



Jonah and Gawain as Flawed Heroes

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The notion of heroism in the fourteenth century is a problematic one, and the image of heroism which *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* portray is an awareness that a hero exists in a constant and morally ambiguous struggle between the endeavour to be perfect and the inexorable failure of this endeavour. As D. W. Robertson observes, there is arguably a 'lack of anything approaching heroic suggestiveness in fourteenth century literature'¹ and it is undeniable that both Gawain and Jonah have their faults. However, instead of the total inability to attain heroism it is arguable that the poems imply that although the protagonists may strive for heroic perfection, they are, as human beings, innately susceptible to failure, yet there is a sense that this fact does not render the attempt any less admirable or necessary. For the poems' protagonists there are fixed standards of heroic perfection, for Jonah it is God and His patience and mercy, and for Gawain it is the chivalric code, symbolised by the pentangle, and it is this standard by which they are measured as flawed heroes. This is demonstrated in the opening line of *Patience* 'Paciencie is a poynt, þaȝ hit displese ofte'² (1) which at once highlights the value of the virtue and humanity's inability to achieve it.

It is arguable that the poem has no stronger advocate of Gawain being a flawed hero than Gawain himself, who readily confesses his faults, 'For care of þy knobbe, cowardyse me taȝt / To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake'³ (2379-80). This forsaking of Gawain's nature as a knightly hero may be measured against the symbol of the pentangle, the emblem of perfection which defines heroic attributes, 'Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle / In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tyle þat hit habbez / For hit is a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez / And vche vmbelappez and loukez in oper / And ayquere hit is endelez' (625-9). The symbolism of the pentangle portrays Gawain as what Stephanie J. Hollis describes as a 'perfect hero, one whose virtues are so preeminent and so tightly integrated that it appears impossible for evil to find entry.'⁴ It is true that Gawain is immediately associated with the heroic qualities of the pentangle, 'Forþy hit acordez to þis knyȝt and to his cler armez, / For ay faithful in fyue and sere fyue syþez, / Gawain watz gor gode knawen and, as golde pured, / Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertuez ennoured / In mote'

¹ D. W. Robertson, *The Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) p. 223

² *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldon, 5th edn (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007) p. 184. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 294. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

⁴ Stephanie Hollis, 'The Pentangle Knight: "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *The Chaucer Review*, 15 (1981) p. 267

(631-5). However, it is this notion of the perfection of the pentangle that is arguably responsible for Gawain's flawed heroism, for it involves upholding all its virtues at once, for failure in one results in failure of all, as its inextricably linked points represent, and the embodiment of this perfection in innately flawed human nature is arguably doomed to failure. As such, although there are many instances of Gawain's upholding of heroic qualities, these virtues are also tempered by faults and the extent of these faults must be weighed against Gawain's virtues in order to consider whether he may be a flawed hero.

Despite fulfilling much of the heroic criteria established by the virtues of the pentangle, one flaw that Gawain may arguably be charged with is covetousness, and one that Gawain himself admits to multiple times, 'Corsed worth cowarddise and couetyse boþe! / In yow is vylany and vyse þat vertue disstryez.' (2374-5). This covetousness, if it may be so called, stems from Gawain's keeping of the girdle and is defined by David Farley Hills as 'a misdirection of love, which ought to be directed to God, not to oneself'.⁵ This implies covetousness can be argued to stem from a love of oneself when placed above God. The existence of this notion in the fourteenth century may arguably validate it as the poet's intent, such as suggested by the Gawain-poet's contemporary, Wycliffe, 'And so covetouse men ben aboute, as foolis, to turne þo ordynaunce of kynde þat God hymself hafs made; ffor God haves putte hymself hyeste of alle þingis, and aftir hym monnis soule, for þus þingis schulden be loved; and erthly þinges lowest, ffor þei schulden be leeste loved.'⁶ From this perspective, Gawain's keeping the girdle out of valuing his life above his faith in, and submission to, God's will may be perceived as covetousness, and therefore he may be considered a flawed hero.

Moreover, this sin of covetousness may be an even greater flaw, for it is a sin that is arguably not confessed, as P. J. C. Field suggests, 'Gawain has committed a mortal sin by not handing over the green belt (and another by making a false confession beforehand)...he is still in a state of mortal sin at the end.'⁷ Before the beheading game Gawain confesses and is absolved, 'Þere he schrof hym schyrlly and schewed his mysdedez' (1880) and the confession of taking the girdle would surely result in Gawain having to relinquish it. Therefore, his keeping it suggests he did not confess it, which would thus invalidate the absolution, as John Burrow argues, 'Gawain was not 'clene' and that the priest's absolution was invalid'.⁸ This notion of covetousness leading to further sins of uncleanness reflects the symbolism of the perfection of the pentangle, in which the failure of one virtue is intertwined with failure of another. This reiterates that it is Gawain's striving for heroic perfection, instead of submission to and understanding of perfection as a higher state that he can achieve, that is his fatal flaw, for although possible in symbolism and creed, its fulfilment in human nature is innately impossible.

Like Gawain, Jonah sets himself a standard of heroic perfection, that of God's patience, but what Gawain strives for with honourable endeavour, Jonah believes he possesses with arrogant pride and he too makes the mistake of not submitting to unattainable perfection, in his case, to God's will. Therefore, Jonah's flaw of impatience is revealed most poignantly in what he views as his most heroic acts,

⁵ David Farley Hills, 'Gawain's Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *The Review of English Studies, New Series*, 14 (1963) p. 127

⁶ Wycliffe, *Select English Works*, ed. T. Arnold (Oxford, 1869-71), iii. 149

⁷ P. J. C. Field, 'A Rereading of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"', *Studies in Philology*, 68 (1971) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173725> p. 259

⁸ John Burrow, *Sir Gawain and Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert J. Blanch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966) p. 125

such as his defiant flight from God's command, 'I wyl me sum oper waye þat He ne wayte after' (86). This is swiftly juxtaposed with the poet's emphatic statement of the futility of such impatience, 'Hit watȝ a wenyng vn-war þat welt in his mynde, / þaȝ he were soȝt fro Samarye, þat God seȝ no fyrre' (115-6). As Ad Putter states, Jonah's supposed heroism is continually depicted in failure, 'we cannot fail to be struck by the fact that the protagonists of... the *Gawain*-poet fail.'⁹ For Jonah, his tale is one of heroically defied tyranny, whereas for the reader it is one of naiveté, self-pity and cowardice. Moreover, the danger Jonah believes to threaten him proves no danger at all, but instead part of God's unceasing care for him. Therefore, the image of Jonah's heroic posturing when he is in actuality perfectly safe appears ridiculous, as depicted in the use of repetition of the contrasting wills of God and Jonah. For example, the repetition of God's command of 'Rys radly' (65) in Jonah's rebellion 'þenne he ryses radly, and raykes bylyue, / Jonah toward port Japh, ay janglande or tene' (89-90) implicitly suggests how Jonah's actions will similarly come to mirror God's command, with or without Jonah's consent.

The poet continually belittles Jonah as a heroic figure, for example, Jonah's actions are described as a 'jape' (57), a noun with negative and frivolous connotations and Jonah himself is described as 'þe wytyles wrechche' (113). Furthermore, the poet actively avoids any close emotional identification, as W. A. Davenport states, the 'reader's sense of Jonah's wrongness is increased by the narrator's distancing ironies and that he is laid open both to condemnation and to scornful, dismissive laughter.'¹⁰ For example, when Jonah is thrown overboard the poet depicts the scene externally, and the repetition of the moment increases this narrative distance. The first is a short and scornful description of the sailors removal of Jonah, 'Tyd by top and bi to þay token hym synne; / In-to þat lodlych loȝe þay luche hym sone' (229-30) and the second takes the form of a more comic description introducing the whale, which only increases the lack of sympathetic identification, 'þe folk ȝet haldande his fete, þe fysch hym tyd hentes; / With-outen towche of any tothe he tult in his þrote' (251-52). Furthermore, throughout the whale scenes, the poet effectively removes the opportunity for pity with moral censure, such as the hellish connotations of the disgusting interior of the whale's stomach, 'þat stank as þe deuel' (274), implying that it is a divine punishment for Jonah's rebellion, and the description of his 'sluchched cloþes' (341) further suggests Jonah's sinful state. These devices demonstrate that although Jonah frequently feels ill-used, the poet ensures that the reader is always disinclined to agree with him.

Furthermore, Jonah's role as a flawed hero becomes clear in the comparison of the character's allegorical and literal levels, for in the former Jonah is a figural image of Christ whilst in the latter he is a portrayal of innate human disobedience from divine will. Putter states, 'Rather than clashing with the meaning of the story of Jonah, the poet's use of typology underwrites its central theme: man's powerlessness, his lack of control, even over his words.'¹¹ More than this, the apparent contradiction of divine perfection and human flaw is resolved in the poet's evoking echoes of Jonah's typological role as Christ in the very moments where he exhibits his most un-Christ like behaviour, such as his hysteric thoughts when ordered to Nineveh, 'Oure syre syttes, he says, on sege so hyȝe, / In his glowande glorye, and gloumbes ful lyttel þaȝ I be nummen in Ninniue and naked dispoyled, / On rode rwly to-rent with rybaudes mony' (93-96). The image of crucifixion places

⁹ Ad Putter "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and French Arthurian Romance (Oxford, 1995) p. 174

¹⁰ W. A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain Poet* (Worcester: Billings and Sons, 1991) p. 132

¹¹ Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (London: Longman, 1996) p. 134

Christ as the standard of heroic perfection against which Jonah is measured, and he is found wanting, for whereas Christ willingly suffered for all, Jonah will suffer for no one. Consequently, the typological Christ-like Jonah is temporarily imposed upon the poem's very humanly flawed Jonah, and thus he becomes a dual representation of both Christ's patient redemption of humanity as well as the impatient sinfulness that makes redemption necessary that is inherent in mankind. This illustrates Jonah's, and thus humanity's, potential for such heroic virtues as God's creations whilst at once highlighting their innate fallibility as such, for as God's creations they are rendered inherently susceptible to sin by their Fall.

On the other hand, in contention with Burrow who suggests the inability of the protagonists to attain any level of heroic status, 'The poems of the Ricardian period project an unheroic image of man,'¹² it could be argued that Gawain's and Jonah's flawed heroism are not condemnable and unforgivable faults at all. Rather, they may be considered a natural human reaction to preserve life - in Gawain's case, the keeping of the protective girdle and in Jonah's, his flight from great danger, and thus these flaws, if such they be, are such that readers, as fellow human beings, surely cannot wholly condemn. Gawain's covetousness therefore, takes the form of self-preservation, which is arguably more heroically virtuous than covetousness of sexual desire or material greed. This motivation is clearly indicated in the bedroom scenes, wherein Gawain refuses to give the Lady a love token, refuses her ring because of its material worth and only accepts the girdle on the promise that it will protect him, 'Bot wered not þis ilk wyȝe for wele þis gordel...Bot for to sauē hymself, when suffer hym byhoued' (2037- 40). In this view, it is therefore arguably acceptable that Gawain, as a man facing death, retains something he believes has protective power. Moreover, the flaw, as Bertilak attests, is mitigated by the natural and honourable reasons behind the deed, 'Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowyng nauþer, / Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame' (2367-8).

Moreover, the issue of Gawain's fear of bodily harm as potentially mitigating circumstances is also contemporary to the Gawain-poet, as Wycliffe's sermon suggests, 'For certis, among alle cowardisis, cowardise of riches is þe moste...And þis is more þan cowardise of bodi, þat comeþ to man for drede of bodi; for a man shulde kindly love more his bodi þan his goodis.'¹³ This indication that covetousness of life is a flaw, but one not nearly so sinful as covetousness of wealth, accords with Bertilak's judgement that Gawain's fault is only slight. Another significant point that Wycliffe raises is the connection between covetousness and cowardice, once again emphasising the interrelatedness of virtuous attributes and how failure of one equates to failure of all. Notably, he too seems to suggest the innate inability to succeed in all virtues, even arguably endorsing covetousness when it concerns self-preservation, 'for a man shulde kindly love more his bodi þan his goodis'. Furthermore, this implicit indication that Gawain's covetousness for life may be a flaw to his heroism, but by no means a fatal and unforgivable one is demonstrated by Gawain's relatively light punishment, from which it can be assumed that he has failed in a relatively small way, 'Trwe mon trwe restore, / Þenne þar mon drede no wape. / At þe þrid þou fayled þore, / And þerfor þat tappe ta þe' (2354-7), suggested by the connotations of lightness of the noun 'tappe', so, as Rosemary Woolf states, 'the flesh-wound is to vow-breaking as beheading is to adultery.'¹⁴ This view therefore arguably also negates the notion that Gawain's covetousness is a

¹² J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1971) p. 93

¹³ Wycliffe, *Select English Works*, ed. T. Arnold, (Oxford, 1869-71), i.372

¹⁴ Rosemary Woolf, 'Review of Burrow', *Crit Q*, VIII (1966), p. 383

mortal sin for being unconfessed. As Norman Davis suggests, the slight punishment Gawain receives implies that the poet 'did not regard the retention of the girdle as one of Gawain's 'mysdedez, þe more and þe mynne,' which required to be confessed.'¹⁵ Therefore, this argument does not necessarily excuse Gawain of hiding the girdle but rather judges it a minor offence that readers may recognise in themselves and thus forgive.

Similarly, Jonah's flaws can also be argued to be acceptable in their humanity, for although as Robert J. Blanch states, *Patience* 'encourages us to feel superior to Jonah',¹⁶ there is also the sense that he is not wholly deserving of this scorn, for numerous though they may be, Jonah's flaws are very human. For example, when Jonah's escape threatens the crew also aboard the ship, he eventually shows his willingness to suffer for others, 'Forþy berez me to þe borde and bapes me þeroute / Er gete ȝe no happe, I hope forsoþe' (211-2). Similarly, once inside the whale, Jonah repents, 'Now, prynce, of þy prophete pite þou haue / þaȝ I be fol and fykel and falce of my hert' (282-3). As Blanch suggests, the reader is 'moved by sympathy for the prophet's human faults and failures',¹⁷ yet it is nevertheless notable that Jonah enacts this virtuous behaviour only when in trouble and in need of help. This implies that such virtues may be a means to an end rather than being virtues in themselves, and as such should not wholly negate Jonah's flaws, but this point only reiterates the humanity of Jonah's behaviour, for it is unreasonable to suppose that many would not act the same in his place.

In this manner, the reader is encouraged to identify with Jonah through the recognition that they suffer the same flaw he does, and so are encouraged to forgive him, as they are with Gawain. If the reader takes, as the poet seems to encourage, a harsh view of Jonah, the result is not the Christian insight expected from such a poem but the same sin of impatience that Jonah is guilty of. For just as Jonah is hypocritical in his desire for strict judgement for others and mercy for himself, so is the reader for judgement of Jonah's sin of which they are also guilty. For example, Jonah's sarcastic rebuke at God for sparing the Ninevites, 'Wel knew I þi cortaysye, þy quoynt soffraunce, / þy bounte of debonerte and þy bene grace' (417-18) raises the irony that if Jonah's desire for judgement had been carried out, he himself would be the one to suffer. This hypocrisy is portrayed in Jonah's condemnation of the Ninevites which, as he fails to recognise, bears striking similarities to his own punishment, of being plunged 'depe to þe abyeme' and 'swolzed swyftly' by the earth (362-3). Therefore, despite the poet's emphasis of a scornful reading of Jonah's flaws, the self-righteous reader is made to be similarly inconsistent, applying a standard of justice to Jonah that would condemn themselves. God's final line demonstrates this universality of Jonah's flaw, 'Be noȝt so gryndel, god-man, bot go forth þy wayes / Be preue and be pacient in payne and in joye' (524-5), addressing not Jonah in singularity but all mankind. As such the reader is encouraged to be 'gryndel' towards Jonah to demonstrate how innate such a flaw is to human nature and thus are encouraged to forgive it.

The contention of the extent of Gawain's and Jonah's position as flawed heroes as discussed above arguably rests in a relationship that A. C. Spearing recognises in both *Patience* and *Gawain*, that of 'a confrontation between a human

¹⁵ Norman Davis, 'Introduction,' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. R. A. Waldron (London: Edward Arnold, 1970) p. 123

¹⁶ *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet* ed. Robert J. Blanch and Miriam Youngerman Miller (New York: Whitston, 1991) p. 154

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 149

being and some more than human power.¹⁸ It is in these confrontations that the poet arguably articulates the sense of thwarted heroism by exposing the protagonist's innate human weakness. Jonah struggles to acknowledge his flaws to himself and to God, and attempts to minimise and distance himself from his flaws, such as in the woodbine scene, where Jonah claims to have understood God's virtues from the beginning, 'Wel knew I þi cortaysye, þy quoynt soffraunce' (417). However the sarcasm of these words are revealed in the following lines, wherein Jonah claims God's task and its effect as wholly his, 'I wyst wel, when I hade wordeq uat-so-euerl cowpe / To manace alle pise mody men pat in pis mote dowelle3, / Wyp a prayer and a pyne pay my3t her pese gete' (421-3). This self-aggrandisement minimises God's role in the Ninevites' conversion and therefore demonstrates Jonah's total misunderstanding of the nature of patience as a casual gratuity. Therefore, Jonah remains ignorant of the extent of his flaws, which arguably depicts him as a more flawed hero than Gawain, who comes to accept that his failings do not negate his heroism but rather emphasise his humanity. However, this reading does not render Jonah's story meaningless but rather extends *Patience's* meaning beyond that of a simple negative exemplum that gains its homiletic effect from the portrayal of Jonah's foolish mistakes. The poem's real value lies in its understanding of how God and the Christian code of conduct works in the world, that the presence of free will renders every human being innately unable to follow God's example unwaveringly, but what matters is the ability to react to finding oneself turned to God's will with patience and understanding of divine mercy and justice.

Like Jonah, Gawain's confrontation with Bertilak and his explanations for his flaws to him depict Gawain's progression of his perception of himself as a perfect hero, symbolised by his wearing of the pentangle, to a flawed hero, symbolised in his adoption of the girdle, through his gradual acceptance of the innate susceptibility to sin of human nature. Gawain's initial explanation of his flawed heroism is to blame it on external vices, 'Corsed worth cowarddise and couetyse boþe! / In yow is vylany and vyse þat vertue disstryez.' (2374-5). As Burrow states, this account is reminiscent of a morality play¹⁹ and this can be taken further in Gawain's externalisation of vice as almost a separate character in itself, which is a typical feature of the morality play, 'For care of þy knobbe, cowardise me tazt' (2379). Therefore, although Gawain does give a harsh moral criticism of his flaws, he does so without recognising that the initial impetus for them resides within himself. It is in this manner that Gawain's criticism differs from morality plays, in which the nature of the protagonists consists of the concept of Everyman, innately prone to sin. In its place, Gawain substitutes the perfection of heroic knighthood, a creed wholly free of sin, and therefore a sign of Gawain's attempt to maintain his image of heroic perfection.

However, in contrast to Jonah, Gawain does gradually acknowledge his human nature, 'Þe faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed, / How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylþe' (2435-6) and this implicitly implies Gawain's acceptance of the real reason behind his flaw, that of fear of death. This therefore represents a considerable change in Gawain's understanding for although he still thinks of himself principally as a perfect hero, his acceptance of himself also as a Christian Everyman introduces the recognition of a liability to err within his nature. Nevertheless, Gawain does not wholly accept personal responsibility for his flaws, and implies that, prone as the flesh is to weakness, evil still exists externally, waiting to catch and attach

¹⁸ A. C. Spearing, 'Patience and the Gawain Poet', *Anglia*, 1xxxiv (1966) p. 306

¹⁹ J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"* (London: Kegan Paul, 1965) p. 109

itself, 'þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laȝt haue / Of couardise and couetyse þat I haf caȝt þare / þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne' (2507-9). Moreover, Hollis observes that "'Teches of fylþe" is a popular homiletic description of sin, deriving from its figurative identification with leprosy',²⁰ and the figure is continued in the connotations of 'caȝt' and thus this identification of sin as disease, like the identification of sin with tempting devils, ensures that Gawain's flaws remain, to some extent, externalised.

In conclusion, Gawain's acceptance of his flaws, and Jonah's negative example of not admitting them, demonstrates the acceptable and inevitable presence of fault in human nature whilst not precluding the attainment of heroism. This is best depicted in Gawain's wearing of the girdle as a symbol of his failings over the pentangle, which does not diminish that symbol of perfection but rather illustrates that heroism must also include the acknowledgment of humanity's innate susceptibility to sin. As such, both Gawain and Jonah are flawed heroes, and although the extent of their flaws varies greatly, their shared primary fault results from their desire to be perfect heroes. Jonah and Gawain's flaws are emphasised in their comparison with Christ and the pentangle, whose perfection is shown to be intrinsically impossible for humans to emulate. Although this is met with varying degrees of sympathy, these flaws are not explained away by the poet but are acknowledged to be universal to the human condition, and as such Jonah and Gawain may be seen less as flawed heroes, and more as human heroes, who are subject to their nature but still strive for excellence.

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²⁰ Hollis, 'The Pentangle Knight: "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"' p. 280

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