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Deforming the Knight: Gawain's Descent into Monstrosity in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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DEFORMING THE KNIGHT: GAWAIN'S DESCENT INTO MONSTROSITY IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

BY

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This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the master's degree and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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This thesis is dedicated to my husband. Thank you, Logan, for helping me put my thoughts together when I was at my wits end. I could not have done it without your support.

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ABSTRACT

DEFORMING THE KNIGHT: GAWAIN'S DESCENT INTO MONSTROSITY IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

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Sir Gawain has always been marked as a victim in the well-known poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but he is much more than that. Standing with the knights of the Round Table, he seems to be the perfect example of what chivalry should look like, especially with an adherence to the common religious beliefs. However, when put into the context of the manuscript in which it was found, Gawain seems to stand as an allegorical figure of the do-not's of feudal and religious chivalry.

Using the lens of Monster Theory via Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and David Williams, I will prove that Gawain is, in fact, the main monster of the poem as he journeys on his quest. Gawain has never been considered in this way, and his choices lead him further and further into monstrosity.

Introduction:

In the Middle Ages, chivalry reigns supreme as a code that tells knights how to present themselves in society. Found within Arthurian literature are prime examples of chivalry and the habits that pertain to each knight, specifically in the trials that come with adhering to the code of chivalry. Throughout this genre, multiple authors follow the formation of the high reputation of King Arthur and his knights to the fall of this fictional kingdom. Knights tend to lean into the traits of monstrosity as chivalry falls from their top priority. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain struggles to adhere to his chivalric code as he traverses the wilderness to try to keep his promises to the Green Knight. Throughout the journey, Gawain tests his chivalry through encounters with lust, pagan magic, rash boons, and cultural abnormalities which slowly deform him into a monster, figuratively and literally. Though not all his flaws are physical, he is still one of the major monsters of the poem, if not the most important monster within its alliterative long lines.

Written in the late 14th century, a collection of religious poetry containing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reveals to readers the confines of religious devotion. Found in a manuscript referred to as Cotton Nero A.x., *Sir Gawain* follows three poems titled *Pearl, Cleanness,* and *Patience.* These three poems all warn their readers of the trials and tribulations of sinners, and they contain directions as to how to adhere to the rules of Christianity. Looking at *Sir Gawain* through this lens, one can see that it is simply a parable containing a warning against wayward men. The poem emphasizes personal choice over the choices that are expected from a religious and chivalrous man and how those choices lead to the man's downfall.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight follows Gawain as he keeps his promise to the Green Knight to visit him one year after the Beheading Game[1] challenge in Arthur's court. Scholars examine this poem for a multitude of reasons, some of which include the religious undertones, the faint feminism, the narrative structure, and the allusions to historical events. Some even focus their studies on the unheard voices within the poem, especially that of Morgan, and others have incorporated a minimal usage of Monster Theory, mostly focusing on the obvious and physical monsters of the poem. Overall, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* creates confusion for many scholars. The poem seems out of place, out of character, and other-worldly, even though it exists in a made-up universe. Gawain is not the same Gawain that Chretien de Troyes had already written about, and he surely is not the knight recreated later by Sir Thomas Malory. Critics have long been trying to understand the obscure identity of Gawain, the inclusion of Morgan Le Fay, and the Green Knight's meaning, and this is difficult to accomplish because many believe the poem to be completely out of place within the Arthurian canon. Others have deeply studied the flippant treatment of Gawain's confessions, and the court's inability to grasp the traumatic experience that Gawain has gone through by the end of the poem. A final group has focused purely on monstrosity in the poem, but they rarely focus on the transformation of Gawain, and instead focus on the Green Knight's obviously monstrous qualities. Benjamin D. Utter argues Gawain is like a heroic Biblical figure, comparing him to David and the Green Knight to the giant. Utter believes that Gawain suffers the same fate as many biblical figures, claiming that the overarching theme is, "how a knight

[1] Also found in *Fled Bricrinn*, or *Bricriu's Feast*, an 8th century Irish myth in which three knights must cut off a giant's head, and in return they must get the same punishment.
Jacobs, Nicolas. "The Green Knight: An Unexplored Irish Parallel." *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, vol. 4, 1982, pp. 1–4.

may successfully triumph over the temptations of the world and remain unstained by 'cowarddyse and covetyse' as well as the impurity of sin" (Utter 132). Similarly, Catherine Cox relates Gawain to a newly baptized Christian, assuring the reader that the Green Knight has "discursively created for [Gawain] a new identity. . . Gawain is proclaimed not as sinless per se, but rather as sinless as a newborn" (162). Ultimately, Lawrence Warner will not accept that Gawain even thinks about being unfaithful with Lady Bertilak, arguing, "No one really believes that Gawain seriously considers accepting the lady's love" (Warner 264). Olga Burakov-Morgan is also pro-Gawain. She explains that his need for prayer, Mass, and professing the faith makes Gawain a worthy and blameless Christian knight. Gerald Morgan claims that the girdle is not a major sin, so Gawain did not do anything worthy of shame. While these scholars all focus on Gawain's bad choices, they put no blame on Gawain himself. These scholars place blame on the outside factors within Gawain's journey. What they do not take into consideration is Gawain's choices throughout the quest and beyond and how personal choices, if made in bad faith, create controversy and crisis for humans within. They do not consider Gawain as a product of his own actions but as a product of impending doom over which he had no control. On the other hand, Joseph Turner argues that Gawain falls into the trap of Lady Bertilak's advances claiming, "Lady Bertilak persuades Gawain through her words and her physical body. . . ultimately enabl[ing] Morgan Le Fay to shame Arthur's court" (Turner 58). Building upon that, Alice Blackwell proves that Gawain "exhibits confusion as to what chivalry requires. He embodies all three elements of the perfect knight, yet he misconstrues individual components and the relationships between them" (Blackwell 95). She further states that he relies on his mishaps of action and

representation throughout the second and third Fitts of the poem. Furthermore, Patrick Outhwaite comes close to my argument in "Sir Gawain's Penitential Development from Attrition to Contrition" (2021). He argues that the mixture of religion and his courtly reputation tricks Gawain which leads to his mistakes in the latter points of the poem. While these scholars are on the right track in my argument, considering the blaming of religious restrictions on the issues within the poem, they do not consider the final product of Gawain's choices. They simply conclude that Gawain is not up to the task, and he returns as an imperfect knight to Arthur's court. They treat Gawain flippantly, not considering the lasting consequences that arise in the end of the poem, which ultimately deform him into a culturally and religiously monstrous creature.

These scholars have concluded, unapologetically, that the Green Knight is the only monster within the lines of the poem. While that is an obvious observation, none have ever considered Gawain anything other than the helpless victim of the poem. Instead, I will prove that Gawain is, in fact, yet another monster, and most of his monstrosity lurks within himself instead of on the outside as it builds throughout the narrative; this is important because Monster Theory has only been used to prove the Green Knight to be the monster within this work. However, seeing Gawain as a monster in this poem changes the meaning entirely and helps to incorporate it into the Arthurian canon more coherently. Perhaps the most comprehensive delineation of Monster Theory resides in David Williams's book, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (1999). Williams's study is one of the original pieces of scholarship delving into the sorting, categorizing, and labeling of monstrosity within creatures who are cast out from Medieval society. Williams describes a Medieval

monster as a creature that "functioned more often as a complimentary, sometimes alternative, vehicle for philosophy" and "probed the secrets of substance, existence, and form incompletely revealed by more orthodox dialectics" (Williams 3). Drawing upon sources from the 6th through the 14th centuries, he begins his study of monstrosity focusing on the religious turmoil of the time, expanding on how the contrasting religions of the period created major discrepancies between right and wrong. Dionysian Neoplatonism and Thomistic Scholasticism were at odds with one another. Neoplatonism is knowing God for what he is, focusing on his positive descriptors. Scholasticism is knowing God for what he is not, knowing the Almighty through the negation of other ideologies. Between Dionysian Neoplatonism and Thomistic Scholasticism, knowing God became something one must work for and find through being perfect or relying on the goodness within people. Williams formulates the argument that monsters represent evil, which ballooned into signs and signifiers of monsters throughout Medieval literature. These signs include physical, cultural, or religious deformity or defiance, and they all lead to monstrosity. Understanding the signs that belong to the signifiers helps readers to understand that monsters exist everywhere, and they are usually made out to be evil. Many scholars build off this foundational work within the study of monstrosity, which is how Gawain classifies as a monstrous creature, as well.

Williams's claim on disorder, formlessness, and deformation of society fits the actions and thoughts of Gawain throughout the poem. He states, "Disorder and formlessness deprive the mind of a habitual structure necessary for understanding and acting and, ultimately, for being" (Williams 77). In the poem, Gawain must exist in a structured environment but ultimately fails to hold up the ideals within those structures.

Removed from the structure in which he once existed, Gawain chooses to deprive himself. When Gawain returns from his journey, he states: For one may keep a deed dark, but undo it no whit" (2512). Gawain not only chooses to dissociate from the table, but he also chooses to dissociate himself from the religion he once ascribed to. Both structures are gone, and he must fend for himself in the chaos that is sure to ensue, as the Round Table is beginning its descent from high fortune. Williams also argues that disorder and formlessness "free the mind in certain circumstances from the restrictions of order and reason" (77). Instead of coming from nothing, monsters often arise from areas where they were once restricted or held to higher standards than they were capable of upholding. They thrive in areas where there is constant order because they can break those restrictive holds. Though they are outside of the cultural and social circles, they would not be set apart without those structures existing in the first place. Another area that Williams comments upon is the idea of language within a monster or monstrous creature. He argues about Gawain himself, "[His] confrontation with the deformed and deforming, specifically engages the failure of language to manifest the real" (Williams 267). Within this thesis, I plan to expand on Gawain's failure of language throughout the poem. It examines speech as the "surest sign of humanity" (127). Williams argues that the failure of speech leads to the beginning or deepening of deformation, thereby creating a monster.

Another section of Williams's work focuses on the descent from cataphatic descriptions (positive descriptions focused on affirmations) into apophatic monstrosity. Apophatic monstrosity is the focus on negative descriptors of a person, object, or creature. Williams describes this as, "denying the lowest and most specific descriptions and proceeds up to the most comprehensive, negating every possible affirmation" (33).

By pointing out what Gawain is not, one can determine that he a is a monstrous creature by negation of religious and cultural expectations. By negating his former reputation and the positive affirmations he once received, he is unable to re-obtain perfection, and he begins to deform as a human into a monster. This loss of identity is central to monstrosity, because it creates disorder within the mind and the space around the creature. By the end of the poem, Gawain has indeed lost his identity within the court and taken on paganistic regalia to fill the void in his belief system. Apophatically, Gawain is not what he once was, resulting in his monstrous transformation.

In his essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" (1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen categorizes monstrosity into a few different areas: body composition, societal interferences and ostracization, and sexual desire. Cohen explains that social boundaries most often make up the monstrous creatures. He expands upon the idea that monsters are something humans create within our idea of the normal psyche. Monsters are where people place their immoral sexual desires, beliefs, and values that are outside the ideals of society. The situations within the poem that include these social barriers are in the categories of gender, speech acts, religious promises, and social constructs, and Gawain struggles to stay within the bounds of each within his actions. Cohen argues that monsters must come from somewhere; they cannot be created out of nothing. He states, "Monsters are never created ex nihilo, but through a process of fragmentation and recombination" (Cohen 11). These processes recreate the creature into something monstrous, breaking down what was once there and replacing it with something less holy or God-like than before. Monsters must come from a person or creature once held together by rules and regulation. He also argues that monsters, "resist any classification built on hierarchy or

merely binary opposition" (Cohen 7). Monstrous creatures, he argues, cannot handle rules and hierarchies because they cannot exist in a system. They are disordered and fragmented, so they do not fit in a regular power structure. Kings, especially King Arthur, cannot control the monstrous creatures of their kingdoms, and Gawain becomes fragmented at the times when his reputed good intentions need to save him. Gawain has the opportunity to recreate his identity for the better, but he cannot get back to his perfect reputation. Cohen states, "Every monster in this way is a double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves" (Cohen 13). Gawain lives as a knight who is deforming into a monster, simultaneously living two different lives. The poem states, "That good Gawain was come" (2491), as in the knight that the Round Table once knew. Then it states, "The blood burns in his cheeks,/ For shame at what must be shown" (2503-2504). Gawain's reputation may have been the 'good Gawain,' but now he is shameful and broken. The court thinks he is the same person, while Gawain knows he has failed, thus he must suffer his double identity.

Also agreeing with Cohen in most aspects about cultural boundaries of monsters is K.E. Olsen in his book, *Monsters, and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe* (2002). Olsen states a monster represents "the fallen state of human existence" (9). He also argues that monsters are "defective creatures, whose parts are without a familiar (physical, ethical, cultural) congruence, or distort both the harmony of the natural and cultural forms with which they are associated" (Olsen 9). According to Olsen, monsters are not those that function in society but those that represent a lack of morality. Because of this lack of morality, they cannot exist within a structure created by moral, or

Christian, humans. Those considered monstrous may have lessons for those around them, but they also have laws and morality clauses that still apply to them. They often deviate from these rules and regulations, but they are still within the range of application. The fact that they deviate from them is what makes them monstrous in the first place (Olsen 21). These creatures represent otherness and the breakage of social norms, cultural bonds, and physical attributes that create bonds within a community. Monsters exist in a place where regulations are broken, and they have no control over themselves, which places them apart from any order of which they were previously a part. They ask us to perceive the world differently, in a new way that concludes humans have misrepresented the "other" for the expanse of time (Cohen 20). Monsters work as a microcosm; inside their bodies there is a host of issues created by the macrocosm in which they live and the time in which they exist. Gawain himself is a microcosm for the issues within the macrocosm of the court.

In direct opposition of monstrosity is the knightly code of chivalry. Chivalry is a code of honor, respect, structure, and religious sanctity. It is an aspirational code of conduct for knights, and by following its strictures precisely, its adherents can approach, though never fully obtain, earthly perfection. Ramon Llull argues the presence of chivalry brings about kindness, loyalty, justice, and truth (40). Monstrosity, on the other hand, is a code of destruction, otherness, oddity, and disorder, one grounded in the defiance of religious practices. It is a state of being for the other and the outcast, and its adherents become separated from society and the possibility of perfection. Monsters were those creatures that did not fit into society due to deformation of language, body, or thought. Applying this definition to a king's court, monstrosity can derive from breaking one's

chivalric code so extensively that there is no hope for return to grace and honor. In the attempt to put the broken pieces back together, the knight is never able to resemble his past self, thus deforming his identity in a way that prevents perfection, which is the ultimate goal of a knight in King Arthur's court.

In Chapter 1: The Cultural Deformity of Gawain, I will examine Gawain's words, thoughts, and actions based on monstrosity. Focusing mostly on the conversations Gawain has with Arthur, Bertilak, Lady Bertilak, and the Green Knight, his deformity becomes evident. Looking through the lens of Monster Theory via Cohen, Williams, Olsen, and Friedman, along with the ideals of chivalry as explained by Llull, I will prove that Gawain blurs the lines between appropriate cultural behavior and monstrous habits that ultimately lead to his downfalls. Gawain struggles to ensure his chivalry is intact when he speaks by the end of the poem, and he fails to maintain the behavior expected of him.

In Chapter 2: The Religious Deformity of Gawain, I will examine Gawain's failed adherence to Christianity through his thoughts, actions, confessions, and taking of the girdle from Lady Bertilak. Focused mostly within the walls of Hautdesert and the return to Camelot, Gawain clearly shows that every belief he had before is gone by the time he returns to Arthur. His confessions tell of the deceit he has participated in, and he chooses shame. All these situations lead to Gawain choosing to rely on anything other than God to save his life and give him courage as he approaches the Green Chapel, which creates a monster within Gawain. Williams emphasizes the intense monstrosity that can come from opposing religious beliefs, and that Gawain shows these as he journeys through his quest.

In Chapter 3: The Physical Deformity of Gawain, I will examine Gawain's

physical traits and how they change throughout the poem. As the poem progresses, Gawain becomes increasingly like the Green Knight in his actions and words, and he begins to show his monstrosity physically. Through these physical traits, he almost becomes contagious for the rest of the court as they adopt his newly regarded symbol of belief throughout the order. Looking through the lens of Monster Theory, I prove that Gawain has leaned further into monstrosity than ever before as he doubles the Green Knight.

Through the study of Gawain through the lens of Monster Theory, the discourse around monsters may change significantly. Instead of focusing purely on the idea of the physical monster, though Gawain fits that category as well, we may focus on internal monstrosity that blooms from inner chaos and identity crises. Monsters are not always creatures who are cast out for their visual abnormalities. Monsters can be created from within, and they may be the worst ones of all, because we cannot see them coming. The study of inner monstrosity may create a whole new space in which monsters are not only figments of our imagination, but they are also within us, creating a mentality that, for Gawain at least, brings down his entire order.

Chapter 1: Culturally Deformed Gawain

As alluded to in the introduction, Gawain struggles immensely in his knightly duties, and he does not adhere to the cultural standards placed upon him. As the poem opens, he is a young knight that is happy to be a part of the Round Table. He has earned the reputation of perfect Christian knight, which means he must adhere to his chivalric code above all. Knights must prove they uphold the Code of Chivalry frequently, publicly and privately. Gawain's chivalry is tested throughout his journey to the Green Chapel as he faces dangerous creatures, women, and fairy-people alike. His conversations, however, are what begins his descent into monstrosity. Examining his speeches with King Arthur, Lady Bertilak, and Lord Bertilak, one can see that his mouth is unbecoming of a knight as he speaks crudely and breaks the oaths he makes.

Gawain has clear issues adhering to the culture that surrounds him. He does not fit into the Round Table in the beginning, as he is perfect in the eyes of the knights around him. He begins the poem by sitting on the dais above the rest of the knights, symbolizing his high reputation before anyone reveals it verbally. The text states, "Talkkande bifore þe hyȝe table of trifles ful hende./ There gode Gawan watz grayþed Gwenore bisyde" (108-109). At this point in the poem, he deserves a seat above the rest, but by the end of the poem, he can barely be seated with the rest of the knights, in his eyes, because he is too flawed. Gawain finds any opportunity to set himself apart from the order in which he exists. He begins by adhering firmly to his chivalric code, again symbolized by his seating at the Christmas feast, which sets him apart from the other knights. Normally, adhering to the chivalric code as closely and perfectly as he does is to be desired. However, this strict adherence sets Gawain up for failure as he attempts to maintain

structure in unstructured settings. He ends by giving up his chivalric code, which further sets him apart from the other knights. Furthermore, Gawain refuses to assimilate back into the Round Table. By doing this, Gawain chooses to deform himself further. Using his misplaced rationality, he chooses monstrosity over knighthood. Gawain deforms culturally by breaking social norms, lying to those around him, breaking promises, and speaking pridefully of himself and his skills as a knight then choosing to be the other in a sea of sameness.

Misuse or deformed speech is an identifier of monstrosity in the Middle Ages. The mouth is located on the head, which is the seat of all reason as described by Williams (142). It must produce reason, especially in the life of a knight, where danger could be around any corner. If reason is misplaced, then speech becomes difficult and unseemly for the creature. Williams states, "Language distinguishes the human from the beast, dividing and contrasting the human and the animal. . . Speech is produced by a rational nature and emerges from the seat of reason" (Williams 142-143). Speech acts are tools that separate between humans and subhuman creatures, between society and the outcast. Williams states that language is a discursive act; something that the subhuman or angelic creatures cannot replicate because of the difference in form between them and humans. Speech is thought out and then expelled through the mouth in a human. This enforces the idea of signs and signifiers creating our language, making language tangible. Without the system of signs and signifiers, Williams argues, those in the human form cannot express their intentions or emotions correctly, which gives the reader the ability to label the monstrous other (142-143).

Williams also describes the mouth of the human as the part of the body that must be controlled. Whether this is in speech or eating, the mouth is a deformation that is not easily hidden from society. Williams writes, "Strict regulation of what is taken through the mouth and what is expelled from the mouth contributes to the construction of the concept of normal, not only in the restricted areas of eating and speaking, but in all forms of behavior" (141). By controlling what goes in and out of the mouth, acting as a filter for our human forms, humans should be able to conform to the normalcy set forth by societal, courtly, or religious expectations. If the mouth deforms, Williams believes, the rest of the human's behavior is more inclined to act outside the parameters set forth by the reigning structure in the human's life. He also says, "The denials contained in the contortions of the mouth address the most fundamental human assumptions and understandings of the nature of reality" (Williams 141). When a knight deforms at the mouth, he loses his sense of reality and reason. Monsters forget to adhere to their oaths, their codes, and their fealty to their lords and their God. Knights begin to lie and resort to defamation and crude comments to keep their egos intact. Gawain speaks "with rage in heart" when he recounts his quest towards the Green Chapel where he filled the airspace with lies, broken promises, and sexual comments, Gawain begins to deform into a monstrous creature through his speech acts in the poem (2501).

Along other lines, Llull discusses speech in the context of the code of chivalry. Knighthood focuses on and examines speech, and it is supposed to be eloquent, kind, and used properly to ensure chivalry is the top priority in any situation. Llull states, "The prideful, ill-mannered [man] who speaks and dresses crudely . . . is not suited to the Order of Chivalry" (61). The quality of one's speech determines whether they were

knighted, and if their habits were to speak coarsely or in a rude manner, they were denied entrance to knighthood altogether. Llull further emphasizes speech and its link to nobility, explaining, “Do not seek nobility of courage in the mouth, for it does not always tell the truth” (57). Llull knows the temptation of falsehood, but it has no place in the chivalric code. So, anyone who wishes to be a knight must reject lying and impure speech to uphold the reputation of a good knight.

Williams and Llull come together with their thoughts on chivalry and speech to create a monstrous category: a knight whose speech figuratively deforms his mouth, creating a questionable display of knightly abilities and a lacking adherence to the chivalric code. In the Middle Ages, speech emphasized courtesy and high mannerisms. The simple switch of pronouns could change a compliment to a threat, resulting in duels, jousts, and wars between people of high honor. Gawain himself in Sir Thomas Malory’s tradition of *La Morte d’Arthur* (1485) jousts against Lancelot, spurring him with insults to harden his physical blows. However, Gawain’s speech leans further into monstrosity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* than in any other representation of Gawain. By deforming the mouth with his lies, broken oaths, and sexual commentary towards a lady, Gawain disregards his chivalric code in terms of speech, thus making his knightlihood less and less cataphatic as the poem progresses. Gawain ends the poem by commenting on his “cowardice” and “covetousness” (2508), as well as focusing on his shame, disgrace, and loss. By the end of the poem, Gawain has deformed completely into an apophatic monster. He turns from the perfect Christian knight to the ruined pagan man.

The first instance of Gawain disregarding the Order of Chivalry as it relates to deformed speech occurs when the Green Knight enters Arthur’s celebration during

Christmas. The Green Knight rides in on a giant green horse. He is clothed in peaceful garments, holding an olive branch, and claiming he is not there for violence. When he offers the beheading game, which is obviously violent, Gawain steps in for Arthur. He states:

> For me þink hit not semly – as hit is soþ knawen-- / þer such an asking is heuened so hyze in your sale,/ þaȝ ȝourself be talenttyf, to take hit yourseluen,/ Whil mony do bolde yow aboute vbon bench sytten. (348-351)

Speaking in this manner, Gawain accepts the challenge to smite off the Green Knight's head, and, in doing so, he reminds the audience in the hall and the reader that he has the reputation for speaking eloquently to get out of situations. Gawain calls on the court, saying: : "'And if I carp not comlyly let alle þis cort rych bout blame'" (360).The court unanimously decides, based on his words, that Gawain is capable of the game. The other knights of the Round Table, and Arthur himself, are in awe of the entire situation, both the Green Knight riding in and in Gawain's speaking ability, that they heartily agree to let the beheading game take place.

By accepting the challenge, and taking twenty lines to explain his reasoning, Gawain's pride gets in the way. He states, "'I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feeblest'" (354). By lying, he begins to descend into monstrosity through pride and false statements. While this could also be interpreted as an attempt to insult the Green Knight's challenge by offering only the weakest of Arthur's knights, it is a far cry from a solid argument. Gawain is known for his good manners, and he would not break the rules of medieval hospitality simply to insult a monster proposing a game. Furthermore, Gawain is only boosting his own ego as he tells the court of his weakness and frailty. This use of speech,

a definite use of litotes, proves pridefulness as he fishes for compliments from his fellow knights. Some may think that starting the poem with Gawain's pride exuding over his audience would mean he is already monstrous. However, Gawain is already living in the tension between chivalry and monstrosity, and he shows that, even though it is early in the poem, he is being tested.

When Gawain arrives at Hautdesert, Bertilak knows who he is. He also knows of Gawain's speaking skills. Bertilak lives in the middle of the woods in a palace that appears to be in the middle of nowhere, proving that Gawain's reputation is assumed to be well-known throughout the land by the assertion of Bertilak when he arrives at Hautdesert. Bertilak states:

> Now schal we semlych se sleȝtez of þewez/ And þe tecchles termes of talking noble./ Wich spede is in speche vnspurd may we lerne,/ Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture. (916-919)

Bertilak has heard of Gawain, and though it may have been from the mouth of Morgan Le Fay, he does know that Gawain is the best of the best when it comes to manners and eloquence of speech. If Bertilak knows this, then the reader can deduce that his reputation for fine speech and good manners, then Gawain is known for such habits. While boosting Gawain's ego, Bertilak assures the reader that Gawain is a capable hero at this point; this assertion makes the descent into monstrosity smoother as he loses this skill throughout the poem. It also makes his changes more apparent to the reader as the poem progresses.

Though very few scholars see character flaws within Gawain's speech, there is an air of arrogance within it. Beauregard does not believe that Gawain does anything improperly in the beginning of the poem, as he believes there is no fault in Gawain's

speech at all. He states, “Gawain represents fortitude in its secondary act, and as such he conducts himself perfectly” (152). Though scholars have previously found Gawain’s speech honorable and noble, Gawain does not conduct himself perfectly. Chivalry, as defined by Llull, is not about boasting, and taking battles for the fame it may bring. It is about protecting a community and committing oneself to humility, temperance, and justice. Jumping into any challenge or battles that comes into the court, especially one that is not offered to the knight in the first place, is simply a search for pride and fame. At a quick glance, it seems that Gawain is doing just that. However, Gawain states, “No bounte but your blod I in my bode knowe” (357). By taking pains to place himself above all others by replacing Arthur, though he claims he feels unworthy to do so, Gawain deforms himself for the first time in the poem. Gawain actively belittles himself to make sure he can perform this game in front of all his brotherly knights. Gawain also chooses to protect his feudal lord, all the while sacrificing himself to be seen as a martyr in one year’s time. By choosing to take this deal from Arthur and swearing he has no worth, though we find out later in the poem that he has a high reputation, Gawain disrupts the order in which chivalry and the Round Table exist.

Furthermore, Gawain’s language is a failure in the code of chivalry. As he deforms his own mouth, he takes down the reputation of the Round Table by seeming frail and weak, which the Green Knight is quick to point out. Williams describes Gawain as a failure of language, as well, saying “Gawain’s confrontation with the deformed and the deforming more specifically engages the failure of language to manifest the real” (267). Williams is correct to believe that Gawain is unable to tell what is right within his

chivalric code, and his speech exemplifies this inner conflict during his speech act with ethe physically deformed Green Knight. He goes on to say:

> Because of his fame for flowery talk and discursive skill, Gawain's replacing of Arthur expands the object of the giant's negation to include not only social constructs represented by the king, but the intellectual and rhetorical achievements represented by the courtier, as well. (272)

Gawain is set up here as a cataphatic figure: his speech is impeccable and valued by all the knights around him, and he is above all in this ability. His words should protect his feudal lord, which he succeeds at, but they should also be used to reinforce the system around him. Gawain states, "þaȝ ȝourself be talenttyf, to take hit yourseluen,/ Whil mony do bolde yow aboute vbon bench sytten" (350-351). As a very minor misuse of speech, Gawain belittles the challenge itself. Gawain tells Arthur that any knight upon the benches around him should be taking this challenge, even though Arthur is capable. While Gawain is explaining this, he makes sure to point out all the knights sitting by and watching the spectacle instead of protecting their feudal lord. Here, Gawain chooses to use his speech to break down the Round Table, when he should be using it to tell the Green Knight about the skills and triumphs of the knights around him, as well as the feats of the king. Instead, he chooses monstrosity in his speech, figuratively deforming his mouth for the first time in the poem.

The second misuse of speech by Gawain is his frequency of rash boons. A rash boon is a promise or oath made quickly without thought about the consequences. In Gawain's case, his rash boons are rather simple, as they are located within the guest-host relationship. He agrees to rash boons with both the Green Knight, who is Lord Bertilak,

and Lady Bertilak, both of whom are under the control of Morgan le Fay. Both rash boons lead to mistakes in Gawain's religious and feudal chivalry, leading only to his downfall. Gawain does not adhere to his chivalric code, not because he makes rash boons, but because he fails to hold up his end of the deal in both promises. One of Gawain's rash boons is to Lord Bertilak after he enters Hautdesert on his way to the Green Chapel. Gawain promises to return every gift he receives within the castle walls during the day while Lord Bertilak is out hunting. In return, Gawain will receive all the game that Lord Bertilak is able to kill. Bertilak suggests:

> 'Quatsoeuer I wynne in þe wod hit worþez to yourez/ And quat chek so ȝe acheue change me perforne./ Swete, swap we so: sware with trawþe,/ Queþer leude so lymp lere oþer better.' (1106-1009)

This exchange of gifts is a rash boon that has unknown outcomes from the beginning; the gifts are vaguely described, and the mission is unclear. Though structurally, this is the same agreement Gawain makes with the Green Knight, what you give me, I give you, this promise with Bertilak proves that Gawain is only thinking of himself. If he offers up a small gift to Bertilak, he gets much in return: food and sustenance for the rest of the journey to the Green Chapel. However, Bertilak has explained this: "[The Green Chapel] is not two myle henne" (1078), which makes Gawain's need for this agreement even more of a bad idea. Bertilak recounts with venison meat in his hands, "'And al I gif yow, Gawayn,' quoþ þe gome þenne,/ 'For by acorde of couenaunt ȝe craue hit as your awen,'" (1383-1384). Gawain takes the meat, kisses Bertilak to seal his end of the deal, and all is well in the eyes of their promise. The problem with the rash boon is this: Gawain promises this vague feat purely for self-interest and self-benefit. He only has his own

manners in mind, mostly because he is terrified that these are his last few days on the earth. Gawain must adhere to the host's rules because he may not have a place to rest if he does not. Defeated, tired, and hungry, Gawain agrees to this exchange game.

The second rash boon that Gawain jumps into is the one with Lady Bertilak. Here, he promises to attend to her every wish after she comes into his room unannounced and forbids him to dress himself. This is also known as courtly love, defined by Andreas Capellanus in *The Art of Courtly Love*, is an affair within a court with an unmarried man and a married woman. Gawain states, "'Me schal worþe at your wille and þat me wel lykez,/ For I ȝelde me ȝederly and ȝeȝe after grace;/ And þat is þe best, be my dome, for me byhouez need!'" (1214-1216). Gawain, yet again, is only thinking of his own gain. He promises to do whatever she may wish of him, though he has chivalric and Godly values to which he must adhere. He admires her bodily features just lines before this promise, and Gawain is incredibly focused on her physicality as she enters the room, too concerned with lust to speak as a knight should. His oath to do what she says is entirely problematic. Lady Bertilak, though acting outside of social constructs, is controlled at this moment in the poem by Morgan le Fay, though Gawain has no idea. Morgan is a fairy creature, and half-sister to Arthur, who is intent on getting rid of the Round Table. She dabbles in the dark arts, and she has devised this whole plan to disrupt everything that Arthur has been working for. This is evident from the end of the poem where Bertilak states that he has "þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges,/ And koyntyse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned'" (2446-2447). Also, Morgan Le Fay exists in the Arthurian canon as an evil sorceress who is out to get the Round Table due to her

romantic obsession with Arthur.[2] Because of this, Lady Bertilak gains access to Gawain in a way that leads to his knightly destruction.

Gawain purports to be the perfect Christian knight, but he chooses to make promises that he cannot keep. His rash boons are only to his faults; Gawain does not use his knightly judgement to get out of this situation with polite chivalry. In the case of Lord Bertilak, Gawain feels a sense of indecency regarding the time he spent with Lord Bertilak's wife in the bedroom, so he lies about obtaining the girdle and chooses not to give the girdle to Lord Bertilak, breaking the rules of the exchange game. In the case of Lady Bertilak, he simply sees a beautiful woman in front of him, and he loses all ability to make rational decisions regarding his own moral obligation to the knighthood. Scott D. Troyan argues that Gawain is not a leader in the bedroom scenes, but he commits to the level of a servant. He argues, "The text implies Gawain is a follower, or a lesser knight" (Troyan 381). Gawain's broken promises make him a lesser knight in the eyes of all around him. He does not follow through on the rash boon set forth by either Lord or Lady Bertilak. Knights must not give into temptation, and, by making the boons he does, Gawain does exactly that. Both oaths sworn and broken create the apophatic descent that Gawain is on throughout the rest of the poem.

Though this situation seems like an easy one to avoid as a chivalrous man, Kim Sydow Campbell argues that Gawain does escape this situation with his chivalry intact due to the setup of the conversation. She states that Gawain has no choice but to obey the commands Lady Bertilak is giving him, writing: "All of the lady's offers, suggestions, and requests in Fitt 3 of SGGK can be classified as directive speech acts in which she

[2] This can be found in Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur* (1469)

attempts to get Gawain to perform an act" (Campbell 56). She goes on to say that Gawain must comply with her to keep his knightly virtue. Though both Lord and Lady Bertilak are commanding in their speech and their actions, Gawain cannot comply with these without breaking Llull's explanation of the Code of Chivalry. Knights, according to Llull, will only act upon the orders of their feudal or religious lord (45). In Gawain's case, this would mean Arthur or God himself would have to make a request. Llull states, "For if a knight professed the Order of Chivalry whilst at the same time detesting and destroying another Order, it would follow that God and the Order would be contrary, and such a contradiction cannot be" (Llull 45). The other "order" in this instance would be Lady Bertilak's hostess position. When Gawain does not treat the Bertilaks as gracious hosts, he detests the order of the guest-host relationship. From there, Gawain then breaks his chivalric code, as you cannot break down one without hurting the other, according to Llull.

Within the order of chivalry, Gawain must attend to his verbal agreements, or he will break down the order in which he exists. When Lord Bertilak wants the final exchange, Gawain only gives half of what he received, keeping the other half for himself. Bertilak says this as he hands over the fox, "Bot þis foule fox felle – þe Fende half þe godez!/ And þat is ful pore for to pay for suche prys þinges/ As ȝe haf þryȝt me here þro, suche þre cosses so gode'" (1944-1946). Gawain responds quickly with a thank you, and he leaves. With his quick reply and quick goodbye, Gawain avoids giving up the girdle. Lord Beritlak gives him the chance to come clean when he brags about the fox, but Gawain avoids any extra conversation than necessary, knowing he has broken his rash boon. When Lady Bertilak wants to give him the ring and the girdle, he only accepts one

of the two after much prodding. If he were to give Lord Bertilak everything he received, physically and emotionally, there may be a breach of temperance, which Llull emphasizes in the cardinal values of chivalry. Furthermore, Williams discusses the oaths made in Hautdesert between the characters. Williams believes that Gawain fears what his words may lead to, and he feels the only course of action is to let Lady Bertilak kiss him, so he does not offend her with his words. He argues, "Because he fears that words have, perhaps, failed, he concedes the Lady a kiss, and for the first time, we imagine, there is silence in the bedchamber" (Williams 276). Though Williams makes some good points about Gawain being fearful of his words and of the situation, Gawain has been praised throughout the poem for his ability to use words as a tool to escape challenging situations. This ability seems to have been stripped away from him with the armor he left at Hautdesert's door, leaving him open to the deformation at hand with the breaking of his promises to the host and hostess.

Gawain also exerts his speech in anger and frustration. Gawain's anger only overpowers his speech around the Green Knight, and Gawain fails to keep his temper with the Green Knight in the chapel. He yells at the Green Knight when he fears for his life, exclaiming: "'Wy, þresh on, þou þro mon! þou þretez to longe./ I hope þat þi hert arȝe wyth þyn awen seluen!'" (2300-2302). Gawain is so full of fear for losing his life, indicated by the exclamation point and the recounting of their deal which was one blow to the neck. The Green Knight attempts to swing the axe three times, which Gawain will not stand for. By not leaving his trust in either the girdle or God, he uses anger as his outlet. His pride overcomes his chivalry, as he raises his voice in a state of pleading. Gawain feels that one swing of the axe should "acquit" him. By showing this fear through

his voice, he further exemplifies that he has lost his skill of discursive language and conversation. He is no longer able to control his emotions or the way they release through his deformed mouth.

Gawain also expresses frustrated speech in the bedroom scene when Lady Bertilak asks Gawain to teach her about the intricacies of love. Gawain retorts:

> ’Bot to take þe toruayle to myself to trwluf expound/ And towche þe temez of tyxt and talez of armez/ To yow, þat (I wot wel) weldez more slyȝt/ Of þat art, bi þi half, or a hundredth of seche/ As I am, oþer euer schal in erde þer I leue,/ Hit were a fole felefolde, my fre, by mt trawþe.’ (1540-1545).

Gawain’s response to Lady Bertilak is through gritted teeth. This is the second day of tempting him with her words and body, and Gawain is struggling to maintain his knightly honor. So, instead of acting upon his weakened chivalric state, he chooses to take her down with words. By suggesting that she is more experienced in the act of love than he could ever know, much more than him given his reputation, he comments upon her sexuality as a pitfall to men. Suggesting Lady Bertilak has more sexual experience than he could ever imagine, Gawain breaks his oath of honor and temperance. He has overindulged in his speech, and he has overindulged in his temptation of frustration. Here, again, his speech tells the reader that his emotions are not regulated, and his mouth is no longer filtering what comes in or goes out. He cannot control anything in a knightly fashion anymore, therefore proving his monstrous descent.

Gawain also uses speech in anger to blame all his problems and misgivings on women. When leaving the Green Knight’s chapel, he projects all his anger on Lady

Bertilak by calling out Biblical men whom through wiles of women have been tricked. He states:

> ’Bot hit is no ferly þaȝ a fole madde/ And þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe;/ . . . And alle þay were biwyled/ With wymmen þat þay vsed./ þaȝ I be now bigyled,/ Me þink me burde be excused’ (2414-2415, 2425-2428).

By comparing himself to Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David, Gawain hopes to diminish his own shame and create shame for Lady Bertilak. By painting Lady Bertilak as the evil temptress woman, he also paints himself as a defenseless man. This is a major character flaw in his vow to uphold justice. He also gives in to pride here, as he likens himself to major biblical features. In this portion of the poem, his speech blames women for all his downfalls, but he also enforces to the reader that he was weak enough to let that happen.

Gawain’s angry and frustrated outbursts deform his speech increasingly as the poem ends. The motive of these three angry and frustrated situations is clear. Gawain needs to blame others to feel better about himself. Gawain cannot control his emotions; his seat of reason and his filter for his speech deforms his mouth by misuse. As this breaks his feudal and religious chivalric codes, he must live with his choices. Olga Burakov-Morgan argues that he makes himself seem like a lesser version of his reputation, especially when he is outside the Green Chapel. She states, “When Gawain does air frustration, as he does at the Green Chapel in the concluding scenes of the romance, he does so like the typical grumbling subordinate” (Burakov-Morgan 61). Gawain lessens himself with his inability to keep calm. He cannot accept what has befallen him, caused by his own hand, so he lessens himself to a ruined man with a seat at

the Round Table, stripping him of his knighthood. Burakov-Morgan argues that Gawain verbally damns all women, past and present, and he makes sure his shame and guilt are not his fault. She states, "Gawain's tirade on the dangers of trusting women shifts the blame away from himself by aligning himself with the worthies of the [Bible] and by transferring the responsibility of his failings onto women who devised and put into execution the adventure of the Green Knight" (62). By placing his blame on others, especially the females of the time, he creates another crack in his chivalric armor. She goes further, saying, "In putting into Gawain's mouth a speech on women's duplicity. . . the Gawain-poet identifies Gawain's inner world – his self-love, fear of death, desire for the Lady, and anger at Bertilak and himself" (63). This speech brings out all of Gawain's worst qualities that he has been fighting throughout his journey to the Green Chapel; he has failed to keep his reputation, so he must drag others down with him. Gawain uses phrases like the "wiles of women" and "wooed," as if women are all sorceresses like Morgan Le Fay. Llull professes, "It is the office of the knight to support widows, orphans, and the helpless" (50). In the Middle Ages, women are thought of as weak, helpless, and poor because of the patriarchal traditions surrounding them. Guinevere, though she is referred to in the poem, says absolutely nothing throughout the tale. Lord Bertilak ignores Lady Bertilak as soon as he is back in the castle, and Morgan Le Fay also says nothing. It is Gawain's promise that he must protect and support women, but he spends fifteen lines in the poem to destroy what little freedom and support they had, and two of the three women did not have active roles in the poem. By spilling misogyny out of his mouth, he further deforms himself into a cultural monster, breaking his chivalric code in the process.

Gawain also uses his speech in the form of lies aimed at the Lord Bertilak. In the first instance of lying to Lord Bertilak, Gawain simply avoids the truth. As Lord Bertilak returns from his first day of hunting, Gawain must return the gift that he promised him. Gawain kisses Lord Bertilak, and Lord Bertilak asks Gawain how he won that big of a favor. Gawain replies with, "'þat watz not forward,' quoþ he; 'fayest me no more,/ For ȝe haf tan þat yow tydez; trawe ȝe non oþer ȝe mowe'" (1395-1396). Gawain refuses to tell Lord Bertilak where he received the kiss, therefore lying via omission about its origin in Lord Bertilak's wife. Gawain sins by the mouth by disrespecting his host and refusing to answer his question. By lying, he negates his oath to be truthful and uphold justice within the knighthood, Gawain furthers his descent into apophatic monstrosity. He is no longer a true knight, nor is he an honorable upholder of justice.

By not upholding his promises to Lord Bertilak within Hautdesert, Gawain is lying to himself and his host. He does not exchange what he promised, and that leaves Gawain's reputation cracked. Alice Blackwell gives insight on promise breaking in knighthood, which Llull further explains. She states, "Gawain's default is also often read as lying, false swearing, or contract breaking. Both theft and oath-breaking fall within the purview of confession" (Submitted 77). She goes on to say, "Certainly promise breaking, with or without swearing on Christian relics or invoking God, counted as a failure for knights" (*Submitted* 85). She argues that Gawain does not fall into the category of failure because she believes that Gawain's actions within the exchange game do not affect his outside life, therefore making Gawain just as spotless in his perfect reputation as he was before. While this loophole to chivalry seems to give Gawain a pass for breaking oaths, the game was not a part of a different life or world. Hautdesert, though orchestrated by

Morgan le Fay, was real. The challenges to Gawain's knightly honor were real. His words and actions inside that castle all affected his ability to maintain his reputation. If they were not, the girdle would not hold shame or guilt for Gawain, nor would his words hold weight anywhere.

Another lie that Gawain finds himself in occurs when he swears to the Green Knight that he will not flinch or turn away from the strike at his head. He states:

> 'Nay, bi God,' quoþ Gawayn, 'þat me gost lante,/ I schal gruch þe no grew, for grem þat
>
> fallez;/ Bot styȝtel þe vpon on strok and I schal stoned style/ And warp þe no wernyng to worch as þe lykez nowhare' (2250-2254).

Gawain swears by God that he will not move when the Green Knight swings the axe, but he flinches away on the first swing. His word is worth little by this time in the poem, and the Green Knight calls him out on it. The Green Knight says, "'þou art not Gawayn,' quoþ þe gome, 'þat is so goud halden,/ þat neuer arȝez in hert'" (2270-2271). He is not the knight that he was a year ago in Arthur's court, and the Green Knight uses this to get into his head; this Gawain is a coward and a liar. He cannot take what he has given, and the Green Knight notices his lack of confidence or courage. Gawain fails to uphold his promise, and he breaks his word by flinching and arguing that he has done enough to be set free, all the while hiding the girdle.

As his speech becomes broken and faltered, some believe that his sins of the mouth may be rectified through common law and religious order. In the Middle Ages, promises held value beyond what they do today; verbal oaths hold immense power, and the Gawain-poet would have been well aware of this within knighthood. Blackwell states,

"Medieval common law simply treats Gawain's broken oath as a broken oath that must be rectified" (Sowing 101). Rectification for Gawain, however, seems unlikely to himself. He feels his words are not worth much, even as he confesses to Arthur near the end of the poem. By choosing not to fix his broken chivalry, Gawain chooses to continue his monstrous descent. The final speech Gawain gives when he returns to Arthur's court is also his final defiance of chivalry in terms of his speech. Gawain states:

'þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne./ And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may

last;/ For mon may hyden his harme bot vnhap ne may hit,/ For þer hit onez is tachched

twynne wil hit neuer'" (2509-2512).

Gawain uses his words to prove his monstrosity after returning to court. Utter explains, "The problem at the heart of the poem is not that some particular sin has been perpetrated by an individual, but rather that the entire court is primed for much greater sin, and in no spiritual condition to recognize it, even as one of their number comes, belatedly and feebly, to sense his own condition" (Utter 147). By telling the court about what happened to him, the choices he made, and the outcome of the beheading game, Gawain convinces even the skeptical reader of his rejection of his perfect reputation. The court's flippant reaction when he returns home further proves that his words have lost all worth to him and to those around him as he struggles with reforming his identity.

There are many situations within this speech that offer monstrous outcomes, and many of these are centered around the chivalry that Gawain should have adhered to. Derek Pearsall argues:

> This speech is an index to the problems of honour that the poem presents; it contains
>
> reminders of all the strands in the delicate fabric of chivalric idealism that the action of
>
> the poem has teased out. The contrivance of the story allows the contradictions within the
>
> system to emerge, reveals the fragility of the weave, the manner in which a multiplicity
>
> of different impulses and ideals, appetites and codes of restraint, are held in precarious
>
> orbit. It only needs one break in the circuit for the circuit to fail, for chivalry, like the
>
> pentangle, is an 'endless knot'. (351)

By giving this speech when Gawain returns to court, he does, in fact, retell all the ways he broke the chivalric code throughout his journey. He also, just as Pearsall states, reminds the reader that chivalry is not all it is cracked up to be. Its restrictions cause confusion as to what is right and wrong, especially within the overlapping of feudal and religious chivalry. In Gawain's words, he calls out himself for not following the chivalric code, and he feels he must separate himself from the knights left. Gawain's final speech examines himself: this speech is to pour guilt and shame on Gawain for his choices. However, what this speech does instead is allow Gawain to return to his prideful nature: he boasts about his failures. He takes the time to tell the entire Round Table and court that he messed up, and he will bear the shame and guilt for as long as he lives, not to

simply remind himself, but he will remind the entire court by wearing the girdle forever. Gawain's ending speech gives foreshadowing to the fall of the Round Table, as well as the social commentary on the strictures of religion, chivalry, and knighthood.

By the end of the poem, the Gawain-poet has made Gawain a new creature altogether. He breaks down culturally throughout his quest to the Green Chapel as he has faced the Green Knight, and he returned almost unscathed, but he has not returned as Sir Gawain, the perfect Christian knight. Rather, he has become an apophatic version of his former self. He has negated every part of his reputation through defying cultural norms, and he has created a monstrosity within himself by breaking down his reputation and choosing not to rebuild in the same way. Cohen argues, as stated earlier, that monsters are created through recombination of their broken identities, and they resist any hierarchy they are built upon. Using these ideas, Gawain is deformed into a cultural monster as soon as he opens his mouth, and he breaks down the cultural order in which he belongs to the point of no return. He uses his speech to exude pridefulness and shame, which are the same flaws that ultimately take down King Arthur and the Round Table. By studying Gawain in a culturally monstrous way, the reader can find a new way to see monstrosity; it is inside Gawain as he ultimately chooses monstrosity over chivalry by creating a divide between himself and the other knights.

Chapter 2: Religiously Deformed Gawain

Gawain is a culturally monstrous creature in ways both social and chivalric, and through destroying those orders, he falls into the same species as the Green Knight. However, monstrosity does not stop within cultural bounds; it also exists in the defiance of the accepted religious beliefs of the late 14th century. The entirety of the Middle Ages was a time of opposing religious beliefs, especially between Christianity and paganistic practices, but the late 14th century was almost wholly devoted to Catholicism. While paganism still existed, Christianity had taken hold in most areas, and many adopted Catholicism as their form of Christianity, especially the aristocracy.[3] Chivalry required Knights to practice Catholicism exclusively, and the Virgin Mary played a large part in their belief system. Olsen explains, "Conversion to Christianity offers, however, another outcome. The Christian God's victory over the forces of disorder, which is, for many Christian authors, also inevitable, and results in the establishment of a new divine order" (3). For the Knights of the Round Table, the Christian God would save them from dire situations in quests, battles, and jousts. As the people of the Middle Ages converted to Christianity, monsters became something to fear, as they were outside the religious order and obviously marred from sin. Before the mass conversion, monsters were signs from God: "God violated the order of nature often and at will to show man something, and since God is benign, his Theophanies are always good" (Olsen 119). Monsters were once there to teach a lesson to the people as to what not to do in their daily lives. After the conversion to Christianity in the early Middle Ages, people treated monstrous creatures as outcasts and others, and many believed those who practiced any religion outside of

[3] Rubin, Miri. *Medieval Christianity in Practice*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 2009.

Catholicism were interacting with the devil or practicing witchcraft. The people who practiced paganism became abnormal, and the Catholics treated the pagans as sinners already on their way to hell.[4]

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's religious identity and faulty character stumps scholars. Looking for a way to justify his decisions and flaws with reasoning and morality, they can never make sense of his lack of adherence to religion. Richard H. Godden wrongly assumes that the Gawain in this poem is not the same person from the rest of the Arthurian canon, but he is another character altogether. He states, "[Gawain] is a pretender of the name of Gawain and not the true Gawain of Arthur's court" (Godden 152). Sharon Rowley claims that he is Gawain, he just does not live up to his name: "The Green Knight and the lady test Gawain's ability to inhabit his identity fully, that is, to 'be' the seamlessly perfect knight his pentangle and reputation claim to be" (Rowley 158). While he does not live up to his reputation, a third outcome is possible. Gawain, instead of trusting fully in his religious tendencies, breaks ties with God to protect his life. By doing so, he further denies his requirement of religion, and that action makes him an outsider. By doing so, he also voids his requirement of feudal chivalry by not upholding the virtues of his feudal lord, further deforming him into a monstrous creature.

The first instance of religious adherence within Gawain occurs when he is gearing up to leave Camelot one year after the beheading game with the Green Knight. The poet describes his shield in great detail, and (s)he emphasizes the use of the Virgin Mary's image on the front. (S)he describes: "His þro þoȝt watz in þat, þurȝ alle oþer þyngez,/ þat

[4] See previous note.

alle his forsnes he gong at þe fyue joyez/ þat þe hende Heuen Quene had of hir Chylde./ (At þis cause þe kny3t comlyche hade" (645-649). The Virgin Mary, having been the mother of the Christian God's son, Jesus, is the holiest woman in the history of the Bible, according to the Catholic denomination. She is the ultimate saint, as she produced a child as a virgin, and that child ended up being what they consider to be the savior of the world. Her appearance on the inside of his shield is supposed both to serve as a constant reminder to him of his Christianity, and to keep him from harm. Gawain's shield should remind him of his fealty to God as he traverses the unknown between Camelot and the Green Chapel.

However, Gawain is quick to give up his armor at Hautdesert as soon as he prays to God for a place to hear Mass and live what he believes to be his last days. Gawain states:

> 'I beseche þe, Lorde,/ And Mary, þat is mydlest moder so dere,/ Of sum herber þer he3ly I my3t here masse,/ Ande þy matynez tomorne, mekely I ask,/ And þerto prestly I pray my Pater and Aue and Creed.' (754-759)

When the castle appears out of nowhere after a prayer asking for a place to hear Mass on Christmas day, Gawain excitedly enters the gates. He hands off his shield to the servants as they undress him of his armor, and the shield is absent until he goes to the Green Chapel. The text states, "þer he watz dispoyled, with spechez of myerþe,/ þe burn of his bruny and of his bry3t wedez" (860-861).Gawain is stripped from his shield and clothes, symbols of his religious teachings and his knightlihood. Without the Virgin Mary to remind him of his religious fealty, he leans into paganism with ease. The act of disarming oneself when entering a court is normal, however, his armor is highly symbolic of his

belief system, and he does not have it within his line of vision throughout his stay at Hautdesert. Gawain deforms himself religiously by physically and emotionally giving up his beliefs in Hautdesert and the Green Chapel. He does not know where the servants are taking his armor, nor does he know if they will be handled with care, especially his image of the Virgin Mary. By giving away his virtues and beliefs in object form, Gawain ends up needing a replacement for the void that he created. Though he does not know it at the time, he will replace the religious objects with a paganistic magical belt, which will bring him shame and guilt presumably for the rest of his life. Williams agrees that stripping Gawain of his armor is symbolic of his descent into monstrosity. He states, "Immediately upon arrival in Hautdesert, we see the hero stripped naked, garment by garment, in a scene in which negative description unfolds into apophatic theme" (Williams 274). Williams goes on to say that they take his helmet, which protects his seat of reason; they also take his sword, which Llull proclaims is symbolic of the cross that Jesus died on to save the world (66); lastly, they take his shield, which holds the visual representation of the Virgin Mary as a reminder to Gawain of his beliefs, but it also serves a separator of sorts between him and the common enemies (Llull 67). A knight without his armor is not only a knight without protection, but a knight without a visual sense of identity. Without a visual reminder of the order in which Gawain exists, he is quick to give it all up for a belief in paganistic virtue.

After Lord Bertilak's servants undress Gawain from his armor and his clothes, they dress Gawain in clothes of their own, which are much more expensive than the ones he was wearing. The poet states "Ryche robes ful rad renkkez hem broȝten/ For to charge and to chaunge and chose of þe best./ Sone as he on hent and happened þerinne,/ þat sete

on hum semly, with saylande skyrtez,. . . þat a comloker kny3t neuer Kryst made, Hem þo3t" (863-866, 870).By redressing himself in the clothes that Hautdesert had to offer, Gawain chooses to remake himself into a new Gawain. No longer is he the adventurous, worn down, young, well-reputed, Christian knight. He is now simply Hautdesert's guest, and he has taken off every signifier that he was ever a part of the Round Table. Gawain has been visually redefined in Hautdesert, and he has become more and more like Bertilak during his stay there.

Williams sees this act as a stripping of identity, as well, but he also sees this as a direct contrast from what happened in Arthur's court. He states, "The contrast is emphasized not only between Gawain 'dressed' in Camelot and 'undressed' in Hautdesert, but also between the stripping of Gawain's body by Bertilak's servants and the chamber in which it occurs" (Williams 275). The chamber mentioned by Williams is the exact chamber where Lady Bertilak will attempt to seduce Gawain three times, which leads him further into ignoring his Christianity via lust and sexual temptation. Gawain no longer has his knightly adornments or religious sentiments, and he is no longer able to keep up his identity, which lies in his reputation of the perfect Christian knight. By doing this, Gawain has less ambition and guidance to follow his moral compass or code, which ultimately leads to his monstrosity.

The longer Gawain stays at Hautdesert, the worse his religious fealty becomes. As Gawain tries to rest and regain strength for the last part of his journey, Lady Bertilak attempts to seduce him. Lying in bed, Gawain has no way to protect himself, and she is determined to get what she wants. Gawain avoids sexual temptation via Lady Bertilak for the first two days, but the third day is much different. His courage and bravery dissipate

as she offers him something he cannot resist: the girdle. The text says the green girdle has the power to save any man: “þer is no haþel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myȝt,/ For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erþe” (1853-1854). At this, Gawain can no longer contain himself, and he accepts the girdle as a gift to save his life. The *Gawain*-poet writes this as he hides the girdle before heading to the Green Chapel, “þen kest þe knyȝt, and hit come to his hert,/ Hit were a juel for ȝe joparde þat hym jugged were:/ When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,/ Myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn þe sleȝt were nobel” (1855-1858). However, this girdle could very well be the only thing holding her promiscuous, unaccompanied robe together, which leaves the passage open for interpretation. Gawain, most likely before receiving the girdle, received more than he bargained for, as her robe could have been undone, and Gawain would have been tempted in a sexual manner. The *Gawain*-poet writes this as (s)he explains how Lady Bertilak was wearing the girdle before she hands it over to Gawain: “Ho laȝt a lace lyȝtly þat leke vmbe hir sydez,/ Knit vpon hir hyrtel, vnder þe cleare manyle” (1830-1831). This absolutely demolishes the ideals of prudence, chastity, and chivalry altogether. Richard Osberg argues, “The girdle is not a reward for sexual service – on the other hand, neither is it a reward for virtuous continence” (Osberg 309). Gawain disregards his morals in an effort to save his life. By doing this, he chooses two sins in one, sexual temptation and pagan magic, all the while going against his pact with Bertilak. Gawain has agreed to give Bertilak all that he receives during the day, and Bertilak will return what he kills while hunting. This exchange does not happen, and he chooses to break the pact while lying to Bertilak about his interactions with Lady Bertilak. By lying, lust, and theft, Gawain has further removed himself from chivalry and descended into monstrosity.

As Gawain puts his armor back on in the attempt to continue his journey, he places the girdle underneath his armor. Before leaving the castle for good, and before placing the girdle shamefully under his armor, he seeks a priest to confess his shortcomings before the Green Knight beheads him. The text says that Gawain "Preuely aproched to a prest and prayed hym Þere/ Þat he wolde lyste his lyf and learn hm better/ How his sawle schulde be saued when he schuld seye heÞen" (1877-1879)

In this first confession, he does not mention the girdle which leads readers to believe that he either does not see the girdle as a sin, or he does not believe he can be forgiven for such an act. Gawain actively chooses to hide his largest sin from the priest at Hautdesert, implying a distrust in God and holy figures. If Gawain really does not believe he can be forgiven, then he is already descending into a monstrous mindset, clearly devoid of an adherence to a religion in which everyone can be forgiven for any degree of sin. Olsen argues:

> One might even say that removed from the order in which their divinity is a prominent element, alienated gods become destructive agents of disorder, causing among other things, serious disruptions of the alethic structure of the fictional world into which they are inserted, resulting in a monstrous hybridization of the divine. (Olsen 11)

By not confessing that he has the girdle, and by not confessing that he intends to keep the girdle, Gawain becomes an agent in destroying the order in which he exists. He was once reputed to be the most perfect Christian knight, and now he is keeping his faults from a priest inside confession and lying to his gracious host who has done nothing to deserve distrust. He breaks the oaths of Catholicism twice, and he breaks the oath of hospitality in

the Middle Ages. Marcel Mauss states, “Exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents [in archaic societies]; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily” (3). Gawain must adhere to this exchange game, just as he must adhere to the beheading game. What is given to him must be repaid in full before the exchange is complete, and Gawain fails to do this. Furthermore, Gawain opens up the possibility of his monstrosity spreading throughout the Round Table. Olsen argues, as stated above, that if a person becomes a monster, it is most likely going to make the structure in which it exists a hybridization of monstrosity. Applying this to the Round Table, Gawain has doomed the other knights, spreading his diseased chivalry to the rest of the knights in Arthur’s court. If Gawain goes against his ordered and structured religion, his chivalric code is decayed, for religion is at the root of chivalry.

As Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel and meets the Green Knight for the second time in his green form, he confesses again. After the Green Knight swings the axe three times at Gawain’s head, Gawain tells the Green Knight about the green girdle. He says:

> ’Now I am fawty, falce, and ferde haf ben euer/ Of trecherye and vntrawpe, -- boþe bityde sorȝe and care!/ I biknowe you, knyȝt, here style,/ All fawty is my fare./ Letez me ouertake your wylle/ And efte I scahl be ware.’ (2382-2388)

After completely negating his former reputation, Gawain contends that confessing to the Green Knight is more of a religious experience than confessing to the proper religious entity. He substitutes the Green Knight for God, as he confesses that he took the girdle from Bertilak’s wife, and he is using it to save his life instead of trusting in God. Gawain asks for the Green Knight to do something only a priest can do, according to Catholicism:

Gawain asks to be saved and forgiven for his sinful nature. John Burrow argues that Gawain is looking for a forgiveness that would be less of a punishment than what God himself would administer. He writes, ". . .his judge is the Green Knight, not God, and the Green Knight's verdict comes, like that of Camelot, from a very human point of view, that of a fellow knight" (Burrow 114). By receiving judgement from a character like the Green Knight instead of God, Gawain refuses his faith for a lesser punishment. Instead of hell, he only faces shame and guilt. Instead of eternal damnation, he receives forgiveness. Gawain knows he cannot lie to the Green Knight, but he feels he can lie to a priest. This gives Gawain a false sense of hope in the Green Knight, where he places his damaged faith. In this, Gawain shows disrespect and contempt for the religion required of Arthur's knights. This action shows how damaged his faith is by this point in the poem.

The substitution of the Green Knight for God makes sense from a human perspective, but it goes against the teachings of the Catholic church. Catherine Cox relates Gawain to a newly baptized Christian, assuring the reader that the Green Knight has "discursively created for [Gawain] a new identity. . . Gawain is proclaimed not as sinless per se, but rather as sinless as a newborn" (162) However, the Green Knight is not a religious entity; he is the epitome of evil in the Middle Ages. Williams describes the Green Knight as the perfect example of a monster: "The Green Knight is called 'aghlich' (monstrous, 136) and 'half etayn' (giant, 140), which accounts for his size, 'one of the tallest on earth' (137). . . Color contrast is created not only by the gold trim of his costume but also by his mysterious red eyes" (269). By using an actual monster for confession, let alone one controlled by pagan magic, Gawain disregards God in a way that no other knight has before, but he gains something out of it. Alice Blackwell writes,

"Bertilak plainly accepts Gawain as a fine representative of his strain of chivalry" (*Submitted* 95). Bertilak sees his second confession as a way that Gawain is trying to better himself. Christianity and paganism catch Bertilak in a tangle. Because he holds a priest and fairy witch in his home at the same time, he may be confused on both Christianity and chivalry. After Gawain's confession, Bertilak responds in a priestly manner:

> 'þou art confessed so clene, beknowen of þy mysses,/ And hatz þe penaunce apert of þe point of myn egge,/ I halde þe polysed of þat plyȝt and pursed as clene,/ As þou hadez neuer forfeted syþen þou watz first borne.' (2391-2394)

Giving Gawain absolution and forgiveness may have been right in Bertilak's eyes, from a monster's point of view, but Gawain knows that he should have confessed fully to the priest before substitution of the Green Knight. Blackwell argues, "A valid fourteenth century confession rests on a sincere, self-aware penitent and a wise confessor who either has access to or knowledge of the textual authorities that frame this sacrament" (*Submitted* 76). At this point one can see that Gawain has lost his faith in God entirely, as he has lost his deeply ingrained sense of religious practices and ceremonies.

Gawain's shameful confession does not impact the court when he returns from his quest as one would expect. The *Gawain*-poet describes the court's reaction as: "þe kyng comfortez þe kniȝt, and alle þe court also,/ Lazen loude þereat and luflyly acorden" (2513-2514). The entire encounter of welcoming Gawain home is happy and comical. Gawain is not taken seriously throughout this entire confession, nor does his confession mean anything to anyone – not even Arthur, who is the standalone symbol of Jesus himself. Blackwell argues, "The court does not construe Gawain's lapse as negating his

virtue" (*Submitted* 95). Rather, she says, they view it as a recapitulation of his quest in story form, a way for him to tell of the events that occurred and move on with his perfect reputation intact. However, Blackwell goes on to say, "A closer look at this confession reveals that it describes Gawain's losses more than it identifies areas for amendment. . . it therefore reveals limitations in Gawain's construction of chivalric virtue" (*Submitted* 93). Due to his inability to confess to the correct entity, and his inability to feel absolved and guilt-free, Gawain is unable to return to his reputation. Furthermore, his incessant focus on his ineptitude forces the reader to victimize him. From a modern point-of-view, Gawain is a man who made a mistake that he cannot let go. From a Medieval point-of-view, Gawain is a perfectly reputed knight who chooses not to be forgiven by foregoing religion and confessing to entities in which he knows he will not receive true, holy, and Godly absolution. Gawain chooses to stay guilty, and he chooses to move into a state of monstrosity. Andrew Johnston argues:

> In *Sir Gawain*, the courtly aesthetic does not erase the contradictions of confession, but it redefines the paradox to integrate it into its own ideological program. . . Instead of accepting the contradiction as an inescapable given, the text extols a radically exteriorized and ritualistic style of religion that fits perfectly into the forms of representation favored by chivalric culture. (63)

While confessions do have contradictions within the poem, they are only contradictory because of the substitution of a holy entity for a monstrous one. Gawain creates the contradictions by the substitutions. Also, this new religious endeavor of shame and guilt does lurk within Gawain, and the court's flippant attitude about his issues within the faith

results in Gawain's avoidance of accepting forgiveness. These actions do not fit the idea of chivalric culture. By the time it does fit into chivalry later in the Arthurian canon, Arthur's court has become a mess of mangled Christians and not-so-chivalric knights. By letting Gawain feel unforgiven and guilty, Arthur sets up his table for failure. He lets his other knights know that not adhering to religion is permitted, considering the glamorization of Gawain's mistakes. Overall, Gawain's confessions lead to misunderstandings as to what chivalry entails and how other knights should adhere to it.

Gawain's lack of adherence to this code leads to his final fall from faith in the latter scene with the Green Knight in the Green Chapel before he knows of Morgan's game. Gawain bends to have his head separated from his neck, but before the axe comes down for the third time, "As hit com glydande adoun on glode hym to schende,/ And schranke a lytel wyth þe scharp yrne" (2267-2268). Gawain, scared of death and scared of God's punishment, shrinks back from what he has promised to withstand with fortitude and courage. Before the axe swings, Gawain uses his discursive speaking skills to give the Green Knight a pseudo-brave face, even though he is terrified of what comes next. He speaks of the discordance of the Green Chapel and calls it an evil place. However, when Gawain bends to take the swing, he flinches back in fear of pain and death. This flinch is a sign that he has not only wandered from his faith in God, but he has also wandered from his chivalric code. By not trusting his faith in God to protect his life, he violates his theological virtue of faith. By not knowing right from wrong, he has violated his cardinal virtue of temperance. For this one instant, while the axe is above him, he fears what will happen to him in the afterlife. He lets his faith in God go, but he also lets his faith in the

girdle slide away. He has lost all faith at this point, not just his faith in God, and he replaces faith with the fear of losing his life and failing in his quest.

The flinch indicates that Gawain has fallen from grace, and his loss of faith is evident in this single action. Beauregard argues, "The dimensions of Gawain's fault, a slight flinch, serve only to emphasize all the more that perfection in virtue is the crucial issue in the poem and that such perfection is achieved by the Green Knight, but not by Gawain" (149). Beauregard points out that Gawain's slight movement of his shoulders indicates that the Green Knight is the real sign of perfection; that he is the exact opposite of Gawain in every way. While there are some holes in this argument, Beauregard alludes to the fact that Gawain, being the real monster in the poem, fails more in the eyes of the Medieval audience than the Green Knight. The Green Knight has bravery and the assurance that if he flinches, his reputation will shatter, which leads him to stay brave and courageous. Gawain, though he knows the same thing is at stake, flinches away from what could be his fate. Therefore, the more perfect being in this situation without contest is the Green Knight. He keeps his word, does not flinch, and knows Morgan's magic will keep him alive, while Gawain goes back on his word, flinches, and believes (at first) that the girdle will save his life. The Green Knight acting in a more chivalric manner proves further that the real monster in this poem exists in the protagonist, not the antagonist.

Gawain's flinch deforms him religiously due to his loss of faith, but that loss becomes more evident in Gawain's third confession to Arthur and his court when he returns home from his quest. He tells them of all the adventures he went on, and then he pridefully explains his new identity within the sinful nature of the girdle. He states:

> Of his fare þat hym frayned; and ferlyly he tells,/ Biknowez alle þe costes of care þat he had,/ þe chaunce of þe chapel, þe chere of þe kny3t,/ þe luf of þe ladi, þe lace at þe last. (2494-2497)

After using his skill of discursive speech to boast of his journey to the Green Chapel, he goes on to say that he must wear the girdle for the rest of his life to remind him of the mistakes he has made. He tells the court,

> 'þis is þe lape and þe losse þat I la3t haue/ Of couardise and coetyse, þat I haf ca3t þare;/ þis is þe token of vntrawpe þat I am tan inne/ And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may last.' (2507-2510).

When the other Knights of the Round Table rejoice upon his return, Gawain chooses to stay somber, further exemplifying his shame. Shame does not only come from a religious belief, but it also comes from letting expectations, reputations, and belief in oneself go. The root of this emotion, feeling shame all the while rejecting what should be his source of shame, is a feeling of disappointment. Gawain has not only let God down, the omniscient being in whom he is conditioned to put his faith, but he has let himself down by ultimately failing his quest. He did not complete the exchange with Bertilak, nor did he complete the beheading game with the Green Knight. Overall, he did not do what he set out to do nor what the court expected of him. Gawain makes his confession illegitimate by showing his shame, because this expression of emotion shows that he does not want forgiveness by God or the court. It feels more like the end to a long-winded tale than a request for absolution of multiple sins.

As a chivalric knight, one must also know the symbols that keep one reminded of their oaths to religion and to knighthood. A symbol that deforms Gawain into a religious

monster is the use of the pentangle within his armor. The *Gawain*-poet goes to great lengths to describe the pentangle, and he gives it fully Christian values and meaning from biblical times. The poet writes:

> 'Hit is a singe þat Solomon set sumquyle,/ In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat hit habbez;/ For hit is a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez,/ And vche lyne vnbelappez and loukez in oþer/ . . . Oueral, as I here, 'þe endeles knot.' (625-628, 630)

The symbol of the pentangle, a five-pointed star, was well-known in the late fourteenth century. The readers would have recognized the symbol as a sign of witchcraft or a demonic device, but the Gawain-poet reassigned its meaning. The poet explains:

> Fyrst he watz funden fautkez in his fyue wyttez./ And efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres./ And alle his afyaunce vpon folde watz in þe fyue woundez,/ þat Cryst kaȝt on þe croys, as þe Crede tellez./ . . . þat alle his forsnes he fong at þe fyue joyez/ þat þe hende Heuen Quene had of her Chylde./ . . . þe fyft fyue þat I finde þat þe frek vsed/ Watz fraunchyse and felaȝschyp forbe al þyng,/ His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer,/ And pite, þat passez alle poyntez—þyse pure fyue/ Were harder happed on þat haþel þen on any oþer./ Now alle þese fyue syþez forsoþe were fettled on þis knyȝt. (640-43, 646-647, 651-656)

The poet assigns the five points to the five wounds of Christ, giving the symbol a Christian tone that it had never had before. He also gives it the virtues of knightlihood, which are reported, as well, in Llull's *The Book on the Order of Chivalry.* The poet claims that Gawain embodied all these traits before he left on his quest, and by putting them on his armor, he should have been reminded how he was supposed to act within the

bounds of chivalry. While it may have worked with his armor still on, he lost the reminder of those virtues when he shed his armor at Hautdesert.

The pentangle has long confused scholars due to its origin in paganism. In the Book of Solomon in the Christian bible, Solomon uses the pentangle to control demons, talk to spirits, and communicate with animals. While this may seem like a miracle to some biblical readers, this would have been a symbol dedicated to darker arts, especially if used poorly. Blackwell argues, "The pentangle assumes a "plentitude" of virtue possible only in the divine, but one may also argue Gawain's own self-image leads him to interpret the knot as fixed, especially since the court assumes a more fluid virtue" (*Submitted* 73). While Blackwell ascribes to the poet's need to justify the Christian undertones of the pentangle, there are still pagan indicators within this symbol. Gawain sees himself within the pentangle at the beginning of the poem, as he has a great reputation that compares him to the faultlessness of Jesus Christ. If one reverts the symbol back to its origins in paganism, that the universe is interconnected and all actions affect others, Gawain set the rest of the Round Table up for failure. If everything is as connected as the endless knot of the pentangle is, then every action that Gawain makes will impact the order of which he is a part. Another term for this belief of synchronicity would be "karma." Christianity does not endorse karma, as the early Catholic church believed in predestination, or that God knows all, plans all, and everything happens for a reason. Blackwell argues that Gawain's pride is what keeps his mindset fixed on his inner-belief that he cannot be forgiven, and he is stuck in this state of shame. Instead of God punishing him for wandering from the predestined path, Gawain punishes himself

through the pentangle, knowing that he cannot live up to the Christian reputation that was literally placed upon his chest.

Along with Gawain's inability to maintain the reputation of the pentangle, the poet also undermines the Christianity within the pentangle that (s)he worked very hard to build up in the beginning of the poem, because (s)he uses the same language to refer to the girdle in the end of the poem as (s)he did to refer to the pentangle. The poet describes Gawain as he travels back, "And þe blykkande belt he bere þereabout,/ Abelef, as a bauderyk, bounden bi his side,/ Loken vnder his lyfte arme, þe lace, with a knot" (2485-2487). While this description seems harmless, using the language of "knot" (2487) and "bound" (2486), as well as describing it as a clothing item that he wears around his midsection ties it directly back to the pentangle's description in the beginning of the poem as "þe endeles knot" (630). The girdle, an obviously pagan symbol, becomes equalized with the pentangle, creating an overall victory of paganism within the poem. While the pentangle on his chest is frayed and patched, the new symbol is bright and a continuous shape; it reminds him of the mistakes he made on his journey and reinforces his guilt, even if it does not actually hold any magical powers.

With the girdle across his chest and his shield on his back, Gawain returns to the court. He has turned his back on Mary and his faith completely, and he does not plan to re-conform to organized religion, especially not one that he has already failed. Gawain proves, by riding into Camelot with this shield backwards and the girdle as the main focal point, that he is never going to be the perfect Christian knight again. He has left his reputation at Hautdesert with Bertilak, Lady Bertilak, and Morgan, and he does not plan to reclaim it. He would rather wallow in shame and guilt, forgetting that he is supposed to

believe in forgiveness and rebirth. By letting his pride get in the way, and his ego inflate too large, Gawain has permanently stinted his belief in God, and he chooses to let it go.

Gawain has become a religiously deformed, monstrous knight by the end of the poem. He no longer is concerned with the ideals of Catholicism, the reigning religion of the time, and he has resorted back to the chaos of paganism. Instead of structure, he creates a reversion to a religion that was no longer accepted during the time. Cohen writes, "[The monster] is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again" (4). Gawain is a representation of the attempted mixture and conversion of paganism into Christianity, and therefore becomes monstrous in his soul. Gawain cannot handle the world that he lives in; he cannot handle the Christian rules he must follow. Gawain deforms from Catholicism increasingly with each line, but especially as he interacts with Lady Bertilak, attempts three rounds of confession, and fears for his life. Cohen goes on to say that "the monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world" (5). Gawain offers an alternative, albeit a negative one, for those who do not conform to Catholicism: monstrosity. Gawain is now, presumably, going to live on the outsides of the Round Table. He has also created a spark in the future blaze of the fall of the Round Table. He has exhibited that religious fealty does not work; he tried and failed, and now he must live with shame and guilt.

While monsters can stem from any sort of disorder, religious deformation is one that involves societal and cultural consequences. Williams claims that religiously deformed monsters, "concern the necessity to deform in order to liberate the being from

the limits of form and to negate so as to free understanding from the limits of logic" (222). Gawain needed to deform to become a monster. In each section of the poem, Gawain is tempted and broken down in the world of Catholicism. He is tempted sexually outside of wedlock; he confesses illegitimately three separate times; and he lives in constant shame and guilt. He had to break down in these three ways to become monstrous. If he did not fail the temptations, if he did not give in to the magic that Morgan created, he would maintain his reputation. By failing and not adhering to religious chivalry, Gawain deforms internally into a monstrous creature, unable to recreate himself into the perfect Christian knight. Blackwell argues,

> Despite a passing reference to the Virgin in the description of the shield, neither she nor any other woman figures prominently in the virtues of the fifth pentad: in his account of moral virtue, he does not credit Mary's intercession for his long history of virtues, though the narrator attributes his fortitude in the face of sexual temptation to the Virgin's care. In so ignoring this aspect of purported chivalric identity, Gawain suggests that his virtues are of his own making. (*Submitted* 73)

Gawain does not give Christianity any credit for his quest; he denies it completely. By not giving any thanks or recognition to a higher power, especially the Christian God, Gawain further rejects his religious chivalry, deforming from human to monster within his soul. He begins creating rules of his own, and he acts as he wants to, not as the church or Arthur wants him to. His decisions are in his own ambition and pride, and he returns as a failed human being, letting all the other knights know that, though he rejected

Christianity, and he is a failed knight, he is going to adhere to his own regulations. This spreads throughout the Round Table, creating issues down the road in Arthurian literature that breaks the brotherhood and leads to Arthur's demise.

Chapter 3: Physically Deformed Gawain

Having demonstrated that Gawain is a cultural and a religious monster, one would think there would be little left to examine. However, Gawain finds himself monstrous in a third way: his physique. In the late Middle Ages, any physical deformity created a disconnect for that creature from the society in which they existed. The culture would consider any bodily feature or function outside of normalcy to be the work of evil or against their God. After the conversion to Catholicism and the deviation from mixed religions, abnormalities in one's physical traits created deeper meanings of monstrosity. This could be anything from an unnatural hair color to an extra limb. Williams argues, "Although physical deformations are by no means the only negations that monstrosity effects, the human body, through its symbolic extensions as well as its physical structure, provides the most complete paradigm for order" (108). Williams, as mentioned before, also states that monstrosity thrives in a place of disorder and chaos. A disordered mind could lead to a disordered body, and vice versa. Agreeing with Williams, Cohen writes, "monsters' bodies quite literally incorporate fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy" (4). Visually, a monster's body can take in the chaos around them and create an image portraying the feelings of the citizens around which they exist. Cohen emphasizes that the location, and the surrounding culture, impacts everyone's physicality, not just the monsters, but the monsters are the most severely affected individuals, becoming warnings to others as they lurk outside the perimeter of normalcy, kept in the dark about the societal standards and changes.

Physical monstrosity, though thoroughly explained by Williams, does not have a place within knighthood. Llull states, "A deformed man who is obese or has another

physical defect because of which he cannot practice the office of knighthood cannot be in the Order of Chivalry" (60). As Llull states above, knights must maintain perfect physicality to maintain their knightly honor and title. In the poem, however, Gawain chooses to disregard this rule as he physically moves from setting to setting throughout the narrative. His ventures lead him to physically deform until he practically mirrors the antagonist. Gawain's physical deformities arise out of lust, fear, and assimilation into monstrosity via the Green Knight. The controversy and tangling within each setting in the poem transforms Gawain even more as he internalizes each environment he exists within.

To begin the study of Gawain's deforming physical traits, one must first examine Gawain's dressing at the departure of Camelot. As he is readying himself for the journey to the Green Chapel, he is adorned with visual assurances of God around him. His armor signifies, "and efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres./ And alle his afyuance vpon folde watz in þe fyue woundez,/ þat Cryst kaȝt on þe croys, as þe Crede tellez" (641-643). The five would be the wounds that come with the crucifixion of Christ: one wound per hand and foot, and the spear to his side. Described in perfection in comparison to Christ after he was believed to have saved the world from sin and death, Gawain begins his journey in the essence of the Divine. Also, he has the Virgin Mary on the inside of his shield, as described in Chapter 2, and he is the epitome of a perfect Christian knight as he heads toward the Green Chapel. Llull puts great meaning on each piece of armor that a knight arms himself with, and the poet goes to great lengths to describe Gawain's armor in detail. Most importantly, Llull states that the shield acts as a barrier between the knight and the enemy "just as the knight stands in the middle between the king and his people. And just as the blow strikes the shield before the knight's body, so the knight must place

his body in front of his lord if anyone tries to capture or wound him" (Llull 68). As Gawain sets out, he is putting his body in front of Arthur, as the game was initially intended for him. Not only is Gawain following his chivalric code by going on this journey, but he is also reminding himself of the purpose of his journey along with the religious restrictions and beliefs he must adhere to.

As Gawain journeys toward the Green Knight, fully armored, he must travel through the wilderness of Logres, which is "so foule and so felle" (717), that the poet does not intend to focus on it long. The *Gawain*-poet writes, "So mony meruayl bi monte þer þe mon fyndez/ Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tempe dole" (718-719). Though the reader does not get to experience the "woules," "wodwos", "bullez", "berez", or "borez" that Gawain encounters in the wilderness, the reader sees Gawain arrive at Hautdesert in a sense of weariness that must be remedied before he meets the Green Knight. By depriving Gawain of the comfort he receives in Camelot and Hautdesert during the journey between the two, the wilderness creates an openness to difference via weariness that would not be there if the journey had not been as treacherous. Much like an actual virus, monstrosity thrives on those who are worn out, those who have deprived themselves from the luxury in which they once existed. When Gawain's mental and physical defenses are lowered, monstrosity can creep in and take over. Williams reminds us that monsters are created out of the place in which they exist, as mentioned before. Friedman also tells us that, "where monstrous beings live has a definite relationship to their nature" (151-152). By existing briefly in a lawless place filled with monsters that run rampant, lawlessness, and a lack of human-like structure, Gawain continues his descent into monstrosity. He is ever-so-slightly open to the wickedness of Hautdesert and

the black magic that awaits him there due to this small part of the journey that even the poet thinks is too much to recount.

Because of his weariness, his stay at Hautdesert offers a restful retreat where he may sleep as much as he wishes to recover from his hard journey. What he does not know is that Lady Bertilak will do her best to ensure she tempts Gawain sexually, and her goal is to get him to break his chastity and purity before he faces the Green Knight. First, she tempts him with the idea of privacy, saying:

> 'My lorde and his ledez are on lenþe faren,/ Oþer burnez in her bedde, and my burdez als,/ þe dor drawen and dir with a derf haspe;. . . ȝ ear welcum to my cors,/ Yowre awen won to wale.' (1231-1233, 1236-1237)

Assuring Gawain that they are alone, she also gives him permission to her body. While this is socially progressive in looking for consent before acting on sexual urges, Lady Bertilak is simply looking for Gawain to slip up in his chivalric code. She tempts him the second day with these words: "I com hider sengel and sitte/ To lerne at yow sum game;/ Dos techez me of your wytte,/ Whil my lorde is fro hame" (1531-1534). Once again assuring Gawain that they are alone, Lady Bertilak attempts to get Gawain to explain his history of love before her, again awaiting him to admit to something or do something outside of his chivalric code. On the third day, Gawain's ability to stall Lady Bertilak is no longer a stronghold, and she offers him the girdle. Lady Bertilak makes Gawain think that he cannot escape his fate without the girdle, as it would save him. However, by accepting the girdle, Gawain receives more than he bargained for. As mentioned before, the text states, "Ho laȝt a lace lyȝtly þat leke vmbe hir sydez,/ Knit vpon hir kyrtel, vnder þe clere mantyle" (1830-1831). In these few words, the poet alludes to the fact that the

girdle is the only fastener on Lady Bertilak's robe. Gawain's probable viewing of Lady Bertilak's naked body violates many knightly virtues. Llull states, "stealing honour means bestowing villainy and ill fame upon each [involved]" (52). In each instance of temptation, Gawain becomes weaker. By the end of the bedroom scenes, Gawain falls into the trap of the girdle, because he believes losing his life is too much for him to handle with God alone. Jessica Cooke argues this about Gawain taking the girdle:

> She learns from Gawain's resistance and finally offers the girdle, combining the qualities which will appeal most to him: lack of material worth and an avowed ability to save his life, which she describes with the most tempting of language. Offering the greatest possibility of protection from harm and the least material value, Gawain succumbs to the gift least damaging to his honour. (7)

Gawain chooses the girdle over sexual advances, and over an offering of a ring that would cast them as courtly lovers, because, as Cooke states, it has the least consequences in Gawain's eyes. R. J. Moll states, "In order to survive this adventure Gawain must be more than the haughty hero of history, and the Green Knight's insults must be silenced with more than the swing of a sword (or an axe)" (801). Gawain accepts the girdle because he knows he must save his life, but he also knows he must take the girdle to get Lady Bertilak to back off. If he accepts anything other than the girdle, then he has denied almost every pillar of knighthood by giving into pleasure and temptation. The problem, however, is the girdle becomes the object that holds the guilt and shame, and he clings to it for the rest of the poem.

Sill wearing the girdle, Gawain heads out to the Green Chapel to meet the Green Knight. After a few swings from the axe, the Green Knight reveals his identity and his agreement with Morgan to try and bring down the Round Table. He also points out that Gawain is wearing his wife's girdle, stating: "For hit is my wede þat þou werez, þat ilke wounen gridel./ Myn owen wyf hit þe weued, I wot wel forsoþe" (2357-2358). The Green Knight uses this as rationale for giving Gawain the nick that I will explore later. Further, the Green Knight tells Gawain that he would not have to worry so much if he did not depend upon his reputation. The Green Knight states, "Bot here yow lakked al lytel, sir, and lewte yow wonted;/ Bot þat watz for ny wylyde werke, ne wowing nauþer,/ Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf—þe lasse I yow blame" (2366-2368). Gawain fails his chivalry, according to the Green Knight, by loving his life too much. Llull discusses the idea of integrity within knighthood and chivalry stating, "A malfeasant knight who fears more desperately for the strength of his body. . .does not practice the office of the knight because of villainy and weakness, or he does not serve or obey the honored Order of Chivalry" (28-29). According to Llull, a knight cannot be chivalric if he loves his earthly self too much, and Gawain is not only guilty of this, but the Green Knight calls him out. Conor McCarthy argues, "In that sense, [The Green Knight] is correct to give the girdle the value that he does, for Gawain, the representative of the Arthurian court, remains preeminent among knights 'in god fayth' in Bertilak's view" (305). He goes on to say that Gawain "falls short of absolute trawþe" (McCarthy 306). Trawþe, meaning righteousness or integrity, is a trait expected of those within the knighthood. According to McCarthy, the entirety of the poem "shows Gawain specifically exemplifying another sense of trawþe, that of 'faith or loyalty as pledged in a promise or agreement" (298),

however, he fails to mention that the girdle does, in fact, fail for Gawain. His trawþe has failed, as he chooses the girdle over the truth. Randy Schiff points out, "Gawain's failure to transform the green girdle into a personal sign foregrounds such degeneration" (83). The girdle was Gawain's only hope, but now it has ruined his quest, his reputation, and his livelihood. However, even though the girdle causes nothing but issues for Gawain, he chooses to continue to wear it for the rest of his days as a visual monstrous label.

As a physical reminder of his haphazard identity, Gawain wears the girdle around his chest as he returns to court and forevermore, much like a scarlet letter. Gawain cannot shake his mistakes and lack of order, so he must wear the girdle as a reminder that he will never be the same Gawain he once was. He says, "þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne./ And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may last;/ For mon may hyden his harme bot vnhap ne may hit/ For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer" (2509-2512). Proclaiming he will wear this for the rest of his life, Gawain gives the girdle the power to deform him. While Burrow agrees that it is a faulty object, noting "the girdle, lying diagonally across Gawain's coat armor and his pentangle, serves as a visible token of his fault" (109), the girdle goes further than a visual representation. The girdle deforms Gawain, as it represents the mistakes he made on his quest that will affect him forever. He deforms by the restriction around his midsection, and it is a reminder of his ineptitude. Wearing the girdle crossways, as stated earlier, through the pentangle and his armor, Gawain crosses out his faultlessness in religion with the exact symbol of his faultiness.

Gawain confesses his faults and the taking of the girdle, but the court sees them as part of the journey. At no point does the court see Gawain as a monster, but that exact

reaction is what dooms them all. He is not only restricted within his identity, but he also restricts himself from the Round Table because of his new mindset and physical traits. Monsters, as Williams reminds us, have physical traits that make them seem different from the rest of the society in which they exist. Gawain's physical reminder that he must feel shame, further disordering his identity, changes him from the knight he once was into the knight he now is. This shame and guilt, however, is not echoed by the court or Arthur. They see the girdle differently from Gawain, and they begin to wear it themselves. Gawain singlehandedly deforms all the Round Table. As they adopt the fashion statement, they deform themselves bit by bit. Kevin West argues, "Net honor accrues to Camelot out of Gawain's experience, even if – and even because – there was a moment of dishonor at the Green Chapel" (13). Though West is right in assuming the rest of the court is affected by Gawain's choices, he is wrong to assume those choices bring honor to them. Manish Sharma states, "For Gawain, the prime representative of an integrated chivalric culture, the girdle is a mark of absolute division and disconnection" (182). The dishonor that happens all throughout Gawain's quest comes back to harm the Round Table in the end, creating disconnection for Gawain and division between the knights and chivalry. The court flippantly react to Gawain's lack of chivalry, religion, and feudal loyalty to Arthur. They even "Laȝen loude þerat and luflyly accorden" (2514) that Gawain holds no fault after his third confession. Though the court does adopt the girdle in honor of Gawain and his bravery, it becomes laughable. In fact, a later reader and scribe assumed it to be connected to the Order of the Garter[5] (1350), adding to the

[5] The Order of the Garter, 1350, was adopted by the English knights as a sign of chivalry. Started in 1348 by King Edward III to mimic Arthur's Round Table fellowship, this order came out of a wardrobe malfunction at a dance. A garter fell off the woman's leg that he was dancing with, and he wore it on the outside of his clothes and admonished anyone who was gawking or naysaying. From there, the Order of the

manuscript “HONI SUIT QUI MAL PENCE”. According to Marie Borroff, this phrase means, “Evil be to him who evil thinks” (64). The placement of this phrase stumps scholars, as Henry Savage says, “There is almost nothing to be gleaned from the marginal notations of this unique manuscript” (146). However, the later scribe comparing the Order of the Garter to Gawain’s struggle lightens the tale slightly, assuring the audience that it was all a harmless game. Nonetheless, this tale should not be taken lightly. Gawain loses all honor and courage in himself within the girdle, and the text suggests he will no longer be able to maintain his old status within the Round Table. The lack of identity within a knight is fatal because the order and structure within the guidelines of knighthood and chivalry create a knight’s reason for living; without that reason, a knight becomes a deformed creature. Julie Rivkin states, “Our mental lives derive largely from biological drives, that the highest achievements and ideals of civilization are inseparable from instinctual urges toward pleasure, constancy, and the release of excitation and energy” (119). Gawain, then, places his identity within the girdle, and he is only capable of making his deformed ideas and thoughts come to life in biological actions. He becomes deformed as the girdle becomes a physical part of his body.

Part of Gawain’s identity within knighthood is a feeling of belonging and safety within Camelot. When Gawain feels he belongs, he is apt to let down his defenses and adopt the ways of those around him. He feels he belongs in Camelot, and he had a good reputation, as discussed in Chapter 1. After the journey through Logres in Fitt ii and iii, Gawain again feels the sense of belonging within Hautdesert. The *Gawain*-poet hints to the reader that Gawain is more like the Green Knight than anyone knows as he settles in

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Garter became a highly appointed knight to the king. Carruthers tells us, “The Knights of the Garter wear two emblems, a blue ribbon with a gold border above the left knee, and a dark blue sash” (68).

at Hautdesert. Throughout the poem, Gawain begins to resemble the Green Knight, but Hautdesert gets the transformation started. As soon as Gawain leaves Camelot, he will never return the same, because Lady Bertilak and the Green knight influenced Gawain too much to ever retain his reputation. Hautdesert blurs the line between right and wrong, and, in this confusion, Gawain forms into a new being. All of Gawain's physical changes are a result of the Green Knight. The Green Knight, of course, is a monster in the eyes of any human, but especially in the eyes of any 14th century human being. The Green Knight is, as stated, green, which according to Williams has "long since been associated with demonism" (269). Though the Green Knight is not a demon, he is a representation of the most evil creature within Arthurian literature—Morgan Le Fay. The Green Knight also has bright red eyes, and while this is not in celebration of Christmas, Williams asserts this discoloration is "a further association with the descendants of Cain[6]" (270). He adds, "The Green Knight is both a monster of excess, by his unnatural size, and of combination, by his mixed nature" (Williams 270). The Green Knight, though physically deformed, also exhibits inner monstrosity. He finds no problem, though under the control of Morgan, to demand Arthur to swing an axe at him and return the same in a year's time. He lives as an outsider in Hautdesert away from all civilization, and he confuses paganism and Christianity within his living space. Through all these things, inside and outside, the Green Knight is a proven monster. However, as the poem unfolds, Gawain begins to take on these tendencies as he becomes a monster himself. Gawain exhibits green in the "green lace" (2497) that lies across his chest for everyone to see. The text

[6] Cain, being an early human born of man, gave sacrifices to God along with his brother, Abel, who was a shepherd. God favored Abel's sacrifices, so Cain killed Abel. God exiled Cain to the wilderness, and God gave him a mark that was passed down to his descendants, according to the Bible.

implies that he will never take off the girdle, as it holds too much guilt and shame that Gawain wants to wallow in. If at the beginning of the poem Gawain is a cataphatic version of a knight, the Green Knight lives in apophasis, or the opposite, of Gawain. As the poem progresses, Gawain begins to fall into apophatic monstrosity that doubles the Green Knight.

The first instance that the Green Knight and Gawain double each other is in their armor, or lack thereof, upon meeting the head of the household. When the Green Knight enters Arthur's court, though sent on a dark mission, he "hade a holyn bobbe/ þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare/ And an ax in his oþer, a hoge and vnmete,/ A spestos sparþe to expound in spelle quoso myȝt" (206-209). The poem further describes him: "hade no helme ne hawbergh nauþer/ Ne no pysan ne no plate þat pented to armes/ Ne no schafte ne no schelde to schwue ne to smyte" (203-205). The Green Knight enters the court looking peaceful, but he is holding an axe in one hand. The axe, though threatening, is not intended for use upon anyone other than himself that evening, but the court and the reader are not inclined towards that fact when he enters the court. Williams claims, "the monster is the embodiment of paradox" (49). Paradox, as Williams states, is a major tenet of monstrosity. The Green Knight is clearly paradoxical as he enters Arthur's court. He arrives to have an axe swung, but only at him. He proclaims peace in his outer appearance, but he proposes and enforces a murderous game. He exists in a paradox that can only be monstrosity. Gawain mirrors this paradoxical nature as he enters the Green Chapel. Gawain comes to fulfill his end of the bargain, but Gawain is cheating with the girdle. He exists in a moment where he looks chivalrous from the outside, but he

is indefinitely monstrous on the inside, quite like the Green Knight's entrance into Camelot.

A further paradoxical trait of the Green Knight and Gawain are their religious beliefs. While the late 14th century held much confusion as to which religion, Christianity, or paganism, was right or wrong, most of society believed Christianity, particularly Catholicism, to be at the center of their lives. Jaspert writes that Christianity in the late 14th century was, "a hierarchically structured, well-organized, and overarching church. . . an institution that did not preach religious diversity, indeed quite the contrary" (390). Catholicism lies in the roots of chivalry, and Christianity is a religion that must exist alone, meaning there could be no mixing of Christianity and pagan practices to be a true Christian. Society no longer accepted mixed religions as a valuable belief system, and it was considered sacrilegious to practice the two side-by-side. The issue with the two main characters within the poem is their conflation of paganism and Christianity. It seems that one line, they are praying to God, while the next, they are praising Morgan's great power and paganistic magic. Llull warns that chivalry depends upon God, and without it, a knight would not be within the Order of Chivalry. If chivalry is out the window, God is surely thrown out, too.

Equally monstrous, though it does not seem so when he first arrives, is Gawain's entrance into Hautdesert. Gawain is quickly stripped of his armor before he meets Bertilak. He is dressed in the same way the Green Knight was, sans the holly bob and axe, as he meets Bertilak in the grand hall. The poem states, "Quen he hef vp his helme þer hiȝed innoghe/ For to hent hit at his honed, þe hende to seruen/ His bronde and his blasoun boþe þay token" (826-828). The servants take his armor, and the poet repeats all

the armor that is now missing, just as (s)he did when the Green Knight entered Camelot. While the Green Knight enters armor-less on purpose and Gawain almost by force, they are both exhibiting peace with their costuming overall. The Green Knight and Gawain have switched places in these two scenes, as Gawain is now the peaceful visitor to a new court, and the Green Knight is the happy host. In this switch, Gawain also becomes paradoxical, though he does not know it at the time. The Green Knight, as Bertilak, offers him hospitality and comfort, though Gawain knows he is on this quest to seek violence. While at Hautdesert, Gawain is merely looking for a place to attend Mass and further root himself into Christianity before he dies, but he finds a better lifestyle in lies and paganism. As he enters the Green Chapel, Gawain continues to mirror the Green Knight's actions as the Green Knight entered Camelot. Gawain calls out, "'Who stiȝtlez in þis sted, me steuen to holde? For now is god Gawayn goande ryȝt here./ If any wyȝe oȝt wyl, wynne hider fast,/ Oþer now oþer neuer, his nedez to spede'" (2213-2215). Gawain calls for the Green Knight as the Green Knight called for Arthur. The text states earlier when the Green Knight is in Camelot, "'Wher is,' he sayd/ ''þe gournour of þis gyng?/ Gladly I would/ Se þat segg in syȝt and with himself speke raysoun'" (224-226). He specifically wants to speak with Arthur, as Arthur was supposed to complete the beheading game. In all situations, both the Green Knight and Gawain ask to speak with the leader of the place in which the beheading will take place. While this is just a courtly and hospitable action, it is important to note that they address the lord/king in the same way. Scott Troyan argues, "[This] makes the two knights parallel to one another" (386). While Troyan points out that only their speech acts are similar, they are also similar in looks and deeds.

The Green Knight, just as Arthur, waits in the shadows for the spectacle to come to him. In fact, he is preparing by grinding his axe.

The Green Knight and Gawain are not only similar in their entrances and challenging of the beheading game, but they are also both confused with the intertwining of religious practices in Hautdesert. Before the beheading, Hautdesert presents a tangle of the two religious practices. Symbolically, this place represents the tension between the two belief systems, and it also represents Gawain's inner fight to keep his faith in line. Within the castle, Lady Bertilak wears a girdle that she convinces Gawain is magical. She tells Gawain, "For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace/ While he hit hade hemely halched acoute/ þer is no haþel vnder heuen to þewe hym þat myȝt/ For he myȝt noy he slayn for slyȝt vpon erþe" (1851-1854). This girdle, which Gawain believes to be magical, is a token held within Hautdesert. Though the Bertilaks know the magic to be false, they are still willing to go along with Morgan's magic that is real within the poem, and they are willing to advance the lie that Gawain's life may be saved to ensure their good standing with Morgan. The Bertilaks hold Morgan in their home as an honored guest, and she controls their every action while her plan plays out. Bertilak seems to be more than okay with this setup, saying: "Morgne þe goddess/ þerfore hit is hir name:/ Weldez non so hyȝe hawtesse/ þat ho ne con make ful tame" (2451-2453). Bertilak goes as far as to praise her for her power in this scene; he describes to Gawain that he is under her control, and the Green Knight has been since he entered Camelot. Bertilak approves of Morgan's evil plans, or he admires her power and evil. Bertilak sees Morgan as a sort of wonder, and he does not condemn her awful plans to take down the Round Table. In fact, he actively participates. He has no problem with Morgan's actions in this scene,

showing his monstrous mind as well as his monstrous body in the Green Chapel. Even with a priest on site, Bertilak is drawn to the plans of Morgan. Gawain is affected by Morgan more than he realizes throughout the poem as she recreates his mental battle between the belief systems at Hautdesert. She manifests his doubt and guilt into the real as Gawain waits for the day in which he must go to the Green Chapel.

Furthermore, Bertilak's confusing religious practices are shown in full swing as Gawain makes himself comfortable during his stay. When Gawain first arrives at Hautdesert, he is looking for Mass, as discussed in Chapter 2. He does attend that service, and the men also attend Mass before going hunting. The text says, "[Bertilak] ete a sop hastily when he hande herde masse" (1135). Bertilak himself verbalizes "God's grace" (920), and "God love you, Sir Gawain" (2239). However, Bertilak also calls on Gog[7] when he is disguised as the Green Knight. By referencing a demon in the face of a trial, the Green Knight invokes a sense of paganism that overtakes him. The reader also knows, along with Mass, confession happens on the premises.[8] With a priest and a sorceress on the premises of the castle, Hautdesert is essentially paradoxical in nature. It is neither fully pagan nor Christian, but a taste of both. Gawain encounters this confusion of paganism and Christianity, and he wears it on his body for the rest of time. As he stays in Hautdesert, he begins to lose what it means to be a Christian, and in that, he becomes increasingly monstrous without his visual representations of Mary or the newly-described as Christian pentangle.

[7] Marie Borroff writes that Gog is a supernatural creature and pagan God of the demonic realm that often represented the end of time (13).

Though the poem makes no mention of a scar on the Green Knight's neck from the axe at Gawain's hand, the reader knows that they will soon have matching nicks on their neck. The beheading action of both the Green Knight and Gawain creates a circularity within the poem, and it creates a sense of doubling and reversal. In this alternate universe, the Green Knight is in charge. Arthur cannot help Gawain, and Gawain must face the agreement he made with bravery and courage as he switches places with the Green Knight as the receiver of the blow. Just as the Green Knight did in Arthur's court, Gawain "lened with þe nek and lute/ And schewed þat schyre al bare,/ And lette as he noȝt dutte/ For drede he wolde not dare" (2255-2258). Gawain perfectly emulates the Green Knight from the beginning of the poem when the Green Knight "a little lut with þe hede, þe lere he discouerez/ His longe louelych lokkez he layed ouer his crown" (417-418). By mirroring the experience within Camelot in the Green Chapel, the two characters further exemplify their mirroring or doubling. The two become even closer in Gawain becoming increasingly like the Green Knight. In the action of giving their bare necks to each other, they maintain the promises made. However, in this action they abandon any sense of humility or ego. The power is in the one who holds the axe, and the image of a martyr is created for Gawain. Because the process is not completed, however, Gawain does not get to die in the name of God and Arthur. He simply gets a nick on his neck, and he must return to court and explain all his wrongdoing. The biggest punishment here is not gaining the reputation he wanted, and instead, Gawain receives a nick on his neck as shame that he must explain to all. Instead of completing the beheading game to become a martyr in the place of Arthur, he lies about the girdle and

becomes a monster in the place of the Green Knight. In this, Gawain and the Green Knight become one.

In further becoming one, their beheading ceremonies further demonstrate a sense of doubling. They both live through this action, though the Green Knight's is a completed beheading, while Gawain's is a small nick. The text explains the Green Knights as follows:

> For þe hede in his honed he haldez vp euen./ Toward þe derrest on þe dece he dresses þe face/ . . . 'Loke, Gawan, þou be grayþe to go as þou hettez/ And layte as lelly til þou me, lude, fynde/ As þou hatz hette in þis halle, herande þis kny3tes' (444-445, 447-449).

Gawain figuratively loses his head by the nick on the neck. Gawain states:

> 'Blynne, nurne of þy bur! Bede me no mo!/ I haf a stroke in þis sted without stryf hent/ And if þow rechez me any mo I redyly schal quyte/ and 3elde 3ederly a3ayn – and þerto 3e tryst—and foo./ Bot on stroke here me fallez --/ þe couenant schop ry3t so, Festned in Aþurez hallez--/ And þerefore, hende, now hoo!' (2322-2329).

Gawain is under the impression, though, that he will die at the hands of the Green Knight. By raising his voice in anger, as explored in Chapter 1, Gawain loses his rationality. He becomes violent and upset. Evelyn Reynolds writes, "The world's best class is characterized by

violence; violence looms behind hospitality; violence inflects all human games" (48). Violence is an art, with its own terminology and propriety. When the Green Knight takes a violent blow to the neck and loses his head, he is a monster, and he is also a spectacle

for King Arthur's feast. When Gawain takes a few less violent axe swings to the head, he is a spectacle for the Green Knight and the audience. The main difference here is that Gawain can deform further through this action into the apophatic version of himself via the violence put on him. The Green Knight is already deformed; he is already an apophatic version of Gawain within the Christian knighthood, whether or not he is decapitated. When Gawain receives the small cut on his neck, he becomes even more ashamed and full of guilt. He receives an earthly punishment for a heavenly sin, and he threatens to "pay back each blow" if the Green Knight tries again. Gawain is happy to have escaped with his life, but the disappointment soon sets in that he did not die in the name of Arthur or God. Gawain completely negates his former identity in that he did not replace Arthur, because the game is incomplete, he has a cut on his neck due to his ineptitude, and he is further deformed physically into a monster.

The Green Knight feels it necessary for Gawain to have the nick on his neck due to his near-infidelity with Lady Bertilak and his taking of the girdle to save his life, but the nick on his neck is a physical deformity. The Green Knight tells Gawain, "Trwe mon trwe restore;/ þenne þar mon drede no waþe./ At þe þrid þour fayled þore,/ And þerfor þat tappe ta þe" (2253-2256). By saying this, the Green Knight ensures Gawain that he has to take the third tap on his neck due to his actions in Hautdesert, but specifically because he took Lady Bertilak's girdle. Gawain responds with, "'foule mot hit falle!/ For care of þe knokke, cowardyse me taȝt/ To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake:/ þat is larges and lewte, þat longes to knyȝtez'" (2378-2381). He knows that he has done wrong, and he confesses this to the Green Knight. However, Gawain does not confess his

wrongdoing until after the Green Knight points out the girdle, and thus he receives the nick. Williams claims:

> Gawain's girdle, worn as a kind of explication of the scar that has replaced the wound on his neck, is a sign of a trace of a state of deformity that is both origin and terminus of all form, all affirmation, and all constructs of the intellect. . . and associates him with all the headless, monstrous forms of teratology. (281)

Williams rightly assumes that the scar on Gawain's neck is enough to lead him into a somewhat monstrous form sometime down the road. However, at this point in the poem, Gawain has become the monster that he has to face. No longer is he scared of what the Green Knight may do to him; as he enters Camelot with the nick, he fears what the people may do to him. Furthermore, the nick works as a permanent reminder of his choices on his quest. He can no longer be the perfect knight he once was if he has a physical defect to remind him of his faults. In the Green Chapel after the Green Knight offers him a place to stay for a few more knights, Gawain cannot get out of there fast enough. The poet describes Gawain's reaction to this invitation to feast with his aunt, Morgan, "And he nicked hym 'Naye!' – he nolde bi no wayes" (2471). When he arrives in Camelot, however, he mentions the nick as the worst wound, stating: "þis blame I bere in my nek./ þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laȝt haue" (2505-2506). Gawain goes on to say that the girdle reminds him of the scar, which in turn reminds him of his "couardise" and "couetyse" and "vntrawþe" that the quest brought him (2508, 2509). The destruction that gives the girdle and Morgan strength is Gawain's identity. Within these physical

markers, he creates an allegory of death, as Baudrillard calls it, as it affects the rest of the Round Table.

While Gawain starts as the perfect Christian knight physically, he deforms greatly in each setting within the poem. He deforms into the worst parts of the Green Knight, making Gawain a monstrous creature instead of a perfect one as he chooses to lurk outside of the Round Table. While the Green Knight only cares about upholding his verbal contracts, Gawain ends up only caring about the swing of the axe and his shame. He has lost his faith in God, and he has replaced it with a fluctuating sense of validity in his mistakes. His identity is now his scar and the girdle, and his physicality is now focused on the traits of the Green Knight. As Gawain brings his monstrosity back to the Round Table, it is important to emphasize that he is an alter-ego of his former self, as he has taken on the identity of the Green Knight. His identity is no longer within chivalry, knighthood, or Christianity, but it lies within what he has learned from the Green Knight. Cohen writes, "The monster can function as an alter-ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self" (17). Gawain, the former Arthurian knight, is no longer what he once was. Instead, he is an Other; he has become the evil that resides in the Green Knight through the scar and the girdle, and his guilt and shame further deform his identity into an unrecognizable subject. Through the process of physically breaking down through lust, taking the girdle, the scar, and his religious confusion, Gawain must reform his identity. Gawain chooses, however, to become something new under the guidance of the Green Knight. Williams tells us that a broken-down identity cannot be replaced perfectly; the shapes simply will not fit together correctly after they have been broken, creating chaos and disorder. Here, in a crossroad of good and evil, Gawain chooses monstrosity. He

chooses to live in guilt and never return to the man he was. He emboldens his monstrosity by choosing not to accept forgiveness and not to take off the girdle. Gawain spreads the monstrosity to the knights of the Round Table in his own selfish identity crisis. Godden writes,

> The green lace, which was a signifier of his personal appropriation of failure becomes a public sign of the court. . . No longer a sign of just Gawain's struggle, the lace now appends to the fame of the Round Table. . . . Gawain finds his personal identity submerged in the larger renown of Arthur and the Court. (168).

Without a sense of identity within Arthur's court after a great quest where he is essentially Arthur's surrogate, Gawain cannot fit in anymore. Cohen adds to Godden, "Every monster, in this way, is a double narrative, two living stories: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves" (13). As Gawain doubles the Green Knight, he creates a new identity. William F. Woods states, "And so the Green Knight's array – the woven and the growing – hints at the boundary area he inhabits between courtly and wild, or inner and outer nature" (12). Gawain, then, also inhabits the space between courtly and wild, due to his taking on of the Green Knight's qualities. He cannot be courtly because of the shame within the scar and the axe, and he cannot be wild due to his former reputation and the court taking the girdle as a new symbol of greatness. The court believes the narrative that Gawain is forever the same; he is forgiven, and he should not be ashamed. They believe he did what he had to do, and he has returned unchanged. Gawain, however, has lost his hope and faith. He lives in the second narrative which he cannot escape, and he shames

himself out of the community. Gawain's belief in his own monstrosity pushes him out of the boundaries of the Round Table, and it puts the rest of the knights in danger of the fall.

The physical deformation of Gawain is a small but important part of his transformation into a monster. Though most of his actual monstrosity lurks within, he does obtain some physical attributes of a monster as he spends time with the Green Knight. Ashley Combest argues,

> The Green Knight functions as a kind of imago for Gawain, both revealing his inadequacy and compelling him into maturation. For Gawain, the Green Knight, much like Arthur, reflects what he is not. (14)

The maturation that happens here, of course, is the change from human to monster within Gawain, but the Green Knight guides Gawain into this new lifestyle. Without any interaction with the Green Knight, Gawain would have maintained his reputation. He would not have gained the girdle, the temptation of Lady Bertilak, the scar, or any paganistic leanings. The Green Knight gave him a guide to monstrosity, and Gawain took to it, as it is an easier way to live in his eyes. Furthermore, Gawain doubling the Green Knight creates a strong assumption that monstrosity is learned and contagious. By bringing the Green Knight's monstrosity back to the Round Table, Gawain sets all the knights up for failure. It does not take long for the girdle to take hold, and, according to the Arthurian canon, it does not take long for the Round Table to fall.

Conclusion:

Throughout the poem, Gawain deforms from what he was originally. Culturally, he deforms through breaking social norms, lying, omitting the truth, breaking promises, and speaking pridefully of himself as a knight and a Christian. Through this breaking of cultural norms, he deforms at the mouth. As Williams reminds us, the head is the seat of reason, which means a deformation on the face would cause a sense of monstrosity. By lying to those around him, he no longer fits into the social bonds that he once had, and his reputation is ruined. Religiously, he forgoes his adherence to Catholicism, and he creates a false faith that is centered in paganism. He gives up his beliefs in Hautdesert and further in the Green Chapel; he trades Mary for Morgan Le Fay as he takes the green girdle, he trusts in magic, and he lusts after Lady Bertilak. He keeps the pentangle close to heart, which has been considered a pagan symbol before it was a Christian one described by the *Gawain*-poet. Physically, he deforms himself by wearing the girdle, the nick on his neck, and doubling as the Green Knight.

Gawain is the real monster of the poem not only through the cultural, religious, and physical deformation of his body and soul, but also through his loss of identity. He apophatically negates his former identity without hesitation. Williams argues, "In the *via negativa*, as in the ontological 'return,' each differentiation of dialectical philosophy is stripped away, its multiplicity reduced, and its presence replaced by absence" (33). In the negative view, Gawain has had all his structures, or philosophies, taken from him, but he chooses not to pick them back up. He chooses not to fight for his old self as soon as he walks into Hautdesert, and his identity goes with it. Without his identity as a knight, he no longer fits into the Round Table. His identity as a Catholic Christian is also in

question, leading to his two identifiers and pillars of livelihood in question. Without a firm hold on who he is and what he believes in, Gawain loses himself. Through this loss of self, monstrosity takes hold. Friedman argues that the physicality of a monster stems directly from their origin, writing, "Moral disposition and physical appearance were firmly rooted in the medieval concept of place" (50). While Gawain left Camelot the perfect Christian knight, he spent time in a place of monstrosity, and he gained those characteristics while he was there. When he returned, his morality and physicality were marred, and his sense of belonging had vanished due to his learned characteristics in Hautdesert and the Green Chapel. If we also latch on to Friedman's idea that God creates disorder to teach a lesson (123), then the Round Table missed the mark. If Gawain is made monstrous by God to prove to the Round Table that they are headed down the wrong path, they did anything but listen. Williams argues, "The monster depends heavily on the process of analogy and transfer" (75). This means that Gawain thrives in his newly made monstrosity only by being compared to the Green Knight, or comparing himself to an irredeemable sinner, and transferring this shame and guilt to his fellow knights of the Round Table. Gawain not only compares himself to shamed people and monstrous beings, he also transfers his monstrosity to others through the adoption of the girdle in the Round Table.

Similarly, Gawain cannot sustain the identity he has at the beginning of the poem. Combest argues:

> Though Gawain's journey is a circular one, it does not allow for the possibility of a return, nor does it sustain a whole or stable identity. The circular imagery constructs a hole which displaces Gawain, for the moment Gawain agrees to the Green Knight's

> terms in taking up the axe, he must undertake a quest in which he loses himself. He accepts entry into culture through an oral contract and is thus inscribed into an alienating narrative of loss. His journey occupies a borderland or liminal space, encircling an empty center or uninhabitable sphere. (Combest 12)

As Gawain tries to figure out who he is through this quest, his reputed identity crumbles into monstrosity. He cannot function, as Combest suggests, due to this huge loss. Through this, he should have gained a deeper faith, physical stamina, and mental toughness. What he actually receives through this journey is the guide to monstrosity. Williams argues, "Loss of self is related to loss of form and to loss of order" (81). If Gawain loses his identity, he no longer has a form to exist in, and he no longer can exist within an order. His despair at the end of the poem is enough to inform the reader that this quest was a lose-lose situation. He states, "'For where a fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore'" (2512). If he did die at the Green Chapel, his entire journey was a waste of a good knight, but he would have lived on in martyrdom; if he lived through the beheading game, he was not going to return the same. The war inside his head as he loses his identity creates a space for an entirely new identity; one where he can completely disregard everything he knew before. He cannot return to his flawless identity in the eyes of God, and he must stick to his marred identity in the eyes of himself.

Extending that idea, Gawain is not exactly identity-less, but he has created a new shamed identity within the girdle and the nick on his neck where he must be filled with guilt and remembrance of his mistakes. He rests his shame and guilt within these two physical traits, which also alters his mental state. This is where the doubling of the Green Knight changes him as a knight. Even if the Green Knight absolved him, "I hold you as

polished as a pearl, as pure and as bright,/ As you had lived free of fault since first you were born" (2393-2394), Gawain holds a new identity within his lack of acceptance of forgiveness. Cox argues:

> At the moment of Gawain's anguished expressions of contrition, the Green Knight, in declaring him absolved of whatever debts he might have incurred to Bertilak, discursively creates for him a new identity. . . Because identity is performative . . . it is subject to the interpretive biases and agendas of those who witness its construction and performance. (162)

Gawain is not insistent or stuck in his monstrosity. As Cox argues, he must choose to perform this action. His choice of wearing the belt and feeling guilty is performative. He must seem like he cannot and will not be forgiven to enable himself to get over his loss of reputation. Due to his mistakes, he feels he cannot be redeemed. Further, Gawain's identity issues foreshadow the fall of the Round Table and Arthur's demise. Godden argues:

> Statements of non-identity that haunt Gawain throughout the poem gesture towards the non-simultaneity of his reputation with himself. . . The knight's presentation in this poem enacts a historical fantasy that attempts to conjure … the trauma of the inevitable downfall of the Arthurian order. (153)

Gawain's identity, as Godden says, is not only hard to grasp for those around him; he cannot accept the identity switch within himself. Not only can he not continue within the order he once excelled in, but also he has poisoned it to the extent that it is doomed for its downfall due to his actions and choices. Llull states:

> The Order of Chivalry must ensure that wisdom and common sense are loved, so that knights may honor the Order of Chivalry in the face of disorder and the failing that characterizes those who think they are following the honor of Chivalry through folly and ignorance. (49)

He sets all knights up for failure within this identity crisis and loss of chivalry, because it spreads from one knight to the next. McCarthy agrees, stating, "Gawain acts as the representative of Arthur and his court, it would seem that the quality being tested in Gawain, that of trawþe, must be regarded as a quality not unique to Gawain himself" (299). For every action and choice Gawain makes, he represents the whole of the Round Table. By making the choice to fall from grace, to break cultural norms, and to deform his rational side, he breaks the future of the Round Table a bit more.

By studying the poem through Monster Theory, and especially by focusing on Gawain, the reader is enlightened in a new way. Previous studies within Monster Theory focus solely on the Green Knight as the obvious and only monster in the poem. While he is a monster, and he fits the traits of many descriptions from the Middle Ages, many scholars do not consider that his traits may spread to those around him. Gawain, on the other side, has always been viewed as the victim. In this lens the reader can see that Gawain chooses monstrosity repeatedly purposely. Williams asserts, "Disorder and formlessness deprive the mind of a habitual structure necessary for understanding and acting and, ultimately, for being" (77). He chooses to lie, break promises, lust after a woman, wear the girdle, give his religious iconography away, and believe in pagan magic. What scholars have omitted before is that Gawain is the worst monster in this poem due to the element of choice. The Green Knight is controlled by a fairy woman, the

strongest one in the Arthurian canon. Morgan guides the Green Knight, and he does not choose violence on his own. Gawain controls himself, and he chooses each negative action in the face of danger. Williams says, “Disorder frees the mind in certain circumstances from the restrictions of order and reason” (77). While this is true, and it is exactly what Gawain does, his freedom from restriction and order means he has doomed his fellow knights, and he has freed his mind to the point of dissociation from self and association with the monstrous.

Becoming a monster is not a small feat, but Gawain makes it seem almost easy. Williams argues, “Differentiation and coordination are equally essential to form and to order; the monster’s kindship to disorder and chaos lies in its function of deforming” (82). Gawain deforms quickly and easily, so much so that Arthur’s court follows his lead. A large part of monstrosity lies in creating disorder, and by giving the court the idea to wear his shame on their bodies, too, Gawain creates an obvious and physical disorder to the knights. There are many reasons for the fall of the Round Table, but Gawain embodies all the negative traits that precede the fall. Before he left Camelot, he represented the ideal Medieval knight. He was a pure Christian; he sat at the high table during feasts. What this poem tells the reader is not that shame and guilt are the correct ways to return from a quest focused on finding faith and testing chivalry, but that even the ideal man and the perfect knight cannot uphold a reputation of perfection. The poem demonstrates that Gawain’s monstrosity comes from the fact that the structures in which he existed are not compatible. In a haphazard mixture of chivalry, courtly love, and religion, Gawain becomes tangled in too many structures to adhere perfectly to any of them. Gawain has taken that societal pressure of those structures on himself, and he has

created a microcosm of the Middle Ages within his own body. Because of this, he has become a culturally, religiously, and physically deformed monster, and he has doomed the Round Table for their fall under the reign of King Arthur. Instead of lurking on the outside as most monsters do, Gawain has infected those on the inside, creating issues to come.

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