rationale signum et sensuale habere."[14]

The (half) brutish Green Knight forces an awareness of these considerations upon Camelot, forces Arthur's knights to recognize that what makes them men and not livestock is their ability to speak, to create and act upon a social identity through symbol rather than symptom. I would argue that the task of Camelot is not entirely to bring its actions into line with its reputation, but also the converse: to align its reputation with its deeds, to signify itself with precision. In

the term the poet uses, "trawþe" means not only keeping one's word, doing what one says, but also saying what one does, and has done.

It is for Gawain, in a speech, to sublimate, modify, and complicate the identity of Camelot, to answer the question "Is this Arthur's house?" and all that implies with "Well, yes, but ...." Gawain's speech before the court (341-61) often strikes modern students, and some critics, as overly elegant, near paralyzed by etiquette, if not absolutely sissified. But in it Gawain accomplishes two important tasks. First, he "rereads" the text of the court for the Green Knight: rather than beardless boys, Arthur is surrounded by "mony ... bolde, / þat vnder heuen I hope non ha3erer of wylle" (351-52); Arthur's taking the challenge himself signifies that he is "talenttyf," rather than out of control; that no one responded to the challenge signifies, Gawain argues *a fortiori*, that the challenge is beneath everyone in the court but himself, the weakest. Second, and more importantly, in asking permission to leave the side of the Queen, in alluding to the rules governing the assignment of adventures ("I have frayned hit at yow fyrst"), begging leave to give counsel, and denigrating both the challenge and himself, Gawain reasserts the signs of the other side of Camelot's reputation: courtesy, rule-bound behavior, restraint. Those signs of elegance and decorum had dominated the opening stanzas of the poem, from the hierarchical placement of the knights, bishop, king, and queen right down to the tableware (107-29), but had been obscured or ignored by the Green Knight's emphasis upon signs of martial valor—or their absence. Gawain's essential task here is the reassertion of the place of symbolic behavior in the definition of Camelot. The idea then emerges that, like the Green Knight, Camelot is a complex entity, requiring a complex sign for full self-identification, an idea reiterated at the poem's end.

In Bertilak's court Gawain is faced, as was Arthur, with problems of signifying clearly who he is and in interpreting the signs used by others. As with Arthur at Camelot, Gawain's identity is first established, but as the complete stanza which the poet devotes to this issue immediately following Gawain's meal makes clear, the knight's reputation is centered in his linguistic and cultural, not his martial, facility: he identifies himself first as of Arthur's court (903-05) and then as "Wawan hymself" (906). At this information, the as-yet-unidentified lord of the manor laughs aloud, and "alle þe men in þat mote maden much joye / To apere in his presense ... / þat alle prys and prowes and pured þewes / Apendes to hys persoun, and praysed is euer" (910-13) so that,

Vch segge ful softly sayde to his fere:
'Now schal we semlych se sle3tez of þewez
And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble,

> Wich spede is in speche vnspurd may we lerne,
> Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture.
> ... ...
> I hope þat may hym here
> Schal lerne of luf-talkyng.' (915-27)

Whatever identities have been associated with the name of Gawain in other romances, our poet has gone to some trouble here to identify his hero with refined behavior and speech. This stanza is for our benefit; the poet does not show Gawain as aware of the public perception of him as the "father of nurture," but he is soon to face equally daunting expressions of his self in the bedroom scenes.

As Arthur had been confronted by the complex Green Knight, so is Gawain confronted by the Lady, who appears hand in hand with the old dame Morgan. The menace and caress of the Green Knight's signs (axe and holly, bushiness and embroidery) are echoed in the ȝep and ȝolȝe, red and wrinkled, bare breast and kerchiefed breast, snowy white and black, of the double lady. W.A. Davenport sees in the two women

> the moralist's emblems of transience and mutability ... Youth and Age, the fair and ugly faces of Fortune, as ambiguous as the holly branch and the axe, as reassuring and threatening.... The poet's most ingenious effect is to weld the two of them together, not only by the antithetical description, but also by presenting the younger as an appendage of the older .... I think the poet may well have expected his audience to suspect an allusion to the tale of the Loathly Lady and to have a flashing idea that the two women are really one, present both in her young and old guises.[15]

And as Arthur had been able to focus only on the axe, sign of battle, so Gawain mistakenly splits off and attends to only half of this sign, simplifying it into the young lady, sign of sensuality. As Arthur had missed that part of the Green Knight that signified culture and game, so Gawain misses that part of the lady that signifies perhaps death, perhaps age. The point is in fact not what either half of the sign might mean alone, but that the two belong together, signifying as a unit the complexity both attractive and repellent of the late medieval notion "woman." While the brute that shows in one half of the Green Knight is a reminder of the consequences of unbridled martial energies, the repellent "olde auncian wyf" of Bertilak's court is similarly a reminder, Like la Vielle in the *Roman de la Rose*, of the consequences of unbridled venereal energies. More importantly, these double figures (in a poem rife with doubleness) are like a Saussurian coin; the two sides are inseparable, mutually define one another, and signify Camelot's humanity. Together, male and female, the Green Knight and the double lady are sign of Gawain's and Camelot's aspirations,

its sought-for identity of splendid military power and stylish courtesy. The multi-facetedness of the sign externalizes the implications of those aspirations, but as Gawain's and Arthur's inadequate readings suggest, neither is yet ready to inspect those implications, to consider what *qualitates* may be implied in the names they so casually use. And, like Arthur, Gawain must face the taunt that he enjoys false fame, that he does not show evidence of those qualities his name supposedly denotes. As the Green Knight had found Camelot deficient in signs of martial prowess, the lady finds Gawain weak in signs of the venereal. He cannot be Gawain, she insists on day one of the temptations, or he would have craved a kiss, by his courtesy. On the second day, too, she argues that if he were Gawain, he would not have forgotten the lesson of kissing from the day before.

If we wonder what connection there might be between the definition of Gawain as user of language and the temptation scenes, the lady herself provides it, for throughout her temptations she quite consistently associates speech and sex, complaining of being slighted equally of kisses and speeches. Though she had publicly received "derne wordez, / Wyth clene cortays carp closed fro fylþe" (1012-13) on Christmas day, in private she desires more "daynté wordez" (1253), and she moves rapidly back and forth on the first day of temptation between expressions of desire for linguistic ("karp") and physical ("cors") intercourse: she refuses Gawain leave to rise from his bed so that she may "karp wyth my knyȝt þat I kaȝt haue; / For I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wowen ȝe are" (1225-26), a Gawain whom she defines as "hendelayk" (1228). She adds immediately that they are all alone in the castle (1230), the door locked (1233), and so she will spend her time well, while it lasts, not—as one expects from her allusions to their safe seclusion—in lovemaking, but "with tale," that is, in talk (1236); she then immediately adds, "ȝe are welcom to my cors" (1237). She is quite consistent in this linkage, complaining on day two of having sat by him twice and having heard "no wordez / þat longed to luf" (1523-24), concluding with another linkage which is only superficially a non-sequitur, "Dos, techez me of your wytte, / Whil my lorde is fro hame" (1533-34).

As at Camelot, Gawain answers the question "are you not Gawain?" with "Yes, but ...."[16] As one example among many, he does kiss, he explains, but "on command," a qualification he states twice.[17] As the Green Knight had tempted Arthur to act upon his reputation, and as Gawain had responded with a speech which qualified, attenuated that martial reputation, so Gawain in the bedroom replies with speeches which qualify his "courteous" reputation. The lady, however, would like some further sign, some "tokenez of trweluf craftes" (1527), and she refers to lovemaking as "token and text" (1515) of chivalry.

Indeed, the least ambiguous sign Gawain could give in satisfaction of the lady's demands for some proof of his purported identity as lover would be lovemaking. But the least ambiguous sign is often not the best to use in establishing one's identity. Though lovemaking and head-chopping, for example, are unambiguous actantial signs of venereal and martial ability respectively, both are normally engaged in for purposes other than signifying, often as ends in themselves, and in any case have potential consequences apart from their value as signs (birth and death, respectively). In this respect such acts or objects differ from such signs as words, which (as Augustine noted[18]) are primarily signs, and only technically things. To use another example, the deer and the boar which Bertilak brings home on days one and two are signs of his hunting prowess, but they are also food. The fox of day three, on the other hand, has no value except as sign, and a very powerful one at that. Gawain recognizes, at least implicitly, that kisses and words are primarily signs, and only secondarily things (are thus sublimations), and confines himself to such non-consequential significations of his identity. In so doing he both avoids unpleasant consequences and asserts and accepts a qualified, more complex sense of who he is. As Arthur had accepted Gawain as a sublimation of—a substitute for—himself at Camelot, so Gawain here uses the kisses as sublimation and thereby accepts an attenuated version of himself as "courtly" knight.

On the third day of temptation though, the lady shifts her ground just enough to throw Gawain off his guard. Appearing to abandon hopes of the lovemaking, she asks for another sign: "Now dere, at þis departyng do me þis ese, / Gif me sumquat of þy gifte, þi glove if it were, / þat I may mynne on þe, mon, my mournyng to lassen" (1798-1800). The glove is obviously a conventional token, and Gawain refuses to give it. He says that no honor would accrue to her to have it, that it does not, in other words, signify the putative Gawain of whom she has been speaking for three days. Whether this self deprecation is entirely earnest, or whether Gawain would prefer to avoid giving what would be a fairly obvious sign of more attachment than he feels or cares to admit is open to interpretation. But it is clear that to give the glove would be to signify himself as that Gawain he has chosen not to be, at least here with her. However, the lady's true intent is not to receive but give; she offers a ring, parallel to the glove as a conventional token, which Gawain refuses as such. She then offers the girdle, which Gawain also refuses, not, as she suggests, because it is paltry, but because it is a sign of her as his, a love token like the glove, and inappropriate for Gawain to accept as Bertilak's guest. Then why does Gawain change his mind? Because, I believe, the lady convinces him that the girdle is different from the ring, is not a token, a sign, but

an instrument, a tool, to ward off harm. Intrigued by the possibility of the girdle as secret weapon, an object which has instrumental value and no sign value (the apparent opposite of Bertilak's fox, with which it will be associated), Gawain accepts.

If this poem and Gawain's experience up to this point teach anything, it is that all instruments and all actions are both what they are and also signs; shields, axes, holly bobs and girdles are all signs, both because, as Augustine held in *De trinitate*, everything is a sign of the Lord who created it and only God is pure entity (*res*) and not sign, and because, as noted earlier, medieval physical culture was highly and self-consciously codified.[19] There is nothing human which is purely *res*, no human act or instrument which is not also *signum*. In accepting the girdle and wearing it around his waist to meet the Green Knight, Gawain modifies his self once more, but because he believes the girdle is an instrument and not a sign and therefore does not wear it as a sign, he lies to himself and about himself. Once the Green Knight has shown Gawain that the girdle is in fact a sign (and only a sign, its instrumental value entirely bogus[20]) Gawain accepts it as such. There has been some confusion about Gawain's wearing of the girdle on his way to the Green Chapel. The note for line 2035 of the Tolkien, Gordon, Davis edition points out that "it is noteworthy (but not always noticed) that Gawain wears the girdle over his surcoat, in full view, not concealed under his armor... ,"[21] which is true. But at that point in the narrative, (2033-35) he wears it wrapped around his waist. As he accepts the girdle as a sign, a sign of himself, he shifts it from his waist to over one shoulder, "*Abelef as a bauderyk* bounden bi his syde, / loken vnder his lyft arme, þe lace, with a knot, / *In tokenyng* he watz tane in tech of a faute" (2486-88, emphasis added). Thus deployed as token, the girdle crosses Gawain's "cote," which he wears on his chest, and on which, as the poet has twice told us (637, 2026), Gawain wears his "cote-armeur," or "conysaunce," the pentangle.[22] The girdle thus forms a heraldic qualification of the pentangle, a "difference," in heraldic parlance, specifically a bend, as Gawain himself, handling the lace, tells Arthur: "þis is the bende of þis blame..." (2506).

The poet's heraldic train of thought is quite apparent here, in diction as well as imagery: "Abelef" (2486) is a heraldic term meaning "slantwise." Spelled thus, it appears in ME only in *Gawain* (a second time in 2517 to describe how the green girdle is worn by the members of the court). Spelled "embelif" it appears in heraldic contexts and as an astronomical term (see *MED*, s.v. embelif). Brault notes its use in blazon in the French romances *Lancelot del Lac*, the Vulgate Merlin Sequel, and *Durmart le Galois*.[23] Of the critics to speculate on the poet's heraldic intentions, Albert Friedman and Richard H. Osberg wonder

whether "the diagonal wearing of [the girdle] represents the heraldic differencing of illegitimacy, the bend or bar sinister of nineteenth century novels," but the suggestion is unlikely: in the first place, the bend sinister as a difference of illegitimacy was a later development than our poem, and in the second place Gawain's bend is dexter, from right shoulder to (under the) left arm (2487). To W.R.J. Barron, the girdle's heraldic quality suggests "that Gawain no longer considers himself entitled to bear the symbol of trawþe."[24]

To the many patterns of repetition in the poem so frequently noted by its readers we may add another: a knight enters Camelot bearing strange arms, which he formally explicates for the court. The first is the Green Knight, with axe and holly bush, and the second Gawain, whose new arms may be blazoned as "gules a pentangle or, bend dexter verte." I believe Gawain's re-enactment of the Green Knight's action is meant to suggest Gawain's growth. He now wears (part of) the cognizance of the Green Knight, who had earlier shown keen awareness of the significant quality of his dress: "for I wolde no were, my wedez ar softer" (271); at the Green Chapel he tells Gawain, in reference to the girdle, "hit is my wede þat þou werez, þat ilke wouen girdel" (2358). Having worn the Knight's weed as instrument, in a fruitless attempt at guaranteeing his self-preservation, Gawain does well to wear it as "conysaunce," recognizing that every(thing) is significant, that metonomy is destiny.

Of course the green girdle indicates Gawain's sense of shame, and it may certainly be taken as a sign of humility, a virtue curiously missing from the sign of the pentangle. Gawain himself refers to it as a "token of untrawþe" (2509). But my point is not what specific vices or virtues the girdle signifies in itself, but rather that the pentangle qualified, differenced, by the girdle is a complex sign, as opposed to the pentangle alone which, for all its multi-pointedness, is most emphatically simple, which is to say singular. It is an endless figure or knot, indivisible, a fact the poet notes before and after his itemization of the particular virtues enfolded in the sign. In debating the relative importance or exact meaning of any of these virtues,[25] we may miss an essential point: the monosemous, unambiguous character of the pentangle as sign. Gawain's new sign, in contrast, is polysemous, complex, an acknowledgement of his new sense of himself. By this new sign, or cognizance, sign of the self, let me specify that I do not mean the girdle alone, which has so often been seen as replacing Gawain's pentangle,[26] but the entire arms of pentangle differenced by the girdle. It is easy to overemphasize Gawain's discovery that he is imperfect, as if he seriously entertained the notion that he was not. Nowhere in the poem does Gawain say in words that he is perfect, and in both Camelot and Bertilak's court he is in fact rather shamelessly

self-deprecating. But he discovers that his conysaunce, the pentangle, does make such a claim, or something close to it.[27] With this sign Gawain has made himself known (conysaunce coming from *connaitre*) as singular, the integer of integrity. As his fault in accepting the girdle to protect himself, and his failure to yield it to Bertilak according to the rules of their game, and his qualifying conversations with the Green Knight and the Lady have demonstrated, his identity is not singular but complex, requiring a complex conysaunce, which he now possesses.

The Green Knight helps Gawain to see that he is flawed, not simple. But he also shows him the necessity of signifying that fact openly, making himself known as not duplicitous but complex. It has been argued that Camelot fails to understand Gawain on his return, and that the court shows a lack of seriousness in adopting Gawain's token as a sign of success,[28] but it seems to me that this wholesale adoption of the girdle as sign is entirely appropriate. Arthur had attempted to simplify the sign of the Green Knight, and Gawain had simplified the sign of the double lady. Now the court resists the temptation to simplify, to ignore the girdle while insisting upon the pentangle, and accepts complex, polysemous signs as befitting itself, doing so with heraldic explicitness, adopting the girdle as a "bende abelef." In other words, the court accepts Gawain's experience as part of its own experience, his badge as qualifying theirs individually as well as corporately. We may quarrel with the court's insistence that the girdle may be accorded to the "renoun" of the Round Table, but we cannot deny the justice of their claim to it as part of their experience.

One notes that the apparent dispute between Gawain and the court over the meaning of the girdle involves a dispute over who Gawain is, for it is his sign. Speaking of Gawain's understanding of the girdle as a sign of his specific sins, Ralph Hanna[29] has noted that "there is no inevitable connection between a symbol and its referent (signs are generally arbitrary), and the only measure of validity is public acceptance, whereby the symbol enters usage and passes as current." Hence Gawain is denied (by the court) the identity of "world's worst sinner." As Burrow puts it, the girdle "has no natural title to any particular moral signification: Gawain institutes it as a sign of untruth for purely personal reasons. This is *impositio ad placitum*. Hence it is open for the court to decide that it should be instituted a second time—as a sign of the 'renoun of þe Rounde Table'. Their significance runs counter to Gawain's; but this is always possible with an arbitrary sign: *'potest significare oppositum suae significationis'*."[30] In a real sense the dramatized dispute over the meaning of the girdle reminds us that identity (unlike the locked pentangle) is not immutable, is always subject to negotiation.

In retrospect one can see that, at least from the perspective I have adopted here, the kinds of language most prominent in *Sir Gawain* are promises and namings. When Gawain makes his promises to exchange axe-blows and gifts, he is, in the terminology of speech-act theory, performing commissive illocutionary acts, whose fit is by definition from world-to-word. When he names himself and when he returns to Camelot wearing the green girdle, he is performing assertive illocutionary acts, whose fit is from word-to-world. An assertive may be assessed both in terms of truth and falsity and also in terms of felicity, since all assertives may be considered eliptical (e.g., "The book is a novel" implies "I state/believe that the book is a novel.") All assertions about the world and the self are subject, as it were, to rejection. As an instance of the assertive, the self-description ("I am a knight," "My name is Gawain") bears a striking similarity to the commissive, promising; assessing the promise involves understanding or hypothesizing about the character of the speaker, just as does assessing self-descriptions. There is little or no difference between "I will always love you" (a promise), and "I am in love with you" (an assertive). To interpret either statement, the auditor or recipient must evaluate the speaker. In Searle's terminology, the sincerity condition in the assertive is belief while in the commissive it is intent. But one's statements about oneself, I would argue, are always a mix of belief and intent. The self-speaker always hovers between belief and intention, promising to do what he believes he can do, asserting by promising that he is the person who will keep this promise. "This statement is false" is a paradox, but "I am untruthful" is not, because while the statement's falsity is fixed, the truthfulness or untruthfulness of a person is not. We can easily believe that someone has enough self-awareness to say "truthfully" that he is "untruthful," for a person is not reducible to one statement; he cannot—for example—know that he will be false tomorrow. As for fit, since the referent in "I am in love with you" is "I," and "I" can change, especially under the influence of the intentions of "I," the distinction between world-to-words and words-to-world has little force. In the final analysis the two kinds of language collapse into one. Naming oneself and keeping (or breaking) promises constitute one complex and inescapable action.

D. W. Robertson has taught us that medieval culture produced iconographic hierarchies, rather than antitheses.[31] Robertson's object was to argue against Romantic dialectical readings of medieval iconography, readings implying antitheses moving toward synthesis. Though there can be no quarrelling with the thrust of Robertson's argument, it would be a mistake to extrapolate from it a picture of a Middle Ages whose symbolism was therefore without tension; though iconography of the divinely ordered cosmos might, whatever its superficially tangled surface (like that of the pentangle), resolve itself finally into order, medieval iconography of humanity is not guaranteed to come inevitably to resolution and rest: like the late-medieval twin sarcophagi featuring lifelike effigy on one level and rotting corpse on the other,[32] medieval signs of humanity are often multifoliate, incapable of reduction to singularity without a quite unmedieval oversimplification. Unlike the commonplace debates between body and soul, the healthy body/rotting corpse dichotomy cannot be resolved hierarchically; the rotting corpse is man's physical end, but it is not superior (as is the soul to the body) to the healthy body. What was probably essential in such icons, didactically speaking, was that humanity recognize the impossibility of construing itself singly, with reference only to the here, the now, and the visible. The poet, I would argue, suggests that Camelot accept such antithetical images as the Green Knight and the Lady as more accurate and instructive, because complex, signs of its identity than its tapestries and candlesticks, or the undifferenced pentangle.

Notes

1. A version of this paper was read first at the 18th International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo in 1983, while a fuller version was read to the Medieval Studies Group of the Department of English of the University of Virginia in 1984.

2. W. A. Davenport, *The Art of the* Gawain *Poet* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), p. 163.

3. J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

4. For the parallel workings of imposition in medieval heraldic practice, see Ross G. Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory and* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), pp. 54-57.

5. "Semiotics and the Function of Culture," in *Essays in Semiotics*, ed. Julia Kristeva (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 285. See further Maria Corti, "Structures idéologiques et structures sémiotiques dans les *sermones ad status* du xiiie siècle" in *Archéologie du Signe*, ed. Lucie Brind'amour and Eugene Vance (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983), pp. 145-63.

6. May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 128.

7. *Early Blazon: Heraldic Terminology in the 12th and 13th Centuries With Special Reference to Arthurian Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

8. *Blazon*, especially pp. 37-52.

9. Robert Hanning, "Sir Gawain and the Red Herring: The Perils of Interpretation," in *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in its Contexts, 700-1600, Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Literature in Honor of E. Talbot Donaldson*, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982), p. 14: "The Green Knight's sudden appearance forces the court, like the narrator and his audience, into an interpretive posture, and its response to the intruder becomes in turn the subject of further evaluation by the narrator."

10. All citations of the poem are from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed. rev. by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). Line numbers will be given, as here, parenthetically in the text.

11. For the sources, cf. Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition In* Sir Gawain and The Green Knight (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1965).

12. Edited and translated by Daniel D. McGarry, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1955), p. 11 (*PL* 199:827).

13. *De vulgari eloquentia* bk. 1, ch. 3. (*Dante Alighieri opere minori* ed. Alberto Del Monte [Milan: Rizzoli], pp. 529-30).

14. Ibid, p. 530.

15. Davenport, *Art*, p. 160.

16. Thus Davenport, *Art*, p. 190, "In the face of these challenges that he is failing to deserve a famous name, Gawain is required to define his own nature, to reply in effect: 'I am Gawain, but Gawain is other than you think'."

17. Lines 1303, "I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a kny3t fallez"; and 1501, "I am at your comaundement, to kysse quen yow lykez."

18. *De doctrina Christiana*, I, 2, ii (*PL* 34:20), "Sunt autem alia signa quorum omnis usus in significando est, sicuti sunt verba; nemo enim utitur verbis nisi aliquid significandi gratia."

19. *De trinitate* VI, 10, xii (*PL* 42:932). See also John Scot Eriugena, *Super ierachiam caelestem*, I.3 (*PL* 122:138-39). In his *De divisione naturae* (V.3), John wrote that "nihil enim visibilium rerum corporaliumque est, ut arbitror, quod non incorporale quid et intelligibile significet" (*PL* 122:865-66). Cf. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London, Shead and Ward, 1955), p. 120. In the "N-Town Passion Play" Satan illustrates this point by referring to the red hose and piked shoes which allow a knave to "make comparycion" to a gentleman, and the "gret purvyauns" which permits "a beggerys dowtere" to "cownterfete a jentylwoman" and labelling a splayed collar trimmed with fur a "seyn to selle lechory" (ed. K. S. Block, *Ludus Coventriae or the Play Called Corpus Christi* [EETS e.s., 120; rpt. 1960], pp. 227-28, ll. 69-71, 101-02, 105-06). For further illustration of the medieval idea that "costume and gesture could actually create identity," see Diane Owen Hughes, "Earrings for Circumcision: Distinction and Purification in the Italian Renaissance City," in *Persons in Groups: Social Behavior as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, ed. Richard C. Trexler (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1985), pp. 155-82.

20. In *The Fortunate Fall of Sir Gawain: The Typology of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), Victor Haines argues that the girdle is potent but only to protect Gawain from being "tohewen," cut in pieces (pp. 141, 158-59).

21. For example, Benson, *Art and Tradition* (pp. 219, 224) and Paul F. Reichardt, "Gawain and the Image of the Wound," *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 157, both write that Gawain conceals the girdle under his armor

22. As J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 115, points out, the poet's efforts to bring the girdle into juxtaposition with the pentangle are quite noticeable.

23. *Early Blazon*, p. 125.

24. *Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Sir Gawain Reconsidered* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p.135. In a note (p. 145, n. 10) Barron adds that he is "not suggesting a formal heraldic distinction, since the normal use of a bend as

a difference was to distinguish the arms of members of the same family." Exactly what a "formal heraldic distinction" would be in this context is not clear to me; a device used to difference related parties could equally be used to alter a single individual's arms. The essential difference between Barron's reading and mine is that he appears to believe that the girdle negates the pentangle, the "symbol of trawþe" (though Gawain does still bear it), while I would emphasize that the two elements of pentangle and bend verte are combined into a new device.

25. A particularly ambitious attempt to decode the pentangle point for point is Gerald Morgan's "Significance of the Pentangle Symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Modern Language Review* 74 (1979), 769-90. One detects, however, a growing skepticism about the possibility or even appropriateness of such attempts, notably Kathleen Ashley, "'Trawthe' and Temporality: The Violation of Contracts and Conventions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *Assays Critical Approaches to Medieval and Renaissance Texts* 4 (1987): 3-24.

26. For example, Burrow, *A Reading*, pp. 116 and 189; Lynn Staley Johnson, *The Voice of the* Gawain-*Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 89: "Rather than a shield which betokens the ideals of chivalry, he now wears a girdle which betokens the weaknesses of the flesh"; and P. B. Taylor, "Gawain's Garland of Girdle and Name," *English Studies* 55 (1974), 13: "... substitution of girdle for pentangle as emblem of worth is a reinforcement of his new-found name."

27. Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory*, argues that Gawain's pentangle is, in its geometric iconicity of endlessness, a typical sign of God, but that Gawain's use of the sign does not imply a claim to perfection but rather an aspiration.

28. For example by P. B. Taylor, ("Gawain's Garland," pp. 13-14): "Uneasy before [Gawain's] puritanical sermon, they insist on taking too lightly the fault he takes too seriously," and more recently by Johnson (*Voice of the Gawain Poet*, p. 91): "captured by the court's laughter, is the sound of Camelot's fall."

29. Ralph Hanna III, "Unlocking What's Locked: Gawain's Green Girdle," *Viator*, 14 (1983): 294.

30. Burrow, *Reading*, p. 189.

31. Most influentially in *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962, ch. 1).

32. Like those of Alice de la Pole, Duchess of Suffolk, and Bishop Richard Fleming of Lincoln. For these and other examples, see T. S. R. Boase, *Death in the Middle Ages: Mortality, Judgment and Remembrance* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 82-87.

BONDING AND SIGNIFICATION IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

KATHLEEN M. ASHLEY

The *Gawain*-Poet's brilliant use of imagery has nourished decades of critical prose. A recurrent motif in this criticism has been the difficulty of pinning down images whose chief trait is their tendency to subtle or to startling transformation—almost (one might say) to shiftiness. *Pearl* has been the locus for much analysis of imagery in the past, but recently Robert Hanning has examined the decorative images in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, suggesting that:

> Society's decorative impulse wholly or partly conceals primary levels of experience or meaning beneath an artfully applied surface, be it of paint, rhetoric, game or ritual.[1]

Hanning's model makes an easy distinction between the "primary levels of experience" and the "artfully applied surface" above them; the difficulty for him lies in how to interpret the "decorative impulse." The ambiguities of the "civilized process of embellishment" both invite and thwart interpretation, Hanning argues, concluding that "the difficulty, or perhaps impossibility, of interpretation becomes not only a hallmark but a main theme of the poem."[2]

While I agree that interpretation itself becomes a theme of the poem, I disagree that we are meant to conclude that such interpretation is impossible. Instead, I would argue that the poem leads its reader to acknowledge ambiguity, and ultimately to understand the need for active *re* interpretation.

My essay takes as its subject the images of fastening, joining and enclosure which are ubiquitous in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and examines these concrete physical connections as metaphors for relationships of all kinds. In a poem which scrutinizes the epistemological status of all connections and claims to meaning, the problematics of the signifier/signified bond can be epitomized by an analysis of the recurrent term "halche"[3]—defined by the *M.E.D.* as "to embrace, enclose, fasten together, or join." I will attempt to show that the poem systematically blurs our initial impression that nature and culture are separate realms. Robert Hanning's concept of "primary levels of experience or meaning" concealed beneath an "artfully applied surface" is not radical enough, for I would argue that the *Gawain*-Poet adopts a strategy which *transforms* "natural" to "conventional" bonding and signification.

TEXT AND MATTER

NEW CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE *PEARL*-POET

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