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 TOKENS OF SIN, BADGES OF HONOR: JULIAN OF  
 NORWICH AND *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

IN 2002, Robert Blanch and Julian Wasserman, reviewing decades of criticism on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, wrote of a “sea change in the authorized vision of Camelot, with the general trend being more condemnatory readings of the court” (74). Since they contend that a reader’s attitude toward Camelot will greatly determine the poem’s reception, it follows that any tendency to read the court negatively necessarily entails a tendency to read the poem as a record of multiple moral failures — presumably to be brought to completion in Camelot’s future fall — which is tantamount to reading the poem as a tragedy. Such a reading takes the court’s laughter at the poem’s close as the laughter of incomprehension or moral oblivion, laughter at the idea that anyone could take so seriously the minor infraction of concealing a gift — precisely the sort of irreverence one might expect from a society founded on Trojan treason and peopled with childish revelers (which two points against Camelot I will analyze in the first portion of this essay). On the other hand, less condemnatory (or more indulgent) readers will hear Camelot’s laughter as a thoughtful and proper response to Gawain’s experience of sin and penance, the members of the court adopting his girdle as their own so as, at once, to remind him that even saints sin and to remind themselves that they should seek to be as rigorously introspective as this model knight. This reading considers the poem to be (divine) comedy, wherein the hero’s temporary debasement results in his and his society’s greater good.

The propensity of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to be read in such divergent ways, owing in great part to the question of the motivation of the court’s laughter, has helped to make it “one of the most discussed of medieval texts,” as Tony Davenport has observed (399). In the present study of this controverted text, I will pursue a less tragic, more optimistic reading of the poem and the court by juxtaposing Gawain’s girdle as token of sin with tokens spoken of by the visionary Julian of Norwich. When, at the poem’s end, Gawain displays the girdle and the scar on his neck as twin signs of his shame, and Camelot then adopts the girdle as its own device, we read that this green baldric “watz acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table, / And he honoured þat hit hade euermore after” (“became part of the renown of the Round Table, / And whoever afterwards wore it was always honoured” (2519-20)).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, I contend, does Camelot transform Gawain’s “token of vntrawþe” (“token of dishonesty” (2509)) into a badge of honor, a transformation that very closely resembles what Julian claims to have seen in heaven with respect to redeemed sinners such as David, Peter, Paul, and John of Beverley, “for there the tokyn of synne is turnyd to worshyppe” (chp. 38).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Julian claims, in this same chapter of her *Revelation of Love*, that in heaven “synne shalle be no shame, but wurshype to man,” which seems to me precisely the viewpoint that Camelot urges upon the self-condemning Gawain, who needs to learn to see his scar not as a sign of failure but as a sign of struggle and survival — who needs to learn to see his wound as God sees it: “Though that he be helyd, hys woundys be sene before God nott as woundes, but as wurshyppes,” states Julian (chp. 39). Elizabeth Spearing translates this line quite wonderfully: “Although a man has the scars of healed wounds, when he appears before God they do not deface but ennoble him” (96). I propose that reading the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in comparison with the contemporary, optimistic theology expressed by Julian of Norwich will help to reveal the romance also to be optimistic, more a story of *felix culpa* than *culpa mea*.

It must be conceded, however, that the poem seems to open on an ominous note, associating the founding of Britain with some primal treachery perpetrated at Troy:

SIPEN þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,  
 Þe borgh brittened and brent to brondez and askez,  
 Þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroght  
 Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe:  
 Hit watz Ennias þe athel, and his highe kynde,  
 Þat sipen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicom  
 Welneghe of al þe wele in þe west ile.

.....  
 And fer ouer þe French od Felix Brutus  
 On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez  
 wyth wyne. (1-7, 13-15)

When the siege and the assault were ended at Troy,  
 The city laid waste and burnt into ashes,  
 The man who had plotted the treacherous scheme  
 Was tried for the wickedest trickery ever.  
 It was princely Aeneas and his noble kin  
 Who then subdued kingdoms, and came to be lords  
 Of almost all the riches of the western isles.

.....  
 And far over the French sea Felix Brutus

On many broad hillsides settles Britain  
with delight. (trans. James Winny)

The siege and the assault being ceased at Troy,  
The battlements broken down and burnt to brands and ashes,  
The treacherous trickster whose treasons there flourished  
Was famed for his falsehood, the foulest on earth.  
Aeneas the noble and his knightly kin  
Then conquered kingdoms, and kept in their hand  
Wellnigh all the wealth of the western lands.

.....  
And far over the French hood Felix Brutus  
On many spacious slopes set Britain with joy  
And grace. (trans. Brian Stone)

Although King Arthur is later deemed “þe hendest” (“the noblest”) of British kings (26), some critics read this appellation ironically in light of the poem’s preamble. As Thomas Silverstein offers, “The prologue with which this all begins, at once conventional *prohemium* for a poem of noble content and *insinuatio* by reason of its devious comic intention, takes us through a history whose primal Trojan hero Aeneas was a traitor, its founding British father Brutus a parricide and outcast, and its outcome a chronicle of ‘blysse and blunder’” (14).<sup>3</sup> Yet critics differ as to the identity of the treasonous “tulk” of line 3, a matter of potentially profound importance concerning the poem’s portrayal of Camelot. Although he sides with the majority of critics in reading Aeneas as the traitor, since such a medieval tradition does exist, Silverstein notes that this passage represents “a notable crux” — the Trojan Antenor, “not named here but [also] known to tradition,” may in fact be the traitor in question (112n3). Indeed, it is not altogether clear that the syntax of the passage associates the treasonous “tulk” with Aeneas (or Antenor) at all.<sup>4</sup> The full stop of line 4 in James Winny’s translation seems to distinguish “princely Aeneas” from “the man who had plotted the treacherous scheme”; and, although he accepts the identification of the tulk with Aeneas, Brian Stone likewise stops line 4 so as to allow a distinction between the tulk and Aeneas (although his omission of “hit watz” and “þat” from lines 5-6 serves somewhat to reconnect them). The semicolon ending line 4 in Silverstein’s critical edition seems as ambiguous as the colon in Norman Davis’s edition, and the poem’s punctuation remains conjectural at any rate, since the poem’s single manuscript, Nero Cotton A.x., lacks punctuation (although there are a few section breaks implied by initial capital letters).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the epithet in line 5, “Aeneas þe aethel” (“princely Aeneas”),

seems to run counter to any identification of Aeneas with the greatest of all traitors, unless one is meant to read “Aeneas the aethel” ironically or, as Davis has it, merely as a marker of “noble birth” (70n3-5).

Gerald Morgan has put forward another intriguing possibility: the *Gawain*-poet may be employing the Virgilian tradition more directly, as opposed to the pseudo-classical tradition through Guido della Colonna; and in Virgil, Aeneas — *pius Aeneas*

le regne / pour la vengeance de sa femme. / La cité prist par traïson, /  
tot craventa, tours et donjon” (“When Menelaus besieged Troy, / He  
moved no more until he had taken it, / Devastating the entire country  
and kingdom / To avenge the outrage of his wife’s abduction. / He  
took the city through treachery, / And destroyed everything, towers  
and keep” (1-6)).

I am distinctly conscious (indeed, even suspicious) of the novelty  
of these suggestions, according to which Britain’s foundations in *Sir  
Gawain and the Green Knight* would have nothing whatsoever to do  
with Trojan treason, a situation which might reduce Camelot’s suscep-  
tibility to condemnation. Yet even acceptance of treasonous origins  
for the British does not disallow a positive reading of the end of *Sir  
Gawain and the Green Knight* — which, admittedly, repeats its first line

of Camelot based on such things as the adjective “childgered,” writing, “I do not recollect that the equally boyish horse-play of the middle-aged Bertilak is ever condemned” (12).<sup>9</sup> The court consists of “fayre folk in her first age” and is the “hapnest vnder heuen” (54, 56); one may or may not hear a range of moral assessment between Winny’s phrasing “luckiest under heaven” and Stone’s phrasing “stood well in heaven’s will.” Although he has come to view Camelot negatively, Wasserman allows that much of the poem’s “richness” derives from its capacity to occasion “seemingly contradictory answers” to its many interpretive questions (115).

The poem’s many references to Camelot’s origins, and its king, its knights and ladies, and their Christmastime festivities may or may not be equivocal, then, but they remain challenging to synthesize into a simple assessment. Morgan’s statement that the poet does not criticize Camelot in the first st is a strong one, given that many commentators have found such criticism. On the other hand, I can see no reference that demands to be taken as a negative judgment, unless some primal and irremediable treason in fact determines Camelot’s fate, or unless terms like “childgered” are necessarily pejorative. There is some danger that an initially negative assessment of Camelot might become too prejudicial in the poem, meaning that the court’s actions at the poem’s end will be construed as spiritually suspect, to the extent that the court has already been constructed as spiritually bereft. Equally erroneous, though, would be the attitude that Camelot necessarily acts correctly by virtue of its name. Indeed, its knightly reputation is explicitly at issue in the Green Knight’s challenge (283ff., 309-15). Ultimately, my optimistic reading requires a Camelot that is at least capable at the poem’s end of right action — a Camelot whose spiritual standing is at least as ambiguous as it is at the beginning. Indeed, perhaps ambiguity is necessary, so renewal can be predicated on it.

Gawain’s own spiritual standing becomes the focus of the poem as he journeys north and faces the twin challenges of Bertilak and Bertilak’s wife. When, on the third day of testing Gawain accepts the wife’s offer of a girdle that will keep him from being slain, and when he then withholds that gift from the agreed exchange of winnings with Bertilak, readers everywhere discern his faithlessness. (That he breaks the established pattern by kissing Bertilak first, after which Bertilak presents him with a “foule fox felle” (“stinking fox pelt” (1944)), seals and symbolizes the deceit.) Complicating matters, however, is the fact that Gawain visits a priest for confession between accepting the girdle and failing to reveal it to Bertilak; critics differ as to the possible efficacy of this confession, even as the poem records that the priest “asoyled hym

surely and sette hym so clene / As domezday schulde haf ben dight on þe morn” (“absolved him completely, and made him as clean / As if the Judgment were appointed for the next day” (1883-84)).<sup>10</sup> Further complicating the situation is the insistence of Bertilak’s wife that Gawain conceal the girdle and “lelly layne [hit] fro hir lorde” (“loyally hide it from her husband”), to which Gawain agrees (1863). Silverstein notes how Gawain has placed himself in a catch-22 here: “If he keeps the girdle he breaks his word to the host; if he tells his host he breaks his word to the lady” (14). Louis Blenkner describes Gawain’s situation in more theological terms: “He is in a position where he cannot *not* sin, the position, according to St. Augustine, of all post-lapsarian men” (370-71). Indeed, he seems already to have failed a moral test in agreeing to hide the girdle from the husband, with whom he has the prior arrangement to exchange winnings. He fails, at any rate, once he fails to deliver the girdle, as the Green Knight — Bertilak — points out the next day upon the third and wounding blow: “At þe þrid þou fayled þore, / And þerfor þat tappe ta þe” (“You failed me the third time / And took that blow therefore” (2356-57)).

Gawain’s initial reaction to being found faithless vacillates between proper contrition and an attempt to shift the blame. At first, the speechless Gawain is “so agreued for greme he gyred withinne; / Alle þe blode of his brest blende in his face” (“so mortified and crushed that he inwardly squirmed; / All the blood in his body burned in his face” (2370-71)). He castigates his “cowarddyse and couetyse” (“cowardice and covetousness” (2374)); he flings the belt back at the Green Knight, who then urges him to accept it as “a pure token / Of þe chaunce of þe grene chapel” (“a true token / Of the exploit of the Green Chapel” (2398-99)). Gawain, lamentably, here indulges in the “homiletic commonplace” (Davis 128n2416-19) of misogyny, bemoaning the pernicious influence of women on even the greatest men: Adam, Solomon, Samson, David.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Gawain seems finally to accept that the failing was his own:

“Bot your gordel”, quoth Gawayn, “God yow foryelde!  
 Pat wyl I welde wyth guod wylle, not for þe wynne golde,  
 Ne þe saynt, ne þe sylk, ne þe syde pendaundes,  
 For wele ne for worchyp, ne for þe wlonk werkkez,  
 Bot in syngne of my surfet I shal se hit ofte,  
 When I ride in renoun, remorde to myseluen  
 Þe faut and þe fayntyse the þe esche crabbed,  
 How tender hitis to entyse teches of fylþe.” (2429-36)

“But for your belt,” said Gawain, “God repay you for that!

I accept it gratefully, not for its wonderful gold,  
 Nor for the girdle itself nor its silk, nor its long pendants,  
 Nor its value nor the honour it confers, nor its fine workmanship,  
 But I shall look at it often as a sign of my failing,  
 And when I ride in triumph, recall with remorse  
 The corruption and frailty of the perverse flesh,  
 How quick it is to pick up blotches of sin.”

Once back in Camelot, groaning and blushing all over again, he tells his story and shows the court the girdle and “þe nirt” (“the scar” (2498)) on his neck, the two working as reciprocal signs of his guilt. The girdle he terms the “token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne” (“token of the dishonesty I was caught committing” (2509)); he claims that he “mot nedez hit were wyle I may last” (“must wear it as long as I live” (2510)). King Arthur then consoles Gawain, and the entire court “laughen loude þerat, and lu yly acorden / Þat lordes and ladis þat lawgen to þe Table / Wchertur us of þe broþerhood, that ȝeryk scheld haue” (“laughs loudly about it, and courteously agrees / That lords and ladies who belong to the Table, / Each member of the brotherhood, should wear such a belt” (2514-16)).



of itself, countering Gawain's despair with its emotional opposite, per the operational logic of the medieval penitential. John McNeill and Helena Gamer point out how "the reconstruction of personality" was a key aim of medieval penance and was to be effected by opposing contraries to contraries, such as joy to dejection (44-45).

Parallel ideas and images in Julian's *Revelation of Love* help to encourage this more affirmative reading of Camelot's adoption of the girdle. Julian firmly believes, with Augustine and Aquinas, that "Almighty God would in no wise permit evil to exist in His works, unless He were so almighty and so good as to produce good even from evil" (Aquinas 1.22.2, repl. obj. 2). Sin constitutes for Julian "alle that is nott good"; "yf synne had nott be, we shulde alle have be clene," which poses the question "why, by the grete forseynng wysdom of God, the begynnyng of synne was nott lettyd [prevented]." Jesus answers Julian as



poem from nominally perfect knight — the knight of the pentangle (619-65) — to perfected knight, a knight made perfect through testing, failure, and recovery, a knight now perfect in his continuous knowledge of imperfection. His is a *felix culpa*, a happy fault, because the

for a statement of her editorial and modernization practices.) It must be stated that I am positing no direct contact between Julian's work and that of the *Gawain*-poet, even as I find certain ideas and images distinctly similar.

3 It should be noted by way of comparison that Geoffrey of Monmouth (1.3) makes this parricide accidental and the outcome of prophecy; moreover, Geoffrey's references to Aeneas in parts 1 and 3 of his *History* make no mention of treachery. Geoffrey was almost certainly working in line with the Virgilian tradition on Aeneas's heroism.

4 Silverstein, citing Davis, notes such texts as *The Geste Hystoriale*, the *Scottish Troy Fragments*, and *Lydgate's Troy Book* as preserving the tradition of a treasonous Aeneas, an idea that goes back through Guido della Colonna to "the ancient accounts ascribed to Dares and Dictys" as well as Servius's commentary on *Aeneid* 1.242 (112n3). Davis prefers the identification of the "talk" with Aeneas over Israel Gollancz's identification of him with Antenor, even as he admits that the "hit watz" in line 5 may refer forwards or backwards (70n3-5). See Haines 40-45 for painstaking analysis of the poem's opening lines.

5 See Davis (xii, xxviii) for information on the capitals and the absence of punctuation.

6 In his glossary, Silverstein gives "tried" and "of proven quality" for "tried, tryed" (s.v.). "Famed" could derive from "of proven quality." Davis, on the other hand, disagrees with Gollancz that "tried" may here mean "distinguished, famous," since "the development of this passage calls for an event, not a general condition" (70n3-5).

7 Only Latin references are given; the translations are those of Fagles.

8 Translations of the *Roman d'Enéas* are mine. McLoone indicates that it is unlikely that the *Gawain*-poet knew the *Roman d'Enéas*. JETEMC Span ~~ACID~~ ~~ET~~ JETEMC Span

hope. Silverstein (168n2513-21) cites from the Vulgate *Lancelot* (which follows Chrétien de Troyes's

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