

“AND HE HONOURED ÞAT HIT HADE EUERMORE AFTER”:
THE INFLUENCE OF RICHARD II’S LIVERY SYSTEM ON *SIR GAWAIN AND*
THE GREEN KNIGHT

By

THERESA OSTROM

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 SIGNS AND KINGSHIP IN RICHARD'S EARLY YEARS.....	14
The Loss of a Slipper and the Finding of the Holy Oil.....	14
Signs, Seals, and Livery.....	23
3 THE WHITE HART BADGE AND THE CONTROL OF SIGNS.....	27
Early Attempts at Livery.....	32
The Badge of the White Hart and the Wilton Diptych.....	36
4 THE LIVERY SYSTEM AND THE CONCEPT OF <i>TRAWPE</i>	49
The Concept of <i>Trawpe</i> in Chaucer's and Gower's Works.....	50
The Green Knight as Arbitrary Sign.....	59
5 THE PENTANGLE AND THE GREEN GIRDLE.....	65
6 CONCLUSION.....	88
REFERENCES.....	97
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	104

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Theresa Ostrom

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Chair: R. Allen Shoaf
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This study investigated the relationship between King Richard II's manipulations of semiotics and the appearance of signs in the fourteenth-century text, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Many critics have noted that the *Gawain*-poet presents conflicting responses to signs in the poem; I argue that these contradictory messages may be directly linked to the program of kingship under Richard II. The king's use of livery (a signifying system which used icons, badges or emblems to denote feudal ties) encouraged allegiance among some subjects, but also excited fears about duplicitous, arbitrary signs and the corruption of their bearers.

I used the evidence offered by chronicles of British history to propose that Richard possessed an awareness of the power of icons and that he used them repeatedly to gain support or to assert his preeminence. Nevertheless, despite many successes at

currying public favor through icons, when Richard II's popularity decreased, the certainty of his rule was less and less assured; as the chroniclers explain, the king's badges, once clear indicators of his authority, degenerated into ambiguous, or meaningless objects.

The theoretical framework for my analysis of Richard II's use of iconic signs was largely drawn from the works of Charles Peirce, Umberto Eco, and the studies of the iconography of kingship by Louis Marin. My own interpretation of the language and semiotics of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was augmented by R.A. Shoaf's book *The Poem as Green Girdle* and his essay "The 'Syngne of Surfet' and the Surfeit of Signs." As Shoaf points out, for the *Gawain*-poet, the basic meaning of a sign, especially one which would signify association, is altered considerably—as it was in Richard II's political campaign.

My reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in light of the livery debate, has yielded unique insight into its philosophical and political complexity. As a royalist, he may have been loyal to Richard's White Hart badge; and yet, aware of the deep divisions Richard's badges created throughout the kingdom, the poet likewise betrays a mistrust of signs. However, the *Gawain*-poet ultimately reminds readers of the unpredictability of all signs—political or otherwise. Through Gawain's ordeal, the poet reveals that the meaning of any sign is constantly in flux, dissolving and forming new meanings; as readers, we must negotiate the sign's capriciousness and give it significance.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

*þat lordes, and ladis, þat longed to þe Table—
Vche burne of þe Bobetherhede a bauderyk schulde haue,
A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryzt grene
And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were.
(Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 2515-2519)*

Critics have often commented on the strangeness of Camelot's sudden adoption of the green girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.¹ For while the joyous acceptance of Gawain's badge of shame seems to re-establish equality and solidarity at Camelot, the green girdle still remains indefinable—saturated with all the meanings that it gains throughout the poem. As a result, the poem ends with two conflicting positions; the first is the compulsion to harness the power of the girdle and distribute it as a liveried sign of Camelot's unity, while the second seems to be a deep-seated fear of the inherently

¹ So many critics have commented on this problem that it would be nearly impossible to produce a full list. However, it is possible to break down some of the commentary into general threads of criticism about the poem. Robert Margeson tried to solve the problem of the ambiguous ending by claiming that the "failure" of Gawain is more crucial to interpreting the meaning of the poem than Camelot's (or Bertilak's) declarations of Gawain's success. Critics like R.J. Blanch and Richard Trask, see the adoption of the girdle as a symbol of Christian values and human weakness. L. Besserman sees the girdle as a symbol which operates with the same logic as the cross in Christianity. According to Besserman, "Like the Cross, the central icon of Christianity, the green girdle is transformed from a sign of degradation and defeat into a banner of victory. Gawain, however, does not join in celebrating this reversal. And we are left wondering whether or not his is the deeper vision" (100). Gregory Wilkin sees the court's adoption of the girdle as a wrongful "attempt to participate in Gawain's partial honor" (120-21). Marietta Patrick, H. Bergner and Martin Shichtman also blame the members of the court at Camelot for failing to grasp the full impact of the meaning of the girdle. More recently, critics like C.S. Finley and Elizabeth Kirk claim that a lack of closure was the poet's intention, and that a case might be made for three or more interpretations of the girdle's significance. Blanch and Wasserman go against earlier, religious interpretations of the girdle made by critics, to claim that, at Camelot "misunderstood signs [. . .] are substituted uneasily for true leadership and the communication of Christian values" (24).

uncontrollable nature of such signs and their ability to upset the balance of power within a kingdom.

An origin for the poet's ambivalence toward signs can be illuminated if we accept the growing evidence that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written in the era of Richard II.¹ In this period, the extravagant use of liveried badges reached an almost unthinkable height; Richard II celebrated and exploited 'liverie de signes' as an extension of his power to favorite subjects and proof of his glory, while Commons and other complainants argued that the proliferation of signs rendered livery an insignificant and expensive practice. Bitter quarrels about the proper use of these signs circulated throughout the kingdom, and could not fail to influence the *Gawain*-poet, even if he was "steadfastly royalist" as John Bowers claims.² Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the prevailing sense of anxiety about Richard's use and abuse of livery, and, in light of this information, to investigate the complex image of the green girdle—a "positive" badge whose dangerous nature lurks quietly beneath the surface of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The word "livery"³ originally possessed a number of different connotations.

However, the earliest and most common meaning refers to a specific military uniform,

¹ Although no scholar has pinpointed a definitive date for the poem's composition, most scholars generally agree that it was during the reign of Richard II.

² Traces of "royalist" sentiments and Ricardian images have already been discussed by John Bowers and other recent critics of the poem, and it is clear that the poet found, in Richard's court, his primary source for inspiration. Bowers writes: "No 'courtly poet' in a hazy generic sense, the Pearl Poet is steadily and specifically royalist, revealing a concern for the precise practice of kingship by his obsessive recourse to regalian images" (15-16).

³The word, livery, is derived from the Middle English word, *liveri*, from Old French *livree*, *delivery*, or from Latin *liberāre*, *to free*, from *liber*, *free* ("Livery").

and badge, issued by feudal superiors to their retainers. The term could also represent a manner of dress adopted by noblemen or gentlemen, or a special manner of dress signifying priesthood or another vocation.⁴ Abuses of this system were endemic almost from its inception; wrongdoers soon discovered that a great lord's livery protected them from punishment; lords abused their obligations to vouch for their retainers in court; liveried men used their badges to intimidate others. Kings and Commons routinely produced legislation designed to control or curtail such abuses. B. Wilkinson explains that "Already, in the Statute of Westminster I, Edward I forbade maintenance by his own officials, and Edward II condemned it in 1327. The first parliamentary complaint against peacetime retinues was in 1331" during the reign of Edward III. According to Wilkinson, this case was dealt with effectively, and Edward III never allowed the lords to "get out of hand" with their retinues (203-204).

In fact, in addition to controlling livery among his lords, Edward III effectively used liveried signs inspired by Arthur's Round Table to strengthen his own rule over England's military class.⁵ However, from the time of Edward III's death to the coronation and reign of Richard II, already existing problems with the livery system rapidly increased. The kingdom was already awash with insignias, some of which were not bestowed by nobles, but adopted by peasants of their own accord. One of the most

⁴ Adopting livery to signify one's vocation or association was routine; livery retainers have been recorded as early as the twelfth century in 1154 and 1162. According to Hicks "the practice was apparently commonplace by 1218, when a northern bandit was reported to be buying cloth in bulk for his 15 accomplices 'as if he had been a baron or an earl'" (Hicks 62).

⁵ Scholars tend to think that Edward's goal in implementing the Round Table was to control the military class and to present himself as a warrior and knight of Arthur's caliber. Paul Johnson writes "Edward could afford to have himself regarded, in the context of chivalry, as a first among equals, the equality being symbolized by the Round table, in the shape of a hollow circle, around which he and his knights sat" (Johnson 121-122).

striking accounts of liveried signs among the peasant class occurs in Froissart's description of the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. Froissart tells us that at least sixty of the rebels, including Wat Tyler, wore jupons (of a presumably matching livery); jurors at Scarborough also describe the livery of hoods the rebels wore in order to further their conspiracy against kings and nobles. The peasant class's adoption of a symbol of their own solidarity, specifically for polemical purposes, suggests that the significance of livery had shifted; instead of referring to a badge or uniform given from a superior lord to his retainer, "livery" could now refer to a more general badge signifying one's association with a group, not simply a king or lord.

Under Richard II, livery came to represent both the traditional manner of dress that signified the rank and honor of the bearer as well as the less romantic use of livery or badges to designate short-term alliances among enterprising commoners. The system exceeded governmental control, used extensively by unscrupulous lords and commoners who sought to exploit the system for economic gain.⁶ As Paul Strohm notes, Commons was powerless to stop the situation—paralyzed by continual debate about these "new and illicit forms of association, in which stable and hierarchically ordered ties of vassalage were challenged by short-term and lateral arrangements for personal advantage."⁷ In this

⁶ In *Hochon's Arrow*, Paul Strohm explains that:

A new syntax of personal relations that became available for use and possible abuse between the late thirteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries. Newly permissible forms of association were offering unscrupulous lords and enterprising upstarts the opportunity to thrive by colluding for economic advantage in ways that diluted or abused [the] traditional social practices [of livery] (57).

⁷ Strohm further explains:

The ties of vassalage were sworn and sanctified and irreversible; those of congregation or covinage or affinity were sustained by improvised oaths of a sort entered into lightly, or by contract, or by the simple acceptance of a badge or other emblem of livery. These practices were brought into textual consideration under a variety of headings, such as covinage, or conspiracy to oppress neighbors by force; maintenance, or connivance in joint legal pleading; champerty, or by the instigation of legal pleas; improper searing and oath-taking to bind the fortunes of a single

petition, the effectiveness of livery was questioned; any honors that might have been bestowed along with a badge were weakened by the simple fact that most social enterprises used this system; it seemed as though anyone wishing it could adopt some form of livery badge. David Wallace explains that this process of adopting badges or signs of alliance was an important creation of “associational forms” in the social world of the Middle Ages. Moreover, he claims that “allegiance to a specific *felaweshipe* or *universitas* could often outweigh loyalty to civic or state authorities” and that adherence to badges helped to preserve a feeling of group loyalty in spite of the political, social, and theological upheaval of that time period (Wallace 73).

Even though Wallace may be correct in suggesting the psychological importance of the “sense of sworn obligation” that the badge seems to uphold, he nevertheless admits that there are two contradictory outcomes to this type of society. The first is an extrapolation of Aristotle’s concept of *koinonia*, which, following William of Moerbeke, he views as *communitas*.⁸ This more idealistic society

group; and nontraditional retaining, especially through the use of livery or emblematic apparel to secure and advertise short-term alliances for mutual profit (*Hochon’s Arrow* 57).

⁸ William of Moerbeke only provides one sense of the meaning of *communitas*, or community—a concept which may have been debated. Walsingham, in thinking of the desire of the St. Albans rebels to be called communes or the commons, writes

Ita enim tunc temporis gloriabantur eo nomine, ut nullum censerent nomen honorabilius nomine “communitatis,” nec quemquam de caetero reputaturi fuerunt dominum, juxta aestimationem suam stolidam, nisi Regem solummodo et communes (Hist. Angl. 472).

[For at that time they gloried in the name, and considered that no name was more honorable than that of “community,” nor, according to their stupid estimation, were there to be any lords in the future, but only King and commons.]

Strohm argues that Walsingham’s attribution of the idea of community to the rebels has two sides. It may be read as absurdity, “a notion held only during a brief period of tumult by a group of befuddled people.” It also might be read sympathetically, “as a rationale for revolutionary conduct” (41) based on deep-seated moral principles, such as truth and loyalty.

is created by a bond of friendship and involves a plurality of participants, with a common aim pursued by common action, with full differentiation between its members but without any relations of subjection or domination on the basis of it (qtd. in Wallace 74).

This bond is only maintained, however, through a “natural” impulse for self-government and a genuine regard for principles of *trawþe* or truth. Once man’s dishonesty manifests itself, we might, like Augustine, begin to believe that the reason for governing images, like livery, is rooted in the essential corruption of man’s eternal soul. Following Augustine, it seems that the badge would be simply act as *remedium peccati*:

"[government] controls the wicked within the bounds of a certain earthly peace" (qtd. in Wallace 74).

Although these are two possible readings of the necessity of livery, in reality, the social practice of livery did not provide the kind of positive corporate structure Wallace describes. Badges, as “associational forms” also did not succeed as agents of governmental control in the Augustinian sense. Rather than preventing wickedness, they seemed instead to excite or perpetuate it. A familiar complaint—that livery gives its bearers license to perform “all kinds of wickedness”—appears in the 1388 petition at the Cambridge Parliament. The Westminster chronicler observes that those wearing badges or *signa* issued by lords were performing various misdeeds:

At this parliament the commons complained bitterly about the badges issued by the lords, “since those who wear them are, by reason of the power of their masters, flown with such insolent arrogance that they do not shrink from practicing with reckless effrontery various forms of extortion in the surrounding countryside; fleecing and discomfiting the poor in every court, including those of the greatest, and indiscriminately robbing the middle and other classes of their rights and reducing them to helplessness” (*West.* 355).

As the chronicler explains, those wearing badges of the lords possess such “insolent arrogance” that they practice extortion, taking advantage of the poor and rich, with little care for justice. It is not merely the natural character of these men, but it is the “boldness of their badges that makes them unafraid to do these things and more besides” (*West.* 355). Badges, although originally meant to function as positive symbols of the good character or reliability of a lord’s retainers, now clearly become the sign of their bearers’ superciliousness.

Historically, whenever such a problem arose with livery, the lords came forward to assure the public that they would keep their retainers under control. However, at this point, when the lords promised that they would punish the perpetrators of such acts, Commons demanded more decisive action. In a surprising move, Richard II himself stepped in, offering to discard his own badges as an example for the lords. The Westminster Chronicler offers the following details of Commons’ ruling:

First, that all the liveries called ‘badges’. As well of our lord the king as of other lords, of which the use has begun since the first year of the noble king Edward the Third (whom God assoil) and all other lesser liveries, such as hoods, shall henceforward not be given or worn but shall be abolished upon the pain specified in this present parliament[. . .] But it is the king’s will, with the assent of the lords in parliament, that the matter touching this article shall be continued in its present state until the next parliament in the hope that in the meantime amendment will be effected by him and the lords of his council, without prejudice to the dignity of the king and of the lords and of all other estates of the parliament (*West.* 357).

These rulings were later incorporated into a statute and “proclaimed” in London and many other places. However, Richard did not keep his promise, or abide by the statute, as we know from the *Vita Ricardi Secundi*. Richard introduced his badge of the White Hart at the Smithfield tournament two years after the Cambridge Parliament in 1390.

Although Richard voiced a desire to give up badges in the hope of restoring tranquility to the realm, he ultimately could not abide by his word. Moreover, Richard went much further than standard practice, patronizing scores of people and one entire region with his badge—in terms of peacetime retinue, this number was unprecedented.⁹ When he was obviously aware of the dangerous results of the distribution of badges, one guesses that it was his overconfidence in his power, coupled with his longstanding faith in the power of signs that led to his obvious violation of the statute.

However, the source of the problems with livery after the Cambridge Parliament's decision in 1388 may not have solely been in the body politic. Wilkinson asserts that "the real trouble was not the impossibility of handling the problems created by the new pattern of feudalism but the personal inadequacies of some English kings" (204). This is undoubtedly the case; Richard II's own inauspicious dealings in livery seem, in part, to have stemmed from his desire to find the perfect symbol to express his divine supremacy as king. For this reason, it seems, the comparatively short list of regal emblems under Edward III¹⁰ mushroomed during Richard's reign. Although Richard II's primary symbol and livery badge would later become a white hart, gorged with an open crown of gold, he also used a white falcon (after Edward II's symbol); or two white harts; or two angels.¹¹ Sometimes Richard would incorporate traditional symbols of the Plantagenet family, such as a branch of broom, to demonstrate his illustrious ancestry, or the baldric of the

⁹ In the reigns of previous kings, the number of liveried men was extended in wartime. In such cases, the men were only tied to their lords on a temporary basis, usually through badges. For example, in 1454 Humphrey Duke of Buckingham was reported to have made 2,000 Stafford knots 'for what end your wit will construe' (Hicks 65).

¹⁰ Edward III had only used a golden lion and a silver falcon as his individual emblems, distributing the livery for the Order of the Garter to only a select group of knights.

¹¹ See Rothery 249.

Order of the Garter, presumably to demonstrate his membership. Richard II, it may be argued, was constantly searching for a symbol that expressed his kingship; he infringed on the livery system most grievously and most often, even from the earliest moments of his coronation. To show the tremendous sway signs had over Richard II, I expand on these issues in Chapter 2 of my study.

My specific objective in this study is to investigate Richard's manipulation of semiotics, through livery, and to explain how the political climate impacted the concept of the sign in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. R.A. Shoaf's book *The Poem as Green Girdle* and his essay "The 'Syngne of Surfet' and the Surfeit of Signs" each provide crucial foundations for my reading of the *Gawain*-poet's concerns with language and semiotics. Shoaf points out a key element in the fabric of *Sir Gawain*—its signs are multiple, enigmatic, and potentially dangerous in their ambiguity. For the *Gawain*-poet, the basic meaning of a sign, especially one which would signify "association" is altered considerably, as it was in Richard II's political campaign. Instead of merely envisioning the icon of a livery badge as a sign of a feudal tie, he championed the badge as evidence of his own royal authority. From all available evidence, it seems he took steps to mask the iconicity of his own badges, so that his own signs would not be seen as *representations* of power, but the *reality* of power itself. However, as Richard II's popularity decreased, the "certainty" of his power was less and less clear, and his badges, like the green girdle of *Sir Gawain*, seem to have no fixed meaning.

The link between the *Gawain*-poet and Richard II goes beyond a shared theoretical or semiotic matrix; the *Gawain*-poet would probably have been affected in a direct way by Richard's use of livery. Historically, Richard II consistently turned to the

use of livery in order to influence his subjects or solidify his bond with noblemen or court advisors. His chosen emblem, the White Hart, was vastly dispersed among his supporters, with the intent of extending the king's image, and by implication, his power. One depiction of Richard II, the Wilton Diptych, emphasizes the eternal power of Richard II's livery by making the icon of the White Hart the seemingly "natural" badge of the angels. Amid this concentration of liveried signs, one might glimpse other competing signs from his Plantagenet ancestors embedded in the scenery, which are curiously juxtaposed against the badges and banners of his own patron saints.¹²

The White Hart badge was widely dispersed in Richard II's beloved region of Cheshire and from that region alone he retained over 700 Cheshiremen to serve as knights, esquires and archers. From this number he selected 312 to serve as personal bodyguards, lavishing seemingly endless affections and monies on his Cheshire coterie. This was the place where he had hoped to rebuild his power base after his humiliating defeat by the Lords Appellant. To demonstrate his love of the region, he flew the banner of Saint George (also the banner of the Order of the Garter), over Cheshire. By this action, Richard had symbolically linked Cheshire to him with two of his most powerful liveries: his own personal emblem, the White Hart badge, and the Order of the Garter,

¹² John Bowers writes:

The central obsession of the Wilton Diptych is the same as Richard II's political and personal obsession throughout the 1390s: the sacred status of kingship...The eleven angels surrounding Christ wear the White Hart badges of Richard II's royal livery, which the king himself is also wearing in the left panel...Besides granting holy sanction to the practice of bestowing liveried signs, this use of the White Hart badges suggests a mystical identification between Richard's household's and Christ's. The angels belong to the king's *familia*, and yet Richard is being welcomed as the missing twelfth spirit in their heavenly company (Bowers 29).

which carried with it all the Arthurian symbolism of the Round Table that it had gained under Edward III.

In the last years of Richard II's reign, "such insignias certainly did not enjoy a reputation as spiritual peace-tokens of the sort described by the poet (in *Pearl*)" (Bowers 96). Once associated with regal grace and the solidarity of the kingdom, such liveried signs merely became a symbol of Richard's growing unpopularity. His enemies criticized the badge openly, and after his death, badges were pointed to as an important factor in his downfall. For example, Adam Usk draws readily on a prophecy of Merlin¹³ to explain Richard II's exile, through the use of The White Hart badges:

Iste dux Henricus, secundam propheciam Merlyny iuxta propheciam, pullus aquile, quia filius Iohannes; set secundam Bridlintoun meriot canis, propter libetatuam callariorum leporariis conueniencium, et quia diebus canicularis uenit, et quia infinitos ceruos, liberatam scillicet regis Ricard in ceruis existentem, penitus a regno affugauit.

[According to the prophecy of Merlin, this duke Henry is the eaglet, for he was the son of John; following Bridlington, however, he should rather be the dog, because of his livery of linked collars of greyhounds, and because he came in the dog days, and because he drove utterly from the kingdom countless numbers of harts—the hart being the symbol of King Richard] (52, trans. C. Given-Wilson).

Livery, as iconic sign, is always uncontrollable, no matter who attempts to use it; for while Richard II had hoped to control his symbol, ultimately it controlled him, even to the point of becoming a portent of his own destiny. In this context, livery behaves more like the green girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as it becomes duplicitous and uncontrollable. Paul Strohm explains in *Hochon's Arrow*: "a brief survey of the 'literature of livery' demonstrates that it does not serve a single master" (179).

¹³ This reference to Merlin's prophecy, according to Given-Wilson, was probably derived from the "Prophecy of the Eagle" which was frequently found beside the prophecies of Merlin in contemporary manuscripts (Given-Wilson 52).

Fears of the dangers of livery, as well as the king's celebration of it could not fail to influence the *Gawain*-poet. He was most likely a Cheshireman himself; the dialect of the only copy of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is that of the North-West Midlands, and scholars have pinned down its origin in Cheshire. In the center of this political strife, the poet must have had feelings of loyalty toward the king that so favored his own province, but may have also experienced feelings of uncertainty toward the future of Richard II's reign, especially when the livery formed the unsteady foundation for his control of the realm. The question of livery and maintenance during Richard II's rule alone reflects the unsettled moment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when the court adopts the badge of Gawain's shame as their symbol of honor.

Richard II's abuses of livery and other iconic signs of kingship and the probable influence on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the focus of the remaining chapters of this project. *Sir Gawain* reflects the growing sense of apprehension about the proliferation of *signa* and the problems of liveried association. As a livery badge, the function of the girdle might reflect the twofold outcome that Wallace sees existing within all forms of association; it may become either a symbol of *trawþe* and *communitas* or reflect a sense of "wickedness" that exists within every individual as a result of original sin. At first glance, it seems that the poet chooses the former option; the poem ends happily—the green girdle, at first a symbol of deceit, finds its place as the sign of unification for a kingdom.

And yet, its meaning is scarcely innocuous. At best, this symbol seems simply another ambiguous emblem of Arthur's reign; at worst, the residue of its original association, as a sign of deception and shame, will never be fully expunged. The negative

meaning of the badge could continue to hold sway over its bearers, threatening the honor and the unity that the members of this court should have “euermore after.” Thus, the poet, perhaps influenced by Richard’s own flightiness with iconic images, conceptualizes one of the most powerful signs in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the girdle, as a sign without predetermined significance—an indeterminate image with a host of meanings.

CHAPTER 2

SIGNS AND KINGSHIP IN RICHARD'S EARLY YEARS

Richard II nursed a growing sense of the power of signs and symbols at an early point in his reign. Even before he took power, chroniclers and literary figures constantly interpreted or reinterpreted signs and symbols so that they would come to signify some crucial element of Richard II's kingship. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter will be to trace the strange history of those signs in the early years of Richard II's reign. Such an investigation must necessarily include the king's coronation, his subsequent obsession with the so-called pageantry of kingship and his own appearance and behavior. In every case, the same events were used over and over again for dramatically different ends: Richard II attempted to prove his fitness as a king and his divinely ordained office, while anti-Ricardian dissidents pointed to the same moments in his reign to demonstrate his rash, wasteful nature and even to explain or predict his eventual downfall.

The Loss of a Slipper and the Finding of the Holy Oil

One of the first significant moments for the future king Richard II occurred when he was ten years old. At this tender age, he was inducted into his father's esteemed Order of the Garter on Saint George's day, April 23rd, 1377. Although the festival seemed auspicious, there was clearly an air of pessimism, which prompted the chronicler to add "*and unfortunate thynges and unprofytable harmes, with many evle, began for to*

sprynge, and, the more harm is, conteyned longe tyme after.”¹ Such ominous portents would continue to follow Richard II throughout his reign, and as he became increasingly unpopular, these initial concerns would emerge as full-blown signs of his failure as a king.

Two months later, Edward the Black Prince was dead, and Richard II had his first real encounter with the awesome power of signs and royal spectacle—his coronation. Crowned when he was ten, this elaborate ceremonial must have influenced him all his life, and the religious and traditional symbolism of the affair could only have confirmed his belief in the sacred dimension of his kingship. As Harold Hutchison notes, the early coronation of Richard II might have been a political warning by Commons, intending to convey their disapproval of his uncle John of Gaunt, but

For the youthful heir to the throne it was an impressive scene—his hereditary claims were now reinforced by the bold voice of the Commons of England, he was soon to be mightier than his mighty uncle, and to rule the great realm of England as undisputed monarch. It was heady wine for one so young (15).

The chroniclers have reported the splendor of the coronation scene with astounding, meticulous detail. The coronation more or less followed the *Liber Regalis*,² consisting of

¹ Quoted in Hutchison, 20.

² The fourth and most important of all English coronation services is that of the *Liber Regalis*, a manuscript still in the keeping of the dean of Westminster. It was introduced in 1307, and was used until the Reformation. The following is a bare outline of its main features:

the ceremonies began the day before the coronation, the king being ceremonially conducted in a procession from the Tower of London to Westminster. There he reposed for the night, and was instructed by the abbot as to the solemn obligations of the kingly office. Early next morning he went to Westminster Hall—and there, among other ceremonies, as *rex regnaturus* was elevated into a richly adorned seat on the king’s bench, called the Marble Chair. Then a procession with the regalia was marshalled, and led into the abbey church, the king wearing a cap of estate on his head, and supported by the bishops of Bath and Durham. A platform with thrones, &c., having been previously prepared under the crossing, the king ascended it, and all being in order, the archbishop of Canterbury called for the Recognition, after which the king, approaching the high altar, offered a pall to cover it, and a pound of gold. Then a sermon appropriate to the occasion

the richly symbolic, but undoubtedly arduous process for a boy so young; the ceremony in Westminster Abbey began with mass, a sermon, the taking of the royal oath, the presentation to and acceptance by the people, the blessing, and the anointing. Next, several symbolic adornments were given to Richard II by the Archbishop following the religious ceremony, including a sword, bracelets, the pall, the crown, the ring, the scepter, and the verge.

All of these elements in Richard II's coronation were infused with religious symbolism. As Walsingham recounts in the *Historia Anglicana*, the divine sanctity of kingship was assured when the Archbishop implored blessing of the new king:

“Omnipotens et sempiterna Deus, benedic, Domine, hunc Regem nostrum; qui regna omnium moderaris in saeculu, tali eum benedictione glorifica, ut Daviticae teneat sublimitatis sceptrum, et glorificatus in ejus propitius reperiatur merito” (*Hist. Angl.*

333). The religious importance of kingship is affirmed throughout the rest of the ceremony as well; when the Archbishop anointed Richard II with the holy oil, a choir sang the Antiphon between the Archbishop's speeches. After this, those present gladly

was preached by one of the bishops, the oath was administered by the archbishop, and the *Veni Creator* and a litany were sung. Then the king was anointed with oil on his hands, breast, between the shoulders, on the shoulders, on the elbows, and on the head; finally he was anointed with the chrism on his head. Thus blessed and anointed, the king was vested, first with a silk dalmatic, called the *colobiuni sindonis*, and then a long tunic, reaching to the ankles and woven with great golden images before and behind, was put upon him. He then received the buskins (*caligae*), the sandals (*sandalia*), and spurs (*calcaria*), then the sword and its girdle; after this the stole, and finally the royal mantle, four-square in shape and woven throughout with golden eagles. Thus vested, the crown of St Edward was set on his head, the ring placed on his wedding finger, the gloves drawn over his hands, and the golden sceptre, in form of an orb and cross, delivered to him. Lastly, the golden rod with the dove at the top was placed in the king's left hand. Thus consecrated, vested and crowned, the king kissed the bishops who, assisted by the nobles, enthroned him, while the *Te Deum* was sung. When a queen consort was also crowned, that ceremony immediately followed, and the mass with special collect, epistle, gospel and preface was said, and during it both king and queen received the sacrament in one kind. At the conclusion the king retired to a convenient place, surrounded with curtains, where the great chamberlain took off certain of the robes, and substituted others for them, and the archbishop, still wearing his mass vestments, set other crowns on the heads of the king and queen, and with these they left the church (“Coronation”).

cried “*Vivat Rex. Alle ‘luia*” ([sic] *Hist. Angl.* 334). The benediction, the enthronement, and the celebration of another mass where Richard II confessed and was absolved, merely served to make the religious dimension of kingship all that more apparent.

Although it was saturated with religious symbolism, the coronation ceremony concluded with a strange event that could have come straight from the pages of Arthurian romance: “the dramatic appearance of the King’s champion, Sir John Dymmock, in full armor at the Abbey doors to offer mortal combat to any opposition” (Hutchison 22). At the end of this long day, an exhausted Richard II was carried out on the shoulders of Sir Simon Burley, to rest at the palace. Before the banquet that evening, Richard II got his first taste of royal power when he created four new earls and nine knights. His youngest uncle, Thomas of Woodstock, was created earl of Buckingham; Sir Thomas Mowbray, a companion of his own age, he made Earl of Nottingham; Sir Henry Percy became Earl of Northumberland; and his tutor, Sir Guichard d’Angle, he made Earl of Huntingdon (*Hist. Angl.* 333). Hutchison claims that this early grant of titles was a well-tempered use of the young king’s power and, on this occasion, he seemed a promising king.

Oddly, this triumphant display of power in the young king’s reign did not capture the imagination of chroniclers, and it did not seem to obsess Richard II himself. Instead, it was the image of young Richard II, so weary that he had to be carried out of Westminster that became the indelible tableau for his supporters and his harshest critics. Hutchison tells us that “Richard lost a slipper as he went, but we have the word of an eye witness that even amid so much splendor and magnificence he played his part nobly in all the beauty of his youth” (22). Although Hutchison’s source, the *Chronicon Angliae*, supports this reading, not all chroniclers agree on the serenity of the moment. The

Westminster Chronicler, for example, recounts that moment because of its dreadful deviance from accepted custom:

It is generally accepted that immediately after his coronation the king should go into the vestry, where he should take off the regalia and put on the other garments laid out ready for him by his chamberlains before returning by the shortest route to his palace, but at the coronation of the present king the contrary was done, with deplorable results; for when the coronation was over, a certain knight, Sir Simon Burley, took up the king in his arms, attired as he was, in his regalia, and went into the palace by the royal gate with crowds milling all round him and pressing upon him, so that on the way he lost one of the consecrated shoes through his thoughtlessness (415-417).

Obviously, this account is not equivalent to the serene and gracious moment that Hutchison describes; instead, it presents the scene as it must have been, partly blaming the crowds and the chaos of the moment for the negligent loss of the slipper. The Westminster Chronicler does not lament the loss of the slipper any further, but he takes the opportunity to suggest that future kings not be allowed to leave the church after a coronation unless the king has gone to the vestry and decently put off his royal insignia as custom dictates (417). However, L.C. Hector and Barbara Harvey provide an important gloss on this moment; since the shoes were part of the regalia Alfred wore during his coronation in Rome by Leo IV, and later by Edward the Confessor at his coronation and entrusted by Edward to Westminster Abbey, the loss of the slipper was significant.

Many chroniclers bypass the incident entirely, and as a result it is difficult to know how seriously this incident impacted popular opinion of Richard II. For the most part, his coronation seems to have continued normally; he went to the banquet without incident, and was successfully presented to the public the following day. Although the unpleasant incident of the lost slipper seems to have faded away from public memory at this point in Richard's career, it was far from being completely forgotten. After Richard

II's death and the ascension of Henry IV to the throne, Adam Usk does not hesitate to reiterate this moment, with several significant changes:

At this lord's coronation, three symbols of royalty foretold three misfortunes which would befall him: firstly, during the procession he lost one of his coronation shoes, so that to begin with the common people rose up against him, and for the rest of his life hated him; secondly, one of his golden spurs fell off, so that next the knights rose up and rebelled against him; thirdly, during the banquet, a sudden gust of wind blew the crown from his head, so that thirdly and finally he was deposed from his kingdom and replaced by King Henry.³

As Paul Strohm affirms, no other account of the coronation mentions any other misfortune beyond the loss of the slipper. Even Adam's first account of the coronation does not include the detail of the slipper, claiming instead that bad council and numerous liberties of the magnates would lead to Richard II's misfortune. This, coupled with "the commonsense fact that crowns seem unlikely to be blown by gusts of wind from royal heads"⁴ suggests that Adam's retelling of the incident was constructed to illustrate Richard II's inability to control the symbols of his kingship from very early on in his reign. This moment in the *Chronicles* encapsulates a larger problem of Richard II's kingship—retrospectively viewed, it becomes the sign of the hatred of generations.

In the hands of a less subtle chronicler, the same unlucky event was reworked to "foretell" of Richard's apparent death by starvation. In this version, a number of other elements in Richard's coronation were brought together to explain yet another prophecy of another "certain knight"—an eyewitness who:

saw the king's slipper falling to the ground and saw the king at the banquet vomiting his food [*ubi vidit Regis sotulare ad terram cadentem et regem ad prandium cibum suum evomentem*']. He explained it thus: "This king will be

³ Adam Usk 91.

⁴ *England's Empty Throne*, 21.

glorious and extremely abundant in food, but he will lose the dignitas of the realm and in the end will die on account of hunger.”

Stohm asserts that the invention of a prophetic ‘knight of France,’ serves a recursive function. Prophecies such as these, no doubt created after Richard’s coronation (and sometimes after his death) attempted to show the consequence of signs throughout his reign. This created the illusion “that the present moment is the consequence of an inevitable and unalterable pattern” (*Empty Throne* 21-22).

Whether Adam Usk’s coronation prophecy was fanciful on Adam’s part, or reflected actual sentiment at the time cannot be determined. However, it is clear that Richard II was deeply troubled by the loss of the slipper, as he took great pains to replace the absent shoe with a new pair of comparable value, as the Westminster chronicler explains. In March 1390, Richard had sent Westminster a pair of “red velvet shoes, with fleur-de-lis worked on them in pearls, which had been blessed by Pope Urban VI shortly before his death; they were to be deposited with the rest of the royal insignia associated with the king’s coronation” (*West.* 415). Paul Strohm tells us that an inventory of the regalia taken in 1356 includes “‘*deux chaunceons de samyt rouge*’ (two slippers of red silk) as well as ‘*deux pairs desporons*’” so presumably, this gift to Westminster was intended as a replacement for the one that he had lost more than a decade ago. Richard’s attempt to rectify the loss, especially after so many years, suggests that he felt, at the very least, responsible for its loss. Or, perhaps, like Adam Usk, Richard thought of the moment as an inauspicious one, and yearned to replace the missing slipper in order to reaffirm his power as king.

The latter suggestion—that Richard considered the loss of a slipper inauspicious—is more likely the case. Richard II undoubtedly believed that coronation

conferred an indelible sign upon him, and that the shift of the sacredness of royal power, as compared with all other constituted authority, was strengthened through the religious and traditional elements of this ancient ceremony. Thus, the scandal that resulted from the loss of a valuable royal insignia seems to have sparked what Nigel Saul calls Richard's "abiding fascination with coronation regalia,"⁵ and his keen interest in the trappings of kingship continued throughout his reign. Around 1390, Richard became increasingly obsessed with externalizing the mark of his legitimacy to the throne; first he replaced the missing slipper with a new pair, and then, he is envisioned as a boy in the coronation scene of the Wilton Diptych.⁶

During the crucial period of 1390-99, he seems to have become fixated on the scene of the coronation, representing it over and over, in an attempt to affirm the legitimacy of his reign, and to assert his power as a king. Later, he was elated in his discovery of the holy oil of St Thomas in the Tower in 1399. Nigel Saul recounts:

For the first time, use was made of the miraculous phial of oil said to have been presented to Becket by the Virgin Mary, and afterwards hidden at Poitiers, until discovered there by Henry's grandfather, Henry of Grosmont. According to Walsingham, Richard had come across the phial while searching in the Tower a year or two previously and had asked Archbishop Arundel to anoint him with it. (423-424).

By this time, Richard's throne was in grave danger, and, if replacing the slipper at Westminster served a symbolic reaffirmation of his authority as king, being re-anointed with this holy oil, would once again establish Richard as unquestioned sovereign.

Traditionally, some kings used holier oil than the bishop's chrism, but the papacy would

⁵ Saul cites the same incident of the lost slipper and uses the same evidence as Hector and Harvey: William Sudbury's treatise on the regalia, incorporated in the *Speculum Historale*. Saul claims that Richard's motivation for giving Westminster the red shoes was to replace a "missing slipper of St Edmund which had fallen off at his coronation" (448). Saul most likely means Edward the Confessor here, not St Edmund.

⁶ A fuller explanation of the Wilton Diptych, and its symbolism, will be provided in the next chapter.

permit only an inferior grade to the emperor. However, this chrism had descended directly from the Virgin Mary's heavenly hands to Thomas Becket, and had been used to anoint Edward II.⁷ This oil undoubtedly conferred upon the anointed a place in the illustrious line of British kings,⁸ but, more importantly, it provided a divinity that superseded all other mortal accouterments of kingship. Unfortunately for Richard, his request to be anointed by this oil was flatly refused, and, after confiscating the oil, the archbishop bestowed the privilege on his usurper Henry.

Signs, Seals, and Livery

In addition to his focus on coronation regalia, Richard also attempted to change the significance of some of that regalia. During the king's minority in 1383-6, the use of the major seals was altered so that he might play a stronger role in government. He expedited administrative procedures, or simply bypassed them, by elevating the power of

⁷ In France, a legend about this celestial oil gained credence. Supposedly, as a special sign of divine favor, the Holy Dove had miraculously descended from heaven, bearing a vessel (afterwards called the Sainte Ampoule), containing holy oil, and had placed it on the altar. Since the oil used in his coronation had come direct from heaven, the king of France was *rex Christianissimus*, the Most Christian king. The first recipient was the Merovingian Clovis, but a drop of oil from the Sainte Ampoule mixed with chrism was afterwards used for anointing the kings of France.

The chrism was introduced into English coronations, for the first time probably at the coronation of Edward II. To rival the French story another miracle was related that the Virgin Mary had appeared to Thomas Becket, and had given him a vessel with holy oil, which at some future period was to be used for the anointing of the English king. A full account of this miracle, and the subsequent finding of the vessel, is contained in a letter written in 1318 by Pope John XXII to Edward II. The chrism was used in addition to the holy oil. The king was anointed with the oil, and next signed on the head with the chrism. As a result of the legendary origin of the oil, comparisons with Christ could be freely made. (Figgis xviii).

⁸ The oil may have linked Richard II with Arthur, at least in the literary sense. Clovis, the French recipient of the oil, was often confused with Arthur, sometimes with comic results. Fife writes:

Sigisbert VI, a Merovingian king-in-waiting, a century after Charlemagne had robbed the family of power, pathetically declared himself King Ursus (Bear) and tried to win back the crown from Louis II. His failure led to exile in Brittany. Thence to England where, out of the blue, it seems, he founded an English branch of the lost dynasty called Planta...hence the Plantagenets. Which may be nothing more than pure romance, to give it the polite name (29).

Hence, in the legends surrounding the holy oil, Richard, if anointed, could have been given a place alongside his "ancestor."

the royal seal. No formal means existed to sidestep the king's authority in this matter, "but after 1383 a pattern began to develop which witnessed a decline in the use of the privy seal to authenticate chancery warrants." It seems that the signet seal was repeatedly used to move the great seal, and Richard expressed his power through the use of a personal signet ring. In spite of his youth and the existence of a king's secretary, Richard seems to have blatantly taken advantage of a loophole in the system (Wiswall 11). Richard apparently used the signet seal to arrange financial matters until 1386, when Bishop Arundel of Ely refused to recognize the authority of the signet over the great seal.

Roughly during this time, Richard was also seeking other personal symbols of his kingship, and of his illustrious heritage. Apart from his unusual obsession with coronation regalia and his unique use of a personal signet ring, he wanted a symbol that could represent him alone. His first choice seems to have been his uncle John of Gaunt's livery, the collar of Esses. Apart from being a family emblem, Richard may have been attracted to the collar because it was an old and unusual type of livery symbol. It had been used by Gaunt and his retainers at a time when collars were unknown as liveries, even as far back as 1371. Richard's adoption of the badge was a haughty display of his own power: when Gaunt returned from Spain in 1389, he was met by his nephew, Richard II. During the meeting, Gaunt was wearing a collar of Esses but Richard took it from his uncle's neck at once and placed it on his own. Apparently, this became one of Richard's many livery badges, since

In 1394 Richard, fourth earl of Arundel, complained in Parliament that the king was in the habit of wearing the livery collar of the duke of Lancaster and that persons of the king's retinue did the same. The king answered that he wore the livery of his uncle Gaunt as a sign of love, as he did the liveries of his other uncles. In 1392 Richard ordered and paid for a gold collar of seventeen esses and

had another made with esses and the flowers of ‘souvenez vous de moi’ (Fletcher 191-2)

However, despite the criticism this badge elicited in 1394, it was initially associated with nobility. John Gower’s metrical chronicle, appended to his poem *Vox Clamantis*, speaks of the collar of Esses as a gift from heaven: a mark of faithfulness and true nobility (Fletcher 202).

Richard II possessed a genuine love of heraldic symbols as well, making use of these symbols as well as badges when it was advantageous for him to do so. For example, when the king prepared to lead his first army on an expedition to Ireland in 1385, he secured the highly revered banner of St Cuthbert for his journey; added to this banner were 38 standards of the king’s arms and no less than 92 of the arms of St George delivered from the privy wardrobe. He would also assume the arms of St Edward the Confessor, a move which had multi-layered significance.⁹ It was “designed to impress not only the wild Irish who held the Confessor in high regard, but also the none too docile English, with the special sanctity of the king’s position as the Confessor’s heir” (Gillespie 122).

The adoption of St Edward’s heraldic arms seems to have occurred before 1394, a time in which Richard was already experimenting with other types of livery. Richard also made extensive use of the livery of the Order of the Garter, distributing robes to the

⁹ Gillespie writes

Richard’s use of St Edward’s arms on his first Irish expedition is well known, but there is evidence to indicate that the king already had begun to impale his arms with the Confessor’s before the death of Queen Anne in 1394, since her arms appear (in at least two surviving examples) impaled with those of Richard and the Confessor. The symbolic conjunction of Richard and St Edward is again emphasized by the impaled arms on the reverse of the heavenly panel of the Wilton Diptych, and it was, of course, immortalized in Richard’s selection of his final resting place adjacent to the Confessor’s shrine. It is not necessary to mistake Richard II for either Sir Lancelot or Giles of Rome to recognize that the heir of Edward III both appreciated and manipulated chivalric ideas and ideals (122).

noble ladies of the court—a chivalrous, but unorthodox gesture. James L. Gillespie points out that the statutes of the Order did not limit the distribution of the badge to ladies, and Richard exercised his freedom in this matter to the fullest extent. Of course, Edward III had given his court ladies some emblems of the Order of the Garter, but “Richard was the first monarch to bestow such marks of honor upon women on appreciable scale, and he remained the most prodigal monarch in his distribution of these robes until the practice was discontinued by Henry VIII” (Gillespie 132). At least 36 court ladies received the robes of the Garter, and, as Gillespie points out, Richard seems to have used this custom to win the support of these ladies’ husbands. However, the badge of the Order of the Garter was more closely associated with Edward III, and, despite the political import of the Garter, Richard remained unsatisfied by the effects of this livery.

In spite of apparent loyalty between John of Gaunt and his young nephew Richard II, John of Gaunt’s use of the collar of Esses as his household badge may have impelled Richard to the distribution of his new livery, the badge of the white hart. The decision to adopt the badge came on the heels of Parliament’s attempt to abolish livery, part of Richard’s new rule that no magnate should provide so great a “livery and maintenance as the King” (Mathew 147). In addition to being a brand new livery symbol, the badge of the white hart did not have the same significance as the collar of Esses or the badge of the Garter. It did not imply the same chivalric bonds as knighthood, and yet it was not a temporary sign of allegiance, as livery badges had been in the past. Instead, it served primarily political ends, even finding its way to Richard’s allies in Spain. Gillespie claims

A privy seal writ dated 2 July but without regnal year declares that the king has granted twelve ladies, twelve knights, and ten squires license ‘to wear and use our

livery of the stag, each according to his/her estate, in the manner and style as it is used within our realm of England'. The king also ordered harts fabricated of gold. One of these was given to the archbishop of Cologne in 1398; a second was sent to the Byzantine emperor in the following year (133).

Richard gave his badge of the white hart to ladies, gentlemen, and regularly depicted it in works of art, or included it in the architecture of churches and other buildings. His intentions here were again political. Between 1394 and 1397, he embraced the idea of himself as emperor, rather than king, styling himself “entier emperour de son roiaume.” He sent the badge of the white hart to Cologne in an attempt to establish close relations with the king of that region, and sending the badge of the white hart to the Byzantine emperor was likewise an attempt to further his aspiration to become “King of the Romans” or Holy Roman Emperor. This distribution of livery was unlike anything that had occurred previously, and thus, Richard seems to have redefined the significance of livery alongside his imperialist ambitions. Gillespie sums up this phenomenon: “The king’s artistic tastes have led historians to search for an intellectualized theory of kingship behind such a programme...Richard seems to have exploited the visual impact of conventional symbols to win what support he could” (122).

Although some of these livery traditions were derived from the court of Edward III, Richard clearly manipulated the system for his own ends. Primarily, it seems that the use of his livery badges and collars were deliberate efforts to reaffirm the sanctity of his coronation, and to expand his regnal power. However, just as the symbolism of Richard’s coronation would later be used against him, so too would the proliferation of new signs and badges—especially that of the white hart.

CHAPTER 3 THE WHITE HART BADGE AND THE CONTROL OF SIGNS

As I described in the previous chapter, Richard II must have felt the power of signs, and, in hoping to control the objects of his coronation, he often relied on images and livery to prove his legitimacy and supremacy as king. However, it was the badge of the White Hart which afforded Richard this opportunity; it became his representational image, in which all of his power and his grandeur were invested. At the peak of his popularity, the badge reflected Richard II's sophisticated, deft use of signs; and yet, his unbalanced policies, political favoritism, and his grievous mistreatment of the livery system would later besmirch the glory of the badge. When Richard's power waxed, the White Hart badge was celebrated; added to the decoration of Westminster Hall, Westminster Abbey and all-pervasive in the Wilton Diptych.¹ However, unfortunately for Richard, when his power waned, and after his deposition, it also became emblematic of all of his regnal indiscretions.²

¹ The Hall remains a monument to Richard's court architecture: it was decorated with carvings of white harts, and was intended to be used for court feasts and court ceremonials. In all Richard spent £12,304 on Westminster during his last years (Mathew 36). It was also depicted on plates, banners, manuscripts, textiles, seals, and many other household items (Gordon 50).

² His indiscretions and injustices were manifold. He tampered with the Rolls of Parliament; he altered and nullified statutes agreed upon by both houses of Parliament. He exercised a dispensing power that was liberal beyond the custom of such a king as Edward III; in various ways he showed that he regarded neither law nor custom as binding his action (Figgis 75-76). There can be no question that by these measures Richard was attempting to create a written constitution, a *lex regia* which should save the rights of the English Crown forever. It is made high treason to attempt the repeal of the statutes; all solemnly swear to keep them (Figgis 76). The poet of *Richard the Redeless* touches on most, if not all of these unjust acts.

John Bowers may be right in suggesting that Richard II “anticipated by nearly three centuries the insights of Pascal” (80). For the elegance of the monarch, and overt displays of supremacy through spectacle, will inevitably contribute to the effectiveness of the king’s badges and other signs. His power can become invested in signs, only through outward displays of authority. Pascal writes

The custom of seeing kings accompanied by guards, drums, officers and all those things that bend the machine toward respect and terror, cause their face to imprint on their subjects respect and terror even when they appear by themselves, because one does not separate in thought their persons from the retinues with which they are ordinarily seen. And the world, which does not know that the effect comes from this custom, thinks that it comes from a natural force; and from that comes these words: “The character of Divinity is imprinted on his face, etc” (qtd. in Marin 14).

According to Pascal, the grandeur that one attributes to the king comes from the consistent association of the king with a certain vision of power. Through this act, the king’s physical body seems to become an iconic sign, as the connection between the signifier—the king’s physical body, and the signified—unusual divinity or grace, become habitual.

As Kent Grayson observes, when we are able to see the object in the sign, we begin to feel that the icon has brought us closer to the truth of that object; this effect is usually more powerful than anything an index or a symbol might create. Grayson points out the obvious problem of this representational framework:

instead of drawing our attention to the gaps that always exist in representation, iconic experiences encourage us subconsciously to fill in these gaps and then to believe that there were no gaps in the first place...This is the paradox of representation: it may deceive most when we think it works best (41).

As long as the king maintains a consistent self-image, and continues to impress the public with his own grandeur, the duplicity of such iconic signs will remain unbroken. The

signs of the king—his portraits, his badges, his liveries—will also carry the same paradox. They correspond to the king’s physical person, and, justified by their relationship to his image as an iconic sign, operate metonymically as signs in their own right. In the words of William of Ockham, the sign “does not make us know something for the first time, as has been shown elsewhere; it only makes us know something actually which we already know habitually” (49).

Consequently, a badge can represent what is already believed about the sovereign’s character, eliciting the same type response of awe and reverence as the king’s actual presence. As Louis Marin tells us, the king’s image *really is* different from the image or insignia of a feudal lord or guild; “the king’s world is set free in the infinity of each of his subjects representations” (xii). Subjects, once dazzled by the spectacle of the king, and swayed by the discourse of the court, will see the king’s fragmentary presence embodied in his signs.

It is not my intention to suggest that Richard II reasoned his own use of the White Hart badge in with the precise theoretical knowledge described by Marin. However, his almost obsessive attention to spectacle, as well as his belief in the uncontestable authority of his own livery suggests that his own thought process must have been along similar lines. He seems to have truly believed that his signs directly signified his royal person, and that his livery could further his imperialist goals to become the sign of his unquestioned majesty.

Like Pascal, Richard clearly understood that “elegance as a means of showing one’s power” (54) also applied to the selection of a badge. Originally a favorite piece of Richard’s jewelry, Richard seems to have chosen the White Hart as his livery badge

partly because he appreciated its ornamental and traditional quality.¹ When worn, the badge would have been sewn or fixed to the left breast. Even the less expensive variety were extravagant; if worked in cloth, it was of white silk with the crown and chain patterned in gold thread. If wrought in metal, it was often gold or pewter—more expensive badges for magnates could be a jewel, or set with rubies and sapphires.² Some of the more delicate badges were made of *émail en ronde bosse* (opaque white enamel fused over gold), a technique practiced on the Continent and perfected in France.

In addition to the badge's obvious physical beauty, it was introduced during one of Richard's most elaborate displays of regal authority. The chronicler of the *Vita Ricardi Secundi* provides us with the only existing account of the White Hart badge's first appearance: at the Smithfield Tournament in 1390, he flaunted the principal image of a white hart with a crown and a gold chain among his typical arms.³ Besides his heraldic and livery symbols, he wore his crown and full regalia, resplendently enthroned before at least two hundred visitors from France, Germany, and other regions. Richard clearly used the Smithfield tournament as an opportunity to become the focus of royal spectacle, "as well as foster his ambition for imperial promotion" by displaying his new symbol to foreign dignitaries (Bowers 97). By appearing in full regal dress, and by impressing

¹ Richard, exceedingly fond of jewelry, routinely added a number of different gilded or bejeweled emblems to his wardrobe. An elaborate pair of broomscod collars, symbolizing his Plantagenet ancestry, were even more exquisite—one was decorated with four rubies, three sapphires and twenty-seven pearls and the other with twenty-three pearls and a ruby (Mathew 28). Richard also owned several golden brooches of White Harts, pledging five of them as security for a loan from the City of London in 1379.

² Mathew, 27-28.

³ The monk of Evesham writes: "*Decimon, undecimo, et duodecimo die mensis Octobris rex tenuit suam magnam curiam in episcopate London, et apud Smythfeld hastilidia grandia. Ad quam curiam uenerunt extranei de Francia, de Selandia, de Alemannia, et de aliis partibus, ducentes secum equos optimos, et arma pertinencia, ubi datum erat primo signum uel stigma illud egregium in ceruo albo, cum corona et catena aurea*" (*Historia Vita* 132).

onlookers with his magnificence, that glory could then be transferred, at least in the public mind, to the badge itself.

The demonstration of Richard's power at the Smithfield tournament only augmented the badge's already layered significance. Firstly, it verified his link to his royal ancestors; Edward the Black Prince owned a bedspread that depicted a White Hart encircled with the arms of Kent, suggesting that the white hart, or, more precisely, the white hind, was the emblem of Richard's mother.⁴ However, the white hart also provided an important link to the Continent, which appealed to Richard's fascination with European culture and his imperialist aspirations. Bowers explains that Charles VI of France wore a similar badge from as early as 1380, "because he was reported to have captured a white hart wearing a crown-collar with the inscription 'Caesar hoc mihi donavit'" (97). Richard must have intended to draw on the connection; a crown collar was clearly added to his mother's emblem, creating the familiar symbol of the *cervus reservatus* pictured on the exterior cover of the Wilton Diptych.

Whatever his intentions were, the actual reason why Richard chose to reintroduce livery at this moment is still unclear. John Bowers, Paul Strohm, and many other critics see the adoption of the White Hart badge as a necessary step in the progression toward his absolutist goal. Nigel Saul proposes a number of solutions, suggesting, among other things, that Richard was ingrained with a love of badges and liveries from an early age, and that the display at Smithfield marks a point when Richard was "deliberately fostering a more elaborate and ceremonial style of monarchy" (340). This new style stressed:

⁴ His mother, Joan of Kent, had as badge a white hind. This white hind was also borne by Thomas Holland, Earl of Kent, her son by her first husband. There is also a theory that suggests Richard II adopted the emblem because it was a pun on his own name, evident in the French spelling "Richart" (Rothery 225).

The glossy impressions which official means of simulation leave upon spectators—whether by direct address or through modes appealing to collective distraction—tear attention asunder; they force the viewer or consumer into a glazed state of astonishment. Subjects are produced when they lose critical or historical conscience; when they succumb to dazzlement or charm of any origin (Conley, xii).

According to Saul, by this act, Richard II refashioned the image of the king, elevating himself to a higher level of mystique and supremacy. However, although the badge of the White Hart might have been the closest Richard II came to reinventing the image of the king, he had been refining his use of symbols for quite some time.

Early Attempts at Livery

The events at Smithfield were not the first example of Richard II's deftness at the manipulation of signs and symbols, and it seems that he seized upon any moment that could create a tableau of his supremacy as king. In an unforgettable moment, he took the collar of Esses off the shoulders of his uncle John of Gaunt, and placed it around his own neck, a gesture that symbolically asserted his claim to the throne, not only by usurping a symbolic link to the Lancastrians, but also by publicly demonstrating his command over his uncle. This spectacle of signification, like so many others throughout the king's career, was undoubtedly designed to impress the onlookers with the incontestability of his reign. Many of his personal symbols, like the collar of Esses, were chosen deliberately, meant to externalize his claim to the throne and affirm his place among the long line of illustrious kings.⁵

⁵ The collar of Esses allowed for a Lancastrian family connection, and the badge of the Order of the Garter demonstrated his link to Edward III. He also used the sun in splendor or a sun burst, a branch of broomscod symbolizing his Plantagenet ancestry, and a white falcon, derived from Edward II. These symbols, although overshadowed by the badge of the white hart, were not only important in Richard's lifetime, but in his death as well; the effigies of Richard II and Anne of Bohemia are heavily decorated with all of these badges, including, not only the white hart, the sun-burst, and the broom sprigs on that of the king, but the

He also delighted in banners, heraldic emblems,⁶ and liveries of every type, experimenting with badges even before he filched the collar from John of Gaunt's neck in 1389. Richard's first attempt at livery was the unlikely choice of Gilt Crowns—a universal, and somewhat generic symbol of kingship. The Westminster Chronicler explains that, after visiting a number of councils around the country, the king visited Cheshire, Wales, and Shrewsbury in 1387, taking a great many men into his personal service. He also sent a serjeant at mace into Essex, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk who

was commissioned to cause the more substantial and influential inhabitants of those counties to swear that to the exclusion of all other lords whatsoever they would hold with him as their true king, and they were to be given badges, consisting of silver and gilt crowns, with the intention that whenever they were called upon to do so they should join the king, armed and ready. This serjeant was eventually arrested in those parts, not far from Cambridge, and committed to prison (*West.* 187).

Eleanor Schifele suggests that the failure of the Gilt crown badge may have encouraged the adoption of a replacement badge. However, one wonders why Richard II would have bothered to replace the badge at all; the dismal failure of the Gilt Crown badge and other political disputes surrounding the king's rights to liveried maintenance should have discouraged Richard from continuing the practice.⁷

ostrich and a peculiar knot on that of the queen. For a fuller discussion of the golden funeral effigies of the king and queen see St. John Hope, 173.

⁶ In 1382 Richard II, who used the same arms as his grandfather, a quarterly shield of Old France and England, married Anne of Bohemia, daughter of the Emperor Charles IV. Her shield was also a quartered one, so the combined arms of the king and his queen, as shown upon her seal, formed a shield of eight quarters. This was further complicated through the later assumptions by King Richard of the arms assigned to St. Edward, a cross between five birds; and the eight quartered shield with this clumsy addition at one side is immortalized in the Felbrigge brass. For a picture of the shield, see St. John Hope, 89.

⁷ During the Merciless Parliament, Robert de Vere was charged with abusing the privilege of the livery system, having “caused the king to have a great retinue of sundry people and to give them sundry badges

As I have already mentioned, signs at this point in Richard's reign were already mistrusted, as evidence by The Cambridge Parliament in 1388. This attack on livery and maintenance highlighted its dangerous side, claiming that the unregulated and somewhat haphazard distribution of badges and other symbols allowed for a breakdown in the social hierarchy. The demand for restrictions on livery was in response to the lawlessness of men retained by lesser lords, as well as the irresponsibility of the magnates; however, the Westminster Chronicler hints at an even more important problem with badges:

At this parliament the commons complained bitterly about the badges issued by the lords, "since those who wear them are, by reason of the power of their masters, flown with such insolent arrogance that they do not shrink from practicing [various extortions in the countryside] it is certainly the boldness inspired by their badges that makes them unafraid to do these things and more besides" (354).

Although the chronicler often expresses dislike for the abuse of badges or symbols of livery, it is significant that he includes a direct quotation from the petition read to Commons. This suggests that the general population at that time was aware of the deception that badges seem to possess. In this instance, the sign seems uncontrollable and duplicitous because the relationship between the signifier (the physical badge) and the original signified (the liveried relationship) has suffered an aperture. Once the signified fissure becomes replaced by the arrogance of the bearers, the sign itself becomes suspect, and the badges would be vilified.

Although the lords offered, as they had traditionally, to discover those responsible for unlawful activity and punish them, this answer could not satisfy Commons. The origin for the unrest resided in the badges, not the men, and commons argued that "peace and quiet in the kingdom" could only be achieved if badges were abolished altogether. In

otherwise than was wont to be done of ancient time by any kings his progenitors" (*West.* 90). John Bowers also points out that the Duke of Ireland, when exiled, was forced to forfeit his livery (96).

a characteristically ostentatious gesture, Richard II intervened with an unexpected offer, pledging, for the sake of tranquility, and in order to set an example to others, to discard his own badges. He supported Parliament's decision to forestall bestowing or bearing livery—an act which pleased commons and sent the lords into an uproar. In a deft political move, he ensured harmony by allowing the lords to continue the distribution of livery “until the next parliament in the hope that in the meantime amendment will be effected by him and the lords of his council” (*West.* 357).

Richard's theatrical suggestion that he set his own *signa* was an attempt to use his subjects' apprehension about short-term affiliation for his own ends. His temporary success in securing public favor by this gesture was unsurprising; the decision did nothing to impede the distribution of livery—it was merely a brief, probably insincere expression of anti-livery sentiment, and a promise to take the matter under consideration at a later time. However, this gesture, just like his previous experiments with livery, was also a moment in which he flaunted his own power—as a king, he “performs” a particular role for the crowd. Strohm notes that “At this moment, he does not simply express an opinion but makes himself into an exemplum, an example of correct behavior” (64).

The “skillful handling of the badges issue”⁸ suggests that Richard had reached a new level of self-assurance and sophistication in his kingship; he was rapidly learning to “control” symbols, both by distributing them, and by taking them away. However, Strohm may be right in claiming that

so large, varied, and influential a body of discourse as that directed against liveries may be briefly turned to one account or another, it cannot be securely possessed—or not, at any rate, by anyone so deficient as Richard in the art of consistent self-portrayal (*Hochon's Arrow* 182-183)

⁸ For Further information on this issue, see Saul, 200.

In January 1390, the parliamentary Commons asked Richard II to keep his promise and discard his badges, and, as many critics have noted, a compromise ordinance was reached.⁹ Richard however, continued to hold the belief that no livery could surpass that of the king, and amended the ordinance to reflect his powers in the matter.¹⁰ Despite his promise to abolish his own livery signs, Richard would outdo the lavish circulation of Gilt Crown badges in 1387 with the adoption of the White Hart badge in 1390. Instead of keeping his promise to abolish his own badges, he introduced a “livery that he yaf lordes & ladies, knightis and skquiers, for to know his housholde from other peple” (Brut 343). However, Richard’s primary use for this livery was not merely to distinguish his own household from others, but to expand his own power. Badges, as Bowers explains, could only be worn by members of a lord’s *familia*, so Richard simply added scores of men to his household and bestowed livery on them, thus assuring himself a large retinue.

The Badge of the White Hart and the Wilton Diptych

One wonders why Richard II would have chosen to fall-back on livery to win political support, especially after his humiliating failure at livery in 1387 and the debacle at Parliament in 1388. In both cases, he had attempted to exercise control over liveried signs and failed. However, it seems that Richard began to feel the full power of his office during this period, and that he toyed with an entirely new rhetoric of kingship. This new rhetoric was designed to establish himself utterly as king, and in these years he reasserted the rights of his Crown above the control of the appellants. First, he redefined the

⁹ In this ordinance, liveries were restricted to household servants, “as well as knights and esquires retained under written indenture by bannerets and above.” (Bowers 97).

¹⁰ See the *Historia Anglica*, 196, for a full account of this meeting of Parliament. Mathew 147 provides a summary of this and other policy changes effected during 1390.

rhetoric of respect at court, introducing a new and lavish vocabulary with which he would reaffirm, and even increase his royal majesty. Saul explains that “the king was referred to as a ‘prince’ and addressed as ‘your majesty’ and ‘your highness’...The lofty language complemented such other expressions of deference as bowing or averting the gaze” (340). The Ricardian concept of regality, especially his insistence of court etiquette and ostentation, was, as always, designed to impress spectators with the splendor and sanctity of his royal office.¹¹

His restructuring of all facets of courtly life, especially his relationship with his subjects, was based on the new semantic system and intended to highlight his increasing authority. By stressing the power of respect within the representative framework of kingship, Richard II may have been doing more than massaging his royal ego. For, as Marin tells us:

Unlike the production of goods for the master’s use, in which the slave “inconveniences himself” because the master needs them, this production of the use-value includes a plus-value [with signs this] plus value [always reflects the] discourse [of] power. In effect, these goods...are less of use than of significance. They indicate, furthermore and all the more so, the mastery of the master (29).

In other words, the words of respect used to address one’s master or sovereign prove no usefulness, apart from their ability to further the image of the master’s greatness. Perhaps Richard II was thinking of William of Ockham, when he suggests: “Words are not connected primarily to concepts and then, through mental mediation, to things; they are directly imposed upon things and states of affairs” (qtd in *On the Medieval* 64). Or, perhaps he recognized the importance of what Boethius suggests “*voces significare*

¹¹ See R.H. Jones, 97.

conceptus"; to speak the name of the king is to bring his person into being, and to invoke the power relationship within the state.¹²

Whatever his influence, the effect of adopting this new lexis would not be trivial; beyond simply impressing his courtiers, it was also a deliberate attempt to claim on his supremacy. "Princeps" or prince outranks "cyning" or king in terms of the type of sovereignty it represents, and "your highness" suggests a deliberate attempt to insist on the untouchable sanctity of his Crown. It seems that Richard II, influenced by the symbolism of his coronation, regarded himself king by virtue of unction and the bestowal of the royal insignia. As Neville Figgis explains, Richard

was the last person to ignore the significance of the preamble to the great Statute of *Praemunire*, which asserts that "this crown of England hath been so free at all times that it hath been in no earthly subjection in all things touching the regality of the said Crown."¹³

As a result, Richard II did not distinguish between what Ernst Kantorowicz calls, "The King's Two Bodies,"¹⁴ believing that the king's physical person and the Crown were one and the same.¹⁵ Richard II therefore became the origin of law and king by God's grace and birthright; he can be bound by no earthly custom. The signs of kingship in the

¹² See William of Ockham, "*voce instituta ad significandum aliquid significatum per conceptum mentis, si conceptus ille mutaret significatum suum eo ipso ipsa vox, sine nova institutione, suum significatum permutaret...Sic etiam intendit Boethius quando dicit voces significare conceptus*" (*Summa* 1.8). Ockham's source is Boethius, the second book of *In librum De Interpretatione*.

¹³ 16 Ric. II c.5, Statutes of the Realm, qtd in Figgis 73.

¹⁴ Kantorowicz explains that the difference between the Crown as a symbolic, incorporeal body and the king's actual body was one of the most crucial distinctions made in the theory of the King's Two Bodies. The "incarnation of the body politic in a king of flesh not only does away with the human imperfections of the body natural, but conveys 'immortality' to the individual king as King" (13). In essence, this affords the king a kind of "super body," while simultaneously creating the need for the king to project the image of "manhood."

¹⁵ Richard was always guarding the privileges of the Crown. These attempts culminated in 1398, the year before his fall, when he proclaimed in his extension of the Law of Treason that every attempt against the king's physical person was a crime of "high treason against the Crown" (Figgis 79).

coronation ceremony conferred this ineffaceable mark of sacramental grace upon him.¹⁶

Thus, he was “absolute” monarch, and his physical presence of the king should elicit awe and respect from his subjects.

A consequence of this heightened sense of respect toward the king himself would be elevated respect for his badges. Under an absolutist monarch, badges and signs of kingship reflect his power, and “in effect, [attract] respect toward themselves” (Marin 30). The signs and badges of the king become the delegates of the king, and represent the dignity and force of his rule. As anointed sovereign, Richard II could have easily, albeit foolishly, believed that all signs and badges both signified and denoted¹⁷ his own personal glory. As the epicenter of power in the realm, all signs connected to him would radiate his own authority back to him. Through signs, Richard could hope to project the power of the king into the masses and assert his own rights of kingship.

The Wilton Diptych provides the most tantalizing evidence of the way in which Richard II was viewed, or wished to be viewed.¹⁸ The Diptych is doubtless another example of Richard’s interest in coronation regalia as a method of externalizing the sacred status of his kingship—a desire that preoccupied him for much of the early 1390’s. Richard could not restage his coronation, but the Diptych evidences his desire to return to it; the eleven angels around him and his youthful appearance suggest that he is being envisioned during his eleventh year, at the time of his coronation. Moreover, despite the religious function of the Diptych, the item is intended, not to portray Richard II

¹⁶ Even after his despotism, he still believed in the sacred vow of kingship. As Figgis tells us, he directed in his will, that he should receive a royal funeral (79).

¹⁷ As Eco claims, “for ‘denotatio’ one must remember that ‘nota’ was a sign, a token, a symbol, something sending back to something else” (*On the Medieval* 49).

¹⁸ The commissioner of the diptych is not known, but many scholars, such as Gervase Mathew and John Bowers suggests that Richard himself may have been directly responsible for the painting.

worshipping Mary and Christ, but to align him more closely with them. The king is unquestionably the focus of this painting:

Every figure, with the exception of one angel, either gestures or looks toward him: the three saints behind him introduce him with their hands, while looking purposefully towards the Virgin and Child and the circle of eleven angels, who are all turned towards the king. Even the pointing finger of the angel at the extreme right was altered from its position in the initial design to point not upwards at the Virgin and Child but unequivocally towards Richard: every detail ensures that the viewer looks first, not at the Virgin and Child, but at the kneeling king (Gordon 22).

As the focus of the scene, Richard dominates, even the Virgin and the Child—a strange anomaly in an altarpiece. However, his influence in the painting is magnified even further by the omnipresence of the badge of the White Hart, which appears prominently on the exterior cover of the Diptych. In the interior scene, Richard II and all eleven angels wear the badge of the white hart, probably as a show of support for his reign, since, as Dillian Gordon points out, they are “English angels.”

In this context, the initially mundane livery symbol gains a heavenly power. Bowers posits that the use of the badge of the white hart suggests a familial relationship between Richard and the angels, beyond his already obvious relationship to the divine family. From the diptych, it seems as if the eleven angels are about to welcome their twelfth member into their “heavenly company.” Bowers also reminds us that the purpose of livery badges was “to impose a group identity upon a lord’s affinity and to link its members together horizontally while focusing their joint affinities upon the lord who retained them” (95). Since the angels become the members of Richard’s household, he can, consequently, elevate himself to a similar plane as the Christ-child, who, traditionally, is king of the angels.

In the left panel of the Diptych, the royal saints of St. Edmund of East Anglia, Saint Edward the Confessor, and Saint John the Baptist, patron of Richard stand behind him in what appears to be a gesture of support. John the Baptist, Richard's patron saint carries an "iconographic lamb that recalls how he had hailed Christ—" *Ecce Agnes Dei* "—as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (qtd. in Bowers 29). However, from the spatial composition of the Diptych, and the fact that John the Baptist's hand rests on Richard's shoulder in what could be a presentational gesture, the lamb could refer to both Christ and Richard at once.

The fact that Richard and the Christ-Child wear the same shade of gold makes the connection between them even more explicit. Concealed in the halo of the Christ child are the thorns and nails of the Crucifixion, and Bowers interprets the juxtaposition of the Christ child and Richard to mean a kingship characterized by "glory and triumph, but [also] suffering and sacrifice" (29). Additionally, Christ child blesses a red-cross banner, which reflects the banner of St. George as patron of the Order of the Garter. Livery (both Richard's own and that of the Order) is here given a kind of heavenly significance—although Christ child does not wear the White Hart badge, he gives his blessing to the banner, demonstrating his own loyalty to it. The overt use of such a symbol connects Richard to them in the way that he is connected through clothing and the iconography of the lamb to Christ. Through this display of heavenly, saintly, and familial support, Richard demands his subjects complete loyalty.

All of the iconography within the Diptych confirms Richard II's reign, and a plethora of other symbols of Richard's kingship are hidden throughout the diptych.¹⁹ If

¹⁹ The white hart on the external cover is lying on a bed of rosemary, a symbol of his wife, Anne of Bohemia. There are also a number of heraldic emblems personal to Richard, including the lion guardant,

the heavens are not enough to legitimize him, he includes links to familial emblems—especially the Plantagenet symbol of the broom cod, which signifies his ancestry. This portrayal of the king seems to further his own goals of mystifying his own reign and presenting himself as a kind of God incarnate. His kingdom becomes a heavenly kingdom, and he exists as icon—on a semiotic plane unattainable by his mortal subjects, alongside Mary and Christ.

By linking Richard II openly with Christ, the painter of the Diptych presents an unambiguous image of the sacred status of his kinship. In fact, in this and other representations of his public persona, Richard seems to hearken back to an earlier concept of kingship, which is described in the *Norman Anonymus*. This view held that the king was the impersonator of Christ, who, on “the terrestrial stage presented the living image of the two-natured God” (Kantorowicz 47). In the system of kingship, the consecrated and anointed king could claim deification, since the act of anointing caused him to become a more excellent man—by divine grace, he became both mortal and eternal, a *Christus*, a God-man.

All of these methods of legitimizing his reign seem, for a time, to have reaped benefits for Richard. In September 1397, he was more powerful than ever; his majesty was unchallenged and his livery was, without question, the most potent livery sign in England. With this symbol, he redefined the relationship between a lord and his retainers, turning household affiliation into a near-religious alliance. Richard II began distributing the badge to a select group of 34 courtiers as early as 1398, and in 1399 he sent the badge off to a number of foreign powers in an attempt to solidify their loyalty to

the red cap of maintenance and silver helmet and the royal arms of England and France ancient (lions and lilies). Around 1395, Richard impaled the latter emblems with the mythical arms of Edward the Confessor (Gordon 21).

him; in fact, Richard's international position had never been so strong. By this time he could boast of a close family alliance with the Valois; the Archbishop of Cologne and the Elector Palatine, and, as Mathew claims, he was being wooed by Pope Boniface IX.²⁰ Richard, convinced of the sanctity of his office, devoted a great deal of energy to "guarding", "saving", and expanding his Crown and dignity. "In the shrill tones of the doctrinaire politician, he repeatedly declares that nothing he does shall threaten his prerogative" (Figgis 75). Even when he was threatened with deposition by the nobles, he held steadfastly to his belief in the rights of the Crown and the divinity of his office, believing that he, as anointed sovereign, could not be "un-kinged" so easily.²¹

Despite his skilled manipulation of signs and symbols, Richard made a number of key misjudgments. He seems to have depended on signs and symbols to support and represent his "greatness" even after his ostentatious court displays and his other attempts to gain public support waned. This was a major mistake, given that the power of such devices is directly dependent on their ability to elicit fascination within the public mind. For we know that "The fabrication of presence yields only a gloss of omnipotence"—an aura—but not an insurmountable power (Conley xii). A sense of power emerges, not from the appearance of badges and icons, but from the lustrous image of the king, and the subject's imagined relationship with that image. This is a system where:

Power can *see itself* as absolute, for the simple reason that the absolute always supposes a "relative" with which it must be compared in order to be greater than all greatness, but that the forgetting or the dissimulation of this relative alone

²⁰ Mathew 151.

²¹ In Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Richard II reiterates the "indelible character of the king's body politic, god-like or angel-like" (Kantorowicz 27). However, throughout the play, these ideas seem to disintegrate, turning to a state of half-reality, where kingship is merely a nothing, or a *nomen*. Eventually Richard II has to "un-king" himself, resigning his office to God alone, perhaps because the immaterial stuff of kingship can no longer be passed to a worthy incarnation.

permits it to pose itself as *absolutely* absolute...but [this edifice] also sets the lure where he recognizes himself in his absoluteness and, at the same time, the trap for his own desire for omnipotence (Marin 56).

In this phantasmagoric system of kingly representation, the continued control of the king is based on his ability to present himself within a signifying system. To perform this task necessitates the continuation of the spectacle, so that signs and symbols will reflect the glory of the Crown. The image of a king, as a figure of absolute authority, must provide a point of interaction with his relative inferiors. Subjects then imagine their relationships to that image, and, will be more likely to accept their subjugation to their majestic king because they have compared the figure of their king to others, and judged him “greater than all greatness.” This often unconscious judgment on the part of the subject allows badges and other icons to maintain their own power and ensures the integrity of the chain of power overall.

It seems that, in spite of his love of icons, Richard did not understand the theoretical implications of his actions. Instead of concentrating on the image of perfection and regal majesty that he had earlier cultivated for himself, he deferred to the rights of his ancestral lineage. Even though he claimed that his supremacy was the “only real guarantee of the customary lawful rights of his subjects,” his actions and his public image often contradicted this declaration (Jones 99). Moreover, Richard played favorites, drawing most of his retainers from the western regions, especially Cheshire, which had supported his father Edward the Black Prince and supported him in 1387. At this early moment, he did not yet openly contradict the Ordinance of 1390 but he established a connection with Cheshire, bestowing a few badges on its citizens, thereby allowing them into his “household.” However, his bond with his other subjects, especially the citizens

of London, was already slipping. Discontent with Richard, his political tactics, his treatment of his subjects, and his use of livery was brewing.

This dissatisfaction with Richard was plain by 1397. In this year, parliamentary Commons heard Thomas Haxey's petition against the distribution of badges,²² a complaint which was directed at the king. Richard's response to allegations of misconduct was of strict defiance. Richard II contentiously replied that "it was contrary to his regality for subjects to interfere with the governance of his household and, furthermore, such complaints offended the majesty which he had inherited from his ancestors" (Bowers 98). In this instance, he flagrantly went against the wishes of commons, recruiting a "vast retinue of lesser servants, most notably the Cheshire archers, so that a total of 750 were retained by July 1398 at the annual rate of £514" (Bowers 98). By this act, he clearly alienated most of his subjects, renewing afresh the old images of badges as the symbol of arrogance, both Richard's own, and that of his subjects. His dishonesty towards the vast majority of his subjects was enough to make much of his grandeur vanish, and cause his badges and livery to lose their original meaning and take on a different, usually unpleasant significance.

Perhaps as a result of the political problems with livery, and Richard's policies in general, literary works such as *Richard the Redeless* and *Piers Plowman* seem to reflect a heightened sensitivity to the behavior of such signs. These poets, according to Helen Barr, long for a "sense of linguistic decorum" when it comes to signs; "signs, if they are to be used properly, must proceed both from honorable intention and also be in

²² There was more at stake than livery itself. The petition presented to parliament by Thomas Haxey was indeed a broad critique of Richard II's governmental policies; livery was simply the most visible symbol of a greater problem of Richard's kingship (McHardy 108).

accordance with true action” (66-67). When the signs are used improperly, the entire signifying system is called into question and corruption results. For, as Barr explains, “While they ought to enable the system to work in a mutually valuable fashion, they fail to bring value to the system by concentrating solely on their empty significance” (72).

As a consequence of Richard’s political choices and his concept of kingship, the badge of the White Hart always had binary significance—it was simultaneously the most beloved and the most despised image of his entire reign. The poet of *Richard the Redeless* (c. 1399) recognized this when he cites Richard’s livery practices as responsible for breaking up the kingdom and turning his subjects against him:

*Omne regnum in se diuisum desolabitur (luce eleven)*²³
 Yit am I lewde and litill good schewe
 To coveyte knowliche of kyngis wittis,
 Or wilne to witte how was the mevyng
 That ladde you to lykynge youre liegis to merke,
 That loved you full lelly or lyverez {livery} begynne (*Redeless* Prologue 53-58)

Throughout *Richard the Redeless*, the poet often repeats a complaint that should be familiar to us. Those that “lyverez usith”—like the bearers of badges the Westminster Chronicler describes—give the appearance of goodness, but their overly gaudy display only masks the immoral ways in which they comport themselves. In fact, the poet stresses the arrogance that the badges gave the bearers, like those liveried men described in the proceedings of the Cambridge Parliament of 1388. The poet explains that those “that had hertes brestes...bare hem the bolder ffor her gay broches.” In this environment, the king would find himself in a sea of symbols, a world of “signes/that swarmed so thikke” (*Redeless* 1. 21). The actual effect of such signs, the poet believes, is the destruction of allegiance, and the creation of mistrust. The king would therefore be

²³ Every kingdom divided against itself shall be brought to desolation (Luke 11).

condemned to suffer the fate of his metonymical signs, since they begin to symbolize anything but Richard's supremacy and regnal control.²⁴

Moreover, Richard's over-confidence in the capacity of signs to act in a representational sense—as denotations of his own power—would have only remained intact had he continued to fulfill the image of his sovereignty that he worked so hard to cultivate in the early years of his reign. Once he deviated from that image, he was unable to regain it, and any course of action he took might inspire the suspicion of his subjects. Once a king's power is questioned, usurped, or redefined, in this way, his symbols also gain a new, unanticipated significance, or lose it entirely. As Umberto Eco explains:

If the real sign for individual things is the concept, and the physical expression (be it word or image) is only a symptom of the inner image, then without a previous *notitia intuitiva* of an object, physical expressions cannot 'mean' anything. Words or images neither create nor arouse something in the mind of the addressee (as it could happen in the Augustinian semiotics) if in the mind there is not, previously, the only possible sign of the experienced reality, namely, the mental one. Without such an inner sign, the external expression results in being the symptom of an empty thought (*On the Medieval* 65).

In other words, without the consistent belief in the inner image, or concept of Richard II as king, the physical symbols associated with him could not be animated by his power, or even represent his power. Once the dream of Richard's divinity and dignity had dissipated, all that was left were signs, and these are empty signifiers. In the words of the poet of *Richard the Redeless*:

Thane was it foly/ in faith, as my thynketh,
To sette siluer in signes/ that of nought serued.
But moche now me merueilith/ and well may I in soothe,
Of youre large leuerey [livery]/ to leodis aboute,

²⁴ In fact, as Nick Ronan has pointed out (311-14) the *signs* themselves become the actors in this farce. The harts and hinds "acombrede the contre" (1. 29). Ultimately, rather than imagining the behavior of harts to reflect that of the men who bear them, the poet finds the men to exhibit hart-like behavior.

That ye so goodliche gaf/ but if gile letted,
As hertis y-heedyd/ and hornyd of kynde
No lede of youre lond but as a liege aughte (*Redeless* 2.48-49).

CHAPTER 4

THE LIVERY SYSTEM AND THE CONCEPT OF TRAWPE

Richard II was inept at maintaining the signifying system of livery; his imbalanced distribution of signs, and his inconsistent self-portrayal led the badge of the White Hart to lose its respectability and become, simply, an empty signifier. Consequently, his subjects became keenly aware of the arbitrary nature of all signs, and especially suspicious of those signs which represent their bearers. Like the poet of *Richard the Redeless*, the *Gawain*-poet seems especially sensitive to the problems created when a sign's signified undergoes unforeseen changes. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the way in which the livery system and Richard II's manipulation of signs were likely to have influenced the concepts of signification that appear in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The identity of the poet responsible for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has yet to be discovered, but, as a result of linguistic research, critics have pinpointed his dialectical area in Cheshire.¹ Ad Putter claims that the latest possible date of the manuscript, based on its illuminations and handwriting, would be 1400. However, in the same breath, he also suggests that the poem must have been written some time before 1400, as Cotton Nero A.x. is "some stages removed from the author's original" (Putter 3).

¹ Ad Putter claims that "a surprising number of contemporary poems in alliterative metre from this region survive, many of them in the same dialect as the works by the *Gawain*-poet" (Putter 29).

This evidence is especially tantalizing; it establishes a closer connection between the Cheshire-born poet of *Sir Gawain* and the political designs of Richard II, which contoured late fourteenth-century England.

Moreover, intrinsic evidence from the poem, such as the architectural details of Castle Hautdesert, further substantiates the evidence for a late fourteenth-century composition date. This means, as Putter argues, that the *Gawain*-poet was writing his Arthurian Romance “around the same time that Geoffrey Chaucer was working on his *Canterbury Tales*, that John Gower was completing his first version of the *Confessio Amantis*, and that William Langland was rewriting *Piers Plowman*” (3). Interestingly, two of these authors composed verses to give Richard advice; Gower’s first version of the *Confessio* was intended as “wisdom to the wise” (8.1.3059), and Chaucer’s “Lak of Stedfastnesse” would likewise offer Richard an indication of behavior befitting a proper monarch. However, in their works, Gower and Chaucer more often flatter Richard than criticize him; it seems that neither poet will risk an open critique of their patron and sovereign.¹

The Concept of Trawpe in Chaucer’s and Gower’s Works

Although Chaucer’s relationship to Richard II may have been that of poet to patron in a traditional sense, the larger ideological context of Richard’s politics does impact on several of Chaucer’s works in interesting ways.² For example, an obvious similarity exists between the personage of the God of Love, as described in the Prologue

¹ John Gower also advises Richard II in the *Vox Clamantis*, a letter of some 600 lines, written in Latin elegiac verse. As Patricia Eberle argues, although he “altered the text at a later date, in this version Gower refers to criticisms of Richard’s government only to defend the young king against his detractors” (Eberle 235). However, since Gower feels compelled to scold the king about his apparent “boyish” attitude, we can surmise that this attribute was noted, and exploited by those who would defame Richard II.

² See Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow*, 72.

to the *Legend of Good Women*, and Richard II. Chaucer describes the god of love as a figure clothed in silk, with green embroidery, and red rose leaves, an outfit strikingly similar to one of Richard's most expensive dresses.³ Likewise, the physical characteristics of this god match Richard's own almost exactly—he is described with “gilte heer [corowned] with a sonne” and a face which “shoon so brighte/That wel unnethes mighte I him beholde” (*Legend*, Prologue 220-233).⁴ This portrayal, if it is indeed a reflection of Richard II, is basically a positive one, despite a subtle hint of the luminous god of love's possible cruelty—his stern gaze makes the poet's “herte colde” (*Legend*, Prologue 240).

Chaucer may have continued to think of the image of Richard II when developing *The Canterbury Tales*. David Wallace sees a parallel between the young, godlike protagonist of the “Manciple's Tale” and that “flour of bachilrie” (9.125), Richard II. According to Wallace, images of “youthful Richard as Phoebus personified (jousting in armor embellished with his grandfather's celebrated sun badge) seem almost *too* apposite” (257). Beyond evoking this particular tableau of the king, Chaucer brings in an iconic sign for his readers—Phoebus' bow. This bow is a clear iconic sign, with obvious implications in meaning; for this reason, it can be a better indication of the qualities of

³ Richard is stated to have owned a dress such as this valued at more than a £1000; it was perhaps not too dissimilar from that worn by Youth in the *Parlement of Thre Ages*, or this dress from the *Legend of Good Women*—green patterned in gold thread (Mathew 14). Another possible inspiration for this outfit might not have been Richard himself but Sir Simon Burley, Richard's tutor and close advisor, who owned a tabard of cloth-of-gold embroidered with roses and lined with green tartarine (Mathew 26).

⁴ Richard was undeniably attractive; Nigel Saul remarks that, in the 1370s, Richard “was probably Europe's most eligible bachelor. He was young, personable and handsome” (Saul 83). Even the chronicler of the *Vita Ricardi Secundi*, who disapproved of Richard in general, remarks on his beauty. He describes a man whose “shining hair flowed; his face was white and round and feminine, often flushed with phlegmatic blood” (*Vita Ricardi* 11).

this figure than the cloudy reference to the “fyry dartes” which are held by the god of love in the *Legend of Good Women*.

The inclusion of the bow is an interesting element within Chaucer’s retelling of the familiar fable. In the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower gives Phoebus a “nobler” weapon, the sword, but other versions, such as those in Ovid, and the *Ovide Moralisé*, adhere to the traditional bow and arrow as the image of Phoebus.⁵ Perhaps Chaucer had a specific reason for selecting the traditional weapon; in the “Manciple’s Tale” the bow is not merely a weapon, but a thing of great power—it is introduced, notably, as a “signe”—a description which does not exist in any other version. Chaucer writes:

This Phebus, that was flour of bachilrie,
As wel in fredom as in chivalrie,
For his desport, in signe eek of victorie
Of Phitoun, so as telleth us the storie,
Was wont to beren in his hand a bowe (125-129).

In this context, the bow becomes an important part of the iconic sign; Phoebus, the flower of knighthood and chivalry, could easily be recognized by the bow he carries with him.

David Wallace argues that the bow “performs a semiotic function equivalent to that of a livery badge.”⁶ By conceptualizing Phoebus Apollo as an archer-god, Chaucer recalls the icon of Cupid and is able to empower him with the force of that image. The result is two icons which seem nearly inseparable from one another; Wallace claims that “there is, in fact, little to distinguish this figure from the *Legend's* God of Love” (257). Thus, since

⁵ See Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Macaulay, 3.800–801: “And he for wraththe his swerd outbreide,/With which Cornide anon he slowh.” Ovid, the *Ovide moralisé*, and Machaut (in the *Voir Dit*) all supply Phoebus with a bow and arrow.

⁶ Not just any livery badge. Wallace is here referring to a specific moment in the Ricardian program, when Richard relied heavily upon the liveried Cheshire archers to act as his personal bodyguards “The bow itself [proved] to be the most potent and terrifying symbol of Richard’s personal authority.” Wallace then points to the incident in 1397 in which the archers had terrified “an open air parliament with the prospect of imminent death” (Wallace 257).

Pheobus takes and assimilates the known icon of Cupid into his own iconography, the sign of the bow may “come to summon mental images of Phoebus” and not Cupid only (Wallace 257).

The fate of the sign in the "Maniciple's tale" is not markedly different from the signs are viewed in *Piers Plowman* and *Richard the Redeless*. The initial correspondence between the signifier and signified contributes to the vision of Phoebus as iconic sign. His nobility and integrity are conceptualized within a single image; Chaucer tells us “And many another noble worthy dede/He with his bowe wroghte, as men may rede” (9, 112). However, this tale is concerned with exposing the truth behind the representational sign, and the attractive icon is eventually shattered. The revelation of the “stable and also so true” wife’s “untrewe” behavior begins to unmask the deception behind the image. In turn, the adulterous “vileyne” of Phoebus’ wife causes his dishonor, and, in “his ire” he kills her with his bow and arrow.

The bow, now associated with an act of murder, can no longer carry the meaning of nobility that it once held. As a result, the previous iconic sign becomes defunct and indeterminate—it becomes a thing lost in ambiguity and confusion. After slaying his wife, Chaucer tells us that Phoebus “brak his arwes and his bowe” (9. 269), destroying his former image. This gesture causes a new sign to arise from the “body of the hapless crow: his loss of song, white feathers, and absence from court will henceforth be read as “tokenynge” (9.302) of his guilt as an accessory to wife-slaying” (Wallace 257).

Ultimately, the original iconic image of Phoebus, the bow, is evacuated of its power and presence, and replaced with an empty song, an absence, a loss.

In all probability, the *Gawain*-poet did not read Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. However, the treatment of the sign in *Sir Gawain* follows a remarkably similar pattern overall; first, there is the representation of Gawain as the knight of "*trawþe*" realized in the iconic sign of the pentangle, a sign that is later metaphorically broken by his disgrace. The previous iconic sign, the pentangle, is replaced by a green girdle, which is initially the symbol of "ire" and outrage, and then becomes a token of guilt and shame. As Gawain explains:

*'Pis is þe bende of þis blame I bere in my nek,
 Þis is þe laþe and þe losse þat I laȝt haue
 Of couardise and couetyse þat I haf caȝt þare;
 Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne,
 And I mot nedeȝ hit were wyle I may last;
 For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit,
 For þer hit oneȝ is tachched twynne wil hit neuer' (Gawain lines 2506-2512).*

In this context, the defeat of Gawain, as Chaucer demonstrates with Phoebus, causes the iconic sign to be broken. When this occurs, the leftover signifiers—liveries and badges especially—must be discarded or granted some new significance. Accordingly, the token of Phoebus' guilt is reflected by the crow, and, likewise, Gawain sees his own shame in "*þe token of vntrawþe*"—the green girdle.

The obvious parallel between Gawain's situation and Phoebus' is that both characters wind up committing acts of "*vntrawþe*" in the hopes of preserving their honor, and their reputations. However, the "Maniciple's tale" offers its readers some words of advice in order to avoid the problems encountered by Phoebus. The author warns against using "wikked" words and lies, since they lead to betrayal, and claims that

[he] that hath mysseyd, I dar wel sayn,
 He may by no wey clepe his word agayn.
 Thyng that is seyð is seyð, and forth it gooth,
 Though hym repente, or be hym nevere so looth.

He is his thral to whom that he hath sayd
 A tale of which he is now yvele apayd.
 My sone, be war, and be noon auctour newe
 Of tidynge, wheither they been false or trewe.
 Whereso thou come, amonges hye or lowe,
 Kepe wel thy tonge and thenk upon the crowe (9. 353-362).

In this instance, the moral of the tale is to remain truthful, and restrain your tongue, lest you suffer the fate of the crow, which was rendered speechless and thrown out of the house. Ultimately, this tale serves as a warning, urging that its readers remain mindful of honesty and mindful of that which is “*trewe*.”

Such a “deep moral concern with *trawþe* is not in itself exceptional”; according to Ad Putter, “it occupied many of the *Gawain*-poet’s contemporaries” (44). In addition to Chaucer, Gower, in the *Confessio*, refers to the exact problem of kingship and truth:

And the vertus whiche are assised
 Unto a kinges Regiment,
 To take in his entendement:
 Wherof to tellen, as thei stonde,
 Hierafterward nou woll I fonde.
 Among the vertus on is chief,
 And that is trouthe, which is lief
 To god and ek to man also (*Confessio* VII, 1719-1725).

It seems that the Ricardian poets had put *trawþe* high on their agendas, since Gower and Chaucer both refer to the necessity of true and plain words, devoid of “double speche.”⁷ This focus was probably a result of the tumultuous political situation of Richard’s later years; his own double-talk, compounded by the misuse of livery and maintenance, and myriad social upheavals had forced these poets to come to terms with a complex and fluid system of relationships. In short, their society seems to exalt *trawþe* as the highest

⁷ Gower ultimately offers the same advice as is found in Chaucer’s “Manciple’s Tale.” Gower writes: “The word is tokne of that withinne,/Ther schal a worthi king beginner/To kepe his tunge and to be trewe/So schal his pris ben evere newe” (*Confessio* 1737-1740)

virtue because keeping promises and honoring contracts is vital in a society that has “lost confidence in its immutability” (Putter 45).

However, the puzzle of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is that, despite similar ideological concerns with contemporary works, the poem does not end with an outright condemnation of Gawain’s lack of *trawþe* or a moral rejoinder. Instead, as Barron observes “we have been invited to laugh at Gawain” (144). The sign of dishonor, the green girdle, is given a new meaning under the auspices of Camelot; rather than simply signifying the emptiness of Gawain’s former image, it becomes a symbol of honor, and seemingly becomes an iconic sign in its own right. For the *Gawain*-poet explains:

*þat lordes and ladis þat longed to þe Table,
 Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
 A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryȝt grene,
 And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were.
 For þat watz acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table,
 And he honoured þat hit hade euermore after,
 As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce (Gawain 2515-2519).*

The iconic sign of truth, seen in Gawain’s pentangle, is broken by the deception of his host, and then, after a brief flirtation with emptiness and shame accorded to the failed sign in other contemporary works, the girdle gains an unexpected significance. It becomes a sign of honor—the liveried sign of the renown and honor of the Round Table. Furthermore, this livery functions as the final iconic sign in the text, the indelible image that will forever appear in the best book of Romance.

There is a positive dimension to the liveried signs in *Sir Gawain* that does not necessarily appear in other contemporary works. It is impossible to know the poet’s exact motivation for this shift, but one can suggest that, like Chaucer, he was responding to the climate of Richard II’s reign. He seems to have had intimate knowledge of

Richard's courtly practices. Richard II's court would eventually find its nub in that region, "culminating in his elevation of the earldom of Cheshire to an independent principality within the realm" (Putter 31). Richard II's recruitment policies repeatedly demonstrated a predilection for Cheshiremen, and they reciprocated with loyalty to the Crown and to the badge of the White Hart. Thus, the Cheshire-born *Gawain*-poet, although probably not a court-poet, was nevertheless

steadily and specifically royalist, revealing a concern for the precise practice of kingship by his obsessive recourse to regalian images. Themes of kingship are explicit throughout the five poems attributed to him, even in the overtly moral and religious poem *Cleanness*, whose central theme turns out to be distinctly Ricardian⁸ in terms of what the documentary record tells us (Bowers 16).

In *Cleanness*, the poet demonstrates an obvious familiarity with Richard's political strategies and persona, and as Bowers asserts, he even seems to indirectly praise Richard's hygienic fastidiousness by linking it with God's perfect cleanliness.⁹

Cheshire had a history of gladly accepting the liveries of the king; in 1387, during a ten-month "gyration" through the region, Richard recruited the Cheshire archers with badges of golden crowns, and in later years, he awarded them his badge of the White Hart, and for a time, the banner of St. George, also the banner of the Order of the Garter, flew over Cheshire. And, for a time, the sublime nature of livery that Richard II longed to illustrate, in Cheshire and elsewhere, seems to have influenced the *Gawain*-poet. For example, the Pearl Queen and the rest of the divine procession, as Bowers explains, "are clothed in identical gowns. And the poet invokes the precise terminology of 'livery' so that they might not be confused with some religious order: 'And all in sute her liuré3

⁸ Bowers is here referring to Richard's obsession with "personal cleanness." Richard II was meticulous in this regard; he constructed bath-houses with hot and cold water, both for himself and for his subjects, introduced the practice of eating with spoons, and invented the handkerchief (16).

⁹ See Bowers, 16.

wasse” (*Pearl* line 1108). The liveried procession, in this context, remains idealized, a “triumphal celebration” of eternal life, and the dream of perfect and serene fraternity (Bowers 139). In *Pearl*, livery bears no trace of a corruptive, or potentially corruptive influence—instead, it is a sign of redemption.

The North West Midlands was in the foreground during the dramatic final years of Richard II, and although the *Gawain*-poet may have been loyal to Richard II, as many Cheshiremen were, he could not have remained immune to the controversies of Richard’s last years. During the most turbulent years, the *Gawain*-poet may have felt some doubt about the success of Richard’s campaign. Aspects of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* suggest that the poet was responding, perhaps unconsciously, to the charges brought against Richard II. Bowers notices the link between “*childgred*” Arthur and his company of “*berdlez childer*” to the allegations of Richard’s own immaturity and unreliability. Other details of the narrative, especially its careful attention to the bejeweled costumes, the feasts served, and the castle décor also bear striking resemblance to Richard’s own tastes, all eventually labeled extravagant by his detractors.¹⁰ Therefore, given his seeming loyalty to Richard in *Pearl* and *Cleanness*, and the political turmoil in Cheshire, one might imagine that the poet’s attitude toward Richard II would have been ambivalent at the very least.

In *Pearl* the livery badge provides a way of articulating a clear relationship between the signifier (their livery and identical dress) and the signified (membership in the community of heaven). We find no such simplicity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; it is a poem overwrought by signs and the problem of “*doble speche*” already confronted by Chaucer and Gower. And yet, unlike other poets, the *Gawain*-poet does

¹⁰ See Bowers, 17.

not seem to destroy icons in order to give us a clear sense of the “right” course of action or truth. In *Sir Gawain*, signs endlessly confound the viewer; as R.A. Shoaf has noted, “their very multiplicity vex and question any exclusivity in interpretation” (“Syngne of Surfet” 153). The relationship between the countless signifiers and their signified seems particularly occluded, and it seems that only particular instances of signification exist and there can be no universal meaning for these signs. It is as if “the classical notion of ‘sign’ dissolves itself into a highly complex network of changing relationships” (*Theory of Semiotics* 49, Eco's italics).

The Green Knight as Arbitrary Sign

The Green Knight is the most frightening figure in the whole of *Sir Gawain*, and for good reason. Aside from a monstrous appearance, he is over-determined by signs—signs that are frightening in their arbitrariness, like a riddle that will never be solved. Here, the threat of emptiness in his meaning is just as terrifying as the possibility of having too many meanings, many of which contradict each other. Initially, we search for meaning on familiar ground, looking for his “cultivated” aspects through the refinement of dress:

*Ande al grayped in grene pis gome and his weded:
 A strayt cote ful strezt, pat stek on his sides,
 Amere mantile abof, mensked whithinne
 Wyth pelure pured apert, pe pane ful clene [...]
 Bope pe barees of his belth and oper bytpe stones,
 Pat were richely rauled in his array clene
 Aboutte hymself and his saddel, vpon silk werkez.
 Pat were enbrauded abof, wth bryddes and flytzes
 With gay gaudi of grene, pe golde ay inmyddes.
 Pe pendautes of his payttrure, pe proude cropure [...]
 Pat euer glemered and glent, al of grene stones (Gawain lines 151-172)*

The Green Knight is dressed elegantly in green, from head to toe, and there is a curious blend of refinement and raggedness to his dress. Several subtle details characterize his manner of dress: the ermine trim of his mantle and hood, the bright gold on silk borders, regal trefoil designs, and embroidered butterflies and birds on his clothing and saddle. His hair is well curled, combed, and bejeweled: “*folden in wyth fildore aboute pe fayre grene*” (Gawain 170-189). Moreover, the cultivated aspects of his dress are complemented by his knightly form:

*Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were,
 Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene,
 And þat þe myriest in his muckel þat myȝt ride;
 For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne,
 Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale,
 And alle his fetures fol3ande, in forme þat he hade,
 ful clene (Gawain lines 140-146).*

J. A. Burrow notes that the Green Knight is, in fact, “the fine figure of a man, according to the medieval courtly ideal.” Nevertheless, the “conventional contrast between massive body and slender waist” is highly pronounced in this description, a physical characteristic that compounds the uncertain nature of the Green Knight (Burrow 13). Thus, even though this character resembles, in part, the “ideal knight,” his imposing size, “elvish” shape, red eyes and green skin and hair clearly suggest otherworldliness. The Green Knight embodies the very nature of the sign, which is to be two things at once, courtier and wild-man, genial host and threatening enemy. He is the ultimate semiotic and logical nightmare.

Burrow explains that the “whole of the following description hovers in a similar way between the monstrous-supernatural and the merry human” (13). However, although much ink has been spilled in the attempt to explain the “real” significance of the color

green, in relation to the Green Knight's identity,¹¹ the court at Camelot can make no sense of his appearance:

*Ther watz loking on lenþe þe lude to beholde,
For vch mon had meruayle quat hit mene my3t
þat a habel and a horse my3t such a hwe lach,
As growe grene as þe gres and grener hit semed,
þen grene aumayl on golde glowande bry3ter.
Al studied þat þer stod, and stalked hym nerre
Wyth al þe wonder of þe worlde what he worch schulde.
For fele sellyez had þay sen, bot such neuer are;
Forþi for fantoum and fayry3e þe folk þere hit demed (Gawain 233-240).*

The Green Knight's form and mannerisms are so contradictory and unbelievable that the courtiers at Camelot are initially speechless, as they have never seen such a marvel in their lives. Even after their close inspection of his apparel and his person, he resists definition so completely that they believe he must be illusion. And, unbeknownst to Gawain at this early stage, they are correct: the Green Knight is, in fact, the product of Morgan le Fay's illusion.

As illusion, he is always void of any "natural" center or structure; he *appears* to be a knight, and he *appears* to issue a challenge to Arthur's court, but the "signs" he presents have multiple, and irreconcilable meanings. R.A. Shoaf, in addressing this "surfeit of signs," points to the end of the description, in which the poet describes the objects carried by the Green Knight: an axe and a sprig of holly. He writes:

¹¹ The most generally accepted meanings for the color green is the color of fairies, the color of the dead, and the devil (Burrow 14). However, a number of other meanings have also been suggested, including the possibility that the Green Knight might be a real man, such as Amadeus VI, also known as the "Green Count" (see D'Ardenne 113) or the "green squire"—a West Midland man supposedly serving at Richard's court (see Highfield 18). Still others suggest that he might be the *aghlich myster*, an agent of divine intervention (Pollard 86-87) or a representative of Christ (Besserman 219-222) or Thor (Zalatel 29-30), and still others have argued that the Knight's green attire and red eyes make him the specter of Christmas. For still more interpretations, see Vantuono, 159-160.

Arthur, and Gawain after him, for example, can only interpret the Green Knight's challenge as implying that he, Arthur or Gawain, is to strike the blow with the ax, whereas, in fact, the challenge is sufficiently ambiguous to leave open the possibility of Arthur or Gawain critically choosing the "holyn bobbe" as the weapon to use ("Syngne of Surfet" 158).

The precise rules of the Green Knight's "game," presumably a challenge to the court of Arthur, are somewhat mysterious. As Shoaf asserts, the ambiguity in the rules of the game would have allowed for it to proceed in a much less lethal direction, had Gawain only chosen the harmless "holyn bobbe" as a weapon. However,

Arthur and Gawain, in short, like the rest of the courtiers, haven't the critical temperament, at least not yet--neither can yet gloss the ax with the "holyn bobbe" and construe the two of them in terms of a different relationship. Hence, each fails to interpret the ambiguity, and Gawain as a consequence takes the lethal weapon, committing himself thus to a life-imperiling encounter a year hence ("Syngne of Surfet" 159-160).

At this point in the poem, Gawain and Arthur, although mystified by the Green Knight's appearance, readily accept the axe as the sign of physical combat, even though more than one option exists.

The reason why Gawain chooses the axe as his weapon, and not the holly bob has been discussed by many critics. Ross Arthur has called it an "iconography of two hands" in which a choice is offered between two contradictory signs. As Shoaf suggests, the critical attitude at Arthur's court precludes them from choosing the holly, because the ax, to the somewhat warlike society of knights appears to be the "natural" sign for "*weppen*." Of course, the seeming "naturalness" of the sign is underscored semantically, by the ambiguity of the Green Knight's own proposal. We are encouraged, by his argument, to choose the axe instead of the holly:

*Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
 Pat dar stifly strike a strok for an oþer,
 I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche,
 Dis ax, þat is heuë innogh, to hondele as hym lykes,
 And I schal bide þe fyrst bur as bare as I sitte.
 If any freke be so felle to fonde þat I telle,
 Lepe ly3tly me to, and lach þis weppen,
 I quit-clayme hit for euer, kepe hit as his auen (Gawain 286-294).*

The premises of the game seem to mention the axe directly—it is the axe, “þys giserne ryche” that will become the prize for the challenger who strikes a blow—presumably with the axe. Moreover, since the axe is the only object mentioned in the rules of the game, the active words of combat seem to refer to it—it is the object which can be handled and used to deliver the first strike. Thus, by the time the Green Knight theatrically asserts, “*I quit-clayme hit for euer*” the axe seems to be the only weapon choice possible. In this instance, our blindness to the ambiguity of the sign leads, as Eco might suggest, to

a mode of argument that, while using probable premises and considering only a partial section of a given semantic field, pretends to develop a 'true' argument, thus covering up the contradictory nature of the Global Semantic System and presenting its own point of view as the only possible conclusion (whether this attitude is deliberately and cynically adopted by a sender in order to deceive a naive addressee, or whether the sender is simply the victim of his own one-sidedness) (*A Theory of Semiotics* 3.5.1, 191).

The sign (the iconic image of the Green Knight holding two “weapons”) is ambiguous. It is part of a system like Eco’s “Global Semantic System”—a formation that designates a free arrangement of signs and signifying clusters—in which language and all its possible textual usages are implicated (*Role of the Reader* 68). According to Eco, the presence of such a structure allows for one type of metonymic relation to emerge—a *codified* metonymic relation, inferable from the very structure of the semantic field (*Role of the Reader* 68). *Semiotic judgments* can be made based on the code, and, since the dominant

object in the Green Knight's discourse is the axe, we assume he means for Gawain to use the axe. This semiotic operation occurs even though there is another legitimate sign; although it is "clearly" a viable option as "*weppen*," the holly bob has nevertheless been elided by the one-sidedness of the discourse.

As I suggested in the previous chapter, when the object seems naturally represented in the sign, we believe that the icon has brought us closer to the "truth" of that object. Instead of engaging the duplicity of the sign, or the fissures within its representation we, like the court at Camelot, fill the gaps unconsciously with visual and semantic clues. Therefore, it seems perfectly "natural" that Gawain should choose the axe, since, based on the construction of the argument, it appears as the only "true" and proper answer to the challenge issued. This drive to discover the true meaning of the sign, however, ultimately only provides a false sense of security; the sign has been given provisional meaning, but its meaning is not necessarily the safest, or even the best option available.

CHAPTER 5 THE PENTANGLE AND THE GREEN GIRDLE

As I explained in the previous chapter, there is evidence for the theory that the *Gawain*-poet was responding to the same problematic of livery, as well as broader concerns about the nature of signs that exist in Chaucer, Gower, William Langland, and the poet of *Richard the Redeless*. However, the *Gawain*-poet's response to the issues surrounding livery, signs and *trawþe* is also plainly different from any of his contemporaries. Gower and Chaucer both champion *trawþe* as a lack of deceit and doubletalk which leads to right action;¹ Langland, and the poet of *Richard the Redeless*, likewise convey the message that signs can only be trusted if they proceed from honesty and true intentions.

The *Gawain*-poet seems to be somewhat at odds with his contemporaries, since, for him, "double speche" does not automatically suggest duplicity or *vntrawþe*. Instead, the *Gawain*-poet, whose concern with *trawþe* might best be viewed in terms of its most obvious icon—the pentangle on Gawain's shield—presents the issue ambiguously. The geometrical shape of the pentangle, with its unchangeable, interlocking lines, deceives us precisely because it presents itself as the natural, immutable sign of truth.² Like Pascal, Charles Peirce explains the mental process necessary to create an iconic sign:

¹ See Gower, *Confesio Amantis*, VII, 1531-1536.

² Shoaf has argued that the connection between the moral concept truth and the geometrical figure is not merely arbitrary. He writes, "Solomon was the first to see, the pentangle is of its nature *like* truth--or so the poet claims. Both are fivefold, interlocking, 'endless.'" (Poem as Green Girdle 70-71).

Any two objects in nature resemble each other, and indeed in themselves just as much as any other two; it is only with reference to our senses and needs that one resemblance counts for more than another...Resemblance is an identity of characters; and this is the same as to say that the mind gathers the resembling ideas together into one conception (Peirce 1.365).

The result of a perceived similarity between the iconic sign of the pentangle and the abstract concept of truth causes the viewer to assume that they naturally correspond to one another. We assume that the pentangle is, in fact, the natural sign of truth because we perceive a correspondence between two objects, even if no shared identity exists in reality. Thus, the inferential nature of cognition creates an icon because it bears a resemblance of some sort to its object, "whether any such Object actually exists or not" (Peirce 2.247).

The pentangle on Gawain's shield could be called an iconic sign, because, as Shoaf suggests, it is the likeness of its object, "a kind of geometrical 'picture' of truth" (*Poem as Green Girdle* 70-71). In fact, the poet gives us some suggestion as to the origin of this likeness, explaining how the sign's relationship as a "token" of truth was established:

*Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle
In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat hit habbez,
For hit is a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez,
And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oþer,
And ayquere hit is endelez; and Englych hit callen
Oueral, as I here, þe endeles knot.*

Presumably, Solomon imagined the pentangle as a natural sign—in the Augustinian sense—because of its geometry.¹ However, the poet does not explain why the appearance of the pentangle, with its five interlocking lines, should be a token of truth. Instead, by

¹ The suggestion that the pentangle is somehow a natural sign may remind us of Augustine, who claims, "those are natural which, without any desire or intention of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves, like smoke which signifies fire. It does this without any will to signify" (Augustine 34).

these words, the poet encourages us to see a relationship between the physical description of the pentangle and the abstract qualities of truth, whether that relationship really exists or not. Furthermore, the iconicity of the sign can lead us to confuse its identity for what it represents or signifies. As Peirce argues:

Icons are so completely substituted for their objects as hardly to be distinguished from them. Such are the diagrams of geometry. A diagram, indeed, so far as it has a general signification, is not a pure icon; but in the middle part of our reasonings we forget that abstractness in great measure, and the diagram is for us the very thing. So in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream--not any particular existence, and yet not general. At that moment we are contemplating an icon (3.362).

The object that the icon represents appears immediately visible and even palpable to the viewer, as if we were confronted with the thing itself. Thus, since we assume that the Pentangle must contain the same properties as its represented object, it seems that we are looking at the object itself. In addition, we can make inferences about that object, since its identity seems to be immediately presented to us by its iconic sign.

However, the identity of the object only *seems* to exist within the iconic sign. Because we can see the object in the sign, we assume that we are looking at the truth in that object; and, when we forget the abstractness of the pentangle's relationship to its object, it is possible to see the pentangle as the very token of truth itself. At this very moment we are seduced by the sign, since an icon maintains its semiotic function by resembling the conspicuous qualities of the object, even though it does not actually represent the object itself. Peirce clarifies: "Each Icon partakes of some more or less overt character of its Object. They, one and all, partake of the most overt character of all lies and deceptions—their Overtness" (1.386). By this observation, Peirce echoes what

Pascal and other theorists of iconicity have claimed; the icon persuades the viewer to suppose that no gaps exist in its representation at all; in looking at the icon, we are hoodwinked into believing that the very kernel of the object's truth appears before us, even though what we are looking at is merely an empty resemblance.

Like the iconic representations of Richard II I described in Chapter 2, this sign of the pentangle presents itself as “natural” through duplicity. Indeed, as Shoaf tells us, it appears “more natural than most signs”; consequently, because it seems “so close to its signified...the pentangle can all too easily obscure the distance or, better, the difference between itself as sign and what it signifies” (*Poem as Green Girdle* 71). The problem of the shield is therefore its sleight of hand—it presents itself as an uncomplicated sign, an image that Gawain either should aspire to or already emulates—even though as an iconic sign it functions as an *exhibition* or *exemplification* of its object, not confirmation of that object's presence.² Through its seemingly overt relationship to its object, we are encouraged to enter that place of “pure dream” that Peirce describes, the place where the icon comes to stand for the thing itself.

This is obviously a far more complicated vision of the sign than we find in the *Gawain*-poet's contemporaries. Other writers typically discover the emptiness of the iconic sign after its object proves to be markedly different from its representation³ and then ask their audience to embrace a concept of *trawþe* by only accepting signs which are not iconic, and can be logically verified. Although many examples exist, one clear

² See Peirce 282; 3. 556; 4. 448; 4. 531

³ As in the case of Chaucer's “Manciple's Tale” where the noble bow becomes an instrument of murder and must be destroyed.

instance of this kind of reasoning occurs in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, when he advises his readers (especially Richard II himself):

To speke upon congruite:
 Logique hath eke in his degree
 Between the trouthe and the falshode
 The pleine wordes forto schode
 So that nothing schal go beside,
 That he the riht ne schal decide (VII, 1531-1536).

However, unlike Gower, the *Gawain*-poet sets up the question of *trawþe* by using a sign which is already iconic, and thus only has a pretended congruity with its object. And, although we may be able to posit a logical connection between the icon of the pentangle and the abstract nature of truth, that relationship is always fraught with ambiguity.

There is an additional dimension to the structure of this iconic sign which complicates the problem of its *trawþe* still further: this iconic sign of truth, is also the iconic sign of Gawain. Prior to its lengthy introduction in this poem, a precise connection of Gawain to the object of his sign cannot be logically discovered or verified; the pentangle has no relationship to Gawain's character in Arthuriana,⁴ and its design is different from all other arms traditionally borne by him.⁵ Far from being hailed as the

⁴ King Arthur's shield device seems to have been first a cross and/or an icon of the Virgin Mary, as reported in the *Annales Cambriae* and in Nennius's *Historia Brittonum* (ca. 800). Though he is said to have carried these "on his shoulders," this might result from a confusion of Welsh *ysqwt* "shield" and *ysqwd* "shoulder" in the translation into Latin from a hypothetical Welsh source (*Arthurian Encyclopedia* 231).

⁵ Chretien does not mention Gawain's arms at all, though he gives detailed descriptions of the blazons of a number of minor knights. "Kyot the Provençal," has Gawain wearing a surcoat with two *gampilûns* of sable in appliqué work. This is a variant of the single *gampilûn* borne by his cousin, Ilinot, Arthur's son. In thirteenth-century French Romances, Durmart, Escanor, and the Second Continuation of Perceval, Gawain's arms are: Argent, a canton gules, with related blazons for his brothers. These may be "canting arms" in French, derived from the name of the father, King Lot of Orkney, because "lot" means "section," and a canton can be considered to be a section of a shield. Geoffrey of Monmouth, explains that Gawain was educated in Rome and was given his arms (not described) by Pope Sulpicius. In the *Perlesvaus*, Gawain received from Pope Gregory the Great the shield of Judas Maccabeus; *Gules*, an *eagle Or*. In "official" fifteenth-century tradition, as represented by the roll of arms attributed to Jacques d'Armagnac, Gawain bears: *Purpure*, a *double-headed eagle Or*, a device derived from both the shield of Judas

most “true” knight at the opening of the poem, Gawain simply appears as “*gode Gawain*” (line 109) and the “*gode knyzt*” (line 381). In fact, there is no reason to suspect that Gawain has any special relationship with the sign of the pentangle until he adopts it during the arming scene.⁶

In fact, rather than attempting to envision Gawain as a true man on his own merit through straightforward character description, the poet presents his correspondence to his sign as “proof” of Gawain’s ethical fiber. The detailed description of Gawain’s iconic sign, the pentangle, frames our understanding of Gawain himself:

*And quy þe pentangel apendez to þat prynce noble
I am in tent yow to telle, þof tary hyt me schulde:
Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle
In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat hit habbez,
For hit is a figure þat haldez fyue poyntez,
And vche lyne vmbelappez and loukez in oper,
And ayquere hit is endelez; and Englych hit callen
Oueral, as I here, þe endeles knot.
Forþy hit acordez to þis knyzt and to his cler armez (Gawain lines 623-631).*

While reading this passage, we overlook the iconicity of the pentangle because it seems to overtly represent its object, truth. Moreover, in this passage, Gawain seems to be directly related to the object of the pentangle—the pentangle accords to Gawain because they each represent the same values of truth. Thus, if we accept this suggestion, we could agree with Burrow’s claim that, the poet after establishing his premise (the pentangle is a sign of truth) and predicting the conclusion (it ‘*acordez to þis knyzt and to his cler armez*’), establishes “what is logically his major premise: that Gawain is ‘true’” (44).

Maccabeus and the emblem of the Holy Roman Empire. His brothers share the same arms with the appropriate differences (*Arthurian Encyclopedia* 231).

⁶ John Burrow has argued that Gawain is initially not marked by any special predestination or individual sign. He is not, like the heroes of other romances, the only knight who is capable of undertaking such a challenge; “one does not feel that the beheading adventure...is for Gawain alone in any mysterious fashion” (Burrow 11).

As I have already explained, the representation of truth, with regard to the iconic pentangle, is merely a hollow resemblance. Nevertheless, in this passage, we are given syntactically linked terms: (1) speaking of Gawain, (2) of the title of truth, and (3) of the pentangle or the endless knot. As readers, we are encouraged to interpret this series of connections by “abbreviation, a process of shortening by condensation rather than by suppression... This first articulation is presented as equal to the second—that is the value of the conjunctive ‘and’” (Marin 53). Thus, seeing an implicit connection between Gawain himself, “truth” and the pentangle, we quickly fall under the spell of the icon, having mistaken the appearance of a connection for the lack of a real basis of association. In other words, “the *referential object of the addressed discourse*, [has become] *the referential object of the received discourse*” (Marin’s italics, 53).

Gawain’s character corresponds, not to the abstraction of truth, or even truth itself, but to an icon of truth—the pentangle. If this connection is initially unclear, the poet wastes no time in connecting Gawain’s own nature with the physical appearance of the pentangle. His traits are conceived as pentads, each recalling the five interlocking lines of the pentangle:

*Fyrst he watz funden fautlez in his fyue wyttez,
 And efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres,
 And alle his afyaunce vpon folde watz in þe fyue woundez
 Pat Cryst ka3t on þe croys, as þe crede tellez;
 And quere-so-euer þys mon in melly watz stad,
 His þro þo3t watz in þat, þur3 alle oþer þyngez,
 Pat alle his forsnes he feng at þe fyue joyez
 Pat þe hende heuen-quene had of hir chylde; (Gawain lines 640-667).*

The image of the pentangle is linked to the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of Mary, each of which allows Gawain to fulfill any definition of truth that the poet puts

forward. And yet, starkly placed within this lengthy description of all the ways in which Gawain can be considered “true” is an interesting detail. Oddly, Mary is emblazoned on the inside of Gawain’s shield presumably because *he is not always true* to his goals in combat. The poet explains that the image of Mary aids Gawain during battle, helping him to remain steadfast and courageous: “*At þis cause þe kny3t comlyche hade In þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage epaynted, Þat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer payred*” (Gawain 648-650). Thus, we must wonder, why should Gawain, who is so “*fautlez*”, and who “*fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres*” have need of the type of insurance policy that Mary’s image seems to provide?

This moment demonstrates that the pentangle, despite being so described as a “token of truth” may have emptiness and weakness within it. This recognition of the pentangle’s inability to correspond exactly to Gawain is crucial, because it implies that other objects are necessary in order to maintain the integrity of the iconic sign. The pentangle may seem to be a representation of the qualities of truth, but that representation only exists through a tenuous syntactical linkage of terms. In addition, presumably, the pentangle and Gawain can only seem reliable, trustworthy icons when other images (such as that of Mary) bolster them.

Rather than lingering on a sign which may be at odds with the meaning of the pentangle, the poet simply absorbs the inconsistency back into the discourse. We return to the description of Gawain, as if no contradiction exists or is even possible:

*Now alle þese fyue syþez, for soþe, were fetled on þis kny3t,
And vchone halched in oþer, þat non ende hade,
And fyched vpon fyue poyntez, þat fayld neuer,
Ne samned neuer in no syde, ne sundred nouþer,
Withouten ende at any noke I oquere fynde,*

*Whereeuer þe gomen bygan, or glod to an ende.
Perfore on his schene schelde schapen watz þe knot (Gawain lines 656-662).*

When confronted by this sign, this “fabulously over determined semiotic weight” (Russell 63), we tend to ignore the gaps in its representation, and assume that Gawain is a true man. Moreover, we also quickly forget that, like the Green Knight, the Pentangle knight has more than one symbol about him; the significance of the other parts of his attire, the image of the Virgin Mary, or the embroidered parrots and turtle-doves and love-knots on his clothing and saddle⁷ have all been overshadowed by the emphasis on the pentangle.

As a result of this construction, we accept the poet’s conclusion that he must be “*triewe*” for the same reason that Gawain does not choose the holly branch as a weapon earlier in the poem—the ambiguity of the situation is occluded by an argument that pre-empts disagreement. The poet makes a case that uses probable premises in the pretense of developing a ‘true’ argument. The argument, as a whole, only considers certain aspects of the semantic system in an attempt to mask its internal contradictions and present its own point of view as the only possible conclusion.⁸ As Stephen J. Russell argues, “Readers are duly assured that the shield mirrors Gawain’s inner virtues but the scene presents them otherwise” (65).

⁷ The Turtledove, according to medieval bestiaries and iconography, signifies fidelity and true love. “The turtle dove does not think of revoking its first vows of fidelity, because it knows how to preserve the chastity which it pledged at its first meeting” (*Bestiary* 163-164). The image of the Parrot among the love-knots might likewise refer to true love and fidelity. However, a secondary meaning of the parrot (emblazoned as a popinjay in heraldry) might modify the meaning of restraint and fidelity suggested by the Turtledove; “[the parrot’s] head is so strong that if you have to teach it with blows while it is learning how to speak to men, you have to strike it with an iron rod” (*Bestiary* 129). Thus, although the general reading of these signs is one of true love, the character of the parrot suggests a more ambiguous meaning.

⁸ See Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* 3.5.1, 191

As a result of this formulation, the qualities of Gawain, conceptualized by the geometrical organization of the pentangle, become the basis for what we can gauge as *trawþe* in both objects. In fact, it is difficult to envision Gawain as “true” with the simple meaning of “honesty, or integrity” that one finds in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, or even the many meanings of truth that Burrow sees within it.⁹ The mental image of the pentangle is so connected to the image of Gawain that it might even be said to function, semiotically, as a livery badge, since thinking of one icon necessarily suggests the other.

As many critics have noted, the pentangle is never directly mentioned after its introduction; whatever organization and definition it may have offered disappears into the background of the narrative. However, even when the pentangle itself is no longer overtly mentioned, the iconic experience continues to influence us, and we may be tempted to read every reference in terms of a highly over-idealized concept of *trawþe*, rather than a simple ethical principle. Gawain is referred to as the “*þe segge trwe*” and “*þis trwe kny3tez*” throughout the narrative, and generally seems to display the qualities that we associate with the pentangle, even during subtle moments when his behavior suggests otherwise.¹⁰

Once the poet has made the association of Gawain with the pentangle, it is not an easy connection to forget. As with signs of kingship, in this context, the iconic sign of

⁹ For the *Gawain*-poet, Burrow explains that

To praise a man for his “truth” might mean (a) that he was loyal to people, principles or promises, (b) that he had faith in God, (c) that he has without deceit, or (d) that he was upright and virtuous. These various meanings [were] of course, closely related to one another; but they leave room for a certain amount of semantic maneuvering, and the *Gawain*-poet exploits this to the full in his exposition of the pentangle (43-44).

¹⁰ Mary is mentioned several times throughout the narrative, and Gawain’s prayers to her while stuck in the middle of Wirral (line 737-759) suggest that he is using her image to sustain his courage. Although he is understandably afraid in the wilderness, he is hardly living up to his reputation as “faultless” in these moments.

trawþe operates because it covers up its emptiness and presents a false image of power.

A belief in the amazing power of the iconic sign sets up a fiction that exists at the basis of every enunciation about the iconic figure—a secret comparison between the iconic figure and all other knights. In our minds, we imagine Gawain as the “Pentangle Knight”—a man truer than all others—and we expect him to behave accordingly. This belief will persist even though that conception hinges on a simulated, iconic projection.¹¹ Thus, what is occluded, and nearly elided by the iconicity of the pentangle, is the nature of Gawain himself, as a knight, and as a man.

It is difficult to understand the poet’s motivation for presenting Gawain in this way. As Eco suggests, in arguments of this type, it may be that the “attitude is deliberately and cynically adopted” in order to deceive the reader into seeing some greater truth about the sign, or that the poet is “simply the victim of his own one-sidedness” (*A Theory of Semiotics* 3.5.1, 191). One might assume that the latter case was accurate, if the pentangle was the only sign that existed in the text. However, at key points, the poet deliberately demonstrates instances where the sign is not one-sided, but extremely fluid and unpredictable, capable of achieving many meanings.

Gawain’s iconic relationship to the concept of *trawþe* may initially blind us to the ambiguity, and finally, the emptiness of his own icon. However, the unpredictability of the sign is evident with regard to the Green Knight, in which physical characteristics, heraldic emblems, and abstract qualities become increasingly and obviously muddled. As Putter notices, Gawain

¹¹ In the political sphere, this comparison can take the form of a unconscious judgment about the King’s greatness above all other Sovereigns. According to Marin, this comparison is generated by the conception of the King’s extraordinary grandeur through his iconic representations (Marin 66).

asks the country yokels of Wirral in vain whether they have ever set eyes on a “knyzt grene” belonging to a ‘grene chapel.’ The *Gawain*-poet only reports their response indirectly, but in their multiple negations (“*Al nykked* him with *nay*, þat *neuer* in her lyue/þay seze *neuer no segge*”) and in the unexpected stress which the alliterative metre forces on the word *such*[. . .]we may nevertheless hear their incomprehension; no, they have certainly not heard of a *green* knight. Now, we cannot be sure how they understand Gawain’s question...it is posed in a way that allows them to...refer simply to the color of the knight’s arms...But the possibility that they take it this way[...]only increases one’s sense of the absurdity of what Gawain knows to be the case: that somewhere in England there dwells a knight who is green all over (49-50).

In this instance, some of the inhabitants of Wirral may assume that Gawain is referring to the Green Knight’s armorial bearings and heraldic emblems because they cannot imagine that a green man exists. Others may assume that Gawain is referring to a knight who is literally green, and likewise claim to have never seen such a man. The vagueness of Gawain’s question necessitates an interpretative act, a decision to understand “green” as a descriptor of a man, his heraldic arms, or both. The multi-layered significance of the adjective “green” creates fluidity in the representational framework and allows for more than one truth to emerge among the townsfolk; even if the audience may assume that Gawain is asking for the knight who is “green all over” and not the knight who carries a green shield.

One might argue that, in the first part of the poem, there is little danger of confusing Gawain’s identity in this way. To ask if anyone has seen a “pentangle knight” would invariably yield a single answer: Gawain. However, when we ask about the Green Knight, identity is not clear by iconic signs or even physical characteristics. Even when the poet presents us with a situation that should signal the identity of the Green Knight, we do not automatically recognize him as such:

*Gawayn gly3t on þe gome þat godly hym gret,
And þu3t hit a bolde burne þat þe bur3 a3te,*

*A hoge habel for þe nonez, and of hyghe eldee;
 Brode, bry3t, watz his berde, and al beuer-hwed,
 Sturme, stif on þe stryþþe on stalworth schonkez,
 Felle face as þe fyre, and fre of hys speche;
 And wel hym semed, for soþe, as þe segge þu3t,
 To lede a lortschyp in lee of leudez ful gode (Gawain 842-849).*

Putter notices a striking resemblance between the congenial but imposing host of Castle Hautdesert and the figure of the Green Knight. He is “immensely tall, outspoken, has a big beard and walks around briskly on stout legs” a detail which recalls the Green Knight’s gait as he runs to recapture his decapitated head (Putter 83). Even more telling is the description that he has a “*face as þe fyre*”—an image which should likewise remind us of the intense fire-red eyes of the Green Knight. Nevertheless, despite the similitude of the Green Knight and his host, Gawain simply regards his host as a man well-suited to be a lord of such a Castle.

It seems that this similarity between Gawain’s (as yet) unnamed host, Lord Bertilak, and the Green Knight himself causes something interesting to happen: his query about the Green Knight’s whereabouts gains tremendous specificity:

*Forþy, sir, þis enquest I require yow here,
 Þat 3e me telle with trawþe if euer 3e tale herde
 Of þe grene chapel, quere hit on grounde stondez,
 And of þe kny3t þat hit kepes, of colour of grene.
 Þer watz stabled bi statut a steuen vus bytwene
 To mete þat mon at þat mere, 3if I my3t last;
 And of þat ilk Nw 3ere bot naked now wontez,
 And I wolde loke on þat lede, if God me let wolde (Gawain lines 1056-1063).*

In this passage, Gawain is careful to explain that he is searching for a Green Chapel, which is occupied by a man who is a knight, a wild man, and the color green. The careful description of the Green Knight creates a contrast between him and the host, a man who

is a knight, but clearly neither green, nor wild. This distinction allows Gawain, and the reader, to ignore the oddity of his host's unspecific response:

*Penne la3ande quop þe lorde, 'Now leng þe byhoues,
For I schal teche yow to þat terme bi þe tymeze ende,
þe grene chapayle vpon grounde greue yow no more (Gawain 1069-1070).*

The host does not respond to Gawain's question as directly as one might expect. With a dubious laugh, he explains that he will take Gawain to his foe, and that he should not concern himself with the Green Chapel at present. Then he makes a promise that increases our suspicions about the host's identity, and his connection to the Green Knight. On New Year's Day, instead of the Lord himself guiding the way to the Chapel as he suggested a few lines earlier, "someone" will guide Gawain: "*Mon schal yow sette in waye, Hit is not two myle henne*" (Gawain 1068-1079). At least two explanations for this discrepancy are possible. He may mean to take Gawain to the Green Chapel indirectly by procuring a guide for him, or, more likely, his laughter and his assurance mean that he will guide Gawain to his foe because he *is* the Green Knight. Gawain could not recognize this however, since without the clear sign of his identity—his greenness—the Green Knight can masquerade as a provincial lord. This results in the narrative even though his host's physical form and characteristics do recall the aspects of his alter-ego in a nearly recognizable way.

As Shoaf points out, the *Gawain*-poet shows us that identification is indeed structured by "relativity and relationships" and not by the constant adherence of iconic signs to their likenesses. For this reason, when signs of association recur, their meaning is unrecognizable without an interpretation of their identity or significance from the poet.

Nowhere is this made more explicit than in the final temptation scene, where Lady Bertilak offers Gawain two very different tokens of her affection. First,

*Ho ra3t hym a riche rynk of red golde werkez,
Wyth a starande ston stondande alofte
Pat bere blusschande bemez as þe bry3t sunne;
Wyt 3e wel, hit watz worth wele ful hoge.
Bot þe renk hit renayed (Gawain 1817-1821).*

The ring, of rich red and gold design, mirrors the colors of Gawain's shield, but, lacking the pentangle it does not signify "truth" or seem to naturally belong to Gawain because of some shared likeness. In the hand of the lady, this ring presents itself as just a ring, without any attached meaning. Why Gawain should reject the token that clearly corresponds to his own colors is not fully explored by the narrative; we are told that his refusal is on the grounds that he cannot "repay" the gift. Lady Bertilak gives an added meaning to this response; she claims Gawain rejects the ring, not because he cannot reimburse her with a gift, but because the ring has a value exceeding what Gawain can compensate. Consequently, she offers Gawain a less valuable and also more suspiciously colored token instead of the ring:

*'If 3e renay my rynk, to ryche for hit semez,
3e wolde not so hy3ly halden be to me,
I schal gif yow my girdel, þat gaynes yow lasse.'
Ho la3t a lace ly3tly þat leke vmbe hir sydez,
Knit vpon hir kyrtel vnder þe clere mantyle,
Gered hit watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped,
No3t bot arounde brayden, beten with fyngrez;
And þat ho bede to þe burne, and blypely biso3t,
Þa3 hit vnworþi were, þat he hit take wolde.
And he nay þat he nolde neghe in no wyse
Nauper golde ne garysoun, er God hym grace sende
To acheue to þe chaunce þat he hade chosen þere
(Gawain lines 1828-1838).*

The girdle, although supposedly less expensive than the ring, is nevertheless made of green silk, patterned in gold thread and encrusted with precious gems. If the ring's color recalls Gawain's own sign, then the description of the girdle is surely a repetition of the colors in the Green Knight's own armor. However, like the ring, the girdle has no apparent attachment to the Knight apart from its coloration. In this discourse, both objects have been evacuated of the significance that they might have possessed earlier in the poem, leaving Gawain with a choice between two seemingly harmless tokens of Lady Bertilak's affection.

For this reason, the girdle can be easily distinguished from the pentangle; it does not immediately present itself as an iconic sign. It may have associations, connections, and meanings, but it does not function as an icon because it does not have an overt physical resemblance to anything (or anyone) else in the poem. Although it may be attached to the Green Knight, as we will eventually discover, its signification is not bound up with his identity. It is, therefore, an arbitrary sign—a sign with no stable meaning. Shoaf writes:

The *knot* that the green girdle *as sign* ties with what it signifies is not permanent, fixed, or geometrically perfect. The green girdle, as the poem is careful to emphasize, is a *pure token* (2398) -- its token-ness, if you will, free of all prescription and proscription (*Poem as Green Girdle* 75).

Although Gawain cannot refuse the green girdle for the same reason that he might have refused the ring, he is reluctant to take it because it, literally, means nothing to him. It is only when the Lady gives it a meaning that Gawain is ready to consider taking the token. She tells him:

‘Now forsake 3e þis silke’ sayde þe burde þenne,
 ‘For hit is symple in hitself? And so hit wel semez.
 Lo! so hit is littel, and lasse hit is worþy;

*Bot who-so knew þe costes þat knit ar þerinne,
 He wolde hit prayse at more prys, parauenture;
 For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,
 While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,
 Þer is no hapel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat my3t,
 For he my3t not be slayn for sly3t vpon erþe.'*

After Lady Bertilak's explanation, Gawain is immediately attracted to the girdle:

*Þen kest þe kny3t, and hit come to his hert
 Hit were a juel for þe jopardé þat hym iugged were:
 When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,
 My3t he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe sle3t were noble* (Gawain lines 1845-1858).

The girdle becomes attractive to Gawain because it offers, through magic, the one thing that he does not possess—indestructibility. Although the pentangle itself may be the endless knot, Gawain, despite his identification with the pentangle, is not eternal, and so he is attracted (and understandably so) by the possibility of emerging, unkilld, from his confrontation with the Green Knight. The ring, and the pentangle itself, cannot offer the same merits as the girdle.

Despite the many qualities reflected in the pentangle, all of which Gawain seems to possess, his bravery may fail upon occasion. In these cases, he has apparently needed additional signs, such as the Virgin Mary inside of his shield, to help him keep his promises and his courage in battle. Such signs are not icons—they are personal items which hold special meaning for Gawain alone. However, in order to preserve the icon as a representation of truth and, by implication, Gawain as the “*man most triewe*” these signs must lie concealed behind or within the description of the pentangle. Perhaps this is why Lady Bertilak:

*...bere on hym þe belt and bede hit hym swyþe --
 And he granted and hym gafe with a goud wylle --
 And biso3t hym, for hir sake, disceuer hit neuer,
 Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde; þe leude hym acordez*

*Pat neuer wy3e schulde hit wyt, iwysse, bot þay twayne
for no3te (Gawain lines 1860-1865).*

This process, would uphold the pentangle as an impervious iconic sign, but it would only do so through duplicity. Since he accepted the girdle, his own sign of the pentangle must be lacking in a crucial respect, but he cannot declare this openly. This results in a paradox; disclosing his acceptance of the girdle to Lord Bertilak will demonstrate the emptiness of the pentangle as an icon, even if it ultimately proves that Gawain is truer than that sign. Concealing the girdle might preserve the appearance of the icon, initially, but Gawain's *vntrawþe* will be apparent. Either way, the fact that Gawain's identity has been tediously predicated on a fraudulent icon will be revealed. He will cease to resemble, even partially, the sign which supposedly resembles him the most.

This tension between the organized, supposedly unchangeable pentangle with the fluid, circular shape of the green girdle comes to the foreground in the final moments of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. We know which course of action Gawain chooses, and, to save himself, not only his life, but also his identity as the pentangle knight, he conceals the girdle. Prior to the battle, he "*Lays vp þe luf-lace þe lady hym ra3t,/Hid hit ful holdely, þer he hit eft fonde*" and on the morning of the battle

*Bi he hade belted þe bronde vpon his bal3e haunchez,
Penn dressed he his drurye double hym aboute,
Swyþe sweþled vmbe his swange swetely þat kny3t
þe gordel of þe grene silke, þat gay wel bisemed,
Vpon þat ryol red cloþe þat ryche watz to schewe.
Bot wered not þis ilk wy3e for wele þis gordel,
For pryde of þe pendauntez, þa3 polyst þay were,
And þa3 þe glyterande golde glent vpon endez,
Bot for to sauene hymself, (Gawain lines 2032-2040).*

When Gawain wraps the girdle around his waist, we can see that the girdle has already overtaken the iconic sign of the pentangle. It is the last item described in this arming scene, and it is described in great detail. The pentangle is not described, but we infer that it is still there, even though the red cloth where it might show is literally covered up by the green cloth of the girdle. The poet again makes it clear that Gawain's intentions are not to deceive, but to avoid certain death, even though by concealing the girdle, he is obviously engaged in an act of deception.

As long as the girdle remains hidden, the truth of the icon, the pentangle cannot be questioned. This allows the reader to maintain that secret comparison, perhaps even as an unconscious assessment, that Gawain is truer than other knights; he, unlike all others, can claim to own the significance of the pentangle because they are both icons of the same object. However, ironically, the duplicity of the icon is revealed by Gawain's own duplicity—in showing his own *vntrawþe*, we must assume that the icon of the pentangle is also an untrue representation.

This demonstration, within the poem, calls the validity of Gawain's iconic sign, and, also his identity, into question. When Gawain shrinks a little from the impending blow of the axe, the Green Knight refers to the qualities earlier attributed to the pentangle to criticize Gawain:

*'Pou art not Gawayn,' quoth þe gome,
'þat is so goud halden,
Þat neuer ar3ed for no here by hylle ne be vale,
And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmez!
Such cowardise of þat kny3t cowþe I neuer here.'* (Gawain lines 2270-2274).

The Green Knight claims that Gawain cannot be the same challenger before him, because by reputation, he is too brave to flee from an enemy, or flinch from a blow. This directly

contradicts his identity as it is expressed by the pentangle; instead of being a man who is like the pentangle, recognizable as Gawain and therefore unlike all others, the Green Knight recognizes a man who is precisely like all others. His iconic sign and his identity are disavowed in one simple observation.

In other texts, when the emptiness of the sign is revealed, the narrative simply ends on the notion of emptiness, and a need to adhere to better signs, or to make better ethical choices. The *Gawain*-poet, however, does not end the narrative here. After the final strike of the axe nicks Gawain in the neck, the Green Knight explains that

*'For hit is my wede þat þou werez, þat ilke wouen girdel,
Myn owen wyf hit þe weued, I wot wel for soþe.
Now know I wel þy cosses, and þy costes als,
And þe wowyng of my wyf: I wro3t hit myseluen.
I sende hir to asay þe, and sothly me þynkkez
On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede;
As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,
So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oper gay kny3tez.
Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wanted
(Gawain lines 2359-2368).*

This speech confirms what we might have guessed before—the green girdle is the property of the Green Knight, who was also Gawain’s host, Lord Bertilak. And, as a result of Gawain’s deception, he can no longer resemble the pentangle with exactness. Instead, although he is nearly the truest knight, he does lack, a little.

However, rather than accepting his lack, Gawain hurls the girdle at the Green Knight, blaming it for his misfortune. Instead of accepting the relatively positive notion that he is nearly faultless he proclaims, “*Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer/Of trecherye and vntrawþe: boþe bityde sor3e/and care!*” It seems that he still thinks of his identity in purely negative terms, and that he is trapped by the emptiness of his own iconic sign. As Shoaf argues

what [Gawain] does not know, however, and what he deliberately confuses, is the right relationship between the green girdle as sign and what it signifies. For him, the girdle, a piece of cloth, has become identical with his life, *lewté* and *trawþe*. But this relationship of identity between the green girdle and what it signifies is arbitrary and, in Gawain's case, wholly subjective; and this he ignores (*Poem as Green Girdle* 67).

Gawain seems truly ignorant as to any alternate significance the green girdle might have, and, when the Green Knight cleanses him of any guilt in the situation, Gawain immediately blames the woman who gave him the girdle for his own misfortune. His fixedness on the pentangle remains evident in his reference to Solomon: instead of having a token of truth from Solomon, Gawain discovers the deceit connected to his token, claiming to have been deceived "*wyth fele sere*" (*Gawain* 2390-2417).

In spite of Gawain's acceptance of a certain (and seemingly inalterable) meaning for the girdle, its arbitrariness is explicit in these last moments. It may symbolize disloyalty, misfortune, and *vntrawþe* for Gawain, but it also has a host of other meanings. Shoaf summarizes these meanings very nicely:

As we have seen, it is called a "'syngne of surfet"; it is also called a "'pure token" (2398), a "'token of vntrawþe" (2509), and, finally, Gawain wears it "in *tokenyng* he watz tane in tech of a faute" (2488; emphasis added)...For the Green Knight, it signifies "'þe chaunce of þe grene chapel at cheualrous kny3tez" (2399); for the Lady it signifies, as her gift to Gawain, her great affection toward him; for Gawain, again, finally, in the moment when he takes it from the Lady, it signifies no less than life itself ("Syngne of Surfet" 155-156).

The meaning of the girdle is therefore only arbitrary, and its meaning will ultimately depend on a contractual agreement. It acts as a pessimistic sign, associated with shame and a warning against cowardice and covetousness, and it is a positive sign, associated with chivalrous champions and friendship.

Gawain, however, is hurt the most by this knowledge of the arbitrariness of signs. His own iconic sign, the pentangle, has been seen as untrustworthy, and he seems unable

to recover his own identity from the wreckage of that sign. On his return home, Gawain wears the girdle, now a baldric, bound at his side, and tied in a knot. When he shows the lace to his fellow knights, he articulates only one meaning, introducing it as the symbol of his shame and *vntrawþe*:

*“Pis is þe token of vntrowþe þat I am tanne inne,
And I mot nedeþ hit were wyle I may last,
For non may hyden his harme; bot vnhap ne may hit,
For þe hit oneþ is tachched, twinne wil hit neuer”* (Gawain lines 2509-2513).

However, the Knights of the Round Table reject Gawain’s imposition of meaning on the girdle. Instead, they all laugh lovingly and then they choose to adopt a similar sign, worn in the same fashion, for Gawain’s sake. The agreement to transform the girdle into a baldric—a liveried sign—robs most of the signifying potency from Gawain’s characterization of it as disgraceful, and gives it a new significance. All the knights who wear the baldric are to be “*honoured...euermore after*” (Gawain 2520).

The *Gawain*-poet, beyond simply being conscious of the ways in which iconic signs lose their significances, seems to possess an acute sense of the arbitrary nature of signs. Gawain cannot exist in absolutist terms as a man of either *trawþe* or *vntrawþe*; the way in which his sign will be read is arbitrary. As a result, instead of retaining the iconic sign to be a “true” knight, or completely rejecting it to become the “untrue” man he can exist simultaneously as both—as Jill Mann has suggested, the girdle is “a badge of honor as well as shame” (Mann 115).

Although we can never know definitively, it does not seem outlandish to suggest that, for the *Gawain*-poet, *trawþe* was not found in icons, signs, or proscriptions, but in our will to keep our promises and remain true to our obligations. If this were the case,

unlike his contemporaries, he would not have wished for the sign to arise from a “true” basis so that we could act upon it with rightness. Instead, he might have believed that right action or good intentions would provide a basis for the sign’s significance, and, once established, this sign could never be untrustworthy, but would retain its meaning forever, in the best books of Romance.

CONCLUSION

Throughout his reign, Richard II would rely more heavily upon iconic signs than any of his royal ancestors. His fixation on signs may have sprung from the overwhelming symbolism of his coronation—an elaborate iconic display designed to prove Richard II’s suitability as King to the populace. Within the larger framework of the coronation scene, signs were introduced to legitimize his reign, each infused with religious and conventional meaning. For example, the golden coronet he received on his coronation day was not merely decorative; it was an iconic sign that carried with it an invisible and immaterial confirmation of his power as king. The Bishop of Wells, in 1436, expresses the iconic significance of the Crown:

In the figure of the Crown, the rule and polity of the realm are presented; for in the gold, the rule of the Community is noted, and in the flowers of the Crown, raised and adorned with jewels, the Honor and office of the King or Prince is designated.¹

The rhetorical implication of this concept, and of other similar methods of defining the king and Crown create an “image [that is] reality at the same time.” Thus, the coronation ceremony would undoubtedly have impressed Richard II with the power of signs, and presented him with the theoretical language that inextricably connected him to the pageantry of his kingship. Throughout his reign, Richard II would seek to affirm, and reaffirm his royal powers through elaborate demonstrations; he seems to have continually

¹ Quoted in Kantorowicz, 363.

exploited the visual impact of the coronation symbols in an effort to keep his image as unquestioned sovereign intact.

In fact, Richard II seems to have been so impressed by the iconicity of his coronation, that he used similar iconic displays whenever he could to bolster his own image. He delighted in spectacle, appearing in his coronation regalia during some political functions, and he appeared in dazzling, expensive array during most others. He created a court life centered on the constant exhibition of himself as sovereign; his was a world that was “over-consciously gay with its fine feasts and joustings” (Mathew 13). He also redefined the terminology used in the royal address to make himself a “prince” rather than a king, a gesture which was part of the larger agenda to increase the public’s reverence of him.

Richard II probably would not have conceptualized his program of kingship in the same terms later explained by theoreticians like Pascal, or Peirce, or even his own contemporary William of Ockham; however, their theoretical formulations mirror what Richard II seems to have longed to accomplish by his distribution of liveried signs throughout the country. As anointed sovereign, Richard II most likely believed that all signs and badges both signified and reflected his own personal magnificence and that these emblems could project the power of the king into the masses. Richard therefore had a good reason to hold an unwavering conviction in his own badges as the “highest and most powerful” in the kingdom: their owner was the ruler of England. This belief in the unassailability of his icons seems to have persisted even though each of Richard’s livery badges (the Gilt Crown badge, and later the White Hart badge) were rejected by a large part of the country.

In addition, Richard made several attempts to present a badge which affirmed his authority, and he relied heavily on the iconic experience to infuse his badges with meaning. For example, to create the White Hart badge—the badge which held the most sway—Richard altered the arms of Kent (his mother’s emblem), changing the hind to a hart and adding a crown-collar. This last addition was presumably to link Richard’s own badge to the legendary moment when Charles VI of France supposedly captured a white hart with a collar inscribed “Caesar hoc mihi donavit.” He presented it to the public in an outstanding iconic display at Smithfield—a gesture meant to affirm his own power and that of the badge itself. This significance of the White Hart badge was also amplified later, in the Wilton Diptych—a portrait which unmistakably conveys the idea that the power of the White Hart badge comes from, and is supported by, a celestial source. Through a series of successive attempts, Richard did secure this meaning of the badge, but only briefly. However, Richard’s unequal political favoritism, and his mistreatment of the livery system would later work against him.

This political climate explains part of the new literary movement, which saw more emphasis on the concept of *trawpe* and more of a concern about the nature of icons. *Richard the Redeless* and *Piers Plowman* reflect a keen awareness of the duplicity of iconic signs and liveries. Such poets wish to explain how damaging empty signifiers can be, and, consequently, express a longing for a sense of precision and attention to the “truth” of signs. In addition, Chaucer, and Gower both suggest that the virtue of *trawpe* should be prized above all iconic images, and hope that their readers, including Richard II himself, will maintain that desirable quality.

Even when signs denote and reflect the power of the King, the unpredictable and often unlucky fortunes of mortal kings often influence their signification. Livery, as Strohm has argued “does not serve a single master” (*Hochon’s Arrow* 179), and although Richard had hoped to control his symbol, ultimately it controlled him. Once Richard’s own practices contradicted the image that he attempted to portray, the fraudulence of his own iconic signs became apparent. Those subjects, like the Cheshiremen, who enjoyed Richard’s continued support, respected the authority of the badge, even though for the rest of the country, the badge had become simply an empty signifier.

The parallels between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the reign of Richard II can be observed, through their common link to livery and the problems of the iconic sign. As a Cheshire-man, the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may have felt a sense of ambivalence toward livery; during Richard’s most troubled days his countrymen remained loyal to the badge of the White Hart, even though the hatred for the badge was steadily growing in other parts of the country. Regardless of the poet’s own feelings about the badge, he could not fail to be touched by the scandal of livery and the eventual ruin of Richard’s own iconic sign. Thus, although for the purposes of this study I have used many theorists to explain the problems of the iconic sign, the *Gawain*-poet would not have needed any such theoretical basis—Richard II’s own whimsicality with livery and iconic images provided him with a ready example.

Although many critics will not hesitate to agree that the *Gawain*-poet is questioning the authenticity of signs, and their meanings, many would be reluctant to link these concerns to Richard’s livery campaign. However, reading the specific historical conditions which surrounded the *Gawain*-poet, and reconstructing, insofar as it is

possible, his own response to the crisis of signification and iconicity at Richard II's court can aid us in determining the driving force in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. From this historical framework, we can suggest that the *Gawain*-poet, like his contemporaries, was deeply apprehensive about the role of icons, liveries, and other "associational forms"—to use Wallace's phrase—in society.

Undeniably, this anxiety about signification existed in many other facets of fourteenth-century life, including, perhaps, the "crisis of chivalry" at Richard's court, often seen as a major factor in *Sir Gawain*'s composition, as well as the general disintegration of *trawþe* in economic and theological spheres. However, the consequence of the livery debate—hitherto under-explored—is that it presents an ideological matrix of questions about the nature of allegiance and *communitas* as they are communicated through signs. At the heart of Gawain's dilemma, we do not discover a civilization that has "evolved away from Christian ideals," as so many critics have argued, or a meditation on the abstract problem of *trawþe*. Instead, we are made to confront the real problem that the *Gawain*-poet would have tackled through the livery issue—can a society based on these types of signs and sworn obligations endure?

There is no easy answer to this question, and the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to convey two messages at the close of the poem. The first is a sense of the inherently uncontrollable nature of signs and their ability to upset the balance of power within a kingdom—a position that can be immediately traced back to Richard II. For, despite the acclaim that the White Hart badge received during the height of Richard's popularity, eventually, the badge was revealed to be merely an icon, not a guarantor of real authority, or even a reflection of it. For the poet of *Richard the*

Redeless, the icon of the badge is irksome because it is an empty but ubiquitous signifier—it “pokes” into everyone’s affairs, pretending to act as an agent of regal authority when it really has no meaning.

The *Gawain*-poet, like the poet of *Richard the Redeless*, is also concerned with the ramifications of iconic signs but his reaction to them is appreciably different. The best example of an icon in *Sir Gawain*—the pentangle—is initially beneficial. It demonstrates not only the identity of its bearer in a mundane sense (Gawain is recognizable as the Pentangle Knight), and it also provides us with a description of his unique and admirable qualities. However, the poet also recognizes that the pentangle *is* an iconic sign; it only *resembles* the objects it represents (both Gawain himself and the abstraction *trawþe*) and it “excite[s] analogous sensations in the mind” (Peirce 2.299; see also 3.362). Therefore, although the pentangle might be said to resemble what it depicts, the signifying force of the image lies in the spectacle of its iconic signification and not in its direct correlation to any real object.¹

Since there is not necessarily any real correspondence between the icon and its object, a hidden danger exists. We may be seduced by the lure of these images into believing they represent a real “truth” of an object when, in fact, icons never truly reflect reality. As the *Gawain*-poet must have seen in his own government, if the likeness between the icon and its object dissolves, it is because the meaning of the sign is altered, or because the bearer of the sign proves dissimilar to it. In this instance, the sign, or the bearer of that sign seems duplicitous, because a betrayal of the imagined meaning of the sign has taken place. Consequently, we might be tempted to blame the choice of sign,

¹ See Deacon *et al.* 188.

calling the pentangle “too idealized” an identity for any one person to sustain, or, we might assign culpability to Gawain for failing to uphold his own icon.

While it is not my intention to argue that the character of Gawain was meant to resemble Richard II directly, this response to the collapse of icons could have been inspired by the behavior of the King himself. Gawain’s aversion to confronting the emptiness of his iconic sign resembles, fascinatingly, the fanatical way in which Richard clung to the validity of his own iconic identity even when it was openly discredited.²

In *Sir Gawain*, although the loss of the pentangle does reveal the emptiness of the sign, it does not, in the end, leave Gawain with a sense of worthlessness. The void left by the icon of the pentangle is eventually filled by the new sign of the green girdle. With its seemingly arbitrary signification, the girdle presents the opportunity for a redefinition of the meaning of signs and the chance to set up a non-iconic sign which still has powerful influence. Thus, at the end of the adventure, it is clear that Gawain cannot exist as a man of either *trawþe* or *vntrawþe* only, but that his identity is contingent on his actions, and on his words, not an iconic sign. His identity is *not* an absolute icon, and *not* matchless in its unconditional perfection, and so the only “true” sign of his identity can only exist in an arbitrary emblem—the girdle. By this chain of reasoning, the poet leaves us with the sense that the only signs which are false in their meanings are those which seem, on the

² *Chronique de la Traison et mort de Richart Deux Roy Dengleterre* recounts Richard’s attempt to defend his reputation through personal combat: ‘this will I prove, and fight four from the best of you, and there is my pledge.’ Gillespie claims that the fact that “Richard would offer such a challenge—or that he could be portrayed as having made such an offer—is evidence of the vitality of chivalric values” in Ricardian kingship. Although the reality of this scene can never be determined, it does suggest that Richard maintained a belief in his own good “chivalrous” character until he met his end (120). This same reaction to icons can be seen in other sources. Even Christine de Pisan remarks on Richard II’s character, claiming that he was once praised “For being *preux*, a true Lancelot/It was said of him, without fault, in matters of arms and battle” but then quickly adds “Fortune greatly harmed him” and he was imprisoned. I have taken the text of this poem from James L. Gillespie’s article, “The Art of Kingship”, pg 118. He cites the original source as *Oeuvres poetiques de Christine de Pisan*, ed. M. Roy (3 vols. Paris, London, 1863-4).

surface, to represent only one meaning, or one image; for the *Gawain*-poet, the meaning of a sign can be constantly in flux, always dissolving and forming new meanings.

As a result, the *Gawain*-poet goes further than many other authors of his time to suggest that all signs are not dangerous; some signs, if agreed upon by consensus and in the spirit of *trawþe*, can be helpful in maintaining social unity. A beneficial example of *communitas*, in this case, arises. As William of Moerbeke suggests, it is

created by a bond of friendship and involves "a plurality of participants, with a common aim pursued by common action, with full differentiation between its members but without any relations of subjection or domination on the basis of it" (qtd. in Wallace, 74).

No one "owns" the girdle, not even Gawain, and, so, no one can be dominated by its influence. The green girdle is adopted in the spirit of friendship and solidarity, and so no one can suffer its ill effects; moreover, once it is given a new meaning it can act as a non-threatening type of livery. Moreover, this livery will always have a fluid meaning—it represents different things to Gawain, Bertilak, the court at Camelot, and finally recalls the motto of the Order of the Garter, *Hony Soyt Qui Mal Pence*, to whoever added it at the close of the poem.

Through revising the historical conditions surrounding the poem's likely composition date, we recognize, not only a repetition of the questions posed by the livery debate but also an indication of how the *Gawain*-poet might have answered those questions. The poet, who was probably a Cheshire-man, and certainly royalist, would naturally have been ambivalent about Richard II's use of iconic signs. And yet, rather than rejecting all signs or livery, on the grounds that they are treacherous or empty, he chooses to remind his readers of the randomness of meaning in all signs—political or otherwise. However, this does not amount to an espousal of iconic signs (even if they

belong to a sovereign)—in fact, the poet suggests that we must negotiate the sign's capriciousness, by giving it a significance which is not iconic, unrealistic, or dominating.

In the spirit of William of Ockham, meaning can only be generated by “willed agreements and connections, not on common natures and necessary connections” (Utz 21). Once a consensual agreement is reached within a society about the meaning of those signs, we should remain steadfast and true to that meaning. It seems that only through these actions can we avoid the traps of iconicity and maintain unity, both politically and socially.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I studied English and Comparative Literary Studies at Occidental College in Los Angeles, California. As an undergraduate, I became fascinated by the historical and literary context of literary creations like Chretien de Troyes' Arthurian Romances, as well as the work of medieval philosophers like William of Ockham. My interest in medieval studies continued throughout my college career and I spent my junior year abroad in Bristol, England, studying Middle English Romances. It was there that I began work on my honors project—a study of the theme of incest and its appearance in many different literary genres throughout this period. I Graduated Cum Laude and with Honors from the Occidental College English Department in 2001.

Since coming to the University of Florida as a Graduate student, I have continued my research into medieval studies, and I was awarded the Bowers Fellowship in 2002-2003 for my work in this field. Working with Dr. Shoaf and Dr. Paxson has allowed me to pursue my longstanding interests in medieval literature and history. In accordance with these interests, my Master's Thesis focuses on Richard II's abuse of the livery system and the influence of this social system on the themes of the poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the future, I would like to persevere in and broaden this thesis topic for my PhD dissertation.

Beyond medieval literature, I have also devoted some study to psychoanalysis, and most recently I have worked to apply the structural aspects of Lacanian theory to the

framework of medieval popular romance. This combination has provided me with new and exciting perspectives in my work, and gave me a subject for my first conference paper. My paper, "The Madness of Subjects and Objects: Psychoanalysis, Historical Relevance, and the Middle English Romance" was given at the University of South Carolina Comparative Literature Conference, "The Desire of the Analysts" in February 2003.