

Of Talking Heads and Other Marvels: Hagiography and Lay Piety in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Among the unresolved issues in our understanding of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the function of the hagiographical references, comprised both of saints whom the poet mentions explicitly (Julian, Peter, Giles, John the Evangelist and/or Baptist), and of those whom he seems to have in mind but does not explicitly name. Since Ronald Tamplin's 1969 essay in *Speculum* substantially introduced the subject, scholars have traced numerous parallels between the stories of the saints and Gawain's adventures with a view to discovering whether the analogies function positively or ironically—that is, whether Gawain is more or less saint-like in his behaviour. Briefly, then, there is broad agreement as to the special importance of saints' references in the poem, but there remains disagreement as to their significance.

If one trend in this discussion is to view Gawain more negatively, another is to adduce ever more intricate analogies between the stories of the saints and Gawain's character and adventures.¹ A recent example of this is Ann Astell's *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* (1999), which finds in the hagiographical material detailed political references as well as ones specific to the fictional narrative. She contends that the saints are an indispensable element in the poet's use of "the coded language of contemporary politics" (128) through which he attempts an instructive revisioning of Richard II's response to the rebellion of the Lords Appellant in 1387, and his subsequent revenge on those same lords ten years later. While the interpretations she suggests for many of the poem's details are striking at first, they do not support her

larger argument, which includes such dubious premises as the lack of imperative for Arthur/Gawain to cut off the Green Knight's head in the first place, and the establishment of Robert de Vere as the prototype for Gawain. Further, we must ask if the political climate, repressive as it evidently was, really compelled the poet to write a kind of detective story, leaving hidden clues for the reader in the know: a concealed reference to a heraldic device here, a significant place name there, a pun somewhere else. Must every reference to a hart, white or not, refer us to Richard's livery? For many readers an interpretation that implies this reconstruction of poetic method marks a reversion to an older type of criticism (the attempt to discover the historical occasion for a poem), not an argument based on the principles of new historicism.²

One of Astell's major arguments refers to the Green Knight, whom she equates with Richard Earl of Arundel, one of the Lords Appellant who was unjustly executed by Richard II in 1397. According to the chronicler Walsingham, the moment after decapitation Arundel's headless body arose and stood unsupported for the space of time it would take to say the *paternoster*; a cult then developed around his tomb, and it was accompanied by claims that the head had been miraculously rejoined to the body.³ In addition to similarities in the decapitations of both Arundel and the Green Knight, Astell finds other connections: for instance, Arundel used a horse as one of his emblems (a reference, she feels, to the Green Knight's spectacular horse); one of the accusers at his trial was Sir John Bushy, picked up in the Green Knight's bushy beard, and a supporter of Richard's was named Henry Green (Astell 122-23). Not only is it difficult to explain why the Green Knight should represent Richard's enemy while also bearing characteristics of his friends, but the ubiquity of emblematic horses and full beards can only reduce the significance of their appearance in the Green Knight's description.

Rather than bringing yet more detailed analogies to bear upon the poem's minutiae, I will argue that the poet's references to the saints, like the chronicle accounts of Arundel's execution, are more likely intended to evoke the audience's knowledge of a broad hagiographical context that included popular traditions of beheaded saints and themes of sexual temptation present in both vernacular and Latin saints' lives. The poet's method is both direct and indirect: the saints he names explicitly do seem to have special meaning for Gawain's adventures, as critics have argued (Tamplin, Blanch, Ryan). But equally important are the unspecified saints in whose stories sexual temptation and/or beheading play a crucial part. Winifred, whose cult was being promoted from provincial to national status at about the time

the poem was composed (Bennett 87) is archetypal, for her story contains both themes. Gawain's detour by the "Holy Hede" (Tolkien and Gordon l. 700) in search of the Green Chapel allows the poet to remind us of her legend: at that location her head was struck off by a pagan suitor whom she had rejected. It was then miraculously reattached to her body by her uncle, St Beuno, who thus was credited with bringing her back to life.⁴ But Winifred is only one of many saints known to the Middle Ages whose decapitation produced a miracle.

Marvelous Heads

In 1981 Edmund Colledge and J. C. Marler, in drawing attention to the recurring theme of severed heads in classical and medieval lore, distinguished between heads that are "cephaloric" and "cephalotic" or, more rarely, both. They cite the well-known examples of St Paul, whose head continued to utter the name of Christ after it was struck off, and St Denis of France, who after his execution carried his head over a mile to his burial place, a legend so famous that it is depicted in numerous paintings and sculptures. Colledge and Marler connect these accounts to the scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in which the Green Knight submits to decapitation and then holds up his severed head to utter a challenge to Gawain. However, they take the analogy no further, and it is indeed a major difficulty to understand what sort of comparison the poet might have had in mind between the Green Knight and these two important saints.

The West Midland poet and his audience had numerous examples of both ambulatory and vocal severed heads close to hand in stories of British saints, especially the strange tales of the Celtic saints of the west country. A number of these are included in John of Tynemouth's Latin collection of the lives of the saints of the British Isles compiled in the mid-fourteenth century, known as the *Nova Legenda Angliae, Walliae, Scotiae et Hiberniae* (NLA) and formerly attributed to John Capgrave. This collection was well-known: it was revised in about 1450, and later translated into English, abridged and printed by both Wynkyn de Worde and Richard Pynson in 1516. Other stories of severed heads similar to those found in John of Tynemouth's compilation existed in Celtic tradition and appear to have been current even in the late Middle Ages. Typically all these stories are a mélange of myth, folklore and Christianity that brings us closer to the world of the Green Knight than the legends of Paul and Denis, or even the famous account of St Edmund of East Anglia, martyred by the Danes, whose head revealed its whereabouts to its searchers from a bramble thicket.

Typically, both the stories in John of Tynemouth's collection and the Celtic tales involve a saint who is martyred by decapitation, and whose head is then carried by the body, or utters words, or does both. He is usually a hermit or recluse living in a secluded place in the woods, near a river or stream. He is beheaded by private enemies (rather than in a formal execution like St Paul and St Denis), and carries his head to a stream or well where he washes it before he dies and is buried. In a few stories the severed head is not that of the saint but of someone else, such as a servant, whose head the saint restores to the body, as Beuno does for St Winifred (Paterno, Cadog and Oudoceus are other examples). There are eleven stories featuring severed heads in John of Tynemouth's collection; analogous narratives are described in Doble's *Saints of Cornwall* and Henken's *Traditions of the Welsh Saints*, testifying to the popularity of this type of story. Six representative examples that include the main features are outlined below:

1 Justinian, a sixth-century saint, traveled to Wales from Brittany. In Pembrokeshire he found another devout man, Honorius, living with his sister and her maid. Invited to live with them, Justinian would only do so on condition that the women were sent away. Honorius at first refused and then finally agreed, and he and Justinian followed a religious life together. The devil persuaded Justinian's servants to kill him; where his head fell, water sprang up which cured the sick. Justinian picked up his head and carried it across the sea to his burial place. The murderers died of leprosy. Welsh calendars testify to his continuing cult (*NLA* 2:93-5).

2 Nectan was a sixth-century Welsh-born hermit who lived in a remote Cornish valley beside a spring. Beheaded by thieves who were trying to steal his cows, he carried his head half a mile to the spring by his hut. One of his murderers went mad, the other became blind but retained partial sight when he repented and buried the saint's body. Nectan had a considerable cult in the west country and his life is recorded by William of Worcester (Doble 5:65-78).

3 Fremund, a martyr king buried in Warwickshire, was decapitated by a traitor who had been promised the throne by invading Danes. Drops of his blood fell on the murderer, causing him severe pain, which ceased when the saint's head spoke words of forgiveness to him. The saint then carried his head in his hands, followed by a marveling crowd praising God. The head prayed to God, and a fountain sprang up in which the saint washed both

his head and his body before turning to the east and dying (*NLA* 1:450-456).

4 Cadog, a Welsh saint, revived a builder whose head was cut off by jealous fellow workers. When Llrwi the builder failed to come home, his children wept, and Cadog asked the reason. Llrwi then appeared carrying his head and asked the saint to reattach it to his body so that he might relate what had happened to him (Henken 94).

5 Decuman, a hermit from West Wales who settled in Somerset, was killed by an assassin while praying; his headless body arose, picked up his head, and carried it to a fountain in which he had been accustomed to wash. His body was buried there (*NLA* 1:263-5).

6 Gwinear, an Irish-born saint, was exiled to Brittany where he was converted after hunting and killing a stag and cutting up the meat for himself and his companions. Later he went to Cornwall and was decapitated by the King of Cornwall. He carried his head to a hill close by but refused to rest there because there were women nearby quarrelling noisily. He picked up his head again and carried it to a spring where he washed it; then he carried it to a small wood, where he was buried. His story was recorded c1300 (Doble1:100-105).

In addition to these male saints, there are also virgin saints who carry their heads or whose heads, like Winifred's, are reattached to their bodies. So common is the motif of the severed head in British saints' lives that the compiler of *NLA* has two or three conventional Latin phrases which he repeats each time to describe it: the saint is described as having picked up "*caput proprium in manibus suis*," "*sine mora*," and "*pendulis brachiis deportavit*" to the place of burial.

Severed heads thus were still a common symbol of Christian martyrdom and power at the time of composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The Celtic versions particularly connect the severed head motif with the figure of the hermit saint and with other motifs found in *Gawain* such as Christianised fertility rituals, command over the natural environment (especially the forest and wild animals), chastity, and vengeance (enemies of Celtic saints are regularly swallowed up by the ground, blinded, turned to stone, suffer deformities, and find the food they have stolen changed into blood). These stories, with their traces of earlier pagan beliefs, are

more full of wonders—and of stranger wonders—than the average Latin saints' lives. If we should still look to romance for the source of such motifs in *Gawain* as the turning of beheading into a game of exchange, and of the bargain at Bertilak's castle, then the British saints' lives, with their combination of the marvelous and a kind of grim humour, provide an equally plausible Christian context for the characters and events in the poem.

The figure of the Green Knight has generally been understood not as a political allegory but as an other-world creature whose origins lie in folklore and secular romance. As Larry Benson demonstrated, the Wild Man of the Woods, the Green Man of fertility rituals and the civilised courtier all lend features to his description. But a contemporary audience would also have recognised in him, more swiftly than modern readers, elements of a common hagiographic icon: the martyr holding his head along with an axe or sword, the instrument of his death.⁵ The richly mysterious mingling of elements in the Green Knight's portrait might well have called to mind the wonder-working Celtic saints in all their unpredictable, nature-loving, vengeful and merciful ambiguity. If Gawain, with his hard-fought battle to remain chaste in the face of Lady Bertilak's seduction, has thematic links with the virgin St Winifred, St Beuno, Winifred's uncle, who is typical of the Celtic saints, may have links with the Green Knight. Beuno was a powerful saint in his own right and the subject of many hagiographies; he revived more than one virgin whose head had been severed (Pennick 105). The Green Knight is not a saint, but neither is he purely secular: he is a moral authority in the poem and Gawain's teacher; he hears his confession and gives him a kind of absolution. His name—Hautdesert—and his secondary dwelling—a chapel by a stream—suggest the habitual abode of the Celtic hermit saint, as do his connections with the fertile world of nature and his alternating vengeful and merciful modes of behaviour. It is interesting to note too that like the Celtic saints, the Green Knight is apparently not able to reattach his own head. Saints like Cadog and Beuno could reattach the heads of *others*, but I found no instance of their reattaching their own. The Green Knight rides out of Camelot with his head in his hands; it is reattached "off stage," by the magic of Morgan, thus both recalling the typical plight of the martyr and allowing the Green Knight his vital double existence in the worlds of romance and hagiography.

Sexual Temptation

The implicit hagiographical parallels in the poem are not confined to the figure of the Green Knight. Scenes of sexual temptation comparable to the attempted seduction of

Gawain are probably more frequent in hagiography than in any other genre. The suggestive link in the legend of St Winifred between virginity and the miraculous severed head is repeated in other stories of British virgin saints such as Osith, Maxentia and Juthwara, and one story, that of Clarus, connects the testing of male chastity with the severed head: Clarus rejects the advances of a rich woman, flees the country and becomes a hermit by a river. Her servants decapitate him, and he carries his head to the hermitage he has built, where he is buried (*NLA* 1:188-89). While in this and similar stories decapitation is the result of *not* succumbing to temptation, unlike Gawain who would presumably have lost his head if he *had* succumbed, one story (Juthwara's) makes it a punishment for suspected fornication.

There are suggestive analogues for the scenes of sexual temptation in stories of other British saints also. Gilbert of Sempringham (*NLA* 1:470-475), while staying with one of his chaplains, was tempted by the sight of his host's daughter. The same night he dreamed that his hand was stuck fast in her bosom and he could not pull it out; "*Vir igitur castissimus vehementer expavescens,*" he left the house as soon as he awoke. St Edmund Rich of Canterbury (*NLA* 1:316-25; see also *SEL* 2:493-4) after symbolically wedding the Virgin Mary is then tempted by his host's daughter who, after making strong advances to him, goes secretly to his bed and lies there naked, waiting for him. He chases her out with a fierce beating and she repents and becomes a clean woman. Clydog of Wales (*NLA* 1:190-1) is troubled by a rich woman who refuses all other suitors; though he flees from her, he is slain by a suitor whom she has rejected.

An important hagiographical account of sexual temptation, one that is the closest to the circumstances of Gawain's encounters with Lady Bertilak, is not British but was very widely known: this is Jerome's story of Paul the Hermit, retold in *The Golden Legend*. Before fleeing into the desert Paul witnesses the persecution of Christians by the emperor Decius. He sees a youth

laid on a downy bed in a pleasant place cooled by soft breezes...he was bound down with ropes entwined with flowers, so that he could not move hand or foot. Then a very beautiful but totally depraved young woman was sent to defile the body of the youth, whose only love was for God. As soon as he felt the disturbance of the flesh, having no weapon with which to defend himself, he bit out his tongue and spat it in the face of the lewd woman. Thus he drove out temptation by the pain of his wound and won the crown of martyrdom... (1:84)

The youth's method of resistance—silencing himself—may remind us that Gawain's downfall was in large measure due to his delight in the innocuous-seeming pleasures of “luf-talkyng” (l. 927). The many stories in hagiography of the saints' impolite (even violent) resistance to seductive women provide an instructive counterpart to Gawain's efforts to resist Lady Bertilak while maintaining his courtesy. The story of Paul and his ascetic life had renewed importance in the late Middle Ages when laymen who wished to live chaste reclusive lives could be invested by the bishop in the Order of St Paul the Hermit (Davis). Again, by drawing parallels between hagiographical motifs and *Gawain*, I am not denying the many important romance analogues, but I am arguing for a broader context for the poem's reception. We can assume that the poet of *Pearl* and *Cleanness* would be at least as likely to know the hagiographical analogues as the romance ones.⁶

Gawain and Lay Piety

But the issue to which we must return is the question of where the hagiographical material leads us in terms of the poem's significance. The popularity in British hagiography of both the severed head motif and sexual asceticism is crucial to a consideration of whether Gawain's behaviour is being praised as comparable to a saint's or blamed for falling short of it. While the trend among scholars is to blame, many readers feel with good reason that, if not a saint, Gawain is at least far superior in virtue to his fellow knights at Camelot. A satisfying answer to the question needs to respond to the poem's ambiguity. Gawain *is* better than other men, “as perle by the quite pese” (l. 2364) in the view of the Green Knight, the poem's moral arbiter. And yet the centrality of the beheading and attempted seduction motifs, and their direct link to the saints, requires that we define his behaviour in terms of martyrdom, and by that standard it must be said that he falls short. He is not willing to lose his life for his principles without taking at least some action—however half-hearted—to save it.⁷

Why should it be important to make a distinction between the behaviour of a saint and that of a very good man at the end of the fourteenth century? The answer may lie in the culture of piety which had achieved popularity among the literate aristocracy. About this trend R.N. Swanson has commented:

non-liturgical activities and extra-liturgical opportunities to express devotion were widespread and important....For a minority, Christianity offered a mode of living that, while distinct from the life of the regular religious, was

a formalised code of action and experience to be followed as closely as possible. (Swanson [1995] 102-3)

Gawain can appropriately be situated in this minority: in adopting the pentangle he undertakes to live a life of more than ordinary piety, one which not only requires him to take part faithfully in the sacraments like all Christians, but also to practise his Christianity more rigourously in every aspect of his life.

On the clerical side, there were efforts to guide and control private religious practice. Some of the treatises that resulted were elementary, recommending daily procedures for private devotion: five recitations of the paternoster in honour of the five wounds, seven Aves for the seven joys of the Virgin, one creed and so on (Swanson [1995] 97). Some however were more ambitious, and remind one strongly of the code symbolised by Gawain's pentangle. The *Abbey of the Holy Ghost* (in Swanson 1993), a work translated from French around 1350-1370, offers moral instruction in the shape of an architectural analogy to an abbey constructed on a site named "conscience," and is addressed to "all those who may not physically enter religion [but] may do so spiritually" (Swanson [1993] 96). The abbey is built of such virtues as Righteousness, Love of Cleanness, Mercy, Patience and Fortitude, Charity and Humility, Penance and Temperance, and Largesse and Loyalty, all described in some detail. There is a paragraph on the finer issues of Courtesy, with obvious relevance to the predicament of Gawain who "cared for his cortaysye, lest crathayn he were" (l. 1773). Here the reader is advised that Innocence and Courtesy must go hand in hand, for "too much innocence may result in too much simplicity or too little, and too much courtesy may result in a too agreeable appearance, either too happy or too forward to gratify the guests" (Swanson [1993] 100). The entire allegorical edifice is linked to Solomon, just as the pentangle is: in this case the comparison is to Solomon's mansion adorned with precious stones.

Another relevant work is Walter Hilton's *Epistle on the Mixed Life* written before 1384 for those attempting a compromise between the active and the contemplative lives as exemplified by Martha and Mary. Hilton argued that the mixed life was especially appropriate to those of high status

who have authority, with considerable ownership of worldly goods, and who also have (as it were) a lordship over other men, to govern and sustain them....These men have also received by the gift of Our Lord the grace of

devotion, and a partial taste of spiritual occupation. To such...pertains this mixed life, which is both active and contemplative (Swanson [1993] 108).

Some of Walter's practical advice is suggestively echoed by the narrator's comment when the lady comes to see Gawain in his bedchamber for the third time. Gawain, gazing upon "Hir brest bare bifore, and bihinde eke," (l. 1741) experiences "wight wallande joye" (l. 1762) as he awakens from his bad dreams about the challenge to come. Hilton recommends that if a Christian attempting to live the mixed life should, on awakening, feel

heavy in body at first, and sometimes lustful: then you should prepare yourself to pray and think some good thoughts to enliven your heart towards God, and...draw your thoughts up from worldly vanities (Swanson [1993] 119).

He also recommends thinking of the saints for inspiration, and especially "of our Lady St Mary above all other saints" (120-21). Gawain of course has a special attachment to Mary: he carries her image on the inside of his shield so that he can look to it for help in the heat of battle. At this point in the poem it is the narrator who thinks of Mary and credits the fact that his hero is saved from mortal sin to Mary's care for him (ll. 1768-9).

Hilton's writing suggests an expansive optimism about the possibilities for Christians to achieve perfect living. He particularly urges emulation of the saints: "inwardly behold [the saints'] holy living, the grace and the virtues that Our Lord gave them while living here; and by this recollection stir your own heart to take them as examples for better living" (Swanson [1993] 120), and in the fourteenth century it seems that pious Christians did consciously aspire to the holiness of the saints—certainly Margery Kempe had hagiographical models in mind when dictating her autobiography (Winstead 102-104 and 178-9). Richard Kieckhefer has noted the difficulty of distinguishing between the piety of devout fourteenth-century Christians and that of their contemporaries who became saints, either by papal canonisation or by popular acclamation ([1991] 291). Late medieval saints characteristically emphasised devotion to the Virgin, patience in the face of suffering, penitence, and inward contemplation of Christ's passion, but many devout laypeople did the same to a lesser degree. Kieckhefer shows that this was a matter of concern for some hagiographers, who were at pains to emphasise the distinction by showing how much more devout in prayer, for instance, real saints were than ordinary pious lay-

people (295). There were those who, unlike Hilton, argued that some qualities in saints such as the strictest chastity were not to be imitated by ordinary people but instead should arouse a sense of wonder and some modified emulation: if the saint could remain wholly chaste, then the ordinary Christian should at least refrain from adultery (Kieckhefer [1984] 13-14). The life of Mary of Oignies, Bonaventure's *Life of St Francis*, and the writings of Teresa of Avila all contain such cautions. Works such as these advised laypeople to seek the appropriate level of perfection, and not to aim too high. At a time when there was a tendency to blur the spheres of the holy and the profane, it was important to some clerics and hagiographers to maintain the distinction between the saints in heaven and ordinary struggling Christians.

Recently it has been argued that the Gawain poet "aristocratizes" religion—that he wrote soft theology, a "courtly Christianity" which was palatable to his noble audiences (Aers 100, Watson 312-313). But the hagiographical parallels in the poem, drawn from the most extreme forms of sanctity (martyrdom, asceticism, the eremitical life), suggest that while the poet has the Green Knight praise Gawain "as a perle by the quite pese" (as a pearl among white peas), he was also quietly inserting a standard of holy living and dying which Gawain does not reach. The poet may be implicating the spiritual pride which made pious layfolk think that perfection was well within their grasp.

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Notes

1 Whereas Shuttleworth and Tamplin feel that the references to the saints were chosen because of their relevance to Gawain's needs and confirm a positive view of his actions, Blanch and Ryan, who both make more detailed associations between the saints' stories and Gawain's, think that the comparisons function ironically to show Gawain's failings. Blanch's essay also contains many examples of the increasingly intricate attention to details of comparison, e.g. "the screech of the Green Knight's axe...possibly an oblique reminder of [St] Giles's function as patron of blacksmiths" (254).

2 See Godfrey for an alternative method of reading political meaning into the poem that sees the issue of severed heads as central.

3 The original account is found in Walsingham's *Annales*, pp. 206-20; Adam of Usk also recounts it in his *Chronicle*, pp. 113-23.

4 The connection between the cult of St Winifred and *Gawain* has been pointed out by many commentators, e.g. Colledge and Marler 422-3, Burrow 190-4, Ryan 52-3. A near-contemporary account of the legend can be found in *Mirk's Festial*, Part 1, pp. 177-82.

5 Farmer lists the axe as one of the icons of Winifred (530).

6 The *Gawain*-poet's celebration of the passive virtues—patience in human suffering, chastity, penance, prayer, inner meditation—as well as his emphasis on personal piety, devotion to Mary and practice of the cult of the saints place him in the mainstream of late medieval devotionalism (Kieckhefer 1984).

7 As has often been noted, although Gawain takes care to wear the green girdle when he sets out for the Green Chapel in Fytte 4, he does not seem to have much faith in its powers to save his life, since we hear nothing further about it until the Green Knight's accusation.

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