

## Gawain's shield: Symbolism and Interpretations of the Pentangle in Religion and Literature

### Introduction and summary of *Gawain and the Green Knight*

**[OHP 1]** Thank you, Anthony. First, I'd like to wish a warm welcome to those who have just joined us at the CMS and I hope the fact that there are those of us here who were once sitting where you are will encourage you that there *is* an end to the road you have started travelling.

This paper was inspired by a close friend of mine who suggested that it was “narrow-minded” to imply that the Pentangle should be misinterpreted, as, through the millennia, it has been used as a symbol of peace and life. One of my readers suggested that this paper was the literary equivalent of F.U.R.B. **[Turn off OHP and put up OHP 2: pause]** This caused me some consternation as I could see no relevance between Gawain's Pentangle **[OHP 2]** and a small furry electronic toy. I have since been informed that it refers to a charming little hymn meaning: “I'm sorry, I don't quite agree with you.”

It is not my intension to say F.U.R.B. It shouldn't sound narrow-minded to imply that the pentangle could be misinterpreted: when I started my first project on *Gawain*, a tutor cautioned me about whom I might be having tea with after I produced a document that had images of various pentagrams, in addition to Jewish and Christian sources, from Conrad, Crowley and Lévi – not people I would choose to have tea with, given that the things that they have in common is that they all have very bad reputations and that they are all dead. What I shall attempt to do this evening is clear up some of the misconceptions concerning the use of the Pentangle in various religions and how its use in history affects the symbolism in the fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I shall be using the term ‘Pentangle’, although the five-pointed star is known by other terms, such as ‘pentagram’, ‘pentacle’ and ‘pentalpha’. Generally, these terms mean the same thing, but it's how different cultures express it.

This paper is effectively in three parts: the first section is to place the pentangle in its literary context within *Gawain*, and the second, to use a fishing analogy, reeling out my lines to religions and cultures of the past and present, before drawing in my fish and coming to the Middle Ages. This is so that we can understand the symbolism of the heraldic emblem that Gawain wears. I need to make it clear that this is not an attack on any belief system, nor am I trying to promote any. I do not profess to be an expert in any religion, so there is no point in asking a question about sheep farming on the Sabbath in Eastern Mesopotamia, nor indeed, asking me anything about Furbies.

Some of what I say may seem beyond the remit of a *medieval* research group: this is for three reasons, all of which may seem blindingly obvious. First: that medieval religion covers a huge timescale and theological thought developed radically during this period, as did the attitude of the Church towards both the general populace and within itself. Secondly, “medieval religion” does not exist in isolation: it did not just spring into existence on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1066: it is a conglomerate of ideas, imagery, interpretations and arguments that has evolved through millennia. Finally, these ideas have not stayed in stasis since 1485. Time, philosophy and science have continued to run and we, in the twenty-first century have to approach the Middle Ages accepting that we cannot fully appreciate how things were centuries ago, and time may well have adapted our interpretations from those of centuries ago.

Finally, as Anthony said, I come from a literary background, so the last part of my paper will be an analysis of the importance of the symbolism of the consequences of Gawain's encounters with the Green Knight; what I don't propose to do is to offer any conclusion as to what the Green Knight represents; I'm afraid I'm here for one night only and we could very well still be debating this point in a week.

One final thought: this paper was written out of respect for my friend who made the original comment, and I'm very grateful to her for making me think about what I have found an interesting voyage of discovery.

I do appreciate that most of you are new to the CMS, and have come from a diversity of disciplines, and even non-medieval backgrounds. I wonder if it would be helpful if I took a couple of minutes to summarise *Gawain* for the benefit of those who may be less familiar with the text before I get into the paper: I hope that those who have been here for longer will indulge me.

## Summary

**[Image of beheading game]** The story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, one of the most popular tales of the fourteenth century, exists in only one manuscript: Cotton Nero A.x, now held in the British Library. It tells of Gawain, who accepts the challenge of delivering a blow with an axe to a mysterious green giant. It is understood that Gawain would accept a return blow a year later. Gawain lops off the knight's head – primitive but effective ... or so Gawain thinks. He is astonished when the decapitated corpse picks up its head and tells Gawain to seek him out at a Green chapel to fulfil his end of the bargain. Personally I can think of better things to do at New Year.

**[Image of Gawain and the Lady]** Eleven months later Gawain arms himself and travels from Camelot into Cheshire, where he finds a castle. The lord welcomes Gawain and invites him to spend Christmas there. He issues a Yuletide game that, over the next three days, he, the lord, will go out and hunt, while Gawain stays in the castle and rests; they will in turn exchange their 'winnings' at the end of the day, that is, whatever they hunt. Although Gawain stays in bed, he is deeply embarrassed when he is wooed intensely by his host's wife and only manages to escape with his chastity intact by conceding kisses to her on the first two days. Each evening, Gawain dutifully gives his host the kisses that he 'won'. However. On the third day, the Lady offers Gawain a girdle that she says will make him invulnerable to the Knight's blade. Gawain accepts this as a means of defence rather than as a love token, but he conceals it from his host and instead only imparts the kisses.

The following day, Gawain travels to the Green Chapel where the Knight waits to strike the return blow. Gawain bears his neck but flinches the first time that the Green Knight raises his axe; mocking him, the knight then feigns a second blow and Gawain remains still. For the third blow, Gawain receives only a nick in the neck. The Green Knight then explains that he has been Gawain's host for the past three days; the three blows represented Gawain's chastity and honesty within the castle. For two of the days, Gawain behaved like a gentleman toward his host's wife, and true to the rules of the game. However, on the third day, he was caught in a dilemma: either to reveal the Lady as potentially unfaithful by conceding the girdle, or concealing it. Either way his choice was to offend his host or the Lady. However, as he only kept the token as a means of protecting his own life, and not as a love token, so he had

technically done nothing wrong. **[Image of Gawain back at Camelot]** Gawain, disgraced by his cowardice, wears the girdle as a symbol of his shame, yet, when he recounts his story to the people in Camelot, they praise his virtue and all wear a green girdle in his honour. As mythology has taught us, the knights of Camelot don't all live happily ever after, but at the end of *this* story, the court all make merry, except for Gawain: older, wiser and shamed.

## Part 1

### i) Gawain's Armour

Those of you unfamiliar with the story of *Gawain* you may be wondering why I have placed so much emphasis in my title on Gawain's shield and the pentangle. In my summary I mentioned that Gawain arms himself before setting out on his journey. This image **[OHP 4: image from the manuscript]** shows the lines in the manuscript that describe Gawain's shield. The whole description of the armour runs for just over 100 lines (ll.566-669): the warrior arming himself before battle is a convention recognised in not only medieval texts, but goes back to the dawn of literature, including the arming scene of Achilles in *The Iliad* and also the Babylonian hero Gilgamesh. So, the arming scene of the text is a *topos* that the audience would have been expecting. Despite the length of the description of Gawain's armour, very little is offered about the adornments. The elements on the armour describe Gawain's character: the diamonds on the embroidered strip are not a symbol of Gawain's extravagance, but of his virtue. According to legend, precious stones had healing qualities, and diamonds represented the strength of those who owned them. Wallis Budge suggested that 'to the early Christians, the diamond was a symbol of our lord and they regarded it as an antidote to both physical and moral evil.'

While the adornments describe Gawain's valour, they also establish the aspect of his character where he will be tested the most. While one might speculate that the audience would have known of Gawain's character of sexual reputation from other legends, the *Gawain*-poet does not presuppose any knowledge on behalf of his audience, nor does he need to mention the countless women to whom he has been married, nor those with whom he has enjoyed sexual encounters. Instead the poet establishes Gawain's legendary love talk, not by exposition, but by describing the armour as adorned with 'Tortors and trulofez' – lovebirds and love knots (l. 612), surely curious items for a war helmet. Having said that, there is a vague suggestion in this story that he had many lovers as many women had worked on the cloth to encase the visor. It was customary for a knight to attempt to earn and carry the favour of one lady, but not 'many'; furthermore the parrot, also on his helmet, is a symbol of lechery. However, one must remember that, in this narrative, Lady Hautdesert embarrasses Gawain when she enters the room: he is bashful and feigns sleep.

### ii) Symbolism of Gawain's Shield

**[OHP 5: image of the pentacle]** Gawain's shield deserves special attention as it is described in perfect detail. Furthermore, the first line of Stanza 27, where the pentacle is mentioned, is emphasized by an illuminated letter. Historically a shield like that which Gawain would carry was made from wood, leather, a plaster called gesso and metal. The shield itself is red, and aside from red gold – which would be too soft for a shield – the only metal that would shine red is bronze; however, even the thinnest of bronze would be extremely heavy. Gawain's shield would most likely be constructed from boiled red leather, *cuir bouilli*, over wood with a layer of

gesso to form a thin but extremely solid cast. The emblem on the exterior of the shield is a pentacle in gold.

Despite wanting to move on with the narrative, the poet needs to describe the importance of the pentangle with some urgency: “I am intent to tell you though tarry me it should.” This in itself is significant, as on other occasions he uses a definite article to describe things that his audience would have recognized ‘*the fords ... the promontories ... the holy head ... the Wirral*’; these latter examples suggests that the audiences would have known the legends and associations with these places.<sup>1</sup> He describes the pentacle in a blend of both Christian and courtly language showing the importance of faith and chivalry. He states the shield is a symbol wisely devised by Solomon, as a token of truth. It is:

A figure that has five points/ and each line overlaps with the other/ and therefore it is endless; and the English call it,/ everywhere, as I am told, the endless knot (ll. 627-30).

Here the poet is playing with the audience as the word ‘poyntez’ means both ‘angles’ and ‘virtues’: another poem bound in the same manuscript begins with the line ‘Patience is a poynt, though it displeases often’ – ‘Patience is a virtue.’

The emblem on Gawain’s shield, the Pentangle, is described as the ‘endless knot’: it is a symbol that has neither a beginning nor an end – a shape that cannot be broken. Solomon’s Seal, as it is better known, is important to Gawain as it represents each of the virtues to which he aspires; the five senses, the five fingers, the five wounds, the five joys (annunciation, Nativity, Ressurrection, Ascension and Assumption) and the five ‘social virtues’. For Gawain it is a symbol of Trawþe – truth; which incorporates ‘fraunchyse’ (that is, generosity); ‘felawschyp’, ‘Clannes’ (purity), ‘Pité’ (both pity and piety) and ‘Cortaysye’. So, five representations, each of them with five significances.

**[OHP 6: image of the pentacle and of Mary]** On the inside of the shield is the image of Mary so that when he looked upon it ‘he never lost heart.’ In Christian symbolism the star of Mary is eight sided. It strikes me as ironic that Gawain is potentially carrying two stars with a total number of thirteen angles on his shield. Not a lucky number to be travelling with! **[Stop for a glass of water]** Of course, the stonemason’s mark on the city walls by Skeldergate is a secular mark; and I only realised as I was printing out the photos that the star of Mary has a five petalled rose in it.

Tony Spearing describes Gawain’s shield as a ‘detailed symbolic interpretation which shows how Gawain goes forth on his quest as the representative of a delicate complex of civilised and religious values. Michael J. Bennett suggests that the pentacle may have come to England with The Templars, whom I shall discuss later. Certainly by the time of the composition of *Gawain*, the pentangle has acquired a Christian significance; however, the pre-Christian values of the pentangle underlie and are active throughout the poem. Having said that Gawain’s adversary is a Green Knight and, in the Middle Ages, green has connotations with ghosts, fairies and the devil. Biblically, Solomon’s seal, gives Solomon power over the demons, so there is little wonder that Gawain is carrying a charm to ward off evil spirits – early in the poem, the Green Knight is described in supernatural terms (‘Fantoum and Fairie’).

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<sup>1</sup> The legend of St Winefred (Gwenfrei) – trefannon; the criminals that hid in the Wirral.

**[OHP 7: Mathematical model]** So, the poet has described Solomon’s seal with mathematical perfection; I present here a mathematical model for anyone who might be interested in it – as a hobby - but I don’t propose to go into it here, primarily because this isn’t the right forum for such a discussion, and secondly because I’m not a mathematician and wouldn’t have a clue what I’m talking about. Gawain had his sights set on perfection; the endless knot symbolises those virtues. Solomon’s wisdom is legendary and he is a model of perfection to which Gawain aspires, but he fell from God’s favour owing to idolatry (2 Kings 11: 1-13).

## PART 2

### i) The OED, the Pentangle and some dates

The Oxford English Dictionary describes the word ‘pentangle’ as a hybrid from the Greek ‘penta’ and Latin ‘angle’. Obvious really. Its first recorded use in the English language is at *sometime* within the fourteenth century, indeed, this occurrence is in the lines of *Gawain* that I am discussing this evening. The lexicographer is wise not to commit themselves to a date as it is fiercely debated; my personal opinion is that it dates from around 1350: there are too many similarities between another Middle English text *Winner and Waster*. Gollancz suggests that it dates from 1375, perhaps to attribute authorship to the ‘philosophical’ Ralph Strode. However, modern academics generally dismiss this suggestion.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Paul Booth at the University of Liverpool told me that he dated *Gawain* and *Pearl* at the end of the Ricardian era and they would have been performed in Westminster Hall around Christmas time. Whatever the answer, this digression has been to explain why the lexicographer did not commit themselves to a date.

The second entry in the OED for the use of the pentangle is at least two-and-a-half centuries later, depending on whose dating you follow. It’s dated at 1646 in Sir Thomas Browne’s “Vulgate Errors”<sup>3</sup> where it is said that “[demons] are afraid of the pentangle of Solomon, three triangles inserted and made of five lines, which I have tried to show on the mathematical model. In another form – pentacle (I shall explain the difference later) – it is used at the end of the sixteenth century by George Chapman, ‘In the Shadow of the Night’;<sup>4</sup> and in the early seventeenth century by Thomas Dekker,<sup>5</sup> and Ben Jonson<sup>6</sup> in the same context. Therefore, certainly in English, neither term is recorded as being in common usage, even centuries after the *Gawain*-poet used it. The reason for this is that ‘pentangle’ was a scholarly term, from the Latin *pentaculum*. Whereas the poet says that he has heard that the ‘English’ call it ‘the Endless knot’ – a less scholarly term; he also says that it is a seal that Solomon set ages ago, yet also refers to it as the ‘new’ and ‘pure’ pentangle by ‘people with learning’. Therefore, there is some contradiction in what he is saying. It is possible that the symbol had just recently come to Cheshire, but he knew that it had ancient roots. Certainly, the five-pointed star has been in use since long before Solomon; but ‘Solomon’s Seal’ has not always had five points as I shall now demonstrate.

<sup>2</sup> The ‘Explanatory Notes’ of the *Riverside Chaucer* ‘Gollancz’s speculation that Strode’s poem is *The Pearl* is incorrect’.

<sup>3</sup> *Pseudodoxia Epidemia*

<sup>4</sup> 16/2 Then in thy clear and icy pentacle, now execute a magic miracle (1594)

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Dekker, ‘The Whore of Babylon’, ll. 200 ff. ‘Take periapts, pentacles and potent charms, to conjure downe foule fiends’ (1607)

<sup>6</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Devil is an Ass*, ‘They have ... their ravens wings, their lights and pentacles, with characters, I have seen all these.’ (1616)

## ii) The shape and history of the Pentangle and “Solomon’s seal”

**[OHP 8]** Although it seems a contradiction of terms, the Pentangle can sometimes refer to a six-pointed star; in botany Solomon’s seal (*polygonatum multiflorum*) is so called because it is said to bear a symbol on its roots, the two interwoven triangles which make up the Star of David, the magic Pentangle which scares off evil spirits. The Ninja used a six-pointed star, with the sixth point representing the void: Ninjitsu as a martial art use the ‘void’ as a means of using shadow and empty space in combat.

It is unclear as to when the symbol changed the number of angles. Wallis Budge states in his study of Amulets and Talismans that:

The well-known pentangle is frequently confounded with the hexagon, and is a design which is said to have been cut on the bezel of King Solomon’s ring. But the Pentangle is many centuries older than the hexagon, for it is found on pots from ancient Babylonian sites.

Thus, the Pentangle has been a significant symbol from ancient times, with the earliest signs being on Mesopotamian potsherds from around 3500 BC. In Egyptian society, the Pentangle represented an element symbolising the three-fold sun god, and at the risk of causing offence, could possibly have been an inspiration for the concept of the Holy Trinity of Christianity.

The Pythagoreans saw the pentangle as a symbol of health – indeed, Pythagorean numerology states that the number five represents motion and adventure, certainly true for Gawain. The ancient Greeks knew the pentagram as the pent-alpha; since it can be seen as being formed from five letter A's. The pentagram was also associated with the golden ratio (which it includes), and the dodecahedron, the fifth Platonic solid, which has twelve pentagonal faces and was considered by Plato to be a symbol of the heavens. Burkhart, in *Lore and Science of Ancient Pythagoreanism*, says that the pentagram had a secret significance and power to the pythagoreans, and was used as a password or symbol of recognition amongst themselves. The neo-Platonists and Gnostics say it as a symbol of perfection – also relevant to Gawain; finally, Sophia, Goddess of Wisdom, would only let bearers of the pentangle into her realm of light.

## iii) Biblical, apocryphal and historical uses of the pentangle

The Hebrews ascribe the Pentangle as a symbol of truth; most notably through the significance of the five books of the Pentateuch. Admittedly the seal of Solomon is not specifically mentioned in any of the canonical books of the Bible, the lengthy descriptions of the building of Solomon’s temple does describe door of olive wood with five sided jambs.<sup>7</sup>

Jewish and Muslim Writings – notably the Talmud and the Koran, but also the Testament of Solomon, describe how during the building of Solomon’s temple he was plagued by demons. He prayed and archangel Michael gave him a ring – Solomon’s seal, engraved with the name of God. **[OHP 9]** The ring gave Solomon power over nature, spirits, animals, and also the power to ascertain the names of demons and with that authority, he used them to assist in the building of the temple. There are, of course, further legends: Muslim tradition states that Solomon once lost the magical ring, and the rebel angel Sakhr obtained it and ruled as king for forty days while Solomon wandered around ragged and destitute; however Sakhr lost the ring in the sea and

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 6:31

Solomon recovered it from the fish that has swallowed it. This incident is also ‘documented’ – if one dare use that term – by Josephus. He describes the ring swallowed by the fish as a pentalpha with a thirty one letter word written in the second and third of a series of concentric circles, an engraving of ‘O Lord our God’ plus a group of Semetic sounding names.

Although Solomon’s epithet is ‘the wise’ his wisdom is taken away from him when he sacrifices five locusts to Moloch for the love of a woman. It was not the size of the creature that was important, but the fact that he had a sacrifice to a false god. However, a number of commentaries have been written on the *Testament of Solomon*, suggesting that a Jewish manuscript had been worked over by a Christian to mention some tantalising suggestions to the forthcoming Christ. What I find important is that in *Gawain* is, despite the importance placed on the description, the name of Solomon is only mentioned twice: once when the pentangle is referred to as a seal that Solomon sagely devised, and secondly when Gawain compares himself to four Old Testament kings who had fallen to the beguilement of women.

There are two women in *Gawain* who are instrumental in his challenge; the foremost is Lady Hautdesert, the host’s wife, who tempts Gawain, the other is Morgan le Faye, who has instigated the whole episode to ‘scare Guinevere’. According to Celtic mythology, the pentangle was a symbol of the goddess of the underworld, Morrigan, or Morgan. Conversely, in Greek mythology the pentangle represented Demeter’s daughter, Kore, and therefore associated with vegetation. Taking both of these hypotheses on board, the pentangle symbolises both the values for which he stands and also represents those that challenge him. It is fairly certain that the origins of *Gawain* come from, amongst other sources, the Middle Irish *Fleò Bricrend* which does support the Celtic mythology, considering that Morgan is the ‘baddie’ of the story. Yet, I suggest it is equally valid to accept the Greek understanding: Demeter’s other daughter was Persephone, who is associated with the underworld, while Demeter herself is associated with vegetation. One reading of the Green Knight is that he is a representation of nature and a reading of the first two stanzas of Fitt 2 show the passing of seasons.

Those religions that place a great emphasis on nature, such as those that follow the Wiccan path, also use the pentacle describe their ‘rede’ or the standards of their beliefs. In this case the pentagram is surrounded by a circle – technically this is called a pentacle. To some wiccans, the pentacle represents the four elements that are crowned by the spirit. However, in the same way that in *Gawain* the pentangle has multiple meanings, so, within the context of the wiccan rede, the elements each represent aspects of the human body and spirit;<sup>8</sup> and Mother Earth, where the spirit is the goddess.<sup>9</sup> The importance of the spirit is that it governs that governs each of the elements, Aristotle saw this as the highest point to which man could aspire.<sup>10</sup> The star, in its own way represents the material world, while the circle represents eternity, and all of that everything is encompassed together. When we compare this to *Gawain*, his shield has his many virtues on the outside, while on the inside he has the symbol of his devotion: the image of Mary. Similarly there is an important circle in *Gawain*, in that it the text ends almost as it begins. The Wiccan ‘rede’ is ‘As long as you harm none, do what you will.’ Some Wiccan groups add that you may only harm someone in self-defence. *Gawain* is a very traditional knight, and his ideology is akin to the *comitatus* that one may see in *Beowulf* where it is important to be within your lord’s favour. This is the reason that he accepts the Green Knight’s challenge: he is protecting the honour of Arthur, his king, Lord and uncle.

<sup>8</sup> A=hands; W=blood; E = flesh and bones; f=mind. Soul is the spirit

<sup>9</sup> A=atmosphere; w=oceans, E= rocks and soil; F+ molten core; spirit = goddess

<sup>10</sup> either the mind, the soul or the spirit

**[OHP 10]** As far as the Middle Ages are concerned, the most well known order of the Poor Knights of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon would be most relevant to this paper in an historical context. I don't propose to discuss their history as such – that would be the subject for another research group.

The issue that I find of note is that the Convento de Cristo at Tomar in Portugal (built in 1160) which was the headquarters first of the Templars, the pentagram appears on gravestones. The facade of the nearby Church of Santa Maria do Olival (which houses the famous pantheon where 22 Master Templars were buried) is marked by a pentagram counterpoised on an enormous rosette. (The five petalled rose is the symbol of the Rosicrucian movement.) Just as an aside, but particularly relevant to our discussion on the interior of Gawain's shield, is that the Templars built an eight sided chapel inside the fortifications.

As I say, the *history* of the Templars is not totally relevant, but their demise was brought about by accusations of irreligious practices and blasphemies, and it is well known that one of the superstitions concerning Friday 13<sup>th</sup> is that it was on that day in October 1307 that Philip IV of France had all the Templars arrested and most were either executed or imprisoned. It is possible that, given that the Convento at Tomar shows the templars' sigil as a pentangle, that this is where the misunderstanding and misuse of the pentangle began? Misunderstandings of the pentangle will be discussed later in the paper.

Certainly through history and western legends the symbol develops into the five-pointed Pentangle, and the OED records the first usage of the word here in *Gawain and the Green Knight*. It is also mentioned in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologicae* and Dante's *Il Convivio*. Later legends emphasise that it is a five-pointed 'Pentangle' (it is called a *drudenfuss* or witch star) that was later used by Goethe so that Mephistopheles could not cross out of the magical circle. It is the form also favoured by Leonardo da Vinci in his well-known image of Vitruvian Man **[OHP 11]**. Here the points represent the classical and perfect human body. The Pentangle can be seen on illuminated manuscripts and in churches and cathedrals; Christians saw the five points to symbolise the five letters of Jesus and Maria, also the five wounds of Christ and Jerusalem; a 4th Century BC jar handle has a seal impression of a Pentangle with the Hebrew letters YRSLM (Jerusalem). Similarly, Gawain sees five significances of the pentangle, each representing five aspects. What is important to the text is not how many angles there were on the symbol, but the significance that Gawain applies to each of the points. So the point of this section (no pun intended) is that a symbol such as the Pentangle can be interpreted in many ways.

#### **iv) Misuses of the pentangle**

Unfortunately, the Pentangle has become misappropriated and this is why many people regard the symbol with disdain: if one accepts that the Pentangle with the head pointing upwards is a sign of peace and goodness, or the image of Christ crucified, then to invert it would be to revert all that it stands for. The principle is that all energies rise through the top of the star. If it is inverted, these energies are crushed by the weight of the lower principles – thus desire and the body conquer the spirit. The inverse Pentangle is therefore used as focussing on primal energy rather than concentrating on spiritual energy. In Greek society the Pentangle with the fifth point descended downwards was known as *arkande* (r-ka-and), representing chaos, insanity and the primal evil of human nature. The inverted pentangle is also commonly



associated with the writings of John Dee at the end of the sixteenth century Éliphas Lévi in 1896 and Alistair Crowley in the 1960's. However, many other symbols have been misappropriated and we now consider them in an adverse light: the Swastika, for example, is the cross of India and employed by the Hindus: it forms the sign of Pisces in the Indian zodiac, but it has taken a more sinister connotation over the last century.<sup>11</sup> With all symbolism it falls on a subjective personal interpretation: I had always been taught that the points of a horseshoe should hang upwards so that it catch the good luck; my mother hangs it upside down, claiming that this way the good luck falls on anyone who walks through the door. What I would like make clear is that each of the religions would revere their symbol, whereas those groups that would mock the symbol would defile it.

So much for history, mythology and superstition: I now turn away from the religious use of the pentangle and shall turn to the importance of it in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. And I hope that so far there has been no suggestion of Furbies.

## PART 3

### i) Gawain's challenges

Having so far established the pentangle and the significance that Gawain places upon it (as well as historical uses and misuses of it), it should be stressed that while the symbol has been associated with demonology since the composition of the *Testament of Solomon*, it is a powerful symbol of creation and goodness, although open to interpretation according to the varying belief systems. There were no 'ill' associations until much later, around the time of the inquisition. I should now like to examine some of the challenges that Gawain faces on his journey and, given how charged with imagery this symbol is, the importance its presence and absence play within the text.

Gawain's journey to the Green Chapel is by no means easy: journeying through north Wales and into Cheshire he travels over a treacherous terrain fighting with dragons, wolves, bulls, bears, wildmen and giants – indeed the poet interrupts the narrative to state that it would take him too long to tell of just a tenth of the encounters. Presumably, Gawain is using his sword and shield to defend himself in these encounters, rather than using his bare hands to tear off their limbs and then beating them over the heads with the soggy end. However, neither weapons nor armour are mentioned. Instead, with typical English bathos, the poet explains that even though Gawain has performed these marvellous deeds, he was more concerned about the weather. At the same time, Gawain's faith is immaculate: he's travelling without really knowing where he's going, and puts his faith wholeheartedly in Mary, praying that she direct him and, as Christmas Eve comes, he prays to her for a place where he might say matins on Christmas morning.

Surprisingly enough, a castle appears, described seemingly made out of paper. I have argued elsewhere that if the castle where Gawain lodges is based on an actual site, then I think it most likely to be Beeston Castle to be Castle Hautdesert because of its panoramic view across Cheshire and Wales [OHP 12]. "Hautdesert" literally translates as a high solitary place and as

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<sup>11</sup> 'The Swastika represents the four streams of energy flowing from a common point in four opposite directions ... The four directions do not refer to physical geometry, but to the four fields of matter and the four divisions of the physical world,' Raleigh, p. 32

the borders are so tight with Wales, then that might be why the states that it is “þe Englisshē” that call the pentangle “þe endless knot.”<sup>12</sup>

Gawain is welcomed by the lord of the castle, who offers him days of rest as the Green Chapel that Gawain seeks is not far away. Thus the first of Gawain’s challenges is complete. It has required endurance and faith. After such an arduous trek, one can imagine the relief of meeting a host who courteously and generously welcomes Gawain for Christmas communion (cleanness and fellowship) and prayer (piety), and, living in a luxurious castle. Indeed the host’s welcome conforms entirely to the creed dictated by Gawain’s pentangle, except in one case: the host does not tell Gawain who he really is! (but then isn’t that what Christmas is all about? The surprise of not knowing what is wrapped under the tree?)

To quote the *Gawain*-poet, it would tax me to tell you a tenth of, in this case, the temptation by the Lady of Castle Hautdesert and the final meeting with the Green knight. Hopefully my summary at the beginning of the paper will suffice, after all, these are two challenges where Gawain’s shield is either inappropriate or discarded. In the first instance he is required to use his wits to sidestep the Lady’s advances; in the second instance, there is nothing to defend him, as he must bear his neck for the Green Knight’s blade. Of course, the Green Knight wields his axe once for each of the three days that Gawain spent in the castle. For two of the days, Gawain behaved like a gentleman toward his host’s wife, and true to the rules of the game. However, on the third day, he was caught in a dilemma: either to reveal the Lady as potentially unfaithful by conceding the girdle, or concealing it. Either way his choice was to offend his host or the Lady. However, as he only kept the token as a means of protecting his own life, and not as a love token, so he had technically done nothing wrong.

## ii) **Could the symbolism of the pentangle save Gawain?**

So, the final question that I will ask this evening is ‘Could Gawain’s pentangle really protect him?’

It is unfair to pour scorn on Gawain’s actions. Unknown to Gawain, his test was not in the green chapel, but in Castle Hautdesert where his virtue – his courtaysy – is challenged when he is left alone with his host’s wife. However, no one has told Gawain the rules of the game in which he is playing: his host has been well aware that Gawain concealed the girdle and his wife was a part of the deception. But from Gawain’s point of view he either offends his host or reveals the Lady’s dishonour. There is no third alternative. Although he dutifully returns the kisses that he ‘won’ during his stay at the castle, he keeps the girdle in order to save his life, and not as a love token. Nor has it been taken for its monetary value, after all, one would have used it to hang material things upon it, - keys or a purse for example. He says his confession after meeting the lady, but by concealing the girdle from his host, his confession becomes worthless: thus his piety and cleanness of soul are tarnished.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, he has broken the rules of the exchange of winnings game; thus he has betrayed the most important of the virtues for which the Pentangle stands: trawþe, as well as that of franchyse – generosity, and felawshyp and courtaysy with his host.

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<sup>12</sup> Writers who discuss the various castles include Ralph Elliot and Michael Thompson. Of course castles were built in particularly strategic positions where they could be easily defended and its inhabitants were able to see any potential oncoming invaders.

<sup>13</sup> ll.1870-1885

The narrative describes him donning his shield before riding out to face the green knight, he must discard his shield when he faces the green knight's axe. In effect, both the shield and the girdle are both tangible objects, the girdle becomes substitute for the shield itself, not its symbolic value. Instead of trusting the unbreakable endless knot of trawpe, he trusts in a flimsy silk girdle. The lady promised that it would make him invulnerable to the Green Knight's blade, and yet, it appears, to me at least, that Gawain does not completely trust in the magical power of lady's girdle, as, on the first occasion that the Green Knight lifts his axe, Gawain flinches. The fact that he concealed the girdle was, of course, the cause of the blemish. It has hurt him more than helped him. Thus, the shield is a tangible form of an emblem of virtue, while the girdle is an emblem of fault.

So the answer to whether the symbolism of the pentangle could have saved Gawain is a resounding 'maybe'. There was no way that he could have adhered to those virtues under the circumstances of the game without revealing the Lady's dishonour. His concealing of the girdle is symbolic of the 'little white lie'. However, In *Gawain* the Pentangle represents knightly ideals: religions throughout history have seen it as a positive symbol representing the unity of the body and soul, or the universe; however, one can only ever aspire towards an ideal. Part of being human is learning from our mistakes. *If* Gawain had adhered to the virtues to which the pentangle represents then he might have had a chance. But we have to remember that he was playing in a game in which he didn't know the rules: he had no idea that he was being tested at the time; and he was placed in a no win situation. Should Gawain have placed his honour over the potential of saving his life and that of the lady, just with the slightest indiscretion? One may argue, as you no doubt will in your discussions here, whether honour and the chivalric code are more important than self-sacrifice. By trying to save his own life, Gawain can potentially do more good works in the service of Camelot, than he could if he were dead. But, by breaking the rules, He has discarded the symbol of faith, and along with it his religion, and all the historical symbolism that goes with it. One by one, the ties of the endless knot are undone, and if you undermine a single point of the endless knot, then the rest will unravel themselves; the endless knot is broken and we are left with a single line, just like the green girdle [**stage prop**].<sup>14</sup> And to use the fishing imagery I used at the beginning of the paper, by means of the green girdle, Gawain is effectively 'reeled in.' (Thank you)

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<sup>14</sup> Note that since Jackie Tasioulas said this, she has realised that Tony Spearing had previously made the same observation.