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Gawain's Five Wits:
Technological Difficulties in the Endless Knot

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Traditionally, the "five wits" of the endless knot on Gawain's shield in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" have been read as the five senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The present paper, following recent work by Peter Whiteford, Simon Kemp, and Garth Fletcher, contends that the five wits may be interpreted as the five internal wits, which include imagination and memory and determine perception. This identification of the five wits as the five internal wits calls into question Gawain's self-identity, predicated as it is upon the five wits' faultlessness. In this context, Gawain's self-understanding is really a self-misunderstanding, and it arguably causes the lapse in his vigilant self-monitoring.

At the end of the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the eponymous Gawain expostulates that he has been found "faulty and false" (2383). Many critics read the fault as a deviation from the perfection signified in Gawain's shield, but few agree as to whether Gawain's self-assessment is tenable.¹ The intricacy of the shield's heraldic device multiplies the possible locations of the "fault": the five-pointed "endless knot" symbolizes Gawain's five [faultless] wits, five fingers which had never failed, faith in the five wounds of Christ, steadfast contemplation of the five joys of Mary, and his fidelity to the five virtues of chivalry (600-602). Pe-

¹ See, for example, the following: Robert W. Ackerman, "Gawain's Shield: Penitential Doctrine in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Anglia*, 76 (1958), 254-65; Richard H. Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," *English Literary History*, 29 (1962), 121-39; David F. Hills, "Gawain's Fault in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Review of English Studies* ns, 14 (1963), 124-31; and Gerald Morgan, "The Significance of the Pentangle Symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Modern Language Review*, 74 (1979), 769-90.

ter Whiteford's recent scholarship suggests that the five wits, when interpreted as the five inner wits rather than the five senses, could be the ground of the fault.² Medieval writers describe these five inner wits as combinations of will, reason, memory, *sensus communis*, imagination, cogitation, and instinct; the sum of the parts is generally called "cognition."³

The five wits, located completely or at least substantially in the post-lapsarian body, inadvertently may generate mistaken impressions that cause rash actions that, in turn, flout accepted codes of conduct—such as the code of chivalry. Correct use of the five wits requires cognizance of their bodily nature and influence of will and reason, both compromised by the fall.⁴ In this context, one may say that, though Gawain denounces his acceptance and retention of the green lace as "sins" against chivalric virtue, the infraction ultimately results from mistaken impressions of the gift's import.⁵ Gawain's self-identity recorded in the heraldic device as he understands it predisposes his fall: banking on the five wits' perfection denies their vulnerability and leads the subject to risk badly mistaken action, and misunderstanding their limited culpability arguably prompts Gawain's more serious, controllable lapses in chivalric courtesy.

2 Peter Whiteford, "Rereading Gawain's Five Wits," *Medium Aevum*, 73 (2004), 225-34. Whiteford's article does not, however, anatomize the failures of the five wits as is done herein.

3 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "wit" can mean anything from mental faculties to physical senses, and critical readings of Gawain's five wits have spanned this semantic range. The following contain extensive accounts of the five inner wits: Christopher D. Green, "Where Did the Localization of Mental Faculties Come From?" *Journal of History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 39 (2003), 131-42; Simon Kemp and Garth J. O. Fletcher, "The Medieval Theory of the Inner Senses," *American Journal of Psychology*, 106 (1993), 559-76; and Whiteford, "Gawain's Five Wits."

4 The following detail this interrelation: Christopher D. Green, "Localization"; and Kemp and Fletcher, "Inner Senses."

5 Whiteford, 231-32, locates the failure in the five wits, but his specific reasoning and attribution of the fault differ from those one presented herein.

The self-identity registered in Gawain's shield depicts an unsustainable combination of technologies of self. While the term "technologies of self" originates with Michel Foucault and thus seems a recent invention, Foucault generated the term while studying, among other things, medieval confessional practice and the influence of institutions on individuals. He describes technologies of self thus:

[They] permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conducts, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.⁶

Clearly, this concept also may apply to an individual choosing one's conduct in the Middle Ages.

The five pentads of the endless knot represent five such technologies of self: they present Gawain's understanding and application of his own cognitive process, efficacy of action, and education (both religious and secular). The five wits, both internal and external (the five senses), are usually considered aspects of the body that allow people to extract information from the sensible world.⁷ His faultless five wits entail that "efte"⁸ he "fayled never þe freke in his fyue fynGRES" (641); he never failed in his five fingers, interpreted by Andrew and Waldron as deeds (641n). His faith in five wounds "as þe Crede tellez" (643-644) reveals that he knows the Apostle's

6 Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds., Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

7 C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2006), 19 and Whiteford, 231.

8 "Likewise," according to Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, Notes and glossary, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, revised edition (Exeter, Devon: University of Exeter Press, 1987), 315.

12 *Quidditas*

Creed, one of the Church's requirements for laypeople.⁹ He contemplates the five joys of Mary (646-647), an artifact of religious instruction. He also upholds another learned code of behavior: the chivalric virtues, consisting of generosity, "brotherly love," purity, courtesy, and piety.¹⁰

The paradigm of the internal wits allows us to treat the "five fives" a truly endless knot. Cognition includes memory, which stores specific information imparted by church and court life. His faith contains a component of memory: he remembers what he has been taught of soteriology, the Creed, and Marian devotions. He "vsed" (or practices) five chivalric virtues presumably inculcated by training. Gawain, we are told, does not fail in his deeds, an evaluation that incorporates knowledge of chivalric "rules." These deeds, measured by standards he has learned, are implicitly successful because ("efte") his cognition has thus far not failed.

Cognition, however, relies on a problematic conduit of information: the post-lapsarian body—and sometimes the corrupted human will and reason as well. According to Christopher Green, no "completely 'standard' version" of the theory of the five inner wits can be found, but the tradition of their existence is well established by the fourteenth century. Some theorists located the five inner wits in the lobes of the brain, while medieval theorists from the ninth century onward tended to locate these faculties in chambers of the brain.¹¹ Aquinas wrote of four inner wits; Bartolomeus Anglicus posited three.¹² In all these, specific knowledge proceeds from the body. This body bears the burden of illness and death, the rewards of humanity's first act of disobedience.¹³ The physical brain suffers

9 W. Nelson Francis, Introduction to *The Book of the Vices and Virtues* (ETS, 217, 1942) (London: Oxford UP, 1998) details these requirements/

10 Andrew and Waldron, 301-62, provide these definitions.

11 C. Green, 131, 137.

12 Kemp and Fletcher, 562. Woolgar, 19, disputes this and says that Aquinas wrote of five..

13 Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England*

illness and imbalances in the humors, the four substances resulting from the digestion of food and contributing to the makeup of the human body, just as any other organ.¹⁴ The unhealthy brain may unintentionally generate mistaken impressions that, if left unexamined by reason, lead to inappropriate action.

Will and reason, both damaged by the fall, complicate the picture. Some considered the faculties such as imagination and instinct as dangerously unreliable because post-lapsarian will and reason might manipulate what the inner senses relay. In the later Middle Ages the inner senses themselves could be seen as fallible; Jean Gerson, for example, argued that instinct could be swayed by the senses, a clear case of the one faculty of the body exerting inappropriate force over another.¹⁵ True understanding, with the goal of choosing what helped one attain one's supernatural end, required constant and interdependent checks and balances.

Avicenna's much-used medical account of cognition divides the mind into universal knowledge, the province of the immaterial "rational soul" that consists of reason and will, and particular knowledge, courses through five chambers of the human brain. Information flows through the sensory nerves and then through common sense (or sensuality), imagination, cogitation, instinct, and memory. Imagination represents what the senses relay, enabling cogitation to shape new images from the old; one may, for example imagine a hat on an acquaintance who has never worn such an article. Estimation, or "aestimativa," is often translated as instinct and governs reactions to the data.¹⁶ Traditionally, estimation is described as what makes a sheep flee a wolf.¹⁷ Finally, memory stores images for further refer-

¹⁴ Faye Getz, *Medicine in the English Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998), 49, 55-7, 87-9; Rawcliffe, 7, 8, 10, 17, 33.

¹⁵ Robert A. Greene, "Instinct of Nature: Natural Law, Synderesis, and the Moral Sense," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 58 (1997), 186-9.

¹⁶ Kemp and Fletcher, 563-4.

¹⁷ C. Green, 131; R. Greene, 183.

ence.¹⁸ Will and reason may recalibrate the mind's impressions or deduce truth from them; both faculties, however, were considered severely compromised by the Fall.¹⁹

This paradigm was not limited to medicine. Aquinas differentiates between instinctive choice and willed or reasoned choice, much as Avicenna separates the five internal senses from the workings of the rational soul. Bonaventure assigns *instinctus naturae*, instinct or *aestemativa*, to "a habit of the natural as opposed to the deliberative will, rather than of the intellect." Instinct, one of the five internal wits, differs starkly from reason and will.²⁰ Bonaventure ultimately locates specific knowledge, the kind gleaned through experience, in the body and "follows Augustine in requiring access by the mind to unchanging standards against which data of sense experience can be measured."²¹ Generally, the five inner senses are described as "intuitive" and "non-discursive," in opposition to the discursive reason and the will.

Popular English vernacular versions of the five internal wits might differ from Avicenna's in the particulars but not the basic assumption. Some accounts list reason and will in the internal wits; the five wits thus include discursive reason as well as intuitive, non-discursive instinctive choosing. Unlike the five wits that are wholly functions of the brain, these five wits suffer from both the soul's and the body's post-lapsarian fallibility: reason and will, we will remember, are universal knowledge compromised by the fall. Despite the differences between themselves and Avicenna, all these treatises are alike in their depiction of the role of the wits: to help the subject choose a course of action, particularly one that directs the practic-

¹⁸ Kemp and Fletcher, 564.

¹⁹ R. Greene, 186-9.

²⁰ R. Greene, 183-6.

²¹ Michael Haren, *Medieval Thought: The Western Intellectual Tradition from Antiquity to the Thirteenth Century*, 2nd ed., *New Studies in Medieval History* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1992), 167.

ing Christian toward his or her supernatural end. A few selected examples follow.

The *Cloud of Unknowing*²² conflates the five chambers of the brain with the faculties of the soul. In this model of cognition, both the fallen body and the fallen soul render wise choosing difficult. The five wits, here, are a combination of intellectual and physical. Primary “myghts” (reason and will) do not need information from the “secondary myghts” (“ymaginacion” and “sensualite”), which “worchen in the body with bodily instruments” (2190-92), but those secondary powers may adversely or positively affect the reason and will (2180-95).

Reason, as elsewhere, is the faculty of discernment: “Reson is a myght thorou the whiche we departe the iuel fro the good, the iuel fro the worse.” (2197-98). Will, too, appears in its traditional role: “Wille is a myght thorou the whiche we chese good, aftir that it be determinid with reson” (2203-4). “Ymaginacion” constructs “images of absent and present things” (2212-13); it seems to incorporate both imagination and cogitation from Avicenna’s model. Original sin corrupts this capacity, which consequently “prints” erroneous images in the mind as easily as true ones (2222-30). Supported by right reason and righted will, imagination serves its proper end: a person might recall his or her religious instruction and meditate upon the Passion, for example (2225-6). However, post-lapsarian reason’s weakness and post-lapsarian will’s vacillation compound the difficulty of using imagination appropriately (2197-2210).

Sensuality (labeled “common sense” by Whiteford and Greene) passes sense impressions to the rest of the mind: “Sensualite is a might of oure soule, rechyng and regnyng in the bodely wittes” (2232). Because of the corrupt physical body in which it exists, it too fails to serve its preordained ends, which might include “needful lyking,” or necessary preferences, such as those involving

22 *Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Patrick J. Gallacher, TEAMS Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University Medieval, 1997). Whiteford also quotes this treatise but to different ends.

one's basic safety (2232-52). "Mynde," the fifth power, comprehends the other four capacities (2254ff.).

The Lay Folk's Catechism,²³ a manual of moral guidance based on Archbishop Thoresby's 1357 edicts for lay religious knowledge, corresponds roughly with Cloud on these points. The Catechism depicts the five inner wits as consisting of will, reason, "mind," imagination, and thought:

These ben also þy fyue Inwyttys/ Wyl/ resoun/ Mynd/ Imaginacioun and thogh lok þat þy wyl be good and holy and loke þat þy Resoun rewle þe and nat þy fleschly lust And loke þat þy Mynde be good and honest and lok þyn imaginacioun be spedynge in louyng of god and not be set to harm or schame And loke þy thow3t be groundyd in þy ioy of heuyn and drede þe peyne of helle/ and þynk not ouer mekyl in þe vanite of þe world. But þynk deuowtly on þe passion of crist in wo and in wele and he schal helpe þe in al þy nede (349-60)

As in Cloud, reason is to guide the will, which chooses actions. Imagination and thought appear to govern contemplation. While imagination is not defined, the prevalence of the definition shared by Cloud and medical writers suggests that imagination is a similar faculty here; after all, meditating upon images, whether in the mind's eye or in a painting, was an important devotional practice. Thought seems to contain specific knowledge that the soul revisits; it thus parallels memory.

These treatises represent a general trend of identifying five internal wits as cognition. Whiteford argues that the *Castel Off Loue*, a translation of a twelfth-century Anglo Norman treatise by Robert Grosseteste,²⁴ refers to the five inner wits as the constituents

²³ *Lay Folks Catechism, Or, The English and Latin Versions of Archbishop Thoresby's Instruction for the People*, eds., Thomas Frederick Simmons and Henry Edward Nolloth (1901. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2007). Whiteford (228) finds a nearly identical list in works of Wycliffe.

²⁴ *Castel Off Loue: Chasteau D'Amour or Carmen De Creatione Mundi: An Early English Translation of an Old French Poem by Robert Grosseteste*, ed. Richard Francis Weymouth (1864. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2007).

of right reason, the faculty which would allow Adam to “distinguish between good and evil.”²⁵ Weymouth’s commentary upon Chasteau D’amour alludes to “A Tract attributed to Wicliffe” that hints at an extensive tradition of the five inner wits: “ ‘Clerkys knowen that a man hath fyue wittes outward, and other fyue wittes inward.’ ”²⁶ Whiteford also finds that 35 of the 46 “manuals” anatomizing the five wits in Robert Raymo’s catalogue treat both inner and outer wits.²⁷ The fourteenth century *Book of Vices and Virtues*, one of the English translations of an earlier French treatise, specifies that five wits of body that serve as conduits (“condites”) of physical “delit” (89/33-90/2). Here, the five wits of body are distinguished from the other five wits that are not the senses, leading to the conclusion that this text reveals the extent to which the five inner wits needed no further explanation, though their functions are mentioned in the section detailing the senses’ corruption of the mind.

Though the tradition of the inner wits lacks univocity, a few generalizations may be drawn. All depict the inner wits as connecting the outer world to the will and abstract reason. Memory, imagination, cogitation, and sensuality or *sensus communis* are physical capacities that convey specific information. While the bodily internal wits (whether three, four, or five) do not make conscious choices (and therefore cannot be seen to cause deadly sin), will and reason can ensure that those faculties relay information correctly.²⁸ One might, for example, use reason to question whether a hypothetical situation (the office of either imagination or cogitation, depending on which model one uses) was really possible. Reason refers to memory when judging the subject’s current situation. Correct choices depend on reason, will, and correct perception of the sensible world, which must be reconciled with one another.

²⁵ Chasteau, 138-9: “he 3af him wittes fyue / to delen þat vuel from þe good.”

²⁶ Chasteau, 138n.

²⁷ Whiteford, 228.

²⁸ R. Greene, 186-9.

Of course, this reconciliation hinges on accurate knowledge of the roles of each capacity—and Gawain, who prides himself on his faultless five wits, seems to lack such knowledge. If we assume the poem to be framed by Avicenna’s paradigm, then Gawain’s self-perceived perfection leaves no room for admitting that the five wits need guidance. If we assume Cloud’s model to be of more influence, then Gawain neglects connecting the five wits, one of which is reason. As Gawain mutters that he “feels” (rather than reasons) in his “five wittes” that the Devil has led him to the Green Chapel (2193-94), the five wits to which he refers resemble Avicenna’s model more. In either case, the body-bound wits cannot be held deliberately misleading, but ignoring their possible shortcomings reflects choice. Gawain’s brain may not be guilty, but his will and discursive reason are.

Gawain’s self-denunciation most obviously compares him to specific knowledge stored in memory: his understanding of chivalry. He specifically accuses himself of “couetyse” (coveting) and “cowardyse” (2379-80), both of which are anathema to his “kynde,” knighthood (2380-81). Covetousness, of course, refers to his wanting something not his own: the purportedly life-protecting green lace offered by Lady Bercilak. Cowardice may be imputed to his attempt to escape a painful death; he exhibits this trait in both his reliance on the lace and also in his flinching before Bercilak’s axe. For these “sins” he considers himself guilty of “vntrawþe,” or infidelity, in both keeping his word and adhering to chivalric values (2383, 2509).

Neither Bercilak nor Arthur’s court shares Gawain’s strict interpretation of chivalry, however. Bercilak holds Gawain guiltless of any sin against chivalry except a love for his own life, for which he absolves him (2368; 2391-95). Similarly, following his confession to his peers at Camelot, the knights and ladies “la3en loude” (laughed loudly) and still consider him to have acted well enough (2514-21).

This disparity of opinion may be interpreted as revealing differences in memory, cogitation (or imagination, in the more extend-

ed sense used in *Cloud*), and reason. Memory stores codes of conduct but may record inaccuracies if the brain itself is compromised. Cogitation relies on memory. It invokes remembered standards for comparison in order to generate an impression of a desired outcome. If it is impaired, however, it may combine information inappropriately and form an inappropriate image of a desired—or possible—outcome. Reason is to check the impressions of both faculties, but there is little evidence of Gawain submitting impressions to reason before he acts on them; it seems, rather, that the memorized images of chivalry are invoked without qualification. For example, Derek Pearsall (among others) has argued that the code of chivalry applies most properly to conduct in the field and should not be brought to bear on a courtly parlor game with the same seriousness it is invoked to govern knightly actions on military campaigns.²⁹ Gawain, however, appears to be of a different mind: he excoriates himself as having betrayed his “kynde,” or knights in general, even though the knights of (Bercilak and those at Camelot) are still quite happy to number him among their own. Implicitly, Gawain’s cogitation applies his memory of chivalric “rules” to a courtly game quite rigidly, and his reason fails to check the monstrous invention. His five wits lead him astray, but the fault lies with the soul’s lapses in its duties.

The scene in which Gawain accepts the lace supports the contention that Gawain relies on intuition rather than reason in this act. When he “decides” to keep the lace, “þen kest þe knight, and it come into his hert / Hit were a juel for þe joparde þat hym jugged were” (1855-56). Gawain, “kest,” or “considered”³⁰ the situation, and then it comes into his “hert,” or heart that this has been given to him to save him. It is worth noting that in this poem hearts are often depicted as intuitive faculties that register fear and other emotions: “joye warmed his herte” when he sees Lady Bercilak, attired in her

29 Derek Pearsall, “Courtesy and Shame in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, eds., Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 351-62.

30 Andrew and Waldron, 309.

pearl-sprinkled fret and fillet (1762). Bercilak rebukes Gawain for his heart being afraid of itself when it seems to face, with the rest of his body, a career-ending injury (2301n). His choice to take the lace, in this context, seems reflex rather than deliberate theft. He neglects to enlist his critical faculties, but one who considers his five wits infallible would implicitly not think this a necessity.

The scene preceding the final temptation hints at an underlying physical deficit affecting Gawain's imagination and cogitation, which could be rectified by reason and will. Before his last temptation, he experiences nightmares: "In de3 droupyng of dreme draueled þat noble / As mon þat watz in mornyng of mony þro þo3tes" (1750-51) but recovers his "wyttes" when waked by Lady Bercilak (1755). He mutters ("draueled") in his sleep, an indication of a vivid dream eliciting a response as if it were real, and his recovery of his wits implies that they were lacking before. He is described as "mornyng," or distressed.³¹ Nightmares, in the Middle Ages, were often held to be the result of the four humors having gotten out of proportion with one another.³² According to John Steadman's classic article, Chaucer's avian psychiatrist, Pertelote, is well within medieval medical tradition when she prescribes a laxative to purge the excess melancholy that ostensibly caused Chauntecleer's disturbing dream.³³ It is a physical remedy for a physical problem. Gawain's nightmare, in this context, reveals dysfunctions in the material brain.³⁴ The conduit of information may be viewed as compromised, and anything passed along it may be inaccurate. Gawain's subsequent impressions, even those not resulting from retained images from the nightmare, are therefore suspect.

31 Andrew and Waldron, 334.

32 John M. Steadman, "Chauntecleer and Medieval Natural History," *Isis*, 50 (1959), 237-9; Getz, 88-9.

33 Steadman, 237-8.

34 Whiteford, 231-2, suggests that the disturbing images of the dream combined with the beauty of Lady Bercilak blind Gawain to the possible consequences of taking the offered token.

Other passages call into question the reliability of Gawain's impressions. Upon his arrival at the Green Chapel, Gawain remarks, "Now I fele hit is the Fende, in my fyue wittes / þat hatz stoken me þis steuen to strye me here" (2193-94). In other words, the five wits perceive that this business is the Devil's doing, designed to destroy him. Were the Green Knight the only "unnatural" being in the story or its genre, such catastrophic thinking might seem understandable if not completely rational. But the poem alludes to all manner of monsters and malevolent mythical creatures, some of which he encountered en route from Camelot: Gawain bests "wormez" (dragons) and "wodwos" ("hairy woodland monsters" according to Andrew and Waldron³⁵) on his journey. None are attributed to demonic or diabolical involvement. Even before Gawain learns that his green-clad adversary and his affable host are the same, he lacks sufficient evidence to equate the Green Knight with the Devil. The impression of Gawain's five wits, here, is at best luridly overwrought. Given the connection between impressions and instinct, inappropriate instinctive acts could plausibly result from such misinformation.

Bercilak attributes Gawain's original mistake, taking and keeping the green lace, to instinct, not volition or choice.³⁶ In "absolving," Gawain, Bercilak describes the fault as "no wylyde werke, no wowing nauþer / Bot for 3e lufed your lyf" (2367-68). His fondness for life, not wooing or wily³⁷ (i. e., plotted) deeds causes him to keep the lace. Instinct, or *aestimativa*, first and foremost addresses itself to the cause of identifying harm and spurring action.³⁸ In other words, if he reacts on instinct, Gawain can only be guilty of an unintentional sin. If blame is to be cast, it falls on reason, as instinct does its job in protecting Gawain from what he perceives as imme-

35 Andrew and Waldron, 721n.

36 While Whiteford attributes this to *vis aestimativa*, as well, our interpretations are different.

37 Andrew and Waldron, 2367n, 362.

38 C. Green, 131; Kemp and Fletcher, 563-5.

diate harm. Only reason, perhaps tapping into memory, can correct impressions and redirect will.

Gawain's flinching before the oncoming axe is one possible example of instinct, yet he does not perceive it so. Gawain, we will remember, first shrinks from oncoming Bercilak's axe (2265-76). Bercilak reproaches him, saying that the man before him cannot be Gawain, as this man demonstrates "cowardice" unfitting "þat kny3t" (2270-75). Here Bercilak equates Gawain with his chivalric virtues, and strips Gawain of his knightly identity by remarking on his purported cowardice, which, as Gawain sees it, disqualifies him as a knight (2374-83). If we assume, as do many readers, that quailing before a battleaxe manifests a healthy instinct for self-preservation, his instinct is faultless, but at odds with the steely resolve he has learned. If we interpret the flinching as preceding an unreasonable sense of impending disaster, then imagination and cogitation trigger inappropriate instinct and short-circuit the bravery Gawain professes. In either instance, Gawain's five wits outrun his chivalric identity. Bercilak, however, only a few lines later tells Gawain that he has acquitted himself well on this count as well as others, and his only "sin" is that of loving his own life and, presumably, acting instinctively to protect it. Therefore, the "sin" does not constitute willful rejection of the principles of chivalry, a definition that parallels the Church's definition of deadly sins as sins spurred by willful rejection of known requirements. Implicitly, Gawain's mistakes only fray the knot a bit.

In the end Gawain unravels the knot himself with his volitional behavior. First, he hurls the green lace back at Bercilak, exclaiming that fear led him to covetousness and cowardice, in defiance of the code of knights (2377-80). Bercilak excuses him, at which point Gawain rants about how women cause men's sorrow, discourteously implicating Lady Bercilak in his own failures (2410-12). This explosion and diatribe cannot be excused as pure instinct; there is no danger to Gawain at this time. One could attribute such a reaction in an actual person to an unchecked, overactive imagination causing an unreasonable fear of having to revise self-identity, in

which instance one could still read the outburst as instinctive and further fallout from unexamined issues, but the poem offers few clues here. In any case, this scene depicts Gawain as understanding his inner wits so little that he neither admits mistakes nor comprehends the absolution implicit in Bercilak's oblique reference to them. In other words, he does not understand the technology he uses.

Bercilak's reproach of Gawain as being afraid of his own heart proves to be prophetic: Gawain avoids examining his intuition, a part of his body. Gawain does not question the accuracy of the five inner wits and their offices and, instead, accounts them faultless.

In refusing to admit the possibility of erroneous perception, one denies the effects of the Fall on body and soul and also denies the possibility of amendment. Even inadvertent lapses may gather an unpleasant momentum. Failure to understand the five wits results in the failure to understand how the individual can accomplish the desired ends—deeds, religious devotion, and adherence to ideals of chivalry. However, understanding the five wits' nature also entails recognizing that misperception is not as serious as deliberate choice. Bercilak seems to acknowledge that the five wits may run counter to learned behavior; love of one's own life may preclude obsessive observance of the minutiae of knightly conduct, already applied to situations far beyond their normal purview (e. g. the courtly game). In his estimation, Gawain has upheld his commitment to chivalry. Gawain, however, judges himself by standards—each absolute and in isolation—committed to a suspect memory. His reaction merely manifests his misunderstanding of his own five wits. Gawain becomes discourteous and blames other people but not the poorly monitored five wits, the unknowing source of the mistakes. The endless knot, blending as it does these disparate technologies of self, was in fact already raveled at the outset; it requires reason to assess, compare, and reconcile input from the five wits, the ground of specific knowledge.

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From the original MS of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The Beheading Scene

http://user.phil-fak.uni-duesseldorf.de/~holteir/companion/Navigation/Anonymous_Texts/Sir_Gawain_and_the_Green_Knight/PicturesGGK/picturesggk.html