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The Importance of the Belt in Religious and Secular Medieval Courtly Love Literature

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By Emily R. J. Long

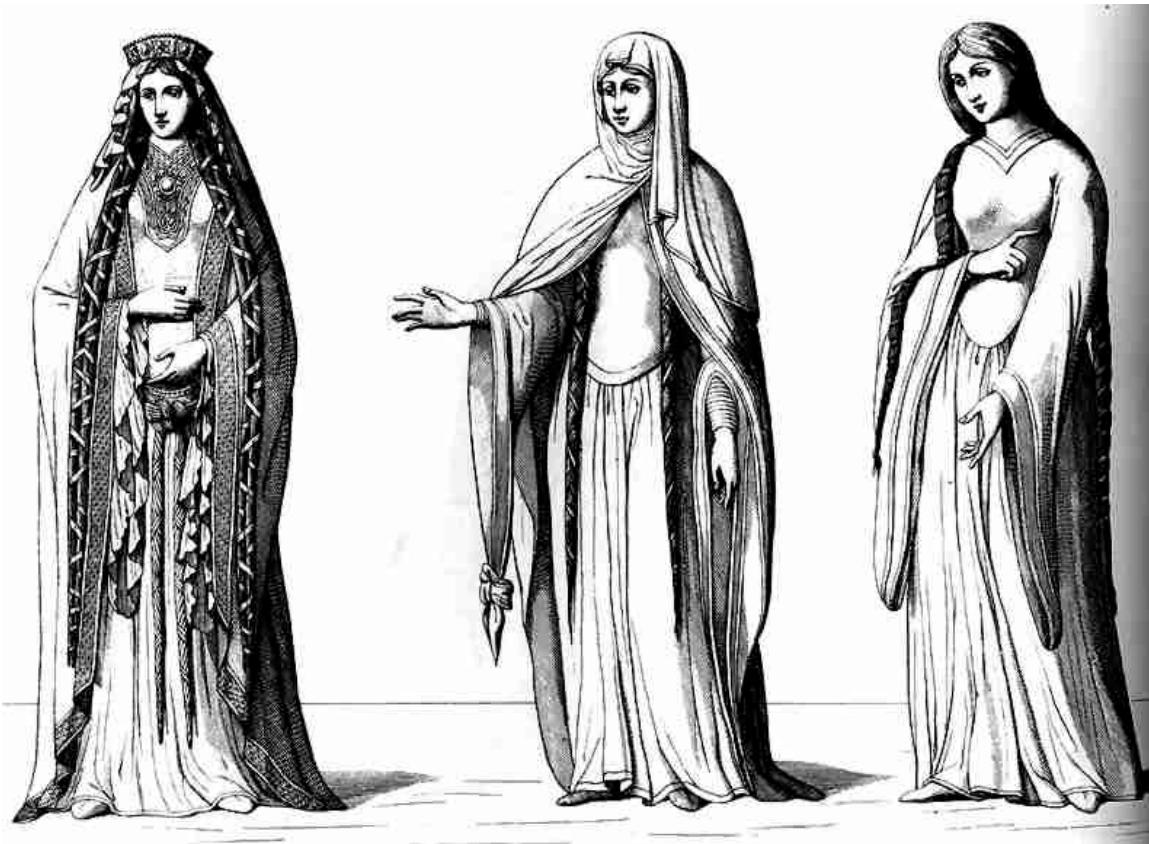


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University Honors 499 Senior Thesis Project

Dr. Mary Dzon, Project Advisor

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Courtly love is one of the best-known themes to emerge from the Middle Ages. This particular theme became such a key characteristic of the time that it pervaded not only literature and song, but even manifested itself in society as a whole. However, few people other than those well versed in medieval poetry would know that often courtly love even spanned so far that it made its way into religious lyric and prose. Most often, the subject of these works was none other than the Blessed Virgin Mary. If the poem was secular, often there was imagery relating to the Virgin or Christianity found within it. Usually, in both religious and secular works, courtly love involved an exchange of gifts to show favor of one courtly lover to another. Three stories from this time period focus on a sort of courtly love relationship between two people that involves this characteristic giving of a gift: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Guigemar*, and an apocryphal account of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven by “John the Evangelist” (Voragine 77). These seemingly different stories share one unifying bond: a belt.

But what is courtly love? Herbert Moller asserts that though it today carries connotations of “courting” a woman, it was far from that. “Courting” is usually reserved for pursuing a marriage, and at the time courtly love had little to do with marriage at all. Moller explains, “While it had originally nothing to do with married life or its customary preliminaries, it greatly influenced the standard behavior of the upper classes, especially their conduct in the presence of ladies” (Moller 39). Courtly love has a sort of formula that involves a love triangle between a young courtly male lover, the courtly lady, and usually her older husband. The object of desire is the woman, who is of courtly or noble status. She is always unreachable in some way or another, thus giving the amorous young man love-centered torment. The young man then writes letters, composes songs or

lyrics, or in some way or another expresses how the woman occupies his thought at all times. There is usually loss of sleep, bodily illness, and other ailments, which are usually exaggerations of his excessive longing for the woman (40).

Historically speaking, this had a lot to do with the common behaviors of the youth during the medieval period. Especially in southern France and Occitania, tales of courtly love became very popular due to the troubadours and the songs they would write in praise of such young men. George Duby explains an interesting social inconsistency, “‘Youth’, for whom the troubadours were themselves the spokesmen, appears in their songs to have been vanquished by the social system: ‘youths’ could never find a woman to welcome them for all women were married” (Duby 121-122). These women had affairs, but with other married folk, which left these young men without a lady to call their own. As a result, perhaps even originally as a social critique, the secular lyrics of the time asserted a change in the social norm to a love triangle that involved a husband, the courtly wife, and the youthful lover, thus creating the love triangle that defines courtly love (122).

Interestingly enough, this love triangle of longing does not always refer to desire for an earthly woman. Sometimes, the longing could be toward a more idealized concept of a woman. The Virgin Mary was often seen as the ideal woman in medieval culture (Reed 1). Virgins were prized above widows and wives, the only other sexual states of being for a woman in medieval times. Thus, who better to write courtly love poetry to than the very mold that other worldly women were expected to fit? In these courtly love situations, the “amorous man” was replaced with a man in dedication to the Virgin, who was somehow constantly beyond the reach of the unworthy sinner because of her sinless nature. Often, the Virgin, like a rich medieval courtly lady, would bestow her kindness

upon those who called upon her and act as an intercessor to those who showed faith in her. However, the Marian miracle story that is most relevant to this particular study is the story of her ascension into heaven without death.

The Assumption of Mary into Heaven

Mary has long been an important figure in Christianity. She conceived Christ without knowing an earthly man in a sexual nature, and was the only woman on earth pure and holy enough to do so. The story of the Assumption of Mary revolves around the principle of her godliness. Though there are several variations on the story, depending on the storyteller, the bulk of it involves the fact that Mary was so pure that Christ could not stand the thought of the earth taking her body, so He came down and ushered her into heaven, body and soul. This particular belief has been held for hundreds of years, but without any scriptural evidence. “One need be only a reader of the Bible, and not a scholar at all, to recognize that the knowledge it yields of Mary is precious little,” (Pangborn 94). If this is the case, then how could such a tradition have survived over so long of a time with no real foundation? This returns to the historical fact that very few people, save for the nobility and the clergy had the ability to read the scripture for themselves. Therefore, apocryphal writings, folklore, and stories had the perfect opportunity to present themselves and be widely accepted. Henry Adelbert Thompson explains that this can also be attributed to an:

Absence of books, or their tremendous cost reduced the mass of the people, even those not illiterate, to the necessity of getting their knowledge of the Scripture from the public reading of them. Also, the view which the people would take of any given dogma, mode of worship, or law of conduct, instead of being based upon a careful and independent study of the Bible, was necessarily colored by the interpretation and teaching of the few men who could and did examine the

sacred Word. Thus the clergy were given an unusual power (Thompson 478-479).

This is perhaps the best explanation for such tradition to be embraced.

This belief of the Assumption is still held by the Catholic Church, and in fact, it was officially declared as a dogma of the Church by Pope Pius XII in 1950 (Louth). It is interesting that it should take so long of a time for these beliefs to become defined and officially declared—the first appearance of such lore occurred at the end of the fifth century at around 431, in the synod of Ephesus (Louth). This declaration was met with mixed reactions by both Catholics and Protestants, and this has been true from virtually the start of the circulation of the lore (Pangborn 93). These doctrines of Mary are collectively called “Mariology,” as a field of study has been developed over time. This particular field of study depends upon the fact that Mary existed, not so much upon scripture itself. Because of this lack of scriptural evidence, much of the proof that it depends upon is testimony, particularly that of the Apostles (95). However, no Christian testimonies survived during the first three centuries since Christianity’s founding; the first actually occurs in writings from the sixth century, and even then, these were not very popular (96). In fact, they were met with quite an opposition that went all the way to the papacy, as “Pope Gelasius condemned them as spurious” (96). This continued until the life of St. Gregory of Tours (who died in 593), who is considered widely to be the first reliable source after Pope Gelasius, and he “explicitly avowed the Assumption” (96). From the tenth through most of the sixteenth century, it was declared by the Roman Breviary that they did not know in what way that Mary’s body was carried away, which undoubtedly had a great impact upon the masses who turned to them for religious guidance (96). And finally, after the sixteenth century, there was much attempt to define

the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, but there was no tradition on which it could be founded (96). And so it continued through time a controversial subject, as it remains to this day.

Two particular manuscripts from medieval England give their own versions of the Assumption of Mary. The first of the two is found in the poetry of William of Shoreham, whose writings include lines of verse that describe many principles upon which people would meditate, including the Seven Sacraments, the Hours of the Cross, the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Five Joys of the Virgin Mary, and finally a section entitled “On the Trinity, Creation, the Existence of Evil, Devils, Adam and Eve, &c.” The second of the two is a prose piece included in a collection of homilies, or sermons, by John Mirk. Both works recount the story of the Assumption of Mary, but with several variations.

Shoreham’s account of the Assumption of Mary is quite brief and simply recounts the story. He tells of a man who received divine revelation from the angels that God Himself would come to take Mary into heaven, and wrote down the revelation in a holy book. Christ Himself came down, and the entire court of heaven alighted at His departing, and He took her, body and soul into heaven. She then became not only His queen, but the queen of heaven, who sends her perfect grace down to the people of earth because Christ will listen to her especially: “Pat hy hys quen, ase ich er mende, / Here grace hy may doun to ous sende, / Hire ioye to fol-uelle. / Ich hopye hy nele nauȝt let ous spylle, / For he hys al to hyre welle / Of ioye þat hijs þe welle” (Shoreham 125-126).

The sermons of John Mirk are intricately detailed, and very lengthy. His *Festial* gives two sermons about the Assumption of Mary into heaven. The first of the two

homilies, Sermon 53, describes the feast of the holy church that celebrates the Assumption. It then goes into detail of the three ways in which the Assumption was accomplished: “worschipfull, and joyfull, and also holy” [worshipfully, joyfully, and holy] (Mirk 221).

First, the Assumption was done worshipfully, because in the Ten Commandments, God demanded that children should honor their parents; Christ did so by putting His mother in such a spot of honor that she should not meet death. “Wherfor Cryst schowyd and dyd þat he taght byfor, yn gret worship to hys modyr, when he wold take hur out of þis world ynto þe blysse þat he ys yn” [Therefore, Christ showed and did that which he taught before, in great worship to his mother, when he would take her out of this world into the bliss that he is in] (221). Christ then sends an angel with a palm branch from paradise as a sign. Mary then requests that the Apostles be present when she is taken up, so the angel sent John to her house, along with other Apostles. Six scores of virgins came to her aid in order to prepare her for this event (222-223). This particular account tells how Christ came down and took her soul first, and then bade the Apostles to take her body to Gethsemane and put it in a tomb. On the third day, He was to come again and reunite her body and soul (223). Her body was cleaned and prepared for burial:

The toke þes maydyns and waschid her body as þe maner ys of þat contray, þat þen cho chane as þe sonne, and sauyrð swettyr þen any spices, and layde hit on a bere. Then toke Ion þe palme, and ȝede before, and Petyr and Poule brighten þe bere aftyr, and þe toþer apostols comen syngyng with angels, soo þat þe song of hom was herd ynto þe cyte (223).

[Then took these maidens and washed her body as the manner is of that country, that then she shone as the sun, and savored sweeter than any spices, and laid it on a bier. Then took John the palm, and walked before, and Peter and Paul brought

the bier after, and the other apostles came singing with angels, so that the song of them was heard into the city.]

As a side note, it is interesting that so much of Mary's story seems to borrow from that of Christ. He was crucified and buried, and three days later He rose from the grave. Also, the night before His crucifixion, He and the Apostles spent the night praying in the garden of Gethsemane. A lot of people were opposed to this idea, especially Protestants, because there is no Biblical proof, and they thought that it would not only confuse character with biology, and that it would elevate Mary to a position that was virtually equal to Christ (Pangborn 97-98). Another reason people were opposed to this was that they thought it could add to separation from other forms of Christianity, because the Catholic Church depended solely upon the belief that it is infallible, or that it could even be misconstrued as being polytheistic (99).

To continue, they parade the Virgin's body in the city, where they are met with fierce opposition, particularly by nonbelievers—people rush into the streets with full intention of harming them, as they come with weapons. Those who strike immediately suffer wounds on their hands. They ask forgiveness and are immediately healed (Mirk 223). Three days later, Christ reunites Mary's soul with her body, and with much exaltation from angels, Apostles, and the saints that are all present, He takes her with Him into heaven, which is how the Assumption was accomplished joyfully (224). It was also accomplished in a holy way, because common man is doomed to die and be consumed in the earth after burial, but Mary was so pure that God could not bear the thought of her perishing in this way, so she was taken into heaven without ever having to feel the sting of death (224-225). Sermon 53 then finishes with a narration portion that tells two stories of testimony to the power of the Lord.

The second homily, Sermon 54, goes into greater detail on the reasoning behind the Assumption of Mary. It goes to great lengths to describe how good Mary was among women, such women as Elizabeth, Mary, and Martha, and it tells how each of these women compare to the holiness of Mary, since she exhibits their most honorable attributes. However, the bulk of this sermon circulates around Mary and Martha, and how they lived in two honorable lifestyles, active and contemplative, both of which correspond to Mary's life (230).

Actyf yn besynes of þe world þe world þe which may not be without trowbull and gret bysynes...Þys ys vndyrstond by Martha. By Mary ȝe schull vndyrstond þe contemplatyf þat lyþe to men of holy chirch þat schuld voyde from hom, yn all þat þay mowe, al maner wor[l]dely bysnes, and ȝyue hom all to spirituall occupacyon (231).

[Active is business of the world the which may not be without trouble and great business...This is understood by Martha. By Mary you shall understand the contemplative that is in lives of men of the holy church that should empty from him, in all that they may, all manner of worldly business, and give them all to spiritual occupation.]

Mirk then continues to describe that Martha was the first person to receive Christ into her house, and likewise, Mary received Him into her womb, therefore actively taking Him into herself (231). Martha's sister Mary was contemplative because she washed Christ's feet with her tears and accepted who He was with great thought. Mary also did this, because after Christ ascended into heaven, she gave her life over to meditation upon Him, so much so that He felt her worthy to be taken out of the world, body and soul (232). It finally finishes with a section of what appears to be a call and response, something that is not uncommon in the church, in praise of Mary.

The apocryphal account of John tells a similar story. Mary weeps because she misses her son and his consoling demeanor. Suddenly, an angel appears and tells her

“See, Lady, I have brought you a palm branch from paradise, and you are to have it carried before your bier. Three days from now you will be assumed from the body, because your Son is waiting for you, his venerable mother” (Voragine 78). Mary then requests that “my sons and brothers the apostles be brought together here with me, so that before I die, I may see them again with my bodily eyes, and may and be buried by them and render my spirit to God in their presence” (78). So the apostles are miraculously whisked to her on clouds from where they stand evangelizing (78-79). However, apparently one apostle is absent. Thomas, known for his doubting, is absent for some reason, and doubts when the apostles tell him what has transpired (82).

Then the most blessed Thomas was suddenly brought to the Mount of Olivet, and saw the most blessed body going up to heaven, and began to cry out and say: O holy mother, blessed mother, spotless mother, if I have now found grace because I see you, make your servant joyful through your compassion, because you are going to heaven. Then the girdle with which the apostles had encircled the most holy body was thrown down from heaven to the blessed Thomas (Knight).

Thomas then asks where the body of the Virgin is buried, and asserts that she is not there. The apostles rebuke him, because he had also disbelieved the resurrection of Christ before he touched the wounds (Knight). But Thomas persists, and they open the sepulcher to find that only the garments in which she was buried still remain (Voragine 92). Thomas explains how he had been preaching when he was whisked away on a cloud later than the rest of the apostles:

He, not knowing the word of God, had been brought to the Mount of Olivet, and saw the most holy body of the blessed Mary going up into heaven, and prayed her to give him a blessing. She heard his prayer, and threw him her girdle which she had about her. And the apostles seeing the belt which they had put about her, glorifying God, all asked pardon of the blessed Thomas, on account of the benediction which the blessed Mary had given him, and because he had seen the most holy body going up into heaven. And the blessed Thomas gave them his benediction, and said:

Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! (Knight).

Thus, this version of the Assumption features further detail than the previous two, because it mentions the girdle of the Virgin. Unlike the connotations that the word “girdle” has today, in the Middle Ages, a girdle was nothing more than a belt, usually a cloth strip that was tied about the body. But what is the significance of this? In order to answer this question, one needs to consult other instances, in this case two secular poems, in which a girdle is given from one person to another.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight begins with a giant green knight entering King Arthur’s court during their Christmas revelries, and wishing to play a game in which he will allow a man to give him a blow to the neck with his battle axe in exchange for a blow he will give to the man a year later (Winny 17). Sir Gawain steps forward in the place of Arthur and delivers the blow to the Green Knight (23-25). The Green Knight picks up his head and leaves the hall (25). After a year, Gawain prepares to go forth and search out his adversary.

In the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there is a lot of religious imagery, especially pertaining to the Virgin Mary. For instance, when Sir Gawain is being readied for battle with the Green Knight, the description of his shield gives a great deal of insight into the importance of piety of knights. In fact, his shield is the most important piece of his ensemble, as it is most indicative of his inner character. According to Johnson, around the fourteenth century, the shields of knights took up new significance, because they became increasingly symbolic (Johnson 76-77). “As shields began to play a lesser

part in warfare, they began to be used as decorative devices which said something about the men who carried them” (77). The shield itself is described as having a “pentangle painted on it in pure gold” (Winny 37). This pentangle has many meanings, each of which correspond to a different part of Gawain’s character: “Therefore it suits this knight and his shining arms, / For always faithful in five ways, and five times in each case, / Gawain was reputed as virtuous, like refined gold, / Devoid of all vice, and with all courtly virtues / Adorned” (37). The pentangle first stands for his five senses and secondly for his five fingers, neither of which had failed him (37). This would be important to Gawain in battle, since knights were expected to be warriors. Third, it stands for the five wounds of Christ, followed by the Five Joys of the Virgin Mary, which would have been very important to his Christian faith, since knights were also expected to adhere to the highest standard of Christian piety and living. Fifth, the pentangle corresponds to his five virtues: generosity, love of fellow-men above all, purity, courtesy, and compassion. These would have been important in his pursuit of courtliness and his personal character. “These noble five / Were more deeply implanted in that man than any other. / Now truly, all these five groups were embodied in that knight, / Each one linked to the others in an endless design” (39).

It is interesting that the pentangle corresponds with the Five Joys of the Virgin Mary. The Five Joys are a set of pivotal moments in Mary’s life that were not only meditated upon in medieval times, but they continue to be a source of meditation for those who practice the Catholic faith today. They were very popular, especially in England, which could account for the amount of mention they receive in religious lyric (Crowne). Enumerated, they are: 1) when Gabriel greeted Mary to inform her of her

pregnancy; 2) the birth of Christ; 3) Christ's resurrection; 4) Christ's ascension; 5) Mary's Assumption into heaven (Shoreham 117-125). This brings *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* into greater consideration, seeing as how he eventually receives a girdle, and at her Assumption, Mary tosses hers to Thomas.

After he journeys to the castle Hautdesert, belonging to Lord Bertilak, Gawain agrees to engage in a game with him. 'Whatever I catch in the wood shall become yours, / And whatever mishap comes your way give me in exchange. / Dear sir, let us swap so, swear me that truly, / Whatever falls to our lot, worthless or better'" (Winny 61). Sir Gawain heartily agrees to this, and plights his troth to Bertilak (61). On the first day, Bertilak's wife comes into Gawain's chambers, and after conversing, gives him a kiss. Gawain then gives this kiss to Bertilak when he returns from hunting, as was agreed (79). On the second day, Gawain receives another kiss from Bertilak's wife, which he gives to Bertilak in exchange for the boar that he captured (93). However, on the third day, something different happens. First, the lady of the castle offers him a ring, which Gawain refuses to accept (101). Sensing that Gawain does not wish to accept the ring because of its costly value, she instead offers the girdle around her waist:

'I shall give you my girdle, that profits you less.'
Quickly she unbuckled a belt clipped round her waist,
Fastened over her kirtle beneath the fine mantle;
It was woven of green silk and trimmed with gold,
Embroidered at the edges and decorated by hand;
And this she offered to the knight, and sweetly implored him
That despite its slight value he would accept it (103).

At first, Gawain refuses to accept this gift as well. However, Bertilak's wife explains to him that though it appears to be a humble belt, it is truly more than meets the eye:

'Now, do you refuse this belt,' the lady said then,
'Because it is worth little? and so truly it appears.'

See it is indeed a trifle, and its worth even less;
But anyone who knew the power woven into it
Would put a much higher price on it, perhaps.
For whoever is buckled into this green belt,
As long as it is tightly fastened about him
There is no man on earth who can strike him down,
For he cannot be killed by any trick in the world' (103).

Gawain heartily accepts the girdle, and the wife begs him to keep the belt a secret and to hide it from her husband, to which Gawain also agrees (103). That night, when he is supposed to give his earnings from that day to Lord Bertilak, Gawain gives him three kisses instead of giving him the girdle he received (107).

The next day is the day of the agreement between the Green Knight and Sir Gawain, so he leaves the castle and goes in search of the Green Chapel, where he will find his foe. When he arrives, he meets the Green Knight and kneels to receive his blow. When the Green Knight swings his axe the first time, Gawain flinches (127). In response to this, the Knight teases him and calls Gawain a coward. Then he prepares to give a second blow, which he stops just before it could come in contact with Gawain's skin (129). Gawain prepares to receive the blow a third time, which the Knight gives, but instead of being decapitated, Gawain only receives a cut on the back of his neck (131). The Green Knight then explains how he is in fact Lord Bertilak, and he knows Gawain's secret. "It is my belt you are wearing, that same woven girdle, / My own wife gave it to you, I know well in truth" (133). The Knight shares how Gawain did not receive a blow the first two times, because he was faithful to the troth he pledged in the castle, but he received an third blow because he was unfaithful in revealing that he had the green girdle (131-132). He gives the girdle to Gawain, who, ashamed of his transgression, agrees to wear it as a reminder of his failure. "And now I must wear it as long as I live. / For a

man may hide his misdeed, but never erase it, / Fro where once it takes root the stain can never be lifted’” (141).

Guigemar

The Lais of Marie de France contain a poem of comparable content, *Guigemar*.

In this particular story, there is a man named Guigemar who cares nothing for love (France 31). He goes hunting one day and shoots a white hind, but the shot ricochets and hits him in the thigh. As he is lying in pain, the hind curses him:

“Alas! I’m dying!
And you, vassal, who wounded me,
this be your destiny:
may you never get medicine for your wound!
Neither herb nor root,
neither physician nor potion,
will cure you
of that wound in your thigh,
until a woman heals you,
one who will suffer, out of love for you,
pain and grief
such as no woman ever suffered before.
And out of love for her, you’ll suffer as much;
the affair will be a marvel
to lovers, past and present,
and to all those yet to come.
Now go away, leave me in peace!” (33).

Guigemar then sets sail in a boat he finds in a nearby harbor. The boat is very richly adorned with costly items, but has apparently abandoned (35). He falls asleep and sails away.

He sails into a kingdom where the king keeps his wife locked up in a tower with her maid (36-37). Seeing the boat floating by out the window, the lady sends her maid to fetch it (38). After they discover Guigemar and assess the situation, they nurse his

wounds, and he falls in love with the lady, as the hind foretold (42). One day, the lady had a vision that Guigemar will die if he does not leave. Worried that each will be untrue, they plight a troth to one another:

“Beloved, I need your promise.
Give me your shirt;
I’ll make a knot in the tail.
You may have my leave to love the woman,
whoever she may be,
who will be able to undo it.”
He gave her the shirt, and his promise;
she made the knot in such a way
that no woman could untie it
except with scissors or knife.
She gave him back the shirt,
and he took it on condition
that she should make a similar pledge to him,
by means of a belt
that she would wear next to her bare flesh,
tightened about her flanks.
Whoever could open the buckle
without breaking it or severing it from the belt,
would be the one he would urge her to love (45-46).

Later that day, the lovers are discovered in the tower. Guigemar runs to the port and finds his boat and sails home (47).

At home, many women try unsuccessfully to untie Guigemar’s knot while his lady languishes in grief back in her tower (48). She escapes from the tower with the intent of drowning herself, and instead finds Guigemar’s little boat docked. She takes it and sets sail for Brittany, where she is taken in by Meriaduc, lord of the castle (49). He falls in love with her, but she shows him her belt and explains that she can only love the man who can untie it.

Meriaduc replied angrily,
“There’s another one like you in this land,
a very worthy knight,

who avoids, in a similar manner, taking a wife
by means of a shirt
the right tail of which is knotted;
it can't be untied
except by using scissors or a knife.
I think you must have made that knot!" (50).

The lord then arranges for Guigemar and the lady to meet once again. They have a loving reunion in which they untie each other's knots. However, Meriaduc refuses to let her go without a fight, so Guigemar assaults the castle and finally defeats him, and they live happily ever after (51-54).

Though *Guigemar* does not have the explicit religious undertones that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has, the fact that there is a belt given in exchange with a troth is notable, considering the other two texts. There are some commonalities that can be found, upon further examination, between the three texts. These three commonalities may give insight into the relevance of the belt as a symbol. In these three cases, the belt could symbolize piety, chastity, or a covenant.

Piety

It is possible that the girdle that Sir Gawain takes from the lady of the house was more than just a pretty piece of fabric. According to Toshiyuki Takamiya in his essay "Gawain's Green Girdle as a Medieval Talisman," it could have been much more. He asserts that "the girdle was conventionally given as a favour or love token by a lady to her champion knight who would go and fight for her sake; it apparently follows a basic formula of courtly love in which Sir Gawain was to love the wife of his lord" (Takamiya 75). So the fact that the token given to Gawain was a girdle would not be too unusual to the medieval audience. The lady of the castle would then be showing her favor to

Gawain and urging him to remember her when he faces off against the Green Knight. Takamiya mentions a scribal error regarding the girdle, ““Hit watz no lasse, bi þat lace þat lemed ful bryȝt”” (76). In his research, he found that an article written by Stoddard Malarkey and J. Barre Toelken, “Gawain and the Green Girdle,” asserts that the meaning of this line could mean either “if it were measured by the lace that gleamed full brightly” or “by the Virgin Lady who gleamed full brightly” (76). This is the foundation upon which he bases his next argument.

Takamiya asserts that the use of prayer rolls were used at this time which would have been comparable to that mentioned in the *Gawain* manuscript. “Let us...turn our attention to another girdle, i.e., a certain kind of roll manuscript which is quite narrow and long, not unlike a girdle” (77). Rolls of this type were commonly bought and sold in the Middle Ages in order to ward of Satan “and carried around in purses suspended from a belt together with a pair of beads...They are often depicted in monumental brasses of fifteenth-century laymen” (77). He goes on to describe a particular roll of this nature that was kept at St. John’s Seminary at Wonerth:

173 cm long and 8 cm wide...It is not entirely green but the four illustrations in the roll are drawn in dark brown and coloured in red, yellow and green. The manuscript bears a curious inscription to the effect that the roll was made as long as the Virgin Mary was tall, and it contains a prayer whose original was carried away by the Devil...The manuscript contains several prayers in Latin and in English...The manuscript also contains four illustrations...The third illustration, of the Wounds of Christ, is perhaps related to one of the symbolisms of the pentangle painted on Gawain’s shield and embroidered on his surcoat (77-78).

Takamiya believes that it is a belt similar to this one that Gawain received from the lady of the castle. Since they were used to ward of the Devil, the mentioning of the Devil multiple times at the Green Chapel helps to add credibility to his argument (78). Further,

the fact that this particular prayer roll is supposedly the same height as the Virgin would allude to the famous “cult of the Virgin” (78). So in wearing a belt that expressed dedication to the Virgin in conjunction with the other religious emblems upon Gawain’s shield, he would then be expressing his dedication to Her. Since Mary is often used as an intercessor performing miracles for those who show such pious dedication to her, the fact that he is supposedly invincible when he wears it would allude to her performing such a feat.

If this is true, then one must look at the story of the Assumption story in a similar manner. If the girdle was commonly used as a token of favor from a lady to her knight, as Takamiya suggests, then Mary dropping her girdle down to Thomas after he prays to her would express a similar sentiment. He would then be expected to “fight for her,” so to speak, in this case defending her honor from those who would also doubt her. This makes a great deal of sense and makes the story even more poignant from a religious standpoint. However, if this theory is applied to *Guigemar*, it seems to fall short, unless he is asking his lady to stay chaste like the Virgin until he returns. This then brings about a second theory in which the belt is simply a symbol of chastity.

Chastity

Often, one hears the expression “chastity belt” in reference to medieval ideas of abstinence and virginity. In *Guigemar*, the belt he bestows upon the lady girds her loins so that no other man can love her unless he can loosen the belt. This undeniably fits the mold of such a belt, since it is worn “next to her bare flesh, / tightened about her flanks” (France 46). The concept of the chastity belt, or the “chastity girdle” as it is sometimes

called, became prevalent in European literature during the twelfth century (W.L.H. 257). In fact, according to this article, “The earliest picture known of a chastity-girdle appears in a manuscript of about 1405;” however, none of the time period survive—those that have survived came from the sixteenth century and onward (257).

If the issue of chastity is considered as the symbol of the medieval belt, it plays into the Assumption story rather well. Since Mary is known for having conceived the Christ-child without knowing a man in the Biblical sense, the fact that she has a belt of such manner would be very symbolic indeed. If Thomas had indeed doubted her Assumption as he had Christ’s resurrection, then the holy girdle falling from heaven would be a sign of her immaculate virginity. Thomas does call her “O holy mother, blessed mother, spotless mother,” which would allude to her pure and virginal form, and the belt is described as having “encircled the most holy body” (Knight). Thus, the belt as a symbol of chastity plays into both stories rather well.

However, when this theory of the chastity belt is inserted into *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it becomes a bit problematic, and requires quite a bit to be read into the situation. First of all, the lady of the castle has been coming into Sir Gawain’s room alone, and in a sense seducing him while her husband is away hunting for the day. Secondly, she wishes to give him a ring upon their third meeting as a token of her love for him. Lovers giving rings as gifts often has connotations of marriage and being faithful to one another. But when Gawain spurns her gift, she loosens her belt from about her waist and offers it to him instead (Winny 101-103). If this belt is a symbol of chastity, she is offering a gift of much more gravity. If this is the case in this situation, then she is in a sense offering her chastity to Gawain—which she later begs Gawain not

to tell that he has taken (103). Later, the Green Knight tells Gawain that he knows he has taken the belt from his wife, and that it is in fact his belt that he had given her (133). This would then mean her chastity was his for the taking, since he is her husband, and the belt that he put about her was to protect the chastity that was his. Therefore, when Gawain confesses to the Green Knight, only he could absolve Gawain of a sin against him. For Gawain to betray him in such a way makes the end of the tale much more poignant, since Gawain at the end of the poem expresses how this particular sin will follow him as long as he lives (141). So thus, the green girdle as a symbol of chastity does work in this particular instance. However, there is one more symbol that it could also express as equally, and this is a symbol of a covenant.

Covenant

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a troth is plighted, or in other words, a covenant is made, between Gawain and Lord Bertilak when they agree to engage in the tit-for-tat daily earnings game. Gawain even gives his word before the Lord, “‘By God,’ said the good Gawain, ‘I agree to that, / And your love of amusement pleases me much’” (61). Yet, he receives the girdle from Bertilak’s wife and does not give it to him at the end of the day as he promised, thus breaking his covenant with Bertilak. When the Green Knight reveals that he knows the transgression that Gawain has committed, “‘For it is my belt you are wearing, that same woven girdle,’” this would then mean that Gawain has taken his word back from Bertilak, to whom he originally gave it (133). So in receiving the green girdle from the wife, Gawain broke his covenant with Bertilak. The Longman Anthology of British Literature’s introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

speaks of the use of covenant in the story: “A knight’s troth and word, a Christian’s election and covenant, the breaking point of a person’s or a society’s virtues, all come in for celebration and painful scrutiny during Gawain’s adventure” (Damrosch 193).

Relating to the chivalric code that a knight like Sir Gawain was expected to adhere to and their covenant to live a worthy live, the Anthology speaks further, specifically regarding quote at the ending:

The girdle also serves to link *Sir Gawain* to political and social issues of the poet’s own time, particularly efforts to revalidate a declining system of chivalry. After the last line in the manuscript, a later medieval hand has added “Hony Soyt Qui Mal Pence” (“shamed be he who thinks ill thereof”), the motto of the royal Order of the Garter, founded by Edward III in 1349 to promote a revival of knighthood (194).

If the fact that a group of knights historically employed this decoration, as the author of the poem suggests that the rest of the knights of the Round Table did after Gawain’s return, it would symbolize them reminding themselves to always be true to their word, as the ideal courtly knight was supposed to.

This ideal of the belt symbolizing a troth or covenant also plays well into *Guigemar*. They promise to one another that they will be true, and they exchange knots in both Guigemar’s shirt and in the lady’s belt (France 45-46). Thus, they have made a pact or created a covenant with one another that was symbolically honored by the exchange of these knots in clothing. Unlike Gawain, however, the two of them keep their covenant to one another, because at the end of the story, they become reunited and are able to untie each other’s knots.

In the story of Mary’s Assumption, Thomas prays to Mary to give him a blessing, and she gives her girdle to him in return (Knight). If the belt she gives him is a symbol of covenant, it would be a symbol of her carrying out what Thomas asked and creating a

covenant that she would bless him. Further, it could symbolize her larger covenant to God to remain a Virgin for the sake of the Christ-child, and God's further covenant with man that He would send His Son through Mary to make atonement for the sins of the world. The fact that she drops such an integral part to who she was as an earthly being would carry great gravity to Thomas and the apostles, and would thus be the great blessing that Thomas asked for.

Though it could symbolize quite a few things, depending upon the context in which it is present, the girdle or belt appears to be a very integral part of medieval literature. Not only is it present in both religious and secular writing, but it is also a gift, given from one person to another to represent something that has transpire between the two. Thus, the courtly love motif is seen in both the secular and religious literature of the Middle Ages, in this case manifested in a piece of women's clothing.

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