Three Studies
of
*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Robert Goltra
The Confession in the Green Chapel: Gawain’s True Absolution

Nedra C. Grogan
Mulier est hominis confusio: The Green Knight’s Lady

Cora Zalatel
The Green Knight as Thor
Three Studies of
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Robert Goltra
The Confession in the Green Chapel: Gawain's True Absolution

Nedra C. Grogan
Mulier est hominis confusio: The Green Knight's Lady

Cora Zalatel
The Green Knight as Thor

Vol. XXXII Spring, 1984 Number 4

THE EMPIRIA STATE RESEARCH STUDIES is published quarterly by The School of Graduate and Professional Studies of the Emporia State University, 1200 Commercial St., Emporia, Kansas, 66801. Entered as second-class matter September 16, 1952, at the post office at Emporia, Kansas, under the act of August 24, 1912. Postage paid at Emporia, Kansas.
A complete list of all publications of The Emporia State Research Studies is published in the fourth number of each volume.
The Confession in the Green Chapel:  
Gawain's True Absolution

by

Robert Goltra

Toward the end of Gawain's climactic encounter with the Green Knight, the Knight explains that he has feigned two blows at Gawain in recognition of the two tests Gawain has passed and that he has administered one blow due to Gawain's failure to pass the third test:

I coule wrapeloker haf waret, to pe haf wrogt anger.
Fyrst I mansed pe muryly with a mynt one,
And roue pe wyth no roif-sore, with ryght I pe profered
For pe forwarde pat we fest in pe fyrst nygt,
And jou trystyly pe trawpe and trwly me haldez,
Al pe gayne pou me gela, as god mon schulde.
Patz ope munt for pe monne, mon, I pe profered,
Pou kyssedes my clere wyf—pe cossez me raetez.
For bope two here I pe bede bot two bare myntes
boute scape.

Trwe mon trwe restore,
Penne par mon drede no wape.
At pe prid pou fayled pore,
And pefor pat tappe ta pe.  

The nick Gawain has suffered was dealt because of Gawain's desire for, acceptance of, and concealment of the green girdle with which the Lady tempted him during their third encounter. Gawain resisted the temptations offered on the first two occasions—thus the two feints—but failed the third test—thus the "tappe." The reaction of the Green Knight, and the later reaction of Arthur and his court, is to minimize Gawain's failings. The Green Knight describes Gawain as "pe faustest freke pat euer on fote zede" (2363), and later, when Gawain tells the court that he will wear the belt as penance, Arthur "comfortez pe knyght, and alle pe court als / Lagen loude peber . . . " (2513-14). Gawain, however, takes a more serious view

Robert Goltra is a graduate student in the Division of English and Foreign Languages at Emporia State University.

\[\text{See Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, rev. Norman Davis, 2nd ed. (Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 2344-57 (pp. 64-65). All further references to this work appear as line numbers in the text.}\]
of what has occurred. He is described as being “[s]o agreed for greme he gryed withinne; / Alle þe blode of his brest blende in his face, / þat al he schrank for schoem þat þe schalk talked” (2370-72). He recounts his failures, saying that fear caused him to be covetous and to act in a dishonorable manner:

For care of þy knokke cowardyse me þagt
To accorde me with couetise, my kynde to forsake,
Þat is larges and lewte þat longez to knytgez.
Now am I farty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer
Of trecherye and vntrawþe: þoþe bityde sorze
and care!

(2379-84)

He later pledges to wear the girdle “in synge of my surfet” (2433). Gawain, then, sees himself as one guilty of “cowardyse,” a failing which, in turn, has led him to practice “couetise” and to reject “larges” and “lewte.” Some readers, however, accept the judgment of the Green Knight, Bertilak, and the court. John Burrow, for one, examines Gawain’s confession of “couetise” and argues that contemporary readers “must have seen that it was Bertilak’s rather than Gawain’s version which was the right one and that Gawain’s remorse was . . . extravagant.” Yet, given the author’s portrait of Gawain, Gawain’s actions in the poem, and the religious thought of the fourteenth century, Gawain’s judgment of his failures may well be the more accurate one. Gawain not only sinned but also made an invalid confession, one later corrected by his confession to the Green Knight.

Gawain is initially presented as the embodiment of Christian perfection. He is described as one

ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue sypez
Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as golde purad,
Voyded of vche vlyany, wyth vertuez enmourned
in mote;
Forþ þe pentangel nwe
He ber in schelde and cote,
As tulk of tale most trwe
And gentylest knytg of lote.

---

2Mary Flowers Brasswell, The Medieval Sinner (East Brunswick, N.J.: Farleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1983). Brasswell reaches the same basic conclusions regarding Gawain’s lapse, its seriousness, and the role of the Green Knight as confessor as are the traces of the sinner through the literature of the medieval period.

3Joseph Longo states that “no one can doubt the validity of the Gawain poet’s delineation of his hero up to the Temptation Scene as, to borrow Henry James’ useful epithet, a ‘reflector’ of the humilitas manifest in Christ’s Incarnation.” The court describes Gawain as one who “[t]o fynde hys fere vpon folde, in fayth, is not þe” (676). George J. Engelhardt sees Gawain’s predicament as one

not made for petty knights uninstructed in the mysteries of consummate chivalric virtue; they could elude or ignore the dilemmas that posed, just as the lesser knights in Arthur’s hall shrank from the challenge of the “aghlich myaster.” But for Gawain it was pat. By universal repute he was the perfect knight . . . The pentangle or “endles knot” emblazoned on his shield was the symbol of his reputation. Like the tracery of that star, his virtue was reputed to be whole, without gap or inconsistency.

The very excellence of Gawain’s spiritual condition is, of course, bound to magnify any lapse in his moral judgment. In Summa Theologica, St. Thomas Aquinas quotes Isidore as holding that a sin is to be considered “so much the more grievous as the sinner is held to be a more excellent person.” Aquinas states four reasons for this:

First, because a more excellent person, e.g. one who excels in knowledge and virtue, can more easily resist sin . . . Secondly, . . . because every good in which a man excels, is a gift of God, to Whom man is ungrateful when he sins. . . . Thirdly, on account of the sinful act being specially inconsistent with the excellence of the person sinning . . . Fourthly, on account of the example of scandal; because, as Gregory says (Pastor I, 2): when the sinner is honored for his position . . . ?

---

7Aquinas, p. 918.
As the seemingly perfect knight, Gawain is an example of the “more excellent person” whose any sin will be intensified by that very excellence.

During his stay at Bertilak’s castle, Gawain is thrice tempted by the Lady. The first day he is tempted by her flesh. Gawain resists this temptation. On the second day, the Lady appeals both to his lust and to his pride in himself as one noted for his skill in matters of love. She chides him that he “[o]rge to a gynke þynk ȝern to schewe / And teche sum tokez to tewlfu craftes. / Why! as lewed, þat alle þe los weldez?” (1526-28). Gawain again repulses her assault on his virtue. On the third day, the Lady appeals to Gawain’s lust, avarice, and fear of death. The Lady again offers her body, and again Gawain rejects her offer. She next offers a ring, the rejection of which shows Gawain’s lack of avarice and covetousness. The third temptation offered on this third day is a green girdle. The Lady

Iȝt a lice lyȝtly þat leke vnbe hir sydez,  
Knite vpon hir kyrtel vnder þe clere mantyle,  
Gered hit watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped,  
Noght bot arounde brayen, beten with fyngez,  
And þat ho bede to þe burne, and blyȝe þisȝt,  
Þag hit unworȝi were, þat hit hit take wolde.  

(1830-35)

Gawain initially rejects this offer, saying he “nolde neghe in no wyse  
/ Naþer golde ne garysoun, er God hym grace sende / To achenue to þe chaunce þat he had choſen þere” (1836-38). However, the Lady informs him that the wearer of the girdle cannot be slain:

quat gome so is gorde with his grene lace,  
While he hit hede hemely haleched aboute,  
Þer is no hapel vnder heuen towehe hym þat myȝt,  
For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erþe.  

(1851-54)

Gawain then withdraws his previous rejection. He realizes, “Hit were a juel for þe joparde þat hym jugged were: / When he achedeu to þe chapel his chek for to fech, / Myȝt he haf slaypped to vnslawyn, þe sleȝt were noble” (1856-58). Gawain

jodel hir to speke,  
And ho bере ou hyme þelte and bede hit hym swythe—  
And he grante þe hym gafe with a good wyle—  
And bisȝt hym, for hir sake, disceuer hit neuer,  
Bot to lelle layne fro hir lorde.  

(1859-63)

Gawain not only accepts the girdle but pledges not to reveal his acceptance to Bertilak. Gawain’s rationale for accepting the girdle, the acceptance itself, and his vow of silence all constitute sins.

As J. F. Kitely points out, “Gawain accepts the girdle from Bertilak’s wife only when he learns of its power to protect life.” Robert C. Pierle argues that Gawain’s failure of courage has been foreshadowed by the description of him at rest which precedes the Lady’s offer of the girdle. Pierle notes that Gawain’s ‘sleep is described as ‘deep gloom’ (I. 1748), and this sleep is troubled by ‘oppressive thoughts’ (I. 1751) of the Green Knight; that is, he is for the first time fearful that he will die—his inner courage has dissolved.”

Pierle reminds us that a “true Christian . . . is ready to face death as Gawain, prior to his inner failure, was ready to do, but this transformed man is obviously not so prepared.” Aquinas refutes any objection that fear is not always evil by answering that “Our Lord said (Matth.x.28): Fear ye not them that kill the body, thus forbidding worldly fear.” He also notes, “It is natural for man to shrink from detriment to his own body and loss of worldly goods, but to forsake justice on that account is contrary to natural reason.” He later writes that “the inordinateness of the fear of death is opposed to fortitude.”

Gawain’s fear, then, is both a sinful rejection of faith in God’s justice and a rejection of the virtue of fortitude. As Aquinas notes, “[I]f a man through fear of the danger of death or of any other temporal evil is so disposed as to do what is forbidden, or to omit what is commanded by the Divine law, such fear is a mortal sin.” Gawain has committed a mortal sin in his inordinate fear, fear which leads him to trust his life to a magic-token, the girdle, rather than to God. When Gawain later rejects his guide’s advice to avoid the Green Chapel and thus save his life, he tells the guide, “Ful wel con Dryȝyn schape / His seruauente for to saue” (2138-39). As D. Mills has noted, “Gawain is his own judge, both before and after the acceptance of the girdle. If what he says is true, there is no need for the girdle . . . , and it is the very

---

"Aquinas, p. 1352.
"Aquinas, p. 1352.
"Aquinas, p. 1721.
"Aquinas, p. 1722.
needlessness of his lapse which constitutes the bitterest irony of all."  

Gawain’s fear of death, a sin in itself, leads him to sin further. Gawain is guilty of being covetous. He has pledged to exchange with Bertilak ‘quat chek so þe acheue’ (1107). If Gawain intends to fulfill this pledge, there would be no point in his accepting the girdle since it would no longer be in his possession when he meets the Green Knight and could not, therefore, preserve his life. However, Gawain has no intention of fulfilling his pledge. He intends to keep—and does keep—from Bertilak that which is due him. By his intention, Gawain sins. Aquinas writes, “It is natural to man to desire external things as means to an end; wherefore this desire is devoid of sin, in so far as it is held in check by the rule taken from the nature of the end. But covetousness exceeds this rule, and therefore is a sin.”  

Gawain’s end is self-preservation, regardless of God’s will. G. V. Smitheres states that “Gawain’s lapse consists in his having held back the green girdle, instead of restoring it . . . as he had done with the kisses bestowed on him . . . .”  

Gawain’s pledge to the Lady that “neuer wyþe schulde hit wyþ, iwyse, bot þay twayne / for nãte” (1864-65) shows him also guilty of the sin of oath-breaking. He has previously sworn to exchange gains with Bertilak and has now placed himself in a position where he must break one of the two oaths. In his letters, St. Augustine writes that “to deny an oath, I do not say to assert anything that contradicts it, but to waver in regard to it at all, this is utterly wrong.”  

Gawain had sworn to the exchange, saying, “‘Bi God,’ quoth Gawain þe gode, ‘I grant þertylle’” (1110). Aquinas writes that “to call God to witness is named jure (to swear) because it is established as though it were a principle of law (jure) that what a man asserts under the invocation of God as His witness should be accepted as true.”  

He further points out that “sometimes God is called to witness in confirmation of something future, and this is termed a promissory oath.”  

In addition to his breaking his oath, Gawain’s granting the Lady’s request for concealment of and silence concerning the girdle places him in a position in which he obviously intends

to commit perjury, if only by omission. Aquinas writes that perjury “implies contempt of God” and that it “of its very nature, is a mortal sin.”  

At the end of the third Temptation Scene, Gawain is obviously in a state of sin. Aquinas points out that “sins are divided into these three, viz., sins of thought, word, and deed, . . . wherefore sins of deed have the complete species; but the first beginning of sin is its foundation, as it were, in the sin of thought.”  

Gawain has committed a sin of thought by fearing death, a sin of deed by accepting the girdle, and a sin of word by pledging his silence. His sins of deed and word are, in accordance with Aquinian theology, rooted in his sin of thought. If Gawain had not feared death, he would not have accepted the girdle and would not have needed to pledge silence concerning that acceptance. The fact that he has not yet physically withheld the girdle from Bertilak nor lied by omission concerning his possession of it does not alter his situation.

In this state of sin, Gawain confesses his sins to a priest and is absolved:

Syþen cheuely to þe chapel choes þe wey,  
Preuely aproched to a prest, and prayed hym þere  
Pat he wolde lyste his lyf and lern hym better  
How his weale schulde be saued when he schulde seye heþen.  
Þere he schrof hym schryly and schewed his mysdedez,  
Of þe mórre and þe myyne, and merci besechez,  
And of absoluccion he on þe segge calles;  
And he asyolde hym surely and sette hym so clene  
As domesday schulde haf ben diȝt on þe morn.

(1876-84)

Yet Gawain has not made a valid confession and is not truly “clene.” John Burrow notes that a “fourteenth-century layman would know that a ‘right shrift’ depended on a number of necessary conditions . . . , without which the priest’s absolution was invalid.”  

Burrow points to the penitent’s “disposition” as one of these conditions and judges Gawain as having “no intention either of returning [the girdle] to the lady or of giving it up, according to his promise, to the host.”  

Burrow believes that Gawain takes part only “in the ‘sacramentum exterius’—the verbal forms of confession and absolution.”  

The Summa Theologica sets forth conditions necessary for
true penance. According to the Supplement to the *Summa Theologica*, penance consists of contrition, confession, and satisfaction.\(^6\) Whether or not Gawain feels contrite for his sins is debatable, but the indications are that he does not. He does go to confession rather than to Mass for the first time since leaving Arthur’s court, but a comparison of Gawain here and in the chapel scene when he recognizes his failure shows few grounds one might use to argue for Gawain’s true contrition at this point. Following the confession, Gawain makes merry with the ladies of the court:

And sypen he mace hym as mery among þe fre ladies,
With comlych caroles and alle kynes joye.
As neuer he did bot þat daye, to þe derk nyght,
with blys.

(1885-88)

There is no evidence of contrition, which is defined in the Supplement to the *Summa Theologica* as “voluntary sorrow for sin whereby man punishes in himself that which he grieves to have done.”\(^7\) Even if one attributes contrition to Gawain, his confession to the priest could not restore him to grace unless it were complete and were followed by satisfaction. The *Summa Theologica* states that “confession is necessary in Penance in order that punishment may be enjoined for sin according to the judgment of the priest.”\(^8\) The priest would have insisted on the return of the belt to Bertilak as part of the satisfaction for Gawain’s sins. Since there is no indication of such insistence, it is obvious that Gawain has not made a complete confession of his sins. An incomplete confession can be valid only if one does not remember a sin and therefore omits it.\(^9\) Gawain cannot have forgotten his acceptance of the girdle, his reasons for doing so, and his pledge to keep that acceptance secret in the short time required to dress and find the priest. His confession is deliberately incomplete and by definition invalid. If Gawain were truly “clene,” he would give the girdle to Bertilak, thus showing that fear for his life no longer controls his actions and that he no longer intends to perjure himself. Gawain does not give up the girdle; he conceals it.

If Gawain is still unclean after his confession to the priest, he needs to make a valid confession. John Burrow argues that Gawain does exactly that in his encounter with the Green Knight at the chapel. He points out that “Gawain’s contrition (‘s scheme’) leads him to confess . . . and to offer satisfaction.”\(^10\) Gawain confesses that fear caused him to behave badly, asks the knight’s forgiveness, and pledges to be more wary in the future:

*For care of þy knokke cowardyse me tæg
To acorde me with couetysse, my kynde to forsake,
Þat is larges and lewte þat longez to knytyez.
Now am I faawte and faale, and ferde þat ben euere
Of trecherysse and vnorwreþe: boþe bityde sorwe
and care!
I bitnowe yow, knyte, here styulle,
Al faawte is my fare;
Letez me ouertake your wyle
And efte I schal be ware.*

(2379-88)

Burrow sees a similarity between the priest’s absolution and that of the Green Knight.\(^11\) The priest “assyled þym surely and sette þym so clene / As domezday schulde haf ben ðigt on þe morn” (1883-84). The Green Knight says to Gawain, “I halde þe polydes of þat þyg and pured as clene / As þou hadez neuer forfetef sypen þou watzw fyrst borne” (2393-94). One may view the “tappe” administered by Bertilak as a sign of penance, but, if so, it occurs out of the sequence of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Similarly, Gawain’s removal of the belt and his return of it to Bertilak would also be out of sequence. His decision to wear the girdle for the rest of his life may act to fulfill the correct sequence.

One may question the propriety of the Green Knight’s acting as a confessor. However, it is not necessarily forbidden to confess to someone other than a priest. The Supplement to the *Summa Theologica* states that although it is preferable to confess to a minister “for the fulness of the sacrament, . . . when there is reason for urgency, the penitent should fulfill his own part, by being contrite and confessing to whom he can.”\(^12\) Gawain, left unclean by his invalid confession, is now truly brought to contrition by the “tappe” and words administered by the Green Knight. Gawain is “[s]o aghawed for greme he gryed withinne; / Alle þe blode of his bryst blende in his face, / Þat al he shrank for: schome þat þe schalk talked” (9370-72). He urgently needs to confess and to offer satisfaction.

---

\(^6\)Aquinas, p. 2573.
\(^7\)Aquinas, p. 2574.
\(^8\)Aquinas, p. 2602.
\(^9\)Aquinas, p. 2995.
\(^10\)Burrow, 75-76.
\(^11\)Burrow, 76.
\(^12\)Burrow, 76.
and he does so. Further support for the view of the Green Knight as confessor to one who remains unclean after an invalid confession is supplied by G. V. Smithers in his essay “What Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Is About.” Smithers argues that the author was obviously familiar with “OF prose romances of the Arthurian cycle, notably La Queste del saint Graal and that part of the Lancelot-Grail which is known as the Agravain.” He points out that these works “teem with hermits and hermitages” and that “the authors or compilers of these works probably took it for granted that a hermit normally had his chapel as well as his hermitage.” Smithers feels that the name of the Green Chapel (as distinct from its nature, to some extent) necessarily implies that the figure represented by the Green Knight is also to be understood as having a hermitage. In fact, we can now see why he was called Bertilak de Hautdesert: the explanation of this name as “of the high hermitage” is as certainly correct as such things can be. Moreover, someone who is represented as the occupant of a hermitage and the minister of a chapel attached to it could normally have been nothing but a hermit. And any such person would have been (at need) just the man to hear a confession by Gawain as a knyt errant... on a typical quest that led him through desolate country.

Smithers feels that this second confession is necessary because of the one “Gawain had made to the more orthodoxly qualified priest of the castle... , in which he had suppressed all mention (so far as we are told) of the girdle.” Gawain’s agony over his failures and his comment that he will ever wear the girdle as a symbol of his failing—as “token of vntrawpe”—are met with laughter by both the Green Knight and Arthur’s court. Yet the most telling example of Gawain’s approach to spiritual perfection may well be his superior ability to recognize the gravity of his sins and the invalidity of the confession he made to the priest. He will continue to wear the green girdle as a sign of penance for his sins, and the decision of the court to emulate his action, their decision that “[v]che burne of jhe brotherhe, a bauderyk schulde haue, / A bende abelof hym aboute of a brygt grene, / And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were” (2516-18), may, even though they are unaware of it, comment on the spiritual imperfection of even the most perfect knight and, therefore, of all those less perfect.

Nedra C. Grogan is a graduate of the Division of English and Foreign Languages at Emporia State University.

3J. A. Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), pp. 74-78.
is accomplished in her use of language and able to exhibit proper breeding at appropriate times while often reversing convention to suit her purpose; she also has the ability to analyze situations and then to switch tactics or adapt her methods accordingly. From the behavior of the lady, we can infer, first, that she has full knowledge of the “plot” against Gawain; second, that all her actions and speeches are well planned and contribute to the meaning of the poem; and finally, most importantly, that she is determined to make Gawain sin.

A thorough analysis of the lady’s character and behavior must include an account of her motivation and her strategy. The lady’s determination is obvious, yet why is she so intent upon tempting Gawain? We can assume that Bercilak’s motivation is based primarily on obedience to Morgan le Fay, and the lady’s motivation may similarly lie in her obedience to her husband. It is also possible that the lady, like Morgan le Fay, is simply devious and seeks pleasure in watching an upright man fail. The lady’s determination may also stem from a sense of duty; she may reason that by making an example of Gawain she will inspire other knights to become more moral. Finally, the lady may simply want a challenge, a typical motivation for humans who have faith in their abilities. Although no clear evidence exists for the precedence of one possibility over another, I choose to think that the lady accepts the challenge to tempt Gawain primarily as an occasion to use her acting talents and test her skills while also contributing to his moral development. Certainly it is at the least, discourteous, and at the most, immoral, for the lady and her husband to trick Gawain, but I would argue that the pair are working together toward a positive end; they hope to cause Gawain to commit a grave sin of pride, not so that they can relish his failure and their triumph, but so that the knight will learn from his experience and take his lesson back to Arthur and the Round Table.

In working toward this positive end, the Green Knight and the lady must create and follow a plan. From the time Gawain accepts the challenge to come to the Green Chapel for his return blow, the couple has a full year to determine the best possible strategy for making Gawain sin. They are certainly both aware of Gawain’s spotless reputation, and thus it is likely that they do not sincerely believe Gawain can be seduced. They may reason, however, that it will make the game more difficult for Gawain and more exciting for them if the lady would feign seduction as a way of shocking and confusing Gawain to such a point that his courtesy can then be corrupted.

Bercilak may instruct his wife to carry out their plan by first making her way into Gawain’s bedroom and then using her talents and charm to corrupt him. Once inside Gawain’s chamber, however, the lady acts independently. As part of her ploy, she subtly offers Gawains sexual favors, but she knows that there is no real possibility of Gawain’s accepting her “love” because of his past fornication and his current mission. With these two facts in mind, then, the lady focuses her temptation on causing Gawain to violate his pact with the host. If Gawain either accepts her offer of sexual advances or gains something from her without informing his host, he will still sin. Therefore, it seems likely that the plan of the host and his wife is to manipulate language and reverse convention, thereby causing Gawain to reject his courtesy, break his pact, and subsequently learn from his experience. Possibilities for the lady’s motivation and strategy are numerous and cannot be firmly supported from the text, but by a study of the scenes in which the lady appears conclusions can be drawn about her personality and abilities.

We first encounter the lady in the second fitt, as the household makes its way to evening services at the chapel. The poet uses no formal introduction; he simply begins calling her “pe lady,” and because of the proximity of the reference, we can assume that she is the host’s wife: “Pe lorde loutes þerto, and þe lady als.” The lady does not become an important character until eight lines later when she shows her interest in the knight: “Penne lyst þe lady to loke on þe knynt” (941). She is curious about this knight whose reputation for courtesy has preceded him to the castle.6

Gawain’s first reaction to the lady is that she is “wener þen Wenore” (945). As he goes to greet her, he is struck by the contrast of her beauty with the ugliness of her companion. Through rapid alternations the poet contrasts the two women, and Gawain becomes impressed with the young lady’s freshness and skill that “Schon schyryr þen snaue” (956). Gawain wastes no time in kissing her “comly” and asking “To be her seruant sothly, if hemself lyked” (974-76). Gawain commits himself as a courteous knight to serve both ladies however he can. Gawain’s careful attention to decorum gives the lady an advantage in later scenes because Gawain must try to live up to his pledge.

The lady next appears in the poet’s description of the Christmas feast. Bercilak takes his place at the high dais beside the old woman,
while “Gawan and þe gay burde togedir þay seten” (1003). Although the poet includes relatively little detail, he does say that he knows Gawain and the lady enjoyed pleasant conversation in their private words: “Wyth elene cortays carp closed fro fylpe, þat hor play watz passande veche prynce gomen, in vayres” (1013-15). Their play “surpassed each princely game” because it was pure and sinless, interesting and intellectual, and because the two were so skilled at the “game” of being courteous and well-mannered. The feast scene anticipates following temptation scenes as it sets up the confrontation between two evenly matched opponents who respect each other, who follow the codes of courtesy, and who dedicate themselves to fulfilling their individual purposes.

Gawain and the lady first meet alone as courteous opponents on the morning after the pact is made between Berselak and Gawain to exchange each day’s winnings (1105-12). On this winter morning Berselak and his company are out hunting, as promised, and Gawain is dozing in bed. The lady, whom we recognize by the phrase, “lofyste to beholde” (1187), enters Gawain’s bedroom to initiate her plan. Her actions as she enters as well as the poet’s diction signal the reader that she is doing something out of the ordinary: “[She] drog þe dor efter hir ful derrily and stylle, / And hir stopped stil-ly and stel to his bedde, / Kest vp þe cortyn and creped withinne” (1188-92). The language used implies surreptitiousness, and even Gawain is deceptive, as he sees her but pretends to be asleep: “. . . and þe burne schamed, / And layde hym doun lystyly, and let as he slepte” (1189-90). The lady’s intention is to “set hir ful softly on þe bed-syde” (1193), not to awaken Gawain, but to play the part of a lovesick epic maiden who merely wishes to gaze upon her loved one in worship. She believes that she will surprise Gawain when he awakens and that he will be disoriented and disconcerted by seeing her beside him. However, unbeknownst to her, Gawain is already considering how to handle the situation while he lurks under the covers: “Pe lede lay lurked a full longe quyle, / Compaunt in his conscience to quart þat cace myȝt / Meue oper amount . . .” (1195-97). The lady begins the first of the temptation scenes, then, at more of a disadvantage than she realizes due to Gawain’s feigned sleep but actual alertness.

When Gawain does “awaken” (1200), the lady immediately begins the conversation and introduces the poet’s use of a common medieval image of captivity: “Se ar a sleper vnlyȝe, þat mon may slyde hider; / Now ar þe tan as-tyt! Bot true vus may schape, / I schal bynde yow in your bedde, þat be þe trayst” (1209-11). The poet draws on convention for this image, both to foreshadow that the lady will eventually “capture” Gawain by “binding” him with her girdle and to illustrate the lady’s character. Gawain and the reader discover, in this scene, the lady’s ability to use language, specifically metaphor, effectively. The lady chooses to show Gawain this ability early in the scene, immediately after he awakens in fact, so that he has the chance to realize exactly what kind of opponent he faces. The lady wants Gawain to take her seriously, but, ironically, she uses a “jesting” tone to hint subtly that she is indeed Gawain’s enemy out to capture his honor. The lady reasons that by using the metaphor of battle she will maintain her game-playing and give Gawain an opportunity to recognize the graveness of his situation without warning him outright.

Gawain senses her game and “surrenders” to her as a proper knight should: “Me schal worpe at your wille, and þat me wel lyke, / For I zede me zederly, and zege after grace” (1214-15). The lady is able to take command, therefore, early in this first temptation scene, but she does not enjoy complete victory, because Gawain “surrenders” only one time (1215).

When Gawain wishes to rise and get dressed, the lady’s reaction (1223-29), as Burrow explains, is “an idea which is to dominate both this and the succeeding temptation scenes.” She will make the decisions because she “possesses” him. In Burrow’s view, her speech that begins “Sir Wovon þe are” (1226) “introduces the first of her attempts to manoeuvre Gawain into acting in accordance with her conception of what his identity involves. . . .” Gawain should sense in this first scene, as the reader does, that this woman is strong-willed and determined; she refuses to let an opportunity pass to “ware my whyle wel, / Quyl hit lastez, with tale” (1235-36).

Because of the line quoted directly above in which the lady shows her eagerness to talk, I hesitate to interpret line 1237 as sexually suggestive, i.e., “You are welcome to my body.” Dean believes, however, that such a “crude” translation is completely in keeping with her character; he argues that “crude” is “the very effect that the lady hopes to achieve” in her plot to entrap Gawain. Dean’s argument parallels mine in that he also sees her as an actress and a “clever opponent,” but one who wants Gawain to think of her

4It is Dean’s idea that the lady “binds” Gawain once in the first scene and also in the third temptation scene

5Burrow, p. 79.
6Burrow, p. 80.
7Dean, 3.
only as a seductress; thus, Gawain will be unwary when she switches her attack from his chastity to his honesty. 13 However, to accept Dean's interpretation of this controversial line, one must disregard the evidence in the text of the deep respect that Gawain and the lady have for one another, and such evidence is too crucial to ignore. It is difficult to believe that Gawain could continue to flatter the lady so convincingly and seem to enjoy her company so thoroughly if he thinks of her only as a crude, evil temptress, plotting to make him commit a sin of "incontinence," which, as Benson notes, would seriously offend Gawain due to his commonly held belief that continence means survival. 14

Although Gerald Gallant also believes that the lady offers her body, his focus differs from Dean's. Instead of concentrating on the crudity of her offer, Gallant comments that "she offers herself as a servant (1240), a complete reversal of the courtly tradition, [which] is also significant." 15 Critics disagree, therefore, about the meaning of the line, but it seems likely that the poet's craftsmanship has rendered it intentionally ambiguous, and it can be read either way—as a crude invitation or as a proper use of the French idiom, i.e., "You are welcome to me." 16

The lady is fully aware of the ambiguity of her language, but she waits to see how Gawain will react so that she can quickly plan her next "speech." Since Gawain's reply is cheerful and mannerly (1242-47), he obviously has chosen not to interpret her statement sexually. Therefore, she reacts in turn with an expression of her desire to show good breeding also: "If I hit lakked ope set at lyght hit were littel daynten" (1250). We see here an example of how the lady adapts her tactics to Gawain's reactions and replies; she bases her next move on his response because she wants to uphold his trust in her and not offend him completely.

The lady needs to maintain Gawain's trust so that he will continue to believe in her as a sincerely pining maiden. It is essential to the lady's game that she continue to be an effective actress, and evidence that she is indeed acting can be found in the poet's own words: "And ay þe lady let lyk as hym loved mych," which I would paraphrase as "Always the lady pretended as if she loved him much" (1881). She is merely playing a part to achieve an end. Despite the fact that she is only acting in her love game, Gawain reacts defensively (1282), and the reader is then allowed to share the lady's conviction that even if she were the fairest lady of all, Gawain will still avoid love because of the blow that he faces (1283-87). 17

The lady then speaks of taking her leave (1288), pretending that Gawain's will-power and courtesy are too strong for her to overcome, but suddenly switches her tactics, challenges Gawain's identity, and casts doubts on his courtly behavior (1292-93 and 1297-1301). Her elaborate praise of Gawain is nullified by this accusation, and there is no indication by the poet that she is jesting. This sudden change is typical and certainly effective in catching Gawain off guard: "Querfore? þo þe reke, and freschly he aske, / Ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his castes" (1294-95). The lady, sensing Gawain's anxiety, responds with a softer approach, blesses him, and then reassures him; again, she does not want him to distrust her completely (1296). When Gawain agrees to kiss her, it is she who "cachez hym in armez" (1305) and kisses him.

The lady's display of aggressive behavior is reminiscent of the maiden of the epic tradition. She is playing the role of a woman in an epic tale, in complete reversal of romance tradition. Her actions befit those descriptions of epic ladies, who, as Maurice Valency points out, "normally made the necessary advances." They were, Valency continues, "shameless." 18 Gawain may or may not consider the lady's aggression as "shameless," but there is no indication in the text of his opinion. He may allow her to kiss him because he wishes to calm her aggression, and he surely does not want to be accused again of lacking courtesy. Whatever Gawain's thoughts, the lady gains her kiss, a minor achievement to end the first day's visit. She also reaps a greater benefit on this morning; she learns that by effectively switching tactics, she can catch Gawain off guard and render him anxious and eager to please. This small victory anticipates her eventual triumph over Gawain's courtesy by the same method—a sudden change of tactics and a shy deception of the knight.

The second day's bedroom scene begins dramatically and abruptly, as the shift from the boar hunt to the lady occurs in the wheel: "þe lady nõt forgate, / Com to hym to salue; / Ful erly ho watz hym ate / His mode for to remewe" (1472-75). The poet is toying

13 Dean, 6.
14 Benson, p. 45.
16 Burrow, p. 81.
17 I disagree with Tolkien and Gordon, who support Gallant's view that this passage (1293-97) is not her thought. If it were, they believe, it would be a "serious flaw in the handling of the plot" (p. 149). The lady actually has full knowledge of what Gawain faces, and she knows that his reaction to her is greatly influenced by his fear of impending death.
with the reader by commenting that the lady did not forget to greet Gawain; not only did she not forget, but she planned in advance what her approach to this meeting would be. She enters with an intent to change his mood (1475); in other words, she hopes to change his strict ideas about courtesy. For the second consecutive morning, she sits softly on his bed, smiles graciously, and then launches into a rehearsed speech before Gawain does any more than welcome her (1477). She picks up where she left off the day before: “Sir, gil ye be Waven...” (1481). She renews her challenge of the previous day and again questions Gawain’s knowledge of courtly behavior. This repeated tactic illustrates that she has carefully pondered Gawain’s reactions to her accusations of the previous day, knows she was successful in bewildering him, and has adapted her plan for the second day accordingly.

The lady also accuses Gawain of having a poor memory as she says, “Pou hatz forgeten gadgety pat gisterday I tazte” (1485). Her attack on his manners, his knowledge of society (1483), and his courtesy continues, as she sarcastically reminds Gawain that kissing “bicomes vche a knych pat cortaysy yse” (1491); her reasoning is that Gawain is ignoring courtesy by not immediately begging a kiss from her. Christopher Dean’s analysis of this second scene is in agreement with mine: “On the second day the lady presses home the advantage that she won the day before.” He continues to say that “she claims that he shows no courtesy... and her accusation hits him at his weakest spot.”

Gawain defends himself by explaining that he does not ask for a kiss because he fears being refused (1494). The lady replies with a seemingly casual comment that she is certainly not so ill-bred as to deny him a kiss, but if she were, he could take her by force (1495-97). The lady is acting subtly seductive, but with no real fear of being forced by the knight, and he, offended by her implication, reminds her that “prete is vphryunda in pede per I lende” (1499). The lady’s suggestive comment actually works against her because even though she has gained the kiss, she senses that Gawain gave it somewhat unwillingly; thus, she proceeds to soften her tactics by saying that he hopes he will not be “wrathed” at her inquiry which follows (1500). The lady’s ability to switch back and forth from severity to sweetness illustrates her command of improvisation and her ability to “think on her feet.”

---

9Dean, 6.

The purport of the lady’s lengthy speech (1508-34) is a presentation of her view of chivalry; her speech serves to put pressure on Gawain and to reveal more of the lady’s character, such as her awareness of convention and her attention to detail. The lady thinks of chivalry as a knight’s duty to pursue love, take risks for love, and uphold conventions of courtly love through any trial:

“And conspicuous among all chivalry, the chief thing praised
Is the loyal sport of love, the lore of the knightly profession
For to describe this endeavor of these honest knights,
How men for their loyal love their lives have risked,
Endured for their love grievous times...”

(1512-17, trans. mine)

Whether it is her sincere belief or only an adopted one suited to her purpose, the lady chooses to present this view of chivalry primarily to let Gawain know, however subtly, that if he does not fulfill her expectations, she will be offended. Thus far in their acquaintance the lady has been disappointed in Gawain, as she bluntly reveals:

“And I have sat by you here on two separate occasions,
Yet heard I never words proceed from your mouth
That ever belit love, less not more;
And you, who are so chivalrous and gracious in your vows,
Ought to a young thing eagerly show
And teach some sign of true love dealings.”

(1522-27, trans. mine)

The lady even accuses Gawain of judging her too stupid to listen to his courtly conversation (1529). She is dangerously close to abandoning her own courtesy here, but her purpose is to get a response from Gawain so that she can interpret how he reacts to a direct affront rather than to sexual suggestiveness.

Gawain’s courtesy remains intact once again; he responds to her exclamation of “For schamel!” (1530) by complimenting her worthiness and “skygt / Of pat art” (1542-43). Once more, the lady’s attempt to challenge his courtesy is foiled by Gawain himself, whose ability to speak well and defend himself is not to be denied. The poet ends the second temptation scene by calling it an impasse: “Bot he defended hym so fayt / Pat no fault semed, / Ne non euel on nawper halue, nawper hy wynsten / bot blysse” (1551-53).

After the second day’s temptation scene, the lady has learned what technique is most useful is exposing Gawain’s vulnerability,
but she has yet to make him sin. As the third day approaches, therefore, the lady must plot carefully to ensure her success. The poet begins the third day's temptation scene by switching suddenly from a description of the fox hunt to a scene at the castle. It is another "cold morne," and again Gawain sleeps while Bercilak and his men are out hunting the wily fox (1731-32). In contrast to the previous two days, we first see the lady, not as she creeps into Gawain's chamber, but as she prepares to go to him. For this third meeting, it is essential that the lady be ready for this clever knight who challenges her skill just as she challenges his chivalry.

The poet tells us that, in anticipation of this third meeting, the lady has not had a restful night: "Bot þe lady for luf let not to slepe, / Ne þe purpose to payre þat þyg in hir hert" (1733-34). The first line quoted here is one of the most controversial of those lines in the poem which deal with the lady's character and motivation. Both the verb "let not" and the phrase "for luf" are difficult to translate, and various interpretations have resulted. Gollancz glosses "let not" as "did not permit (herself)," and says that "for luf" does not indicate love for Sir Gawain but simply a desire for pleasure in his company. Burrow and Gollancz both note that the same use of "for luf" as "friendly sociability" is found in line 1086. Burrow feels that "for luf" in line 1733 is ambiguous. An entirely different interpretation is offered by Charles Moorman, who glosses "let" as "allowed him," i.e., "But the lady for love allowed him not to sleep." Moorman's rendition would allow this line to reflect the traditions of normal romance literature, in which it is the man who pines and stays awake for love. One must consider, however, the poet's frequent reversal of convention and his use of the lady in ways reflecting the epic maiden; in epic tradition, the woman pines. Here, in keeping with her character, the lady pretends to pine. As Dean concludes, the lady maintains command of herself at all times, and thus "luf" must mean "pretended love," which she has "simulated from the beginning and which her role as temptress requires that she sustain." I agree with the views of Gollancz, Burrow, and Dean; the lady lies awake planning her next move in her pretended love ploy. She is currently committed to the "purpose" that is "fixed in her heart" (1734). The lady is determined to succeed, not for personal gain, but to contribute to Gawain's moral development.

Before the lady goes to Gawain's quarters, the poet, for the first time since the chapel scene, emphasizes her provocative dress. She wears a full-length robe trimmed in fur, an elegant "tressour," with "hir þrote þroven al naked, / Hir brest bare biore, and bihind eke" (1740-41). The lady's dress provides a parallel between the fox hunt and this third temptation scene. Gallant comments on the lady's provocative attire and suggests that "the lady is dressed like a fox, both sexually and figuratively, to catch a fox." The poet's attention to detail in describing the lady's sleeplessness and her appearance foreshadows the importance of the third day's visit.

As she enters Gawain's room, the lady is again careful to shut the door, but instead of creeping in, peeping through the curtains, and sitting softly on the bed, as has been her custom, the lady alters her entrance on this third day, making it much more dramatic and impressive. She sails in and briskly "Wayuez vp a wyndow, and on þe wyge callez" (1743). Although Gawain misses her grand entrance due to his "drege dreupynge" (1750), it is lucky for the lady that he is having a bad dream about his "destiné . . . / At þe grene chapel" (1752-53) because he displays relief and happiness in seeing her, which has not previously been the case. While the lady started the first day's scene at a slight disadvantage because Gawain was already awake, this time she profits by his sudden awakening to see her "so glorious and gayly atyre" (1760). Because Gawain reacts to her presence with such genuine warmth, the lady once again tries her tactics of seductiveness; on this occasion she "Nurned hym so neze þe pred" (1771) that Gawain must make a definite decision about whether to accept her advances. It does not take him long to conclude that he must remain true to his host, while maintaining as much of his courtesy as possible (1771-76).

Gawain makes a conscious decision to reject her "love," but the lady knows that she still has a chance to corrupt him. Therefore, she switches tactics, adopts her argumentative method, and demands to know "if ge haf a lemmen, a leuer, þat yow lykez better" (1782). Ga-

---

2Gallant, 47.
3Elizabeth M. Wright notes that "wyndow" (1743) "is an early example—not recorded in the V. E. D. —of the use of this word to signify an aperture other than that commonly so termed. In this case the 'window' is an opening made by flinging aside curtains drawn round a bed" (Elizabeth M. Wright, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP, 34, (1935), 308.
wain's reply, "I welde ryt non" (1790), causes the lady again to modify her approach. She pretends, as she did on the first day, sadly to give up on Gawain, playing the role of the maiden with a broken heart. Sighing and pretending to be a "may pat much louyes" (1795), the lady prepares to leave and then casually, seemingly harmlessly, tells Gawain (she does not ask him) to "Gif me sumquat of jy gifte" (1799). Gawain explains why he cannot comply with her request:

"It would be worth little to give you a love-token:
It is not worthy of you to have at this time
A glove for a keepsake of Gawain's gifts,
And I am here on a mission in countries strange,
And have no servants with bags with things of worth"

(1805-9, trans. mine)

The lady, who expects his refusal anyway, does not even repeat her request, but begins her carefully rehearsed scene: "Pod I hade noqte of yourez, / set schulde ge hau of myne" (1815-16).

The lady's meticulous planning is illustrated by her offer of, first, "a riche rynk of red golde werkez" (1817) and then a simple "girdel" (1829). Knowing the mannerly knight as she does, and realizing that he is on a dangerous journey, the lady knows that he will not accept the huge "starrande ston" (1818). She intentionally chooses a relatively plain belt to offer next—a belt which purposely lacks the magnificence of the ring—so that the modest knight will be convinced to accept such a thing "vomorfi" (1835).

After three days of working up to her climaxtic scene, the lady finally plays her trump card—if Gawain wears the green belt, then "Per is no habel vnder heuen tohewe hym pat myzt" (1853). With this offer, the lady demonstrates her tendency to plan every move in advance; she has perceived what Gawain must be feeling as he faces death, and she chooses her offer of a gift accordingly. Because he wishes both to maintain his courtesy and to save his life, Gawain accepts the girdle.

Although it seems the lady has "won" in getting Gawain to take the gift, she still has an essential detail to take care of before her victory is complete; she must impose "the condition of secrecy" immediately after Gawain accepts the belt. The lady knows that once the belt is in Gawain's hands, he cannot graciously or easily give it back, and she judges correctly; he agrees to keep it from her husband: "...he leude hym acordez / Pat neuer wyge schulde hit wyt, iwyisse, bot he twayne / for nogte" (1863-65). The lady depends on Gawain's attention to courtesy to carry out the final step of her intricate plan to entrap him. She pretends courtesie and entreats him to withhold information from her husband about her gift. As a courteous knight should, Gawain agrees to her terms. The lady, therefore, uses one of Gawain's renowned virtues to cause his downfall. He is not true to his agreement with his husband; thus the lady's goal is achieved, and her acting debut is a success.

Gawain finds himself in a complex situation indeed due to the lady's influence. He is torn by his pact made with the host (1110-12) and his pledge made to the two ladies of the castle (975-76). He will offend either his host or hostess no matter what decision he makes about accepting the lady's gift. Although the lady is not in a self-contradictory situation as Gawain is, she does have her share of problems. She, like Gawain, is bound to an agreement; she agrees to use all her perseverance and skill in influencing Gawain to put his self-preservation above all other commitments. She is faced by new challenges during each temptation scene and must make quick decisions about how to solve them, avoid them, or de-emphasize them.

Because Gawain does sin and then becomes better for it, the lady is successful overall, but she does not enjoy consistent victories. The lady shows an ability to match Gawain's understanding of social convention and the Green Knight's craftiness; her wit, talent, and her prominence in the poem make her equally important and just as fascinating as the characters of Gawain and the Green Knight. In her display of intelligence and persistence, the lady is an atypical romance heroine—and an assured delight for modern readers.

Tolkien and Cordon, p. 122
The Green Knight as Thor
by Cora Zaletel

In the never-ending battle of the critics, few conflicts have been so lengthy as the contest among literary critics to determine the origins and purpose of the Green Knight in the medieval romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Why does this Green Knight continue to be such an intriguing character? Perhaps it is because we do not find any explicit indicators of his values as we do, for example, with Gawain through his association with the pentangle. For this reason, critics have chosen to look beyond the story itself for the Green Knight’s identity. According to Larry Benson, “The Green Knight is especially difficult for critics, and the many attempts to explain features such as his ‘rede eyen’ have made him more of a shape shifter in criticism than he is in the poem.” Many critics have attempted to use myth to determine who or what the Green Knight represents. Nitze saw him as a vegetation myth. Speirs thought of him as a descendent of the vegetation god or nature god and also claimed he represented life. On the other hand, Zimmer saw the Green Knight as death, while Levy and Hans Snyder claimed he symbolized the devil and Christ, respectively. The many attempts to link the Green Knight to fourteenth-century noblemen by biographical association further reveal the disparities among investigations and the failure of critics to agree on the origin or specific purpose of the Green Knight in the poem.

I propose to draw upon Nordic mythology and show that the Gawain-poet based the Green Knight character on the mythological god, Thor, and did so for a very specific reason. Because of the many similarities between the two in dress and accoutrements, physical characteristics, geographic surroundings, behavior, and possibly even values, the comparison of the Green Knight and Thor seems very plausible. I expect to suggest no startling redirection of critical interpretation. Instead, the purpose of this research is to present a new way of accounting for the distinct characteristics of the Green Knight.

Before beginning to discuss the many parallels between Thor and the Green Knight, it may be useful briefly to recap Thor’s life and his cult. In Norse mythology, Thor, also known as Thunor, is the Champion of the Aesir and the defender of Asgard. He appears as a massive, red-bearded figure armed with his hammer, his iron gloves, and his girdle of strength. The cult of Thor had a long life in Western Europe. His widespread cult is attested by the equally widespread name of the fifth day of the week over the Teutonic area—Swedish, Thursd; Danish, Torstyd; Old English, Thunor or Trumond. In the eleventh century, he was still worshipped with enthusiasm by the Vikings of Dublin, and at the close of the heathen period in Western Europe it was he who was thought of as the principal adversary of Christ. Among the Anglo-Saxons, the name Thunor does not occur, but its frequent appearance in English place names points to the presence of his cult in England.

Of all the gods, Thor seems to be the characteristic hero of the stormy world of the Vikings. He put reliance on his strong right arm and simple weapons. The figure of a god with a hammer is said to have stood in many temples at the close of the heathen period. It is with Thor and his hammer that we will begin to examine the many parallels between Thor and the Green Knight.

The first category concerns the objects which are most often associated with each of them—the hammer or ax and the belt or girdle. Mjollnir, as Thor’s weapon was called, was used as a throwing weapon, never failed to hit its mark, and automatically returned to the owner’s hand. The description of Thor’s hammer as short-handled is borne out by the shape of Danish amulets made to imitate or honor Thor’s weapon. These amulets all have a metal ring or piece of leather fitted through the handle, much like the weapon described at the beheading ceremony in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

A denes ax wone dygg, þe dynt with to golde,
With a borelych byte hende þe halme,
Fyled in a fylor, fowre fote large—
Hit watz no lasse þe þat lace þat lemed ful byrht.4

---


The note on the Danish ax in the Tolkien and Gordon edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight explains that it was the ordinary long-bladed battle ax and was so called because it was the favorite weapon of the Vikings who raided England and France. It may be a coincidence that the ax is described specifically as Danish, but I am convinced that it is, in fact, another of many details that help to tie the character of the Green Knight to the Norse god, Thor.

From the ax, we turn to another item associated with the two—the belt or girdle. Gawain’s decision to keep the belt is a crucial event in the poem and is directly related to the testing of his Christian and knightly behavior. At the end of the poem, we find that the belt is actually the Green Knight’s and serves as a part of the attempt to show Gawain his faults. Gawain fails to turn over to the Green Knight the belt which, along with three kisses, was his gain on the third day. One of Thor’s unique features was a belt that gave him ever renewed power and that doubled the strength of his limbs as soon as he fastened it around his waist. So, too, the green belt Gawain kept was known to contain “hidden powers,” as we are told by the host’s wife:

Bot who-so knew þe costes þat knit ar þerinne,
He wolde hit prayse at more prys, parauenture;
For quat gone so is garde with þis grene lase,
While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,
Per is no hapel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat mygl,
For he mygl not be slayn for slayght vpon erbe.

(1849-54)

Relying on the magic belt for strength and security, these two characters were unlike most men of their day, who chose to use armor during their battles. Strangely, the absence of armor marks both Thor and the Green Knight. In no illustration or description of Thor is he wearing armor, unlike other gods, such as Odin, who frequently appeared with shield and helmet. Thor was also a colleague of the berserk warriors of Odin who “went without mailcoats and were frantic as dogs or wolves; they bit their shields and were as strong as bears or boars; they slew men, but neither fire nor iron could hurt them. This is known as ‘running berserk.’” Even though it put one in danger in a time when armor was the norm, appearing without armor might be seen as intimidating. Arthur’s company is rather curious about the Green Knight’s appearance in bright civilian clothes rather than armor: “Wheþer hade he no halme ne hawbergh naþer, / Ne no pysan ne no plate þat pented to armes, / Ne no schaeþe ne no schede to schwue ne to smyte” (203-5). Thor, who would enter fights unarmed with frost giants, and the Green Knight, who entered a potentially dangerous situation with Arthur’s worthy knights, must have had so much confidence in their strength and fighting ability that they felt they did not need to bear the extra weight of armor. Seeing their opponents without armor, challengers must have been further humiliated realizing they had had an open shot at the foe’s vulnerable body, yet still were defeated.

Besides dress and accoutrements, the physical characteristics of the Green Knight and Thor are also similar, including their eyes, voice, and beard. With all the other magnificent qualities of these men, observers still are drawn to comment on the fierceness and burning of the eyes of both. According to the medieval science of physiognomy, the Green Knight’s “rede eyen” that “he reled aboute” indicate strength, courage, and manliness, as we are told by Robert White in “A Note on the Green Knight’s Eyes.” Although Thor’s eyes are never described as red, they are frequently noted as burning, a description which brings to mind the color of fire—red. Medieval authors often equated fire and the color red in their texts, including Chaucer in his Canterbury Tales. In the Knight’s Tale, a short cloak is described as “bret-ful of rubyes as fyr sparklynge” (2164), and the Prologue includes a Summoner “that hadde a fyr-reed cherubynnynes face” (624). If their hammer or ax were not enough to intimidate, having to look into those eyes could have been sufficient to render any challenger, including Gawain, hesitant about going head to head in battle.

In addition to having intimidating eyes, both men are big, tall, and strong, which further enhances the connection between them. Gawain describes the Green Knight as, “half etayn in erde I hope þat he were” (140), and later when he sees him before the beheading ceremony speaks of him as a “hoge hapel for þe nonez, and of hyghe eldee” (844). Thor’s progress through the realms of gods and giants was marked by the continual overthrowing of adversaries and overcoming of obstacles. His usual method of killing his enemies was simple and direct; he simply struck at them with his hammer, slew them with boulders, or broke their backs by forcing weight down

---

upon them. Thor's power extended far, and he was the supreme god not only over the sky, but also over the life of the community whose safety relied on his broad shoulders.

As further evidence of his large stature, great vitality, and strength, Thor was famous for his tremendous appetite for food and drink. At one sitting he ate an entire ox, eight large salmon, and numerous side dishes, in addition to drinking three barrels of mead. Perhaps Thor's delight in eating and drinking is reflected in the frequency of descriptions of feasting in Sir Gawain. When not describing Arthur's knights involved in battles, the Gawain-poet provides explicit details of these knights indulging in numerous feasts centering on some holiday or festival. The Christmas or Yuletide feast is of primary focus in Sir Gawain and we learn from Funk and Wagnall's Dictionary of Mythology and Legend that this, too, is linked to Thor: "The Yuletide period of feasting which began with the winter solstice and varied in length from one day to a month was dedicated to Thor." If the Green Knight is modeled after the figure of Thor, not only would the poem be set during Christmastime because of its Christian significance, but also, perhaps, as a reminder of Thor's own importance at that time of the year.

To catch the attention of feasting or warring knights, an authoritative voice was essential. Thor was a loud-voiced fellow, and this powerful voice rose above the tumult of battle and filled his enemies with terror. Gawain and his fellow knights were stunned when the Green Knight first spoke: "and al stouned at his steuen and stonstil seten" (242). The Green Knight's voice is also noteworthy when Gawain first meets his beheader at the Green Chapel as well as after the beheading game when the Green Knight begins to reproach Gawain for his faulty behavior. The Green Knight's words had quite an effect on Gawain: "pat oever stif mon in study stod a grete whyle, / So agreede for greme he gryde withinne; / Alle pe blode of his brest blende in his face" (2369-2371). Had not the Green Knight spoken to Gawain, perhaps Gawain might not have been so hard on himself. But because of the authority in the Green Knight's voice, Gawain is even more critical of himself than the Green Knight is. Granted, there is a difference between a loud, boisterous voice and one that commands respect, but that each character possesses a distinct, authoritative voice furthers the possibility that the figure of Thor was a major influence to the Gawain poet in formulating the Green Knight's character.

The presence of facial hair is yet another physical similarity between Thor and the Green Knight. Beards were hardly uncommon in the Middle Ages, but because the beards are so emphasized in prose and poetry we realize these beards must have been extraordinary, or in some way special. Both characters possess a stunning, full-length beard. The Green Knight's "berd as a busk over his brest henges" (182). It is "brode, byrtyg . . . and al bever hweed" (845). Thor's face was adorned with a long red beard which he shook when roused, and he is frequently described as a huge, red-bearded, irascible fellow. The color of the beard may have been based on the red sky which foretells a storm. The fact that one of the most famous worshippers of the god, Thorolf of Most, was known as the "bearded man of Most" suggests his beard was something worthy of notice, even among bearded Vikings. Although there is a discrepancy in the color of the beards, the fact that the beard is played up as such a distinct characteristic in each man furthers the possibility that the Green Knight was meant to be Thor-like.

One other item associated with Thor seems to surface in the detail of the whetstone, found in only two of the medieval romances that contain beheadings. In Thor's fight with the giant, Hrungrir, the giant had a huge whetstone and shield. Thor hurled his hammer, and the giant replied by throwing the whetstone. The stone shattered, but one lump of it buried itself in Thor's skull and was never removed. As Gawain waits for his encounter with the Green Knight at the chapel, he hears a noise which "wharred and whette, as water at a mule;/ What! hit rusched and ronge rawye to here" (2203-4). He looks up to see the Green Knight sharpening his Danish ax in preparation for the beheading ceremony. Later Gawain describes the beheading weapons as having "a boremyle bytte bende by pe halme, / fyled in a fylor" (2224-5). Of the six medieval tales that include beheading games, only in Sir Gawain and Percevalus does this detail appear.

The Gawain-poet's proximity to lands which earlier contained people who firmly believed in and worshipped Thor, and his use of
descriptions which mirror the Northland raise many questions which might be easily answered if, indeed, the Green Knight was created to resemble Thor. Most critics agree about the poet’s geographic references. As Charles Moorman notes, “Internal evidence also demonstrates that the poet was familiar with the geography and countryside of Northern Wales, and with the Wirral, a forest in northwestern Cheshire...”8 Germans, Slavs, and Celts all had holy groves in their forests dedicated to the worship of Thor. In fact, the forest of Thor on the bank of the Liffey outside Dublin existed as late as 1000 A.D. In that year King Brian Boru spent a month destroying it, until, we are told in an Irish poem, “the great trees and the lordly oaks alone stood upright.”11 If Moorman and other historians are correct in their assessment of where the Gawain-poet resided—in or around the Northwest Midlands—that puts the poet approximately one hundred miles from people and cultures who at one time in their histories worshipped Thor. Coinciding with the poet’s proximity to prior Thor-worshipping lands is the extend to which the setting or scenery in Sir Gawain reflects the surroundings Thor would have been accustom to in the Northlands. Thor was associated with the great oaks of the forest. Frazer’s Golden Bough explains, “The veneration for sacred groves of trees seems to have held the foremost place [and] the chief of their holy trees was the oak, dedicated to the god of Thunder, Thor.”12 As Gawain rides in search of the Green Chapel, he describes the forest scenery “Of hore okez ful hoge a hundreth togeder” (743). His first sight of the host’s castle was “as it schemered and schon þer þe schyre okez” (772). Wilmot-Buxton, in her foreword to Stories of Norse Heroes, reinforces the similarity between the wild scenery of the Northmen and that scenery described in Sir Gawain: “Northmen were fine storytellers and their imagination was forever being fed by the wild scenery of their rock bound coasts, snowy mountain tops, craggy hills, and dark, mysterious forests.”13 More than once in Sir Gawain do we read descriptions which sound very much like the Northland:

Mony klufe he ouercrambe in contrayes straunge. . . . (713)

Much of the scenery described in Sir Gawain is outdoors and includes intricate explanations of hunting techniques and beautiful descriptions of snow, which would be easily narrated by a Viking or anyone familiar with survival in the Northlands.

Though not as easily distinguishable as the obvious physical similarities, the intriguing behavior of these two men has much in common. Thor’s battles are mostly with frost-giants and giantesses, such as Hrungir, Thrym, Hymir, and Geirrod. Sometimes they try to lure him into their realms unarmed, but for the most part he goes deliberately to seek them and kills them without much difficulty once it comes to a direct trial of strength.22 The Green Knight appears to behave in much the same way in arriving suddenly at Arthur’s hall looking for an opponent. He intentionally goes to Arthur’s castle because he has heard of the court’s reputation in doing battle and so believes the knights will give him a good challenge:

To wone any quyle in þis won, hit wate nothyn erde,  
Bot for þe los of þe, lede, is lyft up to byge,  
And þy borg and þy bernes best ar holden, 
Stiffest unde stil-gere on stodes to ryde,  
Pe wyget and þe worpyste of þe worides kynde,  
Preue for to play wyth in ðepere layke,  
And here is kyddé cortaysye, as I haf herd carp,  
And þat hatz wayned me hider, iwyis, at þis tyme. (257-264)

Besides deliberately seeking opponents, both men appear as figures of comedy and bluff. Many of Thor’s adventures are tinged with humor, especially in his cunningly outwitting the huge giants and playing tricks and practical jokes on the other gods.23 In the
beheading scene, the Green Knight seems to delight in teasing Sir Gawain with feints of his huge ax. The annoyed Gawain, not amused, wishes instead the Green Knight would kill him quickly and cleanly: "Wyl þres on, þou þro mon, þou þreto to longe; / I hope þat þi hert arge wyth þyn æwen seluen" (2300-1). The Green Knight agrees that the teasing has gone on too long and says, "For sope . . . so fellly þou spekez, / I wyl no lenger on lyte lette þim ernde / riȝt nowe" (2302-4). Similarly, the frost giants did not appreciate Thor's comedy and jokes. Had they known their dislike for his humor would end in their deaths, they might have been more appreciative of his many escapades. In Arthur's hall, too, there is a grim touch of jokery; the Green Knight enjoys himself by holding his detached head in his hand, displaying it for all to see and frightening Guenever and the rest of the court.

Both men also appear as figures of disguise. Thor dresses as the goddess, Freya, acting as Thrym's wife-to-be so he can recover his hammer buried eight fathoms below under the rocks of Jotunheim.52 The poet describes the Green Knight in so many guises—host, horrible giant, hunter, and beheader—that the Green Knight in consequence becomes a very problematic figure for critics. Larry Benson is neither the first nor last critic to struggle with deciding whether the Green Knight is a malevolent or benevolent monster, the merriest of men, or a handsome knight.53

Although the values of a person are difficult both to measure and to define, in this instance we must make an attempt to determine the ends toward which Thor and the Green Knight strive. Thor's behavior caused many people to believe that his call in life was to keep law and order in the free community as well as to enforce the keeping of faith between men.54 A.C. Spearing in The Gawain Poet claims:

> The consequence of the failure of the poet to clarify the inner life or the ethical goals of the Green Knight in the way he does with Gawain and Arthur is that modern scholars and critics have felt the need to interpret the Green Knight from the outside.55

From the previous discussion, one might see the Green Knight's purpose and intentions in the poem to be much the same as Thor's. The testing of Gawain included a compact or contract in two parts. First, Gawain was supposed to find the Green Knight a year from the date of their first meeting. He kept that part of the bargain, and the Green Knight congratulates him: "For þe forwarte þat we fest / i þe fyrist nyȝt, / And pou trystly þe trawpe and trwyly me haldeþ" (2347-48). The second part of the compact was the three-day exchange of winnings. Gawain kept his oath until the third day, when he deliberately held back the girdle he had received from the host's wife. He broke the faith with the Green Knight and the Green Knight makes sure Gawain sees his error: "Bot here you lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wondte" (2366). Gawain responds in shame to the accusation: "Lo! þe falsysg, foule mot hit falle!" (2378). In the testing of Gawain, the Green Knight shows that he is concerned with honesty and the keeping of faith between men. The Green Knight does not appear as an outlaw. Although he disrupts the feasting and merriment of Arthur's court, he does no damage and politely asks for a challenge from one of Arthur's knights. He is, in a sense, respecting law and order in this free community. He does no real evil here, but merely addresses the company in a straightforward manner, seeking a competitor. The Green Knight does fail to mention his scheme with Morgan Le Faye to taint Gawain's character, but in the conclusion the Green Knight emerges as a character who teaches Gawain a lesson about himself, rather than as an opponent solely intent to kill him and ruin the court's reputation. The Green Knight finally improves Arthur's court. Gawain is determined to wear the green belt as a sign of his mistakes so that all the court will be reminded of his period of testing and of their own vulnerability.

Supplementing the lengthy list of connections between the Green Knight and Thor are such facts as Thor's mother's identity as Jord, or "earth," reminiscent of once-popular interpretations of the Green Knight as a vegetation or nature god. Also, the place near Staffordshire which even today still looks much like the Green Chapel — and may have influenced the poet — is called Thorsdale. Is it just coincidence, then, that the ax is specifically described as Danish, or that the physiques and physical characteristics of these figures are also similar? If it is more than coincidence, then how does recognition of a Thor-like Green Knight increase our understanding of the poem? What would have been the Gawain-poet's intention in involving a pagan character in a predominantly

---

53Benson, pp. 60-61.
54Davidson, p. 91.
55Spearing, p. 179.
Christian narrative? Questions such as these indicate the need for further investigation of the subject. Although the dissonance among the critics as to the origin of the Green Knight has not been fully resolved, the present study may serve to provide initial resource material for further work in this ongoing critical controversy.