KEEPING THE GIRDLE: *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*, CROSS-DRESSING, AND GENDERED COMMUNITIES

by

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Dedicated to my family, my friends and those who find freedom in walking between the lines.

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ABSTRACT

Gender, anxiety, identity, and Gawain's impossible choice have long been identified and examined as worth studying in the fourteenth-century alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. By focusing on the different states of dress that Gawain finds himself in, the gendered behaviors he engages in, and the fact that he takes on and wears a piece of woman's clothing as his own before his final encounter, it becomes clear that Gawain begins to utilize and slip into a gender fluid state of identity. His behaviors in Haut Desert cross gendered lines, but also the lines of private and public identity: Gawain's fault is revealed at the Green Chapel, when the Green Knight reveals himself to be Bertilak as well as his knowledge of Gawain's girdle. By taking up the green girdle, Gawain cross-dresses and gains access to alternative courses of action and paths towards virtue and survival. Upon returning to his court, his community must take on the girdle as a token of Gawain himself and integrate it in a way that allows for his gender fluidity to become enclosed within the borders of the chivalric community. Gawain's survival and the benefit which he brings his court are materially represented by the girdle which stands for both the honorable and shameful, the knightly and the monstrous, and the feminine and masculine.

Key Words: cross-dressing, feminine, masculine, chivalry, monstrous, Other, private, public

INTRODUCTION

The fourteenth-century alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* tells a story about playing games. It sets rules up to break them, sets characters up to unmask them, and introduces a perfect hero only to finish by marking him with his own shame. Sir Gawain is introduced to the audience as a knight worthy of sitting next to King Arthur's queen, and a decisive and noble member of his community. When a Christmas feast is interrupted by the Green Knight, who asks to play a game, Gawain is forced to step forward to protect the reputation of the court who was otherwise balking in fear at the strange visitor. The Green Knight asks to play a game with simple rules: he kneels down and hands Gawain a giant ax and asks to receive a blow. The only rule is that he will give Gawain a blow in a year's time. Gawain, perhaps hoping to end the game before it begins, or as a response to the insults the Green Knight had already given out, strikes the intruder's head from his body. Yet, the Green Knight picks his own head back up, and leaves, reminding Gawain that in a year's time, if Gawain will seek him out, he will return the favor. Sir Gawain and Arthur's court are left with a terrible fear: how can they send their greatest knight out, without sending him either to failure or certain death? How does one accept a killing blow, and survive? Or worse, how does a court lose the best of itself, and stay the same?

Gawain has no choice but to leave his court as its representative. In doing so, he places a great importance upon his ability to be seen and recognized as the greatest knight of King Arthur's court, although of course, his own humility and virtue prevent him from publicly calling himself this. As he leaves court, there is great lamenting and fear for him from both the ladies and the other men who love him. To prepare Gawain to enter the wilderness and face the Green Knight yet again, he is dressed in shining armor, and his identity and reputation are cemented by the shield he bears, decorated with a pentangle which represents the five unending virtues of chivalry and nobility that Gawain is known to uphold. In this armor, Gawain is protected, not just in a practical sense, but also in a symbolic one. Gawain is able to take his community with him, as his armor marks him not just as a knight, but as a knight of King Arthur's court. Of course, the armor is also decorated with the Pentangle and a few other symbols which also identify him as an individual, the distinguished Sir Gawain. Due to the fact that Gawain's test is not overly concerned with what he can *do*, how he looks and who he is are instead the main

concerns as he undergoes his trials. Gawain's role as a representative of Arthur's court is defined by his ability to *look* the part, and clothing becomes the center of his dilemma as he is lead through various states of undress, and finally offered a tempting and damning piece of woman's clothing which he chooses to take on. As he finally enters the Green Chapel to meet the Green Knight, he does so dressed in his armor with a woman's green girdle wrapped around his waist, choosing to trust in both of these sets of gendered clothing to protect him in the face of certain death. Through a slow breaking down of his identity, various temptations, and games which require him to experience and even enjoy passivity, Gawain engages in a partial act of cross-dressing and explores a possible solution to the no-win scenario that chivalric masculine violence and pride landed him in to begin with.

Gawain's gendered transformation is slowly and subtly brought about by his interactions with Bertilak and the Lady in the court of Haut Desert, where he stays as he awaits his day of reckoning with the Green Knight. In this court, he is stripped of his armor, and engages in a few new games. Bertilak, his host who is secretly the Green Knight, asks Gawain to play a game of reciprocity: everything he earns hunting he will give Gawain, and anything Gawain receives while resting at court or in private rooms he will give to Bertilak. While resting in a private bedroom, Gawain is visited by Bertilak's wife, who attempts to seduce Gawain three times. Simple reciprocity is only the pretense of his host's game, and the Lady's desire for him is also part of a larger game that Gawain cannot yet see. Gawain is actually receiving far more than he gives, and his character becomes mutable according to the animal pelts he receives from Bertilak during their game and the green girdle he takes from the Lady during her third seduction attempt. When Gawain loses his armor – his connection to his representative role and the chivalric community he left – he is given new pieces of clothing that he might identify with. The securely gendered and classed clothing of armor is replaced by more mutable or fluid pieces of clothing: silks and nakedness embrace Gawain as he is tested by the couple who hosts him. The most interesting of these tests occurs in the bedroom as the Lady of the court attempts to seduce him, and eventually gets Gawain to accept her green girdle, which she claims will protect him from coming to harm. For Gawain, this girdle represents an alternative option: where he originally might only abandon or meet his fate head on, the girdle grants him a way out of his no-win scenario, and a path home to his court with reputation and life intact.

In the court of Haut Desert and his final encounter at the Green Chapel, Gawain acts as a reader and interpreter of signs, and as critics we read along with Gawain as he attempts to decode the intentions and deceptions of those around him. Gawain chooses to deceive Bertilak and keep the green girdle and is ultimately shamed for it after the Green Knight gives him a nick on his neck. It is revealed that if he hadn't kept the girdle and broken the rules of the game, he wouldn't have been touched by the axe's blade at all. Scholars have often taken Gawain's lead in this narrative moment and have focused on where his final outburst directs us – towards his shame, and the diatribe against women – and consequently we may ignore what Gawain seeks to distance himself from, which are the intentions and deceptions of Gawain himself. What he easily sweeps under the rug, and what the Green Knight initially focuses on is what Gawain *wanted* that caused him to cheat. The Green Knight locates Gawain's desire as neither for his host's wife, nor the girdle itself but for self-preservation. This locus of desire, the desire for the self, is what makes Gawain's choice to keep the girdle and return to his court with it all the more interesting. Even after he is caught in an act of technical cross-dressing, Gawain does not wish to be parted from his token of femininity and makes a great effort to justify keeping it. The question we might ask, is what does the girdle offer Gawain, and what does it offer the welcoming court of King Arthur who decides upon their knight's return to all take on the girdle as well?

The interactions between men, women, and clothing in this poem are often an echo of conventional romance, but beneath this surface lie manipulations of systems and alternate sources of pleasure and virtue which Gawain will access and utilize. The reader again finds themselves mimicking Gawain's experience as they are confronted with the poem's surface level beauty: the alliterative poetry and stanzaic structures and patterns,[1] draw a reader (or listener) in easily and create a desire for closure and parallel structure in the ending. We begin and end the poem with a knightly-appearing figure entering the court of King Arthur, and both figures carry clothing that is strikingly green, and marks them as Other. Gawain takes on the role of a marvel

[1] For some studies on the structure of the poem, see A. Kent Hieatt, "Sir Gawain: Pentangle, Luflace, Numerical Structure," *Papers on Language and Literature* 4 (1968): 359–69 for the classical study of the Pentangle and a consideration of the significance of the number 5 in the poem, see also Howell Chickering, "Stanzaic Closure and Linkage in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Chaucer Review* 32 (1997): 1–31, and Michael Robertson, "Stanzaic Symmetry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Speculum* 57 (1982): 779–85.

for his court upon his return, and the court welcomes him back, through a system of tokenizing and communal shouldering of symbolic threat. At the center of the poem's systems of exchange and shifts in identity lies the mutable green girdle, which exchanges hands, genders, and meaning based upon the use that various characters find in it.

This possibility of meaning, found chiefly in the girdle, is the long-enduring sweetheart of literary analysis of this poem.[2] The possible repercussions for Gawain's choices, for the game of exchanges, and the Lady's seductive language have supplied scholars with material for an incredible number of approaches. The possible frameworks which have been presented over the years have included explorations of Gawain's individuality, the general identity of the chivalric man, the possibilities and pleasures of different kinds of desires, women's agency, illusions of choice for all genders and the sexual tensions and possibilities the poem presents. Although sexuality and the relationships between the masculine[3] and the feminine that are tied to the girdle and Gawain's acceptance of it have been explored before, the concept of cross-dressing, of wearing the Lady's clothing as his own, has not been fully explored by any studies that I have come across. In this work, I will focus chiefly on the ramifications of the Lady's third day of seduction, when she gifts Gawain her green girdle - taken from her body – and he accepts it for his own sake. This exchange of a silk token, although seemingly conventional between lovers, is markedly different because of the lack of love or clear lust between the Lady and Gawain. The exchange is motivated instead by a feminine desire which lacks sexuality; Gawain combines his

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[2] Sweetheart, yes, but a frustrating partner as well. For significant work on the shifting signs and ambiguities in this poem, see R.A Shoaf, "The 'Syngne of Surfet' and the Surfeit of Signs in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *The Passing of Arthur: New Essays in Arthurian Tradition,* edited by Christopher Braswell and William Sharpe (New York: Garland, 1988): 152–69 and Arthur Lindley, "'Ther he watz dispoyled with spechez of myerthe': Carnival and the Undoing of Sir Gawain," *Exemplaria* 6.1 (January 1994): 67–86 and for a useful study on the girdle as a shifting token of shame and honor see Kevin R. West, "Tokens of Sin, Badges of Honor: Julian of Norwich and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Renascence* 69 (2017): 3–16.

[3] In particular, the consideration of chivalric masculinity and Gawain's relationship to it is explored in work like Carl Grey Martin, "The Cipher of Chivalry: Violence as Courtly Play in the World of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Chaucer Review* 43 (2009): 311–29; Laura Ashe, "*Sir Gawain and the Green* Knight and the Limits of Chivalry," *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance,* edited by Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjević, and Judith Weiss, Studies in Medieval Romance 12 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010) 159–72 and Clare R. Kinney, "The (Dis)Embodied Hero and the Signs of Manhood in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, edited by Clare A. Lees, Medieval Cultures 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994): 47–57.

desire for a feminine object with his desire for himself. This distances him from the masculine community he represents, and his actions after he accepts the girdle threaten to change his very nature. His attempt to hide the girdle breaks the rules of the game he plays with Bertilak and reveals the way that he associates his love of self with a loyalty to the Lady's request. Gawain performs as a woman for Bertilak as he delivers the host's wife's kisses, he acts as the refusing lady concerned with his chastity in the seduction scenes and he is asked to find a masculine virtue of courage in a feminine state of passivity as he takes the Green Knight's blow. Gawain is able to step back from the very edge of chivalric masculinity and back into his court's accepting embrace, but not without permanent changes to his body and his dress when he returns with the girdle wrapped around his chest and his neck scarred. Gawain ends the poem as a gender fluid knightly figure, who is left marked forever by his desire for the feminine.

SCHOLARSHIP ON GAWAIN: ANXIETIES, HONOR, AND SHAME

Gender is often mentioned as a key subject of difference in this poem by critics, although it is notable to mention those studies which deal with other areas of interest which collide with gender and sexuality. One such study by Patricia Ingham reads Gawain's venture outside of the Arthurian court as an exploration of colonialism and systems of maintaining national identity.[4] Ingham notes that "gender takes center stage so that the complicated ethnic and regional differences of the poem's earlier moments – between a centralized sovereign (Arthur), a colonial emissary (Gawain), and a sometime "exotic" Other (Bertilak the Green Knight) – can disappear in favor of an easy split between "masculine" agency and "feminine" aggression."[5] This study seeks to examine whether or not this split is able to bear the metaphorical weight of other anxieties which might be attached to this center of identity. I argue that the poem does not allow gender to easily restructure or reinstate normative relations, but instead allows Gawain's

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[4] Patricia Clare Ingham, "'In Contrayez Straunge': Sovereign Rivals, Fantasies of Gender, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" in her *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain,* The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 107–36. For other colonial or spatial readings of this poem see Gillian Rudd, "'The Wilderness of Wirral' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,'" *Arthuriana* 23 (2013): 52–65 and David K. Coley, "Diaspora, Neighborhood, Empire: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Exemplaria* 32 (2020): 206–28.
[5] Ingham, "'In Contrayez Straunge'" 132.

individuality and the system of tokenizing the Other to facilitate his return to the court without negative communal consequence. Ingham's concept of gender as a fantasy used within the poem is reflected in my construction of gender as a sartorial performance, a concept mainly utilized to structure interactions and grounded within one's dress. By accepting and wearing both masculine and feminine clothing items, Gawain's individual view of self and role within the court is left to experience the dangers and consequences of adaptation, while the community merely benefits through the symbolic redefinition of Gawain's changes.

A narrative concern with normative structures is key to the other two formative studies on sexuality and gender which I build from. Carolyn Dinshaw's work on homosexual desire[6] has been incredibly influential for this argument.[7] Dinshaw argues that the text seeks to use normative heterosexuality to respond to the homosexual desire that might arise from the necessary homosocial systems that make up the poem's courtly setting. Dinshaw's argument examines how the possibility of homosexuality – in the implied consequences of Gawain and Bertilak's game – is produced only to be easily contained by the poem's ending and Gawain's antifeminism: "The poem's antifeminism…works by the same dynamic as the one I have delineated for heterosexuality: the poet creates a world of feminine power, going so far as to ascribe the motivation of the entire narrative to Morgan, only in order to obscure and contain it in the process of reinscribing masculine legitimacy."[8] Dinshaw holds that this regulation of gendered power is also in service of heterosexuality "when normative laws of gender are articulated with normative desire."[9] Dinshaw's examination of the gender dynamics in the temptation scenes and her ability to separate the poem's function and readership from its conception in order to examine the modern possibility it holds has inspired this work to read for queer possibility. The focus shifts in this work from Bertilak's desires, and Gawain's sexuality, to Gawain's desire for a private sense of self and his gender identity as it is altered and built within his trials.

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[6] For another key reading of homosexual desire or queerness in this poem see David L. Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny, and Displacement: Occluding Queer Desire in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" *Arthuriana* 8 (1998): 76–113.
[7] Carolyn Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and Its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *diacritics* 24 (1994): 204–26.
[8] Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss" 219.
[9] Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss" 219.

Another prominent work which has helped to build the foundation for this text is Gail Ashton's "Perverse Dynamics of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"* [10] which argues that the poem's "sodomitical potential…exceeds even the hint of homosexual desire between Gawain and the Green Knight/Bertilak" in the form of Morgan's desire to touch Guinevere through the act of scaring her to death. Another scholar who focuses on Morgan as a key figure in this poem is Geraldine Heng,[11] whose two articles regarding feminine desire and gendered narratives focus on the figure of the Lady and the love-talking between her and Gawain. These are essential for the foundation of my argument, as they establish possibilities of enjoyment and pleasure taken in language and gendered play during the temptation scenes. Heng establishes various moments of reversed gender roles in Gawain and the Lady's love talking, as well as the way in which the girdle functions as a conduit for female or feminine desire, namely Morgan and the Lady's. I argue that the girdle is a token of femininity in general, the Lady's body in particular, and it is marked by Gawain's desire for his own skin. The way Gawain takes on the girdle transforms his body into a more feminine figure than is acceptable within chivalric bounds. Without communal intervention, which transforms Gawain and his girdle into acceptable tokens shared by the entire community, Gawain might not have been able to return as a member of the court because of his transgressions.

Jane Gilbert has examined the roles of gender and sexual transgression in all of the Cotton Nero Poems, and argues that Gawain presents an ambiguous view of these transgressions, one which claims that Gawain associates adultery with all sexuality, leading him to appoint asexuality as the ideal virtue in desiring Bertilak and the Virgin Mary instead of the Lady.12 Although Gilbert focuses on the sexual implications of Gawain's actions, and in particular the kisses he offers Bertilak, she also notes the ways in which Gawain takes on the persona of the Lady herself in order to separate himself from the act of adultery, even as this of course has other consequences for Gawain. Gilbert argues that Gawain allows an inversion of normal sexual

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[10] Gail Ashton, "The Perverse Dynamics of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*" *Arthuriana* 15.3 (Fall 2005): 51–74.
[11] Geraldine Heng, "A Woman 'Wants': The Lady, Gawain, and the Forms of Seduction," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5 (1992): 101–34 and "Feminine Knots and the Other in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 106 (1991): 500–14.
[12] Jane Gilbert, "Gender and Sexual Transgression," *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet,* edited by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, Arthurian Studies 38 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 53–70.

values – exchanging shameful desire for another man with the honorable kissing of Bertilak as a show of Gawain's ability to avoid adultery. Yet, because Gawain keeps the girdle and kisses Bertilak first in the final interaction, his *deception* reasserts the normal values of honor and shame and relegates all of his behavior to be shameful; thus prompting Gawain to leave and confess his sin of desire. In my argument, Gawain's ability to take on feminine action or reactions is essential to his survival and thus the survival of the court itself relies on Gawain's fluid gendered behavior.

The systems of normativity which the critics above contend with are regulated through the honor or shame that a community might offer an individual. Shame and honor are Gawain's main concerns at the end of this poem, and one of the studies that I draw from in order to understand this communal function are Derek Brewer's[13] and Derek Pearsall's[14] chapters on the subject. Pearsall posits a separation from Gawain's private self and his public reputation. I argue that Gawain's private and public selves are intermixed through Bertilak and the Lady's deceptions, as he presents himself with the love token to the Green Knight initially without shame: assuming that his secret keeping was in line with his private interactions and that his appointment with the Green Knight strictly had to do with his public martial identity. The Bertilak couple's deception lowers the barrier between public and private – and therefore, between the performance of clothing, and its connection to behavior and an inner sense of self. Their actions break the agreed upon separation of masculine and feminine desires. At the Green Chapel, the Green Knight is not comfortably one or the other of his revealed identities; he is suitably both Bertilak and himself. Neither seems to be a ruse or a false front – the line between performance and inner truth is broken down until there is no separation at all. For Gawain, this casts new weight onto the sartorial performance he is giving, and he is forced to create a new identity in relation to the girdle as he returns to the court he came from.

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[13] Derek Brewer, "Introduction" in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet,* edited by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, Arthurian Studies 38 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 1–21.
[14] Derek Pearsall, "Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:* The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet,* edited by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, Arthurian Studies 38 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 351–62.

MEDIEVAL GENDER AND SEXUALITY: BENDING BINARIES

Identity is the foundation of much scholarly interest in this poem: Gawain's reputation, his sense of self, and his name are questioned by Bertilak/the Green Knight and the Lady multiple times in the poem. What this work will focus on specifically is gender identity. Although sexuality has already been explored and class and nobility have been confronted as focal points of anxiety, Gawain's gender is often lumped in with a reading of homosexuality or a general sense of "perversity". These readings reflect the ways in which different aspects of medieval identity all merged and coagulated to create communities and persons; thus identifying Arthurian knighthood with masculinity, nobility, and Christianity in equal parts. This miasma of significations and ties to social standings make it difficult for modern readers to examine gender, sexuality, class, religion, and race as unique aspects of personhood, as we do today.[15] However, relying exclusively on medieval gender theory would limit modern readers in contemporary readings of this poem: in other words, couching it exclusively in medieval theory might freeze the poem, and not permit us to allow these characters to ripple and cycle through modern readers' imaginations. Therefore, it is essential to establish both the modern gender theory and the medieval gender theory that have helped me bring my reading to life in this text. The existence of an inclusionary theory of sex and the exclusionary dichotomy of the labels "man" and "woman" point towards a complex and anxious society seeking stable structures of identity. When individual's bodies or genders allow them to be considered distinct actors who are capable of changing the definition of the same act an anxiety about the ability to slip from one gender to another, with a noted power differential, might have led to a larger concern about how one appeared in public. This instability, with its ties to all other aspects of cultural and communal identity, make it a primary theme in many romances, poems, and lyrics, even if it is glossed over as naturally understood and explored. To begin, deceivingly simply, with the concept of binary gender, we have to grapple with the idea that medieval gender was not so strictly binary as many conservative modern spaces of time have viewed it as. According to Thomas Laqueur's

[15] A small note to the effect that the concept of intersectionality is different than treating these categories as though they are defined and signaled by the same thing; although there is cross-over in modern identities and categories, to view each of them as tied to the other so irreparably is not part of modern theory. Intersections imply that they can be separated out and considered as individual categories with their own set of symbols, signifiers, oppressions and performances.

Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud the one-sex theory was a prominent theological and anatomical assumption for medieval writers.[16] In this theory, put forward by Aristotle and Galen, women existed anatomically as a type of male body, with their genitals and reproductive systems seen as inversions of male ones. The inversion was also treated as a 'lesser' version of maleness, one which was not as potent anatomically as the male reproduction system.[17] This theory already sets a distinct theoretical background for anxieties about sex and gender for medieval audiences. Although mainly medical, this concept might be used to frame how medieval writers could have been envisioning the relationship between sexed bodies. Considering this theory, a strict binary is untenable, since the base of these bodies and identities was seen as the same. Even though in literature and cultural practice it is clear that the labels of "man" and "woman" are separate and clearly delineated, even Joan Cadden notes that there is plenty of evidence of medieval scientific texts which although concerned with limiting "displaced" genders and enforcing two sexes in terminology still discussed the existence of middle-space identities like eunuchs, cross-dressed women, homosexuals and hermaphrodites.[18] The anxiety present in the scientific texts might reflect cultural anxieties for the labeling and limiting of gender identities. Such an anxiety implies the existence of a perceived threat of genders which were fluid, lacked a label, or benefited from multiple perceptions. This fluidity of sex and gender is invited into a cultural conscience, along with the suggestion that, perhaps, through an individual's action or self-representation one might make a feminine man, a masculine woman, or a non-binary[19] person who denies any clear categorization on either side of the spectrum.

Beyond medieval accounts of anatomy, reliance on action and self-representation is stressed both by modern gender theory, in the form of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and in

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[16] Thomas Walter Laqueur, "Destiny if Anatomy," in his *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1992): 25–62.
[17] The concept of women as lacking something male is related, but not the same as this theory, which originates in Jacques Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis: 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, vol. 7*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller; trans. by Dennis Porter (New York: Routledge, 1992) and *Le Seminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XX: Encore (1972–1973)*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975).
[18] Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*, Cambridge Studies in the History of Medicine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 202–12.
[19] For a discussion of non-binary and androgynous figures see Leah DeVun, *The Shape of Sex:Nonbinary Gender from Genesis to the Renaissance* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2021).

Ruth Mazo Karras' concept of active and passive sexuality which structured the relationships between male and female sexed bodies in medieval Europe. Karras' views hold that the binary of *man* and *woman* was still upheld and influential in the culture itself, despite Laqueur's theory and any medical texts that might argue for the one-sex concept. Practical uses of gender and sex to structure societal hierarchies did not need really benefit from a theory of sameness; difference and binary views were far easier organizers of power. A physical binary of sex, although dominant, was still influenced by the actions and behavior of an individual. Although some scholars have pointed towards certain sex acts or abstinences from sex as transformative of gender, Karras holds that sexual action might slightly alter but not completely change one's gender. Even though sex actors – the active "penetrator" and the passive "penetrated" – might be taken up by either gender, this did not transform them into the opposite or a third gender, but instead made them into "deviant" or re-gendered men or women.[20] Noting that other identities, like nobility or Christianity, are also relevant and oftentimes central to the construction of gender, this "deviant" label might arguably justify an individual as alternatively gendered; not *just* man or woman, but a certain type or iteration of these two categories. Instead, a deviant person is *enough* of a man or woman to allow them to lay claim to their gender, but they cannot embrace it as the holistic definition of how they present and act. This slight difference is where the Green Knight and the court of Haut Desert offer their real threat. They are intelligible enough as figures and as a social setting for Gawain to interact with them as if he knows them, and to be treated as part of the chivalric community he experiences in Arthur's court. But they are deviant figures – providing hybrid experiences – which manipulate established systems, self-presentation, and dress in order to tempt Gawain into operating under their alternative systems of gender and power.

Here, Judith Butler's gender performance theory[21] might aid the modern reader in interpreting the ramifications of how this might function in actual society, and how the concept

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[20] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Sex and the Middle Ages," in her *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1–33.
[21] Judith Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts" in *Gender Trouble*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 107–203 and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

of different sub-categories of man or woman might de-naturalize and place gender into a performed and socially constructed concept which is made up entirely in the public eye and the private choice or inclination. Butler's work shows that gender is a performance which is grounded in a non-existent truth, a "natural" or private self which has no corporeal or actual reality beyond its consideration as a "truth" or "nature." For Gawain, this lack of grounding can be seen in the vulnerability he displays when he is stripped of his performance material: his masculine armor. His actions, speech, and shifting behavior into passive roles within the new court all begin to create a performance of femininity which flirts with the bounds of what might allow him to be seen as a knight.

To consider Gawain as a hybrid or gender fluid figure is not original to me: Susan Crane writes that Gawain's taking on of a feminine object transforms him into "one who doesn't fit, who embodies a problematic not just of gender but of other classifications…".[22] Crane also considers Gawain's gender or hybrid identity to be secondarily interesting, instead focusing on a broader concept of exploit vs. renown. This dichotomy is deeply related to the study of gender, as well as the specific consideration of Sir Gawain's gender performance as it aligns with his desires to protect his court's reputation. One's actions and one's reputation might be related to a binary of public opinion (gender as perceived by others) and private practice (gender as performed by an individual even in private). In Gawain's case, his gendered performances are given to various audiences outside of Gawain's knowledge, and the changes he undergoes rely upon this blurring of the distinction between the public and the private.

BUILDING BOUNDARIES: MONSTERS AND LADIES

Medieval gender dynamics are interlaced with rules of engagement. One's gender defined one's social role, and often one's sexual role. This becomes a more complicated matter when we discuss the fantastic feminine and the monstrous man within this poem and how they relate to Gawain and the court's senses of self. The importance of the monstrous to the maintenance of

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[22] Susan Crane, "Knights in Disguise: Identity and Incognito in Fourteenth-Century Chivalry" In *The Stranger in Medieval Society*, edited by F.R.P. Akehurst and Stephanie Cain Van D'Elden, Medieval Cultures 12 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 63–79 at 74. In this quotation, Crane is using Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992).

knighthood in particular is supported by the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages,* particularly his work regarding the subject of beheadings and the necessity of monstrous tokens and body parts for knightly communities in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[23] Cohen points to the crisis of nobility[24] in the 14th century as a reason for why the inclusion of gory monster-killing remained popular. He presents a new definition of noble men as male bodies which "the aristocracy did not rely on for wartime protection and expansion"[25] and thus argues that it was necessary to find other symbols and narratives to distinguish noble masculinity as a stable identity outside of martial prowess. In this context, Gawain's narrative explores the limitations and mutability of the perfect chivalric figure; testing his virtues without asking him to raise his sword[26] in his ultimate encounter and test. Similar to the way that noble identities were in flux during the 14th century, Gawain's story explores the limitations of chivalric masculinity, asking the question of how close one knight can get to the monstrous before it begins to alter him.

In the following chapters, as we build and dissect these limitations, we will examine the cracks through which there might be areas of contamination or "leaking" of the Other into the self. Sarah Alison Miller provides a framework for this, as she argues that the female body (alongside the simply monstrous) also occupies the space of threat and border for the male body. In particular, her examination of how Julia of Norwich writes about Christ's crucified body as a

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[23] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "The Body in Pieces: Identity and the Monstrous in Romance," in his *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, Medieval Cultures 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 62–95.

[24] There is some debate surrounding the concept of noble anxiety, although the rising pseudo-middle class and rise and fall of various established families in medieval Europe has often been assumed to be an issue in the minds of nobility in this time. For a case study which argues against this generalized anxiety by examining nobility in Flanders, see Frederik Buylaert, "The Late Medieval 'Crisis of the Nobility' Reconsidered: The Case of Flanders," *Journal of Social History* 45.4 (Summer 2012): 1117–34, as well as Jack H. Hexter, "The Myth of the Middle Class in Tudor England," in his *Reappraisals in History* (London: Longman, Green, 1961), 71–116. For the most notable argument regarding the crisis itself, see Guy Bois, *Crise du féodalisme. Économie rurale et démographie en Normandie orientale du début du 14e siècle au milieu du 16e siècle*, 2nd ed. (Paris: *Presses de la* Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1981).

[25] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "The Body in Pieces" 90.

[26] Although, of course, the poem begins with Gawain's act of violence when he chooses to cut off the Green Knight's head. Some useful conversations around this choice of blow can be found in Manish Sharma, "Hiding the Harm: Revisionism and Marvel in *Sir Gawain*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 44 (2008): 168–93.

"fluctuating site of both penetration and enclosure"[27] is useful in considering the bodies of martyrs and injured men. Gawain's virtue and connection to the Virgin Mary makes relevant some parallels between Christ's body and his. Examining anxieties around the vulnerability of violence or marking of masculine flesh is particularly interesting in examining his open wound that he wears on his neck after his encounter with the Green Knight. Throughout the argument we will also return to this language of closure and penetration as we consider the various knots which Gawain engages with to attempt to anchor himself in various symbols of community or strength.

The monstrous and the feminine are mainly treated as threats in this poem. This narrative fear extends to their material tokens or symbols, which might normally be taken by heroes in order to strip the monstrous or feminine bodies of their power and agency. Instead, this poem allows these tokens – like the Green Knight's head and the green girdle – to disseminate and expand the power and influence of both the monstrous and the feminine at different moments. Gawain is denied the ability to hold up the Green Knight's head after his decapitation and instead his own neck is put at risk. Then, in taking possession of the green girdle, Gawain transforms his own body and armor into a token of feminine intent or desire for a feminine self. The girdle's overdetermined significations make it into a fluid object. Later, when Gawain is welcomed back, the court takes on the girdle as a token *of* Gawain; through his interactions and "contaminations" among the monstrous and the feminine, Gawain becomes a figure who must be tokenized in order to maintain the community he returns to.

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[27] Sarah Alison Miller, "Introduction: The Monstrous Borders of the Female Body," in her *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body*, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1–8 at 4.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES: DRESS AND TOKENS

The importance of clothing in this text is therefore easily recognized by the much written about girdle[28] and the poet's descriptions of Gawain's various moments of dressing and undressing. The Green Knight, despite his green complexion, is also notable because of his eccentric dress and choice of accessories. Identities are unstable in this poem mainly due to their lack of continuity in public and private spaces, and the reliance on clothing to anchor or help to define gender, personal identity, and loyalties. Just as the monstrous and the feminine work as figures or tokens to define the edges of nobility or masculinity so do tokens of divine or noble femininity and chivalric masculinity construct the center of the self. Jane Burns argues that: "At the very core of courtly culture, then, cross-gendered performances are the norm, since social status, not anatomical sex, actively conditions gender identity."[29] Her work on the experience of gender and clothing is fundamental to my own; Burns' construction of how lady's clothing is used by the courtly knight to outline or define his own identity, as well as how armor constitutes masculine identity, and flesh constitutes feminine identity is key to examining the temptation scenes. Mainly, Burns' work helps to distinguish between acceptable layers of cross-dressing; ultimately locating Gawain's own actions as engaging in cross-dressing which is not codified by his community as acceptable until he returns, and they engage in a restructuring of his dress to allow him to re-enter the court.

Cross-dressing[30] will therefore be defined throughout this work as dressing in a way which allows one access to the benefits of the public body of another gender, class, or individual.

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[28] For useful examinations of Gawain's girdle and girdles in general see Lawrence Besserman, "Gawain's Green Girdle," *Annuale mediaevale* 22 (1982): 84–101, Stoddard Malarkey and J. Barre Toelken, "Gawain and the Green Girdle," *JEGP: The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 63 (1964): 14–20, Albert B Friedman and Richard H Osberg, "Gawain's Girdle as Traditional Symbol," *Journal of American Folklore* 90 (1977): 301–15, and J.R Planche, *History of British Costume*, 3rd ed. (London, George Bell & Sons, 1907).

[29] Jane Burns, "Robes, Armor and Skin," in her *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*, Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). 121–48 at 132.

[30] For medieval cross dressing and gender theory in the middle ages, see Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, "Cross Dressing and Social Status in the Middle Ages" in their *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 45–73 and Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe*, New Middle Ages 1 (New York: Garland, 1995).

This includes full disguise, but also partial dress, wherein merely a token of another identity is worn by an individual, in such a way which alters their role in different communities. A distinction is made, then, between total and partial cross-dressing. Total cross-dressing, seen mainly as disguise, enables the men who are shown to use it to access women's bodies or satisfy sexual desires without fear of the communal punishment that their adultery or lechery might provoke. Examples of this type of cross-dressing are found in abundance in the fabliaux wherein sexual misadventure and the deception of others are commonplace. One such example is the fabliau of "La Saineresse" (The Healer) which shows a woman whose husband claims he cannot be tricked.[31] In response to this boast, the woman plays sick and has a cross-dressed healer enter their home in order to have a sexual dalliance, one described in great detail in the text itself. The healer leaves easily, and the woman boasts to her husband in thinly veiled innuendo what her afternoon was like. Through a man cross-dressing as a woman, the woman is able to achieve her desire and act without fear of retribution or shame. Burns argues that "the complex functions of cloth and clothing in courtly settings [exist] as indices of guilt or innocence in adultery, as subtle means of redefining political and personal identity through cross-dressing, as a code for gendering an otherwise unsexed amorous body, and as an incipient attempt to enforce social order between status groups."[32] In other words, cross-dressing disturbs the use of "private" and "public" systems where there is an assumption of continuity between private and public representations of oneself. That is, communal honor and shame systems can be manipulated through changing one's appearance; they are both enforced and subverted through dress and cross-dressing.

When Gawain accepts the Lady's girdle and wears it confidently as his own, I argue that he cross-dresses by wearing women's clothing and assuming he can pass it off as a part of masculine armor. He also accepts the girdle while he is naked and on the defensive in a sexual scenario, marking him as a feminine participant in the verbal sparring. By taking up the girdle and failing to fully integrate it into his armor, Gawain allows his private self to be re-signified instead of the girdle. He thus participates in cross-dressing by not fully following the precedents

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[31] *The Fabliaux*, trans. by Nathaniel E. Dubin, edited by R. Howard Bloch (New York: Liveright, 2013): 524–31.
[32] Burns, "Introduction: The Damsel's Sleeve," in her *Courtly Love Undressed* 1–16.

of taking on women's clothing as disguise or as symbols of either secret or public love. As Gawain steps outside of precedented or codified acts of partial cross-dressing, he necessarily disengages with the system of honor and shame which might have dictated his penance before the Green Knight can force him to admit his faults at the Green Chapel.

Playing with honor through the use of gendered clothing is also seen throughout the tradition of the Arthurian knight, mainly focusing on Lancelot as a figure who is dressed by a woman, dressed as a woman, or mistaken for a woman in various episodes. Although Lancelot and Gawain each participate in the sanctioned act of wearing pieces of women's bodies or clothing as love tokens in other stories[33] the main intent behind this kind of cross dressing is to safely co-opt or own pieces of feminine clothing and therefore safely deal with the feminine body itself. Gawain's attempt to co-opt the girdle is thwarted by a convoluted intent and unclear ownership which is then revealed and condemned in the episode at the Green Chapel. His claim to the girdle as a sign of his shame is then markedly different than these other normalized interactions with tokens of the feminine – although the court later uses it to represent honor, it is only as a token *of Gawain* that this honor can be achieved. Gawain instead melds with this feminine token, taking it on as a flaw in his identity, but still, wholly embracing it as a lasting part of him.

Cross dressing for women serves a far different purpose in the Fabliaux and other fiction, and this is classically represented in the French romance *Silence*.[34] In contrast, the knight who is a lady in *Silence* conducts a full interrogation of what is natural to women and taught to men and where this line can be shifted based on one's nobility or training. Like Gawain, this cross-dressed woman is tempted by a powerful and dangerous Lady in one episode. Although Silence's refusal of the queen is treated as comedic and ironic by the text, mainly referencing that this knight cannot give the woman what she wants, the reflections of Gawain's own refusals might allow us to view him in a similar situation as Silence. Silence is presented as a man because of what they wear, and Gawain is presented as a champion of seduction, because of his textual and

[33] These episodes will be explored more in depth in Chapter 2.
[34] Heldris de Cornuälle, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, edited and trans. by Sarah Roche-Mahdi, rev. ed., Medieval Texts and Studies 10 (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999).

metatextual reputation[35] but neither character wishes to nor is able to act as they are presented. Gawain has no clothing to ground him in the temptation scenes, leaving him open and vulnerable to cling onto whatever protective clothing comes his way. Thusly, Gawain's cross-dressing is similar to the tradition of women dressing as men, instead. He uses it to access safety, to access a power over death that his masculine identity can't easily offer him.

As already noted above, Gawain is not the first knight to wear a woman's token, however. Lancelot's cross-dressing is perhaps the most poignant and relevant of these other examples to reflect back onto Gawain's case. Gawain is involved in a passionless game of wits with the Lady of Haut Desert and is tricked into wearing her girdle as a "luf-token" and as a magic talisman to ward off his own death. This girdle takes on multiple owners and significations, but ultimately becomes a symbol for individual shame for Gawain, and communal honor for Arthur's court. This is an inversion of the way Lancelot uses the Lady of Ascolot's sleeve[36], which acquires individual honor for Lancelot metatextually, but obscures his identity from the court itself. Later, when his identity is revealed, his anonymity increases his individual honor that much more.

Gawain is naked for his most vulnerable moments in the poem as he lies in his bed and is verbally tempted by the Lady. His nakedness is taken to be his vulnerability, but also a sign of feminine flesh. Similarly, Lancelot's body, when left without symbol of gender or sex, is easily mistaken by another man for that of a female lover in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*.[37] This scene is played comedically, but the signification of knightly flesh, is one which is vulnerable to (mis)interpretation, penetration, and transformation. Although Lancelot escapes his own misadventures only with more honor, Gawain's ending is forced to reconcile with the permanent

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[35] This reputation and literary identity has been noted by Catherine Batt, "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant, the Pentangle, and Narrative Space," *Yearbook of English Studies* (1992): 117–39 at 120.

[36] "Stanzaic Morte Arthur," in *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English* Stanzaic Morte Arthur *and* Alliterative Morte Arthure, ed, Larry D. Benson, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1986), 1–111 at 9, 11 (lines 208–216, 291–96).

[37] Sir Thomas Malory, *Caxton's Malory: A New Edition of Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur Based on the Pierpont Morgan Copy of William Caxton's Edition of 1485,* edited by James W. Spisak, William Mathews and Bert Dillon, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983): Book VI, Ch. 5, 141–42 at 141.

changes to his flesh – in the shape of the scar on his bare neck – and the subsequent permanent changes in the court's gendered community itself.

Ultimately, the cross-dressing that Gawain engages in does not fully hide his identity, nor does it grant him access to a powerful masculinity or physical distance from danger as it did for the women who donned armor or clerical robes. Instead, Gawain's choice to cross-dress transforms his body into one that is grounded into both the feminine and the masculine, into the knightly and the monstrous, without clear delineation. So much so that it may appear to the reader that Gawain doesn't know which is which until the Green Knight defines the lines for him. The court's integration of the girdle reflects this breakdown in lines between gender, as both women and men wear the girdle once Gawain returns. Gawain's body is not so easily subsumed back into the court as another man, however. Gawain is marked by the original girdle and the mark on his neck as a deviant male, who benefits the court, as a new part of the border of its communal identity, joining the symbolic space formerly occupied by the women and monsters he engaged with while away.

OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT

In the first chapter, we examine Jane Burns'[38] sartorial bodies' theory and the significance of clothes to reveal Gawain's journey through various significations, and the weight of accepting the girdle and attempting to integrate it onto his masculine body. This chapter examines what it means for Gawain to be naked compared to the aggressive Lady, what gender his clothing might be associated with, and why the use of clothing was so important to tie Gawain to his knot of noble, masculine, and chivalric identity.

The tokens of monsters and maidens will be more specifically applied in the second chapter, where we will examine the girdle as a mutable and fluidly identifiable object which acts as the center of Gawain's change, and then the symbol of his great shame and shift in self. This chapter will examine the gendered nature of the girdle, as well as the other biblical or societal associations that a medieval audience might associate with this object. The main argument

[38] Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed.*

considered in this chapter is the reason why Gawain accepts the girdle, and the gender ramifications for his acceptance and public display of it.

In the third chapter, we finally examine the other factors in Gawain's feminine transformation, focusing on the passive positions that the Lady, Bertilak, and finally the Green Knight ask Gawain to enjoy, and seek honor within. We explore the rhetorical work of Gawain's antifeminist diatribe, and why Gawain rejects the feminine in particular, as well as refuses to return to the court of Haut Desert. This chapter will also consider how and why the court accepts Gawain and takes on his girdle as their own. Gawain is now changed into a familiar-enough subject, one which the court can take a token from to limit the threat that his experiences and changed state might post to the future of the court. But even as this work is done to preserve the community, Gawain is adamant that the girdle and the mark will be with him for the rest of his life, signaling a permanent change to his private view of himself.

In a brief conclusion, the modern ramifications of queer readings of medieval romances are considered in light of the political and cultural landscape that exists in the United States today. Queer scholarship in medieval literature was once considered important in order to build a foundation for queer history and modern identities. This work is written in a time where non-binary or queerly gendered individuals are legislated against, and the mention of queerness is being declared dangerous for children and in education in general. The conclusion will consider the future of queer readings in this text in particular, and in medieval literature in general.

CHAPTER 1: BODIES OF FLESH, CLOTH, AND METAL

INTRODUCTION: LAYERS OF THE SELF

"Clothing makes the man."[1] Detailed descriptions of armor, silk chemises, and fur trimmed robes as well as iconic green girdles feature prominently in multiple fitts of the fourteenth-century alliterative poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* Gawain is armed, disarmed, stripped completely, and then given a new kind of armor by the end of all of his trials and tribulations. Layers of steel and silk are used to reveal Gawain's self-image as well as the image and role that he presents and plays for those around him: identifying him first as a knight, then as a noble, and finally as something hybrid and new when he incorporates the green girdle into his armor before the encounter at the Green Chapel.[2] Clothing is not just ornamental or supplementary in this journey. Jill Mann argues that in courtly narratives, one's dress "does not *cover up* or overlay an underlying reality; rather it *manifests* an underlying reality and because of this it is not superfluous but essential,"[3] which might suggest that Gawain is manifesting or gaining access to the reality of self through what he is wearing. Meaning, that the self is both revealed and constructed through the choices one makes to clothe oneself, as well as the societal rules defining the meanings in one's clothing. This link between medieval garb and identity is also well-argued by Jane Burns, as she examines the ways in which gender and social relations are interpreted by modern historians as they encounter medieval representations of persons and their clothing. Burns presents the example of a seal which belonged to Raymond II de Mondragon de Montauban (c. 1195-1220),[4] which was interpreted by Marc Bloch as a "scene of

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[1] A common place, but sometimes attributed to Mark Twain in the form: "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society." See *More Maxims of Mark,* [edited by Merle De Vore Johnson] ([New York:] n.p., 1927). Reprinted in: Mark Twain, *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays,* Vol. 2: *1891–1910,* edited by Louis J. Budd, Library of America 61; Library of America Mark Twain Edition 5 (New York: Library of America, 1992), 939–47. The quotation is on 942.

[2] Jane Burns, "Robes, Armor, and Skin" 211–48.The classic study of the cultural significance of clothing is: Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking Press, 1978).

[3] Jill Mann, "Courtly Aesthetics and Courtly Ethics in *Sir Gawain and the Green* Knight," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 31 (2009): 231–65 at 244. Rpt in Jill Mann, *Life in Words: Essays on Chaucer, the* Gawain-*Poet, and Malory*, edited by Mark David Rasmussen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 187–220.

[4] Mistakenly identified as "Simon de Mondragon."

love service" because it showed a knight in armor kneeling to a figure without armor; this same seal was re-interpreted by John Benton as "an image of feudal homage and investiture."[5] This confusion reveals a few useful things to a modern audience. Modern conceptions of gender and dress cannot always be reliably projected onto a medieval object or text, yet even in the two different interpretations, the figure in armor's identity was not questioned. Armor often provides modern readers a stable visual and physical manifestation of chivalric identity, and the masculine body which was presumed to lie within it. In medieval context, armor often serves this purpose as well. One's social (public)[6] and individual (private)[7] identity could be built or supported with armor, and the individual was literally physically protected by its metal casing. But just as easily, due to the all-encompassing nature of armor, one's self or physical form could be concealed or transformed through wearing it. As already established, dressing in ways which did not align with or reflect 'natural' or 'true' realities in regard to gender, class, or allegiance could be used in a myriad of ways. For certain knights like Lancelot, dressing as another knight could ensure that he would be able to fight with others fairly, without his reputation dissuading his opponents right away.[8] For Lancelot, disguising himself allowed him access to combat and to a greater reputation – the very need to disguise himself in order to do so is a mark of how impressive his "true" identity was, which could be improved through the use of disguise. It is notable that this achievement of honor through combat was only accessible through the masculine disguise of another man's armor. Lancelot does not cross gender or class lines for access to combat, merely

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[5] Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed* 131.

[6] Social identity being defined here as how others consider one, the role they play in their social situations, and how they are able to relate to others. In queer circles, often this might be related to the concept of "passing" in which one aligns with the broader social or public view of a gender's appearance.

[7] Individual identity is defined here as the identity that one considers themselves, regardless of social or public acceptance or understanding. There has been some debate about whether individual identity can be discussed in medieval contexts, although this work operates under the assumption that the individual can be seen as both themselves and part of a group or communal identity. For broader discussions on the individual and the "self" in medieval romance, see Robert W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth Century Romance* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977) and Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (London, SPCK, 1972).

[8] "How Syr Launcelot rode dysguysed in Syr Kayes harnoys, and how he smote doun a knight." Sir Thomas Malory, *Caxton's Malory: A New Edition of Sir Thomas Malory's* Le Motre Darthur *Based on the Pierpont Morgan Copy* 1: 11 (Table of Contents, Book Vi, chapter 12). In this episode, Lancelot allows Sir Kay to ride home in his armor in order to return safely, and instead wears Kay's armor and shield and is attacked because of this case of mistaken identity.

lines of social identity, that is, passing as another individual in the same gender and class. Other forms of gendered cross-dressing allow individuals to gain access to safety instead: young women might travel across large distances dressed as a cleric or priest.[9] This could grant them both a safety cushion from contact with men and women, while also allowing one particular character in Bocaccio's *Decameron* romantic access to a young man without arousing suspicion.[10] These two main uses – protection and access – are accomplished by these forms of overt crossdressing. In these cases, disguise and masculine dress act as a shell to protect or improve private identities. Yet, in Gawain's case, he begins his journey by being completely covered by his gender and class appropriate dress. His armor is full of attachments, chainmail, and straps which keep him safe and enclosed from the outside world. It is practical in its literal protection as well as symbolic in the integration of the impenetrable Pentangle on his shield, which is an outward showing of Gawain's (and therefore the court's) inner virtues[11], perhaps also reflected by the placement of an image of the Virgin Mary on the inside of the shield.[12] Gawain's dress attempts to stabilize the relationship between his private and public self, physically representing inner virtues and connecting them to his body, keeping both him and the virtues safe in the inflexible and unchanging metal armor. When Gawain enters the court of Haut Desert he is stripped of this armor immediately and dressed in sumptuous furs and silks. However, even as his role of armored knight is taken from him, he is able to perform and present himself as a noble and still fits in at court easily. This comfort cannot last, as he is stripped completely and left naked in bed: privately hidden away from the world of men, without the safety of his metal symbol of his social body.

Following the stripping of Gawain's protective shell, Gawain is not only physically vulnerable: his sense of self is also pushed towards a precipice of change. This instability and

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[9] On cases of cross-dressing in the Middle Ages, see Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man,* as well as Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, "Cross Dressing and Social Status in the Middle Ages" 45–73

[10] Giovanni Bocaccio, *The Decameron,* trans. by Guido Waldman, edited by Jonathan Usher (Oxford University Press, 1993) III.2, 75–82.

[11] This construction is reminiscent of St. Augustine's description of the nature of sacraments, which are outward signs of an inward grace, which was later developed in the work of Hugh of St. Victor in the 12th century: Alister E. McGrath, "Sacraments," in her *Theology* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 170–90.

[12]This placement and its ramifications will be considered in detail in Chapter 2.

desire for enclosure leads Gawain to seek to be covered at first by his bedclothes – which the Lady, who enters to seduce a vulnerable Gawain, takes advantage of. She turns their protective encasing against him: "Now ar ȝe tan astyt! Bot true vus may schape, / I schal bynde yow in your bedde, þat be ȝe trayst':" (Now you are quickly captured! Unless we can make a truce between us/ I shall bind you in your bed, of that you can be sure. 1210-11).[13] Gawain is thus left naked, without symbol or stable sartorial connections to hold up his private self. The next pieces of clothing that he chooses to put on might have the power to redefine him, and furthermore to redefine the court which Gawain chose to represent in his trials. Unfortunately for Gawain, these pieces are his armor and the green girdle, a combination which threatens to rewrite his chivalric masculine identity outside of Arthur's court and the community which regulates it.

THE ARMING: PUBLIC PROTECTIONS

Beginning, suitably, at the beginning, Gawain's arming scene helps to define the role that he is expected to play in his community as he leaves Arthur's court. The poet details the material nature of the armor as well as the order it is put on:

Askez erly hys armez and alle were þay broȝt. Fyrst a tulé tapit tyȝt ouer þe flet, And miche watz þe gyld gere þat glent þeralofte. Þe stif mon steppez þeron and þe stel hondelez, Dubbed in a dublet of a dere tars, And syþen a crafty capados, closed aloft, Þat with a bryȝt blaunner was bounden withinne.	"(He) asks for his arms early and they were all brought. First a crimson carpet, laid over the floor, And much was the gilded gear that gleaned thereon. The strong one (man) steps thereon and handles the steel, Dressed in a dublet of expensive silk from Tharsia,[14]

[13] All quotations are taken from "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 5th ed., Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (2007. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014) and all translations are my own, although I rely on Andrew and Waldron's gloss as well.

[14] According to the Cotton Titus text of Mandeville's *Travels*: "The kyngdom of CATHAY marcheth toward the west vnto the kingdom of THARSE." *Mandeville's Travels, Translated from the French of Jean d'Outremeuse, Edited from MS. Cotton Titus C. XVI in the British Museum*, ed. P. Hamelius, 2 vols.,

Þenne set þay þe sabatounz vpon þe segge fotez, His legez lapped in stel with luflych greuez, With polaynez piched þerto, policed ful clene, About his knez knaged with knotez of golde; Queme quyssewes þen, þat coyntlych closed His thik þrawen þyȝez, with þwonges to tachched; And syþen þe brawden bryne of bryȝt stel ryngez Vmbeweued þat wyȝ, vpon wlonk stuffe, And wel bornyst brace vpon his boþe armes, With gode cowters and gay and gloues of plate, And alle þe godlych gere þat hym gayn schulde Þat tyde; Wyth ryche cote-armure, His gold sporez spend with pryde, Gurde with a bront ful sure With silk sayn vmbe his syde.	And then a well-crafted cape, clasped at the top, Which was trimmed on the inside with a white fur. Then they set the steel-plate shoes upon the knight's feet, His legs wrapped in steel with lovely greaves, With knee-pieces pinned thereto, polished totally clean, About his knees fastened with clasps of gold; Then attractive cuisses, that elegantly enclosed his muscular thighs, attached with thongs; And then the broad hauberk of bright steel rings Covered that man, over the costly stuff[15], And a well burnished arm-piece upon both of his arms, With good and bright elbow-pieces and gloves of plate, And all the goodly gear that should benefit him in that time; With noble surcoat, His gold spurs fastened with pride, Buckled with a sword very securely With a silk girdle about his side." (567-89)

Gawain leaves the court in polished and beautiful armor which tightly encases his body in preparation for great adventure. Jill Mann does a fabulous job examining the language of closure in this passage, arguing that the focus on how each piece of armor is fastened and tied on, and

Early English Text Society, o.s. 153–154 (London: Oxford University Press, 1919–1923), 1: 169. Mandeville apparently identifies Tharse with the Biblical Tharshish (whose actual location is not known with certainty) which, according to some interpretations, was the home of one of the three wise men present at Christ's nativity (see 2: 126). According to Christiane Deluz, editor of the French version of Mandeville's *Travels*, Tharse is a Uyghur province north of Ferghana in Uzbekistan then subject to the Chagatai Khanate and now in modern Kazakhstan. *Le livre des merveilles du monde*, ed. Christiane Deluz, Sources d'histoire médiévale 31 (Paris: CNRS Édition, 2000), 417, 506.

[15] Andrew and Waldron gloss "vpon wlonk stuffe" as "fastened with laces." This is not what the words say and this entry seems to be a misplaced improvement of the previous gloss, "tied on with laces." Earlier editions have: *vpon wlonk stffe*: qualifies ryngez." *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, 2nd ed., Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1987), 229.

the movement from inside to outside as the armor is piled upon his body, creates a self-sufficient and contained sense of knighthood.[16] Mann notes that this brand of self-sufficiency extends towards Gawain's very character and the reason for his journey: "the only reason he has for keeping his promise is the promise itself…Chivalric virtue is its own raison d'etre; it is not supported by practical utility or even by divine command."[17] Yet, I argue that this self-contained identity, rooted *only* in itself and in its mirror images at court, is not very stable when removed from that court. The armor's design seeks to cover but ultimately reveals the vulnerability at the center of knighthood: the individual body that must be completely encased in order to protect itself literally from blows of battle, but also symbolically from the creeping reality of what potential identification or "corruption" lays outside of knighthood.

But a fierce warrior is not the only role or expectation of the chivalric knight. Nobility and courtesy are also requisites of the identity and therefore much of what is described aligns with *these* aesthetics as well – the white fur trim, expensive silk doublet, attractive, bright, and totally polished pieces are not the concerns of a knight who is going out into the wilderness necessarily, but instead of a knight who is meant to be seen by others. Gawain leaves the court as its representative and therefore must conceal his own body, "encasing the male anatomy so fully in armor that no skin shows" to exist as the "properly socialized body" of the Arthurian court.[18] He is transformed from a singular man into a spectacle; one that is meant to be seen by the dangerous Green Knight and the other creatures that lay beyond the court. It is in being seen that Gawain can best serve the court, since the task he has been given is one that requires no action other than to undergo a blow. So, although his armor seems intent on protecting him, because his task requires him to make himself physically vulnerable, the armor's main purpose becomes what it represents and how it appears.

Since physical protection is a secondary concern, mainly intended perhaps, for the journey to find the Green Knight, the armor's encasing must have a symbolic function as well. To appear properly as this spectacle of knighthood, Gawain must completely conceal vulnerable and mutable flesh. He is created "piece by piece before the reader's eyes [as] a knight of

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[16] Mann, "Courtly Aesthetics" 249.
[17] Mann, "Courtly Aesthetics" 249.
[18] Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed* 135.

metal…the attention is focused on the gradual actualization of the knightly figure."[19] Gawain's private identity is hidden and tied to new meaning within the metal, an effect which we might also consider a defense against unknown perils. By burying what is vulnerable about the private self within the public identity and dress of knighthood, Gawain makes his character unreachable and nearly incorruptible. Gawain leaves his court protected by the self-sufficient and encompassing social identity and accoutrements of Arthurian knighthood. Yet, the very need for this amount of covering suggests the vulnerability of not just the private self within but also the social identity which might be threatened by the desires or faults of an individual. As Gail Ashton remarks: "Armor is a marker…of both masculinity *and* its fundamental mutability"[20] and so as Gawain is built up into a knight, the reader might question what he began as – if the armor makes the man, what would Gawain be without his armor? Upon entering Haut Desert, Gawain will be stripped and tested in the nude, and this question will be asked by both Bertilak and the Lady as they push against Gawain's sense of public and private selves. The preparation of Gawain for these trials marks Arthur's court and its representative as simultaneously conscious and unprepared for the individual and communal type of test that he will undergo. The community's reputation and values are inscribed onto the armor itself and Gawain's flesh is not trusted to withstand what it might encounter alone.

Despite this focus on communal identity and social bodies, there are still a few signs of individuality marked onto this armor so Gawain can be recognized by others; private identity and reputation are still important in order for Gawain to act as a useful symbol and extension of the court.[21] The aspects of his dress that are unique to him are "the "vrysoun," a silk band

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[19] Stephanie J. Hollis, "The Pentangle Knight: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Chaucer Review* 15 (1981): 267–81 at 272.

[20] Gail Ashton, "Perverse Dynamics" 59. And for more on this topic, see Jane Burns, "Refashioning Courtly Love," in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz, Medieval Cultures 11 (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 113–24.

[21] The lack of recognition of other knights leads to friendly fire in scenarios like Lancelot's participation in the tournament against the rest of the court when he is not wearing his armor in "Stanzaic Morte Arthur," in *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English* Stanzaic Morte Arthur *and* Alliterative Morte Arthure, ed, Larry D. Benson, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1986), 1–111 at 9, 11 (lines 208–216, 291–96) for some more consideration of knightly disguise and its relation to public and private identities, see Susan Crane, "Knights in Disguise" 63–79.

embroidered with birds and love-knots[22] attached to his helmet (an aspect of his dress largely set aside by scholars and not often mentioned in the text) and of course, the pentangle painted on his shield.[23] Despite Stephanie Hollis' suggestion that these birds and love knots have no great significance, these two identifying marks introduce Gawain's dual public (and presumedly a matching private) identity to the reader: he is the Pentangle Knight marked by an impenetrable and unending symbol of 5 virtues, but he also is covered in cloth decorated by "love knots" which identify him as a courtly lover and noble man. Gawain is secured within his chivalric armor not only by the various ties, attachments, and belts which hold him within, but also by these two symbols of fastening: one of courtly love, and one of chivalric virtue. Gawain is comfortably tied to both at the start of the poem, but the identities that these symbols represent will be slowly unraveled and replaced by his trials in the court of Haut Desert, as his desire to live up to both identities causes him to slip into an entirely new one.

This new identity will culminate later in his acceptance of the Lady's girdle, and so this section of armoring ends suitably with a note about the "sayn(t)" or girdle that holds up his sword. This girdle is masculine and associated with offense; it holds up a sword and is worn on the very outside of his armor. The green girdle will be worn similarly as part of his armor but is utilized in order to survive a killing blow – not preempt it. Gawain's first girdle, casually mentioned but placed importantly at the end of the stanza, seemingly falls in line with his expected role as a masculine knight and underlines the transgressions that the green girdle will represent to him. Yet, both the "sayn" and the highly decorated armor are not exclusively or perfectly masculine. Already, the poet hints at the necessary femininities that provide the boundaries for chivalric masculinity through subtle co-existence. The girdle, tied as the final piece of Gawain's chivalric armoring, also has associations with femininity and virginity – an

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[22] "Love-knots" or "trulofez" are defined as "4.(a) A plant whose leaves and flowers are arranged symmetrically in whorls of four, herb paris (Paris quadrifolia); also, a four-leafed sprig of this plant…(b)a knot formed of two intertwined loops, the truelove knot; (c) a stylizes representation of a truelove knot or of herb paris used for ornament…(d) herb paris or its representation as symbolic of fidelity, devotion, etc,; also, the truelove as a metaphor for Christ or for the foursome of the Trinity and Mary taken together…" in the *Middle English Dictionary*, edited by Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn, and Robert E. Lewis, 13 volumes (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001). Online edition: *Middle English Compendium*, edited by Frances McSparran, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000–2018), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/>.

[23] Hollis, "The Pentangle Knight" 273.

aspect of identity which Gawain uncomfortably skirts as he attempts to remain virtuous, masculine, and a knight as he is tempted by the Lady in later scenes. The word itself is borrowed from Old French *ceint,* a girdle or belt. It first appears in the poem as "seyn" in line 589, referring to the girdle that supports Gawain's sword, and next appears in line 2431 as "seynt" referring to Lady Bertilak's girdle. In this alliterative poem, parallels like this are striking. In contrast to this connection, the poet chooses to call what the Green Knight wears around his waist a "belt" (162). Even at his first armoring, Gawain's perfect masculinity is already briefly associated or decorated with feminine imagery of birds and love knots, as well as feminine terminology[24] in the girdle.

The word 'sayn' (with some variation in spelling) has also been used to refer to the dress of notable women and a few other men in various other middle English texts. Chaucer uses it both in reference to the dress of the Man of Law (prologue, A, 329),[25] and the sensual Allison in the Miller's Tale; "a ceynt she werede, barred al of silk" (A 3235).[26] In the fourth book of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Phyllis uses a "Ceinte of Selk, which sche ther hadde" to hang herself in sorrow for her lover's shortcomings.[27] The Virgin Mary also gives a "seynt" from around her middle, one which she herself had woven of silk and with gold wound into the costly fabric, to Saint Thomas in the version of the "Assumption of the Virgin" found in MS BL Add. 10036 (793-96).[28] In the fifteenth century "*Storie of Asneth*," the titular heroine is told by God's angel to "gird the with þe double ceynt of þi virginite" (438).[29] These figures of new wealth, sensuality, and virginity all wear "sayn": many of them as a multi-faceted symbol of their nature.

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[24] In the same way that one today might call a shirt worn by a feminine person a "top" and one worn by a masculine person a "shirt" – each word means the same article of clothing, but one implies feminine gender or associations.

[25] Geoffrey Chaucer, "Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*," *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition, edited by Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 28.

[26] Chaucer, "The Miller's Tale," *The Riverside Chaucer* 68.

[27] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis,* Vols. 2 and 3 of *The Complete Works of John Gower*, edited by G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899–1902; Rpt. Grosse Point, MI: Scholarly Press, 1968), 2: 324.

[28] *King Horn, Floriz and Blauncheflur, the Assumption of Our Lady,* edited by J. R. Lumby, re-ed. G. H. McKnight, Early English Text Society, o.s. 14 (1901; reprint: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 133.

[29] H. N. MacCracken, "The Storie of Asneth: An Unknown Middle English Translation of a Lost Latin Version," *JEGP: The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 9 (1910): 226–64 at 245.

Gawain is linked both to masculine nobility and to chaste femininity through the "sayn", and this ambiguity is what will leave him open and vulnerable, despite his best efforts to wrap himself within the safe and encapsulating armor of his public sartorial body. Gawain is connected to the feminine, and to the Virgin Mary through *both* his shield and the girdle. His connections imply that his affinity for or identification with the chaste and feminine exists prior to his stay in Haut Desert; the Lady's seductive attempts and questioning of his identity merely brings this aspect of his self out into the public domain. Furthermore, as we see Gawain's connection to the materially feminine in the armor itself, even the masculine metal cannot shirk association with women. The armor is ironically the "perfect mode for cross-dressing for women wishing to switch genders in the social sphere" due to the total cover which it provides one's anatomy. [30] Even the armor itself, so seemingly masculine and stable, might be perceived as perfect for the hidden or frightened feminine form. This armor is what we place on a Gawain who claims not to be afraid when he says "Quat schuld I wonde? / Of Destinés derf and dere / What may mon do bot fonde?" (For what should I shrink back in fear? Of Destiny's hardship and injury / What could one do but undertake it? 562-65).[31] Yet even in this show of bravery, Gawain reveals his own fear by asking the question that concerns his final acts of desperation in accepting the girdle: isn't there *anything* else one can do than die in the face of this task? Within his current armor, no other option is available to Gawain but to show bravery as an absolute, and to give up his individual desire for self-preservation to die as a symbol of chivalric courage.

BREACHING BORDERLINES: THE GREEN KNIGHT AND 'BATAYL BARE'

In contrast to the highly material portrayal of Gawain's sparkling knighthood, the Green Knight's description is that of the recognizable Other: he dresses similarly enough to the court to be recognized and allowed within it, but he oversteps those self-sufficient boundaries. He appears to be recognizable as a man, but bigger; seen as a knight, but also a monster; able to

[30] Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed* 132.
[31] Andrew and Waldron gloss this instead as "What can one do but make trial of what Destiny offers, whether painful or pleasant?" taking derf and dere to be adjectives instead of nouns, but I think that the possessive Destinés would better suit the nouns, which are both negative or referencing harm or even martyrdom. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 228.

speak and to challenge, but so feared that none can act against him. The Green Knight penetrates the self-enclosed court, and Gail Ashton sets forth a useful view of him as an "overwriting of masculine, chivalric identity" who "contaminates 'inside' – for he is also firmly of 'outside'."[32] Most efficaciously, the Green Knight utilizes the codes of honor, shame, and festival in order to manipulate the court into accepting his challenge. He engages in convention to justify his request for a game, by at first recognizing the reputation of Arthur's court and then shaming them as not being able to live up to what he has heard. He identifies how unstable and easily threatened they are by "a worde of on wyȝes speche, / For al dares for dred without dynt schewed!" (a word of one man's speech, for everyone here cowers for fear without a blow being offered, 314-15). The poet points towards not only fear but "cortaysye" as the reason why the knights and other members of the court are at first unable to engage with this stranger (245-48).[33] It is the very regulating force which is meant to protect the court from shame which then is used to shame them.[34] Courtesy, or noble manners and behavior which might welcome a guest, contradicts martial instinct to protect against outsiders. The Green Knight's ability to engage with these rules and bend them to suit his own purpose makes him an incredible danger to the stability of the court's public identity; its reputation and community.

Arthur answers this shaming by offering to the Green Knight, "batayl bare" (277). This phrase could refer to single combat,[35] battle without armor, battle without courtesy or rules, or just "actual battle." If we take the bareness literally as naked battle, that is, without armor, we might see what Arthur is putting on the line in order to fend off this intrusion into the court. Arthur is offering combat without armor, without shield, and without symbols of knighthood to test the pure representation of the court – unsupported by sartorial bindings – against this helmetless and bare combatant. Jane Burn argues that "unprotected flesh connotes chivalric shame" and being unarmored is the same as being "'stripped bare (pur le cors)."[36] Arthur thus

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[32] Ashton, "Perverse Dynamics" 58.
[33] "In hyȝe - / I deme hit not al for doute / Bot sum for cortaysye - / Bot let hym þat al shulde loute / Cast vnto þat wyȝe." (Suddenly, I judge it not all for fear / But some for courtesy / but let him who all should defer to / speak to that man.)
[34] Brewer, "Introduction"17.
[35] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. and trans. W. R. J. Barron (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974)**: 47,173.**.
[36] Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed* 136.

notes the danger and shame that the Green Knight presents himself with and offers to match it with an individual fight that tests the essence of the intruder against the essential representation of the court. Even though this is not exactly what the Green Knight wants, when Gawain steps forward later, Arthur still allows him to represent the court in this way. This might imply that Arthur believes that Gawain would accurately encapsulate the social body of the court, even in 'batayl bare'. Surely, the armor given to Gawain projects this particular image of perfection outwardly, which *should* be grounded in Gawain's private self as well.

Yet, even as his dangerous posturing and over-reaching game shames the court by calling its knights "berdlez chylder" (280), effeminizing and belittling them, the Green Knight possesses a feminine otherness as well. This is far more unsettling as he brings femininity and magic into the court and creates a spectacle of himself as a knight both violent and peaceful, feminine and masculine, strange and recognizable – and most dangerously, victorious. His challenge to the court leaves him headless but living. He is not a monster to be conquered, but instead a figure of judgement and testing. The lived reality of borderless knighthood that he represents threatens the strict edges of identity that uphold the hierarchy of Arthur's court. This hierarchy and bordered identity are best represented in Gawain and his pentangle shield, and chillingly the Green Knight's attire mirrors some of Gawain's – for example, his mantle is fringed with bright fur – which may imply how very close Gawain is to stepping into the same kind of borderless behavior. But there are a few notable differences. They are mainly presented as opposites in their dress – Gawain has steel shoes, and the Green Knight is in socks, Gawain has a beautiful helmet, the Green Knight is bare-headed, Gawain carries an important shield, and the Green Knight instead carries an ax and a holly branch (a symbol of Christmas and peace). Although the Green Knight is greeted with fear and Arthur's challenge, Gawain enters Haut Desert in far more aggressive dress and is greeted with the veneer of hospitality before his armor is immediately removed. Before we get the wonderfully detailed construction of Gawain's armor, the poet makes it clear that the Green Knight has no armor on:

Wheþer, hade he no helme ne hawbergh nauþer Ne no pysan ne no plate þat pented to armes Ne no schafte ne no schelde to schwue ne to smyte; Bot in his on honed he hade a holyn bobbe (Þat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare)	Nevertheless, he had on no helmet nor hauberk neither Nor no gorget [throat armor] nor no plate that pertained to armor Nor no spear nor no shield to thrust nor to strike; Except in his one hand he had a holly branch

And an ax in his oþer, a hoge and vnmete, A spetos sparþe to expoun in spelle quoso myȝt.	(which is greatest green when groves are bare) And an axe in his other, huge and monstrous, A malicious battle ax for anyone to speak of in a tale. (203–09)

The Green Knight arrives shoeless and without armor to show that he is coming in peace, and carries a holly branch, green like himself, a state which mirrors the practice of messengers carrying an olive branch when engaged in peaceful negotiations.[37] Yet his sudden arrival, his great size and his gigantic ax, as well as the fact that both he and his horse are "enker-grene" (bright-green, 150), undermine all of his shows of peace and propriety and instead create a spectacle which unnerves and frightens the feasting court. These dualities and vague borders of identity that the Green Knight exists within have been enumerated and explained in great detail by others.[38] The Green Knight's ability to exist both within the bounds of the court and outside of them is most unsettling and threatening to the onlookers but presents a fool's parody of knighthood for the readers' enjoyment or consideration.

The mechanics by which the Green Knight exists – the ideologies or connotations that allow him to portray these ambiguities – can be used to shed light on the dual role that the Other (namely Femininity) plays for the chivalric individual and his community. The Green Knight is described as equally merry as he is threatening. He is a funny figure; the irony of coming shoeless and holding a holly branch of peace along with a giant ax is surely not lost even on modern readers. His role as a Christmas distraction plays into the concept of carnival, allowing perverse or subversive behavior to exist as a momentary delight. Humor, in this way, is used to belittle and take the bite out of actually threatening identities – if the Other can be laughed at, it doesn't need to be feared. Yet, of course, the Green Knight is also monstrous and fearsome. Through fear, we also see how he represents an actual threat. Just as he steps over the lines of knighthood, he also steps outside of the bounds of a game. His beheading game is less fair than a joust, and his later courtly game of exchanges is ultimately a test of Gawain's true character

[37] "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript,* 215, note to lines 206–07.
[38] For some of these scholarly opinions see: Larry Benson, *Art and Tradition in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1965); Lawrence Besserman, "The Idea of the Green Knight," *ELH* 53 (1986): 219–39; and J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965).

instead of the delightful time-passer Bertilak and the laughing court of Haut Desert present it to be. As a figure that can cross over lines and boundaries (literally riding into the court unannounced and unknown) the Green Knight portrays many of the qualities of the cross-dressing figures previously mentioned. Through the use of cross-dressing, the various regulatory practices of gendered communities can be slipped through, and access to new kinds of pleasure become available. The Green Knight's dress intermixes not gender or individual's identities to create a disguise, but instead presents a spectacle of knighthood and monstrosity that blurs the distinctions between the two.

With this in mind, there is one interesting piece of clothing that both Gawain and the Green Knight share: a piece of cloth around the waist. The Green Knight wears a green "belt" (162) which is "clene verdure" (pure green, 161). This belt, green in design and worn in the same way that Gawain will later wear it, is called by a different name. Gawain's formerly mentioned aspects of femininity– the fur, silk and the love knot decorations –all exist on the outskirts of his dress, but the girdle is worn at the very center, literally tying it all together. When Gawain eventually takes on the green girdle, and places it among his armor, moving it from the private space of the bedroom to his public self, he shifts completely from knightly masculine spectacle to an example of the kind of hybrid gendered expression which the Green Knight presents as a threat to the court in the beginning.

HAUT DESERT: SUMPTUOUS FURS AND COURTLY IDENTITY

With the importance placed upon Gawain's metal armor, and the virtuous strength which it offers, as well as the symbolic weight placed on the 'natural' or true self found within the armor, we might ask what kind of vulnerability is thrust upon knights found without their armor? Particularly in regard to gender identity, and social recognition, any professed desire or action can arguably be righted or protected by the wearing of armor to stand in for a stable gender identity. For example, Jane Burns points (in the Prose Lancelot) to Gauvain's desire to become a woman so Lancelot might love and serve him and argues that this moment "constitutes an expression of gendered subjectivity that does not presume or depend upon a natural alignment of anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance. Gauvain qualifies as a knight and a man at the very moment he casts himself in the role of Lancelot's ladylove principally because of the

armor he wears."[39] However, if one desired femininity perversely or indulged in it outside of homosocial relations as well as outside of the protective masculine armor, they might become like the Green Knight: borderless.

This gendered transformation cannot occur with Gawain hidden deep within the enclosure of his armor. Although he is obviously protected, he is also "locked" into his armor and limited in social interaction when trapped within his paradoxically social metal body. In order to perform his role as a noble, when he enters the court of Haut Desert, he is disarmed literally and figuratively. Here is a court, recognizable and safe, one in which he will not (he assumes) need the symbolic and physical grounding that is provided by his armor. This should be, although foreign, an extension of the court of Arthur in terms of its ability to interpolate Gawain as a knight. However, its inability to do so is hinted at by the courtiers' excitement and knowledge of Gawain's reputation. They are excited that he will teach them the art of "luf-talkying" (927). The courtiers misread Gawain's dual identity as singular, one only concerned with love and courtly matters. They profess that they believe that anyone "þat may hym here schal larne of luf-talkyng" (that can listen to him shall learn of the art of amorous conversation, 926–27). They begin to convince Gawain to refocus his center of self on his courtly identity rather than his chivalric martial self: bringing to the center the aspects of himself that existed only as a supplementary or dependent portion of his identity. The courtiers describe and encourage their own sense of courtly identity for him, destabilizing Gawain through describing his reputation, by praising him as a guest.[40] They place him in a service role of teaching the court and acting as a potential lover for any who seem to fancy him, that is, if his teaching methods are more practical than theoretical. The most interesting compliment they lay at his feet is as a "fine fader of nurture" (919) or a fine father of manners or courtesy – the progenitor or master of courtly identity. By elevating him to this status, they also place the impetus of defining nobility on Gawain's shoulders: this court will apparently define courtesy for themselves through his

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[39] Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed* 137.

[40] "Now schal we semlych se sleȝtez of þewez / And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble." (Now shall we courteously see skilled demonstration of courteous manners / and the faultless expressions of noble speech, 916–17) and "God hatz geuen vus His grace godly forsoþe, / þat such a gest as Gawan grauntez vus to haue" (God has given us His grace generously truly / that such a guest as Gawain (he) grants us to have, 920–21).

actions. Gawain is given the power not only over his own identity, nor just the court's, but also over "cortasye" itself. Of course, Gawain is dressed to match this new testing ground. Gawain is "dispoyled" (860) of his armor. "Dispoyled" can mean to disrobe, strip to the skin, and relieve of arms, all meanings which might appear unthreatening or domestic. But it can also mean to rob, ravage, take away or ruin, or deprive the subject of honor, security or beauty.[41] Gawain has his material symbols of virtue and honor stripped away from him, and is left naked and defenseless, at the mercy of the strange court's servants who provide new clothing for him. Once his armor and defenses are broken down, he is dressed instead in "saylande skyrtez" (flowing skirts) which "sete on hym semly" (sat fittingly upon him, 865) and make "lowande and lufly alle his lymmez under" (all his limbs underneath bright and pleasing, 868). Gawain is taken out of his metal shell of masculinity and placed in flowing skirts, and tight clothing which shows off his bright and shining limbs. His soft interior is revealed, still coded properly as noble if less securely as masculine. Burns notes that in various contexts scholars might presume "that as long as a courtly figure is dressed in armor, whether in a visual image or in a literary text, one can readily recognize and identify him as a proper knight. But as soon as this male figure is "disarmed"…and divested of that key marker of masculinity, his gender comes into question: he looks in fact more like an aristocratic woman."[42] Although Gawain is not perceived as a woman in the literal sense, the courtly manners and love-talking that he is associated with place him, as Sheila Fisher argues, in the "world of women".[43] He remains a spectacle of perfection, but being a chivalric fighter is no longer at the center of his identity, instead his own flesh and individual reputation and sense of self are now available to be looked upon and tested.

The world of women which Gawain enters is arguably one of softness, objectification, and private rooms.[44] Gawain is re-dressed, his flesh is emphasized, and he is later confined to

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[41] All senses taken from *Middle English Dictionary*, edited by Hans Kurath et al.; online edition: *Middle English Compendium* <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/>.
[42] Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed* 131.
[43] Sheila Fisher, "Taken Men and Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Seeking the Woman in late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism,* edited by Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 71–105 at 77.
[44] The invention of the chimney allowed for private rooms in addition to communal gathering places. It is significant that there are six references to chimneys in the various descriptions of Haut Desert (lines 798, 875, 978, 1030, 1402, 1667. See further: LeRoy Dresbeck, "The Chimney and Social Change in Medieval England," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 3 (1971): 21–32.

these private rooms as the other men hunt. He is dressed for "leisurely indolence" and is made to serve a "passive feminized position"[45] in the bedroom. As Fisher argues, "The pentangle knight, formerly the object of male admiration, is now diminished to the object of the female gaze."[46] If the private spaces of the court are feminized, then one might wonder if the private self – divested of the strong masculine identity that armor provides – is at its core feminine and passive, especially when held up to the gaze of wanting women. Gawain was prepared to be seen as a man by monsters and other men, but instead is now ushered into the world of women and made into an object of desire. He is, in his perspective, wanted as a noble teacher by the courtiers, as a lover by the Lady, and simply *desired* by Bertilak in a myriad of subtle and hotly debated ways.[47]

There is no emphasis on ties or belts in Gawain's despoiling, only flowing cloth and shining flesh, which makes Gawain's beauty, courtliness, and vulnerability clear. As a guest, Gawain reverts to his courtly manners, deferring to his host in all things. This puts him at the mercy of the strange court to be touched and seen: a new kind of spectacle for their entertainment. No longer just representing or relying upon his social body of armor and association with Arthur's court, instead, he is forced to be seen by the entire court as a lovely and loving object.

NAKED FLESH: THE UNTETHERED KNIGHT

Gawain's naked flesh is the symbol of his most vulnerable and feminized positions in his trials. Jane Burn argues that flesh both "invites wounding" and defines a courtly lady 'as a woman' to the extent that her flesh is exposed to view."[48] This vulnerability is exploited by the Lady as she tempts Gawain in the bedroom. Nude and vulnerable, Gawain's identity is also in flux. The Lady questions Gawain's reputation and identity:

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[45] Ashton, "Perverse Dynamics" 60.
[46] Fisher, "Taken Men" 78.
[47] Most notably on the subject of homosexual desire in this text: Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss."
[48] Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed* 136–37.

Now He þat spedez vche speech þis disport ȝelde yow, Bot þat ye be Gawan hit gotz in mynde!" "Querfore?" quoþ þe freke, and freschly he askez, Ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his castes.	"'Now He who blesses all speech repay you this pleasure, but that you should be Gawain it's a matter of doubt!' 'Wherefore?' said the knight, and eagerly he asks, Afraid lest he had failed in the form of his speech. (1292–95)

Gawain is concerned with the *form* of his speech, which is the last signifier of courtly identity he can rely upon, since he is stripped of his armor, shield, and silks. The Lady's ability to force Gawain to fear for his own failure exploits the instability that his nakedness and social position as guest has placed him in. She is able to make him doubt his ability to perform his role as knight and lover despite his arguable lack of desire for her. She displaces Gawain's reliance on his own virtue and instead recenters his desire for action onto his individual self. She does not accuse him of being less of a knight, or a man, like the Green Knight will later. Instead, she revokes his very name and reputation itself, encouraging Gawain to reclaim it according to her standards. She asks Gawain to prove his identity through kissing her, invoking courtesy as the guiding rule that would dictate his motivations. Gawain has already been identified with courtly love and courtesy by the court when they welcomed him, and his chivalric identity is all but forgotten as his reputation is brought into question. Gawain begins to associate his identity with the tasks given to him by the Lady, and finally, when she offers him the girdle, it is in desire for a sense of self, or self-preservation, that he takes it. His rash desire to be clothed protectively without care for the nature of the garment is born from and emphasized by the instability that his nudity and the Lady's pursuits have created within him.

Yet, this protection does not lessen Gawain's fear in his final moments with the Green Knight. The vulnerability of flesh is pointed out in the moment where Gawain participates in the beheading game at the start, the poet points out the Green Knight's "naked nec" (420) and has Gawain strike down "on þe naked" (423). This imagery is of course repeated as we focus on "þe bare nek" (2310) and "schyre grece" (white flesh, 2313) which Gawain presents to the Green Knight. In this moment, the Green Knight proclaims "Halde þe now þe hyȝe hode þat Arþur þe raȝt / And kepe þy kanel at þis kest" (May the noble order that Arthur gave you protect you and help you keep your neck at this stroke, 2297–98). His somewhat mocking hope for Gawain also reveals the choice that Gawain has made. Instead of relying on the "hood" of knighthood, which was bestowed upon him by Arthur, Gawain tied his new girdle around his waist and lost his trust

in his communal identity. The bareness of Gawain's neck also reminds the reader not only of his physical vulnerability in this moment, but also of his inability to rely upon neither the symbolic "hood" of chivalry, nor the literal helmet of his armor.

By slowly undressing Gawain and moving him physically apart from Arthur's court, we can see how the poet examines the ways in which chivalric identity can be conceived as a sartorial shell that can be picked apart and taken on and off, performed or subverted, based on an individual's choice. Gawain's descent into nakedness tests his own private nature as one that is not indelibly connected to his communal identity, but instead capable and inclined towards change based on one's desires. In the bedroom scenes, Gawain participates in the "batayl bare" which Arthur initially offers the Green Knight, and as he emerges in a new kind of dress, reveals the ways in which knighthood and masculinity can shift towards embracing femininity, motivated by the smallest amount of desire for self. In the next chapter, we will examine the safe distances that women and feminine objects are kept from the core of knighthood, and the ways in which the girdle oversteps these boundaries and is placed at the heart of Gawain's sense of self.

CHAPTER 2: THE GREEN GIRDLE

INTRODUCTION: BORDERS OF KNIGHTHOOD

If Gawain's chivalric masculinity is tethered to the metal encasing that his armor provides, the symbols which adorn that armor - the love knots, birds and the image of the Virgin Mary – imply a further enclosure, a feminine outline to the public body of the chivalric man. In a general sense, to maintain social and gendered hierarchies or systems of exchange, the social identity with power seems to crave a sense of stability. In this historical moment, masculine nobility required clear definitions in order to maintain class and gender as immutable or naturalized concepts. An incorruptible chivalric masculinity was one that should not be able to easily move between bodies or communities, ensuring the stability of the power that supposedly originated within it. Yet, by attempting to purify and stabilize the masculine identity within knighthood, it also became definable by the difference of the possibly threatening figures around it: the monsters and the maidens. By pushing these two categories towards the edge of the self, the masculine community forces them to form the outline and border of chivalric identity. Indeed, knighthood in romances becomes recognizable by its interactions with monsters and maidens, and therefore reliant upon them. A total reliance is prevented by controlling knights' dealings with these categories. Knights often interact with monsters and maidens by stripping the Other of its agency and personhood, providing definition to knighthood through prescriptive relationships. These often culminate in the safe use of the Other as an object, like a love token from a maiden, sexual objectification, or the claiming of a monster's head or body as a trophy. Love tokens and material symbols of feminine subjects "serve as a surrogate for (their) inspiring presence, propelling the knight who loves her to accomplish feats of extraordinary prowess that bring honor and credit to his name."[1] Similarly, the monster's token – a weapon or body part – serves as a reminder of a knight or court's violent prowess and ability to protect and conquer. By accumulating these objects, knights are able to safely set both maidens and monsters at the

[1] Jane Burns, "Introduction: The Damsel's Sleeve," *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 1–16, at 4.

borders of chivalric masculinity and use them to define and stabilize "social definitions" and hierarchies regarding gender and class.[2]

Monsters may appear as an easy set of differences for knights to compare themselves to. Giants, fairies, and beasts are often hybrids with unstable identities, mutable relationships to power and gender, and desires which exceed what is considered "natural" or virtuous.[3] This is not a threat to the knightly identity when the monstrous is kept at the outside of the sites of social maintenance like the court. Private rooms, if penetrated by the monstrous, might be the most dangerous, since in these spaces the honor and shame system of the community cannot regulate individual actions.[4] The Green Knight, however, becomes a real threat as he enters the court, and refuses to become an object that can be safely interacted with and relegated to the edges of knighthood. He is "that monstrous and disavowed other integral to the masculine chivalric imperatives that of necessity attempt, and fail, to write him out."[5] The safest way for knighthood to interact with the distorted mirror image he presents them with is through violence: a transformation of the threatening monstrous body into a passive object which can easily be incorporated into the court as a trophy on the wall.[6] Monstrous tokens are not as easily added to armor or daily dress, and often must be treated as a part of architecture instead of being subsumed by armor itself. This way, the community shoulders the burden of keeping the symbolic power of the object contained and properly "seen" as a spectacle of the power of knighthood, and not the power of the monstrous body. This balancing is not as effective when token body parts are overly desired or worn by merely an individual. Such a figure becomes

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[2] Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed* 1.
[3] Cohen, "The Body in Pieces" 87–90.
[4] For a useful foundation on the function of the honor and shame systems for aristocrats, see Julian Pitt Rivers, "Honor and Social Status," in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society,* edited by Jean G. Peristiany (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1965)**,** 19–38 and for a more recent application of the theory: Siegfried Christoph, "Honor, Shame, and Gender," in *Arthurian Romance and Gender, Masculin / Féminin dans le roman arthurien médiéval Geschlechterrollen im mittelalterlichen Artusroman,* edited by Friedrich Wolfzettel, Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 10 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 26–33.
[5] Ashton, "Perverse Dynamics," 58.
[6] The classic example here, of course, is Grendel's arm which Beowulf hangs over the entrance to Heorot. See Dana Oswald, *Monsters, Gender, and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature,* Gender in the Middle Ages 5 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 102. This also applies to the dismembered saintly body as explored by Aidan Holtan, "Reading the Body: Dismemberment of Saints and Monsters in Medieval Literature" (Unpublished Dissertation, Purdue University, 2020).

monstrous themselves and loses any chivalric identity. A key example of this is the giant of Mont St. Michel in the "Alliterative Morte," who wears a cloak of beards as he waits to challenge Arthur.[7] The dangers of over-performing the regulatory actions of knighthood (chiefly courtly love and violence) may result in the over-accumulation of tokens from either maidens or monsters, and the loss of the central chivalric identity. However, as we see Gawain at the beginning of this poem, he should have no fear of overreaching his bounds, since he is deprived of the reward for his act of violence on Christmas. He is denied the ownership of the Green Knight's head when it is reclaimed by its owner. Instead, Gawain begins the poem already seeking for the material symbols which should make up the borders of his identity. By denying him easy access to a token of the Green Knight, Gawain leaves his court already desiring to encounter or own a piece of the monstrous.

Just as the monstrosity of the Green Knight is not easily defeated or reduced to an outline for Gawain's virtuous reputation, feminine desire and agency in the poem appear as "an excess, an outside not only intrinsic to the workings of heterosexuality but also capable of breaking the artificial unity of 'sex'" and the gendered hierarchies that this unity protects."[8] As the poem progresses, Gawain is stripped of his stable feminine borders – his reliance on Mary wavers and his safe images of love knots are forgotten as he focuses instead on the complicated green love token – and subsequently the unity of "sex" and his social body are left vulnerable. At the start of the story, Arthur's court is mainly engaged in masculine overtures and systems of interaction; challenges and violent displays of prowess and bravery. Yet, as Geraldine Heng points out "at the limit of the masculine narrative – in the repeating moments where masculine command slips and misses – appear the sedimentations of feminine desire."[9] These "sedimentations" as I see them, are the material connections towards feminine patrons, as well as the threat of hidden female machinations through Morgana and the Lady's presences and concealed intentions.

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[7] "Alliterative Morte Arthure" in *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English* Stanzaic Morte Arthur *and* Alliterative Morte Arthure, ed, Larry D. Benson, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1986), 113–238 at 145 (lines 998–1004).
[8] Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss" 208.
[9] Geraldine Heng, "Feminine Knots and the Other in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 106 (1991): 500–514 at 501.

Gawain begins the poem with two ladies who he is associated with and pledged to: Guinevere and the Virgin Mary. However, his connection to Guinevere is not stable enough to be maintained as he leaves the court, or even once he leaves her side. He has not pledged himself to her, and he holds no material object to stand in for her authority over him. He does maintain his shield which reminds him of the Virgin Mary's guidance over him. However, this object is also not sustainable as he is thrust into a new court, ruled by a woman who is hidden from him, and stripped of his material identity. Gawain is placed even more intensely on the defensive when he has any kind of material object or token taken from him by the rules of the game of exchange. Any object that might contribute to his own honor or identity is given to him by Bertilak, and he finds himself completely unable to actively define himself through violence, hunting, or conquests of love. Bertilak's game of receiving and the Lady's game of desire place[10] Gawain in a state of passive resistance and reception, and as both of these figures supply him with material goods, they continually question his identity, forcing a naked and borderless Gawain finally to choose the girdle to possibly replace and threaten the impenetrability of his chivalric self.

Both the Lady and the Green Knight deny Gawain access to objects. The Lady denies Gawain the ability to dress himself in his own material identity (1220–25). The Green Knight, of course, denies Gawain his head when he picks it back up. Both of them also question Gawain's identity and provide him with specific avenues of action or materials to provide the new foundation of his reputation or sense of self. The Lady asks Gawain to claim his masculinity by claiming her in various ways, and when this cannot tempt him, instead offers him a material representation of femininity, a way to claim the feminine without granting him ownership over the Lady herself. Yet, by accepting and wearing the girdle Gawain desires the feminine *too much* and brings it from the borders into the very center of his identity. The Green Knight, upon asking Gawain to show how fearless he is, is arguably asking Gawain to rely upon the green girdle, to trust in the new identity that he has chosen, and perhaps, to allow its 'magic' to transform Gawain into a borderless figure like the Green Knight, neither monster nor knight, man nor woman, who can reattach pieces of themselves and speak out through a fragmented body. In

[10] The lady, being revealed later as sent from her husband to Gawain to test him, is obviously playing a game. However, the extent to which the Lady might desire Gawain despite (or because of) her loyalty to her husband is not something easily pinned down.

Gawain's blind acceptance of the green girdle, he runs the risk of re-writing his chivalric identity within a new border of gender, which embraces femininity and its powers far too closely and allows them to reach the center of Gawain's private sense of self and threaten to redefine his public body.

LOVE TOKENS: PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

Courtly love provides one of the key mechanisms through which chivalric masculinity keeps femininity at the borders of the identity,[11] while granting aristocratic women limited power over men to maintain, improve and reproduce chivalric systems. Love tokens and material signs of affection act as stable objects that can take the place of gendered bodies, either to serve as public object and sign of affection, or to be symbols of the power that one lover had over the other. The girdle which Gawain accepts from the Lady is described as a "luf-lace"[12] and many scholars have treated it as another iteration of the love-token, reading into it both Gawain and the Lady's desire for each other through the acceptance of this gift.[13] This issue of desire and intention on the behalf of Gawain and the Lady is what makes this love token so complex. Although Gawain and the Lady's laughter and enjoyment in the temptation scenes belies an enjoyment of the game of seduction and love talking, one cannot understand either of their desires to be forthright or settled on the other participant in the game at all. Geraldine Heng argues that through Gawain and the readers' inability to ever understand what the Lady wants, the narrative resists allowing her to be made into a definable object.[14] Joseph Gallagher suggests

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[11] For a good definition of the 'game' of courtly love, see John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), for the classic description of love and its various rules, see Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*; edited by John J Parry (1941. New York, Columbia University Press, 1990); for a useful discussion of the vagaries and controversies of the term *courtly love*, see Roger Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: A Critical Study of European Scholarship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977) and H.A Kelly, "The Varieties of Love in Medieval Literature According to Gaston Paris," *Romance Philology,* 40 (1986–1987): 301–27.
[12] Lines 1874, 2438. Glossed by Andrew and Waldron as "belt as love token" in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript,* 331.
[13] For two very different but useful accounts of desire in this poem see the aforementioned Heng, "Feminine Knots and the Other in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"* and Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss" and for an account of the effects of Morgana's desire see Gail Ashton, "Perverse Dynamics."
[14] Heng, "A Woman 'Wants'" 123.

that there is evidence that Gawain might actually be sexually tempted by the Lady on the third day, but even this suggestion outlines the utter lack of real desire that Gawain shows for her in general.[15]Ultimately, if we can consider the temptation scenes to be as much of a game as Bertilak's interactions with Gawain, we must also read them as acts of pleasure and desire. We need not, however, ascribe this desire to sexual dalliances between the Lady and Gawain. Gawain's desires seem to be the same as they are in the rest of the poem – to save himself and his court as best he can. We may consider the Lady's "boundless desire"[16] to be for all possibilities of her game: she, unlike other ladies in similar scenarios, arguably benefits from any outcome. If this entire adventure is constructed by Morgana to test Gawain's virtue, and Gawain resists the Lady and proves virtuous by refusing or giving the girdle to her husband, she will not be punished for disobeying or cheating on her husband since she didn't and since he asked her to anyway. If she does desire Gawain, and he does fail by being seduced by her, she still wins since she enjoys a lover and a presumably accepting husband. Of course, these suppositions take the most pleasant and optimistic view of the lady's own agency in her life: that is, if she is doing this both because her husband asked her to and she wants to. Yet, this reading seems as likely as a more negative one, if not slightly more so, since the Lady tempts Gawain with such skill and zeal that her reticence is not easily apparent if it lies beneath the surface.

This safety net for consequence, allows the Lady to pursue the temptation and seduction of Gawain as a true game. Though it might be a fine result, the Lady's end goal seems to not to be sex with Gawain; even at the start of their first encounter, the lady offers a striking innuendo: "ȝe are welcum to my cors" (1237). This phrase might mean a few things. It has been taken in two main senses, one explicitly sexual (as in, you are welcome to my body or you are pleasing to my body) and one slightly more ambiguously so, where "my cors" means only "me" and so it would mean "I am pleased to have you here."[17]. However, Arthur Lindley notes a far more interesting layer of meaning in this statement, where "cors" refers to a girdle or lace and therefore, "the Lady, while apparently offering the temptation Gawain will refuse, covertly refers

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[15] Joseph E. Gallagher, "'Trawþe' and 'Luf-talkyng' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 78 (1977): 362–76 at 372.
[16] Heng, "A Woman 'Wants'" 123.
[17] This innuendo is discussed by Andrew and Waldron in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* 253 in the note to line 1237–38.

to the one he will accept."[18] The endgame of the temptation scenes and the primary focus for the Lady is the love token of the green girdle. The intention behind the giving, and the desires behind the reception of this love token set it apart from other conventional tokens in ways which implicate Gawain's sense of self in his acceptance of this gift.

Many love tokens are private, but the motivation behind this secrecy is that if discovered, the love they reveal would be punished by jealous figures of masculine ownership or authority; fathers and husbands. Often, this secrecy is necessary because the lovers are involved in adulterous affairs; messengers and subtle symbols of devotion recognizable only to the two lovers are common. The discovery of this love often culminates in a tragic and final love token, which is sent or facilitated by the angry father or cuckold. For example, in Marie De France's *Laustic* (also titled *Le Rossignol*), a couple's love is marked by the singing of a nightingale; when the husband discovers the affair, he kills the nightingale and sends it to his wife's lover in a box to mark the end of the affair.[19] Similarly, in the first tale of the fourth day of the Decameron, an enraged father discovers his daughter's relationship with a young man, and gives his daughter her lover's heart in a golden cup, seemingly as an attempt to prevent himself from also killing her, hoping that the lover's heart might be violence enough to satisfy his rage.[20]In both of these examples, the necessity of secrecy and the threat to lovers' lives if they are discovered is clear. In contrast, Gawain's chief concern is the threat to his life that the Green Knight poses (who, it is important to stress, Gawain does not know is Bertilak until the end of the poem). His acceptance of the girdle is actually motivated by a desire to protect himself: "Þen kest þe knyȝt, and hit come to his hert / Hit were a juel for þe jopardé þat hym jugged were" (then the knight considered and it came to his mind / that it would be a jewel for the jeopardy that had been allotted to him, 1855–56). He does not accept the girdle out of love nor desire for the Lady herself. In fact, in direct opposition to the other secret love tokens, Gawain views the girdle as a boon for the danger he faces, and it is not, in his mind, a potential cause of danger itself. The secrecy then, is

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[18] Arthur Lindley, "Lady Bertilak's *Cors: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* 1237," *Notes and Queries,* 42.1 (March, 1995): 23–24 at 23.
[19] Marie De France, "Le Rossignol" *Lais de Marie de France,* trans. by Alexandre Micha, (Paris: Flammarion, 1994): 223-32.
[20] Giovanni Bocaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. by Guido Waldman, edited by Jonathan Usher, (Oxford University Press, 1993) IV.1, 255–264.

still motivated by fear of retribution, but not to maintain or save the love affair itself, but instead Gawain's place as guest and subject of Bertilak in the castle. Although the lady "biso3t hym for hir sake diseuer hit neuer" (entreated him for her sake never to reveal it, 1862) to her husband, this only provides Gawain an easy courtly love cover for his own intentions – it might be considered noble to obey a lady. It is not, however, noble to disrespect one's host. Gawain is later forced to examine and find a way to accept himself as *still* himself when this discrepancy is laid bare to him by the Green Knight.[21]By valuing himself, Gawain also mistakenly over values the Lady and her request over the homosocial bond with Bertilak: Gawain chooses to prioritize the feminine over the masculine.

In contrast to these conventional secrecies, other love tokens are used as public displays of loyalty and affection. The key object for this use is the sleeve, which knights might wear attached to their armor to identify them as serving a particular woman. The sleeve as a love token is necessarily public and inscribed onto the knight's armor as a show of association and individual identity. The sleeve is easily and acceptably incorporated into the armor and therefore masculine identity itself, without fear of the feminine exercising real or damaging power over the man within the armor. The sleeve is worn mainly for the interactions between men, and for the masculine gaze. By allowing oneself to be claimed by a lady through wearing her sleeve, there is a sense of ownership which subtly reflects onto the knight himself. As he acts to gain honor for himself and his lady, he is also allowing her beauty or reputation to passively return honor back towards him. Sleeves as tokens of love, and instruments of honor and identity are a fairly common trope.[22] One unique and much-written on example of this is the episode in the "Morte D'Artur," translated into English as (the stanzaic) "Morte Arthur," wherein Lancelot wears the

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[21] One trouble with this discrepancy is that Gawain goes to an apparently successful confession before his encounter at the Green Chapel. The perspectives and purposes of this seemingly false presentation of Gawain's soul's state is addressed in detail in the next chapter.

[22] This can be seen in a few episodes from Chrétien de Troyes quoted from *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, trans. David Staines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990): In "Érec et Énide" at the tournament at Pentacost, "scarlet banners, kerchiefs, and sleeves" are given, bestowed as tokens of love" (27), to the various knights; in "The Knight of the Cart," Lancelot wears strands of Guinevere's hair next to his heart (188); in "Le Conte de Graal," Gawain, as an anonymous knight, receives the sleeve of the younger daughter of Tiebaut of Tintagel to wear, to act as a symbolic protection against her older sister's champion (405–06).

sleeve of the lady of Ascolot in his helmet at her request.[23] This case is particularly interesting in comparison to Gawain's acceptance of the girdle, since both he and Lancelot wear these tokens not out of love for the maiden, but out of loyalty to the knight's reliance upon courtly gendered relations, and the maintenance of manners through the service of a woman. Due to this disconnect between Lancelot's desires and his actions, the symbolic weight of the feminine object is revealed; his "public identity as a prized and proven chivalric champion rests, in this instance, not on his own name or family identity but on a piece of clothing belonging to a lady."[24] Yet, even Lancelot is eventually credited with the prowess of the tournament, and the sleeve is used to identify him correctly through a short investigation by his fellow knights. Gawain's identity is similarly at stake with his taking on of the Lady's girdle. Like Lancelot, he presents himself within a "hybrid, cross-gendered costume"[25] that incorporates a feminine token into masculine armor. Although Lancelot is able to hide his identity behind the sleeve, Gawain hopes instead to hide the girdle within his own reputation, seamlessly incorporating its powers of protection into his metal suit. Whereas Lancelot's more recognizable use of the sleeve is rewarded by the masculine public in the tournament, and briefly chided by the private world of the feminine when Guinevere feels betrayed, Gawain finds himself chided by the masculine in the form of the Green Knight, and unexpectedly acting in accord with multiple women's desires (both in the form of the Lady's ambiguous orders, and Morgan's role in the entire affair) instead. The girdle does not obscure the masculine reality of Gawain, but instead forces him to unexpectedly take on a feminine and private aspect of himself publicly.

Another common trait of love tokens is their use as fetishized objects which allow the masculine subject to reflect upon the body of their beloved. This type of worship mirrored the use of relics and was exemplary of the type of safe interaction and objectification which allowed knights to use women's bodies and tokens to inspire and maintain emotional realities which allowed for great pleasure and great violence. Love tokens bestowed upon men often engaged also in the exchange of feminine agency or bodily autonomy, and "conventional accounts of the

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[23] "Stanzaic Morte Arthur," at 9, 11 (lines 208–216, 291–96).
[24] Burns, "Introduction: The Damsel's Sleeve," 5 and Jane Burns, "Which Queen? Guinevere's Transvestism in the French *Prose Lancelot*," in *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook,* edited by Lori J Walters (New York: Garland, 1996), 247–65 at 260.
[25] Burns, "Introduction: The Damsel's Sleeve" 5.

'ideal beloved' fragment the lady's body into isolated and desirable erotic parts under an admiring male gaze, moving from her forehead to her eyes, her nose, her lips, her hips."[26] Similar to the manageable fragmentation of monsters, these kinds of love tokens allow for knights to streamline the usefulness of feminine bodies and desire, by transforming it into an object which can be owned and carried easily by the knight himself. A famous example of this erotic meditation upon a bodily fragment is Lancelot's use of Guinevere's hair, which he finds on her comb in Chretien de Troy's *Knight of the Cart*: "…for he began to adore [the strands of hair]. To his eyes, his mouth, his forehead, his cheeks, he touched them a hundred thousand times.…Between his shirt and his skin he placed them on his breast, next to his heart....Such faith was his in this hair that he needed no other aid."[27] In this case, Lancelot goes through three stages: adoration, erotic placement and inspired dedication. This token of Guinevere's body is first worshipped and fetishized by him as a stand-in for the whole body of his love, and then erotically and secretly placed next to his skin. No fears about vulnerable flesh or mutable identity are brought up here, since the token and Lancelot's sexual desire and objectification of Guinevere neutralize any femininity that Lancelot might desire. That is to say, Lancelot's desires are mostly in line with the prescriptive sexual desires expected from him. Most notably, like Gawain's supposedly magic girdle, Lancelot feels safe when he wears the hair. However, this safety is created both by his own fervor which the token stirs, and by the idea that Guinevere herself is looking after him. Gawain does not use his token in this way, instead only thinking of his *own* flesh and body when he accepts and wears the girdle, not the body nor the protection of the woman who gives it to him. Any feminine power that Gawain might associate with the girdle then, might also be latently associated with Gawain's own flesh.

GAWAIN AND THE VIRGIN

The use of feminine objects to define and support masculine identities and relationships is not limited to the objectification of women as sexual objects, nor the use of sleeves and other tokens to stand in place of female intentions and bodies. The practice also extends to religious

[26] Burns, "Introduction: The Damsel's Sleeve" 10.
[27] Chrétien de Troyes, "The Knight of the Cart," trans. by Staines, 188.

relics and images. On the inside of Gawain's pentangle shield, a portrait of Mary is emblazoned, clearly visible to Gawain when he wears the shield. It's positioning sets a public and private dichotomy between Gawain's Pentangle – the representation of chivalric virtue and his identity among other men – and the suggestion of private identity, which relies on or identifies with Mary as a guide or example. Mary's feminine objecthood does not threaten but instead bolsters and supports Gawain's public virtues and identity, and the text repeatedly references this image of Mary, and Mary herself, as Gawain's true protector. In the "inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted" (inner half of his shield her (the Virgin's) image is painted, 649) which connects her directly to the five virtues on his shield. She acts as an icon of protection through this material placement, but often acts only when called upon and makes no active intervention in Gawain's perils on her own volition. As he nears the court of Haut Desert: "þe kniȝt wel þat tyde / To Mary made his none / Þat ho hym red to ryde / And wysse hym to sum wone." (The knight well in that time / To Mary made his complaint / That she advise him where to ride / And guide him to some dwelling. 736–39). After asking, he wanders some more, and then calls out to her again with the same intention (753–55). He then finds Haut Desert. This is "some" dwelling, which is what he asked for, but it is not necessarily a safe place for him to rest, as trial lies within. Mary's more passive role of guidance in answer to prayer centers Gawain's reliance on her: if he does not call, she will not help. This later becomes clear in the key moment when Gawain accepts the girdle. Mary's private protection and guidance of Gawain, implied by the inner nature of her placement on the shield, helps to at least present the image of stability and balance between public masculine virtue and feminine borders of control. However, when Gawain is *dispoyled* and his shield is taken, he loses any semblance of a stable relationship between his private and public self. Both are in flux with the removal of his armor and dress, and though the text calls our attention to this connection by invoking Mary's name at the moments of final temptation, because she is lacking a material object to define or ground Gawain, it is not enough to prevent Gawain from accepting the girdle. Mary's presence in the text at the point of Gawain's weakness implies that with this act, Gawain is choosing a new feminine object to bolster his public identity and define his private one. In taking on the girdle, Gawain relies upon new feminine figure that he will use as a guide. Heng argues that the Virgin first appears linked to Guinevere as a "fetishized object" and later is presented as "the courtly mistress" who "contend(s) explicitly for

Gawain as (her) desired prize."[28] Yet, as Gawain chooses to submit to the desires of the Lady instead of asking for the guidance of Mary, there is something different than simply a display of powerful female desires presenting a man with a choice here. The danger of displacing the importance of Mother Mary's materiality with the Lady's love token is located within the different objects' abilities to demand behavior from Gawain. Mary's portrait is passive and exists symbolically tied to the five chivalric virtues that Gawain shows the world. The Lady and her girdle instead are only associated with the virtues of the game – of giving what you have taken – and imply a more flexible system of morality and relations that even involve various types of sexual acts. Gawain's moment of weakness reveals the necessity of the feminine object for the stability of the chivalric self: no great love motivated Gawain, but he still required a feminine patron to tie his borders together and to let him feel safe. The girdle was the most effective offering to wear down Gawain's resistance because it was familiar *enough* as a love token, tempting as an item associated with chastity, and *there* when the other material objects of his former feminine patron were not.

THE GREEN GIRDLE, DESIRES, AND INCORPORATIVE WORK

Although nearly identical in appearance and function, there are important distinctions between the belt and the girdle. In J.R Planche's history of British costume, it is interesting to note that girdles in the 14th century are only mentioned in reference to women, as "handsomely ornamented with gold and silver" worn with "daggers before them in pouches."[29] The sash that men wore around their waist is simply referred to as "the military belt."[30] Although military belts and girdles both hold weapons, and are often well-decorated with precious stones and metals, the real distinction seems to be that a girdle is commonly worn by women, and the belt is worn by men. This is reflected in *Gawain* in the distinction between the belt which the Green Knight wears, and the girdle or "sayn" which refers to Gawain and the Lady's cloth objects worn about their waists.

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[28] Heng, "Feminine Knots" 502.
[29] Planche, *History of British Costume* 145.
[30] Planche, *History of British Costume* 148.

Beyond the gendered distinctions in dress, there are many biblical instances of girdles which might have influenced or at least been known to the poet and their audience. Lawrence Besserman outlines 6 unique types of girdles which signify various classes, states of being and intentions, including "erotic girdles…chaste girdles…martial girdles…priestly purity girdles…prophetic-ascetic girdles…(and) troth girdles" though he notes that "the one most relevant to *Sir Gawain* is the girdle of the Virgin Mary" – the instance which was already considered in the first chapter – "a girdle by means of which Doubting Thomas was brought round to believe in her Assumption."[31] This is relevant since Gawain initially identifies with the Virgin as his patron, as noted above, and also since Gawain works to keep himself both virgin and whole in his encounters with the Lady and with the Green Knight. His dedication to chastity and the protection of his own flesh against both seduction and violence make it easy for the Lady to convince him to substitute his reliance upon martial belts and the image of the Virgin for a new reliance on and identification with a girdle associated with chastity. He even wraps the girdle around himself twice, mimicking the way girdles have already been shown to be worn as symbols of virginity and purity.

Of course, the offering of a belt or girdle is actually a common one when it comes to love tokens, but notably, they are referenced by Andreas Capellanus as a love token which a woman might receive from a man, not the other way around.[32] Love tokens which men would give to women often were used to mark or possess the woman, in the inverse of how women's tokens given to men allowed men to have physical possession over a fragment of the giver. One particular instance of a woman giving a man a girdle as a love token is in another of Marie de France's lai, *Guigemar*.[33] In this story, the lovers each wear a girdle made of the other's clothing, knotted in such a way that the only one who could undo it would be the one who tied it. This token allows the separated lovers to find each other again and correctly identify their lost lover at the end of the tale. In this story, the belts operate as twofold instruments of love: they act as chastity or loyalty signs which ensure that both lovers will remain true, and they also serve as means of identification via the act of unknotting the respective girdles. This story is unique on its

[31] Besserman, "Gawain's Green Girdle" 84–101.
[32] Capellanus, *Art* 176.
[33] Marie de France, "Guigemar," *Lais de Marie de France,* trans. Alexandre Micha, 36-79

own as the love tokens are equal in terms of expected loyalty and proof of identity offered, yet it is useful to see the possessive nature of girdles or belts as love tokens, and the ramifications for Gawain's easy and eager acceptance of the Lady's girdle. Gawain becomes "owned" by the Lady by wearing her girdle, but no sexual encounter happens between them, so this is not a romantic or sexual type of claim. Later, when the Green Knight reveals it is actually *his* girdle which he gave to his wife to give to Gawain, Gawain is revealed to have received yet another gift from Bertilak/the Green Knight and allowed himself to be claimed and given a token that stretches against conventional systems of connection. The girdle is *now* his, but it *was* the Lady's, *except* it was the Green Knight's and arguably, it might be attributed to Morgan, as she controls and rules over the Green Knight and the court of Haut Desert. Gawain is left claimed by an intricately entwined group of deviant masculine and feminine individuals who all desire to have ownership of Gawain in various ways. He has a token not of a maid *or* a monster as his own, but perhaps of both.

Gawain's self is prepared for this shift and the reception of the claiming girdle through the Lady's three-day seduction. The Lady convinces Gawain to accept and embrace the green girdle by slowly breaking down his sense of both his private and public self. The Lady, as already discussed in the previous chapter, questions Gawain's identity in her first two encounters with him, each time using this logic to entice Gawain to kiss her in order to prove or claim his identity, both as a man and as a knight. In their third interaction, Gawain's identity has already been so destabilized that she instead decenters him by asking him for a gift, and Gawain artfully side steps this request:

"Now, dere, at þis departyng do me þis ese: Gif me sumquat of þy gifte, þi gloue if hit were, Þat I may mynne on þe, mon, my mourning to lassen.' 'Now iwysse,' quoþ þat wyȝe, 'I wolde I hade here Þe leuest þing, for þy luf, þat I in londe welde, For ȝe haf deserued, forsoþe, sellyly ofte More rewarde bi resoun þen I reche myȝt. Bot to dele yow, for drurye, þat dawed bot neked! — Hit is not your honour to haf at þis tyme	Now, dear, at this departing do me this comfort: Give me something of yours as a gift, your glove if it were, So that I may think on you, to lessen my mourning." "Now certainly," said that man, "I wish that I had here The noblest thing, for your love, that I in land possess, For you have deserved, truly, exceedingly often More reward by reason than I might access.

A gloue for a garysoun of Gawaynez giftez."	But to give you something for a love token that would be worth only a little[34] It is not to your honor to have at this time A glove as a treasured object of the gifts of Gawain. (1800–07)

Gawain refuses by citing his desire for the lady's own honor, which suits the common desire for knights to serve and honor their patrons with their actions. However, Gawain's professed desire to give the lady a piece of his own clothing to increase her honor mirrors the gifting of a sleeve to increase a knight's honor by reflecting his dedication to his woman. Gawain is also stuck in this scenario, naked in this room without easy access to his other possessions. The Lady preys upon Gawain's nakedness not just by destabilizing his identity, but also by limiting his options in this interaction in particular. Gawain must accept her gift since he himself has – literally – nothing to offer her.

The Lady shifts to offering Gawain gifts, and first offers him a ring. Due to Gawain's lack of desire for the Lady herself, or perhaps a fear that something valuable like a ring might be recognized by the host as his wife's or because Gawain views greed as a sin to resist and hopes to reclaim the stability of his five virtues, he refuses easily. However, as he refuses it for being too expensive, yet again the Lady has walked him into a corner; now he cannot refuse her next offer which she assures Gawain "hit vnworþi were" (it may be of little value, 1835). Yet, Gawain is going to attempt to deny her still, until he realizes the protection the girdle might offer. After this, he "þulged with hir þrepe and þoled hir to speke" (was patient with her insistence and allowed her to speak, 1859) and "þonkked hir oft ful swyþe" (thanked her often very intensely, 1866). He allows her to take the girdle off of her own body and offer it to him: "And ho bere on hym þe belt and bede hit hym swyþe" (and she pressed on him the belt and offered it to him intensely, 1860) Gawain now lies in bed, fully naked, with his new object of identification on top of the bedclothes he initially sought safety in. The girdle allows him to be easily identified, which ties him to the feminine, and to the outlines of desires which reveal him to want something

[34] Andrew and Waldron's punctuation for this passage is shown on the left, but I have altered it in my translation on the right. I think that Gawain's ambiguity is best understood without punctuation, since he is attempting to say multiple things with this statement. Gawain is saying that a glove is an unworthy gift to give such a worthy woman, but he is also implying that it would be dishonorable for the Lady to exchange love tokens with her husband's guest, or perhaps, a man who does not love her.

"Other", something outside of the knots and ties of chivalric masculine virtue. The girdle represents an answer to the limitations of knightly virtue whose "wholesale courage inevitably leads to a death that no longer has value" for Gawain or his court.[35]

Later, Gawain will admit his fault, blaming the weakness on his mortal flesh: "Þe faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed, / How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylþe," (The falseness and frailty of the wicked flesh, How susceptible it is to become infected with spots of sin, 2435–36). The vices of the flesh have been understood to be both lust for a woman, and lust for his own life, combining finally his fear for his chastity and his responsibility to maintain his knightly courage into one outward weakness: the flesh. This is, of course, the most feminine and vulnerable aspect of his otherwise sartorial body. One might argue that Gawain feels great guilt at his desire for his own flesh, the feminine within him, that might have been protected or allowed to exist with the possession of the girdle. Through the use of the girdle as his identifying relic which symbolically sits at least equivalent to the pentangle or the image of the Virgin, Gawain places himself as his own feminine patron. Whereas a woman's role was to inspire knights to great virtue through her testing, Gawain's desire for himself — for his own life — supersedes the desire to protect women, achieve virtue, and maintain the reputation of the court. Gawain instead becomes his own woman — someone to protect and be protected by his knightly self, as he faces the Green Knight and hopes to passively resist death through women's clothing that he believes is now fully his own.

This belief, that Gawain no longer views the girdle as the Lady's but instead as his own when he leaves the court of Haut Desert, is supported by the fact that Gawain does not hide the girdle but instead puts it on after the rest of his armor:

"Whyle þe wlonkest wedes he warp on hymseluen – His cote wyth þe conysaunce of þe clere werkez Ennurned vpon veluet, vertuus stonez About beten and bounden, embrauded semez,	While he threw onto himself the most noble clothes – His coat of arms with the emblem of the virtuous deeds Ornamented upon velvet, potent jewels Inlaid and trimmed about, embroidered seams,

[35] Jayme M. Yeo, "Dere dame, to-day demay yow neuer": Gendering Fear in the Emotional Community of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Exemplaria* 28.3 (May 2016): 248–63 at 256.

And fayre furred withinne wyth fayre pelures – Ȝet laft he not þe lace, þe ladies gifte; Þat forgat not Gawayn, for gode of hymseluen. Bi he hade belted þe bronde vpon his balȝe haunchez, Þenn dressed he his drurye double hym aboute…”	And fairly furred within with lovely gray furs – Yet he did not omit the lace, the lady’s gift; That Gawain did not forget, for his own good. When he had belted the sword upon his smooth hips, Then he wrapped his love-token about himself twice…” (2025–33)

If, as is often assumed, Gawain wears the girdle below his armor, it might be argued that he allows it to exist next to his flesh, where he is most vulnerable and places it under his armor in terms of self-protection both of his identity and his physical self. But if we follow the arguments of several scholars[36] who note that the girdle is mentioned only after the rest of the armor is described, then we might see something more complicated occurring. Gawain misreads how the girdle will be perceived as part of his public body and thinks that he will be able to easily integrate the girdle into his shell of masculinity, while still maintaining its private power and connotations in his private sense of self. Friedman and Osberg argue that “whoever accepts and wears the girdle” is bound to the feminine and “mystical incorporation” which “must be carefully veiled or disassembled when the object is presented.”[37] The conventional use of the feminine and monstrous material symbols – sleeves, decapitated heads and the like – provides a socially acceptable system of signification and incorporation which does not threaten the interiority of the knightly identity. Gawain’s green girdle is not safely incorporated in these ways, it is set apart by the differences of desire and intention. Yet, Gawain himself is dangerously unaware of the instability which the girdle has thrown his social body into. Gawain might even enjoy the way the girdle looks on him, as the text notes “þe grene silke þat gay wel bisemed, Vpon þat ryol red cloþe, þat ryche watz to schew” (the green silk well suited that knight upon the royal red cloth that was glorious to look at, 2035–36); upon leaving the court, he feels completely comfortable with integrating the girdle into his public identity. His casual enjoyment of the girdle implies that Gawain believes that he has successfully claimed the girdle and its identity without any threat to how he is publicly perceived. When this is revealed to be untrue, and Gawain’s cross-dressing is

[36] This perspective can be found in Besserman, “Gawain’s Green Girdle,” as well as in Malarkey and Toelken, “Gawain and the Green Girdle.”
[37] Friedman and Osberg, “Gawain’s Girdle as Traditional Symbol” 303, 309.

shown to be overt instead of covert, Gawain must take more intense measures to stabilize his identity and reputation.

In his final interaction with the Green Knight, Gawain receives the upsetting news that Bertilak and the Knight are one and the same. Before this, however, the Green Knight helpfully reveals that he sees Gawain and his dress for what they are: "For hit is my wede þat þou werez, þat ilke wouen girdel. / Myn owen wyf hit þe weued, I wot wel for soþe." (For it is my piece of clothing that you wear, that same woven girdle. My own wife clothed you in it, I know it truly indeed 2358–59.) Gawain violently reacts to this statement, physically throwing the girdle away from him. The Green Knight attempts to help Gawain reclaim the item safely, suggesting he treat it as a monstrous token, as a "pure token / Of þe chaunce of þe Grene Chapel at cheualrous kny3tez." (pure token / of the adventure of the green chapel among chivalrous knights, 2398–99). The Green Knight easily combines all of Gawain's trials – in the court, the bedroom, and the chapel – into one single adventure, and offers the girdle as the monstrous token to hold all of these threats within it. Gawain might easily take this "out" and return home. But hanging a girdle above the fireplace does not quite strike one as an image of martial conquest. Yet we might argue that in this moment of revelation, Gawain also resents the amount of control that the Other has had over his actions and chooses instead to make his own choices and rely exclusively on his own desires. Ultimately, choosing the path that the girdle itself provided him initially – a true sense of individuality and pleasure in stepping away from *representing* a community, and instead acting as one's own community, one's own woman, and one's own man.

Gawain decides to take the girdle back, and defensively explains what draws him to it (2430–38). He is careful to find a way to keep the girdle, while rebuilding his chivalric virtues through denial: he doesn't desire the wealth of the girdle, the magic of it, or the girdle itself, but instead the virtuous reminder that it might serve for him. Yet even this incorporative work[38] is not enough, when it is revealed that Bertilak is lord of this land "þur3 my3t of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges…" (through the power of Morgan la Fey who lives in my house, 2446). It is now clear, that the court of Haut Desert was always going to be a place of danger and testing

[38] Gawain also engages in an intense repudiation of women and feminine temptation and the desire of the flesh that have ruined previous great men; this diatribe will be considered in more depth in the next chapter.

for Gawain, and when offered the chance to return as a guest, Gawain adamantly refuses (2471). Morgana's power over Bertilak, the court, the Lady and now Gawain means that recognizing the girdle as an individual shame is not enough to allow Gawain to reasonably retain it as a piece of his armor, without allowing it to remain a symbol of his identification with the mystical feminine. Now, he must return to the stabilizing space of the court, wearing the girdle as a "bauderyk" (baldric, 2486). He alters how he wears the girdle, making it more public by placing it across his chest[39] instead of around his waist. The object becomes the visible center of Gawain's armor and is further removed from the acceptable list of love tokens, giving Gawain more power over its ownership and space on his body itself. His fellow knights *must* incorporate the girdle into their own clothing, to re-signify it as a piece of the knight's social body: the girdle is pacified by treating it as a combination of a monstrous and maiden-token. It is worn on the body, but also kept by the entire community instead of only by an individual, in order to stabilize and maintain masculine power over the lack of borders that the girdle previously represented.

In the next chapter, we move beyond considering only the material signs of identity, and delve into the gendered systems of behavior that Bertilak, Gawain and the Lady indulge in. Gawain is slowly made into a passive receiver of gifts, blows, and identities. When the truth of this shift is revealed to him, Gawain must engage in reclaiming and distancing himself from the court of Haut Desert. We will consider both the Lady's tactics of breaking Gawain's sense of self down in more detail than we already have, as well as Bertilak/the Green Knight's similar work. We also engage in the paradox of multiple confessions and consider why the narrative would claim Gawain as successfully confessed when he clearly has not been. Finally, we examine what Gawain's return to the court might mean, as well as how and why the court accepts him and honors him for his adventure.

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[39] One might also consider the focus or impetus of a feminine chest often being the revelatory focus for cross-gendered or not obviously gendered individuals. For an interesting discussion of the imagery which depicts this type of moment for St. Eugenia, see Robert Mills, "Visibly Trans?: Picturing Saint Eugenia in Medieval Art," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5 (2018): 540–64.

CHAPTER 3: GAMES OF EXCHANGE AND PASSIVE VIRTUE

INTRODUCTION: PLAYING WITH GENDER

In the previous chapters, the focus has been on Gawain's material shifts in identity. Gawain bears the weight of an entire court and way of life. He thus relies on material symbols of these things to understand himself and those around him. He has been brought outside Arthur's court, tested for his virtue, and stripped down to a vulnerable and bare body. A mixture of pleasure, fear, and ignorance causes Gawain to wear a symbol of femininity on the outside of his masculine shell when he is given the supposedly magic girdle from the Lady's body to wear as his own. Confident that he can do so without altering his public self, Gawain wears the girdle proudly and yet, when his rash choices are revealed to be known far too well by the Green Knight, he feels total and utter shame at being found lacking (2366, 2372). This shame, and the penance that Gawain takes on himself through the wearing of the girdle, come only after Gawain has already been apparently shrived and shown to be "so clene / As domezday schulde haf ben diȝt on þe morn." (As pure as if doomsday should have been ordained for that morning, 1883–84). This contradiction throws into doubt the reality of Gawain's faults, or at least the systems by which they might be recognized and punished or rewarded.

Prior to the encounter at the Green Chapel, Gawain is restored to his previous image of armored masculinity and virtue. After the revelations offered by Bertilak, Gawain suddenly has the rug pulled out beneath his feet: the rules of the game, the players, and his own choices were not at all what he thought they were to begin with, and so his public identity becomes tarnished. Gawain might have felt that he was able to enjoy a private or individual shift in self through his interactions with the Lady, his more subtle and veiled exchanges with Bertilak, and the priest's apparent inability to affect his behavior or truly *see* Gawain and his intentions. Once the Green Knight reveals his knowledge of Gawain's private actions, Gawain flounders to make excuses

for himself. His external projection of his faults, anti-feminist diatribe[1] and the court's acceptance of him all serve to salvage and re-define the public perfection which Gawain allowed to deteriorate through his deception and use of the girdle. Gawain's rhetorical efforts and denial of the excuses offered to him project any dangerous desires onto the Lady and excluding the threat to the court by placing it on Guinevere's shoulders. When Gawain returns to the court, he claims the girdle as part of him in shame only in order to allow himself to maintain access to this feminine object while still being welcomed back. In response, the court works to retroactively shift the gendered associations of the girdle, instead allowing both men and women to wear it, occluding any major lapse in unity that Gawain's changes might reflected in the court.

Gawain's femininity is initially accessed through his use of clothing, but it is cemented by the behaviors asked of him by both the Lady and Bertilak/the Green Knight. If Gawain's change in self was linked exclusively to the girdle itself, the narrative would not require such rhetorical moves like the linking of Gawain to men tempted by women in history, nor a change in the way that Gawain wears the girdle. During his stay in Haut Desert, Gawain is subtly made to perform the passive role in his relationships to both the host and the Lady of the court. As previously established, the passive sexual role would not have marked an individual as a woman, but as a person who performs a woman's role: "a deviant male."[2] Although Gawain's gender play and eroticized courtly love language has already been examined by other scholars,[3] by considering his use of clothing we can easily track and understand the hunting scenes and the exchange game itself: they force Gawain into a passive position of receiving and responding to the actions of those around him. This passive position will culminate in Gawain's final challenge; to stay still and receive a deadly blow without flinching. Both Bertilak and the Lady

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[1] On the antifeminist diatribe see Catherine Batt "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant"; for a useful examination of the reconstruction of Gawain's identity in the final encounter see Stephanie J. Hollis, "The Pentangle Knight,"; and for a contrary point of view about the misogyny present in this moment see Gerald Morgan, "Medieval Misogyny and Gawain's Outburst against Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Modern Language Review* 97.2 (April 2002,): 265–78.

[2] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Sex and the Middle Ages" 5.

[3] This reading of flipped gender roles has been established by David Mills, "An Analysis of the Temptation Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *JEGP: The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 67.4 (Oct. 1968): 61–30, Heng, "A Woman 'Wants'," as well as Joseph E. Gallagher, "'Trawþe' and 'Luf-talkyng' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,'" *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 78 (1977): 362–76.

utilize the veneer of familiar systems of exchange, hierarchies, and relations to manipulate Gawain into accepting – and perhaps even enjoying – feminine and passive positions. The Green Knight participates in the same type of manipulation at the Green Chapel. There, Gawain's choices ascribe a feminine act, of passively receiving, to a masculine virtue of courage. The borderlines of feminine objects and actions tighten like a noose around Gawain's throat as he is left without a completely masculine position to take in this crucial moment. The Green Knight capitalizes on Gawain's fears and mocks him in a way which reveals a possible overarching desire, for Gawain to become like the Green Knight and rejoin the court of Haut Desert as a fully informed and enthusiastic guest.

In this chapter, Gawain's slow embrace of his role as a feminine passive subject and his position in the court of Haut Desert will be examined through the seduction and hunting scenes. They act together to allow Gawain to experience various feminine literary positions. I argue that there are moments which suggest that Gawain even enjoys these positions, as he attempts to avoid peril and pitfalls of virtue. His enjoyment is allowed by his ignorance of the true perils he is facing, since the Lady and Bertilak engage in familiar courtly and homosocial systems of games, speaking, and seduction to place Gawain off-balance. Gawain will attempt to explain away his actions by relying on some sense of ignorance: "Þaȝ I be now bigyled, / Me þink me burde be excused" (If I am now beguiled, It seems to me I should be excused 2427–28). However, ignorance of being deceived cannot justify his deception of his host, or his enjoyment of the alternate systems he found himself within. This hope of being excused is offered after Gawain projects all of his troubles onto the Lady, and squarely identifies Gawain as hoping to be perceived in opposition to, instead of entangled within, the feminine.

THE GAME OF EXCHANGES AND SCENES OF SEDUCTION

As established in the introduction, medieval gender was used to organize groups socially, sexually, and financially; power could be generated through cross-dressing and cross-behaving since the access to fluid gender identities allowed the movement in and out of systems of shame and honor. Economies – both on large scales and individual scales in exchanges between friends, enemies, and lovers – were gendered and classed by the rules of polite and fair exchange through

gifts, tokens, and fealties. Traffic of land and women among nobility[4], relied upon homosocial relations which facilitated loyalties and friendships through the generosity of one man to another. Generosity or largesse then became key noble virtues, and Gawain himself is marked with this virtue and later claims to have gone against it (2381).[5] The normality of gift exchanges between lords, and of verbal exchanges and love tokens between lords and ladies, allows Bertilak and the Lady to require behaviors from Gawain. He interacts with both of them through the rules of courtesy and love which he assumes hold true in this familiar-enough court.

Two great systems of exchange are featured in the court of Haut Desert: the verbal exchanges and love tokens between Gawain and the Lady in the private bedroom, and then the Exchange of Winnings which Bertilak engages Gawain in. Gawain begins his role as a guest dressed in feminine clothing, as we established in the first chapter, but he also begins the game at a request to remain among the women of the court as the other men leave to hunt (1096): the "frame" of this second game relies on the "assumption that a knight will be at his ease in the company of ladies."[6] Bertilak imposes a passive position upon Gawain, asking for him to remain in bed: "ȝe schal lenge in your lofte and lyȝe in your ese / Tomorn quyle þe messequyle and to mete wende / When ȝe wyl wyth my wyf, þat wyth yow schal sitte / And comfort yow with company til I to cort torne." (You shall remain in your room and lie at your ease / Tomorrow until the time of mass and to meal go / when you wish to with my wife, who shall sit with you / and comfort you with company until I return to court, 1096–89). Bertilak then proposes the game, promises to give Gawain what he earns from the forest, and to receive whatever "chek" (fortune,[7] 1107)

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[4] For systems of homosocial exchange and the sexual objectification of women see Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick, "Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles," in her *Between Men,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985): 21–27 and for the "traffic in women" see Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women,* edited by Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.

[5] For the importance of largesse and gifts between knights as well as the fusion of nobility and chivalry in this poem, see Britton J. Harwood, "Gawain and the Gift" *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 106.3 (May 1991): 483–99 at 485.

[6] Morgan, "Medieval Misogyny" 267.

[7] "Chek" is an ambiguous word. Andrew and Waldron gloss this as possible meaning "bad luck" which would emphasize Gawain's peril in the castle, and Bertilak's supposed generosity as he offers to exchange good for bad. It might mean advantage, recalling its use in chess as "Check mate" gesturing towards the end of the game. The ambiguity in this word is another instance of Bertilak manipulating surfaces and hidden meanings to manipulate Gawain into accepting dangerous proposals.

Gawain earns or receives at court in return. Bertilak is showing himself to be a generous host, but also putting Gawain into a situation where he cannot give Bertilak anything which Bertilak does not already own. Gawain is the only real recipient in this game: a generous offer by a host which forces Gawain to accept the game for courtesy, but also a game which forces Gawain to remain passive and to only receive gifts from Bertilak himself and do so publicly. Any gift Gawain could give Bertilak would be inferior. Even if it is greater, than this reveals how Gawain received or took something of great value of Bertilak's to begin with, not even mentioning the dangers of reciprocating lovemaking with the Lady if Gawain is unsuccessful in denying her.[8] Yet, even though these rules limit Gawain in his public self and his reputation for honor and acclaim, granting the perilous kisses to his host is done with great gusto (1639, 1389, 1937); Gawain arguably takes to the part of recipient and passive collector of Bertilak's hunting trophies quite well.

Beyond Gawain's noble virtues, Bertilak also exploits Gawain's fear to enable him to slip different types of perils beneath Gawain's nose, even as the date of the Green Chapel encounter looms closer. It might be considered that Gawain welcomes the relative safety of private rooms and daily mass in contrast to the dangerous adventures of the hunt: Bertilak steps in to offer Gawain this retreat from martial prowess as he faces his own death, and Gawain accepts it. His fear of his impending death interrupts Gawain's sleep and later will be pointed to by Gerald Morgan as the "incapacitating presence" which "explains how Gawain can overlook the moral reality of what the Lady proposes in offering him the girdle."[9] Fear is identified by Jayme Yeo as a feminine emotion throughout the poem, which, although felt by men, is projected onto the women around them to "distribute the emotional labor of the community, ultimately releasing masculine identity from the otherwise unbearable burden of being simultaneously courageous and fearful."[10] Gawain's final test, of course, asks him to balance this "unbearable burden" in the Green Chapel, but at Haut Desert, he is allowed to indulge in his fears. In fact, his fear is

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[8] Again, for the homosexual "dangers" and possibilities in this piece see: Dinshaw, "A Kiss is just a Kiss"; Ashton, "Perverse Dynamics"; Gilbert, "Gender and Sexual Transgression"; and Richard E. Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the 14th Century,* The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).
[9] Morgan, "Medieval Misogyny" 274.
[10] Yeo, "Gendering Fear" 250.

optimized and manipulated by both Bertilak and the Lady to get him to agree to wear the girdle. This feminine emotion is not able to be projected onto feminine subjects around him, and so Gawain is stuck as the passive subject in a game of receiving, fearful for his life and his chastity as he is distracted by the consequences of his actions coming to fruition at the Green Chapel.

As Bertilak forces Gawain into being the public recipient and passive partner in a game of exchange, the Lady corners Gawain into denying masculinity by attempting to maintain his virtue. The hunting scenes are mirror images of the predatory actions of the Lady towards Gawain in their multiple seductive encounters. Although scholars have long contended that Gawain is cast as the prey in these scenes – as Dinshaw notes: "In the bedroom Gawain is the hunted, the object of the feminine gaze."[11] – it is notable that the Lady herself is given attributes and acts according to the different prey that are killed each day, subtly implying Gawain to be *her* hunter. The first day the men hunt deer, and The Lady enters quietly and begins her seduction softly as she sneaks up on the knight who is feigning sleep. Gawain is cautious immediately but not really afraid for himself; his reaction "is a gesture of comic surprise rather than a serious reminder of moral danger"[12] and he is ready to make amends or help the Lady find her way again. As they begin their encounter, his joviality and laughter in her game of speech also implies that he isn't really threatened. In fact, if read sincerely, Gawain enjoys himself in the seduction scenes, when he isn't rhetorically wrestling the Lady for his chastity. His enjoyment is ambiguous; one possibility is that he might be enjoying the feeling of "winning" as he puts the Lady into what he perceives as her place as loyal wife and woman playing with power that is not her own. His enjoyment would then echo the Lady's own pleasure as they speak, as she perceives herself as slowly but surely winning Gawain over. Another possibility is that he might be enjoying the play itself, as he is never described as happier in these moments than after the Lady has succeeded in getting a kiss from him and then indulging in love talk that is left implicit and vague.

In the first seduction attempt, Gawain tries to play the scene out conventionally, pledging himself to the lady as her beholden knight. However, the scene takes a slight turn when she raises the stakes by claiming the power he has offered her over himself:

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[11] Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss" 212.
[12] Mills, "Analysis" 613.

“Me schal worþe at your wille and þat me wel lykez, For I ȝelde me ȝederly and ȝeȝe after grace; And þat is þe best, be my dome, for me byhouez nede!” (And þus he bourded aȝayn with mony a blyþe laȝter.) “Bot wolde ȝe, lady louely, þen, leue me grante And deprece your prysoun and pray hym to ryse, I wolde boȝe of þis bed and busk me better; I shulde kever þe more comfort to karp yow wyth.” “Nay, forsoþ, beau sir,” syad þat swete, Ȝe schal not rise of your bedde.” (1214–24)	“I will be at your will and that pleases me, For I yield myself readily and call after grace; And that is the best, by my judgement, for I am beholden to you necessarily!” (And thus he joked again with much blithe laughter.) “But would you, lovely lady, grant me leave And release your prisoner, and ask him to rise, I would get out of this bed and dress myself better; Should I cover myself, the more comfort I would have to speak with you.” “No, truly, good sir,” said that sweet lady, “You shall not rise out of your bed.”

Gawain is explicitly participating in a jest. The drag of this moment[13] is amusing to him, and it operates within the normal conventions of interactions between ladies and knights; it is treated by him as simply a joke and doesn’t threaten his sense of private or public self since he feels in control of his own actions and reactions. But the Lady actuates the power he grants her and forces him to reconsider his role in relation to her, to wonder where play and courtly love end and self-altering consequence begins. Gawain is of course, concerned with clothing himself for propriety (and because being naked and with a stranger doesn’t necessarily sound safe if one is concerned with one’s chastity) but also in order to reestablish his own control of the scenario, and of himself. As discussed in Chapter 1, he is un-signified in the Lady’s presence and therefore limited in his movements and how he can approach her.

In this first interaction, the Lady begins a longer game of setting Gawain at ease and allowing him to enjoy their private moments together. She is quiet and demure and mimics the hinds that Bertilak hunts. This will later subtly reveal to Gawain, if he was a particularly psychic

[13] By drag, I mean the gendered interplay of powers that are on display. Although they aren’t performing on a stage or dressed exactly to impersonate the other gender, the Lady is exercising a masculine authority of lordship over Gawain, and this is brought out even more by her physical power over him that he teasingly allows her. However, it feels akin to drag since it is assumed that Gawain is play acting, since if he wished, of course he could move himself by his own power, and without her permission.

reader, both Bertilak and the Lady's true intentions, as the Lady mimics the nature of the animals that Bertilak hunts, and Bertilak serves these surrogates up to Gawain willingly and excitedly, just as he is sending his wife in day after day. This subtle association between the Lady and the prey is in some ways conventional, since this could normally be her role in such a seduction scene, and meta-textually this enhances the play-space of the interaction. It mollifies both reader and Gawain subtly, by outwardly portraying properly coded and used masculine and feminine roles, even as the Lady twists and changes the rules of their interaction to suit her own game. She even describes herself as in Gawain's service – after she had placed herself in power above him a moment before – which mirrors a traditional knightly promise to serve a woman.[14] As Joseph Gallagher points out, however, this reversal does not put Gawain off, instead "Gawain is willing to play at least the verbal part of the game. He is no longer 'schamed' but 'blythe' and if her words suggest masculine desire, his suggest feminine willingness to comply."[15] Though the Lady's cross-gendered behavior is striking, Gawain's readiness to step into the feminine role in order to continue their love play reveals a fluidity of gender that he now has access to due to his nakedness, status as guest, and largely as a knight familiar with courtly love and convention.

At the start of their conversation, the Lady put Gawain at ease and also verified her own noble and discerning character by correctly identifying him: "I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wowen ȝe are" (I know well, indeed, you are Sir Gawain, 1226). Yet, as their interaction draws to a close, she rescinds this statement and claims that he is not Gawain. She questions his identity after establishing herself as a keen reader of nobility and performing the play of courtly love correctly, marking herself as a valid judge of nobility and courtliness. Gallagher notes when referring to Gawain's unsuccessful attempt to reclaim his masculine role as her servant (1241–47), that Gawain's replies also mark him as respecting her opinion, assuming "the validity of her values, since he objects to her praise in the light of them."[16] Though this attempt reveals Gawain's desire for his masculine role in the scenario, this does not necessarily mean that he is uncomfortable within the feminine role: his acceptance of the Lady's values might imply that he is willing to

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[14] It is of note that Burns, "Introduction: The Damsel's Sleeve," 6 argues for another example of this happening, when "…the demoiselle d'Escalot plays the tradition distraught and sleepless male lover to Lancelot's 'dame sans merci'."
[15] Gallagher, "'Trawþe' and 'Luf-talkyng'" 365.
[16] Gallagher, "'Trawþe' and 'Luf-talkyng'" 366.

play whichever role she wants him to. At this point in the seduction, Gawain is still attempting to maintain control over his identity. We see a shift in this in later episodes, especially when he offers to be at her command and gives her freedom of coming and going (1501–02). In doing so, he offers her what she already has, in a similar way to the game he is playing with her husband. The Lady's judgement of what makes a knight 'knightly' and what makes Gawain "Gawain" also associates her with the authority of the Green Knight, another small hint to Gawain, if he was incredibly acute, about the real game going on. Her questioning of his identity mirrors the Green Knight's questioning of King Arthur's court, and then later the Green Knight's denial of Gawain's identity after he flinches at the Green Chapel.

The Lady therefore establishes herself as being capable of requiring real action from Gawain, and as his judge of private and courtly interaction. By putting him at ease in this first private seduction attempt, the Lady lays the groundwork for the manipulation regarding the girdle later. Gawain's ignorance is maintained by his familiarity and assumption of the separation of the center and the borders of his identity. Gawain relegates to the private space of the bedroom courtly love and the interactions with the feminine which a knight is required to engage in, and separately considers the martial prowess and homosocial games as public displays for masculine gaze and benefit. Gawain's mental separation of his game with Bertilak and his endeavors in the bedroom with the Lady prevents him from understanding how his actions in both are actually public and laid bare to the masculine gaze. This fear is hinted at when Gawain reacts negatively to the Lady's overtures to him in public (1658–63). As Gallagher notes, "…the Lady's demonstrations of affection, stolen as they are, upset him in public as they have never done in private, and for the first time he is shown actually suffering from his inability to reject her concept of love."[17] Exploiting Gawain's unstable identity and his trust in her judgement of courtly behavior, the Lady receives the prize she came for, and asks Gawain to associate his very character not with speech or chasteness but instead with the kiss itself; as Heng beautifully contends, "I kiss therefore I am Gawain."[18] This interpolation is not agonizingly drawn out either, Gawain does not "grant the kiss grudgingly. On the contrary, he continues to play at the largely verbal surface of love, prolonging the game of passive male and active female and

[17] Gallagher, "'Trawþe' and 'Luf-talkyng'" 372
[18] Heng, "A Woman Wants" 116.

transforming her request for a kiss into a request that he allow himself to be kissed by her."[19] Gawain has, even at this point, become so comfortable with being the recipient or passive partner, that he views this position as the more virtuous choice[20] even in this amorous scenario.

Following this moment is a description of the slaughtering of the deer: it ends as "Vche freke for his fee as fallez for to have" (Each man claimed his fee/prize as was befitting for each to have, 1358). This is the same way, arguably, that the corresponding temptation of Gawain ends—although who is the prey and who is the hunter is perhaps intentionally ambiguous. Gawain attempts at the end of the episode to reassert both his identity and his role as the man by claiming that he is acting "as a kny3t fallez" (as befits a knight, 1303) but his assertions that he still does so at her power fail to undermine the fact that the Lady holds all power of identification and evaluation over him. Mills argues that in this scene, the Lady happily allows the fluidity of who signifies as masculine, since her power is actionable and Gawain's is not without great consequence: "The Lady serves Gawain, because she can compel Gawain to serve her."[21] Although it has been established that courtly women and courtly love act as maintenance systems for chivalry, the Lady has quickly increased the power she wields over Gawain by centering herself and her requests not as the maintenance of chivalric identity, but instead as its genesis. The interaction between the game of winnings and the Lady's requests are familiar but distinct from the beneficence of lords to their knights, and the services requested of knights by the women they love. In this private moment she arguably created a new exchange system: wherein Gawain did not act in this way because he was a knight, but instead to *acquire* the identity of knighthood.

The second day, the men hunt boar, an animal which is infamous for being a dangerous and deadly prey, goring many hounds and men in this poem with its tusks (1441–44). It might be difficult to see how the softness of the bed that Gawain lies in, and the Lady's amorous overtures might be reminiscent of the bloodshed and gore that the hunting party encounters, but if we view this as the most aggressive day, we might read into the violence in the Lady's requests. The Lady

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[19] Gallagher, "'Trawþe' and 'Luf-talkyng'" 369, referring to lines 1302–06.
[20] Gilbert also argues that Gawain considers chasteness his main concern and motivation behind kissing Bertilak, as the avoidance of the sins of adultery pushes Gawain into accepting asexual and nearly homosexual acts ("Gender and Sexual Transgression," 53–70).
[21] Mills, "Analysis" 617.

begins with her most aggressive tactic, denying Gawain's identity again. She then shifts to asking him for a violent show of passion, paradoxically inviting him to take her by force:

"Ma fay," quoþ þe meré wyf, "ȝe may not be werned; Ȝe ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strengþe, ȝif yow lykez, Ȝif any were so vilanous at yow devaye wolde." "Ȝe, be God," quoþ Gawayn, 'good is your speche; Bot þrete is unþryuande in þede þer I lende, And uche gift þat is geven not with goud wylle." (1496–1500)	"By my faith," said the cheerful wife, "You could not be denied; You are strong enough to constrain with strength if you pleased, If any were so villainous and would refuse you." "Yes, by God," said Gawain, "Your words are good; But force is considered ignoble in the land where I come from, as are gifts that aren't given with goodwill."

The Lady's claims outline how, in her perspective, the chivalrous knight differs in sexual signification from other men. In an effort to regain external signs of himself, Gawain cites his land and his customs as looking down on rape and assault, even as the Lady invites him to identify with the masculine and heterosexual power that such an act might represent. Catherine Batt notes that invoking this darker side of courtly love "exposes how 'courtesy' may simply be invoked to corroborate the claims of a brutal, self-justifying male desire"[22] which only symbolically grants women power in order to create more honor and pleasure for men who are just as ready to "constrayn wyth strengþe" as they are to serve with love. Others, like Joseph Gallagher, suggest that this request is made to manipulate Gawain by trying to relate to where his dread lies, since "he knows he must confront great danger, the road to intercourse with him may lie in flattering his strength."[23] This flattery, is of course laced with great sexual innuendo, as the Lady's reference to Gawain being "stif" enough easily refers to masculine sexuality and anatomy, as well as connotations for masculine desire. If we read the first day as the Lady

[22] Batt, "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant" 133.
[23] Gallagher, "'Trawþe' and 'Luf-talkyng'" 370.

introducing Gawain to the subtle pleasures of enjoying the passive or feminine role in courtly love, this request outlines the distasteful associations with masculinity in courtly love. Gawain rejects the connotations of violence, but also the Lady's meaning of masculine sexual desire. She presents a hyperbolic request for masculine force and incites Gawain to deny masculine action. She also takes on the masculine desire and perspective that Batt referenced and suggests that any foolishness lies not with the male perpetrator of rape, but instead with the refusing woman. This is complicated by the fact that in this scenario, Gawain is the figure who is refusing the lady's aggressive sexual advances: with one suggestion, the Lady rebukes Gawain for refusing her, aligns him with vulnerable feminine victimhood, and praises him all at once.

Gawain's ignorance of the relationships and power structures which are acting upon him does not mean that he remains completely unaware during these episodes. His response reveals that he is not a fool, and his focus on "goud wylle" implies he is referring not only to a consensual offering, but also an innocent one, with hope to the benefit of the receiver. With these words, Gawain claims his identity as separate from the land he is in, and as still governing his character and his actions: hoping to remind the Lady of his public identity which relies on systems and communities far from the private chamber they find themselves in. He also informs the Lady that he suspects that her actions are not in his best interest. Despite Gawain's signs of reticence, the Lady is still successfully interrupting the normal exchange system between aristocratic men and women. The conventional economics of sexuality wherein a man pursues a woman is threatened by a woman not only offering but shaming the man for not taking (which is his expected role): the Lady yet again plays the role of woman only to claim power over Gawain.[24] Similar to the Green Knight's use of these rules at the start of the poem, the Lady makes Gawain's knighthood force him to act in *her* best interest. Gawain receives no benefit beyond the pleasure of her company and their play in bed. This benefit is only private, however, and cannot result in public honor or chivalric prowess as the previously discussed conventional examples of feminine objects might have allowed.

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[24] Another relevant point made by Heng on this topic in "A Woman Wants" 121: "The Lady is a woman who plays a man in the demonstrable act of courtship, but she is equally a woman who plays a woman in that same process."

The third day is the day of most cunning: the men hunt fox, and the Lady tricks Gawain. The shift in the seduction episode is undercut by the hunting episodes which are split in two. The fox escapes the hunters initially, leading them astray while the poet then allows us into Gawain and the Lady's fateful exchange of love-tokens.[25] The Lady begins this interaction pleasantly, acting as if she has already won, kissing him freely, *beginning* their interaction in the way that the others have ended. Gawain will later mimic this gesture, as he begins his last exchange with Bertilak by kissing him first, instead of waiting to receive his gift as he had done for the previous day's winnings. As Jane Gilbert notices: "In kissing Bertilak, Gawain mimics the Lady, reproducing the style of her kisses to him. This scene…involves a change of gender, in which an anatomical man is re-gendered as sexually feminine."[26] Classically, Gawain finds comfort and safety in playing the woman, mimicking his model of femininity to distract Bertilak and better conceal the girdle from him. Gawain's desire for his own self-preservation now overlaps with actions of feminine sexuality, deceit, and mimicry.

Returning to the Lady's third day of seduction, Gawain is strategically caught off-guard. Even before she offers Gawain a solution to his problem, the poet tells us that her presence makes him feel better about his upcoming doom, and that she cheers his heart. The poet also explicitly warns that in this moment "Gret perile bitwene hem stod, / Nif Maré of hir knyȝt mynne" (Great peril stood between them, if Mary were not to mind her knight, 1768–69). The peril mentioned here could be referring to the possible seduction, or the acceptance of the girdle. If it is the seduction, then Gawain is minded by Mary suitably, as he does not give into sexual temptation. But the girdle seems like the more dangerous peril, as Gawain has not truly been tempted by any desire for the Lady. If this is the case, Mary does not mind her knight, and the connection between Gawain and the "correct" defining feminine figure is beginning to weaken. Although he will later take up both the image of Mary and his girdle, Gawain will no longer invoke her name. Instead, the only other two instances of Mary's reference in the poem from this point on will be by Bertilak, and the man who attempts to dissuade Gawain from going to the green chapel (1942, 2140). As they speak her name, it ironically emphasizes the way that Gawain has lost claim to or focus on the guiding influence of Mary – instead her name is

[25] Fisher, "Taken Men" 71–105.
[26] Gilbert, "Gender and Sexual Transgression" 63.

invoked as an exclamation, not for her intercession. After Gawain accepts the girdle, Mary and her image lose their power of signification over Gawain.

Immediately following the girdle's exchange, the narrative returns to the hunt to see Bertilak successful, letting forth an animalistic shout of joy and victory: "Haldez heȝe ouer his hede, halowez faste, / And þer bayen him mony braþ houndez" (Holds him [the dead fox] high over his head, shouts loudly, and there many fierce hounds bark at him, 1908–09). This emphasizes how Gawain nearly escaped the lady, just as the fox nearly escaped the hunters, but was beaten by the appeal to his love for his life, tricked into obeying the wrong master, replacing God and King with this beguiling Lady.[27] Gawain has fully participated in, and seemingly benefitted from, the Lady's alternate system of exchange and power. Batt argues that "the acceptance of a gift from the Lady…competes with the 'exchange of winnings' bargain made with her Lord"[28] in terms of Gawain's loyalty and word; his loyalty to his own life which aligns with the Lady's request wins out against Bertilak's game. This choice, aligns Gawain's self and his preservation with the desires and requests of women, setting him fully outside of the masculine role in his homosocial relationship with Bertilak.

The bartering and sexuality of the Lady's rhetorical maneuvers in getting Gawain to accept the girdle are commonplace in the fabliaux.[29] The Lady shifts the stability of gender and also class, introducing new values and rules of exchange. By relying on mercantile language[30] the Lady creates a new origin for value: gift exchanges allow individuals to bestow value on their relationships[31] but the Lady's offerings allow Gawain to negotiate value through the giving and claiming of gifts. Sheila Fisher also notes the feminine systems of exchange which do not function to develop relationships between men, but instead exist as an extension of proclaimed feminine desires – namely, Morgan and the Lady's – who "either participate in or are ultimately

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[27] One might also draw connections between the acceptance of a powerful item and a request to hide it from "the Lord" as a fairly explicit recollection of Adam's fall; a key scene for anti-feminist exegesis, which Gawain more explicitly involves himself in in his final diatribe.
[28] Batt, "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant" 134.
[29] This is pointed out by Mills, "Analysis" (76–77) in reference to the classic reading of the poem, J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.
[30] See Harwood, "Gawain and the Gift" and R. A. Shoaf, "Love's Relations: The Seduction of Gawain," in *The Poem as Green Girdle:* Commercium *in* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, University of Florida Humanities Monograph 55 (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1984), 31–55.
[31] Harwood, "Gawain and the Gift" 484.

responsible for all of the many contracts made throughout the poem. They generate the plot by functioning as the central generators of systems of exchange."[32] When confronted with the role that he has played, as a puppet to the whims of these women, Gawain will react intensely and attempt to remove himself from the system he entered, throwing the girdle from himself. Of course, this will not be enough to excise the remnants of enjoyment and identity-shifting that Gawain has undergone.

PASSIVE VIRTUE: THE GREEN KNIGHT'S CHALLENGE

When Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel, he undergoes yet another trial which capitalizes upon his decentered identity when he is asked to be passive and receive a killing blow, in other words, asked to be brave through inaction. Yeo notes that "This reversal, which associates passivity with courage and activity with fear, diminishes the affective dimensions of courage in order to highlight the object of fear:" an object which Yeo defines as death. Here, I point towards this fear as a loss of self, either through material death, or a total change of character. This shift in priority is clear by the way in which the Green Knight is able to goad Gawain into receiving his blow:

"Þou art not Gawayn," quoþ þe gome, "þat is so goud halden, Þat never arȝed[33] for no here by hylle ne be vale, And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmez! Such cowardice of þat kniȝt cowþe I never here. Nawþer fyked I ne flaȝe, freke, quen þou myntest,	"You are not Gawain," said the man, "Who is considered so good, Who never cowered for nothing by hill nor by vale, And now you flee for fear before any harm befalls you! I never knew such cowardice of that knight here. I neither flinched nor fled, sir, when you aimed the blow,	

[32] Fisher, "Taken Men" 72

[33] It is notable that the word "arȝe/d might be related to the Old Norse term of "argr" (adjective) or "ergi" (noun) which meant one who was willing to take on the feminine position (receiving or passive) in sex with another man. Though, of course, it is mainly derived from Old English "eargian" which means to lose heart or become timid. See: Preben M. Sørenson, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society,* trans. by Joan Turville-Petre, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization 1 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983).

Ne kest no kauelacion in kingez house Arthor.”	Nor cast no trivial objection in King Arthur’s house.” (2270–75)	

Just as the Lady maneuvers Gawain to identify knightly action with her orders, so also does the Green Knight ask Gawain to associate proper conduct with the Green Knight’s own bravery. With the Lady, Gawain was trapped in a facsimile of a courtly love scenario, naked and in need of gendered or classed signification. Here, he is already marked by the Green Knight and the Lady through the girdle: if he acts here flawlessly, he does so either as the perfect chivalric knight whose courage leads him to needlessly die, or as a fully transformed figure who relies on magic to allow him to overcome death. When the Green Knight mocks Gawain’s cowardice, he is really asking him to trust fully in the girdle, to become fully like the Green Knight by relying totally on alternative systems of power and personhood. Yet, Gawain shrinks back, he can neither fully embrace the magic of the girdle, nor his chivalric courage to face death and lose himself. Instead, Gawain chooses to be brave *enough* and the Green Knight fittingly allows him to be cut *enough* to mark him again, but not enough that he would be lost to either court. Instead, Gawain exists as a new emissary of the feminine othered Haut Desert and returns to King Arthur’s court bearing a new token of his adventure and himself. Yet, he cannot so easily be brought home, without symbolic work on Gawain’s part. He finds himself too deeply entrenched in the ideology and markings of Morgan and her house, and so must account for his actions in a way which will distance him from desires and actions incompatible with the court he wishes to return to.

PROBLEMATIC CONFESSIONS, ANTI-FEMINISM AND A SIN OF DESIRE

This accounting for sins might have taken place far before the events at the green chapel, when Gawain is shrived by the priest in Haut Desert, after he has already failed to honor the rules of the game and kept the girdle from his host. His virtue, his court’s reputation, and his sense of self is at that moment in great peril, but none of this is at the front of his mind; instead, he is mostly focused on meeting the great ax and the possible death that it spells out for him. To be thus prepared for death, he attends confession, and we are told that he is confessed properly and left pure and ready for judgement day (1883–84). This claim is, of course, logically problematic and the issue has been taken up by scholars many times and never, to my knowledge, has a satisfactory answer been reached. The crux of this issue is that Gawain

undergoes two confessions. A dual-confession and paradox of guilt and innocence is suitable considering the duality of the Green Knight himself, and the paradoxical dualities Gawain retains within himself; a perfect, masculine-feminine knight who fails successfully. As Ethan Campbell writes, "the first confession follows proper external form but the inner condition of Gawain's soul is not moved, whereas the second confession is more genuine and sincere but does not follow proper form or have church sanction."[34] In other words, there appears to be a disconnect between appearances and inner truths, with the initial confession aligning with Gawain's self-perception and ignorance of how he will appear to the Green Knight, and then the Green Knight's confession being primarily concerned with Gawain's own judgement and view of himself. The penance, which is missing from the initial confession and which Gawain decides for himself, does not reflect how the Arthurian court sees him publicly, nor how the Green Knight views his indiscretion, but instead how Gawain himself understands his failure. The tension between appearance and "nature" as well as reputation and reality appears both in the seduction scenes and these dual confessions. In both scenarios, Gawain's individual actions help to define and ground what is portrayed by the narrative to be "true." By providing Gawain with two incomplete confessions – either in form or substance – the narrative places the authority of judgement in Gawain and the court's hands, placing weight on the public and private spheres of the social world in the poem, excluding the church and the fantastic from providing reliable structure for right or wrong. Although Gawain is seemingly concerned with virtue, religious virtue is not what the poem is interested in by the end. Instead, Gawain's ability to remain himself – even amidst the threats of change – is what most concerns the poem. Thus, the most likely way to understand the narrator's claim that Gawain was pure and ready for judgement day might be that it expresses the unknowing or ineffective priest's opinion of the apparently virtuous knight; that for the traditional systems of virtue or control – represented by both the priest and Arthur's court – Gawain's fault and success are not recognizable together, and one must be ignored for the other.

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[34] Ethan Campbell, "The Devilish Priest of Sir Gawain" in *The Gawain-Poet and the Fourteenth-Century Anticlerical Tradition*, Research in Medieval and Early Modern Culture (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Press, 2018), 207–22 at 215.

As argued in the previous chapter, Gawain wraps the girdle around himself confidently, believing that he has successfully chosen correctly by keeping the girdle a secret according to the Lady's wishes, and stepping easily back into his martial identity. In our tried-and-true example of another "perfect" knight in both martial prowess and courtly love, Lancelot frequently skirts situations where either he or his love is truly in the wrong, but his ability to beat all others in trial by combat allows for virtue to be publicly maintained, while adulterous love continues in private.[35] Gawain's first confession might be a sign of his own ignorance of his fault, although this is hardly convincing since this would not justify a true confession, since ignorance would not excuse Gawain. Instead, it might be a nod to the paradoxical nature of the chivalric balance of virtue. Gawain might expect to, in his "resurfaced" identity as "gode Gawayn," reclaim all access to virtue and public acclaim through his martial skill at the green chapel, still misunderstanding the nature of the test he will be put to there.[36]Beyond the narrative's disconnect in regard to the first confession and instead focusing on the contradiction in Gawain's perception of his actions, Harwood argues that:

> "There is, I think, no contradiction here. The level at which Gawain knows of the girdle is also the level of his dread – of the dread that generally uses up his libido (1284–89), that troubles his sleep (1750–54), and that must be conquered when he needs to be sociable. He keeps the girdle because, of course, it speaks to this dread. Christianity does not. For him, it is dread and Christianity that are in separate compartments, not Christianity and nobility, which, as we have seen, he understands as comparable demands. The girdle testifies to fallen humanity's inability to make a gift of itself."[37]

The "dread" which Harwood points to, calls to mind the feminine fear which Bertilak and the Lady manipulated and encouraged in Gawain to tempt into changing himself. We might extrapolate from the structure that Harwood presents here, and instead consider that Gawain's feminine fear and his masculine courage are in "separate compartments" and just as similarly, his courtly love loyalties and his homosocial bonding exist as separate tasks of virtue for Gawain,

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[35] This of course occurs in the *Knight of the Cart* when Lancelot defends Guinevere's honor by defeating Meleagant in combat. See Chrétien de Troyes, *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes,* trans. by David Staines, 170–256 at 255–56.
[36] Batt, "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant" 136.
[37] Harwood, "Gawain and the Gift" 490.

who does not connect the Lady's work with Bertilak's game, nor the girdle to the Green Knight, or any of the other disjointed hints of identity and connection across genders and spaces in the court. This disconnect cannot be altered for Gawain by the priest who he confesses to, but the Green Knight's knowledge of the girdle and Gawain's actions allows him to disassemble Gawain's self-perception and bring him to a need for penitence.

This penitence is partly delivered before Gawain knows his fault, as he takes the blow from the Green Knight. Harwood's argument outlines the ways that the Knight's "tap" is exchanged for both the break of contract and the initial beheading, which allows both of these things to be "exchanged for each other" and how this balancing of debts "disturbs the basis of reciprocity itself."[38] I might argue that this reciprocity has been disturbed by all systems of exchange that came before as well; the Green Knight in particular is overly generous. He gives Gawain more than he asked for with a possible motive being to have Gawain replace or at least equate the various material gifts or symbols with the signifying armor and shield that he arrives with. He gives him the girdle through his wife, and the tap in the guise of the Green Knight, and as previously noted, asks Gawain to take up the girdle as a "pure token" of their adventure together.[39] The Green Knight then invites him back to the court, possibly to take his place as a hybrid knight, now enjoying the company of the Lady and the court without boundaries.

When the Green Knight reveals his knowledge of Gawain's girdle and its origin and tells Gawain that he is the one who sent his wife to him, Gawain throws the girdle away from himself and claims that *it* has caused him to forsake his nature (2380) and that he is now "fawty and falce" (sinful and false, 2382). Now found out, he must admit his fault, but already begins the process of externalizing the failure towards forces outside of himself. Gawain reaches for the familiar and enters himself into a history of great men tricked by women in his anti-feminist diatribe. Stephanie J. Hollis[40] articulates how Gawain first separates himself from the action by blaming the abstractions of vice for acting upon him – arguing that he presents the cause of his failure to be not his *own* fear, but the symbolic figure of cowardice which has influenced him

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[38] Harwood, "Gawain and the Gift" 491.
[39] It is interesting to note that the other object which is referred to as "pure" is the pentangle when Gawain first takes it on at line 664.
[40] Hollis "The Pentangle Knight."

towards his actions. Hollis also points out that Gawain makes sure that in the case of all the women he mentions, "the point is that they have proved the downfall of the *best* of men".[41] Gawain, by removing the blame from himself internally, and by re-centering the blame on the Lady herself (as well as Morgan, perhaps, distantly) is reconstructing his perfect and untouchable identity, which has failed these tests and yet been proved as worthy of testing in the process. He also rejects – at least publicly – any of the feminine which has been discovered within himself. The diatribe is a disavowal of the exchange system he was forced into participating in, and a disavowal of the feminine role he was forced to play not only as Bertilak's potential sexual partner, or as the Lady's proposed object of desire, but mainly as the token used to facilitate Bertilak's relationship with his wife, as well as his relationship with Morgan. In the homosocial triangle, Gawain has found himself between women, and between husband and wife, which is the ultimate perversion of his role as knight, stripping him of the signified virtue and masculinity which maintain both his private and communal identity.

Ironically, Gawain mimics the behavior of Bertilak and the Lady to extricate himself from their company. He accesses familiar anti-feminist rhetoric[42], and this use of "the commonplace marks the limits of Gawain's self-awareness."[43] Gawain, upon realizing that his situation and his own role in the systems outlined above were not what he thought they were, relies on familiar rhetoric to help expel femininity away from his sense of self, and instead places it in opposition to him. Yet even this move is given to him by the Green Knight, who marks the lady as Gawain's "enmy kene" (2406) right before the diatribe.[44] Gawain cannot, even now, act first and instead is left reacting to and receiving the prompting language which the Green Knight provides him with. He also provides Gawain with the names of his faults; when he shames him for flinching, and then tells him why he thinks he kept the girdle: "Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wonted; / Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowing nauþer, / Bot for ȝe

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[41] Hollis, "The Pentangle Knight" 269.
[42] The effort to extricate communal shame or misery onto marginalized groups was often violently realized in antisemitic pogroms and witch-hunts in a desire to place blame for plague, see R. I. Moor, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance In Western Europe, 950 – 1250* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).
[43] Batt, "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant"137.
[44] Batt, "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant" 136.

lufed your lyf – þe lasse I yow blame." (Except here you lacked[45] a little, sir, and you wanted a little; but that was for no skillful craft nor seduction neither, but instead because you loved your life –the less for which I blame you, 2366–68.) Just as earlier Gawain validates the Lady's value system by responding to her questioning of his identity, Gawain takes on the Green Knight's ideas by lamenting his "cowarddyse and couetyse" (2374) before beginning to justify his own actions and extracting the consequence of deception or falseness onto the women of Haut Desert and the girdle itself. However, Gawain does not return home empty handed: instead of abandoning that which he has condemned, Gawain takes care to return marked and still wearing the girdle.

A TRANSFORMED KNIGHT AND A LAUGHING COURT

Gawain removes himself from the court of Haut Desert but cannot remove the self-altering girdle. The reason for this is perhaps a latent desire to retain and maintain the girdle, which Gawain thought was so handsome against his red tunic, while still returning to his former place of prestige in the court. The girdle, which passed through so many hands and became absolutely fluid in meaning as it was redefined and co-opted by each new owner, represents Gawain's shame as he describes it to the court. Arthur Lindley identifies Gawain's desire for the girdle as a desire for a stable identity: "permanent guilt is at least permanent identity. Otherwise, what are you when you have stopped atoning?"[46] However, by choosing the ever-mutable girdle as his symbol of shame, Gawain maintains an impermanence of self and offers up to the court both himself and his token as a fluid symbol of honor/shame, feminine/masculine, and courtly love/martial prowess. Gawain returns to court before he fully embraced a hybrid self which enjoyed the pleasures of both masculinity and femininity in the house of Morgan. But his experiences with Bertilak and the Lady, his original green girdle and the fading mark on his neck maintain his individual self as unique enough in the court of Arthur.

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[45] By claiming that Gawain lacked something or wanted something in his action, the Green Knight begins to align Gawain's failure with the feminine. He also calls Gawain feminine by identifying him with such a lack, following the structure of such as work as: Lacan, *Ethics of Psychoanalysis,* and *Le Seminaire de Jacques Lacan.*

[46] Lindley, "'Ther He Watz Dispoyled'" 85.

This altered role is emphasized by the way the court integrates Gawain back into their circles. They welcome him without issue, and "the court refuses Gawain's melancholy prognosis, with its joy and laughter" as he returns as another marvel.[47] This is in direct opposition to the exalted role that Gawain was given in Haut Desert, where he was appointed as the father of courtly nature and manners. Instead, he is lightly mocked as an unreliable or harsh source of judgement. This laughter also brands Gawain's return as both triumphant and humorous, similar to the Green Knight's ironically amusing and terrifying entrance at the start. Gawain's great individual change is noted particularly by the incorporation of the girdle as a symbol of honor by the entire court. They take it on as a community, in a similar way that they might incorporate a token of the monstrous into a hall or physical building. The girdle becomes a token *of* Gawain, and his ability to survive either *by* or *despite* overstepping his bounds as a man and a knight. Gawain's new individual status as closer to the edge of chivalric masculinity is also recognized by a possible reading which includes men and women as members of the court who choose to wear the girdle. The text I have used notes " lords and ledes" (lords and men, 2515) which is an emendation by J.A Burrow[48] from "lords and ladis" as a recognition of the masculine language of brotherhood that comes in the next line.[49] However, if we maintain the original intermixing of men and women, Yeo argues "The unification of the lords and ladies within this affective text therefore gives women a function not only within the narrative, but also within the political body…"[50]This *function* and use of women is different than the conventional use of women and feminine figures as objects to define the masculine. Instead, there is a new use that Gawain discovers for the feminine within himself, the desires he encountered and the way he survived his great trial may be publicly claimed by him as shameful, but they are also labeled as a part of Gawain – his reputation, and his sense of private self –forever.

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[47] Heng, "Feminine Knots" 508.
[48] J.A Burrow, "Two Notes on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Notes and Queries* 19 (1972): 43–45.
[49] Paul Battles also argues against this decision in Paul Battles, "Amended Texts, Emended Ladies: Female Agency and the Textual Editing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," The Chaucer Review* 44 (2010): 323–43.
[50] Yeo, "Gendering Fear" 259.

CONCLUSION: KEEPING THE GIRDLE

Cross dressing allows access to an individuality that is denied to properly encoded persons. In the examples discussed in the introduction, medieval cross dressing allowed women access to agency and protection, and men access to sexual encounters. Medieval cross dressing has an obvious imbalance of advantage: although women might benefit easily by moving into the public persona of the masculine, there are very few cases in which the feminine might appear useful to a masculine figure. Yet, Gawain does indulge in cross-behavior in his interactions with the Lady and Bertilak and cements this behavior through his wearing of the feminine girdle, and his claiming of it for his own. Although the nick he receives and his claim that the girdle will be a sign of shame for him might lead an audience to believe that his encounters and dalliances into the feminine were purely negative, Gawain chooses to keep the girdle. When he returns, the court recognizes the girdle as a new token of Gawain and wears it in honor of him. Gawain, who initially left the court with the desire to protect its reputation, returns home having transformed himself into a figure that appears to offer great honor in the form of a silk token. Through his adventure *and* through the token he offers, Gawain succeeds in increasing the reputation of the court. He utilizes both masculine action and feminine objecthood to be of service to his community, even as he becomes more of an individual through his decisions. Gawain's choice reveals the necessity of the feminine, and the possible ramifications of embracing it further into the community of the masculine.

Clothing exists as both a creative and stabilizing object of communal and individual identity, namely gender and class. Gawain's armor and shield define his public body and are assumed to align with his private self as well. Yet the need the narrator feels to describe the armor in great detail, including the pattern of enclosure or fastening of his dress reveals the vulnerability of the identity it represents: chivalric masculinity *requires* multiple symbols and systems of maintenance to stabilize and naturalize it. Gawain's armor becomes a sign of the mutability of medieval gender, and the focus of his private and public self.

The narrative weight of this armor is emphasized as Gawain is stripped of it and left defenseless and ultimately naked in the court of Haut Desert. In bed, he is tempted by the Lady and while he is naked and without access to grounding sartorial objects of identification, his identity is in flux. When the Lady questions his identity, she also encourages him to play the passive role of the

refusing woman in their conversations. Every night, Gawain then mimics the Lady's actions and kisses her husband for her, becoming the object of ambiguous desire between a man and his wife. The games he participates in place Gawain in a position of reception. He must accept Bertilak's offerings and offer Bertilak only what his host already owns. In his interactions with the Lady, he finds himself the recipient of many a kiss, and possibly begins to become comfortable with the concept of being a passive partner in moments of intimacy.

At the end of the poem, in light of Morgan's power over the court and the key figures within it, the poem presents Bertilak and the Lady as free individuals. Although they both exist through the power or intention of another, it seems that this loyalty does not impede their own joy or pursuit of illicit consequences at all. Bertilak seems completely satisfied with his place in Morgan's court, and his trust that Gawain and his wife might easily become friends implies a general emphasis on pleasure and game in the court, even when trials are not ongoing. The Green Knight's loyalty to a woman, and his choices of clothing mark him with the ability to step over the boundaries of the masculine community, membership of which is one of Gawain's chief concerns. When the Green Knight claims the girdle as his own in the final encounter, this does not make the item a safely masculine piece of clothing, but instead marks it as even more complex and possibly deviant. Although Gawain, by wearing the girdle so obviously on the outside of his armor, seemed to believe he had fully and successfully claimed it as his own, when he learns it is both the Lady's and Bertilak's he is brough to an understanding of what kind of system of exchange he allowed himself to enter.

Since the girdle truly belongs to Bertilak, and the Lady's seduction attempts were a ruse, Gawain cannot consider the girdle a love token as he once did. Bertilak's claiming of it also brings the girdle and its meaning out into the public, creating for Gawain a persona which intermixes Gawain's sense of private action and pleasure with public reputation and consequence. When confronted with the possibility that his private self has changed and his public self might be forced to change as well, Gawain decides to externalize any fault or discrepancy in his character to women in general and marks the girdle as a shameful item in his sense of private and public self.

Yet, for a brief moment, the girdle offered Gawain the type of freedom that it seems the Green Knight enjoyed at the start of the poem. The type of freedom which allowed him to exist as part of multiple identities, including access to the chivalric community and its customs, as

well as the ability to survive a killing blow. Dressed in the girdle and yet to be discovered, Gawain begins to alter his behavior. He deceives his host, having an inaccurate lack of fear of being found out. He also attends confession, and we are told is successfully confessed and left pure without sin, despite the reality of his actions. Indulging in cross dressing and cross behavior momentarily grants Gawain a truly private sense of self, separate from the systems of religious and secular checks and balances that otherwise control and maintain morality. The girdle seemingly offers Gawain an alternate path, one where he might fully embrace a hybrid identity that gives him the answer to surviving the destructive fate set before him. The girdle might allow him to take a killing blow and still live, just as the Green Knight did. Although the girdle's presence does result in Gawain receiving a blow and surviving, we are told that if he had not cheated, he wouldn't have received any injury at all. Gawain suffers from the same short-sightedness that caused him to cheat in the first place: he doesn't fully understand the rules of the game. The Green Knight reveals that if Gawain had been perfectly passive, giving up the girdle to his host and laying down to take a blow without desire to save himself, he would have been left uninjured and unmarked. But of course, the Green Knight claims that Gawain's love for himself is excusable, and this intention is what saves his neck from a deeper gash.

So why would Gawain feel any attachment to the girdle? Why does he throw it away only to take it back up and claim it as a permanent part of his sartorial body? If he refuses to understand what the Green Knight explains to him, and refuses to see the new rules, he might view the girdle as the cause of his salvation, easily ignoring the Green Knight's explanation (as he ignores many of the other things he says). However, Gawain's careful scapegoating of femininity and refusal to stay at Haut Desert reveal instead his new understanding of what has happened to him and the loss of virtue that his desires for the girdle and its alternate path lead him to. Gawain realizes that, because he did not consider the possibility that he would be left unharmed, that he found the mark on his neck and the shame he felt desirable. Shame and injury are, in fact, survivable. The green girdle becomes his symbol of shame and is necessary for Gawain to reclaim control over his own actions. He does not want to give up the alternative options and sense of self that the girdle initially gave him a glimpse of, even after he suffered the consequences of his deception. By labeling it as a shameful object, Gawain is able to retain it and return to his court, without having to deal with becoming too far removed from his community and its values.

Gawain thus returns to his court as an othered figure. His adventure in the court of Haut Desert brings the threat of femininity and gender fluidity to the very core of knighthood by "corrupting" the perfect knight. allowing him to elevate himself as *the* imperfect knight, forever defined by what he calls his shame. Gawain's desire for the feminine, with an absence of sexuality, can be read as a desire to *be* feminine and to allow himself to escape the no-win scenario he finds himself within. When he returns to the court, he attempts to best explain this desire and weakness as something shameful and outside of the court's values. But the court's acceptance of Gawain and the girdle reveals a different perspective on the matter. The court treats Gawain as a marvel and takes on the girdle as a token of him. He is marked by both the monstrous and the feminine and so the entire community works to distribute and neutralize any symbolic threat he might pose. As both ladies and lords take up the girdle, it becomes a symbol of shifting gender and functionality: a symbol of Gawain's shame and his greatest honor, a desire for an alternative outside of a binary – not male/female, living/dead nor pure/sinful but marked as somewhere in between. Gender fluidity, and an understanding of the performance requirements of gender identities allows certain individuals like Gawain to easily step over and back certain lines of propriety and virtue, for their own survival and for the survival of their community.

POSSIBILITY FOR FUTURE STUDIES

My hope for this work as it moves forward is that it might provide some areas of interest that could be further explored, either for this text, or for other relevant or related works. Gawain's treacherous interactions with the Other and the feminine are not unique to him. The various mentions of Lancelot in particular reveal how acts of cross-dressing which are less concerned with true disguise might still offer masculine and feminine individuals a more expanded access to certain behaviors, personalities, or social benefits than previously explored. I think that investigating instances of masculine figures who take on the feminine and how tokens of femininity are used and desired beyond sexual connotations might be made easier through the work done to explore feminine objects and feminine desire in this poem.

I also believe that the distinctions between the public and the private self might be useful in future studies of this poem, and other chivalric romances, for readings that would investigate identity and community. Although a sense of the private self is difficult to find in theoretical or

philosophical discussions, in practical terms, we might consider medieval romantic characters as both individuals and members of a community in order to best analyze their intentions and the consequences of their representations.

Finally, additional work needs to be done in examining gender fluidity and non-binary or trans identities in historical and culturally valued works like this poem. Noting when hybrid identities flourish or when the stresses of the masculine (an identity often defined by its power over the feminine) begin to break down the lines between the two identities is key to understanding how cultural moments of anxiety or great change might result in small instances of personal freedom of expression and experience.

POLITICAL POWER OF QUEER READINGS: FINAL THOUGHTS

I was first drawn to this poem because of its puzzles: the poem itself is full of double-blinds and compelling threats to established orders even as it maintained a strict pattern of numbers and parallel structure. It invoked so many of my interests that I couldn't help myself but return to it time and time again. Growing up as a queer cradle-Catholic uniquely prepares one to enjoy the religious and secular mixtures of anxiety and tension in this piece: Gawain's dilemma, his attempting to remain perfect and virtuous while also valuing himself and his own life was a uniquely modern narrative to me. A fear of losing oneself, of desiring your own life *too* much is a complex and tragic balancing act that many queer individuals who have been closeted or felt unsafe to be fully "out" deal with daily. One often asks oneself: "How much do I value myself, to give up my community?" or "How much of my self am I willing to lose to retain my community or family?" Gawain's dilemma is modern, relatable, and tragic.

The focus on clothing in this thesis was inspired of course by the poem itself, with its wonderful and detailed descriptions of what Gawain and others are wearing but was also inspired by the queer possibilities that clothing has represented for modern and medieval persons. By noting how unstable identities can be, and how fluid characters are even in these highly structured texts of hierarchy and convention, we can engage in an examination of the imagined human in comparison to the lived human. In fiction and poetry, we might represent the possibilities of the self, and as modern readers, understanding these heroic figures as possible reflections of humanity can help us understand and expand our view of ourselves and those around us.

This' poem's women and Gawain indulge a modern reader in what I might call resonant representation. Representation, which is often discussed in modern media, prioritizes the visibility of "diverse" identities, and is often used to only represent a visual veneer of imagined realities of equity. The material and physical reality of equity is often ignored or unmatched: for example, even if a trans character is featured in a popular television show or film, they are too often portrayed by cisgender actors/actresses. This disparity between a fictionally presented equity and a matching reality results in incomplete or damaging representations that are ultimately stories still controlled by those groups in power. Of course, representative readings in medieval works cannot correspond to the hiring and financially supporting of marginalized actors or creators. Yet, representation in historical or culturally valued work which resonates with modern readers as a reflection of themselves has a different kind of power.

When we teach this poem to undergraduates, and when we teach medieval literature in general, the value of our work is in allowing and granting students *access* to these texts. By working through the language with them, through applying modern lenses of relatability and connection, students understand that being human is a condition that was being struggled with far before they were ever worried about exam week and building relationships with their peers. The kind of personal and communal struggle which Gawain endeavors through will speak to younger generations as long as we find the perspectives and problems which will resonate with them the most. I believe that queer readings not only allow queer students to feel a sense of community and history as they are represented in their coursework by these kinds of discussions, but also allows cisgender or heterosexual students a chance to engage in thinking about their own experiences with gender, joy, and connection outside of normalized or silent structures of power.

As I write this, the legislative and judicial rulings in my country are doing violent work. There are now either implemented or proposed laws which prohibit the discussion of sexuality and gender in schools in over 20 states.[1] The mere mention of queerness and any discussion of classical representations of queer identity and joy are now being labelled as dangerous material to feature in schools. Roe v. Wade has been overturned by the Supreme Court; people with

[1] Kate Sosin, "In Some States, Versions of 'Don't Say Gay' Bills Have Been Around for Awhile," Public Broadcasting Service, April 21, 2022. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/in-some-states-versions-of-dont-say-gay-bills-have-been-around-for-awhile.

uteruses are being denied the right to their own bodies and their lives. The mention of queer individuals, community, or history is becoming considered dangerous to children and unlawful. Bodies which can become pregnant have been deemed less human than bodies which can impregnate. Readings about the fragmentation of the feminine or sexually other, and queer identity are readings which push back against legislation and cultural sentiment that seeks to demonize and make monstrous what is considered Other in our country today. Reading for queer identity and possibility establishes a strong precedent and basis for queer history, and allows modern readers access to modes of thought, living, or experimentation outside of what modern media and legislation hopes to package or contain.

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