

al ghosts were material enough to exist outside the mind of a perceiver, material enough to be seen at times by some people, but not material enough to do physical harm to living people or to be physically touched by them. And well he might have used technical language, for his correspondent, Oliver Lodge, a professor of physics at Liverpool University, was also an active member of the Society for Psychical Research.

Frederic Myers and Henry James were friends. When *Phantasms of the Living* was published, Henry James bought his own copy and later consulted it before he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*. When James's story was published, Myers read it. Surely more than casual importance should be attached to the opinion, written shortly after publication of the story, by a personal friend of the author, to a fellow investigator of supernatural phenomena. If Myers, who had spent years recording and studying the narratives of people who said they saw ghosts, thought the governess was a generally reliable narrator of a story about ghosts, perhaps we should pause before we decide that she is neurotic and her ghosts imaginary. But then, Alexander Jones told us that twenty-five years ago.

PETER G. BEIDLER  
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*Reply:*

I should like to make two very brief comments. First, I congratulate Peter Beidler on his discovery of a most interesting piece of evidence. Second, it is gratifying to learn that items consigned to *PMLA* have such a long shelf life.

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### Gawain's Wound

To the Editor:

Paul F. Reichardt's "Gawain and the Image of the Wound" (99 [1984]: 154–61) makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. For it is very important to know that the neck was associated with the will in medieval imagery and that Gawain's wound symbolizes the correction of an improperly ordered will. But we need to look at the early events in the story to understand why Gawain's will—and by extension, Arthur's—needs to be corrected.

Chaucer's Parson tells us that ostentatious hospitality is a sign of pride (vainglory) and that the remedy is humility or true self-knowledge. The ostentatious

Christmas celebration staged by Arthur is probably a sign of pride. Moreover, Arthur himself needs to be carefully assessed on other matters. In lines 85–99, he is described as still subject to the needs of youth for lively action, and he acts against the virtue of fortitude (or courage) when he brashly accepts the stranger's no-win game. At this point his nephew, Sir Gawain, steps in and becomes a surrogate for the brash Arthur. The lesson that Gawain—and by extension, Arthur and his court—learns at the end through the wound is to take care of himself. He needs to value his life properly and not put it on the line just to meet stupid, meaningless challenges. Thus the author reaffirms the idea that the cardinal virtue of fortitude is the mean between the extremes of pusillanimity and brashness.

The author also implies through the images of the story that there is an intimate connection between the right ordering under reason of the irascible appetites (leading to true courage) and of the concupiscible appetites (leading to true temperance). The author calls attention to these interrelated aspects of our animal nature by juxtaposing the hunting scenes, involving aggressive tendencies, and the temptation scenes, involving cupidity. When Gawain learns how to care for himself properly and not be brash, he presumably also learns how to moderate and rule by reason his concupiscible appetites. When everyone at Arthur's court joins in wearing the green banner won by Gawain in his victory over pride, they symbolically join in his newly acquired humility and maturity.

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To the Editor:

Paul F. Reichardt's "Gawain and the Image of the Wound" provides some helpful insights into a major symbol of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. At the same time, the overall thrust of his essay sends the reader striking off in a wrong direction. Reichardt observes in the beginning that "more remains to be said about Gawain's culpability" (154) and, later, "the threat of beheading that hangs over the plot of *Gawain* may be related to the impending dissolution of the Arthurian body politic through the corruptive pride of its own knights" (158). First, nothing in *Gawain* suggests the dissolution to be "impending." This story takes place in the earlier part of Arthur's reign, as indicated by the description of Guenevere as "without a flaw" and, more significant, of Arthur as "a little boyish." Second, in both quotations Reichardt emphasizes the problem as individual sinfulness. Along this line he connects the pentangle only with *homo se relictus*, "the individual operating without the aid of divine grace" (159). He ignores that it can also apply to Arthur's court in its en-

tirety, which as a secular institution based on the secular code of chivalry also operates without the aid of divine grace. As one knows from the tradition as a whole, many of the knights, like Perceval in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval*, forget God and pay a price for that forgetfulness. The institution, as well as its members, is flawed and mortal.

Gawain stands more as type, as the principle representative of Arthur's court and its guiding chivalric code, than as individual. As such, his recollection of the postlapsarian state as the source of his own failings, followed by the Green Knight's point that the entire Round Table suffers from pride, emphasizes the temporal, fallen character of any human kingdom, as well as of any human. The nick, then, marks not only retribution for the sin of pride but also a visible sign of the invisible blemish of original sin. Gawain's culpability is not the issue. Though the greatest knight, he remains only human. Arthur's court, though the highest realm of chivalric perfection, remains only secular. Both need to bow their heads before a higher power and to recognize that in the postlapsarian world they are at the mercy of demonic as well as angelic powers.

We can extend this argument to state that Gawain himself stands for the neck of King Arthur's court. Thus when Gawain is nicked in the neck the court's neck is also nicked. Each receives the blade in order to be relieved of stiff-necked pride. Gawain is the neck of the court and, with Arthur, its head: he is Arthur's most steadfast supporter, he is the court's greatest source of chivalric pride, and he is the finest knight of the courtly body in prowess and courtesy. My criticism, then, is aimed not at Reichardt's anatomical observations but at his tendency to cut off the interpretation of nick and neck a bit too soon.

PATRICK D. MURPHY

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To the Editor:

It seems a shame that in so erudite and persuasive an article Paul Reichardt should nod when he discusses the poem itself. On page 157 he writes, "The girdle Gawain has concealed under his armor in the vain hope that it will save him from his fate can in no way mitigate the implied psychic disorder within the knight's own soul." There is an error of fact here. The poem states that Gawain wears the girdle, not under his armor, but wrapped twice about him over his surcoat, the love lace cutting a green swath across the golden "endless knot" (see lines 2025–40 and Tolkien's note).

That Gawain wears the girdle with this difference is no mere cavil. First, if readers "expect" Gawain to conceal the girdle, as Tolkien's note suggests, then it is perhaps because they remember that Bercilak's wife has made Gawain promise to "disceuer hit neuer / Bot to

lley layne fro hir lorde" (1862–63). But Gawain takes his leave of Bercilak at line 1960 before going to bed; because he doesn't expect to meet him again next morning, any reason for concealing the girdle in keeping with his promise disappears. Readers assume Gawain continues to conceal the girdle, I suspect, because they read it as an inherently shameful object, one Gawain *should* conceal, and so miss an important point—it is not until the Green Knight reveals his true identity as Gawain's host, with whom the covenant of exchange was made, that Gawain himself sees the girdle as an object of shame ("Lo! þer þe falssyng, foule mot hit falle!"). Because Gawain fails to exchange the green lace ("trwe mon trwe restore"), it acquires symbolic significance. What is at stake is Gawain's "vntrawþe": "Larges and lewte þat longez to knyȝtez" would require him to present to Bercilak in the exchange of winnings (*lewte*) even that which could have saved his life (*larges*).

Second, Gawain's reaction to the Green Knight's discovery, so excessive, so overblown, has also puzzled readers. The poet reminds us, however, at the beginning of the encounter with the Green Knight that Gawain is wearing the girdle (the ax was "no lasse bi þat lace þat lemed ful bryȝt—"). If we remember, that is, that throughout his ordeal Gawain has been wearing in full view the symbol of his "vntrawþe," both to the lady, to whose lord he has now revealed the girdle, and to the lord, whose covenant he has abrogated, then we understand better the intensity of his embarrassment, an embarrassment heightened by the feeling of having been made a fool and, in some sense, of having advertised his failures of both courage and loyalty.

Lastly, it seems to me that Reichardt's contention that the "pentagonal design" of Gawain's soul is "marked at exactly that point at which the faculties of sensation and growth are linked to the superior faculty of the intellect through the psychic mechanism of the will" (159) would be strengthened by discovering in the poem the visible symbol of that marking. The green girdle, which twice cleaves the pentangle on Gawain's surcoat (once for "cowardyse" and once for "couetyse") in its first appearance, becomes the bend dexter of "þe fayntyse of þe fleshe crabbed" in Gawain's differencing of it as a baldric (now a single faulting of the pentangle "in tokenyng he watz tane in tech of a faute"). Ultimately, for Gawain and the court, it is transformed into a symbol of the wound itself: "'Lo! lorde,' quoth þe leude, and þe lace hondeled, / 'þis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek.'" The pentangle and the girdle are the heraldic characters of the ideal of chivalric behavior on the one hand and of the human inability to live up to that high ideal on the other; unlike the wound on his neck, which has healed, the wound slashing across Gawain's pentangle is still green.

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