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**Autor:** Beekman Taylor, Paul  
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# The Failure of Family and the Demise of Dynasty in *Sir Gawain*

Paul Beekman Taylor

“Madame,” seyde sir Launcelot, “I  
love nat to be constrayned to love, for  
love muste only aryse of the harte  
selff, and nat by none constraynte.”

Malory 1971, 641

The argument in the pages that follow intends to bring into sharper relief an implication in the text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* largely ignored by the critic whose attention is drawn toward the more obvious and complex aspects of the double exchanges of axe blows and winnings in the field and bedroom. I refer to the implication of procreation underlying the testing and tempting of the hero in his cloistered bed during the nativity season, a testing which has much to do with nativity itself. The testing of Gawain's manhood brings into question not only his chivalric prowess and demeanour in “love celestial” – as Chaucer's Pandarus would say – but his “natural” love, the love of kind which God authorized in the Garden of Eden to replenish each species. In brief, the testing of the exemplar of Arthurian virtue implicates Gawain's sexual as well as his courteous and martial malehood. Gawain's crucial choice is not just between fidelity to incompatible contracts with both Bertilak and his wife, but between either leaving the seed of his noble lineage in Hautdesert or bringing the fertile potential of the body of Bertilak's lady back to Camelot in the form of its girdle-emblem, or doing both.

If Gawain does not exercise one of these crucial options, he lacks essential hermeneutic skills to see them. In the small world of Hautdesert, these skills concern seeing intentions behind words, and reading visual signs on the broad landscape enclosing both Camelot and Hautdesert. When Gawain crosses the liminal wilderness of Wirral, he finds in the North a curious but unmistakable image of what he has left in the South. In the

territory of his shape-shifting host, what is before his eyes is a Camelot refracted into two counter images, one of pleasing and the other of frightening shape. The intricate maze of space in Hautdesert and the hidden interior of the Green Chapel are distorted images of the floor, bench and table interior of Camelot. The nurture of Arthur and his Round Table are reflected in the nurture of Bertilak and countered by the rude and wild nature of the Green Knight. Guenevere's beauty and sexual promise are reflected in the appeal of Bertilak's lady, but contrast with signs of age and sterility in the figure of Morgan. The weatherless context of Camelot, despite the season of its feasts, is given perceptual potential by the sunshine on Hautdesert and snow about the Green Chapel. In these refracted images, Gawain confronts the "other," or the hidden and vital side of things beneath the sterile pageantry of Arthur's court.

The temporal context or story fits its actions. The irruption of the Green Knight into Camelot – where he leaves behind blood and an axe as tokens of life and death – figures the annual seasonal shift from death toward new life. Gawain's journey northward begins on All Hallows Day, or the Feast of the Dead, and achieves its goal on the Feast of Circumcision which marks the New Year and figures a move from death to new life. The Green Knight crosses the same spatial and temporal limen in the other direction, carrying signs of natural force and leaving behind signs of noble strain and its demise, while Gawain's dress and speech signal the order of courtly arts and games in Camelot. Both Gawain and the Green Knight, then, mediate distinct worlds of values, each bringing to the other and taking back something of value to man's participation in social and natural patterns. Gawain's nine-day sojourn in the castle of Bertilak suggests the nine months of maturation of new life. His engagement in a world of contrasting reflections gives him a privileged perspective from which to read the values of the Round Table. That perspective includes in its visual and mental sweep the fertile promise latent in the forms and words of the men and women with whom he visits. How Gawain's trials in the North involve him unwittingly in the natural and political pattern of succession is the central topic of this paper.

The storyteller and historian know of the fearful consequences to dynasty of failed family; that is, of a king's failure to produce a natural heir, or his loss of heirs. The Old English *Beowulf* presents exemplary cases of each. The unlucky king Heremod is forced into exile, and leaves his people kingless until a providential turn of luck casts Scyld Scefing ashore in Denmark. The Geat Heardred is killed in battle without a royal successor,

and Beowulf, who takes the throne, dies without an heir. The poem ends in an elegiac tone of regret for the coming woes of the Geats, left *ealdorleas* – lifeless and lordless. Readers sensitive to the issue of dynasty in *Beowulf* tend to blame the king for loss of dynastic stock without exploring the implications in the text of the queen's role in dynastic succession.<sup>1</sup>

*Beowulf* also provides an interesting paradigm for the role of women in the health of dynasty.<sup>2</sup> Dynasties are founded and maintained in exogamous couplings. Modthryth, Wealhtheow, Hildeburh and Freowaru are all married into foreign households (the only women in the poem whose names are recorded are marital peace-webs to provide heirs for alien thrones). Hrothgar's unnamed sister is married to the Swedish king Onela. Only Hygd (Thought), daughter of Hæreth, is not clearly identified with a foreign family. The "only daughters" of Hrethel and Hygelac are left nameless, though the former, married into a clan of the Wylfings, is the mother of Beowulf. Even Grendel's mother is left nameless, and the text indicates that her death and the death of her son terminate the blood line of the family of giants.

These examples remind us that a woman married into a foreign royal household is an intended matrix of a dynastic line. It is central to European story and elsewhere that dynasties are products of exogamous unions: Zeus and Europa, Aeneas (himself a product of a coupling of mortal and divine bodies) and Lavinia, Theseus and Phaedra, Theseus and Hippolyta, and Tereus and Procne come easily to mind. A paradigm closer to Gawain's turf is the story of Weland, the artificer of Beowulf's armour and a hero of English and Norse poetry and prose. Weland, captured, carried off and sequestered on an island by a Swedish king, exacts vengeance by killing the king's sons, and by seducing and impregnating the king's daughter. While destroying one blood line, he begets another, headed by the hero Witige who serves Theodoric of Bern, and who in English story is a giant artificer like his father. In early Celtic romance, the male progenitor figure is often an otherworldly king like Pwyll of the *Mabinogion* and Melleagaunt of Chrétien's and Malory's *Knight of the Cart*. In Chrétien's *Eric et Enid*, the third branch of the *Mabinogi*, Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, it is the "queen" who is otherworldly. In Welsh tradition, Guenevere is *Gwenhyfar* – "White Goddess."

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<sup>1</sup> Lucan and Suetonius, after them the medieval scholastic moralists, and finally, Jean de Meun, measure the greatest consequence of Nero's cruel life as the termination of the line of Caesars.

<sup>2</sup> In Visigothic communities, the wergild for a woman slain in child-bearing years was substantially higher than at any other time in her life.



One recurrent lesson in these stories is that the renewal of wholesome life out of moral, social and physical waste requires the mediation of a magical fertile force. Women typically mediate that change. In Yeatsian terms, a woman provokes the violence that destroys old life and makes room for the new life which only she can engender. There is an apparent paradox here, for in mediating life, woman mediates death. Not only does she bring into life that which must die, but she embodies a seasonal, or cyclical, principle of time. In the scholastic terminology of the Church, women are empowered with the horizontal thrust of matter along the track between Creation and Doomsday, whereas man reflects matter's *form* in the vertical structure of the universe between God and nature. While woman is matter in time, man is God's timeless stability of form.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, women are nature's agency for providing the succession of life and the reproduction of *form*.<sup>4</sup> So, as a principle of time, women bear the life whose end is necessary to the genealogical succession of dynasty. This dynastic function serves what the medieval Church calls the "common profit" (alluding to God's command to Adam and Eve before the Fall "to wax and multiply," *Gen.* 1: 28), but that profit is lost by premature death or failed sexuality.

It is for these reasons that the urgency to find an appropriate woman to bear a successor incites strategies of appropriation. One such is magical deception such as Uther Pendragon uses to gain access to the body of Igrayne to beget Arthur. A second strategy is the theft of another's wife such as Lancelot's of Guenevere and Tristram's of Iseult, though both lead to death rather than to children. The archetype here is the theft of Menelaus's Helen by Paris which not only incites war and death, but achieves a dynastic design in making of a destroyed Troy the *vagina nationis* of the Western European world. Consequently, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the winning of Lavinia away from Turnus gives Aeneas the occasion to initiate a Roman noble blood line. In Britain, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Arthur descends from the same Trojan line and takes Guenevere of a Roman family for his wife. In short, European dynasties are

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<sup>3</sup> Isidore's *mater est materia* is a medieval commonplace. An appropriate Chaucerian example is the Clerk's Grisilde, who mediates Walter's desire for stability by producing children. Bringing them into time releases Walter from the obligations of time that his people press upon him.

<sup>4</sup> In Jean de Meun's *Roman de la rose*, Nature boasts that she is the guardian and continuer of forms (16791-92).

products of exogamous unions, and when there is a rupture of commerce in child-bearing women, the fabric of the state frays and fails.<sup>5</sup>

Arthurian romance illustrates a number of crucial failures of dynastic succession, and suggests reasons for its rupture. Guenevere, taken from another court against the prophetic advice of Merlin, remains childless, and Arthur's only son is the product of an incestuous coupling, two factors which bring about the downfall of the Round Table. Although the knights of that institution are dedicated to venereal as well as martial deeds, few husband a family. Arthur himself is what medieval commentators would call a *rex inutilis*, one failing to provide for succession; and, despite the sublimity and heat of their loves, neither Tristram, Gareth nor Gawain father children.<sup>6</sup> Lancelot's child, born out of wedlock, succeeds to a spiritual rather than a worldly kingdom.

The social and political context of the fourteenth century lends some urgency to dynasty and genealogy. It was a period in France and England when the rise of capitalism and the loss of land value over-taxed clan unions and incited exogamous marriages (Bloch 1983, 168-9). Noble families husbanded their reproductive resources to avoid a surplus of issue that might delete wealth and nobility in the main blood stream, though the immediate result of this husbandry was unhappy unions, imprisoned ladies and ugly women set to guard the beautiful (Bloch 1991, 169). Mingled with these motives is an urgency to pass on name and land. The opening lines of *Sir Gawain* celebrate the nobility of eponymous dynasties and the founding myths which lend them historical authority:

Sipen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,  
[. . .]  
Ticius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes,  
Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes,  
And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus  
On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayne he settez. . . . (1-14)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In Nordic myth, which the English must have shared but whose vestiges are lost, the giants labour to appropriate the fertility force of Freya, the goddess of love, but their efforts fail before Thor's intractable defence of the gods. Freyr, the god of love, forces the giantess Gerd to be his bride, and the giantess Skadi wins the god Njord for her husband.

<sup>6</sup> Gawain's illegitimate son Gingalein appears in *Li beaus Desconus*, commonly attributed to Thomas Chestre, the author of the Breton Lay *Sir Launfal*. Of course, it is an axiom that the metrical romance was a vehicle of escape from "real" social and political concerns. Barron notes that childlessness is typical to the romance (26).

<sup>7</sup> The text is Tolkien and Gordon 1968. I retain the manuscript form *Ticius* for the editors' *Tirius* since it accords better with *Tuskan* as an eponym.

The epithet *felix* for the eponymous dynast of “Bretayne kinges” of which “watz Arthur þe hendest” (25-6) is more than an alliterative choice. It recalls Tacitus’s qualification of the ideal Germanic king as a *felix imperator* who secures his genealogical line. More importantly, the geographical trace of a genealogy from Troy to Britain identifies the mix of blood in a propitious change of place and climate for the generation of a fresh dynastic strain. This is one sense in the *Gawain* poet’s remark that in Arthur’s court “al watz þis fayre folk in hir first age” (54) and the king himself “sumquat childgered” (86) and animated by “3ong blod” (89). These terms signal the freshness of Arthur’s dynastic potential rather than his youth (he is already uncle to a grown man). At the very end of his poem, with Gawain’s adventure completed and Camelot essentially no better off for it, the poet repeats this same genealogical theme, but without the allusion to dynastic successions:

Þus in Arthures day þis aunter bitidde,  
 Þe Brutus bokez þerof beres wyttensesse;  
 Syþen Brutus, þe bolde burne, bo3ed hider fyrst,  
 After þe segge and the assaute watz sesed at Troye. (2522-5)

One implication of this strategic omission is that Gawain’s Christmas-tide adventure as Bertilak’s houseguest in the far North for nine days has had something to do with the failure of an Arthurian, if not Gavinian, renewal of genealogical lines. In other words, Gawain’s adventures, following what Brutus implanted “fyrst,” and coinciding with Camelot’s “first age,” have to do with the future last age of Arthur’s rule and his line. They reflect the impotence, sterility and adultery which fail family in the “biopolitics of lineage” (Bloch 1991, 168).

The exchange of axe-blows at Camelot and the Green Chapel and the trials at Hautdesert constitute a general challenge to the renown and “surquidrie” of Camelot, a particular challenge to Gawain’s courtesy and courage, and a probe into, if not an assault upon, the efficient function of family in the service of national dynasty. There are no cries of children in the courts of either Camelot or Hautdesert, but the youth and beauty of Guenevere and Bertilak’s lady would seem to promise a bounty of child-bearing which, according to both secular and religious models of family, is essential to providential order.<sup>8</sup> It is significant in this respect that the Green

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<sup>8</sup> For Augustine, *De bono conjugali* (*Patrologia Latina* 40, 373), the three goods of marriage are fidelity, children and permanent union.

Knight reveals to Gawain that his irruption into Camelot was set by Morgan le Faye to frighten Guenevere to death (246-62), and to kill her would prevent her bearing a successor to Arthur's throne. Considering the gravity of this attack on a woman's life and child-bearing function, the subsequent testing of male-centered values may seem but a frivolous bagatelle.

The challenge at Camelot has still other subtle implications. The Green Knight arrives during a celebration of feast and season, though there is no attention among its participants to either the passage of time or the significance of the feast. During the following Christmas season in the North, though there is meticulous observance of the spiritual occasion, there is not even a cursory notice of an appropriateness of feast to the promotion of selective generation explicit in the laws and rules of the hunt. Nonetheless, Gawain's acceptance of the challenge to exchange beheading strokes had thrust him into time. He was granted a year and a day before rendering his life into his opponent's hands; and the association of woman with that time is figured by the image of Mary carried on the inside of his shield,<sup>9</sup> an image which betokens for all Christians the magical fertility of the Virgin Mother. In the period of the composition of *Sir Gawain*, the courtly lady was hailed as a reflection of the Virgin Mary, abstracted as the focal point of desire and "biologized" as a material principle (Kristeva 287).

As noble women, both Guenevere and Bertilak's lady are to be expected to produce a dynastic successor by receiving man's biological seed, just as Mary accepted the impregnating force of God's Word. In the world of Camelot and Hautdesert, sexual games of courtesy comprise the pageantry, or public figuring of private physical coupling (nine months from the Christmas season carries us to harvest, and the nine days between Christmas Eve and the New Year figure the maturation of life in woman's womb). In Hautdesert as in Camelot, however, "luf-talkyng" (927) is no more than *dalliance*, idle banter between the sexes which does not serve the common profit of generation. Gawain is recognized by his host as the "fyne fader of nurture" (919), but that nurture fails to enhance or exercise his nature. In effect, it opposes it, as the text makes clear when the lady at dinner casts seemly glances at Gawain which make him "wroth with hymself, / Bot he nat for his nurture nurne hir azayne [refuse her]" (1660-61). With Gawain alone is the term *nurture* associated in the poem, and the equally telling adjective *noble* is his alone when it refers to qualities of birth. The term "noble," besides designating a coin whose referential value is guaranteed by

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<sup>9</sup> In Geoffrey's *Historia*, Book IX, Chapter IV, it is Arthur's shield, Priwen, which has an image of Virgin Mary on it to give him courage.

the king's image, qualifies things which are the best of their kind; and "to be noble," as social historians point out, means "to be able to refer to one's genealogy" (Bloch 1983, 168).<sup>10</sup>

In the Christmas season interim at Hautdesert, the sexual implications in the contract to exchange things won in the field with those won in the bedroom are appreciable. Since the hunting season for harts and bucks is closed (1156-7), the deer driven past the châtelain's hunting station on the first day are female, *barren* hinds (1320). Meanwhile the dear lady of the castle offers her *clere* body to the reposing Gawain:

"3e ar welcum to my cors,  
Yowre awen won to wale." (1237-8)

No matter how we hear her words, they offer Gawain something of a value-exchange for Bertilak's venison. "Won to wale" qualifies her body as a choice of catch comparable to what Bertilak wins in the field. "To wale" seems clear enough whether *wale* is a verb "to choose" (ON *velja*), or a noun in the phrase "as a choice."<sup>11</sup> *Won*'s dictionary sense of "promise, expectation" derives from a combined basic meaning "place of dwelling," and "abundance, resource."<sup>12</sup> Be it as it may, while we can scan nuances of sense in the lady's speech, poor Gawain's insight into the nature of her world of words is challenged by diction much as the outer array of her beauty challenges it. To Gawain her words are either the vapid idiom of courtesy, a blunt disclosure of her lust, or the array of a hidden intent. Though her idiom is glossed by editors as a simple and courteous offering of an attention to the desires of another, taken at face value it is an invitation to sexual union, the moral intent and natural product of which would be offspring. In the dogma of the Church, the bedroom figures the sanctuary of God, and the bed where children are conceived and born is the church altar (Duby 28 and 225). So, the bed where the essence of marriage is acted out and where Gawain remains prisoner conspicuously throughout much of his stay in the North has a magical aura about it (Brooke 283). Like the garden

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<sup>10</sup> The point is made more expansively by Horrox, who argues that the king's power was mediated precisely through this nobility, as a matter of conviction, courtesy and convenience. By Chaucer's day, "gentry" and "gentil" had begun to replace "nobility" and "noble." See the Hag's sermon on blood and gentility in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, 1146-52.

<sup>11</sup> "Won to wale" translates Norse *vænn at velja* (something promising to choose).

<sup>12</sup> See *OED Won(e)* sb3, I: "expectation of favorable use, resource" (from 1290), and II: "abundance, plenty" (from 1297). In Chaucer's poetry, *won* designates a course of action, or a dwelling place, or abundance and number. The elfin queen Thopas pursues resides in a "privy woon" (7, 1452).



of Eden, it is a holy space where things can go well or ill. The bed is above all, as Chaucer's Wife of Bath knows, a locus of essential conversion rather than of dilatory banter.

In keeping with the terms of the bargain which equate things won in the field with those gained in the chamber, the sexual hints of the Lady's words match the sexual implications of the hunt in the field. While the lady of the manor invites Gawain to choose the abundance of her body (figuratively or literally), the lord of the manor wins an abundance of female deer.<sup>13</sup> Inversely, Gawain resists taking his host's wife, but he accepts her kiss (1306) which he duly returns to Bertilak that evening.<sup>14</sup> Gawain's courtly figure of a knight of the Round Table contrasts with Bertilak's unstudied gestures. Further, while Arthur's knights are like children, the master of Hautdesert is of "hyghe elde" (844); while they are beardless, he has a beard "al beuer-hwed" (845) with "Felle face as þe fyre, and fre of hys speche" (847). The beaver, handbooks on game tell us, is an animal whose testicles are excellent as medicine, and he will drop them on his trail to escape hunters (Barber 43, cited by Massera 11). Gawain as a prey has no such expedient.

Similar sexual implications characterize the hunts of the second and third days. The second hunt is for a boar which Bertilak kills by himself, while Gawain resists the lady's advances again, ceding at the last two kisses (1505, 1555) which he returns to the châtelain that evening. The sexual qualities of the boar are well known in the North as the totem animal of the Norse god of fertility, Freyr, and as a familiar Nordic and English ornamental fertility fetish.<sup>15</sup> It is comically appropriate that while Bertilak confronts in mortal combat an animal of great strength, the lady argues that Gawain is "stif

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<sup>13</sup> In Germanic lore the hart, as the stag standard in the Sutton Hoo tomb furniture indicates, is an emblem of royalty. It is also a fertility figure throughout the Germanic world. Hrothgar's hall is called Heorot; the Germanic tribe which won from the Romans at Hildesheim the treasure known in legend as the Rhinegold were the *Cheruscii* (see Lat. *cervus* "hart"); and the great Sigurd of Norse story (Ger. Siegfried), the *Edda* tells us, was as preeminent among men as the hart is among the beasts of the field. In Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, *cerf* ("deer") is the only food mentioned served Perceval in the hall of the Fisher King (3218-19). Like Bertilak, Perceval is a hunter of deer. His weapon is a spear, while it is Gawain who carries a spear to the Green Chapel (2066, 2143).

<sup>14</sup> The equivalent value of the exchange is all the more difficult to judge, since a kiss given is a kiss received, while the venison given needs a return in order to be shared by both parties. What we have here is a reflection of English contract law which adjudicates the equivalence of goods and services. In this case, the goods are natural game, while the kisses are courtly game.

<sup>15</sup> The boar image on the helmets of Germanic warriors has charm power to preserve the life of its bearer. The Old English word for boar – *eofor* – is a designation for a warrior, evoking manliness, courage and strength.

innoghe" to use his strength to wrest whatever he will from her (1496-7). Though Gawain is her prey, she challenges him to take up the amatory hunt himself.

The third exchange scenario engages the most complex and ambivalent issues. Bertilak hunts the wily fox, an animal low on the ladder of kitchen fare, fetish force and dynastic sign, known neither for the hind's grace and speed, nor for the boar's strength and ferocity, but for cunning, deception and an unpleasant odour. Bertilak tracks down the fox at the moment Gawain is snared by the lady's beauty as she comes to him with "hir brest bare bfore, and bihinde eke" (1741). She takes the offensive by kissing him right away (1758), and before long "pat watz blis and bonchef pat breke hem bitwene/and wyne" (1764-5). Gawain, like the pursued fox, senses the peril of the moment, and so tries to dodge her verbal mischief. For his demur, she upbraids him:

"Blame 3e disserue,  
3if 3e luf not þat lyf þat 3e lye nexte,  
Bifore alle þe wy3ez in þe worlde wounded in hert,  
Bot if 3e haf a lemman, a leuer, þat yow lykez better." (1779-82)

To which he replies with an uncertain smile:

"In fayth I welde ri3t non,  
Ne non wil welde þe quile." (1790-1)

That he does not "wield" any woman is a perilous admission, since the Virgin Mary is his spiritual "lemman" and Guenevere his worldly one. The will to wield no woman is worse, for it counters his courtly role. No wonder the lady takes it as a personal affront; and it also denies the offer of his host, who had said to him:

"3e ar welcum to welde as yow lykez  
Pat here is; al is yowre awen, to haue at yowre wyll  
and welde." (835-7)

In this case, however, we could forgive Gawain for not taking what he assumes to be his host's own property, and his clumsy lie about his moral attachments to another woman might be taken as a generous renunciation of the worldly love of marriage and engendering children; yet he fails to relativize that renunciation by admitting an attachment to a higher idea of



love.<sup>16</sup> No matter how much his manhood has been invited into the lists of love by the lady's advances, the terms of his renunciation of women, even taken as a courtly demur, impugn his sexuality.<sup>17</sup>

Gawain's ungracious remark, at the very least, reveals the insufficiency of his courtly rhetoric to parry the thrusts of the lady's erotic suggestions. If he demurs in fear for "his meschef, 3if he schulde make synne,/And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t" (1774-5), it is because he can only read her verbal gestures and array as an invitation to adultery, and so retreats from the literal implications of courtly dalliance.

Prohibitions against adultery did not dissuade Arthur's father Uther in his pursuit of Ygraine, the product of which is his dynastic successor, but Gawain, like Malory's Lancelot, would seem to disdain sex in order to serve a chivalric ideal, though the pursuit of that ideal, as the Grail quest exemplifies, threatens to lay waste the Round Table. When Gawain resists the gift of her body – if that is really what she means by "Blame 3e disserue,/3if 3e luf not þat lyf þat 3e lye nexte" (1779-80) – she asks for a kiss (1794), but Gawain is so slow in responding that she kisses *him* in seemly fashion (1796),<sup>18</sup> and then asks for a keepsake.

The precarious balance of accounts seems to tip against him when he regrets that he has nothing to give her in lieu of his love. To her credit she offers him the gift of her green and gold girdle, and he accepts on the grounds that its power will save his life when he renders his neck to the Green Knight's return-stroke. The lady removes the girdle from her middle and hands it to him. Though during his first evening at Hautdesert he had kissed the lady and offered to be her servant (974-6), throughout the three days of exchange games Gawain has not freely given her either token or kiss.<sup>19</sup> Instead, the woman has been the pursuer, and each evening what *she*

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<sup>16</sup> In Malory's "A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake," the hero refuses to serve any of the four queens because of his fidelity to Guenevere. In "The Fair Maid of Astolat," Bors explains to Elayne that Lancelot "lovith no lady, jantillwoman, nother mayden, but as he lovith all inlyke muche" (Malory 663). The long chain of disastrous events in the compendious Norse *Njalssaga* begins with Hrut's denial to Queen Gunnhild that he has another woman at home waiting for him.

<sup>17</sup> The word *welde* echoes the Green Knight's offer to Gawain a year earlier of an axe to wield as he wishes (835). Massera traces the testing of Gawain's manhood throughout the poem.

<sup>18</sup> In both Middle English and Old Norse, *seemly* suggests "honourable and fitting." I can't find a context of the term that renders it pejorative.

<sup>19</sup> I have yet to find among those critics who audit the accounts one who tallies the value of the kisses "freely" given between Gawain and others in the hall (1929) as well as with the Green Knight (2472).

has won he returns to Bertilak until a commodity, the girdle, unbalances the service for goods bargain.

By the time the lady quits Gawain's side, Bertilak has caught and torn off the coat of the fox (1725, 1921), leaving the bare body to the dogs. Gawain, unclothed throughout the lady's pursuit and covered only by his bedclothes, is a comic reflection of the fox covered by forest foliage (Massera 30). As the pelt stripped from the fox is all that is deemed of value, so the green girdle stripped from the lady's body is all that Gawain deems he has received of value. After the lady leaves, he rises and clothes himself in blue, the colour of fidelity and of the Virgin Mother (1870-3, 1928), covering his middle with the lady's girdle to save his own skin (1854).

A man putting on a woman's dress to save his life commits an act of opprobrium fraught with more than emblematic significance.<sup>20</sup> He surrenders his manhood, his sexual identity, and his chivalric code of honour. Gawain does not seem to take heed of the difference of power in male and female ornamental panoply, though his wearing of the girdle effectively de-sexes him as he goes off the next morning to receive the return stroke. Were he aware of the significance of what he is wearing, he should rejoice in having been invested with a token of women's life-giving and life-sustaining power. Since an animal's "girdle" is where new life is carried, the lady has offered him a token whose name, form and colour contain women's engendering force.

What I am arguing simply is that Gawain fails to read the full implications of his trial. At least one thing he does appear to feel is the challenge to his manliness, not to the bravery and strength involved in the exchange of axe-strokes, but to his sexual virility and to the language which expresses it. His *kynde* as a progenitor is placed in the sexual lists. The lady's advances constitute, in effect, a challenge to realize words with acts; that is, love-talking with love-making. "If you are a man," her words suggest, "perform a man's natural function, and leave aside for the moment the courtier's artificial and sexless dalliance." The Green Knight's challenge in Camelot a year earlier touched a similar frailty in the link between words and deeds among Arthur and his knights. Now, in a bedchamber, unlike the silent Guenevere in Arthur's hall, Bertilak's lady asserts her gender identity in an erotic combat of words, and Gawain, a lover skilled more in public speech than in private sexual behaviour, and weak in the hermeneutics of

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<sup>20</sup> In Norse society a woman may divorce without question a man dressing as a woman, and *vice-versa*. A man taking on the array of a woman is guilty of *argr* (sexual shape-shifting). For manifestations and consequences of *argr* see Sörensen.

woman's gestures, hears in her words only a lure to a breach of social and moral faith which in legal terms comprises a misappropriation of another's property. If lure there is, it is to draw into contention Gawain's pride in his aristocracy of birth which the mythological genealogies framing the story assert as referential values for founding dynasties. Like the Wife of Bath's Hag in pillow talk to the rapist-knight, she tests Gawain's awareness of the aristocracy of body and soul (Bloch 1991, 166-7).

The curious fact that neither the Green Knight nor the lady are identified by name is pertinent to this chastizing, and it contrasts with the importance of names as dynastic eponyms. Although the Green Knight in Camelot promises to reveal his name to Gawain (408), he does not, except to say that others call him the knight of the green chapel (454). The lord of Hautdesert does not speak his name and Gawain asks it of neither him nor the lady.<sup>21</sup> Whereas the persons of Bertilak and Morgan lie behind the persons of the Green Knight and the Lady, Gawain, representing Arthur and Camelot, should realize in the course of the lady's lessons on name, fame and virtue, that his own social appellation is, like the fox's pelt, detachable, of little worth, and in need of repair.

In effect, both the lady and the Green Knight, like the English Nominalists of the day, would deny the intrinsic bond between name and fame.<sup>22</sup> "Is þis Arpures hous? [. . .] Where is now [. . .] your grete wordes?" (309-12) exclaims the Green Knight when his challenge to the court is met with silence. With comparable innuendo, when Gawain is at a loss for words before the lady, she exclaims: "I wene iwysse, Sir Wowen 3e are" (1226), and then reminds him of his honour and his *hendelayk* (1228),<sup>23</sup> though one suspects by now that Gawain's fame rests solely upon words and not upon deeds. Then, when Gawain fails to respond satisfactorily, she belittles him by adding: "Bot þat 3e be Gawan, hit gotz in mynde" (1293). On the second day, she puts his name in greater doubt: "3if 3e be Wawen, wonder me pynkkez" (1481). Finally, on her third visit, she impugns his identity further with the pronoun *pou* which belies the respect his stature should command.

The Green Knight finishes off the emptying of name value at the Green Chapel when he exclaims "*pou* art not Gawayn [. . .] þat neuer ar3ed for no

<sup>21</sup> Jardine says that the insisting upon gender difference is "mere rhetorical acrobatics" (61), but she argues persuasively elsewhere that women in literature are deprived of identity.

<sup>22</sup> *Bertilak* might signify "bear-game" or "bear gift," and *Arthur* "horrible bear" (*ursus horribilis* is the Latin gloss on Welsh *Artuws*).

<sup>23</sup> Though *hendelayk* is glossed as "courtliness," it signifies "play of hand" (ON *leikr*). In general, French terms make up the vocabulary of courtesy in the poem, while the native Germanic terms always refer to concrete things and acts.

here" (2269-70). The force of the insult is thrust to the quick by the word *ar3e*. Though there is little evidence in Middle English of the sense of unnatural sexuality that the term has in Old Norse, the word refers to a variety of unmanly behaviour such as sloth, cowardice and impotence. It is the standard Old and Middle English term for "cowardice," the word which Gawain uses to lament his intent to save his own life (2508). Though the French and native terms have different stylistic register, French *couart* (from Lat. *cauda*) like *ar3e* designates one who has lost his human nature by growing a tail which he puts between his legs to flee combat. Gawain, then, wittingly or unwittingly, implicates himself in the kind of unmanly behaviour the Green Knight accuses him of. That behaviour exposes the lack of virility of which Bertilak's lady has already accused him.

Gawain has been too long caught on the horns of a dilemma. To have had sexual intercourse with the lady would have been to dishonour his knightly code. Refusing her invitation has put both his manhood and his courtly reputation in question. For argument's sake, let us assume for a moment that the lady's sexual overtures are to be taken at face value and that she would have Gawain use a woman as more than a pretext for courtly dalliance and a spectator for chivalric exploits, but as a matrix of new life for the court. The argument is not impertinent in the context of the entire story, since in his brusque entry into Camelot, the Green Knight exposes the "ar3e [. . .] apel freke" (241) and the immaturity of "berdlez chylder" (280). Such a challenge implicates the natural as well as martial virility of the Round Table. There are no children in Camelot's courts.

Though there are no children in Hautdesert either, the lady of the manor is as ripe for motherhood as Guenevere. It is not unthinkable, then, that Morgan would raise Hautdesert above Camelot in its child-production and the dynastic supremacy of the North over the South, and the exchange bargain which brings Gawain north provides an occasion for an exogamous union. To the question "why not Bertilak as father?" one might reply that the ontology of the popular English, Celtic and Norse imagination of the day qualifies a shape-shifting form under a spell as a de-natured man who would sire monsters.<sup>24</sup> If such were understood here, then Bertilak, under Morgan's command, has lured Gawain to the North to appropriate his virility to produce a blood line rival to Arthur's. So, as Morgan sends the Green Knight to Camelot to test Guenevere's resistance to life-threatening

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<sup>24</sup> In Nordic lore, Loki in a variety of shapes both fathers and mothers monsters. Constance, in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, is accused of mothering a monster.



fright, Bertilak sends his lady "to assay" Gawain (2362).<sup>25</sup> The first meaning of "assay," well-documented from the beginning of the fourteenth century, is to test the nature of someone or something, and indeed the test implicates Gawain's nature, his masculine being, or his manliness. The invitation to a guest to sleep with the host's wife, when the host has no heir, is often a request to produce an heir for the host.

There is an almost diametrically opposed purpose which emerges out of Gawain's courtly resistance to unleashing his sexual potential and breaking faith with his host. Although he refuses the lady's physical body, he accepts an emblem of it woven into a garment which he transports back to Arthur and Guenevere. That is, Bertilak's lady, unable to seduce Gawain to accomplish her own fertile potential, sends a fetish of it to Camelot as a gift. Unwittingly, Gawain had earlier felt something of a bond between Bertilak's lady and Arthur's queen when he first conceives of Hautdesert's lady as "wener þen Wenore" (935). *Wener* is a doublet of the *won* which the lady identifies later as the gift of her body (1238). In the present context the word qualifies a woman in the north with an etymological play on the name of a queen in the south. Since Guenevere's name is Celtic in origin, and the poet plays regularly with the Welsh *gw* and *w* allophonic relationship, *wen* reproduces Welsh *gwen* "white," synonymous with the French word *clere* which characterizes Bertilak's lady (2351), a term which carries appropriate associations of purity and innocence (*OED* def. IV). While it may seem that Gawain commits *lese majesty* in thinking that there is greater generative promise in Bertilak's wife than in his own queen back home in Camelot, the poetic diction conjoins the two women into one being, as if Guenevere were herself shape- and space-shifted into the form of Bertilak's lady.

In the testing of Gawain, then, lies both the mythic topos of investing an outsider with the power and occasion to regenerate a blood line and the topos of winning in a foreign land a life-engendering artifact for home. In

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<sup>25</sup> Though Gawain gives to his host the kisses he has received in the bed chamber, he would not have to perform sexual intercourse with the host should he have done so with the lady. If he took her body, he would only have to return it. In English contract law of the day, adultery was theft of property, and a woman taken from her husband was to be returned with whatever else necessary to make up the value of the husband's loss. In ecclesiastical law it was a breach of faith (*avowtrie*) in the holy bond of matrimony and thus a crime against the Holy Spirit. Bertilak says that he sent to Gawain his "clere wyf" (2351). *Clere* [bright] means "beautiful" here (she is called "þe clere" elsewhere [1489]; but the term also signifies "pure," and so designates the beauty of purity). Chaucer's Parson speaks of the body of saved man in heaven as "moore cleer than the sonne" (*CT*, 10, 1079); cf. the expression "wemless [. . .] and clere" in *Pearl* (737). The *OED* cites Wyclif's use of the term for moral purity and innocence. I have not found the term qualifying a married woman, but it is appropriate for a virgin.

*Sir Gawain* this topos is played out, as it is in the Grail legends, in the visit of an alien to a person and place marked with signs of infertility, and the tests he is given, if passed, restore both person and land with life. The visits of Lancelot and Perceval to the hall of the Fisher King are appropriate analogues. If the *desert* in the name of Bertilak's castle signifies waste as well as isolation, the joy Bertilak expresses in discovering the identity of his guest is a joy of having within his walls a potential fecund force either to activate the potential for giving life to his lady, or to transfer that power back to sterile Camelot. In support of the second purpose, the three-day testing, with the gifts of deer, boar, and fox, are themselves processes of transfer. The girdle itself is a fetish item containing the value of all the animals hunted and kisses exchanged, though Gawain reads it in typical self-reflective fashion as magical armour.

The balance of accounts between Gawain and Bertilak seems to be evened once the Green Knight acquits Gawain with a nick in his neck and accepts the blood spilled onto the white snow as payment for the girdle. The sexual significance of the blood spilled on the day known as the Feast of Circumcision turns the return stroke into a cleansing of Gawain's guilt. With its green and gold colours, which in the chromatic scale of medieval iconography betoken life, the girdle is easily read as a fertility force containing the sexuality of a young woman's life power. The life-value of the girdle balances the death power in the head rolling on the floor of Camelot. In effect, the girdle won and worn by Gawain for the sake of Arthur's court has the potential status of a fertility charm. The bliss of his gain, however, is succeeded by the blunder of the court's laugh at Gawain's shame, and by a jesting adoption of the girdle as an ornamental memorial of an adventure which means nothing to them. The green and gold token of life won and worn by Gawain for Arthur's and Guenevere's expectations of family and dynasty, finally hangs waste on the thighs of lords dallying in the sterile halls of Camelot.

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