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Seeing Double across the Illustrations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

This presentation draws on my forthcoming book about the only surviving manuscript of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a very small (171 x 123 mm), very strange fourteenth-century book that I was fortunate enough to work with at the British Library in 2023. My book argues that the material, visual, and literary forms of its four poems are mutually reinforcing and, further, that each poem vitally informs those that follow it in the manuscript.[1] Its final poem, *Sir Gawain*, thus draws importantly on *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*. Three aspects of these earlier poems will be particularly relevant to my presentation today: first, their shared interest in forms of circularity and enclosure; second, *Pearl*'s fascination with geometry, number symbolism, and counterintuitive ways of perceiving the world (what my book calls "speculation," drawing on the medieval history of that word); and third, *Cleanness*'s theme of divine judgment of earthly pride, especially in its concluding narrative of Belshazzar's Feast, when the prophet Daniel explains to the idolatrous king the hidden meaning of God's famous writing on the wall.

That feast is depicted in one of the manuscript's twelve illustrations, which are unusual on multiple levels: they were added after the poems were copied, sometimes on pages that had earlier been ruled for text; and according to Kathleen Scott, they constitute the earliest pictorial program of full-page images in the Middle English corpus.[2] Although long disdained for their crudeness of execution, especially compared to French manuscripts of the same period, they are the earliest surviving interpretations of the poems they depict and worth taking seriously on that basis alone. My goal is to show how the first illustration of *Sir Gawain*, seen here, refracts both internally and across four other illustrations in the manuscript: the earlier one of Belshazzar's Feast, opposite the

[1] Bahr, *Chasing the Pearl-Manuscript: Speculation, Shapes, Delight* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Fall 2024).
[2] Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts*, vol. 2, 66-68, cat. no. 12.

opening lines of *Cleanness*, and the remaining three illustrations of *Sir Gawain* that appear after the poem, the only ones in the manuscript to follow rather than precede the poem they depict.

I want to begin by showing how *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s first illustration encourages versions of the double perspective that the poem itself both thematizes and tests with its many resonant, often concealed pairings (among them Green Knight/Bertilak, "loathly lady"/Morgan the goddess, and Camelot/Hautdesert).[3] Such narrative doubling is prefigured by the visual doubling of Gawain, where he appears both in the upper left of the page, saluting King Arthur with his left hand as he takes up the Green Knight's axe in his right; and again below, facing the opposite way and now gripping the axe firmly in both hands, as if steadying himself from the shock of what has just happened. Reading the image as a whole, these Gawains clearly represent our protagonist just before and just after making the dramatic cut.[4] The gory aftermath of that cut, with the Green Knight's trunk and head radiating blood from their prominent neck-bones, appears on the feasting table that divides the two moments in time—and the two Gawains.

This scene is striking for its doublings and symmetries, and for the lines those resemblances suggest. For while the Green Knight's severed head divides the two Gawains, it also links them along a line sloping downward at what looks very close to a 45-degree angle. (I'll call the upper-left figure G1, for "Gawain at time-1," and the one gripping the axe in both hands G2, for "Gawain at time-2.") This line starts at the top of G1's axe (Point A) and proceeds down through his head, barely grazing the top of the Green Knight's severed head before ending around G2's neck (Point A1). This trajectory is fitting since Gawain's neck is ultimately nicked by the very axe he holds

[3] British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.X/2, folio 90/94v. All images can be found by searching the digitized version at https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/Browse/Collections/Gawain-Manuscript/ or through the British Library's own digital version: https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_nero_a_x!2_f041r.
[4] As Jennifer Lee points out in a foundational study of the manuscript's images, this illustration "can be 'read' from top to bottom, the scene behind the table leading to the scene in front" ("The Illuminating Critic," 22).

here. This line also passes through King Arthur's sword and G2's axe, further emphasizing the illustration's conspicuous cleaving imagery. Though not part of this line, the top-right figure holds yet another blade above and just slightly to the right of G2's head, almost like a guillotine, whetting our appetite for the poem to come.

This diagonal contrasts with the strong verticality of G2's axe, which is nearly parallel to the two knights' bodies and suggests a nearly straight line extending up through the table and Guinevere's crowned head (180.36 degrees). The diagonal of G1's axe, meanwhile, extends down into the feasting table, and is related by rotation to the axe of G2: specifically, rotating G2's axe (the G2 axis) yields a line that extends through the Green Knight's leg into and through G1's axe (the G1 axis). These lines emerge from the doubling of Gawain across the Green Knight's severed head, and are strengthened by how the neatly Green Knight's body continues or complements the lines created by these axes: his erect torso is roughly parallel with the G2 axis, but the diagonal of his leg continues through the G1 axis. Although held here by Gawain(s), these axes belong to the Green Knight, who will ultimately repay the cut this page depicts. In that sense, these lines offer a preview of the complex games that the two men play in the poem to come: hunt, tease, bluff, requite.

G2's axe also prompts greater attention to Guinevere than she often receives from readers of the poem. On the one hand, she helps creates the horizontal of four faces above the feasting table, and in that sense, her look across to G1 combines with the two axes seen here to create a (nearly) right triangle. Guinevere's connection to G1 highlights the fact that they both seem to be looking slightly downward, quite unlike King Arthur, whose intervening head appears to look out horizontally. The Green Knight's severed head is angled upward so as to look at the queen; the line of their gaze emerges from rotating the G1 axis 45 degrees from its midpoint (just where the

Green Knight sits on his horse), adding to the symmetry of the scene. The green line of this figure anticipates the Green Knight's dramatic revelation, near the end of the poem, that the whole grisly spectacle was organized by Morgan le Fay in hopes of frightening Guinevere to death. This geometric emergence of the female is further strengthened by her green dress: not just because it links her to the Green Knight, but also because it contrasts with the depiction of Belshazzar's queen in the manuscript's earlier illustration of *Cleanness* (folio 56/60v), as we see here.

This contrast is strengthened by striking similarities between the two images. In each, a king and queen gesture in amazement at a supernatural event that interrupts a celebratory royal gathering. A long feasting table with decorative elements divides both pages horizontally about a third of the way down, and in the lower left, a figure in green sits, or rides, in judgement of the proud court above. Indeed, Daniel and the Green Knight appear improbably similar, with bearded blond faces looking up and to the right at the queen, past the king notionally in charge of the proceedings. Such resemblances make other contrasts between the images interpretively interesting: whereas Arthur wears the same royal blue as Belshazzar, for example, Guinevere's green contrasts with the red of Belshazzar's queen, further highlighting her connection to the Green Knight.

More dramatically, whereas the lower-right quadrant of Belshazzar's Feast is conspicuously vacant, G2 takes up much of that visual energy in the later illustration. Does this suggest Camelot's greater ability to respond to external judgment, or do the many other similarities between the scenes outweigh this contrast and make the two pages' resemblances more cautionary? Given the earlier depiction of a sacrilegious feast, might this severed head at Arthur's feast recall that of John the Baptist, as Maidie Hilmo has proposed ("Re-Conceptualizing," 406-07)? The visual echoes that prompt such questions highlight the moral and spiritual dimensions of *Sir Gawain* and,

more specifically, suggest that we should attend especially to its textual echoes of *Cleanness*. I take up some of these, such as a shared interest in paper and polishing, in the last chapter of my book.

Moreover, while most other illustrations in the Pearl-Manuscript depict a single moment in time, these two are more temporally complex. On the left, we see multiple moments collapsed into a single tableau: God writes, Belshazzar trembles, the queen intervenes, and Daniel reads within the same visual space—all with gestures that suggests simultaneity, even though each of those actions occurs sequentially in Biblical and poetic accounts alike. This visual multi-temporality intimates the Boethian metaphor, that God perceives history like a vista seen from above: all at once rather than sequentially. Elsewhere, the illustrator conspicuously reminds us of our limited perspective: for example, by failing to depict the full circuit of either the Heavenly Jerusalem or Nineveh, in earlier illustrations of *Pearl* and *Patience*, respectively. Yet in depicting the very act of textual interpretation by Daniel, the illustrator associates both holy writing and right reading with a multi-temporality fundamentally at odds with the human experience of linear time.

The first illustration of *Sir Gawain* is also multi-temporal, but in a different and almost opposite way. Whereas the lefthand image collapses discrete points of time into a single frame, suggesting the immediacy of divine judgment and the atemporality of divine perspective, the one on the right uses its doubled Gawain(s) to depict time as sequential, and in that sense linear: it moves from top to bottom and left to right, like the English text on its facing page. This abstract notion of linearity is concretized, or enacted, by the geometry of this page as described earlier, which anticipates the poem's depiction of Gawain's pentangle in terms of lines and points in the famous passage seen here:

And quy þe pentangle apendez to þat prynce noble

I am in tent yow to telle, þof tary hyt me schulde.

Hit is a sygne þat Salamon set sumquyle

In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat hit habbez;

For hit is a figure þat haldez fyue **poyntez**

And vche **lyne** vmbelappez and loukes in oþer

And aywhere hit is endelez (and Englych hit callen

Oueral, as I here, '**þe endeles knot**').[5]

Sir Gawain, lines 623-30

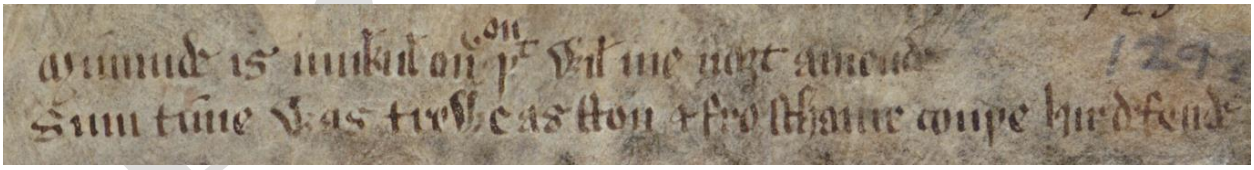
These five interlocking lines and their five points represent the five sets of five that distinguish Gawain: the faultlessness of his five senses and five fingers, his devotion to the five wounds of Christ and five joys of the Virgin, and his commitment to the five chivalric virtues. Emma Maggie Solberg has nicely summarized how this five-by-five-ness—five squared, if you will—is embedded into the poem: "in the poem's five-line bob and wheel, its 2,530 (2,525+5) lines, and its 101 stanzas ([since] 2,530 divided by 101 equals twenty-five with a remainder of five)." I want to focus on this remainder—the poem's final bob-and-wheel—since it mars just slightly the echoic circularity by which *Sir Gawain*'s last alliterative long-line loops back to its first, like the final lines of *Pearl* and *Patience* earlier in the manuscript.

Nor is *Sir Gawain*'s final bob-and-wheel its last textual excrescence. A large Amen—larger than those of the previous three poems, and in more of a display hand—might seem to impose closure, but it is immediately followed by the comparably embellished motto of the Order of the

[5] And I intend to tell you why the pentangle pertains to that noble prince, even if it should slow me down. It is a sign that Solomon established long ago to symbolize *trawþe* [ModE truth, but also fidelity, honesty, trustworthiness], according to the name it has; for it is a figure that has five **points** and each **line** interweaves and locks in the other, and everywhere it is endless, and I hear that the English call it "**the endless knot**."

Garter, *Hony soyt qui mal penc*.[6] Although not part of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by any traditional understanding of poetic wholeness, these words have proven so enticing to readers that both scholarly editions and Simon Armitage's translation have included it in their presentation of the poem. Thus presented, the Order motto becomes a talismanic tribute to the poem's participation in the "real world" of chivalric history that also, through its allusiveness, continues to generate scholarly and cultural activity today.

The poem's generative force is further reinforced by the fact that the motto is not actually the last word in the manuscript. Just after its attempt to lock the Green Girdle's meaning within the martial, chivalric, male-dominated world of the Order, the poem's facing page showcases female agency, both textually and visually. The depiction of a showily dressed Lady Bertilak trapping the stock-still, supposedly sleeping Gawain in bed—their physical intimacy reinforced by the surrounding curtain—is among the manuscript's most famous and delightful images.[7] It is therefore surprising that the curious couplet written just above, at the top of the page, has been so little noticed.



My minde is mukel on on þat wil me noȝt amende
Sum time was trewe as ston & fro scham couþe hir defende
[My mind is greatly on one who will not help/amend me
Who once was true as stone and could defend herself from shame.]

[6] Folio 124/128v: https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/Browse/Collections/Gawain-Manuscript/
[7] Folio 125/129r: https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/Browse/Collections/Gawain-Manuscript/

If the Order of the Garter motto is context that modern scholarship has shaped into text, this couplet seems like both text and context. On the one hand, it is indisputably text: a self-contained couplet marked by both end and medial rhyme, it receives its own entry (2262.5) in the *New Index of Middle English Verse* edited by Juilia Boffey and Tony Edwards. Yet it is so slight, and formally so unlike what has come before, that it's hard to imagine calling this the fifth poem in a five-text manuscript; in that sense, it seems more like context. I believe its significance to our apprehension of the Pearl-Manuscript lies partly in this shifting status: like the shimmering, paper-like outline of Castle Hautdesert, it depends on how we look at it. In that sense, it is another speculative invitation created by the endlessly generative *Sir Gawain.*

As Jessica Brantley has recently noted, the couplet suggests "themes of love-longing, betrayal, and shame familiar from the poem," and although it can be mapped only imperfectly onto the image below it, such inexactness can be interpretively generative.[8] Here, we are invited to imagine the couplet's mystery-she, once true and able to defend herself from shame, who now dominates the speaker's mind much as Lady Bertilak dominates the page. Her refusal to help or amend the speaker—but implied power to do so—refocuses the reader's mind on female agency, and from there perhaps back to the Green Knight's earlier explanation, to Gawain, that Morgan Le Fay orchestrated the whole beheading game in order to frighten Guinevere to death.

Many critics have been skeptical of this sudden revelation,[9] but as we saw earlier, the construction of the beheading scene subtly triangulated Guinevere, and perhaps this very plot-point, into greater prominence opposite the poem's opening lines. Moreover, this illustration

[8] "[H]ere the (male?) narrator implies that a woman once true has fallen into disgrace. In *Gawain* itself it is the protagonist's fidelity that is under pressure, especially in the scene pictured here…. There is not a perfect parallel between the couplet and the scene, in other words…" (*Medieval English Manuscripts and Literary Forms*, 224).
[9] E.g., "Morgan's role as adversary of Camelot, would-be seducer of its knights, and rival of Guinevere is so much a part of the literary tradition associated with the Matter of Britain that her belated invocation in *this* romance as *radix malorum* is all too convenient" (Kinney, "The Best Book of Romances," 463).

means that a courtly, left-facing female figure appears in the middle of the x-axis of the pages that envelope *Sir Gawain*, opposite its opening and closing lines: first Guinevere, then Lady Bertilak. This resemblance visually encloses the poem, further suggesting finality, even as the strangely allusive, seemingly extra-authorial couplet radiates speculative potential outward.

The manuscript's final two images (125/129v and 126/130r) also recall the poem's opening depiction of the Green Knight's beheading.[10] In the lefthand image, the mounted Gawain approaches an ominous tumulus; between and above them, the Green Knight stands impassively, gripping his axe with both hands much as G2 did in the first image. As Maidie Hilmo has pointed out, the mirroring patterns of their figures across this illustration and the opening one suggests a "mysterious identification of the two in person as well as in the roles they play in the beheading game."[11] Building on that suggestion, we should note that the mounted Gawain holds his lance at a similar though slightly less vertical angle to the G1 axis on; and, further, that the Green Knight holds his axe at almost exactly the same angle as the G2 axis earlier.

Significantly, we see Gawain in full battle-dress here, with lance, armor (slightly pinker than the red of his tunic in the first illustration), and curiously conical helmet. The significance of this depiction emerges on the right-hand page, for the awkwardly kneeling figure in front of Guinevere has similar armor to that of Gawain riding opposite: blue conical helmet, light red or pinkish chest, and blue legs with golden poleyns at the knees. This resemblance helps establish the kneeling figure as Gawain; yet as Jennifer Lee points out, the upright figure standing with Arthur and Guinevere "greatly resembles in face and dress Sir Gawain of the first picture," both with

[10] Folios 125/129v and 126/130r: https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/Browse/Collections/Gawain-Manuscript/.
[11] "Further a shape-shifting relationship between Gawain and the Green Knight seems to be implied by their transposition in this miniature [90/94v] and that in which Gawain seeks the Green Chapel. In the first, the Green Knight is seated astride his horse while Gawain holds an axe; in the second, this configuration is reversed … imaging a kind of mysterious identification of the two in person as well as in the roles they play in the beheading game" (Hilmo, "Did the Scribe Draw," 125).

comparable red tunic, blue hose, blond hair, cleft chin, and receding hairline. The only significant difference between them is that here, the upper-right Gawain has exchanged the Green Knight's great axe for a more refined, knightly sword, held over his shoulder and signaling his reintegration into courtly life at Camelot. Lee therefore argues, and I agree, that "we have again a repeated figure of Gawain back in court after the completion of his adventure."[12]

Shirley Kossick likewise argues that we are facing two different aspects of our protagonist. She writes:

> Gawain has returned to the court after his adventures and trial, and is seen standing alongside the king and queen as a representative member of the court. … But the artist also tries to reflect another aspect of the poem by presenting simultaneously with the reintegrated Gawain, the Gawain who bitterly refuses to accept his own imperfection … includ[ing] a kneeling and humbled representation of Gawain being raised to his feet by the king...."[13]

The fact that the poem's first illustration also featured two representations of Gawain further supports this interpretation, as do continuities in color across the figures, noted above. Nevertheless, this final illustration poses more interpretive challenges (and thus also opportunities) than the first, for whereas the first image clearly presented two different time-frames for its two Gawains—before and after the climactic beheading, helpfully divided by the horizontal feasting table—here the two Gawains nearly overlap, and an elaborate archway crowds them into the same frame, thereby suggesting a single action and moment in time. This adds to the obvious difficulty in construing both figures of the final illustration as Gawain: namely that they do not actually resemble one another very much, quite unlike G1 and G2 earlier. This tableau's full interpretive

[12] Lee, "The Illuminating Critic," 26.
[13] Kossick, "The Illustrations of the *Gawain* Manuscript," 33.

potential thus emerges only when we read across illustrations, which envelope the poem they depict—further adding to its accretive, *Pearl*-like layers.

And in one last paradox quite appropriate to the Pearl-Manuscript, the final illustration both is and is not the book's final image. The last folio's verso is blank, but ink from the recto has bled through, leaving an image that looks like an arch or doorway.[14] The recto's four human figures appear as indistinct blobs of vague color; far more striking is the outline of the pavilion at the top, and the somewhat fainter images of the pillars supporting it. This serendipitous and spectral doorway beckons us back into the book: to continue chasing Sir Gawain's endless knot, and the comparably endless intricacies of the Pearl-Manuscript itself.

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[14] Folio 126/130v: https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/Browse/Collections/Gawain-Manuscript/.

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