

**“La Belle Dame Sans Merci?”¹:
Gawain’s Knightly Identity and the Role of Women in
*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

「美女無情?」:《高文與綠騎士》中高文爵士的騎士身份及女性角色探析

Cecilia H. C. Liu 劉雪珍

English Department, Fu Jen University

關鍵字：傳奇(romance)，騎士精神(chivalry)，騎士身份(knightly identity)，性別政治(politics of gender)，顛覆性角色(subversive roles)

It is easy to read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a romantic celebration of chivalry, but this romance contains a more wide-ranging, more serious criticism of chivalry than has heretofore been noticed. Given the mistrust of women by the church in the Fourteenth Century, the placement of the women in the romance becomes a critical medium for educating women the traditional hierarchies, rules and virtues. Interestingly, the women appear as subversive roles to wield great power. In the Temptation scenes, Lady Bercilak is operating unassisted against Gawain as the hunter and aggressor. Thus his knightly identity is threatened in the bedroom scenes of seduction, in which the Lady appropriates the knight’s position as active courtly lover; and that feminization repeated in Gawain’s acting like the woman who kissed him, precipitates a textual vision of violent dismemberment. Morgan is the instigator of the plot which begins the story. However, the poet never intends to present a world where women are powerful; rather, these women constitute a metaphor for other anti-social forces and dangers outside the control of feudalism and chivalry. At the end of the romance, the power the women hold is re-appropriated by the men in order to support the male social order.

表面上，《高文與綠騎士》乃是一部歌頌騎士精神及考驗騎士勇氣和德性之中古英文傳奇。十四世紀女性地位普遍低賤的社會中，無可避免地反映著父權中心思想以及仇視女性傾向的心態。但是此中古傳奇蘊涵深意，貫穿全詩的女性角色舉足輕重。城堡夫人三度色誘高文騎士，表現積極一如男人，又如獵人，高文騎士反而被動，一如女人，雖三度靠著他的機智談吐通過桃色考驗，其騎士身份備受質疑。面對性命攸關之時，高文卻破壞諾言，損及騎士情操。之後綠騎士道出摩根才是整個試煉的幕後策畫者，存心考驗亞瑟王宮廷中騎士規範及高文的騎士精神。詩人在詩末讓男性重拾權柄，再次重建崇高理想及社會秩序。

“La Belle Dame Sans Merci?”¹:

Gawain’s Knightly Identity and the Role of Women in

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

「美女無情?」:《高文與綠騎士》中高文爵士的騎士身份及女性角色探析

Cecilia H. C. Liu 劉雪珍副教授

English Department, Fu Jen University

It is easy to read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK hereafter) as a romantic celebration of chivalry, but Ruth Hamilton believes that "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains a more wide-ranging, more serious criticism of chivalry than has heretofore been noticed" (113). The outstanding Arthurian romance in English is usually seen as built upon the physical and moral ordeal undergone by Sir Gawain, a knight of rare courage and purity. The hero emerges from his chivalrous “Pilgrim’s Progress” with one minor blemish upon an otherwise spotless character. Gawain has two principal adventures, the so-called Beheading Game and the Temptation to Adultery. Most examinations of the politics of gender in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have resulted in interpreting this complex romance from the “masculinist” paradigms. Even some feminist readers are quite liable to re-inscribe the very categorical imperatives they are interrogating. When, for instance, Sheila Fisher argues that the poet represents the plots, games, and contrasts initiated or presided over by Morgan and Lady Bercilak as threats to Camelot’s “dominant ideologies of feudalism and Christian chivalry” (“Taken Men” 72), she takes it for granted that the “dominant ideologies” informing the artist’s eventual eraser (or redefinition in “masculine” terms) of all signs of female power are informed by internally coherent (gendered) system of value (Fisher, “Leaving Morgan Aside” 130-31). In a more recent study of the critical assumptions that reproduce the romance as a gendered narrative, “self-evidently” centered upon Gawain’s experience, Geraldine Heng shows a similar reluctance to recognize the multiple and contradictory constructions of masculinity to be found within this strikingly heteroglot work (500-502). Although both critics offer suggestive reappraisals of SGGK’s narrative dynamics, they also confer a monolithic stability upon the master narrative they claim to demystify. It is my contention that the culturally privileged narrative that appears to marginalize the actions and desires of Morgan and Lady Bercilak does not so much ratify an ideal of “chivalric manhood” as represent its continuous and ultimately equivocal renegotiation.² In this paper I will argue that the poet never intends to present a world where women are powerful; rather, these women constitute a metaphor for other anti-social forces and dangers outside the control of feudalism and chivalry. At the end of the romance, the power the women hold is re-appropriated by the men in

order to support the male social order.

When the Green Knight appears at King Arthur's New Year's feast, the narrator comments:

Half a giant on earth I hold him to be,
But believe him no less than the largest of men,
And that the seemliest in his stature to see, as he rides,
For in back and in breast though his body was grim,
His waist in its width was worthily small,
And formed with every feature in fair accord
was he. (140-46)³

The Gawain-poet's initial construction of manhood is emphatically essentialist. To support his assertion that the Green Knight is as much man as "giant" (140-41), he describes the stranger's well-proportioned male body, with its broad shoulders, slim waist, and flat stomach (142-46). As the tester of Gawain's masculinities, the Green Knight must prove that he is more of a man than Gawain, not just his equal. The Green Knight invokes similarly essentialist, corporeal criteria when he dismisses Arthur's knights as "beardless children" (280), and invites them to prove their manhood by proving their physical recklessness: his opponent in the Beheading Game must be both "bold in his blood" and "his brain so wild" (286). King Arthur, whom the poet has represented from the start as a boyish restless and "brain so wild" ruler (87-89), accedes to the Green Knight's definition of masculine worth as soon as he takes up the challenger's ax. But when Gawain asks to replace Arthur as upholder of Camelot's honor, he articulates a different ideal of Arthurian manhood. If we initially see Arthur as a hyperactive and "a little boyish" (86) reveler who quickly forgets what is due to his own position in grabbing the Green Knight's weapon, Gawain enters the narrative by way of supremely controlled and tactful speech act (343-61), in the course of which he simultaneously defends the behavior of the Round Table, defers to the judgment of his lord and the whole company, and reduces the challenge to a trifling affair, which the weakest of them all may take upon himself (354).

One reader of the poem has claimed that "Gawain's speech before the court (341-61) often strikes modern students, and some critics, as overly elegant, near paralyzed by etiquette, if not absolutely sissified" (Plummer 201). His statement genders verbal dexterity, suggesting that to be gracefully articulate is to be less than a man. Gawain's speech act not only reasserts the "valor," "victories," and "vaunting words" (312) of his peers but, even more significantly, begins to redefine the testing of Camelot's manhood by way of a paradigm shift that gradually relocates his actions within a quite different value system. By the time that hero and challenger have formally settled their contract concerning the terms of the Beheading Game, a quasi-epic testing of brute courage privileging deeds over words is transformed by the *speech act* of both Gawain and the Green Knight into a romance trial of Gawain's

pledged word, his “troth.”

As Arthur’s substitute and Camelot’s representative in the business of troth-keeping, Gawain has put his body on the line, even as he insists upon that body’s irrelevance to his endeavor: “I am the weakest . . . wit feeblest” (354). He does declare that the only bodily power he possesses derives from his kinship with Arthur—“My body, but for your blood, is barren of worth” (357)—but the unfolding romance that contains Gawain does not choose to emphasize the privileged blood tie between uncle and sister’s son (which in some Germanic cultures would make Gawain—already his uncle’s body double in the Beheading Game—Arthur’s heir). Indeed, the narrative presentation of Gawain in the romance’s first two parts encourages us to assume that to represent Camelot’s manhood properly is to become disembodied. As A.C. Spearing points out that we never get any physical description of Gawain to compare with that of the Green Knight (177-78): the poem is full of carefully delineated bodies. The Green Knight is meticulously anatomized on his first appearance, and when he reappears in his human form as Sir Bercilak he is a vivid physical presence, with his high color, ample dimensions, sturdy legs, and beaver-hued beard (844-47). The two ladies at Bercilak castle are also presented in emphatically fleshly terms, as the beautiful body of the hostess is compared with the grotesque ugliness of Morgan. Supernatural champions, alien aristocrats, and alien women are embodied and dissected by the poem as thoroughly as the animals hunted and ritually broken apart in the third part, but real men—that is, representative Arthurian heroes—don’t have bodies, or at least not while their power to articulate themselves on their own terms remains unchallenged.

Part II’s lengthy account of Gawain’s arming for his journey to the Green Chapel (570-666) hardly fleshes him out for us: in the course of nearly a hundred lines he disappears into (or becomes the disembodied product of) his elaborate accoutrements and knightly insignia. We get all sorts of signs for Gawain’s “perfect public self” (Fisher, “taken Men” 88)—the most prominent being the pentangle on his shield, the significance of which is explored at length (623-65). Much of the dramatic tension in the remainder of the poem will derive from the widening gap between the symbolic logic that insists upon the pentangle’s absolute and stable betokening of Gawain’s “troth” and the narrative’s subsequent revelation of the gap between the imperfections of the fallible human being and the seamless moral geometry of the pure pentangle’s endless knot of interdependent virtues. Since the Pentangular Knight is constructed only to be undone, it might be worth asking *who* creates this impossible abstraction of Gawain? Who produces the exfoliating gloss of the pentangle and links it to a Gawain who is, “to his word most true” (638), “devoid of all villainy, with virtues adorned” (634), “as gold unalloyed” (633). Indeed, the maker of the poem knows that Gawain

will only prove to be comparatively virtuous—better than other knights, according to the final judgment of the Green Knight, in the same way as a pearl is better than white peas (2364-65), but not “as gold unalloyed,” not perfect.⁴ So whose discourse is the poet presenting here?⁵

SGGK is a poem heavily laden with the burden of identity: Gawain’s symbol on his shield is the pentangle. With its interlocking lines and perfectly congruent angles delineating the endless unity of Gawain’s physical, moral, and spiritual person, the pentangle is the poem’s major and most insistent attempt to represent a unified identity, inside and out. This is a unity of properly masculine chivalric acts, properly directed desire (both earthly and spiritual), and proper body (the strength). Yet that unified essence, that identity, is later threatened in the bedroom scenes of seduction, in which the Lady appropriates the knight’s position as active courtly lover; and that feminization repeated in Gawain’s acting like the woman who kissed him, precipitates a textual vision of violent dismemberment.

At this point, it is my contention that Camelot itself is “speaking Gawain” in these stanzas, conferring upon him and, by extension, upon community he represents, an exemplary character and an exemplary history. The exegeses of Gawain’s “pentangular virtues,” for instance, suggest that they have been established over a period of time: he “nor found ever to fail in his five fingers,” his “pure mind and manners, that none might impeach” (641, 653). This information is all the more remarkable because Gawain has previously presented himself as a mere novice, even among a group of people whom the poet goes out of his way to inform us are in their “first age” (54). Furthermore, each piece of armor he has donned before the arrival of his shield seems to be pristine, shining, unmarked by battle. These discrepancies within the “versions of Gawain” offered by the poem make the last lines of the first stanza discussing the pentangle particularly interesting. We are told that

On shield and coat in view
He bore that emblem bright
As to his word most true
And in speech most courteous knight. (636-39)

The pentangle is new and bright not because Camelot is *inventing* Gawain-the-pentangular-knight even as his ritual arming takes place. The young knight’s verbal performance before the court and his pledging of his “troth” to the Green Knight has certainly confirmed him as the holder of his insignia even before he has fulfilled the terms of the challenge. The pentangle commentary also completes the process of “disembodiment” begun by Gawain himself. If Gawain’s chivalric intervention had displaced Arthur’s eagerness to body forth the Round Table’s “vaunting words” and “valor” (312), this new “signifying discourse” threatens to render Gawain even more

incorporeal. The pentangle commentary re-presents the hero in terms of a transcendental ideal that plays down his material body and its material connection with other bodies. Gawain's previous insistence that his strength derived from the blood he shared with Arthur is now contradicted by the information that "all his force was founded on the five joys /That the high Queen of heaven had in her child" (646-47) and that his boldness never failed when he gazed upon the image of Mary painted on the inside of his shield (650).

If we look now at the unique archetype of the Virgin Mary and her special relationship to Gawain, we see how the poet has structured the bedroom scene as the conflicting demands of spiritual and courtly love. Mary is unique among women in Christianity. Lili Arkin further indicates, "she is the model of female behavior representing humility and obedience to God in her role as the Mother of God. She is a virgin, untainted by sexuality, which is considered the root of all evil in the early Christian church" (online). As Marina Warner states in *Alone of All Her Sex*, the cult of Mary is inextricably interwoven with Christian ideas about the dangers of the flesh and their special connection with women. She is a life giver without sin, the only woman to have both motherhood and chastity. This seems to sum up the positioning of Mary on one side representing spiritual love, chastity, obedience and life and Lady Bercilak on the other as the archetype of both courtly love and biblical temptress with associations of lust, disobedience and death. Describing this concept so fundamental to Christianity, Marina Warner says "To this day it is a specially graceful analogue... a great vault thrown over the history of western attitudes to women, the whole mighty span rising on Eve the temptress on one side, and Mary the paragon on the other" (60).

That Gawain is Mary's Knight is made clear as he is robed for battle. She is represented as one of the five points of the pentangle, through the five joys of Mary, and her image is etched on the back of his shield. It is important to note that he derives his prowess and courage from his special relationship with Mary. As long as Gawain is facing the dangers which grow out of his bargain with the Green Knight, which does not test his contradicting loyalties in love, his spiritual faith is clear and unshaken and his prowess and courage hold. On his journey to look for the Green Knight he is beset by a number of hardships and is finally at the point of despair. As he lies freezing in the forest he prays to Mary find him shelter and a place to say Mass on Christmas eve. She answers his prayers and leads him to Bercilak's castle.

Upon entering the elegant stronghold, Gawain is almost immediately stripped of his armor and his insignia, and his face turns "fair and fresh as the flowers of spring" (866). From the moment he steps into the castle, Gawain's knightly identity is challenged: he *acts like* a woman. Nevertheless, as a guest in Bercilak's castle,

Hautdesert, Gawain-as- representative-of-Arthurian-manhood continues to be a voice rather than a body: the northern courtiers are primarily interested in his reputation as a wielder of the “impeccable speech” (917). In the bedroom Gawain is the hunted, the object of a woman’s gaze. The lady slips into his bedchamber in the morning while he sleeps, “deftly and still” (1188) draws the door behind her, and waits for him to stir:

...she stepped stealthily, and stole to his bed,
 Cast aside the curtain and came within,
 And set herself softly on the bedside there,
 And lingered at her leisure, to look on his waking. (1191-94)

Her long look fixes him just as earlier she has made him the object of her gaze on his first night at the castle (934, 941). Now keeping him unclothed and horizontal in his bed, she makes him her “prisoner” as he puts it (1219).

Herself an emphatically physical presence—“her body and her bearing were beyond praise” (943)—she traps him naked in his bed on her first morning visit and ambiguously announces that he is welcome to her body (1237). As she bandies words with him, her verbal assaults are aimed from the first at remaking his identity (and re-defining his “manhood”) in terms of erotic action. The reversal of courtly roles here couldn’t be clearer: her gaze fixes him, she names him, she offers herself as his servant, whereas just the night before, greeting the lady and her older companion (Morgan) for the first time, he offered himself as their “servant” (976).

It is no surprise that the conversation is punctuated with signs of identity confusion, mistakes, failure. When the Lady first slips into his chamber, Gawain pretends to sleep, and internally schemes to find out what she’s up to. He may seem self-possessed and wily then, and in the next moment cunningly picks up her talk of truce and bondage by calling himself her prisoner (1210-20); but he might seem rather less solid when he doesn’t recognize himself as the knight she is addressing, the knight known to all: “I am not he of whom you have heard” (1242; cf. 1243-44), “the praise you report pertains not to me” (1266). This is courtly politesse, of course, and it goes on: he tries to counter her construction of himself as her master when he offers himself as her servant (1278). And she flirtatiously interjects that since he hasn’t requested a kiss from her he can’t be Gawain at all: “But our guest is not Gawain . . .” (1293), “So good a knight as Gawain is given out to be, . . . Had he lain so long at a lady’s side,/ Would have claimed a kiss, by his courtesy. . .” (1297-1300).

By doubting his identity, the Lady explains that the real Gawain would have wished to salute her with his lips as well as with his fine speeches (1293-1301). The Lady re-articulates the chivalric ideal in emphatically secular terms, suggesting that knights are “noblest esteemed/ For loyal faith in love, in life as in story” (1512-13). Gallant words should be matched with deeds, courtesy enacted in kisses, “love talks”

should be an invitation to other kinds of intercourse. If he is “really Gawain”—really the exemplary representative of the Round Table, the knight who is “the noblest knight known in [his] time” (1521)—he must be willing to re-constitute himself as a desiring male whose flesh responds to her femaleness. But courtly games—literal and figurative fencing—such as this one, with its role reversals, are in fact a serious business for Gawain, whose knightly identity is understood to be so seamless a unity of internal nature and external act, of moral, physical, and spiritual: Gawain, responding to the Lady’s challenge to his identity *as* Gawain, indeed allows her a kiss, as if he is attempting to re-confirm his status *as* Gawain, the one who kisses (1302-6). Earlier we were told that Gawain bore the pentangle—one of whose five knots also re-presents him as Mary’s knight and another of which insists that his “virtues” (634), his bodily purity, is never crooked—because he is “courteous knight” (639): the knight of the noblest speech. However, his superlative pentangular virtues are open to interpretation: they may encode other values than those of Christian chivalry. From the Lady’s point of view, Gawain would behave like the “courteous knight” in employing his perfect speech—and perhaps some other talents—to teach her “the craft of true love” (1527); in so doing, he would cease to be the knight whose “pure mind and manners, that none might impeach” (653). The lady’s insistence that Gawain should “body forth” his courtesy draws our attention to its simultaneous over- and under-determination as an abstract of Gawain’s value. The “pure pentangle” is finally unable to impose clear boundaries between secular social graces and more elevated virtues that share the same signifiers.⁶

On the following day the solidity of Gawain’s identity is again denied because of what he hasn’t done—claim a kiss: the bedroom conversation opens with a conditional that might sound downright threatening in this context: “Sir, if you be Gawain . . .” (1481). Through the course of the poem Gawain is told, when he is not acting like the reputed Gawain, that he is not, after all, Gawain (see also 2270). When his active role is usurped by the Lady here, when he is not *doing*, he has no proper, courtly, masculine identity.

However, Gawain refuses to accede to his hostess’s equation of the “valor” with the “loyal faith in love.” So on the third day of his testing, he rejects both her ring and her girdle when they are offered as love gifts that might signify his surrender to carnal desire. But when he accepts the lady’s redefinition of the girdle as a life-preserving talisman, and, in concealing it from his host, contravenes the terms of the Exchange of Winnings game, he nonetheless ends up “re-embodied.” Having acknowledged the vulnerability of his flesh and privileged his hunger to live over his pledged word, Gawain is no longer “to his word most true” (638), and it is thus not surprising that the pentangle is never mentioned by name again in the narrative, and

instead there is a vision of complete crisis when Gawain's seamless knightly identity is put at risk by the Lady's acts. Gawain's indoor seduction is linked to Bercilak's outdoor hunt by juxtaposition, as those two tightly interlaced sets of scenes are bound together with conjunctions (see 1178-79, 1319, 1560-61, 1730-31, 1893-94). The feminizing role reversal inside the bedchamber is mirrored on the first day by Bercilak's choice of prey: Gawain and female deer—barren hinds and does—are hunted in narrative tandem. The animal whose slaughter is described is the mirror image of Gawain: finally killed, her throat cut, the limbs cut off, the doe is eviscerated, and her insides are unlaced (1334). In a passage whose length has always been a puzzle—we know the gentry must have loved this detail, but it does seem excessive in this carefully structured romance, and such detail is repeated in the narration of the following two hunts (of male animals)—the animal body is split to pieces. Dinshaw suggests that

this unlacing of the body is the poem's visual representation of Gawain's knightly identity's failing. When such identity fails, the body perceptually disaggregates, because it's that identity matrix, that interlocking knot of English Christian chivalric characteristics and behaviors here, that ideally and ever tenuously accords unity to this knightly body in the first place. The chivalric behavior that Gawain performs is so fundamental that without its guarantee of unity he is subject to—or, better, subject of—corporeal disaggregation. (134)

The account of his re-arming before his departure for the Green Chapel makes no mention of the pentangle. We are told instead that he did not leave behind the lady's gift:

Gawain, for his own good, forgot not that:
When the bright sword was belted and bound on his haunches,
Then twice with that **token** he twined him about.
Sweetly did he swathe him in that swatch of silk,
That girdle of green so goodly to see . . . (2031-35, bold added)

The last phrase echoes ironically—in the first arming sequence the pentangle shield had also “matched him well” (622). Geraldine Heng argues that whereas the pentangle is “an abstract, bodiless sign, the girdle is a sign that is also a fully material object, one that carries . . . the impress of the body itself” (505). It marks the knight with the lady's embrace, especially as the poet labels it a love “token” (2033). Here Gawain's body is not only made visible, but also feminized. His disavowal of the Virgin Mary is shown when he trades one symbol for another, the pentangle for the girdle. He gives up the symbol associated with the Virgin Mary and instead embraces the girdle which is associated with the Lady. Hamilton believes that the poet constructed the pentangle

as a metaphor for the confusion of chivalry and religion since "all three aspects—Gawain, religion and chivalry—are equivalent, all intertwined and interdependent, none more important than the other. Gawain has lost his sense of proportion, his perception of the proper hierarchy of values" (114).

The hero's embodiment is reemphasized in the poet's description of the blow that cleaves his naked flesh at the Green Chapel; at the very moment of his chastisement for the sin of privileging his corporeal existence above his "troth," Gawain is most visibly a *mere* body: "The end of the hooked edge entered the flesh,/ And a little blood lightly leapt to the earth" (2313-14). If Gawain's preliminary embodiment, at the hands of the lady, makes his body fleetingly female, his second one, at the hands of the Green Knight, makes him briefly at one with the hunted animals and the alien male. Gawain's adventures oblige him to recognize that he is not the superior and singular being he had thought himself to be (Spearing 230), and in these passages the diction of the romance quietly insists that he is just like everybody (and every body) else, even though his very identity as representative Arthurian man had seemed to depend on his separation from the condition of mere women, animals, and male exotics.

Gawain's self-condemnation in the wake of his token punishment is revealing; he says to the Green Knight:

Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life,
And coveting came after, contrary both,
To largesse and loyalty belonging to knights. (2379-81)

Fear of the axe blow led him to value his body's survival above his "value"; he has betrayed both the "troth" he pledged to his host in the Exchange of Winnings agreement and his faith in the power of God and the Virgin to preserve him against evil. Gawain perceives that he has therefore forsaken his "kind"—both his true nature and his kinship with the brotherhood of all virtuous knights. His sympathetic adversary has already suggested that to be only human, to love one's life a little too much, is not incompatible with being a pearl among knights (2364-65). But Gawain's identity has been constructed by himself and others in terms that will not allow him to reconcile his apprehension of the humanity that is also part of his "nature" with his more limited definition of knightly worth. Sheila Fisher has argued that in betraying his own notion of "knighthood," Gawain necessarily betrays his masculinity, "for in this poem 'knighthood and masculinity are in the end the same thing' ('Leaving Morgan Aside' 141). However, the poem that contains Gawain can also envision a knight-hero who, rather than constructing an exclusive and alienating ideal of chivalric manhood, might re-imagine himself in terms of a fallible—if nevertheless admirable—humanity that admits common ground with the Other (whether that Other

is female or a male who does not belong to the community of Camelot). The mysterious figure who now calls himself Bercilak de Hautdesert suggests that Gawain returns with him to his castle to celebrate the New Year, and invites him to re-encounter his wife's aged companion, who has now been identified as Morgan le Fay and the instigator of the Beheading Game—and who is also, Arthur's half sister and Gawain's aunt.

Gawain doesn't want to risk another encounter with Morgan. He has, moreover already complicated his conclusions about his betrayal of his own nature with a further explanation of his failure, a misogynistic denunciation of the wiles of women, all biblical temptresses, in the course of which he invokes the exemplary transgression of Adam, Samson, Solomon, and David (2414-28). These men, says Gawain, were the noblest—“proud princes, most prosperous of old” (2422)—of their time, and “one and all fell prey/ To women that they had used” (2426-27); he can hardly be blamed for sharing their fate. In this way he displaces the blame and is able to regain his power within the story by returning not as a failure but as a fully reinstated knight of honor. Tellingly ignoring all the tricky questions that might be raised about the actual moral agency of his heroes, he suggests that the spiritual error into which he has been led by the weakness of *his* flesh is the inescapable condition of all *men* faced with female beguilements. By this definition Gawain's failure proves him to have been a “real man” all along.

Furthermore, Gawain's explanatory narratives reinserts him within a fellowship of his peers, it does so by shifting the moral focus of his discourse from the falling of a man to the beguilements of a threatening Other. Not surprisingly, the poet never intends to present a world where women are powerful; rather, these women constitute a metaphor for other anti-social forces and dangers outside the control of feudalism and chivalry. All the external threats they represent, and the internal conflict they generated, are eliminated. Power is back in the hands of the appropriate authority, and Gawain's loyalties are redefined. At the end of the romance, the power the women hold is re-appropriated by the men in order to support the male social order.

As he returns back to Camelot, Gawain re-embraces the narrative of his unmaning, the regrettable story of his embodiment, insisting that the girdle testifies to the “frailty of flesh perverse” (2435). And at Arthur's court he lays bare to his peers the scar that designates his own Christmas incarnation: “The nick on his neck he naked displayed” (2498). But despite Gawain's re-description of the girdle as a “blazon of the blemish that I bear” (2509), Arthur's followers cheerfully reappropriate it to decorate “each brother of that band, a baldric should have” (2516); so “that was taken as a token by the Table Round” (2519). Their reaffirmation of Gawain's worth is, however, predicted upon an exclusive rather than an inclusive gesture. The Green

Knight had suggested that the representative of heroic masculinity might recognize the frailties of the flesh that bore witness to his kinship with every body else and still be a pearl among knights. The Round Table's appropriation of the girdle as a special decoration for each knight of the brotherhood, the exclusive insignia of a group of warrior males, ignores the possibility that to wear the green girdle is to reassert one's ties with *all* of humankind.

As Lili Arkin observes, "the conflict Sir Gawain confronts becomes a metaphor for other problems facing the Fourteenth Century aristocracy" (online). Gawain's bargaining with Lady Bercilak, a bargain outside of the traditional aristocratic exchange system, is suggested as dangerous, against the chivalric order. Bercilak's chastisement and reinstatement of Gawain in the social order, at the end of the Beheading Game, suggests that the traditional loyalties within the hierarchies are no longer enforceable. The inevitable collapse of Arthur's court and the Round Table along with the chivalric system is foreshadowed by the bookend references to Troy. Since the knights have not learned their lesson about the dangers of courtly love, they will be destroyed. This romance thus becomes a message, not for Arthur's court, but for the Aristocratic readership of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Notes

¹ I borrow the title from John Keats' poem "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (1819) which means "the beautiful woman without mercy." It is the title of an old French court poem by Alain Chartier. Keats focuses on how experiencing beauty gives meaning and value of life. Please see "Enjoying 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', by John Keats" by Ed Friedlander in <http://www.pathguy.com/lbdsm.htm> for more information.

² Studies of the poem have emphasized in particular the perpetual (re)negotiations of value in the vocabulary of "pricing and prizing" that attaches itself to assessments of the hero's performance: see, for example, R. A. Shoaf, *The Poem as Green Girdle: Commmercium in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1984); Jill Mann, "Price and Value in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Essays and Studies* 36 (1986): 294-318. My own emphasis here is on some of the less explicitly marked transactions of (masculine) value that take place in *SGGK*.

³ *SGGK* is from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams, et al. 7th ed. Vol. 1. (New York: Norton, 2000), 156-210. The modern English translation is by Marie Borroff (1967). Further citations from the poem are noted parenthetically in the paper.

⁴ One might add that the poem's largest portrait of *all* Gawain's insignia offers some contradictions. Although he carries his divine mistress, Mary, on the inside of his shield (649-50), Gawain's harness is elsewhere embroidered with lovebirds and love-knots set there by other earthly women (612)

⁵ *SGGK* seems to exemplify Bakhtin's notion of "heteroglossia": it repeatedly sets competing language systems in dialogue with one another, most notably in the different "versions of Gawain" produced by different speakers in the poem. I would propose that the

arming sequence, although ostensibly rendered in the voice of the omniscient narrator, is ultimately recontextualized by the narrative as a whole as just another of these (often partial and prejudiced) constructions of Gawain. For Bakhtin's discussion of narrative "dialogization," see "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981), 162-64.

⁶ Britton J. Harwood examines the tension between the Christian ethos and the aristocratic ethos in the poem in "Gawain and the Gift," *PMLA* 106 (1991): 483-99; see especially 489-90. Wendy Clein discusses the alternative "courtly" and "moralist" perspectives offered on Gawain's chivalry in the poem in *Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Norman, OK: Pilgrim, 1987).

Works Cited

- Arkin, Lili. "The Role of Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." Online. Internet. 4 May 1995.
<<http://www.chss.montclair.edu/english/furr/arkin.html>> 6 Feb. 2003.
- Bakhtin, M. M. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981. 162-64.
- Bullough, Vern L. "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages." *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Clare A. Lees. Medieval Cultures. Vol. 7. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994. 31-45.
- Clein, Wendy. *Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Norman, OK: Pilgrim, 1987.
- De Roo, Harvey. "Undressing Lady Bertilak: Guilt and Denial in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Chaucer Review* 27 (1993): 305-24.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. "Getting Medieval: *Pulp*, Gawain, Foucault." *The Book and the Body*. Ed. Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame, 1997.
- Fisher, Sheila. "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Passing of Arthur: New Essays in Arthurian Tradition*. Ed. Christopher Baswell and William Sharpe. New York: Garland, 1988. 129-51.
- . "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*. Ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1989. 71-105.
- Griffiths, Fred. "A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Question of Masculinity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." Online. Internet. 2 Feb. 2003.
<<http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/masculin.htm>>

- Hamilton, Ruth. "Chivalry as Sin in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *University of Dayton Review* 18 (1987): 113-17.
- Harwood, Britton J. "Gawain and the Gift." *PMLA* 106 (1991): 483-99.
- Heng, Geraldine. "Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *PMLA* 106 (1991): 500-14.
- Keen, Maurice. *Chivalry*. 1984. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986.
- Mann, Jill. "Price and Value in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Essays and Studies* 36 (1986): 294-318.
- Plummer, John. "Signifying the Self: Language and Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl Poet*. Ed. Robert Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman. Troy, New York: Whitston, 1991.
- Shoaf, R. A. *The Poem as Green Girdle: Commmercium in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1984.
- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M. H. Abrams, et al. 7th ed. Vol. 1. New York: Norton, 2000. 156-210.
- Spearing, A. C. *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970.
- Warner, Marina. *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Vintage, 1983.



Image Source: <<http://www.pathguy.com/lbdsm.htm>>

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" by John Keats

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
Alone and palely loitering;
The sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,

So haggard and so woe-begone?

The squirrel's granary is full,

And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow,

With anguish moist and fever dew;

And on thy cheek a fading rose

Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads

Full beautiful, a faery's child;

Her hair was long, her foot was light,

And her eyes were wild.

I set her on my pacing steed,

And nothing else saw all day long;

For sideways would she lean, and sing

A faery's song.

I made a garland for her head,

And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;

She look'd at me as she did love,

And made sweet moan.

She found me roots of relish sweet,

And honey wild, and manna dew;

And sure in language strange she said,

I love thee true.

She took me to her elfin grot,

And there she gaz'd and sighed deep,

And there I shut her wild sad eyes--

So kiss'd to sleep.

And there we slumber'd on the moss,

And there I dream'd, ah woe betide,

The latest dream I ever dream'd

On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings, and princes too,

Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;

Who cry'd--"La belle Dame sans merci

Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam

With horrid warning gaped wide,

And I awoke, and found me here

On the cold hill side.

And this is why I sojourn here

Alone and palely loitering,

Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,

And no birds sing.

The Story

The poet meets a knight by a woodland lake in late autumn. The man has been there for a long time, and is evidently dying.

The knight says he met a beautiful, wild-looking woman in a meadow. He visited with her, and decked her with flowers. She did not speak, but looked and sighed as if she loved him. He gave her his horse to ride, and he walked beside them. He saw nothing but her, because she leaned over in his face and sang a mysterious song. She spoke a language he could not understand, but he was confident she said she loved him. He kissed her to sleep, and fell asleep himself.



He dreamed of a host of kings, princes, and warriors, all pale as death. They shouted a terrible warning -- they were the woman's slaves. And now he was her slave, too.

Awakening, the knight found the woman was gone, and he was left on the cold hillside.

Analysis

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" means "the beautiful woman without mercy." It's the title of an old French court poem by Alain Chartier. ("Merci" in today's French is of course "thank you".) Keats probably knew a current translation which was supposed to be by Chaucer. In Keats's "Eve of Saint Agnes", the lover sings this old song as he is awakening his beloved.

Keats focuses on how experiencing beauty gives meaning and value to life. In "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", Keats seems to be telling us about something that may have happened, or may happen someday, to you.

You discover something that you think you really like. You don't really understand it, but you're sure it's the best thing that's ever happened to you. You are thrilled. You focus on it. You give in to the beauty and richness and pleasure, and let it overwhelm you.

Then the pleasure is gone. Far more than a normal letdown, the experience has

left you crippled emotionally. At least for a while, you don't talk about regretting the experience. And it remains an important part of who you feel that you are.

Please see more paintings about “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” as follows.



Image Source: <http://cgfa.sunsite.dk/hughes/p-hughes19.htm>



Image Source: <http://www.jwwaterhouse.com/view.cfm?recordid=20>

About chivalry and knighthood

First, let me give you some ideas about chivalry and knighthood. According to Maurice Keen, chivalry helps fashion the idea of the “gentleman,” the concepts of courtliness/courtesy, skills in games and war, courage (especially in combat), loyalty to friends, personal honor (public approbation/esteem tied to the avoidance of anything shameful and commitment to doing the right thing, even if it meant risking life and limb), the idea of the “constant quest to improve on achievement” (15). He further expounds: chivalry is an ethical system that emphasizes honor, providing ... a nexus between the ideals of society and their reproduction in the actions of individuals—honour commits men to act as they should... Chivalry's most profound influence lay in just this, in setting the seal of approbation on norms of conduct, recognised as noble when reproduced in individual act and style. (249)

Medieval Chivalric Values, Ethics and Morals

Medieval chivalry has influenced modern, romantic conceptions of **honor**, especially **military honor**. Marine Corps recruiting commercial: 'Once there were men who knew the meaning of honor [visual: closeup of a knight and his sword]--there still are, the Marines! [knight's sword becomes Marine sword, closeup of a Marine]. The ideal of chivalry has attracted generations of young people to the military life. It underlies such movies as "An Officer and a Gentleman," "Top Gun," and even "Rambo."

Chivalry is an ethical system that emphasizes **personal honor**. As Maurice Keen wrote: "the most important legacy of chivalry to later times was its conception of honour ... Transaction of honour, a contemporary anthropologist has said, 'provide ... a nexus between the ideals of society and their reproduction in the actions of individuals--honour commits men to act as they should'... Chivalry's most profound influence lay in just this, in setting the seal of approbation on norms of conduct, recognised as noble when reproduced in individual act and style." (*Chivalry* 249)

Chivalry helped fashion the idea of the 'gentleman,' in which concepts of courtliness/courtesy, skills in games and war, courage (especially in combat), loyalty to friends, personal honor (public approbation/esteem tied to the avoidance of anything shameful and commitment to doing the right thing, even if

it meant risking life and limb), the idea of the 'constant quest to improve on achievement' (Keen 15), and individualism were tied together. Chivalry also shaped one aspect of romantic love: the idea that the male could win/be worthy of his 'lady love' by winning approbation through noble/honorable acts.

Work Cited:

Keen, Maurice. *Chivalry*. 1984. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986.
