

Matthew Forster  
English 399: Senior Seminar  
Professor McInerney

Green Things:  
Reading the Green Girdle as the Governing Object of *Sir  
Gawain and the Green Knight*

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a poem composed in the fourteenth century by an anonymous poet, has been the subject of innumerable theories and criticism in the intervening centuries between the poem's composition and my own study of it. Scholars have taken a wide

variety of approaches in trying to unpack and understand the intricacies of the poet's work. Although approaches differ, what is largely constant is the desire to figure one object from the narrative as the crux of the poem. On this score, with a few outliers, scholars are divided into three camps: they choose the axe of the Green Knight himself, or Gawain's shield and the pentangle emblazoned on it, or the green girdle that saves Gawain from the Green Knight's blow. The widespread desire to read the poem through one object cements the fact that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an object driven narrative. As the poem progresses, much of what the reader learns about characters is not through their actions in the primary narrative, but by values assigned to them through objects, doled out in narrative asides resembling classical moments of ekphrasis.

Rather than fighting the poem's own object-centricity and the scholarly fixation on objects within the poem, this paper seeks to provide a new critical lens through which to view the poem and my own interpretation of which object best governs the poem. In spending any lengthy amount of time with the poem, it becomes impossible not to obsess over an object. The circularity of the poem encourages this myopia. Additionally, the lack of a concrete moral at the poem's end, a romance's hallmark, makes it difficult to understand the poem through traditional thematic readings. Because the success of Gawain's quest is ambiguous, scholars seek another means to understand the poem more holistically. Although I have every intention of engaging in a similar process, to remove an object from the narrative to use as a lens for a hermeneutic study of the work is to pursue a perilous path.

A perfect example of the dangers of fixating upon one object within the narrative is provided by Leo Carruthers in "The Duke of Clarence and the Earls of March: Garter Knights and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Driven by the poet's anonymity and an insatiable desire

to more fully understand the poem, Carruthers takes the symbol of the green girdle, and the inscription of the garter knight's motto at the end of the manuscript as a way to speculate on the identity of the Gawain Poet's patron. Carruthers' piece starts with the type of astute summation of an object's importance in describing Gawain that shows the generative potential of this object-centric line of enquiry: "Worn first by Gawain as a talisman [...], it is elevated to the level of sign, on a par with the pentangle [...], then adopted as a chivalric emblem. Gawain returns home wearing it as a baldric, i.e. across his right shoulder and tied in a knot under his left arm. For the hero, the adventure has been one of progress from self-delusion to self-awareness, from pride to penitence" (Carruthers 67). After this perceptive summation, Carruthers feels the need to pluck the girdle out of its literary context, historicizing it. Not content with exploring the girdle's potential within the narrative, Carruthers seeks the real thing, hoping to give some answer to the mystery surrounding the creator of the poem. The extra-narrative leaps Carruthers makes fall short. He relies on a scribal addition to a manuscript and speculation about the identity of figures present at the New Years' feast in the poem's first fitt as evidence for his argument. While his argument fails in its primary role, it does an exemplary job serving an unintentional function: it highlights the vice grip thingness has on scholars who read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Before examining objects within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is important to ask the governing question, what makes an object significant? In an effort to answer this question, I have focused upon both "Object Oriented Ontology" (OOO) and "Thing Theory". Timothy Morton begins his explanation of OOO with the somewhat radical conception that everything is an object. In figuring the world in object-object relationships, the natural disposition to view the world as a series of subject-object relationships is eradicated. While initially puzzling, this object-object relationship becomes especially generative when viewing an object centered

narrative like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In seeking an object that governs both the primary narrative and Gawain's behavior as a character, it is easier to find a singular object if one also considers Gawain to be an object. OOO reduces everything to equals. Subject-object relationships give privilege to the subject as a governor of the object, but, when everything is viewed as an object, the world appears as a series of parallels. Once one accepts that everything is an object, including Gawain the character and the narrative itself, it becomes possible to see how objects interact with one another. Morton claims that there is an irreducibility to objects, a strong "otherness" that will always shade the object, preventing a total understanding of it. The most lucid example Morton provides is that of a coin. Simply put, a coin has two sides, heads and tails. But we can never view both simultaneously. There is always an "other" side. When the coin is flipped, the positions are reversed, but what remains constant is that there is a dark side to the object. Therefore, as an irreducible entity, an object can never be fully viewed. When two objects are placed in the context of each other, they can only ever mistranslate each other. Morton, extending the theoretical work of Harman, another scholar developing Object Oriented Ontology, explores the power of irreducibility: "Harman simply extends this irreducible darkness [the notion that as many times as we flip over a coin there will always be an "other side" and we can never see the entirety of an object] from subject-object relationships to object-object relationships. Objects encounter each other as operationally closed systems that can only (mis)translate one another[...]. An object is profoundly "withdrawn" - we can never see the whole of it, and nothing else can either" (Morton 165). These irreducible "operationally closed" systems are the crux of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Using the framework provided by OOO, this paper will demonstrate how Gawain, as an object, is mistranslated throughout the poem by other "operationally closed" objects.

While OOO is helpful in figuring the relationship between objects, Thing Theory, as explained by Bill Brown in the first chapter of his book, *Things*, provides a critical framework for the analysis of an object by itself. Like OOO, Thing Theory acknowledges the duality of objects. But where OOO claims they are irreducible, and mistranslatable, Thing Theory views both sides of an object separately. Thing Theory accepts the duality of objects and embraces the “other side” of an object. For Brown, the two sides of an object are the physical and the metaphorical. In fact, at the center of Brown’s work is the tension between separating and merging these two sides. The most explicit example of an object with a dual nature is a window. A window is simultaneously a solid object and a transparency through which we see other things. When one stops looking through a window as a “transparency” one can begin to see it as an opaque object itself. The takeaway, Brown writes, is how this alters our perception of the world: “We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: [...] when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” (Brown 4). By this logic, an object is at its most effective when its duality is symbiotic, and not self-defeating. A window works so brilliantly as a metaphor because while being a transparent portal, it is simultaneously performing its role as an opaque object. Gawain repeatedly attempts to define himself with objects. The object that governs Gawain, however, must be capable of holding its own in both the physical and metaphorical world. If it is in the moments where an object stops working that Brown sees its “thingness”, any object that defines Gawain must

function doubly: it must simultaneously “consume and exhibit”. It must not have these explicit moments of thingness.

Neither OOO nor Thing Theory is a perfect theory. Both have their shortcomings. OOO, in submitting to an object’s irreducibility, makes analysis of a singular object difficult. OOO is only generative on a holistic level, figuring objects in conjunction with each other. In contrast, Thing Theory revels in an object’s duality. In viewing an object two ways, however, it is possible to lose context, overly determining one’s reading by obsessing over a single object, as many scholars do. By framing *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with both OOO and Thing Theory, it is possible to strike a balance between the two theories. The two help make up for each other’s shortcomings. OOO and Thing Theory, when used in tandem, act as bifocals. OOO enables one to see long-distance, how Gawain and an object interact and mistranslate each other. Thing Theory acts as the reading lens; it focuses more closely on the object in front of the reader, exploding its dualities and adding more depth to OOO’s broad view. The green girdle, the object that successfully governs Gawain, and by extension the whole poem, will be proven to function both in the framework of OOO and Thing Theory.

This paper will follow the path set for us by the poet himself. As Gawain does, this paper will begin with the Green Knight’s axe, then explore the pentangle that adorns Gawain’s shield and clothing, before finally settling upon the green girdle given to Gawain by the lady of the castle. Dealing with the objects in the order that they are embedded in the primary narrative enables the study to stay grounded in the world of the poem. To extract these objects from their place in the narrative is to neglect their context, an important aspect of their description and function. Treating them sequentially, axe, shield, girdle, will demonstrate the way each object has an opportunity to translate Gawain, before the poem’s linearity is lost at the end. As the

poem does, this study will end with the girdle, making its case as the governing object of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The first object within the narrative that has been touted by scholars as a possible governing object is the axe of the Green Knight. With the Green Knight's arrival at the New Year's feast, it is also the first object that drives the narrative. The reader is exposed to the axe early in the first fitt of the poem. It assumes a position of importance at the end of the lengthy description of the Green Knight and his horse:

And an ax in his other, a hoge and unmete,  
 A spetos sparthe to expoun his spelle, quoso myght.  
 The lenkthe of an elnyerde the large hede hade,  
 The grayn al of grene stele and of golde hewen,  
 The bit burnyst bryght, with a brod egge  
 As wel schapen to schere as scharp rasores,  
 The stele of a stif staf the sturne hit bi grypte,  
 That watz wounden wyth yrn to the wandez ende,  
 And al bigraven with grene in gracios werkes;  
 A lace lapped aboute, that louked at the hede,  
 And so after the halme halched ful ofte,  
 Wyth tryed tasselez therto tacched innoghe  
 On botounz of the bryght grene brayden ful ryche. (208-220)

The first characteristic that the reader notices about this axe is the overwhelming amount of green on it. It is made of green and gold steel (212) and engraved with green throughout. There are also tassels, lavishly embroidered with green beads, wrapped about the axe. The splendor of the axe holds its own with the wielder, a near giant stranger clad almost entirely in green and colored green himself. Like the wielder of the weapon, however, the axe is remarkable not only in appearance, but also in scale and function. In fact, the first thing the poet tells us about the axe is that it is monstrously huge (208). The remarkable scale of the axe is reinforced later in the description, as we learn that the head was "the lenkthe of an elnyerde" (210). The poet also makes sure to inform the reader that the axe was sharpened to cut as smoothly as a razor. This

axe, in addition to being beautifully crafted, is a potent weapon. It is capable of felling a man in a single swipe.

The axe's centrality to the Green Knight's beheading, the first significant action in the poem, demonstrates its lethal function. Alain Renoir, in his article "Descriptive Technique in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" focuses largely on this initial beheading. Renoir borrows from cinematography, using the analogy of a camera and the frame of a shot to color his analysis of the scene. Renoir notes the ability of the Gawain Poet to vividly describe scenes: "The technique of our poet is to draw a single detail out of a uniformly illuminated scene which is then allowed to fade out in obscurity and of which we may be given an occasional dim glimpse at psychologically appropriate moments" (Renoir 127). Using the scene where Gawain beheads the Green Knight, Renoir points out that the narrative camera narrows onto the axe and follows it all the way through the Green Knight's neck:

Gawan gripped to his ax and gederes hit on hyght,  
 The kay fot on the folde he before sette,  
 Let hit down lyghtly lyght on the naked,  
 That the scharp of the schalk schyndered the bones,  
 And scrank thurgh the schyire grece, and schade hit in twynne,  
 That the bit of the broun stel bot on the grounde. (421-426)

While the initial swing of the axe is performed by Gawain, once the blow has begun, the focus of the narrative is exclusively on the axe. It is as if after setting the axe in motion, Gawain is supplanted by inertia. As Renoir notes, the poet's focus narrows all the way to the very tip of the blade, tracing its path through the neck until the steel blade rings against the floor in line 426. Renoir likens this to a cinematographic close-up, and asserts that it has the effect within the narrative of heightening the suspense of the action and the significance of the blow.

Renoir's depiction of the beheading is rather astute. He effectively illuminates the narrowing of the poet's field of vision, highlighting the axe as the means of decapitation. The



beheading scene demonstrates the axe's functionality beyond a shadow of a doubt. Although the reader already feared the axe from its initial description when it was in the hands of the Green Knight, the beheading shows that the axe is razor sharp and functional in hands other than the giant sized ones the knight possesses. While Renour picks up on this, his is a very aesthetic reading. He focuses on the visual brilliance of the poem. By using the axe as his central object, he grounds the axe in a visual, mimetic world. I do not disagree with Renour's approach, but in addition to highlighting the poet's narrative play, the decapitation also elucidates that the text is centered on the axe's functionality rather than any symbolic value that it may be assigned. To return to the metaphor of the window, the axe is only the pane of glass. Used to brutal effect, we see the axe slice through the bared neck of the Green Knight. We are exposed to none of its history, or what any of its decorations say or depict. Although a beautiful embellished piece, it is metaphorically unembellished in the narrative. The axe is placed firmly in the world of tools. It is an instrument to be used. There is nothing upon which to look when viewing the axe as a window. An object must exist in both the physical and metaphorical worlds. Brown asserts that we see an object's "thingness" when the object stops functioning in one of these worlds. In the case of the axe, it is only ever an object. Gawain takes it up, assumes a firm stance, and then disappears from the frame as the axe takes over the poem until it has completed its duty. The axe never interacts with Gawain. It projects no meaning. Rather it takes over for him, performing the decapitation and supplanting Gawain at the center of the narrative. One could be forgiven for forgetting that it is Gawain who deals the blow.

Although the axe critically lacks an explicit symbolic meaning, from the poet's initial description of the axe and its first action within the poem, it appears as an object that could claim to define Gawain. In the hands of the Green Knight, an otherworldly giant, it is still remarkable,

receiving a lengthy ekphrasis from the poet. Within the context of the narrative, this reading appears to gain steam, too, as the axe is both the implement of and the reward for the bargain that Gawain is to strike with the Green Knight. Gawain uses the axe to decapitate the Green Knight, and he is allowed to keep this ornate weapon as his prize. Kathryn Walls latches onto this thread, writing that: “The axe is the very last property of the Green Knight to be elaborated upon, and it is described in great detail (208-220). Thus emphasized, it goes on to govern the action of the poem as a whole” (Walls 13). At the close of the first fitt, when Gawain has beheaded the Green Knight, King Arthur urges him to hang up his axe:

He glent upon Sir Gawen, and gaynly he said,  
 ‘Now sir, heng up thyn ax, that hatz innogh hewen.’  
 And hit watz don abof the dece on doser to henge,  
 Ther alle men for mervayl myght on hit loke,  
 And bi trwe tytel therof to telle the wonder. (476-480)

Walls interprets this hanging up as a metaphorical positioning of the axe above Gawain, subsequently governing the poem. While Walls sees this as the crystalizing moment where the axe gains a governing significance, it instead can be construed as the moment where the narrative forsakes the axe, leaving it behind until the return blow is dealt at the poem’s end. There, too, the axe is employed more as an instrument than a symbol. Walls neglects Gawain in her assertion. Rather than being burdened by the axe, in hanging it up Gawain retires it, consigning it to no longer be an instrument of death, but rather a signifier of past actions, a relic of sorts. Under the lens of OOO, it is difficult to figure Gawain and the axe together.

Part of the problem is that Gawain spends such a brief amount of time with the axe. It is primarily an object of the Green Knight. While Arthur does refer to it as “thyn ax”, it is effectively only Gawain’s from the time it takes him to decapitate the Green Knight to the moment where he hangs it on the wall. When the reader first sees the axe, it is an object

interacting with the Green Knight, an extension of his unique coloring, imposing size, and giant-like strength. Not a sword, it entrenches the Green Knight in an otherworldly position, denying him the weapon of a courtly hero. Morton asserts that things can only ever mistranslate each other. The axe can certainly mistranslate Gawain. It is the weapon of a giant. Garishly offensive, its size makes it unwieldy, and it lacks the balance of power provided by a proper knight's sword and shield. For a knight of Arthur's court, who prides himself on his religious and courtly virtue, the axe would never serve as an appropriate weapon. Walls does an excellent job illuminating what the axe can signify, but she falls into the same trap that catches Carruthers. She notes that after it is hung up, the axe "remains uninterpreted within the poem." She states that "the axe cries out for interpretation" (Walls 13). Obsessed with the axe, Walls goes beyond the text, attempting to imbue our reading of Sir Gawain with extra-textual references to death and the Bible. While she makes a convincing case, she glosses over the fact that Gawain, and by extension, the poet, never impart such an important position to the axe. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not shy away from its own object-centricity. As the protagonist, Gawain is acutely aware of what his belongings signify, and how he wants to project himself to the world. In the mistranslation afforded by OOO, there should be reciprocity. Here, however, Gawain never attempts to translate the axe. Rather, he leaves it behind, hung on a tapestry in Arthur's court. The axe exists as a prize from the Green Knight, and not an object of Gawain. As a result, the axe does not inform Gawain's self-perception. In an effort to find a governing object, it becomes clear that the axe cannot assume that position of privilege. Like Sir Gawain, we will leave the axe behind, seeking an object that interacts more intimately with Gawain and better fits this essay's theoretical framework.

After the axe has been hung up by Gawain, consigned to Arthur's mantle as a passive reminder of Gawain's contract and the past adventure, the poem's second fitt begins. It swiftly moves through the nascent year to return to the holidays and Gawain's preparation for his quest to fulfill his debt to the Green Knight. The pace with which the narrative dispenses with the intervening year, a mere two stanzas, demonstrates its relative unimportance in the narrative. It also heightens the importance of the next major object which the poet introduces to the reader. As Gawain readies himself to leave on his quest, a lengthy ekphrasis ensues, describing the finer details of his armor and accouterments, all outside of the primary narrative arc. After Gawain has been "hasped"<sup>1</sup> (590) into his armor, a word that aptly demonstrates the finality of Gawain's commitment to the quest and foreshadows his steadfast devotion to the iconography present on his armor, he picks up his helmet. This is the last step in putting on his armor:

Enbrawden and bounden with the best gemmez  
 On brode sylkyn borde, and bryddez on semez,  
 As papjayeze paynted pervyng bitwene,  
 Tortors and trulofez entayled so thyk  
 As mony burde therabout had ben seven wynter  
 in toune. (609-14)

The helmet displays the opulence and beauty of Gawain's armor, showing his place as one of the most prominent knights in Arthur's court. In addition to demonstrating Gawain's value, the helmet narrows the reader's focus. Directly preceding the introduction of the shield, the helmet closes the dressing of Gawain. Symbolically, the helmet is rooted in the world of courtly love, resplendent with turtle doves and other amorous symbols.<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of this dated symbology on the helmet acts as a foil, making the Christian symbology present on Gawain's

---

<sup>1</sup> which can be translated roughly as locked.

<sup>2</sup> Laura F. Hodges suggests in her piece 'Syngne,' 'Conysaunce', 'Deuys': Three Pentangles in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" that the devys (617) on Gawain's helmet could in fact be the pentangle. Hodges article is well argued. But given that the devys on the helmet is surrounded by symbols of courtly love, and the vague manner in which the devys is referenced, I still see more value in reading the helmet as a symbol of courtly love.

shield all the more poignant. It points to a conflict of ideology present in the Arthurian canon as a whole, as the genre is christianized, moving from the world of courtly love to a more religiously devout ideal. When Gawain's body is fully adorned in his armor, he is left only to assume his crowning object, his shield, and mount his horse. The first thing the reader learns about the shield is that it is functional and strong, illuminating its value in battle as much as in court. As the largest canvas, and the outermost item on Gawain's person, the shield assumes the point of prominence in his representation of self to the world.

In spite of having already engaged in a lengthy description of Gawain's armor, the poet feels the need to describe the shield and explain its symbolic value, "thof tary hyt me schulde"<sup>3</sup>(624). The poet's consciousness of the delay to the primary narrative, as illuminated by his extra-narrative insertion here, cements the shield as the primary symbol of Gawain at this junction in time. When the reader returns to the primary narrative, having spent an equal amount of time reading about the shield that Gawain carries as about the entire preceding year, the reader understands the shield's value and how it acts as the first impression to those he meets on his quest.

Of the objects in the narrative, the shield is the one with which Gawain would most like to define himself. On the front of the shield is the pentangle, a symbol that the narrator goes to great lengths to describe:

Hit is a syngne that Salomon set sumquyle  
 In bytoknyng of trawthe, bi tyle that hit habbez,  
 For hit is a figure that haldez fyve poyntez,  
 And uche lyne umbelappez and loukez in other,  
 And ayquere hit is endelez; and Englych hit callen  
 Overall, as I here, the endeles knot. (625-630)

---

<sup>3</sup> Translated roughly as "even though it should delay me".

Emblazoned on the front of the shield, gleaming in pure gold, the pentangle acts as a beacon, illuminating the values that Gawain holds dear. Also in the pentangle is the continued presence of a “locked” language. The pentangle is an “endeles knot” with no beginning or end. As a representation of a value system, it leaves next to no wiggle room. Gawain, locked in his armor, decked with a symbol known back to the days of Solomon, has projected a clearly defined ethos by which to govern himself. If the pentangle and the shield are to define Gawain, he must be the perfect Christian knight, faultless in faith and behavior. It is an impossibly high standard to meet, made higher by its prominent position on both his shield and coat (637). The doubling of the sign, seen on more than one of Gawain’s garments, establishes it as the primary symbol of Gawain at this point in the narrative.

While the pentangle garners much of the attention from scholars, it only accounts for half of the symbolic value of the shield. The shield is embellished equally on its interior as on its exterior:

That alle his forsnes he feng at the fyve joyez  
 That the hende heven-quene had of hir chylde;  
 At this cause the knyght comlyche hade  
 In the inore half of his schelde hir image depaynted,  
 That quen he blusched therto his belde never payred. (646-50)

On the inside of Gawain’s shield is a depiction of the Virgin Mary, the “hende heven-quene”. Befitting Gawain’s martyr-like devotion to his ideals, there is no splendor surrounding her image. A sacrosanct figure, the Virgin Mary’s countenance is more valuable to Gawain than any rich embellishment could be. Where the pentangle is inlayed in gold, and Gawain’s armor and clothes are of the finest material, the Virgin Mary’s portrait is a simple portrayal. This bare portrait allows the power of her presence to be the most important part of the description of the shield’s inner face. Held close to his heart, both in value and position, the Virgin Mary acts as a

constant reminder to Gawain of the values that he fights to uphold. Hidden from general view, this is an internal symbol, a source of strength that adds an extra layer of value to an object that is already loaded with Christian ideology. The Virgin Mary, while similar to the pentangle in ideology, is a private projection of faith and power, a fountain upon which Gawain is able to draw.

To return to the metaphor of a coin, the shield is in many ways the perfect object. Literally two-sided, it easily maps heads and tails. On the front of the shield is the pentangle, an outward projection of Gawain's virtuous ideology. On the other side of the shield, unseen by those looking at the shield's golden front, is a portrait of the Virgin Mary, a deeply spiritual presence, meant only for Gawain, as a way to spur him on in battle and maintain his near saintly faith. Beyond the literal duality of a two-sided object, there is a metaphorical doubling on the shield, too. Thematically constant, the shield has two sides, one to project outwardly, and another to project inwardly. The two are inseparable, but cannot be viewed simultaneously. Irreducible, the shield always has a dark, "other" face. When viewing the elaborate pentangle and its pentatonic representation of faith, the simple portrait of the Virgin Mary is unseen. Conversely, when drawing strength from Mary, the purest, most distilled icon of Christian faith, it supplants the more ambiguous pentangle on the shield's "other", outward face.

What is easily lost in the shield's rich symbolism, is that at its core, the shield is supposed to be a functional piece of equipment. It is a vital piece of Gawain's armor meant to protect him from danger.<sup>4</sup> The shield's primary function is not merely to remind Gawain of his values or to keep him away from the dangers of an immoral life. Rather, it is to shield him from real, bone-

---

<sup>4</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, there is a useful parallel between Gawain's highly symbolic armor and the armor given to Aeneas by Venus in Book VIII of the Aeneid. Supplanting a fully functioning suit of armor already in Aeneas' possession, the new shield and helmet are redundant. But the shield hints at the future of Rome, serving a primarily symbolic function, much like Gawain's shield does.

crunching, flesh-stripping danger. A mainly defensive tool, in the poet's hands, however, the shield's primary role quickly becomes an offensive function: "Then thay schewed hym the schelde, that was of schyr goulez, / Wyth the pentangel depaynt of pure gold hwez. / He braydez hit by the bauderyk, aboute the hals kestes, / That bisemed the segge semlyly fayre" (619-622). Where the axe is barely spoken about with regards to Gawain, the poet is careful to frame the shield in relation to Gawain. Never an independent object, its ekphrasis is immediately framed within the context of the shield's relationship to Gawain. Instead of describing the shield, the poet explains why "That bisemed the segge smlyly fayre"<sup>5</sup>. The shield sacrifices its "thingness" within three lines of its introduction. It is relegated to being an extension and reflection of Gawain and his morals, rather than a true shield. The description of the shield is continually hijacked by Gawain's exemplary behavior:

Forthy hit acordez to this knyght and to his cler armez,  
 For ay faythful in fyve and sere fyve sythez  
 Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as golde pured,  
 Voyded of uche vylany, wyth vertuez ennoured  
   in mote;  
   Forthy the pentangel nwe  
   He ber in schelde and cote,  
   As tulk of tale most trwe  
 And gentylest knyght of lote. (631-639)

What follows is a lengthy aside about how Gawain fulfills each of the five virtues assigned to the five points of the endless knot. What is most remarkable, however, is not Gawain's behavior, but how the poet remains centered on Gawain. "Forthy hit acordez to this knyght and to his cler armez"<sup>6</sup>, the pentangle is again being framed against Gawain, and not the shield. The shield slips out of the narrative, acting merely as a canvas for the pentangle. At this point in the narrative, the pentangle confirms what we already know about Gawain; that he is a virtuous, honest, brave

<sup>5</sup> Roughly Translated as "Where it suited the knight very well".

<sup>6</sup> "Therefore it suits the knight and his shining arms".



knight. He is about to seek out the Green Knight in good faith and may potentially meet his end. As a functional object, the shield is a non-entity. Relegated to the symbolic metaphorical world within a few lines of its introduction, the shield never establishes itself in the physical world as a shield. For all the beauty of its dual projection, both inward and outward, the shield lacks the kind of duality necessary for it to be an ideal object. The shield's two meanings both reside in the same sphere of metaphor and allegory, not in the diverse value of function and sign.

The shield's lack of functional value is truly cemented by its absence in moments of violence when Gawain could use a defensive barrier. Illuminated only in a narratological aside, the shield is missing from the primary narrative. When Gawain's armor is fully assembled, the pace of the narrative accelerates once again, skimming over the brunt of his journey until he reaches the castle where he spends the holidays. The many dangers that a knight would face out on the road during battles are glossed over: "At uche warthe other water ther the wyghe passed / he fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were, / And that so foule and so felle that feght hym byhode" (715-717). The only indication the reader receives that Gawain has used his shield at all is in this brief aside, where the poet informs the reader that Gawain was forced to give fight. For a knight on a quest, in full armor, these battles would seem to be an integral part of Gawain's adventure. The poet, however, is not interested in demonstrating Gawain's valor as it has already been represented in a symbolic light. The poet goes one step further in removing Gawain's valor from a battle-won form by chalking up Gawain's success to his devotion to God: "Both wyth bullez and berez, and borez otherquyle, / And etaynez that hym aneledede of the heghe felle; / Nade he ben dughty and dryghe, and Dryghtyn had served, / Douteles he hade be ded and dreped ful ofte" (722-725). In spots where it might become clear that Gawain acted valiantly by wielding his sword or warding off beasts with his shield, the poet instead gives credit to the

values inscribed on the shield. Already elevated by its prominent position on the shield and Gawain's coat, the pentangle completely supplants the shield's physical value, handing Gawain's victory to faith and not skill. The shield is an overwrought symbol. It assigns to Gawain a saintlike virtue that is impossible to maintain. It idealizes him, removing him from the physical action of the primary narrative, leaving his exposition in the symbolic ekphrastic asides of the poem. As much as Gawain may desire this rarified air, he is human. He is flawed, and by his own admission, the shield and its pentangle cannot be the object through which the reader views him.

Although it fades from the primary narrative rather quickly<sup>7</sup>, it must be noted that the pentangle does govern Gawain's behavior for the first half of his journey. Gawain is represented as a faithful knight without equal. His reputation precedes him when he finally arrives at a castle in a land unknown to him. In fact, it is his virtue as a knight of Arthur's court that draws him into the treacherous covenant with the castle's Lord. Seeking rest before he must pursue the Green Knight and receive the blow owed to him, Gawain agrees to trade with the Bertilak, the Lord of the castle, whatever he accrues in the castle for the spoils brought back from the day's hunt. Gawain agrees to this pact in good faith. But his value system is put to the test by Bertilak's wife. Every morning, the Lady visits Gawain, endeavoring to sleep with him. In doing so, she puts Gawain's two competing worlds in direct opposition. A knight in Arthur's court, Gawain comes from a society that trumpets courtly love along with a pattern of behavior that forbids him from sequestering himself from a lady, especially one as fair as Bertilak's wife. But Gawain, as depicted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is also the epitome of a good Christian, and as such, he cannot canoodle with the woman married to his host. This internal conflict, between

---

<sup>7</sup> R.A. Shoaf also points to the disappearance of the pentangle in the first chapter of his book *The Poem as Green Girdle: Commertium in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: "Moreover, Gawain (and the poem) concentrates on the girdle at the end to the exclusion of any further mention of the pentangle" (Shoaf 6).

courtly knightly and Christian virtue, makes his pact impossible to keep. Succumbing to three kisses, Gawain largely avoids a betrayal of either his host or his own ideology. When Gawain is offered the green girdle, an object that can supposedly save him from the blow he is due to receive, his desire for self-preservation overrides his promise to his host and his ideologies.

The moment that Gawain accepts the girdle from the Lady and does not repay it to Bertilak at the end of the day, is the moment that the endless knot of the pentangle is broken. An overwrought value system, the pentangle was always set up to fail, for no human could possibly live up to its knot of endless virtue. Although he initially refuses the girdle, when Gawain finds out about its powers, he can no longer resist the temptation. Gawain's internal fall from grace is well documented by the poet:

Then kest the knyght, and hit come to his hert  
 Hit were a juel for the joparde that hym jugged were:  
 When he acheved to the chapel his chek for to fech,  
 Myght he haf slyyped not be unslayn, the sleght were noble. (1855-8)

This moment represents a first in the narrative: a moment where Gawain makes a decision purely out of self-interest. The decision to take the girdle, while symbolic, is rooted in the primary narrative. Gawain takes it to survive. Where in the first arming scene Gawain was dressed by others, handed his weapons and ideology, in this final dressing, Gawain is responsible for his vestments:

Whyle the wlonkest wedes he warp on hymselven -  
 His cote wyth the conysaunce of the clere werkez  
 Ennurned upon velvet, vertuuz stonez  
 Aboute beten and bounden, enbrauded semez,  
 And fayre furred withinne with fayre pelures -  
 Yet laft he not the lace, the ladies gifte,  
 That forgat not Gawayn for gode of hymselven. (2025-2031)

The first notable aspect of Gawain's dressing is the reduced prominence of the pentangle. Previously a symbol worthy of a lengthy ekphrasis, it is now reduced to a "conysaunce of the clere werkez"<sup>8</sup>. Not even explicitly mentioned by name, the pentangle has been supplanted by the green girdle. It is also important to note the repetition of "hymselven". The reflexivity demonstrated by this word, that Gawain is dressing for himself, adopting the girdle for his own preservation, is lacking in the earlier arming scene that centers around the pentangle. In the earlier fitt, the pentangle overshadows Gawain, making itself the central focus of the scene. Here, Gawain is in control of the girdle, putting it on to work for him, "for gode of hym sylven". This self-interest is repeated a mere few lines later:

Bot wered not this ilk wyghe for wele this gordel,  
 For pryde of the pendauntez, thagh polyst thay were,  
 And thagh the glyterande golde glent upon endez,  
 Bot for to saven hymself, when suffer hym byhoved,  
 To byde bale withoute dabate of bronde hym to were other knyffe. (2037-2041)

Again it is made clear that Gawain adorns himself with the green girdle for its power to save his life from the fell of the Green Knight's axe. His desire to wear the girdle, in many ways his first act of agency in the poem, is a powerfully human decision.

An object that is initially introduced in the functional world of the primary narrative, the girdle quickly gains value in the hermeneutic, symbolic world. Unlike the pentangle, however, which has one rigidly defined symbolic value made explicit by the poet, the girdle takes on a variety of meanings. The girdle is a difficult object to pin down. Within the last fitt of the poem, four different sets of people attempt to read it. The most succinct summation of the girdle's multiplicity of meaning is provided by Ralph Hanna in "Unlocking What's Locked: Gawain's

---

<sup>8</sup> "a finely embroidered badge".

Green Girdle."<sup>9</sup> Hanna attempts to divide the potential readings of the girdle by demarcating them with their reader. Each reader sees a different value in the girdle. Version one of the girdle is the value given to it by the Lady, where the girdle is seen as an object imbued with magical powers. Version two of the girdle is the value assigned to it by Gawain, where he perceives the girdle as the embodiment of his humanly sins. Version three is the Green Knight's reading of the girdle, where it is a representation of Gawain's chivalric adventure. The last version of the girdle, version four, is the reading in which Hanna sees the most value. It is the value assigned by the knights of the round table in adopting the girdle themselves. It is "a sign of their human complicity and sympathy, their fellowship with the discomfited Gawain" (Hanna 153).

The poet himself is aware of the girdle's plurality. In fact, after it is first introduced by the Lady, the poet uses nine distinct words to refer to the girdle.<sup>10</sup> The poet's diction ranges from the very trivial "lace" that is prevalent when the girdle is in the possession of the Lady, to the fully symbolic use of the word "token" that is used once Gawain has re-fastened the girdle as a baldric over his shoulder. While there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the poet's diction and the values assigned to the girdle centuries later by Hanna, there is a split in the poet's diction between the words that describe a functional object and the words that refer to a symbolic entity. When the reader first encounters the girdle at the end of the third fitt, it is introduced as a "girdel" (1829), the word most often associated with it in English. In the very next line, however, it is referred to as a "lace" (1830). The feminine, delicate word "lace" grounds the girdle as an object of the Lady. The lavish, dainty nature of the girdle in her hands is further enforced by its subsequent description as a "silke" (1846) and a "luf-lace" (1874). When the Lady describes the

---

<sup>9</sup> In addition to Hanna's article, alternate readings of the girdle have been written by authors such as Leo Carruthers and R.A. Shoaf.

<sup>10</sup> the poet's words, in order of appearance are: girdel, lace, silke, belt, luf-lace, drurye, wede, woven girdel, bauderyk.

girdle in this way, she is attempting to play up its triviality. Gawain at first refuses a ring she tries to give him, so she instead offers him this insubstantial green lace. Gawain again refuses, but the Lady discloses its true value, loosening Gawain's resolve: "For quat gome so is gorde with this grene lace, / While he hit hade hemely halched aboute, / Ther is no hathel under heven tohewe hym that myght, / For he myght not be slayn for slyght upon erthe" (1851-4). The next time that the girdle is mentioned, it is called a "belt" (1860). This marks a shift in the nomenclature of the girdle, from a lace worn by the Lady of the castle to an object adorning Gawain that is supposed to spare his life. Before Gawain wears the girdle, however, it is referred to as a "drurye" (2033).<sup>11</sup> The poet's diction, referring to the girdle as "drurye" directly before Gawain assumes the girdle for the first time, explicitly marks the transition of ownership from the Lady to Gawain. Having accepted this token of love from the Lady, the girdle is free to assume its more functional purposes. This more functional nature of the girdle is marked, as in the context of Gawain it is subsequently referred to as "gordel" (2035).<sup>12</sup> Gordel of course being the closest to the word we use today to refer to the girdle or belt that would be wrapped around one's waist. This fits with the girdle's placement around Gawain's waist when he dresses himself to go face the Green Knight. The girdle fittingly retains its nomenclature as girdle until Gawain reappropriates it as a sign. Once it has served its primary function in saving Gawain's life, it takes on a second meaning, as the Green Knight realizes what Gawain is wearing. The girdle is subsequently called a "bauderyk" (2487)<sup>13</sup>, as Gawain wraps it around his shoulder instead of his waist. The choice to call the girdle a baldric makes the object explicitly Gawain's. Eminently masculine, a baldric is an object that fastens a sword and is at the core of a knight's equipment.

---

<sup>11</sup> "A token of love or affection, a keepsake."

<sup>12</sup> "A belt worn around the waist, used for fastening clothes or for carrying a sword, purse, etc."

<sup>13</sup> "A sash or girdle, worn over the shoulder or around the waist, for carrying a sword, a hunting horn, a pouch; a baldric; also an ornamental sash or girdle."

In addition to the value of holding a knight's sword, one of the most defining marks of a knight's class, a baldric also possesses a less functional value as an ornament. Simultaneously functional and symbolic, "bauderyk" hints at the duality of the girdle. Finally, the girdle is once referred to as a "token" (2509), having apotheosized from functional thing to symbolic object.

As an object, the girdle is of particular interest. In function, it is a belt for the Lady, a girdle for Gawain, and then finally a baldric for Gawain and the rest of Arthur's knights. In meaning, it is both a mark of shame for Gawain, and a sign of acceptance when adopted by the other knights. To return to Bill Brown's metaphor of the window, the girdle is simultaneously translucent and opaque. A concrete object, the girdle functions in the narrative as a gift, a protective belt, and an emblem. It is repeatedly used, in different guises, but always functional. As a transparent window to the symbolic world, the girdle is a kaleidoscope of diffraction and convoluted meanings. As Hanna points out, the girdle symbolizes different things for different people. Its multiplicity of potential meanings demonstrates the girdle's ability to be successfully read as a sign. Regardless of who reads the girdle, it is always imbued with a secondary symbolic value. The girdle is a fluid object. In both the physical and symbolic world it constantly reinvents itself in order to stay relevant within the narrative. But what is constant amidst the girdle's repetitive reinvention is that it always possesses both practical and symbolic function. Both opaque and translucent, the girdle is exactly the sort of object that Brown writes about.

Although Gawain most wants to be associated with the Christian virtue and valor projected by the pentangle, he comes to accept the human flaw he sees reflected in the girdle. If objects can only mistranslate each other, the various interpretations of the girdle's meaning take on a new value. An irreducible entity, the girdle is multi-faceted. The girdle demonstrates the complexity of Gawain's own failure. Where the pentangle is a locked sign, rigid in its meaning,

the girdle is far tougher to define in a singular sense. Hanna's four potential readings of the girdle need not be exclusive. What makes the girdle so powerful is that all four of the readings can make claims as being probable legitimate readings. For Gawain personally, the girdle is a mark of shame. A foil against the idealized pentangle, it represents his fall from grace in keeping the girdle a secret from his host. As Gawain is motivated by a desire to save his life, the girdle is a sign rooted in human flaw, a lowly token when weighed against the saintly ideals of the pentangle. There is always an "other" side to an object, however. What Gawain perceives as the true meaning of his new baldric is only one part of its value. Far less negative than Gawain's reading of the girdle, the Green Knight perceives the girdle as a token of Gawain's adventure. Likewise, in being adopted by the other knights of Arthur, the girdle is once again redeemed, bringing Gawain back into the court, and not ostracizing him for his own perceived failure. When all these disparate readings are viewed as portions adding up to one holistic meaning, the girdle actually approaches a representative depiction of Gawain. It must be admitted that Gawain can never be perfectly represented by an object. But in a flawed process, the girdle comes the closest to capturing the complexity of Gawain. The human flaw, the knightly virtue, and the community of Arthur's court are all important aspects of Gawain's person that the girdle represents. Within the narrative, no one character can see the complete meaning of the girdle. Too myopic, each character can only read the girdle as they themselves see it. From any individual perspective, the girdle will always be a mistranslation. It is only with the perspective gained from being outside the primary narrative that the girdle begins to crystalize as an object that truly defines Gawain. A knight who is not quite perfect, but still more virtuous than the masses, Gawain is well defined by the amalgamation of the girdle's meanings.



If we broaden our scope to view the poem in a more holistic light, the girdle takes on an even greater significance. The girdle is the essential object because rather than being elevated above the axe and the shield, the girdle subsumes them. The girdle is the summation of both axe and shield. The initial depiction of the girdle recalls the description of the axe in the first fitt: “Gered hit watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped, / Noght bot arounde brayden, beten wyth fyn grez[.]” (1832-4). Primarily green, embellished with intricate gold, the girdle identifies itself as from the same realm as the axe. Although of comparatively less value than the heavy wrought axe, the girdle is still a luxurious item, made of silk and gold. Like the axe, its functionality is enriched by its physical beauty. Beyond the similarity in color palette and origin, the girdle is the axe’s foil in the narrative. When Gawain is struck by the axe, it is the girdle that saves him. The otherworldly power of the girdle absorbs the axe’s blow, effectively ending the role of the axe within the poem.

In what would be the second beheading scene, Gawain is unarmed. Where his armor and shield should be of explicit help, he lies defenseless, in compliance with his contract with the Green Knight. In function, the girdle acts as his shield from the axe’s blow. Gawain’s shield is absent function throughout the narrative, and in this moment it is fully replaced by the girdle. Further, the shield’s primary function as a canvas for the pentangle is replaced by the girdle, too. Rather than losing the pentangle, it is reshaped when Gawain recasts the girdle as a baldric about his shoulder. When the Green Knight discovers that Gawain is wearing his wife’s girdle, Gawain responds by violently breaking it from his person: “Thenne he kaght to the knot, and the kest lawsez, / Brayde brothely the belt to the burne selven” (2376-7).<sup>14</sup> Exposed as dishonest, when Gawain “kaghts to the knot” he rips it from his body. In the literal sense, he is losing the girdle from his body. But the pentangle, the endless knot that has been locked around Gawain

---

<sup>14</sup> “Then he took hold of the knot and looses the buckle, Flung the belt violently towards the man.”

throughout the poem, is also being evoked. By untying the knot, he is admitting his fault, and freeing himself from the ideological rigidity represented by the pentangle. Free of the pentangle, Gawain is able to tie himself in to a new representational item:

And the blykkande belt he bere therabout  
 Abelef as a bauderyk bounden by his syde,  
 Loken under his lyfte arme, the lace, with a knot,  
 In tokenyng he watz tane in tech of a faute. (2485-8)

Recast as a baldric, the girdle replaces the baldric already worn by Gawain.<sup>15</sup> More important than replacing the baldric though, is the way that Gawain fastens himself to this new ideology with a knot. “Bounden by his syde”, the girdle envelopes Gawain much the same way the pentangle did previously. But where the pentangle was an explicitly defined knot with five points, the girdle is a more fluid sign. Still infinite, it is circular in shape, fastened underneath Gawain’s arm.

The circularity of the girdle, the new endless knot, is then reflected by the poem itself as an object. The narrative arc of the poem is distinctly circular. The poem both begins and ends with a historicizing move invoking the fall of Troy. The two proems, found at either end of the poem, frame the work with a non-narrative allusion to classical epics. The general nature of these proems, seen often in classical literature, serves to distance the reader from the tale of Gawain. The reference to Troy makes explicit the circular shape of the poem. Beyond the bookending of the primary narrative with a proem, however, the story itself comes full circle. The story takes a full year, both beginning and ending in a nascent year at Arthur’s court. The blows to the Green Knight and Gawain are also dealt a year apart. When the poem draws to a close, it feels remarkably as if it is just starting, with a feast and the adoption of the green baldric by all the

---

<sup>15</sup> Gawain is shown to be wearing a baldric in fitt 2 of the poem: “He braydez hit by the bauderyk, aboute the hals kestes, / That bisemed the segge semlyly fayre” (621-2).

knights. The knights adopt the girdle as a mark of camaraderie, but the effect of this move is that it minimizes the moral that Gawain is trying to convey. Because the moral, the traditional end of a romance, is diffused by the other knight's adoption of green baldrics, the poem lacks the authoritative end associated with the genre. Instead the reader could be mistaken for thinking himself back at the start of the poem. Remarkably girdle shaped, the poem is governed by the girdle itself. Fluid and irreducible, the girdle comes closest to representing the intricacies of both Gawain and the poem.

The fluid shape of the primary narrative, warping itself from a traditional narrative arc into something more circular and ambiguous invites non-traditional readings of the poem. The scholarly pre-occupation with objects in the poem is a response to the poem's lack of concrete ending. The Gawain poet's tendency towards lengthy ekphrases also encourages readers to assign a larger importance to objects within the narrative. Missing from much of the action in the poem, Gawain's involvement in the poem proceeds largely through dialogue and the poet's exegesis. As the poet offers up each object, Gawain is read in conjunction with that object, until the narrative casts aside the first object in favor of the next one. And as the next object is introduced, it becomes central to the poem's next location. This paper, after tracing the objects within the poem, from the axe, to the shield, to the girdle, decides to settle on the girdle. The decision to elevate the girdle to a position of central importance is made in company with many fellow scholars. It is far from an original decision. Ultimately, Gawain too makes this choice. The theoretical lens created by OOO and Thing Theory, however, reveals previously unseen aspects as to why the girdle is the appropriate choice. Coming from the same world as the axe, functionally replacing the shield, and assigned a plurality of meanings, the girdle is the complex object that can repeatedly recast itself to govern the poem. The girdle best represents the

pluralities of Gawain's human nature, attempting to project onto him numerous meanings, each one exposing a part, but never the entirety of Gawain's character. Importantly, the girdle succeeds where the other objects fail: it functions in both the metaphorical and physical world of the narrative.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has intrigued scholars for centuries. I would be naive to claim that I have laid bare all of its intricacies. After all, the poem itself is an object. Irreducible, multi-faceted, and fluid, the poem can only be mistranslated in the same way both Gawain and the girdle himself are. Instead, scholars strive to illuminate parts of the poem, to create a series of threads that can be woven together, leaving the reader with a holistic, albeit frayed tapestry.

#### Works Cited and Consulted

##### Primary Text:

Winny, James. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Middle English Text with Facing Translation*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 1992. Print.

##### Secondary Texts:

Brown, Bill. *Things*. Chicago: University Of Chicago, 2004. Print.

Carruthers, Leo. "The Duke of Clarence and the Earls of March: Garter Knights and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." *Medium Aevum* 70 (2001): 66-79. Print.

Federico, Sylvia. *New Troy: Fantasies of Empire in the Late Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003. Print.

Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1980. Print.

- Hanna, Ralph, III. "Unlocking What's Locked: Gawain's Green Girdle." *Viator Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 14 (1983): 289-303. Print.
- Hodges, Laura F. 'Syngne,' 'Conysaunce,' 'Deuys': Three Pentangles in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight". *Arthuriana*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Arthurian Arms And Arming (Winter 1995), pp. 22-31.
- Kurath, Hans. *Middle English Dictionary*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1962. Print.
- Morton, Timothy. "Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology." *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 19.2 (2011): 163-90. *Project Muse*. Web. 30 Nov. 2012.
- Renoir, Alain. "Descriptive Technique in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." *Orbis Litterarum* 13.2 (1958): 126-32. Print.
- Shoaf, R. A. *The Poem as Green Girdle: Commercium in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gainesville: Universities of Florida, 1984. Print.
- Walls, Kathryn. "The Axe in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." *Anq-a Quarterly Journal Of Short Articles Notes And Reviews* 16 (2003): 13-18. Print.