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Doe 1

Mary in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Courtly Mistress or Spiritual Defender?

Place the title of your paper in headline style capitalization as a header before the text of your paper.

In reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK), many scholars explain Mary's presence in the text as an attempt at redeeming Norman courtly practices. However, considering the Northwest-Midlands origins of the text and its adherence to a time-honored tradition of Marian doctrine, this theory is insufficient to account for the way in which she is depicted. By tracing Mary's role as patron saint and heavenly queen, the *Gawain-Poet* elevates her role from the role of courtly mistress to that of a spiritual defender.

Double space every line within the body of your paper.

The virgin Mary was a familiar figure to medieval audiences. In his book *The Church: A History*, Joseph Lynch states that popular teachings of the period identified Mary as the exemplar apostle: unique for her role in the incarnation and status as Queen of Heaven (271). These doctrines were already well-established by the 1400s, as may be seen in *Pearl*, a prominent sermon of the period written in the form of a dream-poem. This work not only depicts the aspects of Mary's identity mentioned above, but also emphasizes her devotion for purity. Stern draws attention to this in his essay on *Pearl*, stating that it is not only physical chastity alone that makes her worthy of reverence, but an "abstract spotless faithful maidenhood" (79). While Mary's physical purity is an important symbol, it is her devotion to further convey the deeper purity embodied in her immaculate life. This arc of devotion, combined with her status as the Mother of God, made Mary one of the most important figures of the period (Lynch

To format in-text citations, place the author's last name and the page number in parentheses at the end of the sentence, before the final punctuation (54).

271). Incorporating Mary's status via time, iconography, and invocation, the *Gawain-Poet*

establishes her role not as a Christianized courtly mistress, but as a spiritual defender and heavenly patron.

Mary first enters through time. In the medieval period, it was commonplace to celebrate of Christmastide, with a biblically or spiritually significant event ascribed to this book on Christian historical church customs, Francis Weiser speaks about these customs, some of which were dedicated to the celebration of particular saints for their "in with the Lord" (122). The eighth day of Christmastide, January 1, would have been recognized during the medieval era as the "Feast of Saint Mary," celebrating her dual virginity and maternity (137). This day also features prominently in *SGGK* as a frame for the story and the day on which two of the most important events take place.

The main action of *SGGK* is indicated as beginning on a Christmastide day, "Wyle Nw Yer was so yep that hit was new cummen" (1.24). This date is further clarified when Gawain to exchange blows, given that the (1.60). Later in the text, when the year is Knight, Lord Bertilak offers to have a ser fulfill the conditions of the challenge (2.1076). Having the two central moments of the tale – the challenge and the Green Chapel encounter – framed by Mary's own day establishes the events that will take place as under her domain, and as such she holds more influence over the outcome than was typical even for a patron saint.

The significance of Mary as an icon inside Gawain's shield should not be underestimated. First, it indicates of her status as the knight's patron saint, as bearing the icons of such was

common during the period. If Gawain's courage should waver during battle, the icon also serves as an inspiration to courage, shown in the following lines: "At this cause the knight comlyche hade / In the inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted, / That quen he blushed therto his nelde never payred" (*SGGK* 2.648-650). The knight also finds courage in Mary's "five joys / That the hende queen had of hire chylde," and he bears a pentangle illustrating five positive qualities on the outside of his shield (2.646). While there is not a strict parallel between the two characters, both possess sets of five ascribed to their characters and are exemplars of purity in some form, which reinforces the appropriateness of the *Gawain*-Poet's choice in patron saint for his main character.

The shield also serves to establish Mary's role as a spiritual protector. Richard Greene's essay, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Protection," describes the artwork as an

If you use the name of the source in the text, you do not need to repeat the author's last name in the parenthetical citation (54).

...an instance of extraordinary significance in the late Middle Ages" (126). Medieval armor as having both physical and spiritual purposes (126). This was chiefly scholarship of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, in which he uses the allegory or be various Christian spiritual qualities (126). However, this allegory was taken as literal meaning, giving armor an added level of im... as well as... ar as being a... trials, etc.] of... ary with an... makes the... difficulties or... k's girdle a... of faith in

The book of *Ephesians* establishes the symbol of faith, "with which you can extinguish all the flaming the evil one" (*English Standard Version*, Eph. 6.16). By associating an object perceived as having literal qualities of faith surrounding the shield into an indicator of Gawain's level of faith in Mary's protection from the temptations he may encounter. This makes the knight's acceptance of a more serious error, as it not only illustrates a slip in morality, but

When citing the Bible, include the version in italics as well as the book, chapter, and verse. Separate the chapter and verse with a period and only abbreviate the book if it appears in the parenthetical citation (122-123).

the one who is supposed to act as his rightful defender. Rather than looking to Mary and the shield for protection, Gawain's r... lled with thoughts of his deception via Lady Bertilak's gift, and the loss of faith with the words "in god faith... / Bot here yow lakked a yow wonted" (*SGGK* 4.2065-2066). Gawain's actions protection will not only stain his morality, but also fracture his relationship with Mary, a complex dynamic further revealed in the text's use of saintly invocations.

When citing a range of lines, pages, or paragraphs, place a dashed line in-between the lines. If citing multiple pages, lines, or paragraphs that are not connected in a range, use a comma [ex. 4, 17] (56).

According to typical traditions surrounding patron saints, level of interaction between patron and recipient via invocation. This occurs primarily through the avenues of prayer, exclamation, and narration. Mary's image of shield also acts as a mobile form of interaction that aids in unifying the three physical other primary invocations: the wilderness, the bedroom, and en route to the Green...

Only place one character space between sentences (see <https://style.mla.org/number-of-spaces-after-period/>).

Gawain's search for the Green knight is hardly a summer... aning shortly after All Saint's Day, which takes place on the first of November (*SGGK* 2.536). After

wander... wilderness for several weeks, he is still unable to find the Green Chapel and on... offers a prayer: "To Mary made his mone, / That ho hym red to ryde, / And w... wone" (2.737-739). Despite the lack of immediate answer, the petition for guidance and granted, as seen the next morning when Gawain prays again to "Mary... oder so dere," asking for somewhere to hear the "masse / Ande thy matyn... n return the "pater and ave / and crede" (2.754-58). It should be noted that the... as the "Hail Mary," is a common prayer used when making a petition for the saint's intercession before God or aid in trying circumstances. The request to hear mass is also significant, since, as someone under the patronage of Mary, the Christmas day midnight

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mass of St. Mary Major would have held extra significance (Douglass 22). No sooner has Gawain finished his prayer than a castle appears “pyched on a prayere” (*SGGK* 2.768). By this use of wordplay, the *Gawain*-Poet clearly establishes the connection between the knight’s request and his patron’s answer, which comes on a day known for Mary’s ultimate act of grace: the birth of Christ. However, this is not the last time that Mary’s assistance will be requested in an hour of need.

Scholars predominantly view the bedroom scenes in *SGGK* either in contrast with the hunt or as a conflict of courtly and moral codes. However, Ronald Tamplin takes a different view in his article, “The Saints in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” arguing that this point of the story should also be noted for its inclusion of Mary, as these scenes are where her presence is strongest in the narrative. He is faced with the dilemma of either giving in to Lady Bertilak and breaking a rite or night refusing her and breaking a chivalric code, Mary is invoked as a form of protection against temptation (*SGGK* 3.1126-1304). This action is doubly appropriate, first for her role as a spiritual figure considered exemplary for purity and chastity (Tamplin 410). This usage of a Marian invocation as a protection against some form of unchasteness was not uncommon, finding employment in other medieval tales of the period (410). However, Mary’s protection only extends so far as Gawain’s faith remains strong, and as his devotion begins to falter, he becomes vulnerable.

In the first bedroom scene, Gawain awakes to the presence of Lady Bertilak, who attempts to draw him into a sexual encounter (*SGGK* 3.1126-1304). However, the knight dodges her requests one by one, finally offering an only half-jocular “Mary yow yelde,” or “Mary you repay” while deflecting her with thanks for the attentions she is offering (3.1263). According to Tamplin, this remark acts as an admonition, pointing out that there is a “higher and contrasting

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standard of conduct” for the lady’s behavior (410). However, Lady Bertilak is determined to have her way, and refutes the words with an ironic “Bi Mary” of her own, used as a casual form of dismissal (*SGGK* 3.1278, Tamplin 410). This interchange establishes tension between the patron saint and Lady Bertilak, with one attempting to protect Gawain from the vice the other would draw him into (Douglass 24).

However, the knight’s fall has already begun. After leaving the bedroom, he casually declares to Lady Bertilak “yowre knight I becom,” without considering the implications of the phrase (*SGGK* 3.1279). For although there was an element of generosity in saint-patronage, as saints were under no obligation to assist petitioners, there was also an element of bargaining. While saints fulfilled requests and assisted those in need, they also required in return an expression of loyalty (Lynch 269-70). By thoughtlessly removing his fealty from Mary in what Stephen Russel calls a “dark conversion,” Gawain effectively removes himself from under her protection. Although technically a sin of unchasteness, the knight has still committed an impure act, a downward turn for his character (221). Even observation of the mass is unable to prevent it from becoming merely form (Douglass 24). This catastrophe continues as he confesses his wrongdoing at the Green Chapel – signified by the fact that he does not gain.

When quoting lines of poetry, use a forward slash to demonstrate where each new line begins (*MLA Handbook*, Sec. 1.3.3).

In the third bedroom scene, the fracturing of Gawain’s loyalty to Mary continues. As he does not invoke her, the task is left to the narrator, who states “Gret perile bitwene hem [Gawain and Lady Bertilak] stod, / Nif Mare of hir knight con mynne” (*SGGK* 3.1768-9). The knight is unaware of his peril, however, and when the lady offers him her green girdle for protection, he accepts, completely dismissing the fact that he already possessed protection through Mary’s image on his shield and active intervention (3.1827-61). By relying on trickery and magic rather

than the Queen of Heaven, the severing of his bond with the saint is completed, and Gawain now must experience the consequences.

Later the same day, Lord Bertilak returns from the forest to Gawain in the gift-exchange game with Gawain (*SGGK* 3.1934-5). The knight, bound by the code of chivalry and its code-of-conduct rules, withholds the girdle from his host in an act of deception. Gawain had previously received three kisses from Bertilak as part of the deal, using the exclamation “Mary” (3.1937). Although the invocation of the Virgin Mary’s name and oath was typical of medieval behavior, in this context it also acts as a reminder of where his loyalties should be (Tamplin 410). However, the knight neglects this merciful opportunity to make the situation right and restore his relationship with both host and patron saint, choosing to continue in deception.

Another opportunity for repentance occurs the next day when Gawain rides to the Green Chapel. This time the opportunity to turn is even more overt, as it is on Mary’s own day - a day that celebrates her act of grace in helping to bring about mankind’s redemption - that it is offered. However, Gawain’s mind is not on his patron saint and her past actions of protection: his thoughts surround the girdle and its potential to save his life (*SGGK* 4.2030-1). Even as he is being taken to the Green Chapel and his guide makes the exclamation “Mary!” his attention fails to return to its proper place (4.2140). There will be no Marian prayers or invocations of protection from Gawain, demonstrating a double-state of faithlessness as his trust in God and Mary falters and he renounces the aid of a patron saint for that of earthly magics. He does not realize the betrayal until it is too late, the contest is over, and the Green Knight himself comments on his lack of heavenly loyalty (4.2363). Experiencing penance, Gawain keeps the girdle as a reminder of his betrayal towards heaven, and before the Arthurian court proclaims his

These sentences only use section numbers because they are citing a paraphrased sentence from the previously used source (see <https://style.mla.org/paraphrase-of-many-sentences/>).

scar to be a sign of “unleute,” or “disloyalty” (4.2499). But despite the court’s attempts to dismiss the seriousness of his experience by adopting green girdles as their symbol, his encounter with sin is not something the knight will ever be able to forget (4.2513-9).

A powerful presence in *SGGK*, the question still remains of how exactly Mary is meant to function within the tale. The theory of her role as a Christianized substitute for a courtly lady holds merit as a potential source of contrast between her and other female characters. However, it does not

request transformed England under the management of a new French (7). Along with ideals of chivalry and a desire to transform the Arthurian practice of courtly love, a concept foreign to the Anglo-Saxon people (Keen), the expression of chivalry, with all its customs was viewed almost religiously at times; “Adoration and inspiration” were the central focus, with the knight inspired to great feats by the adoration of his pure lady (14, 166). Whether that love took a sexual form, was merely platonic, or even went unreciprocated was left up to interpretation (Moore 624). However, no matter the author, the lady was always pure and elevated while the knight honored her through “prowess, valor, and devotion” (622).

In light of the relationship between Mary and Gawain, as well as the inspiration he takes from her via his shield and religious devotion, it is easy to see how the saint became cast in the role of courtly mistress. In her article on “Feminine Knots and the Other” in *SGGK*, Geraldine Heng points out that most scholars “argue or assume” that the saint serves this function based on the aforementioned reasoning, referring to Gawain as Mary’s “knight” or “man,” and citing his loyalty to her in chivalric terms (510). Heng even goes so far as to state the relationship is “eroticized (but necessarily sublimated)” in order to achieve a “strategic discursive shape and

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significance in this text” (510). However, the idea of Mary’s role being limited to a distant inspiration and recipient of honor through another’s valorous acts does not encompass all the parts she plays in *SGGK*. And when considering the Northwest-Midlands origins of the tale, and its sharp critique of courtly culture in general, one must question why the *Gawain*-Poet would choose to embrace this facet of what would have been perceived as a Norman shortcoming and attempt to redeem it.

In early medieval doctrine, Mary possessed a unique role in her status of exemplary apostle and Queen of Heaven. In fact, Marian theology of the period established her as the paradigm for co-defender of the church with Christ, referring to her as “exercising a protective leadership” (Hollis 137). These qualities of active leadership and protection embodied in the *Gawain*-Poet’s Mary exist in direct contrast to the role of a courtly mistress, which was either passive or indirect. However, the most powerful difference from the courtly dynamic comes in the form of Gawain’s systematic failure to honor Mary in any of the ways a Norman society demanded chivalrous knight pay tribute to his lady: he fails to defeat the Green Knight in any of their encounters, shows cowardice at the thought of death, and completely breaks the loyalty he owes the saint. Rather than the knight being placed in the position of heroic defender, Mary acts as a constant intercessor on Gawain’s behalf, both in Heaven and Earth, while providing in his time of need and offering (despite rejection) her protection. This casts her as Gawain’s spiritual defender: combatting evil, protecting those under her care, and expressing loyalty in ways that would have been considered heroic for a ruler in the alliterative tradition.

As both patron saint and heavenly queen, Mary possesses a heroic duality in *SGGK* that elevates her from the role of a mere courtly mistress and shapes her into a valiant spiritual defender. While not a main figure in the story, her presence acts as a deep influence on the

outcome of the tale and thus must be taken into account by scholars in order to possess a full understanding of the text. Depicted with reverence, and almost an air of nostalgia, Mary represents yet another attempt by the *Gawain*-Poet to recapture an older tradition that had begun to fade in the face of Norman culture.

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