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Displaced Blame and the Feminine Threat: Gender Conventions and Gendered Authority in the
Romances of Chrétien de Troyes and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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26 April 2013
Table of Contents

Introduction: .................................................................................................................................... 3

Chapter One .................................................................................................................................... 6

Chapter Two.................................................................................................................................. 24

Chapter Three................................................................................................................................ 39

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 56

Works Cited .................................................................................................................................. 59
Introduction

“Far Off-Places, Daring Sword Fights, Magic Spells, a Prince in Disguise”: Medieval Romance in the Making

Courtly love romances have long been a part of our cultural heritage. Popular culture is full of references to women dreaming of knights in shining armor, damsels in distress eagerly awaiting Prince Charming, and little girls dressing up as the princesses they someday intend to become. As a child, I was not immune to these references. One of my cinematic role models as a child (because of her passion for books), was Belle, from Disney’s animated Beauty and the Beast. Even she exclaims, “Far off places, daring sword fights, magic spells, a prince in disguise!” Her description exemplifies what I, too, held dear: the romance of the medieval courtly love era, which has long held our society—and me in particular—in thrall.

As a child, one of my favorite aspects of medieval romances was the stories of King Arthur’s court. As a burgeoning feminist (or, at the very least, someone who was interested in “girl power”), I was drawn to these stories because the female characters had personal autonomy and power. Where else could I read a story where women are encouraged to seek love outside of an arranged and loveless marriage? Or where a woman can send a man off onto dangerous quests to prove his love? It was all so very empowering and romantic—I used to command the male children of the neighborhood to go off and battle trolls and dragons in my name. It seemed that women held power over men—until I reread Chrétien de Troyes’s twelfth-century romances as an adult. Suddenly, the women did not seem so powerful—and the men did not seem quite so powerless. I came to the hypothesis that the leading ladies of the courtly love romances were, in fact, still stuck in the same gender conventions of medieval Europe and that the power I had always assumed women held in these courtly stories was nothing more than illusion. It was with this hypothesis that I approached my current project.
While Chrétien’s romances seemed to conform to this hypothesis, when reading the fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I noticed something entirely different occurring. In this text, the women do *not* conform to medieval gender conventions. While numerous critics have written extensively on gender within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I was curious how gender was reflective or indicative of power relations. With a man’s feminization, does he lose power? With a woman’s masculinization, does she obtain power over men? These two questions drove me to focus my research and writing on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the power relations therein.

Within Chrétien’s romances, both men and women adhere to medieval gender conventions marked by activity (masculine) and passivity (feminine). Because these gender conventions are adhered to, women are not the empowered figures that they are so often assumed to be. Rather, the control and authority stays firmly vested in men. In *Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, there is an inversion of gender conventions. With this inversion in which Gawain becomes feminized and Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey are masculinized, the positions of power likewise become inverted. I argue that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a critique of feminine power, as it illustrates that negative consequences occur when masculine power is displaced into the hands of women.

In my first chapter, I establish the traditional gender conventions of both courtly love romances and western medieval society. Using Heidi Breuer’s book *Crafting the Witch: Gendering Magic in Medieval and Early Modern England* as my framework and Chrétien’s *Erec and Enide* as my example, I discuss how masculinity is signified by activity, whereas femininity is signified by passivity. I then delve into C.S. Lewis’s seminal work on courtly love, *The Allegory of Love*, and argue against his premise that women possess power within courtly
romance. I point to the history of feminist scholarship that likewise argues that in romances like those of Chrétien, women are not empowered.

In my second chapter, I argue that within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, traditional courtly love gender roles are subverted, causing a shift in gendered power dynamics. Gawain shifts from the active knight and becomes passive and feminized, thereby losing his position of authority and power. Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey are represented as active and masculinized and both have control over Gawain. Lady Bertilak, unlike the female courtly lovers of Chrétien’s romances, uses sexuality and aggression to entice Gawain to sin. Morgan le Fey orchestrates the entire Green Knight plot in order to test the court of Camelot, indicating that she has control not only over Gawain, but over King Arthur and all of his knights as well.

In my third chapter, I argue that Gawain suffers a fall from chivalry because of his acceptance of the green girdle (which breaks the exchange oath between him and Lord Bertilak) and because of his cowardice at the Green Chapel. I further argue that Gawain has *direct* blame for his sins, whereas Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey have *indirect* blame, because their schemes to undermine masculine power led to Gawain’s decisions. However, the text attempts to shift all of the blame onto women—not only Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey, but all women. In doing so, the text illustrates a deep and pervasive fear of women who hold positions of power.
Chapter One

“Her Forehead and Face Were Whiter Than the Lily-In-Bloom”: Conventional Courtly Love, Feminine Disempowerment, and Masculine Authority in Chrétien De Troyes

Before moving on to the ways in which Sir Gawain and the Green Knight inverts gender conventions and invests women with power, I must first turn my attention to the more traditional aspects of courtly love wherein traditional gender conventions are reflected and where women remain acquiescent to men. Within courtly love romances in particular, and western medieval society in general, there are clear divisions between what gendered a man masculine and a woman feminine. Primarily, a woman is gendered feminine through her passivity whereas a man is gendered masculine through his activity. Heidi Breuer further characterizes these conventions: “The initial descriptions of the heroes and heroines, for example, enact a characterization of femininity as static beauty and masculinity as valiant activity” (17). A woman’s passivity, then, is directly connected and correlated to her physical appearance,—gendering her body as female. A man’s worthiness as a man—that is, his chivalry and valianc—is dependent on the physical activities he performs with his body.

Description of a woman’s physical form signifies her gender as female. Breuer argues the descriptions given by courtly love authors “focus attention on...those parts of the female body which come to signify femininity, such as (long) hair, (smooth) face, or (high and round) breasts. We know our heroines are feminine women because the narrator lingers on this fact—it’s what makes them desirable as lovers” (17). Her body—specifically her body viewed by males (inviting a voyeuristic pleasure)—is put on display for the audience to examine. The “lingering” description is akin to the stereotypical masculine lingering eyes literally looking a woman up and down to assess her value. In Chrétien de Troyes Erec and Enide, Enide’s introduction is ushered in with a lengthy passage on her physical description:
The maiden was most beautiful. In creating her, Nature had expended all her effort. More than five hundred times even Nature herself had marveled at having fashioned on this occasion such a beautiful creature. Since that time, despite all her possible efforts, there was no way in which she could reproduce her own model. Nature bears witness that never before had such a lovely creature been seen on the face of the earth. (6)

Before Chrétien expands on the traditional description of her hair, forehead, and eyes—the disjointed body parts that somehow combine to create a woman—he purports Enide’s beauty with an almost-religious1 reverence. That Nature itself is personified illustrates the divine purpose with which Enide’s beauty came into existence. There is no emphasis on her thoughts, character, or actions, which is not in some way correlated to her physical form. The primary focus with Enide’s introduction is her physical beauty. Not only is Enide beautiful, but her beauty is hyperbolized within this passage. Her creator “marveled” “more than five hundred times” at just how lovely a creation Enide is. The excessive marveling establishes early on Enide’s beauty as superlative, as superhuman, as unique. The singularity of her beauty is further reinforced by Nature’s inability to “reproduce her own model.” Enide is marked as a woman by her beauty, but she is marked as the heroine of the text by her superior beauty, to which no other woman can lay claim.

While the physical body dominates the characterization of women, physical activity characterizes a man. That is not to say, however, that a man’s appearance is not described. Breuer argues:

The narrator typically emphasizes those parts of the body with signify masculinity, like the (broad) chest, (thick) legs, and head, and provides the heroes with

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1 See my later discussion on Lewis’s “Religion of Love.”
powerful phallic weapons like the sword, the spear, and the war-horse. Weapons and armor do not appear in descriptions of ladies—this is uniquely masculine equipment, guaranteeing the bearer a better position in the hierarchical social system dictated by feudalism. (19)

Each of these physical descriptions directly correlates to a knight’s ability to perform an action or activity—for his king, for his lady, for his chivalric duties as a knight and lord. The “(broad) chest” and “(thick) legs” and other bodily muscles signal his prowess on the battlefield or in a jousting tournament. Likewise the weapons, while indeed phallic, are also constant reminders of the active duties expected of knights within their feudal station.

A prominent example of knightly (and therefore masculine) activity is hunting. *Eric and Enide* begins by establishing hetero-normative gender roles with a courtly hunt. At Cardigan, King Arthur resuscitates an ancient hunting game the knights must seek to kill a white stag. Hunting not only signals an active way for a man to prove his physical prowess and skill in killing, but it also, as John Cummins points out, “prepares a man for war, maintaining in peacetime a range of skills, both mental and physical, which he may need quite soon in battle” (3). That honing of skills during hunting signifies constant activity and the potential—or perhaps the promise—of a masculine show of strength in war. This necessity to prepare for war corresponds to Breuer’s argument that gendered “behaviors also characteristically conform to a chivalric construction of masculinity as aggressive action and femininity as passive endurance” (20). Masculine activity such as hunting and partaking in battle conform to that aggressiveness, whereas women not only endure the voyeuristic gaze of the audience, but also that of her hero, while passively existing as static, but lovely, objects.
To establish some context, I want to note that within courtly love romances, gender is often inextricable from class. When I refer to a woman gendered as female and a man gendered as male, the conventions that gender them as such are directly related to their prescribed roles within the upper-class of society. Courtly love’s fixation on the wealthy, upper echelon of society is not unfamiliar in today’s social and literary climate. One need look to the royal frenzy caused by the highly publicized romance between England’s Prince William and Kate Middleton, or America’s obsession with Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. Their wealth and social statuses have burrowed deeply into our social consciousness, which positions them as beautiful objects to admire. Even popular literature of today reflects our desire to read about the wealth and beauty of others. In Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight Saga*, the vampire Edward’s desirability is not only composed of his immutable good looks, but his huge bank account. In Walt Disney fairy tales, princesses rule the genre—unless, of course, a rags-to-riches theme transforms the unfortunate peasant into a wealthy and noble lady worthy of our gaze and admiration.

In courtly love romances, love is filtered through this same affluent and glittery lens. The heroes and the heroines within these stories conform to that wealthy and noble ideal. In *Knight of the Cart*, the protagonists are the king’s wife (Guinevere) and the king’s right-hand-man, who, of course, is titled and noble (Lancelot). The story is much the same in *Erec and Enide*, but with a slight rags-to-riches twist. Erec, the hero in the story, is the son of a king and due to inherit his father’s kingdom. Introducing himself fully to Enide’s father, he says “I am the son of a rich and powerful king. My father’s name is King Lac; the Bretons call me Erec. I belong to King Arthur’s court, where I have been for the last three years” (9). Not only is Erec next in line for his father’s wealth and power, but he casually (or perhaps, not so casually) name-drops King Arthur, illustrating his own personal network of friends in high places. Enide, unlike Erec, is but
the daughter of a poor vavasor. Enide is quite literally dressed in rags: “She wore [her shift] under a long-sleeved white linen smock, which was so old that it was worn through at the elbows; she wore no other clothing” (6). This tantalizing image of a woman half-dressed with skin peeking through old and tattered clothing is eventually supplanted by Erec’s wealth. While Enide comes from a poor background, she still conforms to the class system in place within courtly romance, as she was elevated by her husband and through marriage. Additionally, Heidi Breuer illustrates how class is often conveyed through the racial descriptions of the characters:

[T]he romances visually mark the women by including details such as blond hair, light-colored (grey) eyes, or light skin, which privilege a white body. Fairness or whiteness certainly connotes a racial designation, but it also carries a class signification. A person who had the luxury to stay out of the sun—an aristocrat or noble—would have a lighter complexion than a person forced to labor daily in the sun, rain, wind, and snow—the peasantry. (17)

Even Enide, who starts out as the daughter of an impoverished man, is marked as someone who will metamorphose from rags to riches because of her gendered description. As Breuer points out, Enide is described in racial terms: “her forehead and face were whiter than the lily-in-bloom” (6). Her white skin and her beauty (implied in this passage by the comparison to a lovely flower) signify that Enide is destined (and, perhaps, worthy) of the nobility. The white skin also signifies that Enide is (soon to be) an aristocrat. Her physical body bears no implications of the lower class. It is not surprising that courtly love romances would reflect primarily the nobility;—after all, the nobility was the target audience. In this regard, it is also not surprising that these stories should reflect and reinforce the gender conventions of the society in which they were written.
While these gender conventions are firmly rooted in courtly love, what then, is courtly love itself? C.S. Lewis describes the “sentiment” of courtly love as “love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love” (2). The term “adultery” needs clarification. Often, though not always, the love between the two protagonists in courtly love romances is extramarital. Pamela Porter points out that marriage in the Middle Ages was “a matter for the entire family, quite often with additional input from the Church or the local community. The arrangements were rationally planned on commercial lines, involving transfers of money and property – and, in the case of the upper classes, the negotiations might embrace political or military concerns as well” (16-17). As a way of circumventing these economic, political, and public demands placed on couples, courtly love focuses rather on the emotional and the passionate love between a man and a woman (as opposed to conjugal duty). One of the ways to ensure readers that the love was for love’s sake was to set it outside of marriage. C.S. Lewis argues that “conjugal affection cannot be ‘love’ because there is in it an element of duty or necessity: a wife, in loving her husband, is not exercising her free choice in the reward of merit” (36). This love-outside-of-marriage seemingly granted a woman agency as she was allowed to look beyond that imposed economic or political union and find a relationship for her own pleasure.

Because of this extramarital love, however, the conflict between fidelity (to one’s lord, for example) and passionate love often manifests into a narrative conflict between chivalry and courtly love. Lancelot’s love for Guinevere is an example of this conflict—Lancelot is torn between his passionate desire (courtly love) and his fidelity to Arthur (his lord and Guinevere’s husband). Chivalry and courtly love endure a tenuous and an at-times-contradictory co-existence. Porter offers a succinct definition of chivalry:
[Chivalry is] a code of behaviour introducing a civilising element into a society that was in many other respects harsh. It was fundamentally a knightly code (the world ‘chivalry’ derives from chevalerie, the old French term for horsemanship, a skill essential for one whose professional life depended on mounted combat) and relied in the presence of ladies to allow it to flourish in its fullest form. (33)

It is within this “civilising" existence that Lewis’s “Courtesy” and “Humility” come into play, for a knight must possess both in his dealings with his lady. Both characteristics embody the values such as courtesy and humility but clash when the love of a woman threatens a knight’s code of conduct. This threatening often occurs in conjunction with a woman’s power over men. C.S. Lewis has translated it to mean women hold power over men:

The lover is always abject. Obedience to his lady’s lightest wish, however whimsical, and silent acquiescence in her rebukes, however unjust, are the only virtues he dares to claim. There is a service of love closely modelled on the service which a feudal vassal owes to his lord. The lover is the lady’s ‘man’. He addresses her as midons, which etymologically represents not ‘my lady’ but ‘my lord’. This whole attitude has been rightly described as ‘a fedualisation of love’. (2)

Lewis paints a female courtly lover as a powerful figure who has the ability and wherewithal to command and control her lover. A man’s highest calling is seemingly rooted in his “obedience” to his “lady’s lightest wish.” Obedience to a woman disempowers men’s own positions of authority. Additionally, Lewis casts the female courtly loves in a somewhat callous light, suggesting that they demand obedience to their “lightest wish, however whimsical.” Women are here painted as pitiless, cold-hearted despots. Lewis also he goes so far as to equate women with the feudal lord, subjugating men as her vassals. After all, the hero often suffers debasement,
humiliation, or shame, all in terms of his chivalric shortcomings which were brought on by his love for his lady. His lady love is often at the heart of this suffering.

Lewis’s own argument that women have total control over men somewhat collapses with his discussion of the Religion of Love. Lewis situates the [divine] power of courtly love romances within Love itself—not in mortal man, nor woman. Lewis frames this discussion around Andreas Capellanus, the twelfth-century author (and contemporary of Chrétien de Troyes) of De amore. Lewis says, “To the love religion, or rather the love mythology, Andreas [Capellanus] makes interesting contributions....Andreas goes far to complete his parallelism with the God of real religion” (37). Citing an example from Capellanus, Lewis claims that “Love [is attributed] the divine power of reward and punishment after death” (37). While Lewis claims that women have control over men and undermine masculine authority, he later suggests that Love is a divine authority. The notion that women hold sway over men, however, is one that needs addressing.

Despite the lover’s apparent abasement, the power women hold over men in courtly love romances is but an illusion. Underneath this appearance of power and autonomy for women, traditional medieval gender conventions are still firmly instilled in courtly love. Men maintain the masculine gender role of activity, such as choosing which lady upon whom he will bestow his love and thereby grant power, as well as hunting, questing, and performing numerous perilous tasks in order to prove his love, honor, and chivalric worthiness. In contrast to the masculine role, the female courtly lovers maintain their positions of passivity, such as being the objects of physical attraction, awaiting men to return from their quests, and being carried off by rival knights and villains while awaiting rescue. These conventions of activity and passivity reflect the gendered positions of power. Thus despite this illusion of feminine power, men
maintain their control and power over women while granting them the mere appearance of control and autonomy.

While it may seem that female courtly lovers have the power to control men, it is often overlooked that men themselves choose the ladies whom they will grant the illusion of power, thereby maintaining the activity-passivity dichotomy. In Chrétien de Troyes’s romance, *Erec and Enide*, Enide is chosen as a romantic interest by Erec because of her beauty (a point to which I will return) and because of her ability to further his own goals. Enide has the unique ability to aid Erec in winning the custom of the sparrowhawk—the tournament where a sparrowhawk is seated on a perch in front of everyone with only the most beautiful of women having the right to claim it: “Erec then said that he wished to claim the sparrowhawk on behalf of his [the vavasor’s] daughter, for there would be, in truth, no maiden with a hundredth of her beauty” (9). Enide’s personal worth is reduced to that of an instrument which furthers masculine goals. Erec’s initial interest in Enide is because her beauty surpasses the beauty of all other maidens (once again, described in superlative terms wherein no one else has even “a hundredth of her beauty,” signifying just how beautiful Enide is). He wants to use her beauty to win the tournament—he is the one who is empowered.

But Erec, an unmarried prince, also seeks to make Enide his wife. Erec’s desire for marriage, however, is tacked on at the end of his request to Enide’s father like an afterthought: “But I pledge to you, I swear, if you will provide me with arms and entrust me with your daughter that I may win the sparrowhawk tomorrow, I will take her to my own land if god grants me victory. There I will have her crowned, and she shall be queen of ten cities” (9). Here, the potential relationship between Erec and Enide is intertwined with the economic exchange that is the hallmark of a medieval marriage. Not only are goods changing hands (between men) for
Enide’s body, but “victory” (winning the sparrowhawk) is yet another prerequisite of their marriage, as Erec says he will “take her to [his] of land if god grants [him] victory” (9 emphasis added). Despite the threat their marriage later poses to Erec’s masculinity, it was nevertheless his choice that leads to the conflict—a choice precipitated on his own selfish desires. Erec’s desire to win the sparrowhawk tournament is precipitated by his own need to defeat a rival knight, whose dwarf had struck Erec “a terrible blow across the neck with his whip” (4). Erec originally sets off to “avenge [his] disgrace or else increase it” (4). He additionally says (speaking of the offensive knight) “You can be absolutely certain both of us will fight until he defeats me, or I him” (4). Therefore Erec’s plan to use Enide to win the sparrowhawk away from his enemy is one mediated by a desire for a masculine show-of-arms and revenge—and he uses her beauty to accomplish this goal.

Beauty may seem to be empowering for women because it grants them power over both men’s actions and bodies, but they remain passive objects of desire without voices or personal autonomy. As Breuer illustrates, “Heroines are most commonly presented in tableau—they stand, sit, or lie quietly while the heroes examine them” (18). The worshipping of feminine beauty is a passive experience for ladies but an active one for knights and kings. In Chrétien’s Knight of the Cart, Guinevere’s beauty often leads to trouble for Lancelot. In one scene, after Guinevere has been kidnapped by Malignant, Lancelot notices his beautiful queen:

They also noticed a crowd of people following the bier and a tall knight in front escorting a beautiful lady on his left. From the window, the knight recognized the queen. He did not cease to gaze on her most attentively, happy to do this as long as possible. When he could not see her, he wished to hurl himself out onto the ground below. (177)
Guinevere here is described as “a beautiful lady.” While this description may be mild compared to the lengthy passages detailing Enide’s beauty, Lancelot’s reaction to his love’s beauty is here hyperbolized. Guinevere’s beauty is such that Lancelot’s own life means little to him. When the object of his affection is removed from his gaze, his desire is transformed into one of violence and self-destruction wherein he wishes to “hurl himself out onto the ground below.” While it may seem that it is merely Lancelot’s love of Guinevere that forces him into happy reveries where he could “gaze on her most attentively,” or suicidal panic, it is her physical appearance (or lack thereof) which induces both of these emotional extremes. In this passage Guinevere’s physical form has control over Lancelot’s actions and sanity. However, Guinevere herself lacks a voice in this scene. Indeed, she is physically removed. Lancelot may as well be gazing at a painting for all the interaction he has with her. How, then, does she have any control or power? While I will concede that Lancelot himself seems to be lacking control, Guinevere is not empowered in any way by his exaggerated lack of control over his emotions.

Another scene where Guinevere is physically absent but where her beauty is (melo)dramatically adored by Lancelot is when Lancelot discovers her comb during his quest. Happily giving the beautiful comb over to his female companion, Lancelot has eyes only for the hair that had been trapped therein. The hair itself is given a description similar to Enide’s entire bodily description in *Erec and Enide*: “If you wish the truth from me, gold refined a hundred thousand times, then melted down as often, would be darker than night in contrast to the brightest summer day of the entire year, were you to see the gold and the hair placed side by side” (188). Once again, beauty is described in a superlative and hyperbolic fashion. Lancelot is examining stray hair from a comb—something we would throw in the garbage and might even consider gross. And yet here it is transformed into something that is more valuable to Lancelot
than gold itself. Not only is it worth more to him, but it is also more beautiful, as the hair’s color
is more fair and pure than melted gold itself. The passage illustrates how a part of a woman’s
body symbolizes her femininity and beauty. Not only is Lancelot enraptured by the hair because
it belongs to his beloved, but it is also a beautiful symbol of her absent beauty.

Indeed, Lancelot becomes so enraptured that he seems almost aroused by the hair: “The
eye of man will never behold anything accorded such honor as the strands when he began to
adore them. To his eyes, his mouth, his forehead, his cheeks, he touched them a hundred
thousand times. All his joy consisted in doing this” (188). The hair in this scene becomes a
surrogate for Guinevere’s absent physical body. Lancelot eroticizes it by rubbing it not only on
his “eyes, his mouth, his forehead, his cheeks”—as if he were being kissed by the hair. The hair
thus becomes a substitute for Guinevere’s lips. He rubs the hair under his shirt on his breast, as
well. He repeats this eroticized touching of the hair “a hundred thousand times,” illustrating
compulsive behavior. Once more, while Lancelot acts irrationally over strands of hair,
Guinevere’s physical presence is represented only through an objectified and insubstantial body
part. He rubs the hair over his own body, caressing himself much as a lover would caress him. In
this sense, Guinevere’s physical body or presence is not needed to induce a pleasurable or erotic
experience for Lancelot. Her voice, her body, and her power are all conspicuously absent.
Guinevere is in fact disempowered because her worth and love are represented by a mere part of
her body.

Like Guinevere, Enide is physically present during Erec’s adulation of her beauty, but
voiceless:

Her forehead and face were whiter and brighter than the lily-in-bloom. In a most
wondrous fashion, Nature had given her the complexion a fresh rosy hue that
illuminated her face. So brilliantly glowing were her eyes that they seemed a pair of stars. God never knew how to make a finer nose, mouth, or eyes. (6)

First, Enide is objected by a description centered around her body and physical description. The passage focuses on her forehead, face, complexion, eyes, nose, and mouth—all physical characteristics—described in terms of metaphor to illustrate just how fair and lovely these characteristics are. Her forehead and face are compared to the beauty of a flower—the whiteness signaling not only class, but also purity and freedom from blemishes. Her complexion, too, is compared to a flower—a rose. This additional floral comparison not only underscores her youth and loveliness, but it conjures up the image of a maidenly blush. Her eyes are then compared to the light of stars, illustrating their luster and magnificence. Her beauty is also the ultimate beauty as “God never knew how to make a finer nose, mouth, or eyes.” God’s inability to recreate her perfection once again establishes her as the ultimate beauty within the text.

Enide’s description stands in sharp contrast to Erec’s description at the beginning of the tale: “Such beauty was his that nowhere on earth could be found a knight so handsome. Though not yet twenty-five, he was most noble, brave, and becoming. Never had any man his age displayed such valor” (2). While Erec, like Enide, is beautiful, the majority of his introductory description is focused on his active deeds—nobility, braveness, valor. These qualities gender him as masculine. Enide’s description, in contrast, is purely about her beauty.

Enide’s passivity is most exemplified by one line in her description: “What more can I say of her beauty? To be honest, she was made to be gazed upon, for a man could see himself reflected in her as in a mirror” (6). The mere sentence construction highlights the passivity. Her beauty passively exists for the active gazing pleasure of men. Additionally, that “a man could see himself reflected in her” illustrates that her beauty exists for the benefit of masculinity. Through
it (and through possessing it), he sees his own beauty and self-worth. Enide’s beauty, and thereby
Enide herself, is reduced to nothing more than a mirror—an inanimate object—whose purpose is
to reflect masculine achievement. Kathryn Gravdal suggests that Enide is endowed with sexual
power because of her clothing: “Chrétien sets up Enide’s sexual power early in the narrative as
part of the marked scopic economy of this romance....when Erec first sees the woman who will
soon become his wife, she is dressed in (revealing) rags and tatters” (572). Sexual power does
indeed exist with this scene, but it is empowering only to Erec. While Enide’s half-naked form
certainly entices Erec, his primary goal is to use her in order to win a tournament, so the power
remains firmly within his grasp. Enide does not use her beauty to control Erec; he uses her
beauty to a tool to gain revenge. He seeks her out as a tool to further his own abilities and
masculine show of arms. While her beauty may seemingly grant her power over Erec, he is the
one who places conditions on his love and holds the real power.

Female sexuality may seemingly emasculate men, but in fact, women remain powerless
and voiceless through many of the sexual interactions in courtly romance. In the case with Erec
and Enide, Enide’s sexual hold over her new husband is what seemingly confines him to the
bedroom and keeps him from performing his chivalric and knightly duties. The numerous details
the text provides about their wedding night and the emphasis placed on Enide’s sexuality serves
to set the stage for the trouble in paradise that later occurs. After their marriage, Erec’s culturally
constructed gender—that is, his masculinity as defined in terms of warfare, tournaments, and
battle—is all but annihilated:

But Erec was so in love with [Enide] that he cared no more for arms, nor did he
go to tournaments. He no longer cared for tourneying; he wanted to enjoy his
wife’s company, and he made her his lady and his mistress. He turned all his
attention to embracing and kissing her; he pursued no other delight. His companions were grieved by this and often lamented among themselves, saying that he loved her far too much. Often it was past noon before he rose from her side. This pleased him, whoever might be grieved by it. (67)

This passage seems to indicate that Enide’s sexual pull emasculates her husband. Everything that genders a medieval man as man (tournaments and arms—in other words, displays of violence and warfare) is sublimated by Erec’s sexual desires—all he desires is to “enjoy his wife’s company.” His sexual satisfaction is signified by Erec’s making his wife not only his “lady,” but also his “mistress.” The word “mistress” not only signals a sexualized relationship, but also a relationship wherein Enide is mistress over Erec, seemingly granting her power over him. She is further endowed with the blame for his inability to perform his duties: “his companions were grieved by this...saying that he loved her far too much.” The other men of the court locate Enide as the cause of Erec’s inability to pursue any “other delight.” Additionally, his obsession with Enide has escalated to the point where he spends not only the nights with his wife, but the mornings as well, where it is “often...past noon before he rose from her side.” The evidence points to Enide’s powerful sexuality, drawing Erec toward her and away from her duties.

Despite Erec’s temporary leave of absence from his knightly duties (for it is not long-lived), Enide herself has no power within the bed chamber. It is not Enide’s sexuality that is a destructive force, but rather Erec’s own: “His only wish was to lie beside his wife, whom he made his sweetheart and his mistress. Embracing her and kissing her occupied all his attention, and he longed for no other pleasure” (31). Within this passage, Erec is still the character possessing the activity—even if it is within a sexual encounter and not knight games or duties. He *makes* her his lover. He *embraces* her. He *kisses* her. The text focuses on his desires,
pleasures, and wants. Enide is merely a body to whom these actions are being done—her own sexual desires or responses are unmentioned, thus reinforcing her passive femininity.

While C.S. Lewis suggests that within courtly love, power is inverted so that women are like lords and men like vassals, I argue that the inversion never occurs. What genders a man masculine (activity) and a female feminine (passivity) remains consistent within the courtly love romances. Gender conventions are held in place and men continue to hold the power. My argument is line with an on-going tradition of feminist scholarship on courtly love. E. Jane Burns, in her article “Courtly Love: Who Needs It? Recent Feminist Work in the Medieval French Tradition,” outlines the history of feminist scholarship rebelling against ideas such as those of C.S. Lewis that locate women within positions of power and reverence. Burns states:

Early analyses that condoned the courtly myth of women as revered subjects—whether as lovely platonic soul mates on the model of the Virgin Mary, ultimate arbiters of civility and court manner, actual adjudicators of legal cases of courtly love, literary patrons who inspired, commissioned, received, and thereby ultimately created an entirely new mode of refined literary composition—have been replaced by studies showing the courtly lady as constructed by cultural forces that fix and limit her as an object used to promote the amorous desires, literary aspirations, moral improvement, marital superiority, social mobility, or psychic fantasy of men. (35)

Burns points to the shift in scholarship wherein critics take a second look at the role of women and determine that their positions of power are, in fact, fallacies. John F. Benton is one such scholar who suggests that “courtesy was created by men for their own satisfaction and it emphasized a woman’s role as object, sexual or otherwise. Since they did not encourage a
genuine respect for women as individuals, the conventions of medieval chivalry...did not advance women toward legal or social emancipation” (35). Benton suggests that the text cannot be empowering to women as the romances do not call into question any of the misogynistic practices nor do they “advance” rights for women. Kathryn Gravdal in her book Ravishing Maidens also calls into question the tradition of reading courtly romances as empowering women:

We can reread the work of one canonical medieval author, Chrétien de Troyes, and ask why he has long been viewed as a beloved master of medieval literature and an expert in the representation of feminine psychology. A close reading of female sensuality and male brutality in Chrétien discloses the essence of the power play behind ‘romantic love.’ The resistant reader of the medieval romance perceives the ways in which male domination and female submission are coded as emotionally satisfying and aesthetically pleasing. (15)

Gravdal argues that far from empowering women, medieval French romances condone masculine violence and rape.²

While I suggest that women never possess power or autonomy within courtly love romances of the twelfth century, such as The Knight of the Cart and Erec and Enide, in the fourteenth century, with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a true power shift occurs. Gender roles within that text are inverted so that Gawain becomes feminized and Lady Bertilak and

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Morgan le Fey become masculinized, so that (or with the result that) the women of the text are endowed with actual power over men.
Chapter Two

“Keep Company Awhile With My Captive Knight”: Gender and Power Inversions in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

The medieval literature featuring King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, as I have illustrated with the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, reflects gender conventions of the Middle Ages wherein men are active (and have power) and women are passive (and powerless). On the one hand, virile knights hunt, quest, and fight in search of glory and fame. On the other, yielding damsels need rescuing and are chained to hearth and home. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a poem where these gender conventions are not only defied, but openly inverted. This inversion of gender expectations also signals an inversion of power: Gawain, made passive, is subject to the very real power now possessed by the two women in the text—Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey. By inverting gender roles, the artificial power held by women in courtly love is actualized in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The text uses the courtly love motif to express anxieties over feminine power and autonomy which are ultimately manifested in Gawain’s fall from chivalry and his un-triumphant return to Camelot—both of which were precipitated by women.

Within Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the gender (and power) inversions occur for Gawain, Lady Bertilak, and Morgan le Fey. First, Gawain is removed of his masculinity and endowed with femininity. He is placed in the distinctively feminine sphere and space of Hautdesert, the realm of Lord and Lady Bertilak. This placement is sharply dissimilar from the masculine and conventional court at Camelot. Gawain’s passivity also contrasts with the activity of Sir Bertilak. Both men partake in gendered activities: Bertilak is an active hunter while Gawain lies passively abed. Second, Lady Bertilak takes on the roles of sexual aggressor by actively seducing Gawain in Fit III. While Gawain lies abed, he plays a passive role where Lady
Bertilak plays an active one—switching the traditional gender positions. And finally, Morgan le Fey actively pulls the strings behind scenes, exemplifying a powerful, autonomous—and therefore dangerous—woman.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins at the court of Camelot, which is representative of traditional courtly love conventions. The poem first begins with the Gawain-poet connecting the magnificence and glory of Arthur’s court not only to Rome, but to Troy before that, thereby linking the Matter of Britain to the Matter of Rome, and legitimizing Camelot as a normative, and as Harvey De Roo labels it, idealized court (“What’s in a Name” 237). Additionally, the public nature of Camelot lends weight to its idealization. A.C. Spearing, weighing in on the issue of public and private spaces, argues that “at Camelot, all action takes places in public and involved the whole community of Arthur’s court ... the poet seems to treat Arthur’s whole court as constituting a single public space” (141). This public nature suggests that everything is on the up-and-up: everything is honorable and there is no subversive sneakiness. Setting the idealized and public stage of Camelot establishes its normative position when later compared to the subversive court of Hautdesert. Additionally, expanding on De Roo’s and Spearing’s arguments, I suggest that Camelot is representative of the courtly love conventions—specifically in regards to gender conventions—that will later be challenged and subverted once Gawain leaves.

It is within this traditional court that conventional gender roles are also established, illustrating the “correct” and active way for men to behave. The story begins on Christmas—a Christian holiday that is later opposed to the pagan goings-on at Hautdesert—where both men and women have gathered:

The king lay at Camelot at Christmastide;

Many good knights and gay his guests were there,
Arrayed of the Round Table rightful brothers,
With feasting and fellowship and carefree mirth.
There true men contended in tournaments many,
Joined there in jousting these gentle knights. (37-42)

This passage illustrates prescriptive masculine qualities. First, it underlines the importance of homosocial ties that unite Camelot. The knights of Arthur’s court are like “brothers.” These homosocial ties are later threatened when Gawain ventures forth from Camelot to Hautdesert. Catherine Cox suggests this “Christian ‘broþerhede’ of Camelot effectively subsumes Gawain and his identity—‘for sake of þat segge,’ ostensibly for Gawain’s own good” (386). While I am not convinced that his identity is subsumed, I will argue that Camelot exists within a normative and even static state where Christianity and gender roles are never called into question. This heteronormativity can be seen in the above passage, where the Gawain-poet outlines the “true” masculine pastimes such as feasting, partaking in masculine fellowship, and jousting, once again highlighting the activity of masculinity. Thus the normative roles a man must play in order to be considered a man are clearly outlined. Further, all of these activities are done within the group and in public, further normalizing the connection between masculinity, activity, and public spaces.

The role of women is likewise established at this traditional court, with the description of Guinevere, the only female given “importance” or mention at Camelot:

Guenevere the goodly queen gay in the midst
On a dais well-decked and duly arrayed
..............................................
Fair queen, without a flaw,
She glanced with eyes of grey
A seemlier that once he saw,
In truth, no man could say. (76-77, 81-84)

Guinevere is uncharacteristically described as good and flawless. However, her centuries-old history as an adulterous and petty queen, as she is often described in the earlier Arthurian cycles, cannot be completely erased. Here, she is merely silenced and masked—a threat in waiting. Nevertheless, she serves as an imperfect foil for the subversive females in the text—Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey—because she exists as a static and unmoving character; in other words, she is passive. She does not once speak in the poem. The queen is left voiceless and silent—an object to be looked upon by men, reinforced by the lines “A seemlier that once he saw” (emphasis added). As the Gawain-poet describes Guinevere, the audience is placed in the role of a man, surveying her beauty. Guinevere’s silence and stasis suggests that in Camelot, the role of a woman is to be but a beautiful ornament. Additionally, the poem focuses on her beauty: she is “fair” and “without a flaw” and has “eyes of grey.” These descriptions mirror the descriptions of feminine beauty in Chrétien de Troyes’s romances. What construct Guinevere as feminine in this scene are the traditional courtly love conventions of stasis and beauty.

While the court of Camelot establishes both masculine and feminine normativity, it also establishes the normative male-female relationships: “Clergy and all the court acclaimed the glad season, / Cried Noel anew, good news to men; / Then gallants gather gaily, hand-gifts to make” (64-66). The mentioning of clergy, Christmas, and good news (reminiscent of the gospels) underlines the Christian foundations of courtly behavior between men and women. The “hand-gifts” are additionally of great importance. Marie Borroff points out in the footnote of her translation that “what seems to be meant is a game in which men concealed gifts in their
outstretched hands, offering them to ladies who had to guess what the gift was or perhaps which hand held it. The forfeit for guessing wrong was a kiss” (5). Game playing is obviously an on-going theme throughout the poem. In this instance, however, the men act as the instigators of the game, whereas the women must forfeit a kiss. This mirrors the gender-inverted kissing game between Gawain and Bertilak later in the text. Thus the “hand-games” illustrate not only normative male-female relationships, wherein the man is the instigator and the female is the prize, but also illustrate normative game-playing. However, the events at Hautdesert challenge the idealized conventions of Camelot: gender is inverted and trouble ensues.

After Gawain leaves the normative court of Camelot, he arrives at the subversive court of Hautdesert, which serves as the foil of Camelot’s “right” and “normal” court. Here, gender roles (as prescribed by Camelot) begin to break down. Upon Gawain’s arrival, his masculinity (that is, his activity) is stripped away to make room for his later feminization. Immediately he is stripped of his shield and arms: “When his high helm was off, there hastened a throng / Of attendants to take it, and see to its care; / They bore away his broad sword and blazoned shield” (826-28). It is important to note that not only his armor is removed, but also his “broad sword and blazoned shield.” These two objects are symbols of the Christian and normative court of Camelot, where a man’s first duties are to his lord and to God. Thus Gawain’s sword represents his duty to Arthur (the feudal lord to whom he has pledged his service and honor), whereas his shield (emblazoned with the pentangle) symbolizes his loyalty and duty to not only the Virgin Mary, but Christianity in general. When his armor is stripped away, Gawain’s ties to the Church and to Arthur are stripped as well.

The sword and shield also represent his active warfare duties as a knight and member of King Arthur’s court. Without his weapons, the expected actions that go with it fall to the
wayside. Not only is armor a symbol of lord and Church, but more importantly it represents the prescribed masculine gender role of the medieval feudal system. Michael Amey suggests that the function of knightly armor was defense—it was through this armor that one could be physically recognized as a man (66-67). Additionally, a knight is defined through his prowess in battle and thus his weapons are symbols of masculine warfare. This is reminiscent of the jousting previously mentioned at Camelot: weaponry and battles—even mock battles—define “true” manhood. Amey also points out that in the story of Percival; King Arthur himself gifts the armor to Percival—a common practice seen throughout Arthurian literature. This symbolic act of a king bestowing armor to his vassal would further tie the knight and his armor to his king and the king’s court.

Additionally, the removal of armor further continues Gawain’s de-masculinization as the clothes themselves help gender a body. To remove Gawain’s armor is to remove his knightly masculinity, as he can no longer participate in the roles that require it: “With light talk and laughter they loosened from him then / His war-dress of weight and his worthy clothes” (860-61). This strips away his association with King Arthur’s court—a court where masculinity is never called into question and also where the paragon of femininity—Guinevere—is static and unmoving. His “war-dress” in particular calls to mind his masculine chivalric duties at King Arthur’s court. As a result, the elimination of Gawain’s sword and shield upon his arrival at Hautdesert and the subsequent confiscation of his clothing symbolize a stripping of hegemonic gender roles. E. Jane Burns discusses the importance of gendered clothing in the Middle Ages and suggests that “the properly socialized body in Arthurian romance results from encasing the male anatomy so fully in armor that no skin shows” (“Refashioning Courtly Love” 118). Burns argues:
When we encounter this knight relieved of his armor and most of his weapons, we confront a man “stripped bare” ... although he remains fully clothed. Thus the courtly knight’s masculinity and social status derive from the fact that his specific body parts are encased and literally unseen. He is gendered masculine precisely to the extent that his anatomical sex is concealed and unverified. He is a knight and a man, curiously, to the degree that he has no clearly sexed body. (119)

While I agree that a man bereft of his armor and weapons is “stripped bare,” unlike Burns, who focuses on the anatomical sex of man and woman, I suggest that Gawain is “stripped bare” because his prescriptive gender role (as symbolized by the armor) as a man has been removed. As previously illustrated, it is the role of a noble knight to participate in mock battles, real battles, and defense—this is what genders a knight as a man—not necessarily covering of body parts anatomically sexed as male. I further suggest that after Gawain has been stripped of his masculine clothing and armor, he then “has no clearly sexed body.” The removal of his masculine trapping causes an erasure of gender, which allows for his feminization.

After the removal of his masculinity, Gawain’s feminization begins via his removal to a lady’s bower. That he is led into a chamber and not a hall is of particular significance. Spearing discusses how specific locations were endowed with gendered connotations: “given the patriarchal nature of medieval society, which denies public status to most women, the hall is a masculine space; the chamber is a feminine space, or at least, from the predominant male point of view, a space where male encounters female” (140). Spearing additionally contrasts the private and enclosed spaces of Hautdesert (such as the lady’s bower) with the public spaces of Camelot. Expanding on Spearing’s claim, I suggest that Gawain’s entrance into this “feminine space” signals the beginning of Gawain’s feminization. Within the bower, the strict boundaries
of prescribed gender roles are beginning to break down. Gawain is placed directly into a space typically inhabited by women. By proximity, he is viewed through the same lens that one would view the lady of the household. Therefore the dissident court of Hautdesert symbolizes the beginning of Gawain’s gender inversion.

Yet it is not only the setting that challenges Gawain’s prescribed gender. After his host has ensured a stripping away of Gawain’s masculine activity, Gawain is then further endowed with feminine passivity. The seduction and hunting sequences in Fit III put Gawain’s feminization into stark relief. The overall structure of this section demands an obvious contrast between Gawain and Bertilak. Bertilak’s masculinity is established and the gendered activities of the two men are contrasted. Bertilak and Gawain make a pact to exchange winnings and Bertilak decrees, “‘A-hunting I will go / While you lie late and rest’” (1101-02). This juxtaposition of hunting and lying in bed sets the stage to view Gawain as a passive character. While Gawain lounges abed and engages with the Lady, Bertilak’s hunting scenes are described in violent detail. That Bertilak goes hunting has particular significance within medieval allegories. In his book on the art of medieval hunting, John Cummins argues that in late medieval literature, the prey (often deer) is frequently used as an allegory for a woman who must be caught (that is, sexually seduced), whereas the hunter can be read as a sexual pursuer (80). However, as Cummins points out, these masculine hunting scenes are usually coupled with a seduction of a woman. This allegorical counterpart—the seduction of a woman—is missing from Bertilak’s role as the hunter. Instead, it is Bertilak’s wife who plays the huntress in attempting to seduce Gawain—a point to which I will later return.
While Gawain remains safe in bed at Hautdesert, Bertilak ventures into the forest in order to hunt. Bertilak’s active hunting scenes establish the hetero-normativity within the text. The first day of the hunt, the prey is deer:

They harmed not the harts, with their high heads,
Let the bucks go by, with their broad antlers,
For it was counted a crime, in the close season,
If a man of that demesne should molest the male deer.
The hinds were headed up, with ‘Hey!’ and ‘Ware!’
The does with great din were driven into the valleys. (1154-59)

I would like to draw attention to two aspects of this particular passage. First, a great emphasis is placed upon the fact that it is “does” and “harts” and not “male deer” that Bertilak hunts. This language further reinforces the symbolism of the male hunter and the female prey. Second, equal emphasis is placed on the negativity of hunting males—indeed it is decreed a “crime.” This serves two functions in the text. It denounces Lady Bertilak’s active hunting of Gawain, as males ought not to be hunted, but rather be the hunters.

The conclusion of the deer hunting and the death scene that is next described is not only vividly violent, but lengthy in its detail: “They divide the crotch in two...And cleave the trunk apart / With hard strokes they hewed of the head and the neck” (1349-53). The language of violence within this passage not only signifies a man’s active role as hunter. The men “divide,” and “cleave,” and “hew,” signifying an active engagement with weapons. The violence underscores the masculine activity: not only was a man required to be violent within battle and during official duties, but also during their pastimes as well. J.D. Burnley suggests that the Gawain-poet’s devotion to the dismembering is a medieval literary trend:
Manuals set out the craft, and skill in dismembering the quarry was so esteemed that whole scenes are devoted to this in more than one romance. Skill in breaking the deer, as part of courtly accomplishment, may attract the attention of onlooking ladies in the same way as exemplary conduct on the field of battle or mesure in the counsels of the hall. (4)

Expanding on Burnley’s description, I suggest that hunting becomes a performative activity, wherein the men compete and the women—passively—look on and admire. Not only was it popular enough to reflect in literature of the time (like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), but it also illustrated the correct gender conventions. A man’s “breaking the deer” is considered a “courtly accomplishment”—that is, his active participation in this violent sport signifies that he is accomplishing the expected goals for a noble man. Additionally, such violent accomplishments would surely “attract the attention of onlooking ladies.” This line suggests that men should not only be active participants, but that they must perform for women. It also signals that women are passive, as they become the spectators of activity.

The lengthy dismemberment scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is yet another expression of masculine virility simply because it is an active and traditional pastime for a man of nobility to fulfill. But language of the deer hunting and death scene not only describes masculine activity—it also has an undertone of sexualized violence. The “breaking of the deer,” as Burnely puts it, has more to it than just skill and active masculinity. Cummins suggests that in medieval hunting descriptions, the final killing and death of the animal is akin to the “consummation or at least the reciprocation of feeling” (80). The language of the passage would seem to support this theory. Not only do they “divide the crotch in two” (1349), signifying violent sexual penetration, but the passage describing the dismemberment of the deer is linked
with sexuality through the domination of man over flesh. In this sense, masculine sexuality can be read as violent and aggressive. Bertilak accomplishes his goal as an active dominator, hacking the deer into submission. Bertilak’s virility stands in contrast with Gawain—the virility of aggression and conquest. Bertilak achieves his masculine virility by way of killing and dismembering—conquest over a deer. Gawain, however, does not reach masculine fulfillment because he is unable to consummate his relationship with Lady Bertilak. Unlike Bertilak, Gawain does not enjoy a conquest.

Bertilak’s next hunt is for a boar—a decidedly more dangerous animal than the guileless deer. While hunting in general is a masculine pastime, the hunting of a boar lends particular weight to establishing Bertilak’s strength and virility. Indeed, the hunting techniques differ sharply. Whereas Bertilak employs hounds and other knights to kill the harts, Bertilak himself slays the actual boar: “For the man, when they first met, marked him with care, / Sights well the slot, slips in the blade / Shoves it home to the hilt, and the heart shattered” (1592-94). The language in this passage once again connotes sexuality. The hunter “sights well the slot;” the “slot” signifying the female genitalia. His sword is transformed into a phallic symbol, with which he “shoves it home to the hilt,” indicating intercourse. Additionally, the “shatter[ing]” of the heart is akin to an orgasm. Thus once again, the death of the animal serves as a symbol of sexual fulfillment and thereby the fulfillment of masculinity.

The final hunt on day three—this time for a fox—further reinforces the seduction symbolism. Here the fox is portrayed as wily, and Bertilak must work hard to finally catch his prey. The fox “blenches from the blade”, symbolizing a courtly dance between man and woman where the woman blenches, or eludes, her partner and plays hard-to-get (1902). Bertilak goes in for the kill and finalizes the hunt. Thus these three hunting scenes serve to highlight Bertilak’s
masculinity: he partakes in the pastime designated to the lord of a manner outside of the castle and he kills and dismembers his prey effectively and efficiently. Therefore, these scenes function to highlight Gawain’s activities within the castle. While Bertilak is away from the court, Gawain lies within a lady’s chamber. Second, Gawain stays abed, resting, when he should partake in the masculine sports of hunting. Finally, while Bertilak achieves his ultimate fulfillment (that is, the killing and dismembering), Gawain never reaches the paralleling sexual fulfillment, despite the sexual games instigated by Lady Bertilak. Gawain’s passivity is highlighted through this stark comparison to Bertilak’s hunting prowess.

While Bertilak may exemplify active masculinity, Gawain’s time abed in the lady’s bower signals his passivity: Gawain becomes the prey, whereas Lady Bertilak takes on the role of hunter and seductress. At the time Bertilak engages in the masculine hunt, Gawain lies abed and plays the part traditionally assigned to a female seducee. While many critics have noted the ways in which the hunting scenes parallel the Lady’s seduction tactics, I will instead focus on the gendered language within these sequences and illustrate Gawain’s passive role and the Lady’s aggressive one. Critics such as De Roo and David Boyd agree that the Lady’s attempted seduction places Gawain in a feminized position. De Roo suggests that the “play in the bedroom ... ‘softens’ Sir Gawain” (“Undressing Lady Bertilak” 312). Boyd, likewise, says that “being hunted and entrapped by the Lady manipulated him into a position traditionally assigned to the courtly female” (81). While Gawain is indeed regulated to the role traditionally assigned as the female, what is more important is the power shift that occurs—Lady Bertilak, through activity, possesses the traditional masculine power, and Gawain—through his passivity—becomes helpless to the whims of the lady.
Lady Bertilak’s gender role is inverted as she becomes active and aggressive whereas Gawain remains passive. The first day, the Lady threatens force as a way of physically subduing Gawain. Lady Bertilak tells Gawain: “‘You will not rise from your bed; I direct you better: / I shall hem and hold you on either hand, / And keep company awhile with my captive knight’” (1223-25). Here, the Lady uses the language of domination to force Gawain into a passive role. She commands that he “will not rise from [his] bed.” This line not only establishes Lady Bertilak’s authoritative position, but it also keeps Gawain confined, passively, to a bed. Lady Bertilak is endowed with the masculine qualities of boldness (as she entered the chamber while he was sleeping). She refers to Gawain as her “captive,” and threatens to forcibly hold him: “I shall hem and hold you on either hand.” This line further suggests aggressive activity, as she will physically hold Gawain down to keep him within her power. She also threatens that she will “bind” him to the bed, further reinforcing the notion that she has physical control over him (1211). Thus her physical instigations take center stage. Gawain, too, uses the language of submission and thereby roots himself in the role typically assigned to the female: “For I surrender myself, and sue for your grace/ ... And were pleased to permit your prisoner to rise” (1215, 1219). Once again, the notion of “surrender” reinforces that hunting symbolism. Gawain refers to himself as a “prisoner” of Lady Bertilak, positioning him within the realm of female power.

On the second day of the seduction, the subversive power of Lady Bertilak’s active sexuality comes into sharp relief: “Thus she tested his temper and tried many a time / Whatever her true intent, to entice him to sin” (1149-1150). Through her sexuality, she attempts to force Gawain to “sin”—that is, to commit adultery. Her aggression is signified by her attempts, “many a time,” to seduce or “entice” Gawain. Boyd points out the importance of position in medieval
“Active” and “top” were considered decidedly male traits, whereas “passive” and “bottom” belonged to females (80). Expanding on Boyd’s claim, I suggest that Lady Bertilak takes the sexual position of “active” and “top.” Her sexuality is subversive because she is aggressive and she is in the position of power and control over Gawain. In the case of Lady Bertilak, she takes the active sexual role—this not only associates her with masculine gender, but it also leaves Gawain to fulfill the passive (and feminine) sexual role.

Lady Bertilak further uses her aggressive sexuality to tempt Gawain on the third day: “her face and her fair throat freely displayed; / her bosom all but bare, and her back as well” (1740-1741). Unlike the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, here Lady Bertilak actually uses her sexuality to place herself in a position of power over Gawain. She bares her “throat,” “her bosom,” and “her back”—she uses her naked body as a tool in order to entice Gawain to sin. And Gawain is not immune to the power of her sexuality—“his heart swelled swiftly with surging joys” (1762). His “swelling” and “surging” has additional sexual overtones, connoting an erection. Gawain becomes aroused and enjoys the sight of her bared flesh. Ultimately, however, Gawain is able to resist the temptation she offers: he does not enjoy the consummation of their constant flirtation. Lady Bertilak is not successful in enticing Gawain with her body or with other love tokens; she is, however, successful in enticing him to take the green girdle. Although Gawain declines to accept it at first, upon hearing her persuasive argument that it will protect him from harm, he accepts (1855).

While Lady Bertilak is endowed with active qualities and possesses sexual power over Gawain, it is Morgan le Fey who has ultimate power over all the men of the text. Upon revealing to Gawain that he is, in fact, the Green Knight, Bertilak explains Morgan’s powers:

Through the might of Morgan le Fey, that lodges at my house,
By subtleties of science and sorcerers’ arts,
The mistress of Merlin, she has caught many a man,

Morgan the Goddess, she,
So styled by title true;
None holds so high degree
That her arts cannot subdue. (2447-9, 2451-4)

It is here revealed that Morgan has been the instigator of the entire adventure. Morgan is the woman behind the curtain, pulling the puppet strings. As Bertilak indicates, she has “caught many a man,” suggesting the power she holds over men. Additionally, that he calls her “the Goddess” further signals her power extends beyond that of mere mortals. Her power is such that others are unable to “subdue” her. Not only is Morgan a powerful woman, she is the most powerful woman.

Three principle characters within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* experience gender inversions—and because their gender conventions are inverted, so too are their positions of power. Gawain first becomes de-masculinized and later feminized and Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey are placed in masculine positions of activity and granted power over men. However, the text implies that because women enjoy positions of power, Gawain suffers a fall from chivalry. I therefore suggest that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a critique and castigation of feminine power and autonomy.
Chapter Three

“She Made Trial of a Man Most Faultless by Far”: The Consequences of Female Power and the Gawain-Poet’s Castigation

As I have illustrated the ways in which both the gender conventions and the power dynamics of courtly love have been inverted within Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, I would like to turn my attention to the consequences of these inversions. Gawain’s power is dislocated onto the female characters by his feminization and the women’s masculinization. His feminization at Hautdesert places Gawain in a situation not only to lose his masculinity, but also his knightly valor and goodness. There are two significant moments wherein Gawain, now feminized, gives way to covetousness and cowardice, indicating a fall from valor and honor—and, to use the language of Gawain himself, commits “sins.” First, Gawain accepts the girdle from Lady Bertilak, signifying not only disloyalty for Bertilak but a cowardly desire to preserve his own life. Second, Gawain flinches away from the Green Knight’s blade at the Green Chapel, once again illustrating the cowardice that supplanted the valor. Despite Gawain’s direct accountability for these sins (he is the one who accepts the girdle, he is the one who flinches), both Gawain and the Green Knight attempt to shift direct blame onto women, illustrating a critique and disapproval of women who hold power.

Before Gawain’s fall, he is established as a good knight. His goodness is highlighted throughout Fit I: he is described as “Gawain the good knight” (109) and “goodly Sir Gawain” (685) whose “equal on earth can hardly be found” (676). The emphasis on good sets the stage for us to view Gawain as one of the best knights of Arthur’s court. It creates a value judgment for his character—not only is he courteous and chivalrous as knights are wont to be, but good attaches a moral quality to Gawain.
More importantly, however, Gawain is brave and free from the taint of cowardice that later haunts him on his return to Camelot. Upon the Green Knight’s arrival at the court of King Arthur, he issues his challenge, but no one responds: “If he astonished them at first, stiller were then / All that household in the hall, the high and the low” (301-2). The Green Knight’s proposed game is so shocking that it literally silences the court. That the text indicates it caused stillness in both “the high and the low” illustrates the extent to which the Green Knight appeared frightening and appalling. These lines also set the stage to place Gawain above everyone else when he finally answers the Green Knight’s challenge.

Gawain alone of the knights of Arthur’s court rises to the taunt and challenge of the Green Knight, signaling his bravery and valor above the rest—which is especially significant considering the renown of Arthur’s court. Met with silence, the Green Knight then further taunts the court:

“What, is this Arthur’s house,” said that horse-man then,

“Whose fame is so fair in far realms and wide?

Where is your arrogance and your awesome deeds,

Your valor and your victories and your vaunting words?” (309-312)

The knight points out that by their silence, the knights of Arthur’s court are belying their supposed “valor” and “victories.” He illustrates that despite the renown of “Arthur’s house,” the silence of the knights is indicative of cowardice. In the face of these words, Gawain volunteers (with Arthur’s permission) to take on the knight: “I beech, before all here, / That this melee may be mine” (341-42). Here, Gawain sets himself apart from the other knights and establishes that the challenge belongs to him, as does the title of bravest and most valorous. That Gawain makes
this proclamation “before all here” at the court further legitimizes his claim, as it commends him in the eyes of his knightly peers.

When the time has come for Gawain to seek out the Green Chapel, even his knightly attire personifies his honorable and knightly characteristics:

> His surcoat blazoned bold;
> Sharp spurs to prick with pride
> And a brave silk band to hold
> The broadsword at his side (586-89)

His surcoat mirrors his “bold” acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge, his spurs signify his own “pride,” and the sword hanging at his side is a symbol for his bravery. In these lines, masculinity and the qualities of an honorable knight are inextricably linked. The symbols of masculinity—a weapon and pieces of armor—are part of what engenders Gawain as a knight of quality. But the shield with the pentangle is most indicative of Gawain’s worthiness:

> For ever faithful five-fold in five-fold fashion
> Was Gawain in good works, as gold unalloyed,
> Devoid of all villainy, with virtues adorned
> in sight.
> On shield and coat in view
> He bore that emblem bright,
> As to his word most true
> An in speech most courteous knight. (632-39)

Gawain was worthy of wearing the pentangle (a revered and holy symbol of goodness) because of his own “good works,” emphasizing his moral character and his good nature. These lines
further establish Gawain’s pre-Hautdesert cowardice and covetousness. Before he ventures forth from Camelot, he is “devoid of villainy,” possesses “virtues” and is worthy to bear the noble emblem of the Virgin Mary and the pentangle. Catherine Batt argues that the pentangle is significant in and of itself, because “like a circle, [it has] no beginning and no ending, making it an apt sign of integrity” (124). Expanding on Batt’s argument, the pentangle itself symbolizes (like Gawain’s armor) his integrity. The last line describing the shield with the pentangle reinforces that he possesses all the qualities of a chivalrous and “courteous” knight. By using the superlative language “most courteous knight” and “his equal on earth can hardly be found (639, 676), the Gawain poet establishes Gawain’s superlative position as the best knight. This elevated position heightens Gawain’s sins and the fall from valor he experiences at Hautdesert and the Green Chapel.

Gawain’s fall is first signaled by his acceptance of green girdle from Lady Bertilak. It is important to note, however, that, while he later changes his views, at first Gawain does not consider this act a sin: “It was a pearl for his plight, the peril to come / When he gains the Green Chapel to get his reward: / Could he escape unscathed, the scheme were noble!” (856-58). In this moment of the text, Gawain’s focus is primarily on escaping the confrontation with the Green Knight with his head intact—he sees the green girdle as a way to do just that. Indeed, he considers that the taking of the girdle might even be a “noble” endeavor. While Gawain is (for the moment) blinded by his desire to keep his head, the word “scheme” seems to indicate a tacit disapproval of Gawain’s plan and brings to mind the “trammels so quaint” cast by the villainized women of the text. Gawain’s blindness is motivated by covetousness—not only for the girdle, but also for his own life by extension.
That Gawain does not initially consider the taking of the girdle to be sinful is supported by the first confession scene. A number of critics tend to agree that Gawain’s priestly confession is insincere compared with his confession at the Green Chapel.³ Gregory Gross makes this very observation, saying, “It is a commonplace observation among critics of SGGK that Gawain makes a faulty confession to the priest, its corollary is that he makes a good one to the Green Knight” (151). Charles R. Sleeth additionally observes that “we cannot fail to sense that Gawain’s confession and purification at the Green Chapel is effectual and that the supposedly priestly absolution at Bertilak’s castle was not” (176). I would like to add that Gawain is, at the point of his first confession, so blinded by his own covetousness that he does not think to confess the sin of taking the girdle because, in his mind, he has not sinned.

However, as the Green Chapel scene unfolds, it is apparent (to Gawain, the Green Knight, and the readers) that the taking of the green girdle does constitute a sin. Batt argues that the “pentangle on his shield is emblematic” of truth, and by supplanting it with the girdle, Gawain later considers himself to have violated that very truth (117). For Batt, then, the girdle itself becomes an anti-symbol of the pentangle. I would like to expand on Batt’s argument and suggest that the girdle not only represents the opposite of the pentangle (that is, it represents sin and untruth), but that it also represents the feminine. The girdle itself is owned by a woman (Lady Bertilak), and she removes it from her own body before giving it to him (1830-31). That Lady Bertilak was wearing the girdle feminizes an otherwise gender-neutral article of clothing. As the shield and armor are inextricably linked with masculinity and normativity, the girdle is linked with femininity and subversion.

Additionally, the girdle represents yet another of Gawain’s sins: the breaking of the exchange contract with Bertilak:

“And Gawain,” said the good host, “agree now to this:
Whatever I win in the woods I will give you at eve,
And all you have earned you must offer to me;
Swear now, sweet friend, to swap as I say,
Whether hands, in the end, go empty or no.”

“By God,” said Sir Gawain, “I grant it forthwith!

If you find the game good, I shall gladly take part.” (1105-11)

Gawain “swears” to offer Bertilak everything he earns. By withholding the girdle, he breaks this oath. Moreover, Gawain swears by God. This further legitimates the oath between the two men, as Gawain is a Christian knight operating under the rules of chivalry. This scene also mirrors the oath of fealty between vassal and lord. According to Jacques Le Goff, a “vassal placed his hands, joined together, between those of his lord, who closed his hands over those of his vassal; the vassal then declared his wish to give himself to his lord ... Next he pronounced an oath of fealty, he gave the lord his faith and he could add a kiss” (91). Their public declaration to exchange winnings is thus similar to the public and open declaration of homage. The two men even seal their deal with a kiss: “They talked in low tones, and tarried at parting. / With compliments comely they kiss at the last” (1117-18). This kiss functions as a feudal “sealing” of Gawain’s oath—an oath which he breaks. However, Gawain does not break this oath of his own accord. It is Lady Bertilak—a woman—who coerces him to take the girdle and thereby renounce his promise to Lord Bertilak. Even Bertilak himself (or rather, the Green Knight) chastises Gawain for breaking the oath, saying, “Yet you lacked, sir, a little loyalty there” (2366). His
loyalty in question is that to host. By breaking the oath, Gawain commits another sin attached to the green girdle.

The other sins attached to the taking of the green girdle are Gawain’s covetousness and cowardice. These are the two sins that Gawain himself later verbalizes: “Cursed be a cowardly and covetous heart” and “For the cowardice and coveting that I came to there” (2374, 2509). Gawain’s covetous is marked by his desire to both possess the girdle and the desire to preserve his own life, in effect, “coveting” his own life over bravery and valor. His cowardice, in connection with the girdle is marked by his inability to meet the Green Knight without the lace as protection. In effect, Gawain is motivated to take the girdle out of fear, an emotion far removed from the Gawain of the beginning of the text, at Arthur’s court, who fearlessly accepts the Green Knight’s challenge. But the taking of the girdle is not the only sin for which Gawain must later repent. The second moment that signifies Gawain’s fall is his flinching from the Green Knight’s blade.

When Gawain flinches from the Green Knight’s blade, he once again gives in to the sin of cowardice. As Gawain presents himself to the Green Knight, he intends to fulfill the pact previously made to allow the Green Knight to behead him, as Gawain had previously beheaded the Green Knight:

\begin{verbatim}
And down it descended with death-dealing force,
And his shoulders shrank a little from the sharp iron.
Abruptly the brawny man breaks off the stroke,
And then reproved with proud words that prince among knights.
“You are not Gawain the glorious,” the green man said,
“That never fell back on field in the face of the foe,
\end{verbatim}
And now you flee for fear, and have felt no harm:

Such news of that knight I never heard yet!

I moved not a muscle when you made to strike,

Nor caviled at the cut in King Arthur’s house;

My head fell to my feet, yet steadfast I stood,

And you, all unharmed, are wholly dismayed—

Wherefore the better man I, by all odds, must be.” (2266-79)

Gawain but “shrinks a little” from the Green Knight’s blade—a natural reaction, one might think, to an incoming weapon attempting to sever head from body. The Green Knight, however, takes Gawain’s shrinking as a sign of cowardice. The Green Knight contrasts the previous glory of Gawain to his now fallen state. That he calls Gawain a “prince among knights”—perhaps sarcastically—because his next words (“You are not Gawain the glorious”) indicate that Gawain has fallen from his former glory and valor as a knight. Additionally, the Green Knight makes a comparison between himself and Gawain, recalling the previous comparison between Bertilak’s masculinity and Gawain’s femininity. Here, the Green Knight casts himself in a masculine and brave light (the same light which shone on Gawain at Arthur’s court). He calls himself the “better man” and recalls that when Gawain made to strike at him at Arthur’s court, he “moved not a muscle.” This reminder serves not only as a comparison to Gawain now, but also draws our memory back to Gawain’s position as a stalwart and fearless knight who challenged the green man when no one else would.

Gawain is unaware of his sins at first; the Green Knight is the one who brings about Gawain’s realization and self-awareness. Gawain’s flinching and the Green Knight’s revelation
about his identity ushers in a bout of Gawain’s self-disgust and pity which further evidences
Gawain’s fall:

As he shrank back in shame from the man’s sharp speech.

The first words that feel from the fair knight’s lips:

“Cursed be a cowardly and covetous heart!

In you is villainy and vice, and virtue laid low!”

………………………………………………

“Behold there my falsehood, ill hap betide it!

Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life,

And coveting came after, contrary both

To largesse and loyalty belonging to knights.

Now am I faulty and false, that fearful was ever

Of disloyalty and lies—bad luck to them both!—and greed.

I confess, knight, in this place,

My faults are grave indeed;

Let me gain back your good grace,

And hereafter I shall take heed.” (2372-75, 2378-88)

During this confession, Gawain shrinks back from the realization of his sins much like he shrinks away from the blade. He is so disgusted by own actions that his reaction is similar to flinching away from a deadly weapon. Here Gawain also names his two chief sins: cowardice and coveting. Like the Green Knight (when he berates Gawain for shrinking away in fear), Gawain also draws our attention to the qualities a knight should possess, namely “largesse and loyalty.”

We are also reminded that Gawain at one time possessed these qualities. His claim that “In [him]
is villainy and vice, and virtue laid low” stands in sharp contrast to Gawain’s description at the court of Camelot where he was “devoid of all villainy, with virtues adorned / in sight” (634-35). The use of the similar words “villainy” and “virtues” illustrate the Gawain has transitioned from the paragon of knighthood into the contrary and indicate a clear fall from his previous renown. Additionally, we are reminded of the Green Knight’s previous proclamation that Gawain “lacked…a little loyalty” (2366). Gawain speaks of his “falsehood” and of being “faulty” and “false”—these self-admonitions refer back to breaking the exchange oath and not handing over the green girdle. While he did not see the girdle as being sinful previously, here he has changed his tune. I suggest that it was the Green Knight’s “sharp speech” and his disdain that brought forth Gawain’s realization that he had acted in a discourteous fashion. After all, the Green Knight, upon revealing his identity, confronted Gawain as Bertilak, the very man with whom Gawain had broken his oath. Gawain is much like a child stealing a piece of candy in this sense: he did not feel guilty until he was caught.

Gawain clearly experiences a fall from chivalry and does, as I have illustrated, share in the blame for his disgrace: it was his decision to withhold the love lace from Bertilak and his fear that motivated him. However, beneath Gawain’s fault, the text implies that there is a deeper threat: women. The women in the text are directly endowed with the blame that leads to Gawain’s fall from chivalric honor. I suggest that this threat is indicative of an anxiety over women in positions of power. As I have previously illustrated, Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey take on masculine roles and therefore are invested with actual power. This power leads to direct and specific consequences for Gawain. However, while the women are indirectly to blame for Gawain’s fall (as they are scheming behind the scenes), Gawain’s sins are because are directly
result of his own choices. Despite this, the text shifts the blame away from Gawain and solely onto the shoulders of women.

The Green Knight shifts the blame away from Gawain and onto Lady Bertilak. During Gawain’s confession at the Green Chapel, the Green Knight explains Lady Bertilak’s role:

She made trial of a man most faultless by far
Of all that ever walked over the wide earth;
As pearls to white peas, more precious and prized,
So is Gawain, in good faith, to other gay knights.
Yet you lacked, sir, a little loyalty there,
But the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either,
But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame. (2362-7)

The Green Knight, while still pointing out that Gawain shared a little of the blame in that he “lacked…a little loyalty,” rationalizes Gawain’s fault. Gawain did not act out of “cunning” or because he wanted to court Bertilak’s wife, but because he “loved his own life” and was moved by self-preservation. Instead, the majority of the blame is shifted onto the shoulders of a woman—in this passage, the blame belongs to Lady Bertilak. The Green Knight rationalizes that even the “most faultless of men” can fall prey to the “trials” of a woman. This rationalization, in a sense, restores to Gawain the “good” quality that he had previously possessed at Arthur’s court.

Next, the blame for Gawain’s fall is shifted to yet another woman—Morgan le Fey:

She guided me in this guise to you glorious hall,
To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride
That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table.
She put this shape upon me to puzzle your wits,
In this passage the Green Knight reveals that it is Morgan le Fey who is behind the entire plot—not only behind transforming Bertilak into the Green Knight, but also indirectly, behind the test of the green girdle. The language indicts that Morgan is behind the scenes, pulling the strings. She “guided” the green knight to Camelot. Morgan’s overarching social and political power is indicative of Gawain’s fall from chivalry. It is entirely by Morgan’s design that Gawain experiences a fall from grace, as both Bertilak and his wife operate under the control and orders of Morgan. The text gives two reasons why Morgan le Fey orchestrated this elaborate scheme. First “To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride / That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table” (2457-58). This mentioning of pride directly correlates to Gawain’s wounded pride and his fall from honor. Thus if this is indeed her motive, Gawain’s shame is a direct result of Morgan’s test of his excessive pride. The other reason given is “To afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death” (2460). While this seems an excessively petty reason at first glance—to merely frighten another woman—it hints at a subversive scheme. The goal is not only to frighten Guinevere, but to essentially assassinate her. One cannot overlook the historical tradition in which Guinevere’s adultery lends a hand to the fall of the Round Table. Thus this line recaptures Guinevere’s faults, because, however passively, she lends a hand to Gawain’s shame. More importantly, however, this line opposes the virtuous married female who operates under her husband’s power (Guinevere) with the dangerous unmarried female who operates under her own power (Morgan). Thus, Morgan’s schemes are the culmination of masculine anxieties about feminine autonomy as they illustrates how, at the behest of a woman, the entire court could potentially suffer—and indeed, how Gawain actually suffers a fall from chivalric pride and honor because of the machinations of a woman.
After the Green Knight points out that these two women had a hand in Gawain’s downfall, Gawain commences his misogynistic rant against women:

Both herself and that other, my honored ladies
That have trapped their true knight in their trammels so quaint.
But if a dullard should dote, deem it no wonder,
And though the wiles of a woman be wooed into sorrow,
For so was Adam by one, when the world began,
And Solomon by many more, and Samson the mighty—
Delilah was his doom, and David thereafter
Was beguiled by Bathsheba, and bore much distress;
Now these were vexed by their devices—‘twere a very joy
Could one but learn to leave, and believe them not.
For these were proud princes, most prosperous of old,
Past all lovers lucky, that languished under heaven, bemused.
And one and all fell prey
To women that they had used;
If I be led astray,
Methinks I may be excused. (2412-28)

Here, all women are endowed with blame for the subversion of chivalry, not only “herself” (Lady Bertilak) and “that other” (Morgan le Fey). Gawain rants that “true” knights become trapped in the women’s “trammels,” threatening masculine power, indicating that even one so great as himself can become trapped and twisted in a feminine net. Women are here described as having “wiles,” referencing their schemes and plots. Gawain goes on to draw make Biblical
references, illustrating his point that many great men have suffered because of a woman. By making this connection, Gawain not only aligns himself with the Biblical greats (reinforcing his own “goodness” once more), but he also aligns Morgan and Lady Bertilak with the Bible’s bad girls. By making these comparisons, it paves the way for Gawain to lessen his own guilt and blame, as he says “Methinks I may be excused.” Personal accountability for his sins is completely displaced onto the shoulders of women. While critics such as Catherine Batt and David Boyd have discussed the anti-feminism and misogyny behind this rant, I suggest that while Gawain’s speech may be laden with misogynistic language, underneath lays the reality of the text—women are indirectly to blame for Gawain’s fall. Lady Bertilak tempts Gawain into accepting the Green Girdle and breaking the exchange oath, and Morgan le Fey is the instigator behind the entire plot. Women do share in the blame here because they do scheme to undermine masculinity. However, the enticements of Lady Bertilak and the schemes of Morgan le Fey cannot eclipse Gawain’s personal accountability—regardless of Gawain’s attempt to do just that. Gawain is directly responsible for his own short-comings: he made the choice to accept the girdle and he broke the masculine codes of bravery and chivalry. Despite this, the text works to release Gawain from blame, by shifting the blame to women. Gawain rather suddenly releases himself from any personal accountability after his own bout of self-disdain in an attempt to rationalize his own sins.

I suggest that behind this shifting of blame within the text is a fear that women who power pose a threat to men. Lady Bertilak represents a fear over female sexuality, as her aggression and boldness threatens to undermine the heteronormative conventions of chivalry and courtly love. The Lady (unsuccessfully) tempts Gawain away from not only his chastity, but

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4 See Batt’s “Gawain’s Antifeminist Rant, the Pentangle, and Narrative Space” and Boyd’s “Sodomy, Misogyny, and Displacement: Occluding Queer Desire in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.”
succeeds in subverting his piety. By convincing Gawain to accept the girdle, she supplants the pentangle and the Virgin Mary emblazoned on now-removed shield. This removal from Christianity further underscores his oath both to God and to Bertilak to exchange the winnings. Thus, by convincing Gawain to take the girdle and thereby break his exchange contract with Bertilak, the Lady succeeds in subverting honor. Morgan le Fey in particular represents masculine anxieties over female intervention within the political sphere as she is the ultimate force behind Gawain’s downfall. As Susan Carter points out, female “agency is down-played, mentioned but not fully interrogated” (34). Carter suggests that this down-playing functions as a way of maintaining the mystery of female magic. I, however, see it as a hidden threat hovering below the surface. Morgan le Fey represents the ultimate autonomous—and therefore dangerous—female in the text. The master manipulator, she transforms Bertilak into the Green Knight and sends him forth to Arthur’s court, exerting her autonomy and control from the outset.

While Gawain attempts to rationalize his own sins by placing the overarching blame onto women, it nevertheless does not erase that he has fallen from his chivalric glory. His return to Camelot reinforces his shame and the lasting consequences brought on by women:

And the bright green belt on his body he bore,
Oblique, like a baldric, bound at his side,
Below his left shoulder, laced in a knot
In betokening of the blame he had borne for his fault (2485-88)

The green girdle, the symbol of feminine subversion⁵, also takes on the meaning of a symbol of Gawain’s own “blame” for his faults and sins. Unlike Gawain’s first confession to the priest where he does not show any contrition for his sins, after the confession at the Green Chapel

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⁵ For further discussion of the green girdle as a symbol of the feminine, see Heng, Geraldine. “Feminine Knots and the Other Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” *PMLA* 106 (1991): 500-514. Print.
Gawain wears the lace for just that reason. Gawain’s intent is to wear the girdle as a mark of penitence, to gain absolution for his sins. However, absolution is never to be his because the court takes the girdle and misunderstands its significance in relation to penitence and its symbolism of female power.

By misappropriating the girdle, the court of Camelot denies Gawain absolution and ignores the threat of female power:

The king comforts the knight and the court all together
Agree with gay laughter and gracious intent
That the lords and the ladies belonging to the Table,
Each brother of that band, a baldric should have
A belt borne oblique, of a bright green,
To be worn with accord for that worthy’s sake.
So that was taken as a token by the Table Round,
And he honored that had it, evermore after. (2513-20)

By appropriating the girdle as “a token of the Table Round,” the girdle is reinterpreted from a symbol of penitence and female subversion into one of chivalry and brotherhood. This reinterpretation suggests that underneath chivalry, there lies dishonor, cowardice, and the female threat. More important, however, is the court’s reaction to Gawain’s confession about the events at Hautdesert and the Green Chapel: the laugh. They see his trials and tribulations as nothing but a joke. Their trivialization of Gawain’s wearing of the green girdle illustrates that they fail to recognize the importance behind it. This moment is a fundamental critique of female power: Gawain returns to Camelot wearing a feminine belt, as a symbol of his sins caused by the feminine threat. However, Arthur and his knights fail to see this. Nothing is done to curtail
Morgan and her plots, suggesting that the most subversive danger of all is their failure to recognize its presence in the normative court of Camelot. Ultimately, Morgan’s scheming goes unpunished and even unacknowledged by Arthur. She is left outside of the realm of masculine control and retains her autonomy and power.

These instances of blaming women within the text are overall indicative of an overall anxiety about female power and autonomy. Indeed, one cannot overlook that it is Morgan herself who drives the entire plot forward—despite her silence as a character. She, herself, may be lacking a voice, but her power radiates throughout the text. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* thus serves as a not-so-subtle warning to its audience: women in power present a distinct threat to masculinity, chivalry, and masculine power.
“You Are Positively Primeval”: The Potential Autonomy of Historical Medieval Women

While representations of gender within Chrétien de Troyes’s romances reflect the proscribed conventions of masculine activity and feminine passivity, there is a marked shift in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight written two centuries later. With this shift in gender conventions, the text not so subletly denounces women who take on masculine roles of power. Through a manipulation of the courtly love conventions, the Gawain-poet attempts to illustrate the negative effects that befall men when women take control. I must next question the socio-historical context behind this misogynistic anxiety. Did a shift in female power and autonomy occur in fourteenth-century England? These questions need to be explored in order to historicize the masculine anxiety in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Historical scholarship points to a rise in female autonomy in the fourteenth century, mainly due to women’s ability to enter the workforce and secure financial independence. Simon Penn notes that not only were women actively involved in England’s expansive wool trade as weavers and spinners, but they also earned wages as retailers and agricultural laborers (1, 6). Additionally, this increase in female workers occurred not only in the “pre-industrial towns,” but in “rural society also” (Penn 14). Some women possessed not only personal, financial autonomy (as they were able to control their personal finances, and secure their own futures by working), but women also played an important role within England’s economy. Their contribution helped to shape England’s industries and agriculture and cemented their importance in a population depleted and suffering from the Black Death.

Due to women’s ability to enter into England’s workforce, they had the potential to break away from the once compulsory wife- and motherhood roles as well as from the authority of men. Penn suggests that many of those women who earned wages “seem to have been free from
any familial restriction. They appear as independent labourers, moving from place to place in search of work, responsible alone for their well being” (14). Women’s ability to earn their own wages and establish financial independence from a male family member marks a definite shift in English society. Some women operated outside of masculine control—not only financially, but also physically, having the autonomy, authority, and means to move around the country.

Furthermore, Penn notes that in some cases, records “not only confirm that women were engaged in the same harvest tasks as men, but that they were also at times receiving the same pay” (9). That women were issued equal pay at times (a concern that is still present in our present-day society), further illustrates women’s power and importance in the fourteenth century. It also helps to establish a context for the misogynistic treatment of female power in fourteenth-century texts like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

As I embark on the next stage of this project, I intend to more fully investigate historical contexts related to female power. While Penn’s article focuses primary on women from the peasantry, I need to further examine the power and authority within the middle and noble classes. In doing so, I hope to anchor my argument that the Gawain-poet castigates female power to a historical context in which women truly did, upon occasion, have equality, and perhaps, even power over men.

As this stage of my project comes to an end, I look back on the disappointment and disempowerment I felt when concluding that heroines in courtly love romances did not enjoy the power that I had, as a child, once assumed they possessed. However, with the promise of my impending historical research on female autonomy and power in the fourteenth century, I feel empowered once more. The courtly love romances of Chrétien may portray women as vain, flighty, and powerless, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may portray women as power-
hungry manipulators, but I am not deterred. I look ahead to discovering not only actual instances of power, but actual women outside of fictional, male-written texts. My continuing passion and love for the literature surrounding King Arthur has ushered in a new interest in seeking the voiceless women in medieval history. Too often in today’s common parlance, the term “medieval” is used as a descriptor for something outdated, backwards, or oppressive. While arguing that women in the fourteenth-century enjoyed the potential for actual power, I hope too to repurpose the term “medieval” as something empowering. In fact, Belle from Beauty and the Beast gets it right when she reprimands Gaston for his misogynistic outlook on the domestic role women should, in his opinion, hold: “Gaston,” she says “you are positively primeval.” Looking forward, I want to take part in liberating women from the middle ages from the stereotype of “medieval” and empower them once more.
Works Cited


