

SparkNotes Editors. "SparkNote on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." SparkNotes.com. SparkNotes LLC. 2003. Web. 16 Dec. 2010.

Character List

Sir Gawain - The story's protagonist, Arthur's nephew and one of his most loyal knights. Although he modestly disclaims it, Gawain has the reputation of being a great knight and courtly lover. He prides himself on his observance of the five points of chivalry in every aspect of his life. Gawain is a pinnacle of humility, piety, integrity, loyalty, and honesty. His only flaw proves to be that he loves his own life so much that he will lie in order to protect himself. Gawain leaves the Green Chapel penitent and changed.

Green Knight - A mysterious visitor to Camelot. The Green Knight's huge stature, wild appearance, and green complexion set him apart from the beardless knights and beautiful ladies of Arthur's Camelot. He is an ambiguous figure: he says that he comes in friendship, not wanting to fight, but the friendly game he proposes is quite deadly. He attaches great importance to verbal contracts, expecting Sir Gawain to go to great lengths to hold up his end of their bargain. The Green Knight shows himself to be a supernatural being when he picks up his own severed head and rides out of Arthur's court, still speaking. At the same time, he seems to symbolize the natural world, in that he is killed and reborn as part of a cycle. At the poem's end, we discover that the Green Knight is also Bertilak, Gawain's host, and one of Morgan le Faye's minions.

Bertilak of Hautdesert - The sturdy, good-natured lord of the castle where Gawain spends Christmas. We only learn Bertilak's name at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The poem associates Bertilak with the natural world—his beard resembles a beaver, his face a fire—but also with the courtly behavior of an aristocratic host. Boisterous, powerful, brave, and generous, Lord Bertilak provides an interesting foil to King Arthur. At the end of the poem we learn that Bertilak and the Green Knight are the same person, magically enchanted by Morgan le Faye for her own designs.

Bertilak's wife - Bertilak's wife attempts to seduce Gawain on a daily basis during his stay at the castle. Though the poem presents her to the reader as no more than a beautiful young woman, Bertilak's wife is an amazingly clever debater and an astute reader of Gawain's responses as she argues her way through three attempted seductions. Flirtatious and intelligent, Bertilak's wife ultimately turns out to be another pawn in Morgan le Faye's plot.

Morgan le Faye - The Arthurian tradition typically portrays Morgan as a powerful sorceress, trained by Merlin, as well as the half sister of King Arthur. Not until the last one hundred lines do we discover that the old woman at the castle is Morgan le Faye and that she has controlled the poem's entire action from beginning to end. As she often does in Arthurian literature, Morgan appears as an enemy of Camelot, one who aims to cause as much trouble for her half brother and his followers as she can.

King Arthur - The king of Camelot. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthur is young and beardless, and his court is in its golden age. Arthur's refusal to eat until he hears a fantastic tale shows the petulance of youth, as does Arthur's initial stunned response to the Green Knight's challenge. However, like a good king, Arthur soon steps forward to take on the challenge. At the story's end, Arthur joins his nephew in wearing a green girdle on his arm, showing that Gawain's trial has taught him about his own fallibility.

Queen Guinevere - Arthur's wife. The beautiful young Guinevere of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to have little in common with the one of later Arthurian legend. She sits next to Gawain at the New Year's feast and remains a silent, objectified presence in the midst of the knights of the Round Table.

Gringolet - Gawain's horse.

Analysis of Major Characters

Sir Gawain

Though Gawain and Guinevere share the high table at the New Year's celebration in Arthur's court, he describes himself as the least of Arthur's knights in terms of both physical prowess and mental ability. His modest claim to inferiority and his high status at court—he is Arthur's nephew and one of Camelot's most famous knights—testify to both his humility and his ambition. Gawain seeks to improve his inner self throughout the poem. After Gawain arrives at Bertilak's castle in Part 2, it is evident that his reputation is quite widespread. To Gawain, his public reputation is as important as his own opinion of himself, and he therefore insists on wearing the green girdle as a sign of shame at the story's end. He believes that sins should be as visible as virtues.

Even though the Green Knight essentially tricks Gawain by not telling him about his supernatural abilities before asking Gawain to agree to his terms, Gawain refuses to back out of their deal. He stands by his commitments absolutely, even when it means jeopardizing his own life. The poem frequently reiterates Gawain's deep fears and anxieties, but Gawain's desire to maintain his

personal integrity at all costs enables him to conquer his fears in his quest for the Green Knight.

Gawain is a paragon of virtue in Parts 1 and 2 of the poem. But in Part 3 he conceals from his host the magical green girdle that the host's wife gives him, revealing that, despite his bravery, Gawain values his own life more than his honesty. Ultimately, however, Gawain confesses his sin to the knight and begs to be pardoned; thereafter, he voluntarily wears the girdle as a symbol of his sin. Because Gawain repents of his sin in such an honorable manner, his one indiscretion in the poem actually ends up being an example of his basic goodness.

Gawain is not a static character. In his encounter with the Green Knight, he recognizes the problematic nature of courtly ideals. When he returns to Arthur's court at Camelot, the other lords and ladies still look to him like lighthearted children, but Gawain is weighed down by a new somberness. Though he survives his quest, Gawain emerges at the end of the poem as a humbled man who realizes his own faults and has to live with the fact that he will never live up to his own high standards.

The Green Knight (also known as Bertilak de Hautdesert and the Host)

The Green Knight is a mysterious, supernatural creature. He rides into Arthur's court on New Year's Eve almost as if summoned by the king's request to hear a marvelous story. His supernatural characteristics, such as his ability to survive decapitation and his green complexion, immediately mark him as a foreboding figure. The Green Knight contrasts with Arthur's court in many ways. The knight symbolizes the wildness, fertility, and death that characterize a primeval world, whereas the court symbolizes an enclave of civilization within the wilderness. But, like the court, the Green Knight strongly advocates the values of the law and justice. And though his long hair suggests an untamed, natural state, his hair is cut into the shape of a courtly garment, suggesting that part of his function is to establish a relationship between wilderness and civilization, past and present.

At Gawain's scheduled beheading, the Green Knight reveals that he is also the host with whom Gawain stayed after his journeys through the wilderness, and that he is known as Bertilak de Hautdesert. As the host, we know Bertilak to be a courteous, jovial man who enjoys hunting for sport and playing games. A well-respected and middle-aged lord, the host contrasts with the beardless Arthur. In fact, his beard is "beaver-hued," a feature which associates the host with the Green Knight. Other clues exist in the text to connect the host with the Green Knight. For instance, both the Green Knight and the host value the power of verbal contracts. Each makes a covenant with Gawain, and the two agreements overlap at the end of the poem.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Nature of Chivalry

The world of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is governed by well-defined codes of behavior. The code of chivalry, in particular, shapes the values and actions of Sir Gawain and other characters in the poem. The ideals of chivalry derive from the Christian concept of morality, and the proponents of chivalry seek to promote spiritual ideals in a spiritually fallen world.

The ideals of Christian morality and knightly chivalry are brought together in Gawain's symbolic shield. The pentangle represents the five virtues of knights: friendship, generosity, chastity, courtesy, and piety. Gawain's adherence to these virtues is tested throughout the poem, but the poem examines more than Gawain's personal virtue; it asks whether heavenly virtue can operate in a fallen world. What is really being tested in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* might be the chivalric system itself, symbolized by Camelot.

Arthur's court depends heavily on the code of chivalry, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* gently criticizes the fact that chivalry values appearance and symbols over truth. Arthur is introduced to us as the "most courteous of all," indicating that people are ranked in this court according to their mastery of a certain code of behavior and good manners. When the Green Knight challenges the court, he mocks them for being so afraid of mere words, suggesting that words and appearances hold too much power over the company. The members of the court never reveal their true feelings, instead choosing to seem beautiful, courteous, and fair-spoken.

On his quest for the Green Chapel, Gawain travels from Camelot into the wilderness. In the forest, Gawain must abandon the codes of chivalry and admit that his animal nature requires him to seek physical comfort in order to survive. Once he prays for help, he is rewarded by the appearance of a castle. The inhabitants of Bertilak's castle teach Gawain about a kind of chivalry that is more firmly based in truth and reality than that of Arthur's court. These people are connected to nature, as their hunting and even the way the servants greet Gawain by kneeling on the "naked earth" symbolize (818). As opposed to the courtiers at Camelot, who celebrate in Part 1 with no understanding of how removed they are from the natural world, Bertilak's courtiers joke self-consciously about how excessively lavish their feast is (889–890).

The poem does not by any means suggest that the codes of chivalry be abandoned. Gawain's adherence to them is what keeps him from sleeping with his host's wife. The lesson Gawain learns as a result of the Green Knight's

challenge is that, at a basic level, he is just a physical being who is concerned above all else with his own life. Chivalry provides a valuable set of ideals toward which to strive, but a person must above all remain conscious of his or her own mortality and weakness. Gawain's time in the wilderness, his flinching at the Green Knight's axe, and his acceptance of the lady's offering of the green girdle teach him that though he may be the most chivalrous knight in the land, he is nevertheless human and capable of error.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

The Seasons

At the beginning of Parts 2 and 4, the poet describes the changing of the seasons. The seasonal imagery in Part 2 precedes Gawain's departure from Camelot, and in Part 4 his departure from the host's castle. In both cases, the changing seasons correspond to Gawain's changing psychological state, from cheerfulness (pleasant weather) to bleakness (the winter). But the five changing seasons also correspond to the five ages of man (birth/infancy, youth, adulthood, middle age, and old age/death), as well as to the cycles of fertility and decay that govern all creatures in the natural world. The emphasis on the cyclical nature of the seasons contrasts with and provides a different understanding of the passage of time from the more linear narrative of history that frames the poem.

Games

When the poem opens, Arthur's court is engaged in feast-time customs, and Arthur almost seems to elicit the Green Knight's entrance by requesting that someone tell him a tale. When the Green Knight first enters, the courtiers think that his appearance signals a game of some sort. The Green Knight's challenge, the host's later challenge, and the wordplay that takes place between Gawain and the lady are all presented as games. The relationship between games and tests is explored because games are forms of social behavior, while tests provide a measure of an individual's inner worth.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Pentangle

According to the Gawain-poet, King Solomon originally designed the five-pointed star as his own magic seal. A symbol of truth, the star has five points that link and lock with each other, forming what is called the endless knot. Each line of the pentangle passes over one line and under one line, and joins the

other two lines at its ends. The pentangle symbolizes the virtues to which Gawain aspires: to be faultless in his five senses; never to fail in his five fingers; to be faithful to the five wounds that Christ received on the cross; to be strengthened by the five joys that the Virgin Mary had in Jesus (the Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and Assumption); and to possess brotherly love, courtesy, piety, and chastity. The side of the shield facing Gawain contains an image of the Virgin Mary to make sure that Gawain never loses heart.

The Green Girdle

The meaning of the host's wife's girdle changes over the course of the narrative. It is made out of green silk and embroidered with gold thread, colors that link it to the Green Knight. She claims it possesses the power to keep its wearer from harm, but we find out in Part 4 that the girdle has no magical properties. After the Green Knight reveals his identity as the host, Gawain curses the girdle as representing cowardice and an excessive love of mortal life. He wears it from then on as a badge of his sinfulness. To show their support, Arthur and his followers wear green silk baldrics that look just like Gawain's girdle.

Text Analysis

PART 1

By framing the central plot of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with an account of Britain's founding by the Trojan Brutus, the poet establishes Camelot's political legitimacy. He also links his own story with classical epics such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, thereby creating a literary connection to the ancient world. In the second stanza, the poet claims that he heard the original story of Sir Gawain recited "in hall" (31), but also that it was "linked in measures meetly / By letters tried and true" (that is, it appeared in written format) (35–36). In addition to giving his poem both political and literary roots, the poet gives his poem both an oral and a written history, all in two brief stanzas.

The author devotes a lot of space to describing the lavish, intricate details of the feast, including the guests, their clothing, and the hall itself. The knights and ladies of Arthur's court are full of vitality and joy, resembling the New Year that they celebrate. The poet describes them as "fair folk in their first age," and he uses words like fresh, lovely, comely, young, and mirthful to describe them (54). Later, the Green Knight echoes these descriptions but exaggerates them, calling Arthur and his knights "beardless children" (280). These descriptions of Arthur's courtiers as children in their "first age" implicitly compare the court to humankind in its "first age," before the Fall in the Garden of Eden. The emphasis on the court's youth and lack of experience suggests that these

youthful people might be capable of failure, error, bad judgment, and sinfulness, just as Adam and Eve were.

The poet's description of Queen Guinevere sitting on her dais, surrounded by exotic tapestries and jewels, suggests that the queen herself is first and foremost a beautiful object. The fact that Guinevere sits surrounded by tapestries from the far reaches of the earth supports the poet's hyperbolic insistence that Guinevere's beauty surpasses that of all women in the world. The poet does not touch on the moral or ethical aspects of Guinevere's character—whether her exceptional body hides an ugly soul or enshrines a pure one remains for the reader to decide. However, any medieval reader would recognize Guinevere's youthful beauty as the very thing that will later bring about the fall of Camelot: she is destined to betray her husband with Lancelot.

The Green Knight provides a less ambivalent commentary on Arthur and his courtiers by branding them inexperienced children in need of testing. At the same time, the Green Knight's own character remains ambiguous, so we don't know whether or not we can trust his judgment. The knight's green costume and the holly bob he holds in one hand symbolize nature and fertility, but his costume is also ornamented with gold and he carries an axe, symbols of artifice and civilization. The Green Knight represents both the artificial and the natural worlds, and he seems to be a superhuman as well as a supernatural figure. These implications are confirmed when the Green Knight survives decapitation, showing himself to have the power of resurrection.

Gawain's placement at the high table and his blood ties with Arthur characterize him as someone who maintains a high status among the knights of the Round Table. Yet, when Gawain steps forth to accept the Green Knight's challenge, he claims he is the weakest of Arthur's knights. Again, the author refuses to indicate whether Gawain's self-deprecation stems from a real sense of his own inadequacy or whether it hides a kind of boastful knowledge of his own knightly stature. Many scholars of medieval chivalry believe Gawain's behavior in this scene accords with the rules of knightly courtesy, but the poem gives us no commentary on Gawain's motivations at this crucial plot juncture.

Although the Green Knight refers to his agreement with Gawain as a "game," suggesting that the challenge is no different from any of the other games played by Arthur's court, the Green Knight words his challenge like a legal contract. He refers to the agreement as a "covenant" and mentions dues, and he makes Gawain repeat the terms multiple times. The Green Knight's language foreshadows the fact that his game will have serious ethical implications; it will test not only Gawain's bravery, but also his honesty and integrity.

PART 2

The opening lines of Part 2, which detail the changing seasons of the year, seem a digression from the tale, but they actually correlate very closely with Gawain's changing state of mind. Just as the external world shifts over the course of a year, so too does Gawain's inner climate. He transforms from a joyous youth to a mournful figure as the world passes from winter to summer and back again. The seasonal imagery sets a tone of mutability and instability for the rest of the story, which is important because Gawain is soon called upon to demonstrate steadfastness in a world that is designed to change and be changed by the cycles of life and death.

When Gawain's prayer brings into being a castle that didn't exist moments before, it seems as if Gawain's senses falter, as he sees what looks very much like a mirage glimmering in the distance. The five senses are one of the five virtues represented by the pentangle on Gawain's shield, and during his stay at the host's castle, each of the qualities represented by five points of the pentangle will fail Gawain. Once inside its walls, Gawain's physical abilities (his five senses and his five fingers) fail him again, beginning when the "wine goes to his head" at line 900 and continuing as he proceeds to spend all of his time lounging around the castle. Further, although Gawain frequently calls on Jesus and Mary for aid in the wilderness, once inside the court, his piety fades to the background, and his devotion to the five wounds of Christ and five joys of Mary cease to function as defenses. With his physical and spiritual defenses faltering, Gawain's five knightly virtues—friendship, generosity, courtesy, chastity, and piety—undergo examination by his host in Parts 3 and 4.

Though the mysterious court seems beautiful and safe, the poet's descriptions of the castle and its inhabitants give us many clues that it holds deep dangers for Gawain. Along with Gawain, we learn not to trust physical appearances, because Gawain's perceptions prove unreliable and the things he perceives unstable. The miragelike way in which the host's castle appears to Gawain foreshadows that things are not as they seem—if one mirage can deceive Gawain's senses, others can as well. Also, the host's physique and his initiation of a covenant, disguised as a harmless game, recall the character of the Green Knight from Part 1. Though the host's proposed game seems innocent enough, he makes Gawain repeat the terms of the agreement, just as the Green Knight did at Camelot.

The poet describes the two women as "unlike to look upon . . . / For if the one was fresh, the other was faded" (950–951). The poet's language suggests that although the two women may be "unlike to look upon," they are not completely unlike in other ways. By describing the younger woman as "fresh" and the older woman as "faded," the poet suggests that the two women form two ends of the same spectrum. The old woman functions as a *memento mori* (a Latin phrase meaning "remember death"), who reminds the reader of the unavoidable destruction of the physical world. Furthermore, in medieval iconography, an old woman next to a young woman often allegorically represents vanity. The

significance of such a representation was that love of worldly beauty means neglect of the spiritual life, and since worldly beauty must always fail and die, its pursuit will always prove vain.

PART 3

The alternating hunting scenes and bedroom scenes narrated in Part 3 parallel one another, suggesting an analogous relationship between the lady's attempts to entrap Gawain and the lord's attempts to catch his prey. Each of the three days begins and ends with the violent, fast-paced action of the chase, and embedded at the center of each day is the courtly, bawdy bedroom scene. For both the hunters and Gawain, each day leads to a more valuable—and more dangerous—set of winnings. The three hunting scenes portray the larger patterns of the poem in brief allegories. The hunting scenes and the seduction scenes together address all the major issues of the poem.

There are a number of parallels between the hunt scenes and Gawain's own quest. The host considers his gory and dangerous hunts "sport" in the same way the Green Knight considers his pact with Gawain a "game," and, like the Green Knight's challenge, the hunt scenes test the hunters' nobility. The way the doe hunt starts out by separating the victims from the herd brings to mind the Green Knight's challenge to Arthur and his company. The deer hunt happens at a group level, with multiple hunters and the mass execution of dozens of animals. In medieval hunting guides and bestiaries, deer are ranked as "beasts of venery" or "beasts of chase." Though not fierce or confrontational, the animals were considered noble to hunt because they challenged their hunters' skill and because their meat and hides have use value.

The boar hunt, on the other hand, engages the host and his prey in one-on-one combat. Boars were also considered beasts of venery, but were among the most dangerous game when cornered. That the host decapitates the boar and carries his head into the castle on a pike also recalls Gawain's imminent decapitation. Interestingly, the foxes hunted on the third and final hunt were, in the Middle Ages, considered mere rodents, of the lowest class of the beasts of venery. Though difficult to hunt, they represented no real nobility or value, and were considered ignoble and deceitful animals whose fur possessed little usefulness or beauty. Thus, to spend the entire day hunting and to bring back nothing but what the host calls a "foul fox pelt" seems like time and energy wasted (1944). On this third day, we might expect the prize to have more value, but the host's winnings have no worth at all, a fact he points out to Gawain during the exchange.

The three bedroom scenes also take the form of games, and they also build toward an anticlimax. The lady plays a new kind of game with Gawain, putting him in a precarious situation by testing two knightly virtues that she places at

odds with one another: his courtesy and chastity. When Gawain refuses to give in to the lady sexually, she accuses him of being discourteous; as soon as he responds in a more courteous manner, the lady again pushes him toward being unchaste. The lady's arguments, which are duplicitous and highly persuasive, vary between complex subtlety and bawdy suggestion. During their first bedroom encounter she claims innocently that she wants to "pass an hour in pastime with pleasant words" (1253), and she seems pious when she praises God for putting in her hands "all hearts' desire" (1257). Yet we know that she is pinning a naked Gawain to the bed, holding him in her arms.

By claiming that she possesses Gawain only through God's grace, the lady evokes a complicated system of religious and political imagery. As the host's wife and as a noblewoman more generally, the lady exceeds Gawain in rank, and his chivalry requires him to obey her, facts of which she reminds him when attempting to seduce him. Also, the notion that courtly love—the love a knight might have for a lady of higher rank than himself—leads to spiritual ennoblement had been popularized centuries earlier in continental literature. Invoking religion at this erotically charged moment reminds Gawain that part of his spiritual education as a knight should involve courtly love. For Gawain to refuse her advances, he must break his knightly responsibility to be courteous; for him to accept, he must break his chastity.

On the third day, Gawain's resolve weakens when the stakes shift radically from courtesy versus chastity to honesty versus safety. On the surface, the green silk girdle that the lady offers Gawain looks exactly like the kind of token that a courtly lady might give her lover (and Gawain initially rejects it for this reason), yet the ethical dilemma it represents is related to self-preservation rather than to chastity. When the lady tells him that the girdle also protects its wearer from being wounded or killed, Gawain is eager to be able to fulfill his promise to the Green Knight and still survive. What Gawain wants is a loophole through which he can escape death but still honor his covenant with the Green Knight. Unfortunately, using this loophole requires him to deceive his host—a breach of honesty and gratitude for hospitality. Gawain does not notice that the girdle's silk is green and gold, like the Green Knight's clothing, and he disassociates the girdle itself from the lady's body, which it surely symbolizes, despite its magical properties, or else accepting it would not have been taboo in the first place.

Though in the end Gawain does not sleep with the host's wife, and though he does not view lying about the magical girdle to save his life to be as big a crime as adultery, the omission nevertheless breaks his vow with the host. In desiring to find a loophole in his covenant with the Green Knight, Gawain also seeks to create one in his agreement with the host. The fact that Gawain goes to confess his sins immediately after taking the girdle indicates that he knows he has broken his vow.

One medieval scholar famously asked what Gawain would have to give the host if he had in fact slept with the lady, and the possibility of Gawain and the host's wife having sex certainly raises this question. Consequently, homoeroticism is at the heart of the exchange-of-winnings game, since Gawain's winnings are inevitably in the form of sexual favors, and since he is required by his pact with the host to give his winnings to the host at the end of the day. The logical outcome, if the lady had succeeded, would be that Gawain and the host would have to sleep together. The erotic scenario in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* creates a triangulation of desire: through their mutual attentions to the host's wife, Gawain and the host establish an implicitly sexual connection with one another.

PART 4

Echoing the opening of Part 2, Part 4 opens with a description of the passing of time and a general description of the atmosphere, followed by an account of Gawain putting on his armor and leaving the castle. Though briefer and more somber in tone, this second description balances the earlier one and begins to bring the poem toward its close. The harshness of the winter, with its howling wind and numbing cold, fits Gawain's bleak mood.

The date on which Gawain sets out to find the Green Chapel is important. In the medieval liturgical calendar, January first marked the Feast of the Circumcision. (In the Judaic tradition, circumcision took place exactly eight days after a child's birth, so Christ's circumcision occurred on January 1, eight days after December 25.) The Green Knight's beheading occurred a year and a day earlier, on the eve of the Feast of the Circumcision, suggesting a parallel between the Green Knight's head and the foreskin of Christ. That the Green Knight is able to reassemble himself after his decapitation recalls Christian belief in Christ's resurrection and in the resurrection of all bodies after Judgment Day. On the New Year's Day a year and a day after the Green Knight's symbolic circumcision, the Green Knight punishes Gawain not by decapitating him, but by lightly cutting his neck. This cut symbolizes circumcision as well, but it lacks the supernatural elements of the Green Knight's punishment.

The axe that the Green Knight is sharpening when Gawain finds him is evidence of the knight's contrast to the courtly tradition from which Gawain comes. At Camelot, the knight's axe is described at length, and in the forest, we discover that the Green Knight possesses a new Danish axe that replaces the one Gawain and Arthur hung up in the hall at Camelot. The Danish axe connects the Green Knight with England's Anglo-Saxon roots. Originally associated with the Vikings, the presence of the Danish war axe aligns the Green Knight with a regime that is older than the one Gawain's lance represents. As such, the Green Knight represents a relationship with a primeval human existence.

When the Green Knight spares Gawain, it is clear that the knight has changed from a character obsessed with the absolute justice of pacts and agreements into one who understands the possibility of compassion and mercy. Up until this part, the Green Knight has seemed to privilege the exact letter of his covenant with Gawain above mercy or even justice. But at the end of the story, he transforms into a much more compassionate figure. He calls it his right to spare Gawain from decapitation, and explains, "You are so fully confessed, your failings made known, / And bear the plain penance at the point of my blade" (2391–2392). The combination of an Old Testament rite, the circumcision, with a New Testament one, the confession, frees Gawain from the sin of lying about the girdle.