

“BE PREPARED TO PERFORM WHAT I ASK”—INVASIONS OF AFFECTIVE PIETY IN THE COMEDIC ACTIVITY OF *THE SECOND SHEPHERDS’ PLAY* AND *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

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DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES,
PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

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ABSTRACT

Beginning with an investigation into forms of aurality used in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth-century Middle English devotional literature, this article breaks down journeys of affective piety in both the courtly romance and urban cycle plays. Traditional understandings of genre divisions are super-ceded in the Middle English period by performative spirituality and invocations to the audience/ reader to a contemplative posture. The Wakefield Master and the *Gawain* poet developed their work aware of the Lollard critiques of church excesses and invested in personal expressions of inward devotions which had been popularized in the work of Nicholas Love and other Carthusian texts dealing in popular piety. Both *The Second Shepherd’s Play* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* develop landscapes of upheaval and redemption around their characters, drawing the reader into individual reflection on well-known sacraments and intervals of the church year.

KEYWORDS

Affective piety;
Cycle dramas;
Romance;
Devotion;
performance.

INTRODUCTION

A new investigation into the prevalence of imaginative devotion and its effects, not only on spiritual output written for elite readers, but also on the creative performance of all medieval English culture, demands new connections be drawn between subjects and genres previously classified as isolated phenomena in the latter part of the English Middle Ages. This paper pays respect to the diversity of materials that were used in the Middle English world as both meditative and dramatic texts in marrying a study of the performative and devotional strains contained in *The Second Shepherd's Play* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Jessica Brantley, in her groundbreaking work on the Carthusian Miscellany MS Additional 37049, examines medieval reading culture within a religious setting where the main performative act was meant to take place through “the readerly process of understanding” (Brantley 2007). Manuscripts of all variety, through the process of imaginative devotion, take on a transformative quality that links them to both the broad understanding of pageantry and the repetitive, often semi-public medieval reading culture.¹

The lines the contemporary reader typically imagines between disparate genres have no meaning when encountering the reality of how manuscripts were collected, shared, and read for both a lay and spiritual audience. Dialogue contained in the written text was at various times performed in individual engagement, read aloud in aural transmission, or presented in a conventionally dramatic fashion within a set scene. In the same way, the modernist divide between works that are meant to be examined in a purely spiritual context and those created for “secular” preoccupations is meaningless in the vernacular of 14th century England. Whether the medieval reader chose to lean more into the “imaginative” or “devotional”, the reading experience nevertheless creates a theatrical opportunity both of spectacle and what Brantley examines as the “influence of drama on rhetoric” where the varied opinions and positions of the characters are performed inside the act of reading (Brantley 2007). Drama as a rhetorical tool is obvious in the varied judgments on Gawain’s “crime and “pardon” that end his romance. So too with the performance of the “false nativity” in *The Second Shepherds' Play* as a spectacle to be judged against the staging of the Incarnation.

An examination of the pageantry and pedagogical dialogues of *Gawain* alongside the more conventionally “theatrical” works of the Wakefield Master respects a readership which was trained to encounter “monastic reading and civic spectacle, individual meditation, and communal worship, lyric and dramatic poetry” all together as a means of imaginative

1. See Brantley’s chapter, “The Performance of Reading” in her *Reading the Wilderness* for a thorough investigation into the “vibrant means of spiritual making” (Brantley) evident throughout vernacular reading culture in this period.

and spiritual development (Brantley 2007). More than a comparison of a Courtly or “high” example of vernacular literature which explores devotional themes to a more Popular or “low” example demonstrated in civic drama, this paper shows how to lay participation in and exploration of personal and civic piety infused all creative modes of medieval English output. The unifying threads of vernacular affective piety, as expressed in *The Mirroure of the Blessed Lyfe of Jesus Christ (Mirror)* by the Carthusian brother Nicolas Love, and the conventions and possibilities outlined by examining these texts through Performance Theory, make these connections explicit. Not only the characters but the reader, viewer, and hearer of these vernacular texts perform a journey towards understanding through the scenes and disputes presented to them. What is created is not only a reimagined space but a performed interiority. The play-acting in both works condenses space, shifting quotidian journeys into mental and spiritual transformations. It recasts time to fit with the cyclical patterns of the church calendar and upends conventional patterns of power and injustice to allow for the absurd and transformative invasion of redemption.

NICHOLAS LOVE AND THE THEATER OF IMAGINATIVE DEVOTION:

The Carthusian religious house at Mount Grace was established in the political turmoil at the beginning of the fifteenth century, during the last years of Richard II’s reign and his overthrow and succession by Henry IV (Tuck 1984). It was in this house that Nicholas Love wrote what he considered a translation of St. Bonaventure’s *Speculum Vita Christi*. His work, more interpretation and commentary on Bonaventure than what would now be accepted as a translation, includes a definition for an incredible outpouring of creative approaches to Christian devotion occurring contemporaneously. Coming at the same time as the Lollard heresy, and meant to satisfy a lay devotional system which placed an increased emphasis on the Word of Christ as central to approaching the mysteries and sacraments, Love’s *Mirror* uses both scripture and the prayers common to Middle English catholic² practice to demonstrate ways in which the devout lay reader can keep Christ’s words and salvific actions close.

The turn of the fifteenth century represented a period of intense religious and political turmoil that affected the lives and religious practices of the common people. Lollardy not only attracted a large following of the middling and lower classes of both genders, but also addressed many of the critiques routinely expounded upon, and often censored, in a wide variety of vernacular texts. Love reflects on the gospels to address the controversy of lay readership of the scriptures for his lay audience. He presents Christ’s activity on earth, his manhood, as a gift to the Christian community

2. I intentionally use lower-case c catholic throughout my discussion to direct readers towards the denotation of universal or standard in Christian practice rather than the post-Reformation designation of the specific Catholic denomination.

through the recording of “þe precious drinke of his / holi gospel, with þe which aftur he confortet alle holi chirch & a3eynus þe venyme of diuerse heretiks”³ (Love 149). Love responds to a growing need of the lay population to engage with scripture and devotional practice beyond their attendance at mass. His *Mirror* was not divorced from the same spiritual desires that initially crafted the tenets of the Lollard heresy.⁴ As Ian Levy explains, John Wyclif, the theologian from whom many of the beliefs central to what has been traditionally considered Lollardy originated, developed his theology of consubstantiation from a sincere desire to re-engage with the Word as he saw contained in the scriptures. However, he wrote his treatise at a time when the boundaries of orthodoxy were being pushed to a historically narrow parameter. What Wyclif viewed as his conservative pushback against more fringe interpretations of scripture was branded a heretical theology shortly after his death (Levy 2003). In this climate, the variety of vernacular poetry reflecting specifically on devotional themes offers a fascinating portrait of how pious culture was received and performed in late fourteenth-century Middle English.

As Gail Gibson illustrates in her examination of East Anglian material culture, affective piety, the act of devotion that involved direct engagement with the story of the gospels to approach an understanding of the enormity of God, perforated all ranks of society at the end of the fourteenth century. In response to a “growing English self-consciousness—national civic and personal” (Gibson 1989), more works meant for private devotion such as Love’s *Mirror* were circulated in the vernacular. Love’s work divides scenes from the life and narratives exemplifying the character of Christ into days of the week as a pattern for believers to divide their spiritual practice “as in liknes & onlich as a manere of parable & deuoute ymaginacion, stiryng man to loue god souerely for his grete mercy to man & hus endless gudnes”⁵ (Love 9). Devout imagination permeated much of Christian practice at this time. Simultaneously, changing urban centers became the annual sites of a variety of creative takes on the Biblical narrative in the form of the mystery cycle dramas. Several of these cycles have been preserved and demonstrate creative, broad, and often subversive handlings of spiritual materials. The Wakefield Master’s work illustrates brilliant handling of social realities and provides a creative

3. “The precious drink of his holy Gospel, with which he comforted the whole of his hoy Church afterwards and with which he protected it against the venom of various heretics” (All translations into Modern English are my own with the aid of *The Middle English Compendium* <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary>)

4. The most obvious example of how the practice of affective piety could be conflated with or perceived as Lollardy, lies in the life of Margery Kempe and the frequent accusations of “preaching” that dogged her penitential piety. A study on the uniquely feminine experience of ever-shifting line separating contemplative piety from heresy has been a fruitful line of engagement from imaginative devotion.

5. “As in a likeness and solely in the form of parable and devout imagination, stirring men to love God chiefly for His great mercy to humankind and His endless goodness.”

interpretation of how the power manifest the life of Christ could intrude into and transform lived experience.

Nicholas Love, when discussing Christ's fast in the wilderness, urges his followers into contemplative exercises away from the crowds and press of society. He says that to be spiritually positioned to see God, the pious reader should "go in to solitary place, & in als miche as þou maist, sauynge þin astate, fle þe cumpanye of fleshly men... Fil not þin eyen and þin eres with veyn fantasies"⁶ (Love 72). Love's *Mirror* calls its readers to participate in the action of the gospel beginning with associations to contemporary life. The fantasies and contrived comedic scenarios that begin the *Second Shepherds' Play* might look like a distraction in the context of spiritual growth, but the comedy speaks to the very heart of the imaginative devotional practice. The bawdy appraisal of contemporary issues imagines a landscape onto which the miracles of the incarnation and nativity of Christ make a profound invasion.

The popular appeal of imaginative devotion was not confined only to civic, cycle dramas. While the mystery cycles were meant to be consumed by a general and mostly illiterate audience, the courtly gestures of the romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* imagine a different readership. The *Gawain* poet demonstrates comfort with court life and a fascination with ornamentation that has been traced back to a close connection to Richard II's court. However, the comedic arc of both the play and the romance, and both works' engagement with physical and spiritual spaces, demonstrate the use of "liminal states brought about by some kinds of rituals" (Suydam 1999). The liminality of both works allows the pious to engage these works on a creative as well as devotional level. For this reason, the romance of *Sir Gawain* and the Wakefield Master's work is worth examining in communication with one another.

While similarities exist between the creative interpretations of biblical texts Love makes in *Mirror* and the broader interpretations provided in the Wakefield Master's work, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a romance that is preoccupied with questions about the sacraments, is first a courtly text. The *Gawain* poet is well versed in the world of feasting, hunting, and chivalric conduct, a busy, "fleshly" world where Gawain undergoes a quest that begins in the space of courtly romance and ends in a spiritual argument. Christine Chism makes a compelling case that the main thrust of much of Gawain's actions illustrates the potential pitfalls of the increased centralization of the Ricardian court. However, the sudden comedic turn on the serious topics of sin and penance are not merely in service of a happy ending. The connections between the two works

6. "Go into a solitary place, and in as much as you may, considering your condition, flee the company of men... Do not fill your eyes and ears with vain (useless) fantasies."

become more obvious if they are moved out of the context of genre and into a study of the performative aspects embodied in each text.

MODELING PROPER DEVOTION IN OUTWARD SHOW AND INWARD PERFORMANCE:

Performing effective piety and mystical expression should not be confused with insincerity in worship or belief. Performance studies provide a key to handling the critique that worship that is performed “connotes an illusion or a show one which raises suspicions (not admirations) in the audience” (Pitches 2011). There is nothing innately artificial about performing or acting out spiritual tenets or beliefs. Performing acts of imaginative devotion can create a natural space through which the believer imagines themselves moving from the actions confining the reality of lived experience which is best illustrated by the straits of the weather and poverty in *Second Shepherds’* or the chivalric codes and conventions of the romance genre seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, into a fuller understanding of the salvific actions of the gospel.

The Wakefield Master is as engaged in his short play with the interactions between inward piety and outward performance. As they are debating the duplicity of their sheep-stealing companion Mak, the shepherds in the Wakefield Master’s play make a compelling observation about the appearance deceptions can take. Mak is distinguished by his wolf-skin coat. Coll remarks such a dress is common these days as “so are many hapt, Now namely within” (*Second Shepherds’* 532-533). Mak’s outer dress, his ad-dress, allows the audience of *Second Shepherds’* a brief yet complete introduction to his inner life. His wolfskin, inner and outer, forms a cue to the audience that his intentions will always stand in contrast with the false performances he tries to pass off, first as a “sond from a greatt lordying”⁷ (*Second Shepherds’* 294), and then as a pious friend of the shepherds rattling off pseudo-Latin. Edminster’s examination of the subversive, anti-clerical strains in the Wakefield Master’s work, highlights the appearance of Mak’s wolfskin and the shepherd’s commentary on it as an example “common among the Lollards... audiences would have understood pastoral themes as a metaphor for commenting on the clergy” (Edminster 2005). The performance Mak makes of faking his benign intention adds meaning to his wolfskin trappings and suggests a larger question of what it means to embody bad clerical practices. In discussing his body while in the act of performance, Guevara explains that he cannot think of himself just as single selfhood but must imagine “an undeniable tension between the ideological inscription of the body and the body as a lived entity” (Guevara 2011). Mak embodies both his personal and symbolic corruption in a way that points to redemption for both aspects of his character.

7. “a great lord’s minister”

The gifts presented to the Christ child in the *Second Shepherds'* might seem odd, as does the shepherd's shift into an understanding of the gravity of what has been revealed to them. After all, they change from complaining about how "sore" and out of joint they are after beating up Mak the sheep thief to the postures common to anyone who has ever seen a shepherd on a greeting card or in a front lawn nativity set in an absurdly short window of dramatic time. Their reaction to seeing the Christ child is a complete reversal from the anti-child, anti-family language that has dominated the farcical first half of the play. In his examination of the subversive nature of the *Second Shepherds'*, Edminster looks at its view of marriage and childbirth, key elements to the story of Christ's incarnation, as ultimately oppressive before the tension of the drama is broken by the farce. Edminster sees Coll's oppression under the new aristocratic practices of the enclosure as comparable to Daw and Mak's plight as a husband "forced from the sexual embrace of his wife and made to tend children" (Edminster 2005). Daw's complaint includes a warning about the end of his will being his own, presumably because he is now subject to making decisions in consideration for his family. He warns young men "of wowyng, / For God that you boght, / Be well war of wedyng"⁸ (*Second Shepherds'* 131-133). Mak pushes this complaint to absurdity when he announces his pitiful situation comes mostly from a wife who "ilk yere that commys to man/ She bryngys furth a lakan, /And som yeres two"⁹ (*Second Shepherds'* 349-351). Babies are a weight on Mak, one that drives him into the act of staging his parody of the incarnation in the first place. In Rick Bowers' reading, Mak's role is as a figure of misrule and carnival. His coming into contact with the mystery of the nativity has him inadvertently acting "within a parodic economy of sacred theft and sacred restitution... beyond the physically immediate to the transcendent" (Bowers 2002). The shepherds' contending with Mak announces to the play's audience that the status quo introduced in the opening complaints is about to be upended and renegotiated.

The first shepherd, Coll, demonstrates a mastery of the complex mystery in front of him in his address to the infant Jesus. He greets the baby with an acknowledgment that he is the Godhead who "has waryd, I weyne, / The warlo so wylde;/ The fals gyler of teyn"¹⁰ (*Second Shepherds'* 1028-1030). He then easily balances this solemn, joyful pronouncement of Christ's incredible majesty with simple sympathetic delight in seeing a happy baby, remarking "[l]o, he laghys, my swetyng"¹¹ (*Second Shepherds'* 1035). The shifts and balances within *The Second Shepherds'* are remarkable, even within the genre of the mystery play. Liam Purdon remarks on how "[Second Shepherds'] suggests... that the qualitative metaphysical condition

8. Beware (stand well clear) of a wedding

9. "Every year that passes she bears another baby and some years, two."

10. I know has battled, the wild warlock (Satan), who beguiles men"

11. "Look, he laughs, my sweetheart"

of the pastoral mind—that is the condition of mind of the local everyman figure—must first encompass if it is to appreciate fully the experience of God in the Nativity by being cognitively “priestlike” (Purdon 2003). This reading suggests the depth with which the playwright was willing to engage with the performances of imaginative devotion. The active, working shepherds find their mundane and difficult reality displaced by the birth of Christ and demonstrate what the proper response to this shift must be. By recognizing the majesty and the humanity in the baby Jesus, the shepherds adopt the proper posture to address the mystery of the incarnation: a model that can be imitated in the regular devotion of other “everymen”.

Leprow, in her case for the defensive orthodoxy of the northern mystery cycles, argues that the Wakefield Master sets up the action of the play so that “[the shepherds] are also potentially clerical pastors” (Leprow 1990). However, their actions and posture emphasize more the “pastoral” or leadership potential of these dramatic models than a strict “clerical” role in the way that Leprow suggests. The shepherds try and fail to imitate the song given to them by the angelic messenger. Their role, their audience’s role, is not to stand in place of the spiritual marvels that have been imitated on the stage. Instead, the shepherds urge each other and all their audience to go quickly and seek out the marvel. The shepherds remain grounded in their human nature. Therefore, their acts can be imitated. Those interacting with the performance of *Second Shepherds’* need not be priest-like themselves to experience the intersection of God with mundane space and linear time.

Redeeming the lay life as a place inspiring imaginative devotion is as much the work of the *Gawain* poet’s romance as it is the farce in *The Second Shepherd’s Play*. Gawain’s role as a chivalric knight in an Arthurian legend introduces us to a model given in the *Mirroure of the Blessed Lyfe* on how the active layperson could enhance their devotional practice. Rather than distinguishing the active and contemplative vocations as separate callings in the manner repeated in several vernacular mystic texts of the time,¹² Love speaks to the possibility of the active life leading into, even intermingling with, the contemplative experience. He imagines his vernacular audience, “lewde men & women & hem that bene of symple undirstondyng”¹³ (Love 10), as people capable of engaging with the mysteries of the gospel by keeping the narrative themes close to themselves through guided instruction.¹⁴ In his examination of Mary and Martha as models

12. See the *Cloud of Unknowing* for a description of the contemplative vocation as one set apart from not only the active life, but a push away from the imaginative devotional tools employed by Love and towards an emptying of self to all stimuli but the presence of God.

13. “Lewd (common or unlearned) men and women and those that are of simple understanding”

14. Love’s first invocation, borrowed from Bonaventure, is to St. Cecilia who is said to have kept the gospel close to her breast: an evocative image considering the inward facing

for the contemplative and active lives, Love points to the active life as a process that must begin with the longing spirit to practice “wipdrawing fro vices & profetyng in vertues”¹⁵ (Love 120). The Gawain we meet at the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to provide an excellent model for a knight who has taken the first steps in moving through a pious, active life towards more contemplative considerations.

The model for the virtuous active life presented in *Sir Gawain* seems to be that of the virtuous courtier. The *Gawain* poet describes his protagonist as an ideal hero, first by illustrating his willingness to undertake service for his king, beseeching the embarrassed Arthur that “this melly might be myne”¹⁶ (SGGK 342). Christine Chism especially argues for Gawain’s role as a representation of the changing role of the nobility under Richard II. As the Ricardian court was becoming more of a centralized entity, Gawain’s position as “a courtier who draws his power directly and solely from the king’s generosity” (Chism 2002) takes on significance to the poet’s courtly readership. The importance of personal piety in Richard II’s court has been documented by the rise of Carthusian houses and the recorded practices of personal piety. In “Lollard Knights and Carthusian Monks”, Tuck concludes, contrary to the suspicion that the Ricardian court was a hotbed of heretical practice, the features the knights of the court took from the Lollard movement were more in line with the same personal piety trend reflected in Love’s *Mirror* and other works of vernacular devotion focused on the individual’s posture in contemplating the divine. The trend that Tuck sees in Richard’s court was a moment towards “the pietistic and moralistic attitudes of early Lollards rather than to the more specifically anti-sacramental, anti-hierarchical and pacifist teachings...” (Tuck 1984). Using this model, Gawain acts as a perfect stand-in for the pietistic courtier that held sway in the Ricardian court.

The role of performed piety inside the narrative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* becomes complicated when combined with the *Gawain* poet’s conception performed and perceived knighthood. Gawain delineates himself by his modeling moral and chivalric virtues. His knightly behavior is presented as originating with the religious values illustrated by outward signs of popular devotion. The reader is told how Gawain’s five-pointed fidelity and service to his monarch is predicated on “alle his afaunce upon folde was in the/ fyve wonundes/ that Cryst kaght on the croys, as the crede tells”¹⁷ (SGGK 642-644). The reader is drawn towards the sign, prepared for the question of how Gawain’s outward symbols correspond to his inward soul. This gradual exploration of a symbol is comparable to

portraits kept close by Sir Gawain.

15. “Withdrawing from vices and prospering in virtues”

16. “this be my engagement”

17. “All his thoughts in this earth were on the five wounds that Christ received on the cross as the Creed (the Gospel) says”

how Love would choose to break down a narrative theme from his chosen portion of the Bible into comparative elements.¹⁸ Like Love, the Gawain poet deals with scripture in a creative, adaptive manner that is meant to be read not as strict interpretation, but guidance through distinct spiritual themes. In discussing how the Gawain poet uses his theology, particularly in *Pearl* and his treatises on Patience and Cleanliness, Richard Newhauser notices his similarities to Nicholas Love in the way in which he “compressed text where necessary or rearranged passages to create themes and narrative” (Newhauser 1962). Gawain will take on the project Love sets out for how to move through the active life towards Christ.

The decorative shade of the romance drama becomes penetrable as the *Gawain* poet explores his desired themes. The abbreviated quest which Gawain undertakes is not littered with a series of magical adventures, but takes the knight “into Northe Wales/ alle the iles of Anglesay on lyft he holdes”¹⁹ (SGGK 696-698), crossing over a landscape familiar to the original readers of the poem as a wild place at the center of a contemporary conflict in which “local gentry were at a crossfire when it came to expanding royal influence” (Chism 2002). In this realistic setting, Gawain is not at fault for the outward way that he chooses to act throughout his stay with Bertilak. When his game with Bertilak’s lady begins to have greater temptations and more stakes, Gawain shifts the game with Bertilak into a return of given kisses; his hurry to fulfill part of the agreed bargain serves to “indicate Gawain’s guilty conscience” (Haines 1982). As long as he can obey the strictures of the game’s rules, Gawain can put off taking any action either towards an affair with his hostess or to put a stop to her advances. His performance as a guest also allows him to put off any serious examination of what his interactions with Bertilak’s lady mean for his inward feeling or essence as a model Christian knight.

As DS Brewer explains in his introduction to the *Companion to the Gawain Poet*, the middle English literary landscape does not allow for distinguishing between the religious and the secular. The *Gawain* poet demonstrates Gawain’s character as an illustration of how the outward trappings of knighthood can be the beginning of a journey towards contemplative positions. His outward appearance suggests a desire for inward perfection. We are told that his outward-facing shield demonstrating the pentangle protects an inner image of “hende heven quene... that quen he blusched therto his belde never payred”²⁰ (SGGK 647 & 650). Gawain takes this image to heart. In his abbreviated quest through familiar wildernesses, he prays

18. For example, Love’s chapter on the Annunciation includes a breakdown of each line of the Hail Mary prayer into a meditation on how each aspect of the address signals the mystery of Christ becoming man through Mary, what is entailed through blessedness, and the power of intercessory prayer.

19. “Into Northern Wales, keeping the isles of Anglesey on his left”

20. The fair queen of heaven... since he regarded that queen, his courage never failed”

in his confusion to Christ “and Mary, that is myldest moder so dere, / of sum herber ther heghly I myght here masse”²¹ (SGGK 754-755). While Gawain believes himself merely to be imitating the models given to him by proper spiritual practice, and illustrates his beliefs on his insignia, the performance he is embodying makes him a model for the knights and courtiers who read his romance. In her study on the penitential themes in lesser-known romances, Hopkins illustrates how “[p]iety and devotion are constantly encountered and referred to as essential qualities for a knight” (Hopkins 1990). The body Gawain inhabits is one which the courtly literate audience can identify with, but his transition describes a nuanced movement into the acts of devotional performance.

If Arthur’s authority is meant to serve as a mirror to Richard II, it is important to see what consequences a penitential story might have on a court audience. Arthur’s “sumquat childgered”²² behavior—demanding the adventure that summoned the Green Knight to propose his perilous game, flying into a rage when mildly taunted so that he has to be checked by the service of one of his knights—has overarching consequences for everyone. As Haines explains, Arthur being called and responding to a quest that ultimately has a penitential mission “makes it difficult for individual members of the court, as we have seen to avoid being drawn into guilt” (Haines 1982). As much as Gawain represents a “surrogate reader of the Poem” under the strains of affective piety (Cooper 1999), he is immediately surrogate brought in to represent the court of Camelot in the wild spaces of the romance quest. The reader brought along on this journey through reading the romance would understand the weight of representation Gawain carries with him inside a courtly romance; he can never just be one knight on a personal quest. Gawain’s steps as a penitential knight become essential to see what will happen for the imagined court of Camelot and the aristocratic romance readers inside Richard’s court.

The tension in the romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is revealed in Gawain’s movement through the active forms of piety into a real understanding of the Godhead. Gawain’s body, his described comely features, his meaning-laden armor, and the speeches he makes all are meant to be ideals of these essential qualities, and still he has not obtained the directives of his mission. Gawain’s meaning is revealed with his movement into Hautdesert and performance at a new court under the strictures of penance. The *Gawain* poet lets us know the spiritual journey which Gawain will be undertaking when Bertilak’s court informs him “this penance now ye take/ and eft hit schal amend”²³ (SGGK 897-898). Gawain struggles with

21. And Mary that is the dearest and mildest mother, I might here have a measure of your heavenly help”

22. Playful with a sense of childishness

23. “You undertake this penance now, and it will serve afterwards”

his role as performing the role of a penitent so that the poet might illustrate how his readership can best embody the same position. As Guevara describes, the flattening of outer and inner reality is essential to effective performance. Lived experiences and embodied positions in society “are part of a continuity inside my body... and they all occupy some similar process” (Guevara 2011). Gawain’s embodied movement in his romance is towards reconciling his outer performance with an inner reality of pious devotion. If he is still acting as a courtier, then Gawain’s presence in Hautdesert, and his subsequent dive into the narrative’s dialogue on penitential actions, have everything to do with the court he represents. As Chism argues in her examination of the political realities that inspired the Gawain poet, the struggle over the identity of Camelot and its neighbors in light of a consolidating court means Gawain is “reduced to an errand boy” (Chism 2002). If viewed through the lens of affective piety, however, Gawain’s role as a go-between is far more significant. He acts as a representative of all those made to embody the posture of penance.

TRAVERSING SPACE AND TIME ON THE SPIRITUAL STAGE:

The most important element of the imaginative devotion as outlined in Love’s treatise is the ability of the pious to place themselves in the mind of the devotional material with which they are working. The goal of a creative, affective posture is to experience a reveling in the presence of God outside the bounds of linear, anthro-centric time. Love’s *Mirror* lays the scenes of his daily meditations on the life of Christ so that his readers feel connected to the spiritual mysteries presented in the mundane activities they share with the human figures of Jesus and his family. Human conceptions of time are laid aside in favor of a cyclical, spatial narrative arc with God’s salvation of mankind as a central theme presented and represented throughout the Christian year. Both the *Second Shepherd’s Play* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are set around the Christmas season. The barren, dead season of the natural calendar is also a season heavy with the mystery of the Incarnation in the Christian devotional cycle and a season of penance that leads into the feasts signaling a “New Year” and an opportunity for transformation. Characters drawn into this medieval setting of Christmastime are playing within a multilayered symbolic landscape and naturally face journeys that lead them towards the divine mystery.

In her groundbreaking collection of essays on the late medieval performance practices of mysticism and devotion, Suydam points to the liturgical traditions of the medieval mass as providing a key to how “the three elements of religious ritual—space-time and story—found their most prominent expression” (Suydam 1999). The space which the *Second Shepherds’* action occupies creates a flattening of experience, where the action of the farce with the stolen sheep occurs in the same place where

Christ is born. The play also manipulates historical time, compressing the performance of the biblical past and the acknowledgment of the medieval present into the cyclical and redemptive time scale of the Christian story. The space provided inside the conventions of late medieval drama creates a fruitful space for spiritual questions posed at its audience.

The Wakefield Master uses similar methods of identification to the actions and events of the Nativity which Love's *Mirror* employs to help the audience of *Second Shepherds'* draw closer to the significance of the depicted events. The shepherds each begin their complaints on the condition of life as hired men with a pronouncement about a landscape and climate well known to an audience in the north of England at Christmastime. Their dialogue creates a landscape onto which their audience easily can transpose their imaginations. The winds and rains on the plain of Bethlehem "ar spytus... and the frostys so hydus"²⁴ (*Second Shepherds'* 83-85) reflecting a similar landscape to what Love points out in his description of the nativity.²⁵ Christ has chosen to be born at "þe tyme þat was most noyus and hard, as þe cold wyntour"²⁶ (Love 38) as a gesture towards the wrongs of the world which must be done penance for. Indeed, the cold weather in the *Second Shepherds'* acts a prelude to a list of fractured social relationships which would be identifiable immediately to their audiences. The shepherds make oaths by "oure Ladye" and worry that the contemporaneous enclosure acts have made them "nerehandys/ oute of the doore"²⁷ (*Second Shepherds'* 16-17). The cold of the winter in Bethlehem and the inhospitable working conditions the shepherds face signal the audience they are walking in familiar territory as the comedy pushes towards Bethlehem.

The winter landscape that vexes the characters of the *Second Shepherds'* also creates a powerful metaphor of Christ's birth as a reality-altering invasion into lived time. Rick Bowers notices that the cold the shepherds complain demonstrates the coldness in their relationships with one another and their community. The staged portions of the shepherds' experience, according to Bowers, illustrate "a world desperate for an intervention of cosmic grace" (Bowers 2002). As Liam Purdon notes in his examination of the area around Townley where the Wakefield Master presented his plays, understandings about the spiritual value of work, a "psychic dignity to labor as well as to the things used to facilitate work" were elevated by the common people hoping to undertake spiritual practice in their lived experience (Purdon 2003). This is a similar trend to that which Nicholas Love illustrates throughout the *Mirror* by his preoccupation

24. "Are spiteful... and the frosts so hideous"

25. There used as an illustration of the humble circumstances into which the Godhead chose to become a man and to invoke pity for Jesus and his mother.

26. "The time that was the most harmful and hard, as the cold of winter."

27. "Nearly out of doors (homeless)"

with the labor and active lives principally of Christ and Mary, but also in his framing of Martha the sister of Lazarus as a dignified model of incorporating devotion into an active experience. Modern understandings of how theater is staged and structured help to illustrate how the spiritual and economic tensions in *Second Shepherds'* are introduced, subverted, and then redeemed. Presenting lived injustice into a shifting and open theatrical space allows the players in the Wakefield Master's work "to combat not only the rigidity of built environments but also the powers that shape them" (Hannah 2011). The *Second Shepherds'* use of the cold and barren space of contemporary work where spiritual dignity is under threat by the consolidation of lands and abuse of the labor by the local aristocracy, allows its audience to see the miracle of the incarnation as invading into their lived reality.

The progression of characters and narrative reflected in both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *the Second Shepherds' Play* begins with a physical displacement. The action only shifts into a spiritual transformation after a transition through the emotional lens through which the characters experience their situation. The shifts in the brief *Second Shepherds'* are perhaps more noticeable than in the constant referral to comedy and festivity throughout *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. However, the separate works are similar in the way they reflect the actions of the sacraments as a redemptive comedy. In discussing the creation of theatrical space, performance studies allow for a conceptualized space that has to be negotiated as "between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the subtle and the spectacular, the banal and the epic" (Hannah 56). The real world, in both *The Second Shepherds'* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is represented alongside deep concerns, even protests of a status quo in the social, political, and spiritual realities that occupied the turn of the fifteenth century.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight makes similar moves to the Wakefield Master's work at the beginning of its narrative. The readers are given points of identification both through the use of romance tropes and contemporaneous allusion. The *Gawain* poet introduces the mythical history of Britain before inviting his readers to listen as he spins them "an outrage aventure of Athures wonderes/ if ye wyl listen this laye bot on little quile"²⁸ (*SGGK* 29-30). What the *Gawain* poet does in this gesture is invite his readers to engage interactively as a person who listens to tales. Their reward for engaging is the "wonderes" that transcend the bounds of a simple adventure story. In performance studies, the interactive nature of narrative is innate. Even in a distanced format of storytelling like the relating of a romance where "an audience's side of the interaction is

28. "An extravagant adventure concerning Arthur's extraordinary deeds, if you would listen carefully to this story for just a little while"

largely silent, there is still an integral reciprocity... an exchange is implicit" (O'Grady 2011). The interactive and contemporaneous nature of both the *Second Shepherds' Play* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* create a space viable for the performance of affective piety.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight plays with elements of space and time to cue an alert pious audience of the Ricardian court that a deeper journey is at play than one contained by romance conventions. The *Gawain* poet demonstrates his fascination with journeys at once imaginative and spiritual in his consolation of theology, *Pearl*. The grieving narrator of this poem begins his journey through grief with an acknowledgment that he knows what he should do as a practicing Christian, "thagh kynde of Kyrst me comfort kenned"²⁹, but cannot bring himself to do so: "my wreched wylle in wo ay wraughte"³⁰ (*Pearl* 55-56). The narrator's journey begins with a logical understanding of God's redemption, but the journey to consolation must be realized through a practice of interiority. The narrator moves in imaginative and spiritual spaces through his dialogues with the Pearl maiden. He claims how "fro spot my spyryt ther sprang in space;/ my body on balke ther bode in sweven. / My goste is gon in Godes grace/ in adventure ther mervayles meven"³¹ (*Pearl* 61-64). This creation of spiritual space through imaginative landscapes is a dominant theme in the *Gawain* poet's work. Like the narrator of *Pearl*, Gawain too must undergo a movement from rational understanding of his practice as the Knight of the Pentangle to a deep engagement with Christ's redemptive action in the lives of sinful individuals. His acting out the role of a knight leads him eventually through a journey within his spiritual understanding.

Before he goes out to face his death, Gawain goes and makes a confession which according to Aers "is presented as valid and the priest's absolution as being in accord with the church's teaching on the saving power of the sacrament" (Aers 1999). The problem for Gawain, as for the narrator of the *Gawain* poet's *Pearl*, is that Gawain's performance of piety does not indicate an understanding of Christ's charity and grace. As Blenker describes, the journey of the narrator's soul in *Pearl* "correspond to the Augustinian division of the rational soul into three faculties—memory, understanding and will—ascend to Christ" (Blenkner 1970). At the point where *Pearl*'s narrator is given a glimpse of the truth of the Pearl maiden's consolation, he is unable to describe what he is experiencing. He says of Paradise "anunder mone so great merwayle/ no fleschly hert ne might endeure"³² (*Pearl* 1081-1083). The reader is moved towards the ineffable at the heart of mystic texts meant only for the contemplative soul. The

29. "Though he knew the kindness of Christ"

30. "My wretched will is forged in woe"

31. "From that spot into space my spirit quickly sprang, my body remained on the mound. My spirit went by the grace of God to go on a marvelous adventure"

32. "So great a marvel that no earthly heart might be able to endure it"

Gawain poet remains dedicated to his imaginative exercise which permits him only to state there are matters so profound they cannot be stated.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight deals with a journey towards the heart of Christ, not, as in *Pearl*, in an imagined spiritual landscape, but inside the heart of one questing individual. The final failure to adequately understand the impact of grace affects both the speaker of *Pearl* and Sir Gawain. The poetry of *Pearl* cannot adequately depict the beauty of Paradise. The narrator can only rush madly towards it only to be expelled from the object of his desire knowing that the only return is through the daily and common devotion found in the Eucharist where “in the forme of bred and wyn/ The preste uus schewes uch a daye/ He gef uus to be His homly hyne”³³ (*Pearl* 1209-1211). Gawain too is left grasping at a fully realized ascent to Christ which would make the question of his performance as a courtier and knight meaningless. He is led to repeat his story back to the court, where his journey of penitence is given a new lens in recounting, and Gawain is judged an excellent player. It is only through repetition of his performance as a penitent can he begin to approach the full meaning of his soul’s journey.

COMEDIC UPHEAVAL AND THE FESTIVITIES OF REDEMPTION:

The setting of Christmas in both *The Second Shepherd’s Play* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* allows for a space for expansive “play” that might be alien to a reader not accustomed to the creative landscape of Middle English religious literature. Mystery plays were a space to freely criticize the social order as well as invert the expectations of the normal hierarchy as much as they were meant to bring the community together.³⁴ Figures on the periphery of the most serious of Biblical mysteries frequently swear, inveigh scatologically, argue, and bemoan the difficulties of their existence. Into this proto-realist setting, often played for laughs and showing humanity at its basest, comes the grandeur and joy of the Christian redemption arc.³⁵ Mak’s farcical performance of the false nativity and his frequent donning and shifting of disguises makes for an obvious parallel to the “playacting” that sows the ground for the salvific comedy to germinate, but examples of distortion and overturning litter both works. Gawain is surrounded in all his endeavors by lightness and frivolity that allows him to enter perils to his life and soul without paralyzing trepidation. He might be playing the role of the dutiful knight, but everyone around him, including the Green Knight and King Arthur are set up to play roles

33. “in the form of bread and wine the priest shows us each day the form [God] gives us as his homely (recognizable or comfortable) presence on earth”

34. The Massacre of the Innocents in the Townley Cycle for instance has the mothers not only weeping for the children killed on Herod’s orders but fighting back in what could become a raucous melee as the women accuse the authorities of having “stolen” their children from them.

35. The classical understanding of comedy, as defined in *Poetics* (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm>) is supplanted by the Comedy of Salvation more familiar to readers of Dante and spread throughout the late medieval Christian landscape.

in what turns out to be a great game of absolution. The courtiers who see Gawain off with cheer and festivity make a game of his heroic return to the point that his feelings of unworthiness begin to make him look like a poor sport. In both the comedic bumbblings of the shepherds and the reckless festival air of Arthur's court, a theatrical space is opened which allows the realities of existence to be overturned. In these disruptions, the delighted audience is meant to witness a glimpse of the radical repositioning offered by the Salvation Narrative.

The games and "playing" which occupy both *The Second Shepherds'* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, both signal and enact profound moments of spiritual grace with community-wide implications. The staging of the pageant wagon requires that the physical space where the farce has taken place to transform into the stable where the shepherds meet the Holy Family, an act which is only possible in a performative reading of the play if "the punishment and overthrow of the false Mak, leads sequentially and causally to the birth of the Christ-child" (Edminster 2005). This sequencing seems counterintuitive and only can be made sense of in the process of a spiritual journey such as the ones undertaken by both the shepherds and Sir Gawain. When discussing the penitential language that infuses a large portion of spiritual writing at the turn of the fifteenth century, both orthodox and less so, David Aers sees a theme of spiritual wholeness in an individual must involve a "a transformation of relations in the community and the demands may certainly be radical" (Aers 1999). The safe distance of games and playacting create an invitation to engage with some of the more radical demands of spiritual and communal transformation.

The characters that occupy *Second Shepherds'* dramatic space are not only the victims of a broken system, they help perpetuate its injustices. Coll curses the slights committed against working men like himself, but there is no place in his or Daw's conception of injustice to extend compassion to their junior assistant Gib. The boy's overworked, terrified demeanor has him labelled a "ledyr hyne" (*Second Shepherds'* 214) whose ravings make him more trouble than he is helpful. The bullied Gib then is the first to turn on Mak, calling him a devil and warning the others to "take hede to his thing" (*Second Shepherds'* 290). Of course, Mak is a thief, a deceiver who at least appears to try and use witchcraft to steal from neighbors just as poor as he is. In the lived reality of those who saw the *Second Shepherds'* in its original staging, and for whom life could be "often brutal humiliating and short" (Edminster 2005), the warning Gyll gives to her husband that his crime has made him "lyke for to hyng"³⁶ (*Second Shepherds'* 446) is no exaggeration. The threat that Mak should and will hang for his theft was a grounded reality many in the audience

36. Likely to hang

would embrace as easily as the senior shepherds embrace taking their frustrations out on Gib. The festive nature of the subversion in the *Second Shepherds'* is a tremendous overturning of injustice for “men whose desperate need for Christ is apparent in their weariness with life and life’s processes” (Helterman 1999). The shepherds take the first step of breaking out of the weariness and brutality of their lived experience and perform a radical disruption of mundane cruelty. Mak is not hanged for his crimes. As Bowers points out, “Mak never knows when to stop playing” (Bowers 2002), but fortunate for him, the playful inversion of parody allows for him to be shown charity that begins to appear divine. As Helterman explains, the cosmic setup of the first half of the play requires that “[o]nly by casting out the Mak in themselves can the shepherds expel the spiritual winter” (Helterman 1999). The rough pardon the shepherds give to Mak serves not only to redeem the comic character but the entire space which all the players who witness the nativity occupy.

Where the *Second Shepherds'* handles the spiritual joy of the nativity through shifts into what Bowers and Helterman call the carnivalesque in the false incarnation of the sheep theft plot, the comedy of *Sir Gawain* is distilled throughout the romance conventions it either transforms or rejects. The comedy of Gawain’s ultimate redemption and pardon seems almost lost on the protagonist and leaves room for the courtly audience to negotiate whether or not Gawain is still in need of doing a penance for trying to save his own life. This dialogue creates a tremendous potential for the readers of the romance to negotiate issues in their devotional performance. What is created by the lingering questions is a theatrical, performative space where creative examples can be representative of larger issues. The issue of penance in romance becomes a cycle of interactive dramas. The several penances throughout the narrative serve a similar purpose as situations set up inside the conventions of interactive theater where “audience members are invited to understand the factors involved in creating the problem and to assist the protagonist and others in finding positive ways forward” (Sommar 2011). Placing the audience into the plights of the characters in both the *Second Shepherds* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are key to how their poets draw their readers into interactions with devotional themes.

In his examination of the theology employed by the *Gawain* poet, Nicholas Watson begins his examination by looking at the piety and restorative justice laid out in *Piers Plowman* as an example of symbolic, imaginative engagement with the same question that occupies *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: what must society do to be saved? But unlike Langland’s language or even the more standard mystical language employed by Julian of Norwich or Nicholas Love, Watson argues that “the *Gawain* poet’s dialectical and stylistic choices point in an opposite direction towards establishing

close contact with a lay audience able to understand (perhaps even constituted around their ability to understand) an ornate and regionally-specific vocabulary” (Watson 1999). This choice of language, tied intrinsically to the regional and socio-political space common to its intended readership, is key to how imaginative devotion functions in romance. Sir Gawain experiences a spiritual transformation through the complicated engagement with his duties as a knight and the alien world of death games he has chosen to inhabit. Christine Chism sees a significance in the variety of quest, host, and love games being performed throughout the romance to the court of Richard II. Richard, especially in his juvenilia, demonstrated his affiliation to the “childegered” Arthur through his fascination with ludic pastimes and mummerly as a symbolic gesture of rulership (Chism 2002). In this model, it is difficult to say when Gawain’s moves are meant to become serious. His dangerous game with his hostess is described at first as “dere dalyaunce ... with clene cortays carp closed fro fylthe”³⁷ (SGGK 1012-1013). Like Mak in the *Second Shepherds’*, characters in *Gawain*, do not create a clear boundary where the “play-acting” should come to an end, until Gawain is forced to face his mortality at the Green Chapel.

The journey undertaken in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* pulls the knight “out of this secure realm of courtly diversion and implicate him in a world where life is lived vividly” (Chism 2002) as much through the challenges laid on Gawain’s virtue as in the spiritual journey that Gawain finds himself trying to negotiate at the end of the romance. It is not until the very end of the romance that Gawain begins to understand his “failure to comprehend more than the external trappings of his quest while ignoring its fundamental insistence on a consistent moral commitment to one’s professed ideals” (Hark 1962). Gawain feels compelled to restore himself into the community before Bertilak even has the space to condemn him. Feeling the incongruity of his role as the Pentangle Knight with an act that he frames as greedy and cowardly, Gawain tells Bertilak he feels himself to be “fawty and falce, and ferde haf been ever”³⁸ (SGGK 2382). For a crime much smaller than the trick perpetrated by Mak and under none of the same threat, Gawain makes a similar appeal for mercy. Unfortunately, he does not comprehend when mercy is handed to him. Although he performs the acts that should absolve any guilt lingering over the court from the adventure, Gawain struggles to accept his pardon. When Gawain “shares the knowledge of his guilt first with The Green Knight... and finally with Arthur and his court and he does public penance for it” (Barrow 1999), the pious reader of the romance is left to fill in how complete or even necessary the pardon of Pentangle Knight is meant to be.

37. “A gentle pastime with clean, courteous talk free of filth”

38. “Wicked, dishonest and cowardly have always been”

The key that the *Gawain* poet gives to his readers is the return to the now redeemed joy of the court to which Gawain makes his safe return. Gawain's contention with his faults, his transition through active affective piety becomes a symbol in Arthur's court which "was accorded the renown of the Round Table"³⁹ (SGGK 2519). It is the court's reaction and not Gawain's self-loathing stature as "blind to comic mercy... the butt of the divine joke" (Haines 1982) which is given the last word in the romance. This suggests that the community sees the arc of Gawain's journey as ultimately salvific and worthy to be remembered as a model of chivalric and pious action. Having gone through supernatural disruption and been forced into the world of treacherous playing, Arthur's court can redefine itself through the posture of penance and the language of forgiveness.

CONCLUSION: AGAYNST FALS HERETIKS?

The tension central to much of the pious output from the 1380's into the first quarter of the fifteenth century has to do with how much the text chooses to be aware of, or even sympathetic to the critiques of the church establishment offered by the Lollard heresy. Nicholas Love deliberately distinguishes his work meant to guard against heretical belief, while Julian of Norwich is forced to take several "authorizing" steps within her text to properly situate some of her more radical theology well within orthodox parameters. Imaginative, pious practice contends with these issues in a much freer and potentially more complicated way than those offered in a work delineated as "devotional". On the one hand, both the *Second Shepherds' Play* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* demonstrate creative ways in which "it becomes possible for mediators to be spiritually transformed, even drawn into an ecstatic unitive experience with the divine" (Suydam 1999), but it is not as clear how these experiences fit within the contested parameters of the orthodoxy of their time.

Lauren Leprow makes an argument for cycle plays as a northern reaction to the incursions of the Lollard heresy. In Leprow's view, the fact that the cycles are set around the feast of Corpus Christi as a sign that the plays were performed to strengthen orthodox sacraments and "would be antithesis of the Lollard spirituality and would be singularly abhorrent to the followers of Wyclif" (Leprow 1990). However much the reflection on the incarnation in the *Second Shepherd Play* seems to fall in line with orthodox belief, there is something to be said concerning the ways in which the shepherds contend with the Word of Christ over false practice. Edminster challenges Leprow's reading and explains how subversive elements of the play suggest "[The Wakefield Master] certainly shares many of [the Lollard] concerns about the orthodox Catholic church (Edminster 2005). Mak's deception aligns enough with the "false shepherd" parables to suggest he plays a role as a model of the sort of bad cleric Lollard critiques

39. "Became renown around the Round Table"

see as unfit to carry out the sacraments. It is not a coincidence that in Mak's pastoral hands, the "lamb of God" becomes an object of comedy. The suggestion that Gyll swears by her willingness to "ete this chylde"⁴⁰ in a parody of receiving the Eucharist in order to reinforce the lie she is telling suggests the Wakefield Master's primary purpose is not to prop up orthodox veneration of all the sacraments. The shepherds' however end their encounter with the great charity of Christ in a state of grace that suggests that the wrongs of the false clerics have been redeemed and the world has been renewed to a state they have not before witnessed.

The model provided in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* leaves a more complicated question of whether the sacraments offered by the orthodox church speak to the spiritual needs of the pious lay person. Gawain has struggled throughout his romance with putting on and off the armaments of his spiritual practice and knightly duties. Much of his spiritual journey is his transition into a subject on which the sacrament of penance is examined. Gawain's struggle and therefore the reader's dilemma with understanding the beginnings and endings of a proper penance begins with the fact that it is not Gawain's confession to the priest that the reader sees. We see Gawain instead ready to perform his duty as a chivalric hero, then his confession to and absolution by the mercurial Green Knight "of the poynt of [his] egge"⁴¹ whereby Gawain is said to be "pured as clene as thou hades never forfeled"⁴² (SGGK 2392-2394). The wild nature-figure of the Christmas feast, not the priest, provides Gawain with the penance of a manly blow and tells him he is clear of his sins in part due to his courage. The performance of penance has been placed into a purely knightly context for the questing Gawain to interpret.

If he is absolved of his every sin, Gawain's continued performance of his penitent stance veers into the connotation of dramatic which Pitches thinks audiences consider somehow too exaggerated to be sincere. However, more than the sacrament of penance, Gawain receives a confirmation from the Green Knight that his work engaging with the tenets of his belief are aimed in the right direction. By engaging in affective piety, Gawain can move his spirit much in the same way as the Bethlehem shepherds towards an understanding of his transcendent connection with the divine.

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40. "Eat this child"

41. "The blade of his weapon"

42. "Washed as clean as if you had never sinned"

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