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THE PENTANGLE: GUIDING STAR FOR THE *GAWAIN*-POET

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The pentangle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has frequently drawn critical comment because it represents a deviation from convention. In other tales Gawain's emblem is a griffin or an eagle, and the anomalous use here of the five-pointed star seems to bear an intentional relationship to the author's individual conception. The well-known fact of the *Gawain*-poet's literary sophistication, that is, his careful habits of composition and his awareness of traditions, contributes to this theory that the geometrical form is meant to harmonize with the poetic design.

Gawain critics have already analyzed some of the conceptual issues that the symbol helps to structure, such as the balance which it fixes between the values of Christian and "courtly" love, values to which knights of the later medieval romances are supposed to adhere and for which the hero of the poem undergoes testing.¹ One scholar has even carried the investigation of the emblem into a study of numerical aspects of verse construction.² No one, however, has yet considered a correspondence with the narrative design of the work as a whole.

Since it is commonly believed that the *Gawain*-poet also wrote *Pearl*, reference to the lapidary patterning in the latter strengthens the theory, which I am proposing, that a single image is intended to give poetic unity to each work. It has been generally accepted that the flawed jewel which provides *Pearl* with its title also gives the poem its form, that of an "endless round" with one structural fault near the middle, and the image

¹ See Robert J. Blanch, ed., *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1966); Marie Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962); Mother Angela Carson, "The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and Its Function," *Studies in Philology* 60 (1963): 598-605; George L. Kittredge, *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916; reprint ed. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1960).

² A. Kent Hieatt, "Sir Gawain: Pentangle, Luf-Lace, Numerical Structure," *Papers on Language and Literature* 4 (1968): 339-59.

also suggests the cumulative method of development that characterizes the dream-vision.³ Beginning with a direct examination of the sense of equilibrium which the pentangle establishes in *Sir Gawain*, the present article then seeks to demonstrate that, when the geometrical symbol is seen to provide an overall structure, as the gem does in *Pearl*, its five points fall at significant junctures of the play between diction and meaning and, finally, its interlocking, crisscross lines graph the journey that helps define the poem as a romance.

When the pentangle first appears in the poem in the second fit, it firmly unites spiritual and chivalric realms and takes a position of dramatic emphasis. As part of the description of the arming of Sir Gawain before he leaves on his journey, the verses about the five-pointed star (ll. 619-669)⁴ share in the conventional significance of such a topos: the confirmation of a man's knighthood. Specifically, the emblem identifies Gawain as a knight in the service of the Blessed Virgin. Though the narrator lists five explanations of the pentangle's significance, it is the interpretation referring to Mary that has greatest meaning to Gawain, as the reader discovers from the presence of Mary's image painted on the inside of his shield, balancing this abstract representation on the outside. The poem as a whole establishes a similar equilibrium between spiritual and temporal concerns. The five perfections of Gawain that the pentangle symbolizes are themselves true to this symmetrical pattern, culminating in what the narrator calls the "fyft fyue" (l. 651), qualities which blend human and divine virtues: "fraunchyse and felazschyp," "clannes and . . . cortaysye," "and pite, þat passez alle poynteȝ" (ll. 652-54).

The lines that follow these establish another kind of balance by reversing a distinction between "pentangle" as the formal name for the device and "endless knot" as its informal designation. This epithet suggests a verbal connection between Gawain's emblem and lovers' symbols devoid of religious significance, for the mention of the "endless knot" immediately follows a description of the cloth on his visor, a cover which many a lady has been embroidering for seven winters with true-lovers' knots and other figures that belong to the iconography of love. This hint of Gawain's readiness to receive ladies' favors and wear them openly together with the

³ This type of analysis may be found in Marie Borroff's introduction to her verse translation of *Pearl* (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. xii-xix, and in Robert Max Garrett, *The Pearl: An Interpretation*, University of Washington Publications in English, vol. 4, no. 1 (Seattle, 1918).

⁴ This and all subsequent references to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from the edition by Sir Israel Gollancz, EETS, o.s. 210 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940; reprint ed. 1966).

pentangle foreshadows the later tarnish on his honor when he wraps around his waist the green girdle he has accepted from Bercilak's wife.

Gawain's identity, so clearly defined in the Camelot and arming scenes, has become dubious by the time he reaches the Green Chapel, where we see him outfitted with not only the pentangle but also the green belt, which he considers at this point to be not an emblem like his knot but a source of power in itself. Yet even the perfect pentangle has contained from the beginning the potential for failure, for Gawain's reference to Solomon's deception by a woman recalls that the narrator introduced the five-pointed star by telling us that the Biblical wise man himself established it as a sign "in bytoknyng of trawþe" (l. 626). *Trawþe* involves the interconnected concepts of fidelity, truthfulness, and faith. Wearing the green girdle threatens to break these interlocking virtues, which Gawain embodies, by disrupting the gold and red pattern on his coat, thus symbolically destroying his character by destroying his identifying insignia. In view of the belief that the devil cannot cross lines that form a pentangle, it is a sure sign of guilt when the devil's traditional color, green, breaks through the union of gold and red originally established through the description of the gold pentangle on Gawain's red shield. The broken pattern, then, is emblematic of Gawain's broken word.

Showing his own concern for the faithful use of words, the poet frequently suggests the protagonist's shortcomings through implications of diction. The word *costes*, in particular, reveals the impress of Gawain's pentangle of virtues, and his infidelity may be linked with his inattention to the five meanings of this word with which the poem plays. This article will show a structural relationship between the geometrical symbol and the occurrences of this word, but first it is necessary to discuss each instance individually. The word occurs initially in the sense of the terms of a social contract, the first situation to which Gawain's word binds him. His commitment requires him to set out in quest of the Green Knight, an action that has religious significance in the romance tradition, but the primary tone at the outset seems secular. Just before leaving, he says to King Arthur, "ze knowe þe cost of þis cace, kepe I no more" (l. 546). Since the conditions of the beheading game to which he so tersely refers here seem to ensure that he will not live to return, Gawain's courage and honor appear unquestionable in the beginning.

The second instance of *costes* brings in the meaning of devotions, services, or proper behavior in a religious sense. At this point, Gawain is journeying through the wilderness, and the narrator evokes his humble, pious state of mind by showing the knight

Carande for his costes, lest he ne keuer schulde
 To se þe seruyse of þat syre, þat on þat self nyȝt
 Of a burde watz borne, oure baret to quelle . . . (ll. 750-52)

In the next lines the heartfelt prayer Gawain utters seems to receive an answer in his discovery, immediately afterwards, of Bercilak's castle.

Costes appears, then, just at the start and conclusion of Gawain's travels in the wilderness. The narrator uses the word again to foreshadow the knight's admiration for Bercilak's wife in these terms:

Ho watz þe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre
 And of compas and colour and costes of alle oþer. . . (ll. 943-44)

Here *costes* has the sense of *manners*, a meaning that continues through the next three instances of the term, all of which refer to Gawain as the embodiment of courtesy. The three occurrences of the word mark, first, the lord's compliment to Gawain (l. 1272) at the time when he asks him to stay past the departure of his other guests and, then, the two temptation scenes where Gawain's honor remains intact (ll. 1295, 1483).

In both of these interviews with Bercilak's wife, *costes* appears in the context of her doubts about Gawain's identity. Suggesting that to refuse her favors is an act of discourtesy and a denial of his own name, she appeals directly to the same associations of values and identity that the narrator has shown to be bound up in Gawain's emblem. Her reasoning is faulty, however, because the knight can easily avoid discourtesy without becoming obligated to her in the way that she asks. He need not betray her lord's double trust in him, neither the implicit good faith that always governs the relationship between guest and host, nor the explicit agreement that the two have made to exchange the day's winnings. When Gawain considers the lady's accusations that he is remiss in his *costes*, he thinks only of manners. His ultimate failure, however, involves no inadequacy in his tact or his appearance of graciousness, a concern that has too greatly preoccupied him. Instead, he falls short in his loyalty to the terms of an agreement and in his devotion to Mary, the two senses of *costes* in which he has proven faithful before his arrival at Bercilak's castle.

When *costes* appears in the third temptation scene (ll. 1733-1869), Bercilak's wife uses it in a new sense (l. 1849): to refer to the magical, life-preserving qualities of the green belt which she tempts Gawain into accepting. The knight breaks the chivalric code, of course, when he does not turn the girdle over to his host, in accordance with his oath, and he commits the spiritual sin of despair, not trusting in God's power to protect him in even the most difficult situation.

The fifth way the word *costes* functions in the poem is to create a sense that the Green Knight has an omniscience similar to the author's, for he makes associations of sound and sense that escape Gawain. The suggestiveness of this technique heightens the surprise of the lord's revelation to Gawain:

Now know I wel þy cosses and þy costes als
And þe wowyng of my wyf,—I wrozt hit myseluen. (ll. 2360-61)

Though the alliterative pattern requires the use of a word with the *k* sound, the choice of *costes* is hardly inevitable here, and its meaning in this context seems to refuse to be humanly limited. The multiplicity of possible senses and the occurrence of this fifth *costes* in lines that reveal the speaker's god-like control encourage the reader to scan the whole tale and seek an explanation in the art of the poetry itself. On considering the Green Knight's first appearance we find that the French sources set the time for his intrusion on Arthur's court at Pentecost, and the name of this spring feast-day may well have lingered in the poet's mind and strengthened the association of sound and meaning as he wrote. The fact that he makes the time of the action New Year's, the traditional high holiday of the Round Table in English romance, does not destroy the similarity between the strange knight's appearance on New Year's Day and the Holy Ghost's descent upon the apostles at Pentecost.⁵ Coexisting contradictions have already been seen to remove the Green Knight from the human realm, but now strengthened ties with the cycle of nature, whether in winter or spring, and this new link with the Holy Ghost provide the final coalescence of distinctions in God.

In view of the speaker's divine character, then, this fifth *costes* generates a new threefold unity for the poem. Applicable senses of the word in this line are: the terms of agreements on which society depends, the duties of religious observances, and the courteous manners that characterize a Christian knight. The first meaning refers to the reason for Gawain's coming to the Green Chapel. The second plays on the contextual associations with Mary and "courtly love" conventions, particularly the usual reference to sexual consummation as the gift of "mercy" or "pity," expressions which prepare the mind for the traditional consideration of human love as a metaphor for divine grace. The third meaning which the Green Knight may intend concerns Gawain's manners, which the lord has praised so highly that *cortaysye* seems to be the particular virtue that has

⁵ Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 26.

made Gawain worthy of staying longer in Bercilak's castle and, therefore, worthy of the highest test of a Christian knight. The only other instance of *costes* in the poem occurs in the lines summarizing Gawain's account of his adventure:

and ferlyly he telles,
 Biknowez alle þe costes of care þat he hade,—
 þe chaunce of þe chapel, þe chere of þe knyzt,
 þe luf of þe ladi, þe lace at þe last. (ll. 2494-97)

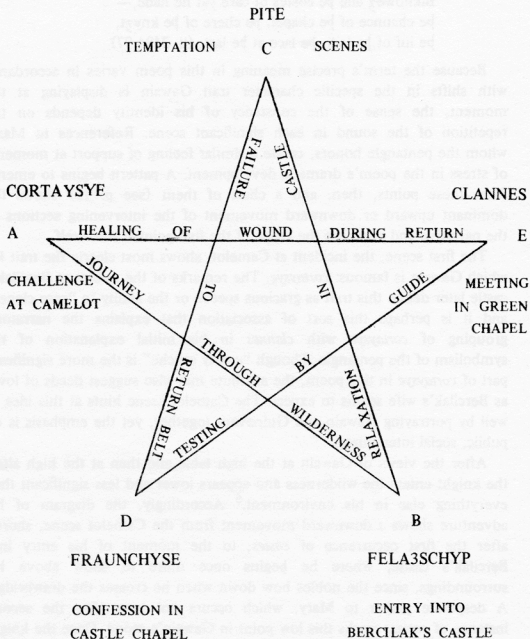
Because the term's precise meaning in this poem varies in accordance with shifts in the specific character trait Gawain is displaying at the moment, the sense of the constancy of his identity depends on the repetition of the sound in each significant scene. References to Mary, whom the pentangle honors, create a similar feeling of support at moments of stress in the poem's dramatic development. A pattern begins to emerge from these points, then, and a chart of them (see p. 16) shows the dominant upward or downward movement of the intervening sections of the narrative and produces the shape of the five-pointed star itself.

The first scene, the incident at Camelot, shows most clearly the trait for which Gawain is famous: *cortaysye*. The remarks of the nobles at Bercilak's castle later define this trait as gracious speech or the ability to "carp clene," and it is perhaps this sort of association that explains the narrator's grouping of *cortaysye* with *clannes* in his initial explanation of the symbolism of the pentangle. Though "comly speche" is the more significant part of *cortaysye* in this poem, the attribute may also suggest deeds of love, as Bercilak's wife seems to expect. The Camelot scene hints at this idea as well by portraying Gawain and Guinevere together, yet the emphasis is on public, social intercourse.

After the views of Gawain at the high table and then at the high altar, the knight enters the wilderness and appears lower and less significant than everything else in his environment.⁶ Accordingly, the diagram of his adventure shows a downward movement from the Camelot scene, shortly after the first occurrence of *costes*, to the moment of his entry into Bercilak's castle, where he begins once more to show above his surroundings, since the nobles bow down when he crosses the drawbridge. A desperate prayer to Mary, which occurs not long after the second instance of *costes*, marks this low point in Gawain's mood. Once the knight has entered the castle, we immediately see his host embracing him, using his first name, paying him elaborate compliments, and devising sports for

⁶ Alain Renoir, "The Progressive Magnification: An Instance of Psychological Description in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Moderna Sprak* 54 (1960): 248.

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their mutual amusement. No matter what Bercilak's motives for such behavior may be, he clearly sets up a situation that dramatizes another of Gawain's virtues: *felazschyp*.

Gawain's spirits steadily rise in this friendly atmosphere until he encounters the difficulties that Bercilak's wife creates for him. His courtesy and sense of fellowship with his host carry him through the first two days of temptation. On the third, it is only after he believes himself out of danger from the lady's demands that he accepts the girdle from her, a gesture that signifies *pite*, even though the motive for his act is as dubious as the reason for Bercilak's gestures of fellowship. During these temptation scenes, the high point of the pentangle, the word *costes* occurs five times. The line bending around the point that marks the temptation scenes turns to the left in order to represent the step backward that Gawain takes here in his journey. If the diagram were to trace only temporal traveling, the segment CD would have to be to the right of segment BC, and the graph would then not describe a pentangle. Such a forward motion is not justified, however, since the diagram represents a spiritual voyage in which there is a regression. No other five-pointed figure satisfies these conditions.

The dramatic movement descends from point "C" because in the chivalric code the acceptance of a lady's favor and the agreement to wear her colors indicates an attachment that Gawain does not feel and does not intend to pursue. Though the lady in this case is using false words of love, she succeeds in setting up a real test of the sincerity of Gawain's actions. During these scenes of temptations both participants invoke Mary's name, thus reminding the reader of Gawain's obligation to the Virgin and the virtues of her emblem. Because Mary appears so often in the role of Gawain's beloved, his failure to mention her name when Bercilak's wife asks if he has a sweetheart seems to be a breach of *trawpe*. Immediately after his denial comes his fateful acceptance of the girdle.

Gawain's subsequent failure to return the belt to his host makes him guilty not only of another lack of faithfulness but also of covetousness. The narrator and Bercilak pointedly clear Gawain of this last sin because, this time, the sin has been only the form of his act, and the motive has been the excusable one of self-preservation. Gawain, however, accuses himself of covetousness in his confession in the Green Chapel, for as a courteous knight he understands the necessity of faithfulness in both appearance and intent. Because for him covetousness has never been a motive in itself, the line that traces his spiritual state after his acceptance of the girdle ends its downward motion when it runs into his true characteristic of *fraunchys*. The location in the narrative where the descending line turns upward again may

be set in the chapel in Bercilak's castle, where Gawain makes a formal confession before a priest. At this point the dramatic situation absolves him of the appearance of covetousness by countering an appearance of penitence. Because Gawain still keeps the green belt, his contrition is not yet wholly sincere. It is significant that, of the five angles of the diagram, point "D" is the only one not marked by an occurrence of the word *costes*; this lack conforms with the hollowness of the action there.

It is not until Gawain's full confession in the Green Chapel that he again attains complete *clannes*. Appropriately, then, after the purging of his conscience in the second encounter with the Green Knight, his usual spiritual equilibrium is restored. The single horizontal line in the pentangle connects these virtues of *clannes* and *cortaysye* and graphs his return to Camelot, which the narrator relates without the up-and-down motion of the imagery that characterizes the rest of the poem. The episode in the Green Chapel achieves this sense of balance because of the contrast it forms with the earlier scene of confession in a real chapel with a real priest. Gawain's conversation with his guide, just before he arrives in the glade where he is to offer himself for beheading, shows that he is spiritually ready for the action that tests his *clannes*. In response to new temptations to run away from the encounter, he firmly asserts that he places all his faith in God. The idea of cleansing here recalls the association of this scene with the ritual of circumcision, an article of the Covenant instituted under the Mosaic code as a health measure.⁷

In this contradictory outdoor setting, deeds and words nevertheless reveal a wholeness of purpose, for the Green Knight dispels the mysteries of his earlier actions, and the fifth *costes*, whose threefold significance is discussed above, also occurs here. Finally, Gawain's spiritual integrity is proved when he tosses the belt away. In accordance with the poem's closing movement, Gawain takes the girdle back, understanding it now as a symbol like the pentangle whose power lies outside the object itself, in his adherence to the virtues it teaches him. The wound which heals on the journey back to Camelot, leaving a slight scar, illustrates once more this return to integrity through a cycle that comes round to its beginning with a difference. Sir Gawain, who has been proven the best of men yet short of perfection, returns to Arthur's court where he is received with courtesy, but we do not hear his own speech quite recover from the temporary anger he has shown in the Green Chapel. The indirect discourse which we do

⁷ Henry L. Savage, *The Gawain-Poet* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1956), p. 27, notes that Gawain comes to receive his blow on the Day of Circumcision, the first day on which Christ shed blood for man, according to Church doctrine.

find, when he summarizes his adventure (ll. 2494-97), contains the final instance of *costes*, thus suggesting a connection of the lines at "A" through sound. But the presence of the last five lines, added after line 2525, which repeats the first line of the poem, significantly places the traditional structural flaw, sign of the poet's humility, where it prevents the end from quite locking into the beginning. The pentangle, whose lines may be set ajar just enough to let in the devil, finds no rival in the girdle as an emblem of the poem's closing action, for, though the mind may understand the belt to be a symbol of human imperfection, the eyes still see its form as divine and unending.

In *Sir Gawain*, then, the poet displays his concern with bringing form into accord with intention and uses diction and narrative design to catch at traces of the humanly unattainable ideal expressed by the dominant symbol. The work embodies the lesson of humility and the sense of balance which the hero learns, even while it points beyond to a goal of divine perfection. All of these concepts are illuminated by the author's decision to use the pentangle as Gawain's emblem rather than the conventional griffin or eagle. Sir Gawain's five-pointed star guides the poet in his composing just as surely as it does the knight in his wandering.

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