

## **The Obstacle and the Way: Women and Gender in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the double-edged logic behind events and characters in the Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In particular, it highlights the ambivalent, contradictory way in which women function and the ramifications of the way women stand in relation to knighthood. Though a woman is the cause of the Knight's failure (the obstacle), she is also the agent of such a realization (the way). Adopting a double approach rather than a problematic mono-dimensional stance, we attempt to show how women are simultaneously the "obstacle" and the "way" to chivalric adventures and the knightly ideal. Women hinder or delay knightly adventures, and yet trigger new adventures in the process. In the very act of testing the knightly ideal, they can hone the individual characters of Arthur's knights as manifested in the case of Gawain. Understanding this double role of women can help us distance ourselves from the contradictory readings of the poem and appreciate the richness of the text. A multiplicity of interpretations, i.e. ambivalence, is a thematic link the text invites.*

**Keywords:** Gender; Women; Feminism; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; Arthurian Romance; Alliterative Poetry; Ambivalence

Despite the proliferation of critical oeuvre on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (henceforth shortened as *Sir Gawain*), this fourteenth century alliterative romance continues to be a rich hunting ground for critics. Critics are still exploring the poem's rich themes, characterization, style, authorship, structure, and narratology. One current area of critical interest is the poem's feminist import. The poem's seduction scenes that involve Gawain and Lady Bertilak, Gawain's antifeminist diatribe, and the role of the enigmatic Morgan le Fay in contriving the beheading challenge in Camelot have been explicated by critics. Women who indirectly influence the action of the poem like the silent Mary and Guinevere have also, to a lesser extent though, been studied. However, the ambivalent, contradictory way in which women function in the romance still needs further exploration. A survey of the available feminist literature on the poem shows that most critical approaches have been mono-dimensional. Critics have busied themselves with definitive claims about Morgan's success in humiliating Arthur's court and terrifying Guinevere or lack thereof, Gawain's success in his quest, and the role of Lady Bertilak as an honest tester or a seductive temptress. Thus, the critical scholarship on the poem is often chaotic and contradictory.

It has to be acknowledged that part of the critical controversy over the poem results from the nature of the poem itself. The poem's skilful perspective and point of view and the nature of its themes make final judgments often impossible. To the unwitting reader, the poem consists of "contradictions." For some critics, Gawain learns from his experience and succeeds in his quest. For others, he fails and is punished for his disloyalty with Bertilak. Arthur is childish, proud, and wild, yet "kene bi kynde", gracious, and "þe hendest" (l. 321, l. 26). Camelot is immersed in worldliness, feasting, drinking, and trivial laughter, yet a "wynne halle" renowned for "surquidré" and courage (l. 2456, l. 2457).

The poem conveys the message that appearances are never to be trusted; an old lady, Morgan, turns out to be Gawain's aunt and the prime mover of the plot; a bizarre Green Knight is in fact a courtly castle owner; a knight's symbol of failure is other knights' success baldric; a beautiful, "unfaithful" lady turns out to be a subtle tester collaborating with her husband; and what seems to be a dreary mound is actually the sought Green Chapel. The poem evidently poses a hermeneutical crisis for Gawain, and, by implication, for the reader. Gawain's understanding of the unfolding plot is as subjective and limited as that of the reader. In the course of the romance, Gawain has to learn the double-edged logic behind events and characters.

The poem is an open text in terms of themes, characters, and impact on readers. Internal textual evidence suggests that readings and interpretations of personal experiences can be totally subjective and extremist. Upon Gawain's return, Arthur's court interprets his account of the adventure of the Green Chapel lightly and assigns the girdle a new meaning, the total opposite of what Gawain ascribes to it. What Gawain sees as a sign of untruth is seen by the court, as they agree, as a baldric of honor and a symbol of union among court members. Bertilak, on the other hand, sees the girdle as simply a girdle, and asks Gawain to keep it as a token, a reminder of his adventure at the Green Chapel. This uncertainty in the text has led a critic like Catherine Batt (1992) to argue that "the poem denies us a 'moral centre' on which to establish absolute judgements with any certainty" (p. 127).

Another critic expressed the same claim more forcefully: "In the end it is well-nigh impossible to say with any degree of assurance *exactly* what *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is *only* about" (Moorman, 1968, p. 111; emphasis original). It seems that while some critics pointed out the difficulty of giving final judgments about the poem, others have failed to see *Sir Gawain* as an open text and, as a result, have ignored a key feminist point. They have not fully demonstrated the ramifications of the way women stand in relation to knighthood in this romance. Adopting a double approach rather than a problematic mono-dimensional stance, this paper attempts to show how women are simultaneously the "obstacle" and the "way" to chivalric adventures and the knightly ideal. Women hinder or delay knightly adventures, and yet trigger new adventures in the process. In the very act of testing the knightly ideal, women can hone the individual characters of Arthur's knights as manifested in the case of Gawain. Understanding this double role of women can help us distance ourselves from the contradictory readings of the poem and fully appreciate the richness of the text. After all, a multiplicity of interpretations, or at least ambivalence, is a thematic link in the text.

The poem poses a hermeneutical question by showing different interpretations of or perspectives on the same issue right from the outset. The meaning assigned to events is often what characters agree on rather than a final, determinate meaning. The Green Knight upon his entry into Camelot is a frightening figure ("an aghlich mayster" l. 136), yet handsome and his features are in proportion. He is between a giant and a human being, but is neither one. After the beheading scene in Camelot, Arthur, Gawain, and the rest agree that they saw a marvel and continue with their revelry and high spirits although Arthur and Gawain may have thought differently about the meaning of the challenge. Arthur and Gawain laugh, as the Green Knight leaves the court, to make the beheading scene part of Christmas games, but they agree among themselves that what they saw was stunning:

Ʒe kyng and Gawan þare  
 At þat grene þay laze and grenne,  
 Ʒet breued watz hit ful bare  
 A meruayl among þo menne. (l. 463-l. 466)

Arthur even hides any signs of astonishment when he tries to comfort Guinevere. Although he cannot deny that he has seen a marvel, he still pretends that the beheading he just witnessed was a Christmas interlude in line with the atmosphere of laughing and singing in Camelot. Arthur here imposes his subjective meaning on the beheading scene:

ƷaƷ Arþer þe hende kyng at hert hade wonder,  
 He let no semblaunt be sene, bot sayde ful hyze  
 To þe comlych quene wyth cortays speche,  
 'Dere dame, to-day demay yow neuer;  
 Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse,  
 Laykyng of enterludez, to laze and to syng,  
 Among þise kynde caroles of knyȝtez and ladyez.

Neuer þe lece to my mete I may me wel dres,  
For I haf sen a selly, I may not forsake.' (l. 467-1. 475)

Hence, the poem self-consciously dramatizes its open-endedness and hidden meaning. There is a contrast between façade and reality, the apparent meaning and the buried one. Even loose gender roles, mainly in the seduction scenes, highlight the notion of ambivalence and the need to question all fixed positions. Within this wavering logic, gender in this text can help explain the dual logic behind the roles of women in particular and the unstable meaning of the poem in general. To some extent, the goal of this paper is to redeem women in the romance and expose the falsity of mono-dimensional readings.

In *Sir Gawain*, women are neither marginal nor totally evil if examined in the light of the general way women function in the romance proper. Aiding a lady in distress has always been a perfect cause for knightly adventures. However, a knight on a quest often declines a woman's love. Hence, Gawain declines the love of Lady Bertilak, for he is on "an erande in erdez vncouþe" (l. 1808). He answers Lady Bertilak when she thinks that he is in love with another woman by saying that he neither has a lover nor will have one for a while (l. 1788-1. 1791). Gawain has a mission and cannot accept gifts until his mission at the Green Chapel is achieved. Accordingly, when the lady offers him her girdle, Gawain refuses:

And he nay þat he nolde neghe in no wyse  
Nauþer golde ne garysoun, er God hym grace sende  
To acheue to þe chauce þat he hade chosen þere. (l. 1836-1. 1838)

A knight on a quest finds an excuse from obligation to a potential mistress. Abstinence indicates that a woman can act as a distraction for a questing knight. Yet, quests are often carried out in the name of or dedicated to a lady. A knight errant is supposed to help weak women while a courageous knight wins the love of the fair woman. Woman acts as an inspirational force for the knight, and adventures are often carried out in the name of a mistress. This is why a love token from a beautiful lady like a girdle or a ring can be valuable for a knight. On the other hand, a seductive enchantress traps knights and ends their quests. A knight faces a dilemma in dealing with women. Marriage can hinder the ideal of knight errantry, for the domesticity of married life is not commensurate with a life of adventures; a love affair can interfere with the social responsibilities of a knight; and courtesy towards a woman may tarnish personal honor or be practiced against the ideal of the chivalric code (Barron, 1974, p. 2). It is this range of interrelationships between a knight and women that should be highlighted in discussing women in this romance.

Women in this romance, and in other medieval romances as well, have a subtle presence. The "strong" presence of Lady Bertilak in Hautdesert and Guinevere in Camelot as beautiful ladies associated with the most prominent lords in both courts should not eclipse the depiction of Mary on the inside of Gawain's shield as a moral, spiritual guide or the shadowy presence of the muffled Morgan as an honored lady in Hautdesert; nor should we ignore the constant presence of ladies and maidens in both courts and their share in the festive spirit celebrated in Camelot and Hautdesert. For instance, such nameless women participate in the exchange of kisses and gifts in Camelot on the New Year's Day. In Hautdesert, many ladies and maidens amuse Gawain during his stay there and are invited to witness the exchange of winnings each day. Bertilak is happy with his hunt and sends for the fair ladies and knights to show them the boar's flesh and tell them the story of the hunt. In a sense, Bertilak is displaying his manliness and skill as a hunter before the assembled knights and ladies:

þe lorde ful lowde with lote and laþter myry,  
When he seþe Sir Gawayn, with solace he spekez;  
þe goude ladyez were geten, and gedered þe meyny,  
He schewez hem þe scheldez, and schapes hem þe tale  
Of þe largesse and þe lenþe, þe liþernez also  
Of þe were of þe wylde swyn in wod þer he fled. (l. 1623-1. 1628)

When Bertilak tells Gawain that the Green Chapel is less than two miles away and asks him to stay in the castle till New Year's Day, Gawain happily accepts the offer. Bertilak immediately sends for the fair ladies of the castle to entertain him:

þenne watz Gawan ful glad, and gomenly he laþed:  
'Now I þonk yow þryuandely þurþ alle oþer þynge,

Now ached is my chance, I shall at your will  
Dowelle, and ellez do quat ze demen.'  
Þenne sesed hym þe syre and set hym bysyde,  
Let þe ladiez be fette to lyke hem þe better.  
Per watz seme solace by hemself stille; (l. 1079-l. 1085)

These ladies amuse Gawain and make him forget about his quest for a while. Moreover, they distract him during the seduction attempts of Lady Bertilak. Lost in this feminine amusement, Gawain never considers leaving the castle or joining Bertilak in the hunt. In such a capacity, women act as the obstacle rather than the way.

Women are yet an inherent part of the knightly community, a founding pillar of Hautdesert and Camelot. In Arthur's court, "luflych lorde, ledez of þe best" are the pillars of the company at Camelot (l. 38). It is difficult to imagine these courts full of knights, and yet devoid of women. Women are essential to the self-definition of the body chivalric by virtue of the ambivalent way in which they relate to the knightly ideal as the obstacle and the way. It is Christmas time in Camelot when the poem opens, a festive season of joyful spirit for the young court and young Arthur. Guinevere is described as a beautiful, high-spirited queen. Guinevere is not actually "a lifeless, static figure" (p. 289) as Colleen Donnelly (2003) calls her. Even in her silence, Guinevere signifies much about the vital role of women for the chivalric community. She is "grayþed in þe myddes" among her knights at the table for New Year's dinner (l. 74). The centrality of the young hero Gawain, as the masculine hero of the forthcoming adventure, and the queen, as the feminine counterpart to the hero, to the action is suggested right from the start, for Gawain sits next to Guinevere at the middle of the table. Gawain, along with his brother Agravain, also has a special status as he is the king's nephew:

There gode Gawan watz grayþed Gwenore bisyde,  
And Agrauayn a la dure mayn on þat oþer syde sittes,  
Boþe þe kynges sistersunes and ful siker kniztes; (l. 109-l. 111)

For New Year's dinner, Guinevere is joyous; she sits at the high dais with jewels, silk, and tapestries surrounding her (l. 75-l. 80). Such a beautiful queen is a moral compass in the court. She is seated in the middle of her knights as was proper. Like Lady Bertilak and Morgan who occupy prominent positions at the dinner table with Gawain and Bertilak in Hautdesert, Guinevere here is also a prominent figure at the table in the same way Gawain is. In fact, it is Gawain who "sate bi þe quene" (l. 339). This indicates the centrality of women for the chivalric community. On the second day of Gawain's stay at Hautdesert, the guest and his hosts gather for a meal, and Bertilak sits next to Morgan who sits in the highest seat. Gawain and Lady Bertilak sit at the middle of the table:

Þe olde auncian wyf hezest ho syttez,  
Þe lorde lufly her by lent, as I trowe;  
Gawan and þe gay burde togeder þay seten,  
Euen inmyddez, as þe messe metely come,  
And syþen þurȝ al þe sale as hem best semed. (l. 1001-l. 1005)

Geraldine Heng (1991) was one of the few critics who realized the power of the feminine impulse in the poem. Heng rightly argues for a feminine text penetrating the apparently masculine one, and tries to give women some power in the overall scheme of the plot. She argues that "Morgan and the Virgin are like each other in being, unlike others, powerful supernatural figures" (p. 501). She also claims that the romance has a "feminine subscript" and that the romance is essentially "the theater of its feminine figures" (p. 501). Heng's assertions about the important role of women in the poem are valid and relevant to the thrust of this argument in attempting to reclaim and redeem women. Women often function as initiators of chivalric adventures in the very act of hindering such adventures. As "enchantresses" or "seductive women", some female characters in *Sir Gawain* defy common gender roles of ladies in distress or ravished victims populating romances. Rather than being the passive objects of knightly adventures or just inspirational forces for adventures, women like Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay assume an active role of initiating and complicating adventures. In an attempt at evading the dichotomies of the representation of women in the poem as enchantresses/temptresses versus Madonnas/passive females, we should revisit the characters of Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak. In Arthurian romances, Morgan is often associated with evil and magic. However, she should be seen as an ambivalent figure, which captures her ambiguity and double role in *Sir Gawain*.

Morgan is certainly a controversial figure. The critical opinion is divided over her presence in the text. For example, some critics see her presence as integral to the poem and justified. Others see her presence as inorganic, a weak point in the poem. While some critics argue that her plan fails, others argue that she succeeds in humiliating Arthur's court and frightening Guinevere (Moorman, 1968, pp. 106-7; Baughan, 1950, pp. 241-48). Critics like J. R. Hulbert and G. L. Kittredge in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw Morgan's role as minor and her presence as a "flaw" in the plot, for Bertilak's sudden revelation that she is responsible for the whole action seems "unsatisfactory" (Vantuono, 1999, p. xxxii). Others saw her presence as organic to the theme and plot (Baughan, 1950, p. 241; Narin, 1988, pp. 60-66). For example, Baughan (1950) contends that "through Morgan le Fay's plan the beheading episode is no less an apotheosization of chastity than are the other parts of the romance" (p. 251). Baughan even calls her a "noble enchantress" (p. 251). Few critics took a reader-response approach and pointed out a psychological role Morgan plays for the author and the audience of the poem. For example, J. A. Burrow (1966) argues that "At the end of his poem the author is to use Morgan le Fay as a dumping-ground for all his suspicions and resentments which we have stored up on Gawain's behalf in the course of his adventure..." (p. 64). In a similar vein, Speirs has argued that Morgan is "a bone for the rationalizing mind to play with, and to be quiet with" (qtd. in Cooper, 1998, p. xxxii).

Albert Friedman (1966) argues against earlier critical claims that Morgan succeeds in humiliating the court, that her presence is organic, or that she does moral reformation of Arthur's corrupt court. Friedman asserts: "Try as we may to justify the poet's methods, we cannot get around the stubbornly solid impression that he fails to convince us that Morgan is organic to the poem" (p. 158). Friedman sees in Morgan only "a foil to enhance the beauty of Gawain's temptress" and argues that "nothing of our image of her is altered by what Bertilak has said, no suspicions confirmed. It seems thus less than shrewd to speak seriously of Morgan as the 'moving force ... of the entire plot' when the plot has moved so sturdily to its conclusion without even an allusion to her" (p. 157). Friedman fails to account for Morgan's ambivalent role in the poem or realize that change and reform can be individual or internal, for change only succeeds when it begins with sincere individuals like Gawain.

He does not approve of the role of Morgan as reformer. He argues: "But the *coup de grâce* to the reformation theory comes in the fact that neither Arthur nor his court show any change in character or behavior as a result of Gawain's adventure nor do they promise such a change in the future" (p. 149). Friedman then offers a generalized, essentialized, and stereotypical judgment on Morgan that fails to consider the contradictory aspects of her character. He argues: "Granting for the moment that Arthur's court is sexually immoral or otherwise corrupt and in need of reform, is Morgan the proper agent for such a task? By nature fays are sexually insatiable, and Morgan is perhaps the most promiscuous lady, mortal or immortal, in all Arthurian romance" (p. 147). Friedman's study gives definitive answers for Morgan's success and her presence in the text. He argues: "For so elaborate an adventure, the initiating motive does indeed seem surprisingly slight and vague. In the result, Guinevere was not fatally shocked and Morgan did not succeed in humiliating Arthur by proving that his leading knight lacked the virtues of knighthood" (p. 136). As we will see, this critical model may not be particularly helpful for analyzing a subtle text like *Sir Gawain*. It not only ignores textual evidence to the contrary, but also ignores the role and representation of other women in the poem. If emotional/psychological states and attitudes like fear, guilt, and shame are difficult to measure, it becomes indiscreet to issue final judgements about Morgan as a reformer, about Guinevere's fear, or even about Gawain's success in the quest.

Edith Williams (1985) offers a different critical model, probably a more helpful one, when she analyzes Morgan as a mythic, archetypal figure with "essential elements of the trickster archetype with all its contradictions" and contends that "however malevolent her initial intent may have been, it has an ultimately salutary effect on Gawain because it presses him into the discovery of his own humanity" (p. 39). Morgan's character, Williams argues, is capable of "extremes of surrender to sensual, and consequently debilitating, eroticism; of love turned to hate, which usually results in frustrated, self-defeating efforts; a love which, in the midst of frustrated desire, can be transformed into a self-effacing concern; and, perhaps, most importantly of all, a testing of fidelity, which goads a hero to come to terms with his own integrity" (p. 44). Williams argues that Lady Bertilak and Morgan disappear "after he [Gawain] has come to terms with himself" and calls them "the dual Morgan" (p. 52). However, Williams argues that Morgan's initial evil intent changes after "her defeat" (p. 52) and that she wreaks "havoc" "all to a good end" (p. 53).

If the psychological approach Williams espouses underscores the ambivalence of Morgan's character and role, then we should not say that Morgan is defeated; the implementation of her scheme "to a good end" inherently means that she does not fail. Stephen Manning (1968) offers another useful pattern and says that such a psychological approach "explains Morgan's role as the Terrible Mother, the negative aspect of the collective unconscious..." (p. 293). Within this psychological frame Manning posits, "Lady Bertilak is the anima, the feminine counterpart to the hero, with whom he must relate" (p. 287). The anima, Manning reminds us, "as all archetypal figures, is ambivalent" (p. 287). Bertilak in this scheme is the shadow, for the shadow represents "the personal unconscious" (p. 286). As Gawain's shadow, Bertilak "represents something which is both good and evil" (p. 285). Manning advocates a psychological approach, for it "stresses the importance of the double aspects of the poem's structure, supplementing the more emphasized use of threes," i.e. the three seduction days, hunts, exchanges, and blows (p. 294). Manning's argument, though exaggerated in its use of psychology and lacking in textual evidence, follows the same line of thought presented in this paper to underscore the ambivalence of the way women relate to the knightly code. To pin woman to a specific role/position is to go against a richly diverse female nature.

In Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, Morgan can be seen in the light of the above psychological model as an ambivalent character of mood swings and extremes. She appears at the end as a reconciled healer to Arthur taking him to Avalon. However, she is also an evil sorceress conspiring against her half-brother and his court and driven by enmity towards Guinevere. In *Sir Gawain*, Morgan le Fay is equally ambivalent. She seems to be a mover of the whole adventure, as we know at the end of the poem from Bertilak. Bertilak says that he is the Green Knight and that he was sent by Morgan to test the renown of Arthur's knights and to terrify Guinevere to death. To be specific, Morgan wanted to test the pride and glory of Arthur's court and see whether what is said about the great reputation of the court is true. Morgan le Fay is identified as a goddess responsible for the whole scheme. She sent the Green knight in that shape to Arthur's court:

For to assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were  
Pat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;  
Ho wayned me þis wonder your wyttez to reue,  
For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dy3e  
With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked  
With his hede in his honde bifore þe hy3e table. (l. 2457-1. 2462)

It should be noted that testing the renown of the court is different from being intent on destroying it or depriving it from its wits. The Morgan we have here, we would say, is different from the Morgans present in Malory and French Arthurian romances who are often associated with malice.

The primary motivation for the whole action is rendered as the enmity between Arthur's court and an enchantress like Morgan. Thus, Morgan, if we are to trust Bertilak's account, initiates the beheading challenge of the Green Knight in Arthur's court. Guinevere, on the other hand, indirectly and partially provokes the adventure because of the implicit hatred Morgan feels toward her. However, Guinevere is not terrified to death at the sight of the Green Knight or his rolling, and then speaking head, which complicates things for Morgan. Morgan apparently hopes that Arthur's court will fail to take the challenge of a gigantic knight in green, carrying a huge ax and insulting the assembled court. An evil intention may be suggested by her desire to terrify Guinevere to death or befuddle the brains of the assembled court. Alternatively, and if Bertilak's claims are exaggerated or not meant literally, Morgan may want to humble a youthful, proud court ruled by Arthur, teach this court a lesson, and solve a personal feud with Guinevere. The intended death of Guinevere from fear is symbolic of the ensuing paralysis expected in the court, i.e. lack of action among Arthur and his knights and their inability to take up the challenge. However, after some silence Arthur considers assuming the beheading contest and actually swings the ax when Gawain humbly asks the king to take it. What was probably meant to end the renown of Arthur's court backfires in a sense. Or else, what was probably meant to test and purge Camelot comes to fruition. Gawain hacks off the head of the Green Knight and agrees to receive the return blow after a year and a day at the Green Chapel. Such an act saves the fame of the court and makes it wait for a prospective adventure at the Green Chapel, which will in turn beget many other adventures on the way to and from the Green Chapel. Moreover, the way Gawain takes the quest confirms the status quo in Camelot. Gawain politely asks for the quest and all the knights, including Gawain, mainly out of respect, allow the head of the court, Arthur, to respond to the intruder first.

When Gawain asks to take up the quest, thus acting as a good knight concerned about his king and seeing the absurdity of the challenge as unfitting for the king, he is given the unanimous approval of the court. Moreover, Gawain survives the test after all, though not without a harsh lesson, and vindicates the courage of the court that is put to the test through Morgan. What was initially viewed as an obstacle to the court is now seen as the way to more glory. Moreover, if Morgan meant to humiliate Arthur as the head of the court, Gawain, a prominent representative of the court, succeeds in answering the beheading challenge.

On the other hand, Lady Bertilak traps Gawain in the private chambers of the castle and temporarily obstructs his knight-errantry. From one perspective, Gawain's stay at Hautdesert in its entirety "serves primarily to deflect him from the true aim of his quest" (Adderley, 2000, p. 53). It also points out what is weak in Gawain's character or what still needs to be done to improve an already refined character. The repeated contrasts between Gawain and Bertilak serve in this direction. They show Gawain one aspect of his knightly identity that is not adequate in itself. After all, knighthood is not all about the external world symbolized by the hunting adventures; the internal world, symbolized by the castle and its chambers, needs to be improved as well. While Bertilak actively pursues his outdoor hunting and unleashes his masculine valor against the beasts he hunts, Gawain inhabits the private, domestic realm of bedchambers, soft curtains, and warm bedcovers. The host's performance of a masculine gender identity outside the castle is countered by a reversal of gender roles within the castle, with Gawain as the hunted male evading the active pursuit of Lady Bertilak. Gawain is literally naked under his bedcover when Lady Bertilak enters his chamber on the first day of the exchange game. She jokingly, yet symbolically, claims him as her prisoner, and he accepts his status as her servant. She says "'I schal bynde yow in your bedde, þat be 3e trayst'" (l. 1211). It is no wonder, then, that the Lady questions this new vulnerable identity of Gawain ("'Bot þat 3e be Gawan, hit gotz in mynde.'" l. 1293), who, she claims, fails to live up to his reputation for courtesy and courtly love. Again, woman functions to restrain or distract a knight from taking potential adventures, yet simultaneously reminds him of what is expected from him according to the knightly code. In other words, Lady Bertilak asks Gawain to consciously perform his identity and gender role as Gawain by telling him that a courtly knight should not fail to kiss a willing lady. Gawain's identity is questioned on the second seduction day, and he is accused of being a negligent student:

'Sir, 3if 3e be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez,  
Wy3e þat is so wel wrast alway to god,  
And connez not of compaynye þe costez vundertake,  
And if mon kennes yow hom to knowe, 3e kest hom of your mynde;  
Þou hatz for3eten 3ederly at 3isterday I taztte  
Bi alder-truest token of talk þat I cowþe.' (l. 1481-l. 1486)

The Lady's authoritative stance as a master instructing a novice knight is quite different from her playful remark on the previous day that she is Gawain's servant and that he is welcome to her body (l. 1237-l. 1240). Lady Bertilak "acts desirous, but whether she is motivated by desire, by her husband's command, or by something else altogether remains pointedly ambiguous" (Rowley, 2003, p. 171). So, female pleasure or desire is also performative, for Lady Bertilak assumes a role and enacts it very well. Her performance of assertive and docile femininity may not represent her true intentions. Lady Bertilak's performance of active and passive gender roles is suggestive of the thematic ambivalence pervading the text.

Bertilak asks Gawain to stay in his castle, sleep late, and enjoy the company of women, his wife in particular, during the host's absence in the hunt. Gawain does this in fact; for three successive days, Bertilak goes to hunt while Gawain makes merry with the women in the castle all day. While he is enjoying the women's company in the castle and staying snug in his bed, Bertilak is hunting in the forest. The recurrent juxtapositions between the hunting scenes and the castle bed or entertainment scenes indicate the stark difference in gender roles performed by Bertilak on the one hand and Lady Bertilak and Gawain on the other:

Þus laykez þis lorde by lynde-wodez euez,  
And Gawayn þe god mon in gay bed lygez,  
Lurkkez quyl þe dayly3t lemed on þe woves,  
Vnder couertour ful clere, cortyned aboute; (l. 1178-l. 1181)

The lord leads his men in hunting boar all day while Gawain lies in bed in garments of rich colors and surrounded by abundant curtains (l. 1466-l. 1471). On the third day of the exchange game, Bertilak in the fields "hatz forfaren þis fox þat he folzed longe" (l. 1895). On the other hand, Gawain is high-spirited among the ladies who entertain him:

Sir Gawayn þe gode, þat glad watz withalle,  
Among þe ladies for luf he ladde much ioye; (l. 1926-l. 1927)

The same contrast appears earlier in the poem when Bertilak is hunting childless hinds in the woods and Gawain is entertained between the two fine ladies Lady Bertilak and Morgan:

And made myry al day, til þe mone rysed,  
with game.

Watz neuer freke fayrer fonge  
Bitwene two so dyngne dame,  
þe alder and þe zonge;  
Much solace set þay same.

And ay þe lorde of þe londe is lent on his gamnez,  
To hunt in holtez and heþe at hyndez barayne; (l. 1313-l. 1320)

On the second day of the hunt, the lord hunts wild boar while "þe lede with þe ladyez layked alle day" (1560). On the third day, the lord leads his men in fox hunting in the cold woods outside while Gawain lies snug inside elegant curtains:

And 3e he lad hem bi lagmon, þe lorde and his meyny,  
On þis maner bi þe mountes quyle myd-ouer-vnder,  
Whyle þe hende knyzt at home holsumly slepes  
Withinne þe comly cortynes, on þe colde morne. (l. 1729-l. 1732)

These repeated contrasts between Gawain and Bertilak emphasize what is at stake in Gawain's life at the castle among the ladies and their entertainment. Bertilak's model and that of the ladies need to be appropriated and fused in the knightly identity of Gawain as each model has something useful for Gawain.

On the third seduction day, Gawain accepts the girdle, hides it, and goes to a priest for confession. He confesses his sins and is absolved. He then joins the amusements and the laughter among the ladies of the castle with dances and different pleasures. On the other hand, while Gawain is lost in this haven, the lord is leading his men hunting. Gawain's merry mood is particularly noticeable on this day, for now he has a girdle that, he believes, will save his life:

And syþen he mace hym as mery among þe fre ladyes  
With comlych caroles and alle kynnes ioye,  
As neuer he did bot þat daye, to þe derk nyzt,  
with blys. (l. 1885-l.1888)

Women, throughout the castle scenes, give Gawain the entertainment necessary for distracting him from the traditional knightly ideal. In fact, Gawain's defending his chastity from the wiles of women within the walls of the castle and then his earnestly and repeatedly kissing Bertilak, and thus assuming the role of the Lady with relation to his host who now assumes the role of the true valiant, outdoor Gawain, is the total opposite of what a questing knight should be doing. From another perspective, a knight is not all about physical courage unleashed on other knights, giants, or savage animals. Gawain's spiritual and moral worth needs to be tested and honed by women in the castle. Lady Bertilak seems to invest in the language and manners of love, which does not also constitute the knightly identity by itself. She herself is a reader of romances, and reminds Gawain that love and war is all what romances and chivalry are about ("And of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed/ Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes;" l. 1512-l. 1513), a strong hint that a knight without adventures is not really a knight even if he is serving a lady. The basic chivalric models presented by Bertilak and his wife are never adequate in themselves. Physical valor, on the one hand, and noble manners and the language of love, on the other, need to combine in the identity of a knight.



In testing the courtesy of Gawain, Lady Bertilak simultaneously acts as his teacher and pupil. Donnelly (2003) claims that Lady Bertilak “acts as teacher as well as a tester, reminding him that it is unwise to drop your guard in a strange place” (p. 282) and reminding him about her husband who is away hunting (p. 283). The Lady, we should remember, calls Gawain “a sleper vnslyze” when she enters his bedroom for the first time and thinks he did not wake up (l. 1209). However, she also acts as a student who wants to be instructed in “trweluf craftes” and continually forces Gawain to live up to his reputation and name as Gawain (l. 1527). His failure to teach her the language of true love means that he knows nothing about noble manners and is not Gawain, i.e. that he is just trying to perform the identity of the real Gawain, or that he is ignoring her as unworthy to be taught about such a language (l. 1528-l. 1529). So, we find Gawain struggling to remain faithful to Bertilak while not insulting the lady as well by acting boorishly. They exchange sweet words, and he is in danger as she almost lures him; he has to either give in or refuse rudely. In such a dilemma, Gawain seeks refuge from a woman in another, for Mary is invoked to help her knight. While one woman acts as the obstacle to the chivalric code by trying to effect Gawain’s fall from the knightly code of honor, another woman serves as the way:

þay lanced wordes gode,  
Much wele þen watz þerinne;  
Gret perile bitwene hem stod,  
Nif Maré of hir knyzt mynne.

For þat prynces of pris depresed hym so þikke,  
Nurned hym so neze þe þred, þat nede hym bihoued  
Oþer lach þer hir luf, oþer lodly refuse.  
He cared for his cortaysye, lest craþayn he were,  
And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne,  
And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t. (l. 1766-l. 1775)

Probably, a clear example of woman as the obstacle and the way is Lady Bertilak’s attempt to act as the obstacle by trapping Gawain into an exchange of love tokens. Gawain implies that relegating the woman becomes the way for the questing knight. Therefore, Gawain declines the Lady’s offer of a gift. Lady Bertilak, we know later, conspires with her husband Bertilak to test Gawain’s courtesy and chivalric manners. This female-tester, it turns out, gives way to a new turn of events, i.e. propels the plot and acts as the way to adventures, by giving Gawain some kisses and then a green girdle. The girdle is to cause Gawain—in an attempt to save his life through the supposed magical powers of the girdle—to conceal it in the exchange of winnings with Bertilak. When Gawain reaches the Green Chapel for the return blow, he is exposed by Bertilak as a liar and a false knight. Gawain is especially nervous for being tested by a woman as he considers himself morally superior (Donnelly, 2003, p. 285). In other words, Gawain sees woman as the obstacle, the cause of his fall from perfection. During the seduction scenes, Lady Bertilak employs language as a means of power to overthrow common gender relations. Gawain often finds it difficult to respond to her courteously without tainting his personal honor or being dishonest with his host. The covenant between Gawain and Bertilak is broken through language in a sense. Gawain “claims to have given his host all that he won that day, which is an outright lie” (Donnelly, 2003, p. 291).

However, Gawain confesses the truth about his keeping the girdle, receives a blow that nicks his neck, and finally returns to Camelot to recount his adventure. Though he feels ashamed, Gawain still wins the girdle as a sign of his adventure at the Green Chapel and adds it to the insignia of the court. What Gawain sees as a sign of shame is seen by the knights of Camelot as a badge of honor. Such a green sash becomes a symbol of union and fellowship among the members of the court. Through a feminine knot, Gawain falls, escapes death, returns to Camelot, and is eventually ready to resume his adventures. His feelings of shame for his cowardice and covetousness in this adventure will necessarily incite him, as a knight upholding a knightly code, to take up new adventures to restore his tarnished honor, the most important thing for a knight. The fact that Gawain falls a victim to the guiles of women will motivate him to repel the temptations of the flesh and be more careful with women in future adventures. What is particularly interesting is that the Lady’s gift of the green girdle helps the unfolding adventure in the Green Chapel. Without the girdle Gawain takes from the Lady, Bertilak would have faced a dilemma. Gawain takes a blow that only grazes his neck because he concealed the girdle from Bertilak on the last day of exchanging winnings.

Had Gawain dishonored himself with Lady Bertilak or simply rejected her girdle, Bertilak would probably have hacked off Gawain's head and deprived him of the end of the adventure celebrated at Camelot or even future adventures. Moreover, death would mean absolute failure; a nick on the neck means partial failure or imperfection and a chance for future redemption and corrective behavior.

Michael Twomey (2001) argues that Bertilak's invitation for Gawain to return with him to Hautdesert and see his aunt Morgan is significant as Gawain "carries Morgan in his body, in his blood" in the same way his knightly identity is established through "the blood of his uncle" (p. 113). The feminine, therefore, is an inherent part of the knightly code. In other words, it cannot be separated from the body chivalric, and should not be ignored, suppressed, or unjustly relegated. Gawain declines the invitation in order to return to Camelot. Probably, Gawain has had enough. He now carries his psychic femininity within himself. The woman on his shield and in his heart, Mary, is now supplemented by another woman in his psyche, Morgan or her double Lady Bertilak.

In a similar fashion, Twomey (2001) argues—by way of emphasizing the centrality of women in the romance—that "Although this final revelation [that the old lady in Hautdesert is Gawain's aunt Morgan] is surely the greatest surprise for Gawain, because it brings the foreign, female, magical Morgan from a wilderness castle called Hautdesert to lodge within Gawain himself, Bertilak has at the same time admitted something equally momentous about himself: that just as Morgan resides in Gawain's blood, she also resides in Bertilak's feudal identity" (p. 113). This can be interpreted if we remember that Bertilak's revelation of his own identity as Bertilak de Hautdesert (l. 2445) immediately yokes, without invitation, the powers of magic possessed by Morgan who also dwells in Bertilak's very castle (l. 2446-l. 2451). This close relationship between Bertilak's identity and the presence of Morgan in his castle as well as the sudden appearance of the castle when Gawain appeals to Mary for a shelter should make us reconsider some relations in the text. Bertilak's uninvited reference to Morgan when asked by Gawain just about his name indicates a close relationship between Bertilak and Morgan. In a sense, their identities are intertwined. We could even infer that it is the presence of Morgan in Bertilak's castle that gives him his identity and social role as Bertilak de Hautdesert. The static depiction of Mary on Gawain's shield and the presence of the old Morgan in Hautdesert make these females emblematic of the eternal feminine that inhabits the residual memory of man.

On one level, the religious and the magical seem too close. One wonders if Mary and Morgan are collaborating to test Gawain or whether they become one, representing extreme sides of Gawain's anima or soul, the bright side versus the dark one. Gawain appeals to Mary for a shelter to hear mass and crosses himself while he is searching for the Green Chapel. Gawain's wish is immediately granted as if through magic, and he sees the finest castle a man has kept. If Mary, rather than Morgan, is the one who grants Gawain's wish, then why does she direct Gawain to a castle inhabited by Morgan? It seems possible that Mary is also testing Gawain and collaborating with Morgan in this regard. The fact that Morgan contrasts with Mary (a Celtic goddess vs. a Christian one) and Lady Bertilak contrasts with Guinevere (a garrulous, beautiful temptress vs. a silent beautiful queen) makes it apparent that these women occupy different ends of dichotomies, and that they should not be easily cast off as marginal or minor. Lady Bertilak threatens Gawain's chastity more and presses him so hard and another lady, Mary, is invoked to help her knight before he succumbs. Mary, a symbol of sexual chastity, is cast against a "seductress" like Lady Bertilak. The image of the Virgin Mary on the inside of Gawain's shield is meant for guidance and protection (the way) against the girdle which can be thought of as both an obstacle and a way. Moreover, Mary as depicted on the inside of the shield is close to Gawain's heart, and thus a constant reminder of chastity. This contrasts with the girdle that Gawain dons on his waist as a constant reminder of his failure through another woman in the castle. In Freudian psychoanalysis, ambivalence is highly valued. The line of demarcation between love and hate, life and death, and pleasure and pain can be very indistinct. Thus, these female testers in the romance can be alter egos oscillating between being the obstacle and the way.

The physical description of Lady Bertilak—her beauty, youth, bare breasts, and neck on the third day of seduction—is juxtaposed against and interwoven with the physical description of Morgan, the old, ugly, and wrinkled hag with a thick body and broad buttocks. Morgan and Lady Bertilak are almost inseparable. The nameless lady is led by Morgan when these two come to greet Gawain after chapel. The description of the beautiful lady stepping out of her pew is intertwined with that of Morgan in the same paragraph. First, Lady Bertilak comes out from her pew and is accompanied by many lovely ladies to highlight her superior beauty when compared with that of the other ladies and even with that of Guinevere (l. 941-l. 945).

Then, both ladies are described as Gawain makes his way to the chancel to greet them, and their description is overlaps. The description highlights things as they seem to Gawain who at this stage fails to perceive the feminine plot weaved against him by these two ladies. The description of both ladies is worth quoting at length:

Ho ches þurȝ þe chaunsel to cheryche þat hende.  
An oþer lady hir lad bi þe lyft honde,  
Þat watz alder þen ho, an auncian hit semed,  
And heȝly honowred with haþelez aboute.  
Bot vnlyke on to loke þo ladyes were,  
For if þe ȝonge watz ȝep, ȝolȝe watz þat oþer;  
Riche red on þat on rayled ayquere,  
Rugh ronkled chekez þat oþer on rolled;  
Kerhofes of þat on, wyth mony cler perlez,  
Hir brest and hir bryȝt þrote bare displayed,  
Schon schyrer þen snawe þat schedez on hillez;  
Þat oþer wyth a gorger watz gered ouer þe swyre,  
Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn with chalkquyte vayles,  
Hir frount folden in sylk, enfounbled ayquere,  
Toreted and treleted with tryfleȝ aboute,  
Þat noȝt watz bare of þat burde bot þe blake broȝes,  
Þe tweyne yȝen and þe nase, þe naked lyppez,  
And þose were soure to se and sellyly blered;  
A mensk lady on molde mon may hir calle,  
for Gode!  
Hir body watz schort and þik,  
Hir buttokez balȝ and brode,  
More lykkerwys on to lyk  
Watz þat scho hade on lode. (l. 946-l. 969)

Now Gawain bows to the old, ugly lady and courteously kisses the beautiful one (l. 970-l. 974). The clear contrast between both ladies in terms of beauty hints at the fact that they may be two physical manifestations for the same essence, and therefore psychological doubles of each other. After Gawain meets and greets both ladies, he asks to be their servant and they lead him while they talk; they take him to a chamber while servants bring spices and wine. Laughter, wine, words, spices are all used as a means of entertainment that night. More importantly, both women lead Gawain while they are talking. In a game of power relations, more power is attributed to these women and Gawain is relegated to a subservient role:

Þay kallen hym of aquoyntaunce, and he hit quyk askez  
To be her seruaunt sothly, if hemsself lyked.  
Þay tan hym bytwene hem, wyth talkyng hym leden  
To chambre, to chemné, and chefly þay asken  
Spyceȝ, þat vnsparely men speded hom to bryng,  
And þe wynnelych wyne þerwith vche tyme. (l. 975-l. 980)

Although we are not told about the extent to which Gawain knew Morgan in the castle, the poem seems to suggest that Gawain was entertained by Morgan and Lady Bertilak as well as other ladies. At least, textual evidence shows that Gawain meets her three times: one time after chapel when he greets her and the Lady and they spend the knight amusing themselves, another time the next day when they meet for the meal, and a third time when Morgan and the Lady entertain him on the first day of the exchange game while Bertilak is hunting deer. Gawain does not fathom her role in the ongoing plot, for she is “occluded: her identity, role, and purpose are pointedly hidden. But, on the other hand, she is also a realistically drawn figure who resides at Bertilak’s castle” (Narin, 1988, p. 64). When Morgan is absent from the scene, Lady Bertilak continues to test Gawain, thus following the initial scheme of testing the Round Table begun by Morgan.

Bertilak seems involved with the testing ordeal initiated by Morgan, for he might be still carrying Morgan's wish. After the three return blows Gawain faces at the hands of the Green Knight, later revealed as Bertilak, Gawain emerges as a more admirable character than he was before the blows. It seems that the test as a whole made a better knight within human terms. Bertilak admires the brave prince standing in his armor on the field (l. 2333-1. 2335). The Green Knight now assumes agency and claims that he planned the whole thing at Hautdesert. He says "I wro3t hit myseluen" (2361). He then says that he sent his wife to test Gawain, and that it was through his wife that he found Gawain the best knight ever on earth, a direct reference to woman as the obstacle and the way: "I sende hir to asay þe, and sothly me þynkkez/ On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede" (l. 2362-1. 2363).

According to Bertilak, Gawain succeeded as a human being. If Gawain is to blame, it is because he "lufed your lyf" (l. 2368). Even this can be justified as a natural, instinctive fear for one's life. Gawain blames his "cowarddyse" and "couetyse" for hiding the girdle from its owner (l. 2374). Gawain confesses, receives his penance, and is absolved of everything. As a trophy, he takes the green girdle to remind himself of the adventure of the Green Chapel. He also wins the friendship of Bertilak who invites him to return with him to his castle and meet his wife. Gawain asks Bertilak to commend him to the lady of the castle and "þat oþer, myn honoured ladyez" (l. 2412). However, the process of testing is not over yet. While Gawain declines Bertilak's offer to go to Hautdesert, he lapses into an antifeminist diatribe in which he condemns the "wyles of wymmen" (l. 2415). In this regard, and if we are to assume that Gawain's testing is still going on and that Bertilak is still under Morgan's spell, Morgan becomes "a kind of subcreator, subtly and invisibly controlling those around her, guiding them, in spite of their free will, towards an end for which she has predestined them" (Adderley, 2000, p. 55). Morgan "has created a situation in which Gawain has allowed himself to drop his guard" (Adderley, 2000, p. 56).

She is a goddess, we should remember, and it is possible that one final lesson Gawain has to learn before he leaves to Camelot is that the bravery he showed after flinching once is not adequate for a knight. Gawain has to learn that "his first reaction to failure creates yet another failure, the desertion of courtesy, the virtue he had championed all along" (Adderley, 2000, p. 56). Gawain blames evil women down in history for beguiling men by way of exonerating himself. This again casts women in the role of the obstacle and the way through the psychological projection of one's mistakes onto a woman. Gawain blames women for the fall of great men and cites Biblical figures in an attempt to restore his lost perfection. The girdle he dons becomes a constant reminder of what needs to be done for a knight to succeed. Gawain clearly expresses the role of woman as the obstacle and the way when he says that it would be far better to love women well without believing them if possible ("...hit were a wynne huge/ To luf hom wel, and leue hem not, a leude þat coupe" l. 2420-1. 2421). Gawain's qualified assertion means that women can function ambivalently as the obstacle and the way. At the same time, it highlights the centrality of women to the knightly code and the knight's self-definition.

On the return journey, Gawain faces many adventures, overcomes them, and continues to wear the green baldric. Gawain tells the story of how he came to wear this sign of "vntrawþe" he was in to Arthur's court (l. 2509). The girdle becomes part of the fame and unity of the Round Table as other knights decide to wear a green sash. The girdle is treated as a sign of "þe renoun of þ Rounde Table" and honoured he "þat hit hade euermore after" (l. 2519-1. 2520). What Morgan tried to test is tested, and the knights interpret Gawain's adventure as a success within human limitations. *Sir Gawain*, then, seems to deal with individual redemption and reform. If there is a change, it is internal and individual rather than collective. C. M. Adderley (2000) points out that "[c]ivilization, Camelot, the New Troy, oppose incivility, wilderness and the Green Chapel" (p. 51). Gawain must experience another world in Hautdesert and the Green Chapel in order to realize the dangers that waylay his identity and Camelot. As Barron notes, "[t]he challenge, then, had been to the reputation of the Round Table as a whole; but to Gawain his failure is personal and inexcusable" (p. 21). Arthur's court is still young and apparently lacks in wisdom. Arthur's court is rendered as "berdlez chylder" in the language of the Green Knight (l. 280). They take things lightly. They are stunned to see a huge green man in their midst, yet revert to loud amusement and celebration of the New Year's feast after the Green Knight is gone. When Gawain returns, they laugh at him and continue in a festive spirit, deciding to wear a green baldric to honor the dispirited knight. It is no wonder that the poem ends and begins similarly with a reference to the fall of Troy and the founding of Britain by Brutus and the noble reign of Arthur. Arthur's court may be destroyed by its corrupt individual knights or the bad influence of Guinevere. Hence, and if we agree on Morgan's role as a moral tester, it is logical to see why Morgan wants to frighten Guinevere to death through the beheading challenge. As a prominent woman in Arthur's court, Guinevere is more of a moral compass for other knights if she acts as the way.

Her infidelity to Arthur, if she acts as the obstacle, can be destructive; she can corrupt other knights through her bad influence and power. Therefore, if Guinevere as the obstacle is absent and if individual knights, like Gawain, are confirmed in virtue and honor, the court should thrive. Or else, we should expect the worst. If Morgan is conveying a moral lesson about chivalry and queenhood, then one woman, Guinevere, is the obstacle while another, Morgan, is the way.

Gawain is made aware of his identity and reputation in the three seduction scenes at Hautdesert. So, he is conscious of his performative role as the knight of courtesy when he kisses Lady Bertilak after she questions his identity as Gawain who is reputed for courteous manners with ladies. As W. A. Davenport (2006) says, the Lady uses “Gawain’s own reputation as a weapon against him” (p. 279). Still, this does not mean that Gawain fails to live up to his renowned knightly identity. On the contrary, the Lady intentionally helps him hone his knighthood. Bertilak as the Green Knight, on the other hand, again questions Gawain’s identity by way of making him conform to his assumed courage. Gawain flinches after the Green Knight’s first feint and is immediately rebuked for lacking the courage of the real Gawain. Bertilak capitalizes on Gawain’s fear to teach him a lesson and remind him about the masculine identity of Gawain as a brave knight, for “[i]n terms of cultural norms governing chivalric codes, cowardice is culturally marked as feminine” (Cox, 2001, p. 381). When Gawain attacks women, he tries to “reclaim his place in the masculine, homosocial world of Arthurian knightly codes” (Cox, 2001, p. 381). On the second feint, Gawain does not flinch and is consciously enacting his knightly identity as Gawain.

In a sense, identity becomes performative in the same way gender is performative during the seduction scenes. Gawain’s response to Bertilak after the recognition scene makes it clear that he temporarily gave up his natural loyalty and honesty because of cowardice and covetousness and accuses thus himself of treachery. He is aware he was not true to himself when he hid the girdle from his host. Davenport (2006) rightly argues that “[w]e have been shown by the end a hero subordinate, deferential, nervous, who is tested, tempted, tricked, and whose difficult path is overhung by reminders of idealistic and romantic conceptions of knighthood” (p. 283). When Gawain returns he does not mention Morgan. Moreover, the fact that he asks Bertilak to commend him to Morgan and Lady Bertilak indicates his awareness of a pure test or a hoax without malign intentions. On the other hand, it might be just a courteous remark. In addition, Bertilak invites Gawain to come back with him to Hautdesert, for he apparently knows that Morgan and his wife have friendly feelings toward Gawain. These remain inferences in the absence of textual evidence. The effect of the quest on Gawain is an introspective knight who feels guilt and shame and feels what other members in the court cannot experience. Gawain’s self-critical stance shows his understanding that he is not perfect. Though a woman was the cause of his failure (the obstacle), she is also the agent of such a realization (the way).

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