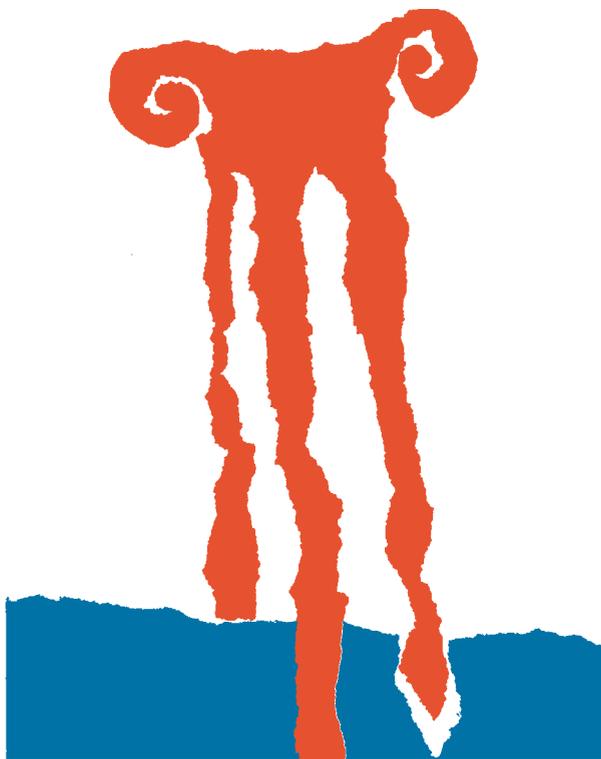


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**“The Taint of a Fault”: Purgatory, Relativism and  
Humanism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

Bill Phillips

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## **“The Taint of a Fault”: Purgatory, Relativism and Humanism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

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### **Abstract**

Far from being a poem about the chivalric code, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is essentially concerned with religion. The Romance genre is used to reveal the shortcomings of the Church in the late fourteenth century, just as it begins to feel the first effects of early Renaissance humanism, and of religious reformers such as John Wyclif. Early and medieval Church doctrine, like the chivalric code, imposed a set of conditions which were effectively impossible to fulfil, and it must have seemed to many people that however strenuously they strove to comply, they were inevitably doomed to hell. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, possibly influenced by the teachings of John Wyclif, is a religious allegory in which the intractability of the chivalric code stands in for a Church assailed both for its corruption and intransigent abso-

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lutism. The doctrine of purgatory, which became orthodox only by the late thirteenth century, symbolises the kind of relativist development envisioned by the Gawain author in his/her critique of obsolete and unworkable codes.

**S**ir *Gawain and the Green Knight* leaves the reader with “a whole series of interrelated queries”. (Barron, 1984: 23) The poem is clearly not a conventional Romance, written as it was long after the fashion for the genre had waned, and its meaning and purpose defy easy explanation. Its protagonist, Sir Gawain, is faced with an impossible task, the sole purpose of which, by the end of the poem, is apparently to discredit the chivalric code itself. The use of an outdated literary form to disparage an obsolete code (assuming that the chivalric code was *ever* taken seriously) does not sit easily with the poem’s long-held reputation as an important and serious work of literature. The Gawain author was, however, debating questions more far-reaching and controversial than the viability of an already redundant code, but made use of the romance form to question absolutism in general, and within religion in particular. Even more specifically, I would argue, the poem offers an allegory of the debate surrounding the doctrine of purgatory, its attendant indulgences, masses

for the dead, the intervention of saints, the efficacy of relics and pilgrimages and the sacrament of confession.

Much debate throughout the history of the Church has been concerned with the establishment of doctrine. The nature of the Holy Trinity, for example, was a matter of debate and division both before and after the Council of Constantinople in 381 (confirmed by the Council of Chalcedon in 451), which established the Nicene Creed as the foundation for Christian faith (Christie-Murray 1976: 47). The consequences for a society in which there was effectively no freedom of conscience were enormous, and the lives of individuals who did not accept the dictates of the Church were in serious danger. Heretics were likely to suffer torture and a painful death, but the Church further taught that they, along with any number of other lost sinners would also spend eternity in hell. The Church, then, during the Middle Ages, favoured an absolutist approach, according to which doctrine was laid down by Church Councils and upheld by Church authorities. Nevertheless, there were a number of occasions in the history of the Church in which absolutism was implicitly rejected, as the doctrine of purgatory demonstrates. The possibility of avoiding eternal torment by spending an unspecified period of time in purgatory is a relativist alternative to the unpalatable ortho-

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doxy of eternal damnation. There was, furthermore, scriptural justification for believing that the fate of the dead might be altered, as the Second Book of Maccabees suggests: “And also in that he perceived that there was great favour laid up for those that died godly, it was an holy and good thought. Whereupon he made a reconciliation for the dead, that they might be delivered from sin”. (2 Maccabees 12, 45). The doctrine of purgatory only slowly became orthodox, after a series of discussions at the second Council of Lyon (1274), the Council of Ferrara-Florence in (1438-45) and the Council of Trent (1545-63). According to The Second Council of Lyon: “Souls are purged after their death, by purgatorial or purificatory penalties, and that, for the alleviation of these penalties, they are served by the suffrages of the living faithful, to wit, the sacrifice of the mass, prayers, alms, and other works of piety that the faithful customarily offer on behalf of others of the faithful according to the institutions of the church”. (Le Goff 1984: 285). The Twenty fifth Session of the Council of Trent similarly argued that: “...there is a purgatory, and that the souls there detained are aided by the suffrages of the faithful and chiefly by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar, the holy council commands the bishops that they strive diligently to the end that the sound doctrine of purgatory, transmitted by the Fathers and sacred councils, be believed and main-

tained by the faithful of Christ, and be everywhere taught and preached". (Schroeder 1978: 214).

It should be noted that "Purgation was consequent upon a prior decision that the soul was destined for heaven; it was unavailable to those destined for hell". (Bynum 1995: 280). Indulgences, prayers for the dead etc. serve only to reduce the amount of time spent in purgatory. Nevertheless, the doctrine of purgatory surely implied, for most believers, that they were less likely to go to hell. Indeed, the doctrine of purgatory opens up the more modern-day assumption that no-one is capable of committing sins so heinous that they deserve to spend eternity in torment.

The definitive acceptance of purgatory was made at the Council's third sitting (1555-59) under Pope Pius IV in defiance of Protestant assertions that the doctrine, depending as it did on the apocryphal books of Maccabees, was unbiblical. Article XXII (1562) of the Anglican Church, for example, maintains that "The Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God," while Article V specifically names the books of the Apocrypha as being non-canonical.

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Even the most cursory analysis of medieval Christianity reveals, then, that it was a time of ongoing religious debate. Much of this debate was devoted to fixing religious doctrine in as absolute and unambiguous fashion as possible, yet with the Renaissance, beginning in Italy in the early fourteenth century, and slowly spreading its ideas and attitudes across Europe, relativist concepts such as purgatory became increasingly acceptable. This apparent relativism on the part of the Catholic Church, perhaps a result of Counter-Reformation soul-searching, suggests a closer engagement with Renaissance humanism than that displayed by Protestantism. This is not particularly surprising. Much Protestant Reformation thinking was consciously anti-humanist – particularly in its virtually exclusive reliance on the Bible as a source of authority. The Anglican church again provides an example: in “His Majesty’s Declaration” which prefaces the “Articles of Religion” in *The Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England* we are told: “That therefore in these both curious and unhappy differences, which have for so many hundred years, in different times and places, exercised the Church of Christ, We will, that all further curious search be laid aside, and these disputes shut up in God’s promises, as they be generally set forth to us in the holy Scriptures”.

Did the Gawain author contribute to these religious debates? He was obviously an educated man (if we can safely assume that he was a man, rather than a woman). As A.C. Spearing points out: "*Purity, Patience and Pearl* all show the Gawain-poet's close familiarity with the Vulgate Bible. In the case of *Pearl* particularly, the poet displays a knowledge not only of the Apocalypse of St John, which is his main source, but of many other parts of the Bible, allusions to which he weaves together with great deftness. He may well have consulted Latin commentaries on the Apocalypse and Genesis (for *Purity*) and Jonah (for *Patience*), and he certainly makes use of such traditional elements in scriptural exegesis as the treatment of Jonah's descent into the whale as a type of Christ's descent into Hell, and of Abraham's three angels as a type of the Trinity" (1970: 13). It would seem strange, therefore, if a writer, so well-versed in scriptural matters had been unaware of the major religious and cultural issues of his time. His more famous contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer, was brilliantly displaying the influence of Renaissance ideas, while John Wyclif's followers were disseminating Lollardy across southern, central and eastern England. Wyclif, who, "though retaining a belief in Purgatory, [...] repudiated indulgences, masses for the dead and the cults of saints, relics and pilgrimages" (Christie-Murray 1989: 114) must have been known, if only by reputation, to

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the Gawain author, since the latter “may well have lived in one of the great castles of Lancashire, Staffordshire or Derbyshire where John of Gaunt kept court, as secretary or chaplain”. (Barron 1984: 4) It was thanks to John of Gaunt that Wyclif survived long enough to die a natural death, (Sisam 1982: 145) while Chaucer married the nobleman’s third wife’s sister (Coghill 1951: 10) and was, reputedly, referring to a Wyclifite when he wrote of the Parson in *The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*:

A good man was ther of religioun  
And was a povre Persoun of a toun,  
But riche he was of holy thought and werk.  
He was also a lerned man, a clerk,  
That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche;  
His parishens devoutly wolde he teche (lines 477-482).

Thus Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, was patron of both Wyclif and of Chaucer, and presumably known of by the Gawain author who was “almost certainly a cleric from the north west Midlands - probably a relatively unimportant cleric; perhaps in the service of a nobleman; and, arguably, his patron belonged to the circle of prominent Cheshire courtiers at the royal household in London”. (Putter 1996: 37 quoting M.J. Bennett *Community, Class, and Careerism: Cheshire and Lanca-*

*shire Society in the Age of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983) Given Gaunt's support of Wyclif it is not unreasonable to assume that the Gawain author and his patron were equally sympathetic to Lollardism (if only for political expediency), or were, at the very least, highly sensitised to the question of religious reform. If not, life must have been extremely tense at the Gaunt-dominated royal household.

This, then, is the context in which Sir Gawain and the Green Knight should be understood, for the poem is, in essence, a disquisition on the inherent contradictions of absolutism in two distinct but equally uncompromising institutions - the chivalric code, and the Church. Indeed, it should not be surprising that a poem ostensibly concerned with chivalry, should also be about Christianity, after all, the other poems attributed to the Gawain poet - "Purity," "Patience" and "Pearl" are unequivocally religious. According to Andrew and Waldron:

The most cohesive force in the four poems is the body of intellectual and moral beliefs assumed and analysed within them. These beliefs are in essence those of orthodox medieval Christianity together with those of the chivalric social morality of the high Middle Ages, here held in a specially close relationship, so that (for instance) [...] Gawain's virtues, as symbolised in the pentangle, are simultaneously the virtues of perfect knighthood and perfect Christian conduct (1996: 16-17).

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*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has long been seen as a text which questions the tenets of chivalry and courtly love, “the courtly order,” as Speirs says, “has been put to the test of nature”. (1991: 62) Indeed, it was written when romances were already outdated, and was a genre which was not, anyway, a traditional English form. The story opens with the Christmas celebrations at Camelot during which a mysterious Green Knight challenges the company to deal him a blow, to be returned a year hence. After some discussion Sir Gawain offers to accept the challenge, is accepted by the company and proceeds to decapitate the Green Knight, who then blithely scoops up his own head by the hair, reminds his adversary that he must receive a return blow at the Green Chapel in a year’s time, and rides off. According to the chivalric code Gawain must consent to this suicidal mission which should end, logically, in his own unresisting death. We have here, at the beginning of the story, its first inconsistency since if the Green Knight has such obvious magical powers at his disposal, it hardly seems fair that Sir Gawain, who has not, be obliged to accept the challenge. Yet magic seems essential to the whole process, especially as the directions provided by the Green Knight are hardly adequate: “þe kny3t of þe grene chapel men knowen me mony; / Forþi me for to fynde if þou frayste3, fayle3 þou neuer..” (lines 454-55). Magic, however, was a tra-

ditional feature in Romance, and its use is neither unexpected nor unfair: as Gawain's story unfolds, it becomes clear that he is not intended to be the victim of insuperable powers against which he has no defence -magic, in fact, appears to come to his aid in the shape of the green silk belt. Indeed, it might reasonably be argued that Gawain survives his final encounter with the Green Knight precisely because he *did not* surrender the green belt to his host. Its was, after all, supposedly imbued with properties designed to prevent his death, and the poem explicitly acknowledges the power of magic, as the Green Knight's own decapitation demonstrates.

A more serious difficulty associated with Courtly Love is revealed by the discomfort Sir Gawain experiences at the hands of his host's wife. It is, perhaps, difficult for modern readers to understand the gravity of Gawain's position. In fact, in the fourteenth century "finding a married woman alone with another man was sufficient proof of adultery to satisfy many courts" (Brundage 1987: 519). For punishment "fines, penitential processions, and public whippings were the commonest penalties, although in aggravated cases, especially with prominent families involved, the death penalty was occasionally imposed" (Brundage 1987: 519). Gawain, then, is in serious danger when Sir Bertilak's wife enters his bedroom while

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her husband is away hunting and sits on his bed. The knight, in his embarrassment, pretends to be asleep until he realises that he can keep up the deception no longer. Having pretended to wake up, Gawain asks permission to get dressed: “I wolde bo3e of þis bed and busk me better,” (line 1220) he says, which does not necessarily imply that he had nothing on, though W.R.J. Barron argues that he is “naked in his bed” (Barron 1984: 14) and according to Nicholas Orme, during the fourteenth century, “Boys at least seem often to have gone to bed wearing nothing”.(2001: 79). But is Gawain’s cowardly pretence at sleep, however justified by his nakedness, permitted by the chivalric code? Is not Gawain dissembling, or at the very least being discourteous to the lady, by his deceit, and is he not guilty of failing to face a challenge honorably? Worse still is the problem posed by the lady herself. According to the code she is permitted to ask anything of him and he must obey, but what happens if her demands conflict with his other obligations to his host? “The code itself posed problems,” argues Barron, “not least the ranking of its component elements, each considered as an absolute” (1984: 2). It is this conflict of absolutes which is ultimately to be the undoing of Gawain. Although he adroitly parries the Lady’s lovemaking without rejecting her outright, the difficulty of his situation serves to show up the absurdity of the chivalric code. We might also

ask ourselves, as perhaps Sir Gawain does, to what extent must the code of chivalry towards women be respected when the lady herself seems to be unworthy of it. His host's wife's flirting is outrageously promiscuous and although Sir Gawain cannot honorably welcome her into his bed it seems absurd that obedience to the code will also not permit him to risk insulting her by explicitly rejecting her advances. The impossibility of Gawain's position reaches a climax when he is offered the green silk belt. It is with enormous difficulty and at great risk of offending the lady that he rejects her previous offerings of a glove and a gold ring and he is, in a sense, obliged to accept the third gift since his arguments for refusing her are wearing thin. His great crime, however, is not in accepting the gift, but in failing to surrender it up to his host in accordance with what A.C. Spearing refers to as the "Exchange of Winnings agreement" (1970: 225) they had previously made regarding the exchange of each others' good fortune over the holiday period: "Quat-so-euer I wyne in þe wod hit worze3 to youre3, /And quat chek so 3e acheue change me perforce. / Swete, swap we so—sware with trawþe—/ Queþer, leude, so lymb, lere oper better" (lines 1105-1109) Yet here a greater obligation would seem to intervene— that of self-preservation and even, it might be argued, the prohibition on suicide. Gawain has been offered a means by which death at the hands

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of the Green Knight can be avoided. His right to refuse this boon, at least from a Christian point of view, is doubtful even though a reliance on pagan magic, and the fact that he agreed to seek the Green Knight in the first place, is hardly consistent with Christian practice. Gawain's final humiliation is meted out by the Green Knight when the return blow is finally delivered: “Gawayn on þat giserne glyfte hym bysyde, / As hit come glydande adoun on glode hym to schende, / And schranke a lytel with þe schulders for þe scharp yrne” (lines 2265-2267). The Green Knight accuses Gawain of cowardice, and declares himself to be the better man since he did not flinch when it was his turn to be beheaded. Gawain, suitably chastened does not flinch again, although after the Green Knight's second aborted stroke he becomes angry at his adversary's frivolity. With his third blow the Green Knight draws blood, but then steps back and explains that he did not harm Gawain the first and second time in recognition of the two occasions that their agreement to exchange winnings over the Christmas period was honoured. The third gift that Gawain received -the green silk belt- was not surrendered as it should have been, and the wound inflicted on him is punishment for this lapse. Gawain is mortified, and admits his crime, but the Green Knight rapidly reassures him:

I halde hit hardily hole, þe harme þat I hade.  
þou art confessed so clene, beknownen of þy mysses,  
And hat3 þe penaunce apert of þe poynt of myn egge,  
I halde þe polysed of þat ply3t and pured as clene  
As þou hade3 neuer forfeþet syþen zou wat3 fyrst borne.  
(lines 2390-2394)

Gawain is not convinced, and accepts the green silk belt, not as an emblem of victory, but

in syngne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte,  
When I ride in renoun, remorde to myseluen  
þe faut an þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed,  
How tender hit is to entyse teches of fyple;  
And þus, quen pryde schal me pryk for prowes of armes,  
þe loke to þis luf-lace schal leþe my hert (lines 2433-  
2438).

On his return to Camelot Gawain delivers a similarly contrite speech, but Arthur and the court

La3en loude þerat, and luflyly acorden  
þat lordes and ledes þat belonged to þe Table,  
Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,  
A bende abelef hym aboute of a bry3t grene,  
And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were.

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Fot þat wat3 acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table,  
And he honoured þat hit hade, euermore after,  
As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce (lines 2514-  
2521).

The court's quite different response to the clash with the Green Knight raises, as W.R.J. Barron remarks in the introduction to his translation, an uncomfortable question “Can he accept the court's judgement on Gawain's adventure, with its implication that in chivalry ends justify means and honour exists in the eyes of the world rather than the heart of the individual?” (1984: 23) Barron suggests that a solution to this betrayal of Gawain's rigid principles is offered by the Green Knight himself who implies that “relative rather than absolute success is all that even the best of mortals can achieve” (1984: 23) when he argues that, despite Gawain's failings he is “þe faut-lest freke þat euer on fote 3ede; / As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more, / So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oper gay kny3te3”(lines 2363-2365). Although neither Barron nor the Gawain author refer to it, the Green Knight's argument is a refutation of the Pelagian heresy. Pelagius, probably a British monk of the late fourth and early fifth centuries, was ascetic in character and, presumably as a result of his own perceived success at resisting sin, preached that humanity could perfect

itself and reach heaven through its own efforts, and although he willingly accepted that God's grace was of help, it was, he claimed, not essential (see Christie-Murray 1989: 87-95). Such a doctrine strikes at the foundations of Christian belief. If Pelagius was right, then Christ's sacrifice on the cross was unnecessary, as was the virgin birth and the doctrine of original sin, while the possibility of human perfectibility becomes universal and no longer peculiar to Christ alone. Pelagius's ideas, which were declared heretical by the Church, are uncannily similar to the ideals of chivalry, and just as impossible. It is tempting to see Pelagius as a humanist rebel, defying the authority of a monolithic church, but this is by no means the case. The Church, which was far from monolithic at this time, was much more humanist in its understanding of human weakness than Pelagius was, for whom any deviation from the path of righteousness deserved eternal damnation. The Church's approach is, in fact, closer to that taken by the Green Knight whose praise for Gawain's failed attempt at perfection is more humanist than the latter's own, Pelagian, self-condemnation. Arthur and his court, meanwhile, have gone too far the other way and celebrate the less than perfect outcome of Gawain's mission as an unmitigated success. Such inconsistencies, together with the uncomfortable fact that the chivalric code proves incapable of providing sufficient guidance

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for even the most virtuous of knights, would indicate that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, far from being a conventional Romance, offers an unambiguous critique of an anachronistic aristocratic ideal.

The *Gawain* author was, as we know, deeply concerned with religious questions as *Pearl*, “a poem found in the same manuscript as *Gawain and the Green Knight* and generally attributed to the same poet writing in the latter half of the fourteenth century,” (Spearing 1991: 237) amply demonstrates. In *Pearl*, the narrator, mourning the loss of his two-year old child, falls asleep on her grave. In a dream he sees her on the other side of a river, beyond his reach. She tells him that she is now safe forever, and that he must not mourn. He wishes to join her across the river but she explains that, following the Fall, only the dead may cross. In a second dream he is permitted to see the heavenly kingdom and in his attempt to reach it he wakes up reconciled to the will of God. The poem both accepts the doctrines of original sin, and the antidote for it -baptism- and debates, as did Wyclif, the question of salvation by grace or through works, and we are left in no doubt that it is grace which is decisive: the last line of stanza 55 is clear: “For þe grace of God is gret inoghe” (Sisam, 1982: 67) Reliance on grace alone (for such, effectively, is one of the

arguments of *Pearl*), implies that the *Pearl* author, like Wyclif, “repudiated indulgences, masses for the dead and the cults of saints, relics and pilgrimages” (Christie-Smith 1989: 114) for their privileging of effort, of piling up of merit, even of financial expenditure, over faith in God’s grace.

In *Gawain and the Green Knight* we are given the example of Gawain relying too heavily on his own efforts and being found, inevitably, wanting. Despite his agreement with his host, Gawain promises that no-one should know that he has received the gift because she “biso3t hym, for hir sake, disceuer hit neuer, / Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde;” (lines 1862-3) He finds himself, clearly, in an impossible situation, but help, of a kind, is at hand, since he immediately goes, on leaving the lady, to the chapel where he “[p]reue3ly aproched to a prest, and prayed hym þereþat he wolde lyste his lyf” (lines 1877-8). We are told that

he schrof hym schyrly and schewed his mysdede3,  
Of þe mynne, and merci beseche3,  
And of absolucioun he on þe segge calles;” (lines 1880-1882).

which the priest does, making him “so clene / As dome3day schulde haf ben di3t on þe morn”.(lines 1883-4) Confession was, like Purgatory, a medieval addition to Church doctrine,

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having been laid down at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and by which everyone was exhorted to “go to confession at least once a year and receive communion at Easter” (Orme 214). We are not told whether Gawain genuinely confessed all -that he must either break his promise to his host or to the lady, nor whether he confessed to placing his trust in a green silk belt of magical and therefore presumably non-Christian-powers. Perhaps he did, but if so he confessed in bad faith, with little or no intention of truly repenting and with every intention of sinning again. Whatever the case, Gawain has failed to place his trust in God and is unworthy of God’s grace. His next confession, not to a priest, but to the Green Knight, is genuine. He not only makes a true and sincere confession of his faults, but resolves not to repeat them. There is again an interesting parallel with Wyclif, who preached that the virtue of the sacraments administered by the clergy “depended on the worthiness of the minister” (Christie-Murray 1989: 114). Wyclif effectively replaced the official clergy with poor preachers, on the grounds that the former were too corrupt to impart the true message of the scriptures. Despite his association with witchcraft, the Green Knight is also a more useful, indeed more genuine, confessor than the ordained priest to whom Gawain first confessed. It might even be argued that the Green Knight is standing in for the figure of Christ himself as his instruc-

tions to Gawain at their first encounter suggest: “Forþi me for to fynde if þou frayste<sup>3</sup>, fayle<sup>3</sup> þou neuer” (line 455) which is strongly reminiscent of Christ’s words in the Gospel according to Luke: “And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. (Luke 11:9-10). **(note 1)** Burrow makes a similar point when he argues that “In Sir Gawain God hardly figures; yet here the words and actions of the Green Knight, as he emerges as an authoritative judge at the Green Chapel, may be seen to raise similar issues; for he tempers justice with mercy in delivering his all-seeing judgment upon the hero” (2001: 56).

Gawain’s penance is heavily symbolic. Rather than die, the absolutist punishment for his inadequacies, he must wear the green silk belt as a badge of shame. This relativist punishment is, in fact, a kind of earthly purgatory for Gawain, who must spend the rest of his life contemplating his own failings. It also fits neatly with medieval theology regarding confession. Burrow points out that “The shame which a sinner feels in the confessional is itself salutary (a good confession should be ‘verecunda’), as is the belief that sins which he cannot bring himself to display to his priest will cause him more public

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shame later on” (1984: 125) This is precisely what happened to Gawain, who is obliged to reveal his sins to the court at Camelot:

He tened quen he schulde telle,  
He groned for gref and grame;  
þe blod in his face con melle,  
When hit schulde schewe, for schame. (lines 2501-2504)

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers, then, not just a critique of chivalry and the code of courtly love, but of absolutist Christian doctrine. Just as Gawain must fail to be the perfect knight, he must also fail to be the perfect Christian. Since these failings are inevitable, it is reasonable that the punishment for them should be temporary and, if possible, didactic rather than retributive and final. If Sir Gawain is an everyman, which was, after all, a typical literary figure of the period, then the poem is an allegory not of the shortcomings of courtly love, but of a corrupt, absolutist church. King Arthur and the Round Table, supposed arbiters of the code, are shown to be cynical and worldly in their self-serving jubilation at Gawain’s return, a fact that both Gawain and the reader are forced to realise. The Church has also been compromised. The priest’s absolution is shown to be worthless unless the sinner’s confession is full and honest, which only the sinner and God himself can

truly know. The implication, then, is that the intermediary role of the priest is meaningless, as, by extension, is the whole intermediary paraphernalia of indulgences, masses for the dead etc. The Green Knight, in his Christ-like role, knows precisely where, when and how Gawain has sinned, and is thus able to help him, not through any special powers of absolution, but through the simple, and human, expedient of revealing to Gawain where his faults lie. Gawain's punishment is self-knowledge, the realisation that he is not, and cannot be, perfect -confession and retribution are effectively internalised. Those institutions which establish the canons and monitor the externals of virtue- the Court and the Church- are shown to be both unrealistic in their demands and hypocritical in their own imperfect observance of them. The theology of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is largely Wyclif's. The Church as an institution is corrupt, all elected believers are effectively of the priesthood, purgatory is a merciful alternative to eternal damnation, and human intervention in the purgation of others is unacceptable (See Christie-Murray 1989: 114). Gawain is, in effect, the Wyclifite protagonist of a late medieval *Pilgrim's Progress* which displays far greater sympathy for human weakness than Bunyan ever would.

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1. The Gawain author would not, of course, have been familiar with the King James Authorised Version, but with the Latin: “et ego vobis dico petite et dabitur vobis quaerite et invenietis pulsate et aperietur vobis omnis enim qui petit accipit et qui quaerit invenit et pulsanti aperietur” (*Evangelium Secundum Lucam* 11:9-10).