Systems of Exchange and Reciprocity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Jane Barraclough

English Department

McGill University, Montreal

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Abstract.

This discussion of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight concentrates on various conflicts in the text. The first chapter examines a tension between feudal values and emergent commercial values. The process of historical change is present in conflicts of meaning in particular key terms used throughout the poem. The second chapter examines how commercial discourse penetrates the traditional language of courtly love. The third chapter discusses conflicting concepts of the self centred around the character of Gawain. Feudal contract and commercial contract were based upon different notions of the self, the first a community sense of identity, the second a developing concept of the individual. The final chapter examines the self-conscious nature of the poem. Its constant references to the rest of the Arthurian corpus are related to the poem's preoccupation with history and historical change.

Résumé.

Cette thèse porte sur le poème Sir Gawain and the Green Knight et plus particulièrement sur les divers conflits que l'on peut relever dans ce texte. Notre premier chapitre traite des tensions y opposant les valeurs commerçantes naissantes à celles de la féodalité. L'évolution de l'Histoire se fait sentir à travers le conflit qui oppose certains termes-clés tout au long du poème. Le deuxième chapitre étudie le langage commerçant qui s'infiltre à travers le style traditionnel courtois du poème. Le troisième porte sur les diverses conceptions du «moi» chez le personnage de Gawain, accords féodaux et accords commerciaux étant fondés sur des notions divergentes de l'être (soit la notion d'identité commune pour les premiers et une conception naissante de l'individu pour les derniers). Le dernier chapitre traite de la conscience propre du poème dont les traits fréquents aux autres œuvres arthuriennes témoignent d'un souci de l'Histoire et de son évolution.

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For my mother

Margaret Ross Barraclough

who led the way

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Preface.

The relationships between the different characters in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight[1] are all based upon some notion of exchange. The exchange of blows between Gawain and the Green Knight and the exchange of winnings between Gawain and Bertilak are the most obvious of these. The act of exchange is based upon the fundamental idea of a mutual contract or agreement between two parties. The terms of these contracts become increasingly confused as the poem develops because there are at least two systems of contract being drawn upon - feudal contract and commercial contract.

Much of my interpretation of how feudal contract functioned is based upon Marcel Mauss' interpretation of what he describes as "primitive contract" in his book The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies[2]. His argument, put simply, is that

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[1] W.R.J. Barron, ed. & trans., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1974). All line numbers will be included parenthetically in the text.

[2] Marcel Mauss, The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967).

early gift-giving ceremonies, such as potlatch, were based upon a highly complex set of mutual obligations and inter-dependencies between tribes. He refers to this system of exchange as the practice of gift and counter-gift. This work of anthropological theory, written in the 1930's, has had a profound effect upon the field of feudal studies. Jacques Le Goff points out in his essay, "The Symbolic Ritual of Vassalage" that the bond between lord and vassal in the feudal system is structurally similar to the systems that Mauss describes:

> investiture is clearly related to the practice of the gift/counter-gift.[3]

The investiture of the vassal by the lord is the point at which the two seal the contract that has been made between the two of them.

The mutual contract between lord and vassal lay at the heart of what we now descibe as feudalism. It is difficult to make general statements abcut what actually constituted feudalism, because of huge geographical variation and the changes within each local system as they developed historically. It can,

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[3] Jacques Le Goff, "The Symbolic Ritual of Vassalage," Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 252.

however, be said that it was a political system based upon a personal relationship, specifically that of the lord and vassal. This relationship has been described as a form of kinship:

> throughout the Middle Ages the relationship of lord and man was regarded as a sort of kinship, never as purely mercenary.[4]

Marc Bloch argues that feudal contract was directly related to ties of kinship:

> feudal ties proper were developed when those of kinship proved inadequate.[5]

Feudal contract had a particularly "moral" aspect because of the personal nature of the contract, according to Bloch's analysis of the system:

> For among the highest classes, distinguished by the honourable profession of arms, relationships of dependence had assumed, at the outset, the form of contracts freely entered into between two living men confronting one another. From this necessary personal contact the relationship derived the best part of its moral value.[6]

He also emphasises the mutuality of the contract between the ruler and vassal:

> The originality of the latter system consisted in the emphasis it placed on the idea of an agreement

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[4] Alan Harding, A Social History of English Law, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 19.

[5] Marc Bloch, Feudal Society Vol 2: Social Classes and Political Organization, trans. L.A. Manyon, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) 443.

[6] Bloch 445.

capable of binding the rulers.[7]

Jacques Le Goff emphasises the fact that it is the vassal who chooses his lord rather than the other way around. He sees this as one of the ways feudalism empowers the vassal, and it is this equality between lord and vassal that is the distinctive feature of feudalism.[8]

The conflict between the mutual contract and the property aspect of feudalism is integral to the entire history of feudalism. F.L. Ganshof's book, Feudalism, is a detailed historical account of the development and decline of European feudalism. He describes the history of feudalism as a conflict between the personal bond of vassalage and the property aspect of the fief, which correspond to the act of commendation and the benefice respectively. "Commendation ... is in the fullest sense a mutual contract." [9] At different points in the history of feudalism, one or the other of the two elements were more prominent:

> the personal relationship was in Carolingian times the more important of the two. A benefice, in the technical sense of the word, would be granted only

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[7] Bloch 452.

[8] Le Goff 256

[9] L. Ganshof, Feudalism, trans. Philip Grierson (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1952) 8.

> to a vassal, but it was perfectly possible to be a vassal without at the same time holding a benefice.[10]

In the later stages of feudalism, however, the emphasis changed:

> during the thirteenth century the property element became the principal element in feudal relationships, though this evolution did not naturally take place everywhere at the same speed or to the same degree.[11]

Ganshof sees in this the inevitable demise of the system itself:

> When [vassalage] became attached to alienable property, however, instead of to property which could be alienated only with the greatest difficulty and which had been simply intended to facilitate the service of the vassal, it virtually ceased to be a personal obligation and became no more than a commodity which might be sold to the highest bidder and whose maintenance was divorced from considerations of morality or honour. It lost in consequence all its stability and perhaps the very reason for its existence. [12]

A tendency towards commercialism was therefore always latent in the system.

The conflict between mutual contract and commercial contract is deeply embedded in the language of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. My analysis of the language of the poem owes a g at deal to the ideas of

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[10] Ganshof 40.

[11] Ganshof 139.

[12] Ganshof 140.

Raymond Williams. He, perhaps more than any other critic, perceives language as an explicitly historical process and itself the site of ideological conflict. The process of meaning is more than a general system of signification:

> the most active problems of meaning are always primarily embedded in actual relationships, and that both the meanings and the relationships are typically diverse and variable, within the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change.[13]

A language does not simply reflect the processes of society and history:

> some important social and historical processes occur **within** language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meanings and of relationships really are.[14]

Changes in meaning are never clear-cut, hence the ambiguity of certain key terms:

> Earlier and later senses coexist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested.[15]

A work of literature is not simply a reflection of the processes of society and history, any more than a language is. It is a dramatisation of certain tensions

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[13] Raymond Williams, Keywords (London: Fontana, 1983) 22.

[14] Williams 22.

[15] Williams 22.

or problems, an imaginative projection that may include possible or impossible resolutions.

I have found Freud's essay "On the Uncanny"[16] useful when examining the reaction of Arthur's court to the alien figure of the Green Knight. Moreover, the process of repression and the final return of the repressed elements in a disturbing and apparently alien form that Freud describes is highly suggestive when examining social repression. I will argue that the uncanniness of much of the poem is caused by the return of certain socially repressed elements in history. Using Freud's theory of the uncanny, I will show how the Green Knight comes to embody all that Camelot has repressed about itself.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight self-consciously deals with the process of historical change. I will begin by examining the way in which the poem is framed at the beginning and the end by references to a large historical context. The feast at Arthur's court which follows is therefore placed in a context of historical change. My discussion will continue with an analysis of the feast as both confirmation and subversion of

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[16] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," Complete Psychological Works. Vol. 15 (London: Hogarth P) 220.

feudal hierarchy. I will go on to discuss the Green Knight's intervention in the feast, and the ambivalence of his challenge to the court. The second chapter will examine Gawain's scenes with the lady and show how they express conflicts within the Arthurian tradition of chivalry. At this point I will analyse how commercial terms are interwoven with the traditional language of courtly love. In the third chapter I will discuss the conflict in the poem over Gawain's sense of self, to what extent he identifies himself as the representative of his social group and to what extent he begins to develop a more personal sense of honour and thus what Robert Hanning has described as a sense of himself as an individual. In the final chapter I will examine various twists in the plot, in particular the ending. The unexpected agency of Morgan la Fee in the action of the poem shows us how Sir Gawain and the Green Knight functions as a self-conscious narrative constantly referring to the entire Arthurian corpus. Her involvement places Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in the context of the larger drama of the destruction of the brotherhood of the Round Table.

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Chapter One:

The Contract.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight deals openly and self-consciously with social conflict and change. The opening fitt of the poem is composed of a condensed version of ancient British history as it was perceived at the end of the fourteenth century:

> And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus
> On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he sette3
> wyth wynne,
> Where werre and wrake and wonder
> Bi syþe3 hat3 wont þerinne,
> And oft boþe blysse and blunder
> Ful skete hat3 skyfted synne. (13-19)[1]

> [far away across the English Channel Felix Brutus on many a broad hill happily establishes Britain, where from age to age there has been war and misery and distress, and prosperity and disaster have constantly and quickly succeeded one another ever since.]

The notion of "history" at this time was not distinct from what we would now describe as "tradition." The purposes of history were indistinguishable from those of myth, in that both served to explain and justify the status quo. The notion of "objectivity" had not yet become associated with the concept of history:

> In early English use, history and story (the alternative English form derived ultimately from

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[1] 3 is used to designate the character ȝ in the Middle English alphabet. þ is used to designate þ.

> the same root) were both applied to an account either of imaginary events or of events supposed to be true.[2]

It was not until the fifteenth century that "history" moved towards the notion of an account of past real events. The idea of history as a continuous and connected process did not emerge until the eighteenth century. Until that time history was always "a history," a specified series of events:

> The movements of history could be and were perceived separately and individually.[3]

The most obvious source for this passage at the beginning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain[4]. Unlike the religious histories that preceded it, Geoffrey's account includes the concept of fortune as a factor within the historical process:

> If the overt regulating factor in the succession of reigns in Britain is God's providence, there is nonetheless a covert, even unconscious recognition of a cyclic pattern in history, a pattern which remorselessly regulates the life and death of

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[2] Williams 146.

[3] Robert W. Hanning, The Vision of History in Early Britain (New York and London: Columbia UP, 1966) 1.

[4] Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of the Kings of Britain, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966). Part One deals with Brutus' journey to Albion, which he renamed Britain "from his own name." (72)

> realms in a manner analogous to fortune's regulation of the lives and deaths of great men.[5]

The History of the Kings of Britain and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight share this sense of the process of human affairs. Britain is established from the ashes of Troy as part of a long and geographically wide-ranging process of invasion and integration:

> Geoffrey elaborately develops and repeatedly underscores the cyclical nature of history. The British nation arises from the ashes of Troy: the first Britons are Trojan captives of the Greeks who unite under Brutus and free themselves from Grecian bondage.[6]

In Gawain and the Green Knight there is an overwhelming sense of the frailty of social structures in the face of these forces of flux; "prosperity and disaster have constantly and quickly succeeded one another ever since" (lines 18-19).

The opening passage of Gawain and the Green Knight describes violent social change as an inherent part of Britain's history; periods of stability have alternated with periods of strife. The world of Arthur's court is set firmly within this structural framework of extended historical time, for the final lines of the poem return us to the time-scale of the

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[5] Hanning 136.

[6] Hanning 140.

beginning:

> Syþen Brutus, þe bolde burne, bo3ed hider fyrst,
> After þe segge and þe asaute wat3 sesed at Troye, iwysse,
> Mony auntere3 here-biforne
> Haf fallen suche er þis. (2524-28)

[Since Brutus, that valiant man, first came here, after the siege and the assault had ended at Troy, truly, many such adventures have occurred in times past.]

Gawain's adventure with the Green Knight is to be seen as one of the long series of events of human history. There is a sense of focusing in on a small series of events embedded in a much larger time-scale.

It is in this context of social change that Arthur is presented in his feudal feasting hall amongst his knights and ladies and it is this social world that is invaded by the fantastic figure of the Green Knight. The Green Knight arrives at Camelot as the court is in the middle of a Christmas feast. The feast performed a distinct social function within feudalism. It corresponds in function to the potlatch that Marcel Mauss describes in his book The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies. The pre-capitalist economic system he describes is one "in which exchange of goods was not a mechanical but a moral transaction, bringing about and maintaining human, personal relationships between individuals and

groups."[7] The potlatch functions as a bonding device within the community:

> The potlatch - the distribution - is the fundamental act of public recognition in all spheres, military, legal, economic and religious. The chief, or his son, is recognized and acknowledged by the people.[8]

The feast is an act of conspicuous consumption that adds to the prestige of the clan leader and reinforces his power over his vassals:

> The rich man who shows his wealth by spending recklessly is the man who wins prestige. The principles of rivalry and antagonism are basic. Political and individual status in associations and clans, and rank of every kind, are determined by the war of property, as well as by armed hostilities, by chance, inheritance, alliance or marriage. But everything is conceived as if it were a war of wealth.[9]

The prestige of the individual, and hence the group, is closely bound up with expenditure. Exchange in these forms of society is not merely material but extends to include courtesies, entertainments, ritual, military assistance, women, children, dances and feasts.

The description of potlatch given by Mauss in The Gift corresponds to the form and function of the

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[7] Mauss, Introduction ix.

[8] Mauss 39.

[9] Mauss 35.

medieval feast. The feudal feast was an assertion of the lord's dominance over his vassals, his clan's dominance over others and an affirmation, justification and reification of the hierarchical nature of feudalism itself. The world of Arthur's court in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Christmas feast which is one of the expressions of its culture can be placed squarely in the context of the self-affirmative feast of feudal hierarchy:

> þis kyng lay at Camylot vpon Krystmasse,
> With mony luflych lorde, lede3 of þe best,
> Rekenly of þe Rounde Table alle þo rich breþer,
> With rych reuel ory3t and rechles merþes.
> þer tournayed tulkes by tyme3 ful mony,
> Justed ful jolile þise gentyle kni3tes,
> Syþen kayred to þe court, caroles to make. (37-43)

> [The king was at Camelot at Christmas time, with many a handsome lord, the best of knights, all the noble brotherhood of the Round Table, duly assembled, with revels of fitting splendour and carefree pleasures. There they held tourney on many occasions; these noble knights jousted most gallantly, then rode back to the court to make merry.]

It is emphasised here that the "rych reuel" of Arthur's knights is "ory3t," usually glossed as "meet" or "fitting," in other words suited to their particular rank. The tournaments that are referred to in the passage are a symbol of the rank of Arthur's knights. The knights are also described as the "brethren" of the Round Table, a term always used to

refer to the members of the Chivalric Orders. The notion of brotherhood amongst knights lies at the core of the Arthurian tradition, for the Round Table was designed in an attempt to diffuse the internal rivalries of the royal court, by avoiding the crude symbolism inherent in the hierarchical seating arrangements at prestigious feasts. The Gawain-Poet cites the Round Table at the beginning of this passage but then strangely enough goes on to flout the tradition of the Round Table by expressly stating that at this court the knights are seated in order of nobility:

> When þay had waschen worþely, þay wenten to sete,
> þe best burne ay abof, as hit best semed.(72-73)
>
> [When they had duly washed, they went to table,
> the noblest person always being more highly
> placed, as seemed most fitting.]

The emphasis is again on "seemliness", the need for physical appearances to reinforce a social ideal. The colourful details of the tapestries which are a backdrop for the high table where Guinevere is sitting serve to reinforce her social position in the group:

> Dressed on þe dere des, dubbed al aboute,
> Smal sendal bisides, a selure hir ouer
> Of tryed tolouse, of tars tapites innoghe,
> þat were enbrawded and beten wyth þe best gemmes
> þat my3t be preued of prys wyth penyes to bye,
> in daye; (75-80)
>
> [placed on the dais of honour, all about her

> richly decorated, fine silk around her, a canopy above her of choice fabric of Toulouse, many hangings of Tharsian stuff, which were embroidered and set with the best gems that ever money could buy]

The feast affirms the hierarchical nature of the society it is celebrating.

Various forms of domination interrelated to reinforce the group's cohesive sense of identity. For example, by encouraging a sense of competition towards other clans, the group could stabilise its own internal rivalries and increase its solidarity. This is precisely the function performed by the highly ritualised joust within the Arthurian corpus. Internal tensions could be defused by creating a fictional external enemy.

The Green Knight is one of many of these enemies that visit Camelot within the Arthurian canon. It is made clear in the poem that these struggles have an important ritual function by the fact that Arthur waits for a challenge or a "miracle" before the feast:

> And also an oþer maner meued him eke,
> þat he þur3 nobelay had nomen, he wolde neuer ete
> Vpon such a dere day er hym deuised were
> Of sum auenturus þyng an vncouþe tale,
> Of sum mayn meruayle, þat he my3t trawe,
> Of alderes, of armes, of oþer auenturus,
> Oþer sum segg hym biso3t of sum siker kny3t
> To joyne wyth hym in iustyng, in jopardé to lay,
> Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oþer
> As fortune wolde fulsun hom þe fayrer to haue. (90-99)

> [And he was also influenced by another custom, which he had assumed as a point of honour, that he would never eat upon such a festive day before he had been told a novel tale of some perilous incident, of some great wonder, which he could believe true, of princes of old, of feats of arms, or other adventurous deeds, or until someone had begged him for some trusty knight to join with him in jousting, a man ready to stake his life against another, each allowing the other such advantage as fortune should favour him with.]

The intervention of the Green Knight destabilizes the central moment of self-affirmation that lies at the heart of the feast. The feast in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a social structure attempting to reinforce the hierarchical values of feudalism. The Green Knight's physical appearance hints at a different culture - low rather than high culture. Popular celebrations were often marked by the participation of fabulous and exotic characters, and of particular interest for this case, was the Wild Man. With long hair and a long beard, wearing animal skins and crowned with leaves, the Wild Man of the Woods was to be found in holiday processions throughout Europe at this time.[10] The Green Knight bears a striking resemblance to this figure, with his long hair, beard and extraordinary green colour. The

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[10] See J. Heers, Fetes, Jeux et Joutes dans les Societes d'Occident a la fin du moyenage (Montreal: Institut d'Etudes Medievales, 1971) 12.

world of the popular festival belongs to a different class than Arthur's court. The difference of the Green Knight is reinforced by the weapon he carries. He is carrying an axe, which was not a chivalric weapon. The fight between the Green Knight and Gawain has to be described as a game, for Gawain would be breaking the chivalric code by accepting a challenge to fight with anything but a knight's weapons. The axe is a weapon that belongs to another class than the knight's. The Green Knight therefore carries connotations of the celebrations of social classes excluded from Camelot's celebration of chivalry.

The Green Knight can be seen as a figure from the popular culture that has been excluded from this celebration of aristocratic values. The traditions of the peasants were frequently associated with the remnants of paganism; the Church Fathers believed that pagan customs were both an inevitable part of the rural life of ignorant peasants "deprived of reason,"[11] yet at the same time they were to be feared as being possibly subversive of the absolute power of the Church. Into the context of a Christian feast steps a

[11] See J. Caro Baroja, Le Carnaval, trans. Sylvie Sese-Leger (Paris: Gallimard, 1979) 305.

figure whose physical appearance does not correspond to that of a Christian knight. The description of the Green Knight corresponds with one of the few existent descriptions of the pre-Christian Celtic warrior. This description of a young knight in "The Dream of Rhonabwy" from The Mabinogion strongly resembles that of the Green Knight:

> He could see a youth with yellow curly hair and his beard new trimmed, upon a yellow horse, and from the top of his two legs and the caps of his knees downwards green. And a tunic of yellow brocaded silk about the rider, sewn with green thread, and a gold-hilted sword on his thigh, and a scabbard of new cordwain for it, and a deerskin thong and a clasp of gold thereon. And over and above those a mantle of yellow brocaded silk sewn with green silk, and the fringes of the mantle green. And what was green of the rider's and his horse's apparel was green as the fronds of the fir trees, and what was yellow of it was yellow as the flowers of the broom.[12]

The emphasis in the description of the clothing on embroidery, colour, fringing, thongs and clasps is similar to that of the Green Knight's dress:

> And al grayþed in grene þis gome and his wedes:
> A strayt cote ful stre3t, þat stek on his sides,
> A mere mantile abof, mensked withinne
> With pelure pured apert, þe pane ful clene
> With blyþe blaunner ful bry3t, and his hod boþe,
> þat wat3 la3t fro his lokke3 and layde on his schulderes;
> Heme wel-haled hose of þat same grene,
> þat spenet on his sparlyr, and clene spures vnder,
> Of bry3t golde, vpon silk bordes barred ful ryche,

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[12] The Mabinogion, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London: Everyman, 1949) 139.

> And scholes vnder schankes þere þe schalk rides.
> And alle his vesture uerayly wat3 clene verdure,
> Boþe þe barres of his belt and oþer blyþe stones
> þat were richely rayled in his aray clene,
> Aboutte hymself and his sadel, vpon silk werke3.
> þat were to tor for to telle of tryfles þe halue
> þat were enbrauded abof, wyth bryddes and fly3es,
> With gay gaudi of grene, þe golde ay inmyddes.(151-67)

> [And everything about this man was green and his clothes were green: a straight tunic, very close-fitting, which clung to his sides, over it a gay mantle, adorned inside with close-trimmed fur, clearly visible, the facing resplendent with bright, pure white ermine, and his hood as well, which was thrown back from his locks and laid on his shoulders; neat, tight-drawn hose of the same green, which clung to his calves, and below, bright spurs of shining gold, on silk straps richly striped, and no shoes on his feet where he rests in the stirrups. And his whole costume was, indeed, bright green, both the metal bars on his belt and various bright jewels which were richly disposed upon his elegant dress, about his person and his saddle, on silken embroidery. It would be too difficult to describe half the details that were embroidered upon it, with birds and butterflies, with bright ornaments of green, everywhere amongst the gold.]

Residual elements of a pre-Christian culture became fused with popular tradition, partly because they were excluded from the hegemony. Interestingly enough, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is set in one of the most rural areas of England, where these customs always retained a stronger hold over the imaginations of the people. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is written in a northern dialect of Middle English and the north of England still maintained a strong sense of local

identity at this time[13]. Traditional customs usually had a distinct regional flavour and were often an expression of local identity.

The Green Knight is the repressed historical past of Arthur's court itself, the "pagan" past from which their chivalric values grew. The Green Knight is **not** alien; he is in fact a deeply familiar figure. He is what has been driven out, made other and strange. In his essay "On the Uncanny," Freud describes the state of unease produced by this simultaneous strangeness and familiarity, and what it is that produces the fear itself. The German unheimlich, usually translated as "uncanny," means literally "not of the home," referring to that which was once known and familiar but has been driven out and repressed:

> the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.[14]

He also points out that the meaning of heimlich is at

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[13] For the state of society in Cheshire and Lancashire at the time the poem was written see Michael J. Bennett's book Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire society in the Age of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," (Cambridge, Cambridge UP:1983). As he points out, "Throughout the middle ages, and indeed well into modern times, patterns of social organisation necessarily remained extremely localised in character." (p.6)

[14] Freud 220.

times very close to that of its supposed opposite, unheimlich, and cites a definition by Gutzkow:

> "Heimlich?"... What do you understand by "heimlich?" "Well...they are like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again."[15]

The unheimlich is in fact deeply heimlich or familiar. This sense of a buried spring is evoked by the Green Knight's physical appearance, its overtones of pre-Christian heroes embody something hidden, a cultural phenomena believed dead and buried, which has returned to life. The sense of the uncanny is also partly derived from the uncertainty as to whether we are in the real world or in a purely fantastic one.[16] The Green Knight produces a highly ambiguous reaction in the feasters. His character is "a sardonic intermingling of grimness and jest. . . he transforms joviality into deep disquiet and then as quickly festoons terror with gaiety."[17] The axe that he carries has disturbing connotations of execution. The contest that will take place between the Green Knight and

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[15] Freud 224.

[16] Freud 230.

[17] See T. McAlindon, "Comedy and Terror in Middle English Literature: The Diabolical Game," Modern Language Review 60.3 (July 1965): 321-332.

Gawain is not a true test of strength but a strange execution scene. The Green Knight is clearly "other" to the social world of Arthur's court. The fearful silence after the Green Knight's departure is broken by the laughter of Gawain and Arthur. The incongruity of this laughter reflects the uncomfortable ambiguity of the game/combat.

The Green Knight is a particularly uncanny figure. He is archaic and fantastic in his appearance and yet addresses the court in the familiar terms of chivalry. There is a dissonance between his alien appearance and familiar form of speech that is particularly discomfiting to the spectators at Arthur's court. With his first sentence the Green Knight places himself within the political world of his shocked spectators:

> þe fyrst word þat he warp, "Wher is," he sayd,
> "þe gouernour of þis gyng? (224-25)
>
> [When at last he spoke, "Where," he said, "is the ruler of this company?]

The word governor had a very specific meaning at this time and referred to the king in his most absolute of feudal capacities, that of jurisdiction, "the power to fix in a final manner what is right and just, to determine what is the law. . . The gubernator

(governor) was he who had jurisdiction from which no appeal lay to any higher court."[18] Not only is the Green Knight appealing to the highest secular authority, he is appealing to him in his role as arbitrator, and perhaps even more importantly in his role as law-**maker**. The governor had the power of legal definition within feudalism so The Green Knight is appealing to the highest authority in the feudal system, ar[1] the system's centre of self-propagation.

The Christmas festivities are expected to conform to the norms of feudal ideology[19]. For example, Arthur is expecting the festive game to be couched in the rules of chivalry:

> Oþer sum segg hym biso3t of sum siker kny3t
> To joyne wyth hym in iustyng, in joparde to lay,
> Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oþer
> As fortune wolde fulsun hom þe fayrer to haue.(96-

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[18] Walter Ullmann, Law and Politics in the Middle Ages (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975) 34.

[19] Ideology has been described as "false consciousness," as abstract and false thought, particularly by Engels in a letter to Mehring in 1893. I prefer to use it in a more neutral sense, notable in Marx's Contribution to the Critique of Political Philosophy (1859):

> The distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production ... and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic - in short, ideological -forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.

I am indebted to Raymond Williams' Keywords for this clarification. See his entry for "Ideology."

99)

> [until someone had begged him for some trusty knight to join with him in jousting, a man ready to stake his life against another, each allowing the other such advantage as fortune should favour him with]

Jousting is described here as a form of exchange, each knight offering his life in the balance, "lif for lyf." It is a game involving chance and danger, almost an aspect of self-sacrifice. A member of the group is making himself vulnerable to the challenger from another clan, which subsequently strengthens the bonds between members of his own clan. The game is therefore expected to conform to the socio-economic demands of the group. However, the Green Knight begins to manipulate and subtly alter the familiar terms of the festive challenge.

The Green Knight's first challenge is offered in traditional chivalric terms:

> Bot for þe los of þe, lede, is lyft vp so hy3e,
> And þy bur3 and þy burnes best ar holden,
> Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde,
> þe wy3test and þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde,
> Preue for to play wyth in oþer pure layke3,
> And here is kydde cortaysye, as I haf herd carp
> (258-63)

> [But because your renown, my lord, is so loudly extolled, and your castle and your men are held to be the best, the strongest of mounted men-at-arms, the bravest and best of human kind, valiant to contend with in various noble sports, and here chivalric courtesy is displayed, as I have heard tell]

The Green Knight makes it clear that he has come to challenge the reputation of Arthur's knights and to test their worth. There is already a difference in emphasis however. Arthur's expectations emphasise the aspect of exchange present in the cultural agon[20], whereas the Green Knight offers his challenge as part of a testing process. He questions the real value lying behind the reputation of Arthur's knights. The question of the definition of value crops up again and again in the poem. Value as a Platonic notion of intrinsic, absolute worth is threatened when value is assessed at a commodity level, when people and things are only worth their price. When faced by the initial terrified silence of the court, the Green Knight mocks the emptiness of their reputation[21]:

Where is now your sourquydrye and youre

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[20] Marcel Mauss insists on "the agonistic character" of cultural exchange in The Gift (p. 4). Exchange is always competitive and inherently dangerous:

> in giving... a man gives himself, and he does so because he owes himself - himself and his possessions - to others. (p. 45)

[21] Throughout the Arthurian tradition honour is an ambiguous concept; the question that constantly arises is whether it is a simple matter of reputation or whether it implies a notion of intrinsic worth. See D.S. Brewer's article "Honour in Chaucer" in English Association Essays and Studies (1973): 1-19.

conquestes,
Your gryndellayk and your greme and youre grete wordes?
Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of þe Rounde Table
Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wy3es speche,
For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed! (3111-15)

[Where now are your pride and your triumphs, your ferocity and your anger, and your bragging words? Now the revelry and the renown of the Round Table have been overthrown by a single word from one man's mouth, for all of you are cowering with fear without a blow being offered!]

The Green Knight begins to introduce terms which subvert the language of the feudal contract. As the Green Knight turns from Arthur and his court at large to Gawain the challenge undergoes some interesting transformations. The Green Knight is at first insistent on its status as a game:

Nay, frayst I no fy3t, in fayth I þe telle . . .
Forþy I craue in þis court a Crystemas gomen. (279-83)

["No, I seek no fight, I tell you honestly...And so I ask in this court for a Christmas game]

The challenge is accompanied by the offering of gifts:

If any so hardy in þis hous holde3 hymseluen,
Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
þat dar stifly strike a strok for an oþer,
I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche. (285-288)

[If anyone in this household considers himself so bold, and is so hot-blooded, so rash-headed, that he dare fearlessly strike one blow in exchange for another, I shall give him as a gift from me this splendid halberd]

Immediately after this description of the axe as gift,

the Green Knight begins to use the language of property law:

> I quit-clayme it for euer, kepe hit as his auen,
> And I schal stonde hym a strok, stif on þis flet,
> Elle3 þou wyl di3t me þe dom to dele hym an oþer barlay. (293-96)
>
> [I surrender it for ever, let him keep it as his own. And I shall stand and take a blow from him, unflinching, on this spot, provided you will award me the right to deal him another when I claim it]

The action of quit-claim would usually take place when two parties had a claim to a piece of land; to avoid a law-suit one party might issue a quit-claim, thereby legally relinquishing his claim to the piece of property.[22] The axe is beginning to hold a somewhat more ambiguous position in the game. Is it a gift or a piece of property with two rival claimants, only to be given in exchange for a return blow? The first description of the axe is marked by images of entanglement:

> þe stele of a stif staf þe sturne hit bi grypte,
> þat wat3 wounden wyth yrn to þe wande3 ende,
> And al bigrauen with grene in gracios werkes;
> A lace lapped aboute, þat louked at þe hede,
> And so after þe halme halched ful oft,
> Wyth tryed tassele3 þerto tacched innoghe,
> On botoun3 of þe bry3t grene brayden ful ryche. (215-20)
>
> [The grim figure gripped it by the handle, a stout staff which was wound round with iron to the end

[22] Black's Law Dictionary, rev. 4th ed. (St. Paul, MI: West Publishing, 1968) 1417.

> of the stave, and engraved all over with beautiful designs in green; around it lapped a thong, which was fastened at the head and then caught up many times along the shaft, with many fine tassels fastened to it by studs richly ornamented in the same bright green.]

Involvement in claiming the axe seems to indicate entanglement in social contracts couched in conflicting terms[23].

Along with the gift of the axe the Green Knight offers his opponent "respite" for "a twelmonyth and a day."[24] As well as meaning "the temporary suspension of the execution of a sentence", the term respite has connotations of civil law, where it refers to a delay given a debtor by his creditors for the payment of the sums which he owes to them[25]. The Green Knight is beginning to use the language of that great bogey-man of the feudal economy, the usurer. The time-period of a year and a day also had particular significance within the context of civil law. It was at the end of

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[23] See Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, "Medieval Contracts and Covenants: The Legal Colouring of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Neophilologus 68 (1984): 598-610, for the process of quit-claim.

[24] See Robert J. Blanch, "The Legal Framework of a Twelmonyth and a Day in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 84.3 (1983): 347-52.

[25] "Respite," The Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed.

that time that certain individual rights of possession came into operation. If unchallenged within that time, a man obtained seisin at the end of a year and a day, seisin being the ancient Anglo-Saxon right of ownership on the basis of occupation. If he could remain hidden for this time a serf would win ownership rights to his own person, he would become a freeman. A year living on the king's manorial land would also free a shackled bondsman. This time-period therefore not only has the significance of winning the right to ownership of land, the most important of material goods in this society, it has implications of owning oneself, of escape from certain oppressive social contracts. The Green Knight is using language associated with the property aspect of late feudalism. The agreement he is making is taking on connotations of a legally binding contract associated with property.

When the contest passes into the hands of Gawain we have the first indication of what is to become an abiding preoccupation in the poem with the question of payment:

> ... þou schal seche me þiself, where-so þou hopes
> I may be funde vpon folde, and foch þe such wages
> As þou deles me to-day bifore þis doupe ryche. (395-97)
> [you will seek me on your own, wherever you think

> I may be found on this earth, and yourself receive such payment as you mete out to me today before this noble assembly.]

The word "wages" occupied very shifting ground at this historical moment. Its original meaning had not been commercial but had conveyed the notion of a pledge or security. Emergent in the 1300's was the sense of payment to a person for a service rendered, which had originally referred to the employment and payment of mercenaries [26]. The term wages was therefore associated with the breakdown of feudal military obligations and used in this context in the poem creates an interesting threatening undertone to the Green Knight's challenge to Arthur's court.[27] From gifts of axes, we have moved to the offer of wages. The axe itself has taken on a new significance as the terms of the contract have shifted. After the departure of the

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[26] "Wages," The Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed.

[27] For a detailed discussion of feudalism in England in the fourteenth century see K.B. MacFarlane's article, "Bastard Feudalism" (Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research 20 (1945): 161-80):

> The origin of the practice of substituting paid for unpaid service still remains untraced in detail. But its most significant stage was reached when the need was felt for an army more efficient and more durable than the feudal host.

Green Knight it is hung on the wall "bi trwe tytel þerof to telle þe wonder" (480) [with its manifest authority relate the strange event[28]]. True title refers to the legal substantiation of a claim; the axe is no longer a gift freely given but a concrete reminder of the unfulfilled nature of Gawain's contract with the Green Knight, publicly displayed on the wall of the feasting hall.

As the end of the year approaches, Gawain visits Arthur to ask his permission to leave on his quest:

> Now, lege lorde of my lyf, leue I yow ask.
> 3e knowe þe cost of þis cace, kepe I no more
> To telle yow tene3 þeref, neuer bot trifel;
> Bot I am boun to þe bur barely to-morne,
> To sech þe gome of þe grene, as God wyl me wysse.
> (545-49)

> ["Now, sovereign lord of my life, I ask your leave to go. You know the nature of the affair, and I do not care to speak to you further about the difficulties involved, it would only be a waste of breath; but I am to set out for the return blow tomorrow without fail, to seek the Green Knight, as God shall guide me."]

"The cost of this case," translated by Barron as "the nature of the affair," is an interesting play on words. In old Northumbrian kostr had many meanings

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[28] W.R.J. Barron's translation is useful but frequently elides over the specificity of certain words. In this case, the legal implications of "true title" are lost in the translation. The modern version becomes highly abstract, whereas the original is very socially and historically specific.

varying from a state or condition through to quality or characteristic. It could therefore refer to a temporary or permanent value. The notion of permanent, inherent value due to essential characteristics remained in the middle Northumbrian costes but was already archaic at the time the poem was written. The emergent meaning was "That which must be given or surrendered in order to acquire, produce, accomplish or maintain something; the price paid for something."[29] It would appear that notions of inherent or essential value are being semantically displaced by notions of market value, something is only worth its price on the open market. Arthur is being asked to recognise the inherent nature of the quest and also the commercial cost of the legal "case" that is taking place, the use of the word in a specifically legal context also having emerged at this time. Gawain is boun or bound in a legal sense to the pursuit of his quest. The system of bound apprenticeship was fairly new at this time and was proving to be the urban threat to the residual feudal nature of rural Britain. It was a social contract not based on any notion of mutual obligation in a permanent and so stable way but a

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[29] "Cost," The Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed.

carefully defined period of service based on a notion of monetary value. At this point in the poem Gawain is bound to an individual other than his feudal lord, moreover in terms that suggest a different set of social relations than those to which he has been accustomed until this point. The Green Knight and his contract clearly represent a threat to the bonds that tie Arthur and his knights together.

Gawain has not been at Bertilak's castle for more than a few days when he starts getting involved in more games of exchange. The exchange of blows is displaced from the focus of the narrative by the exchange of winnings between Gawain and Bertilak. The agreement between Gawain and his host Bertilak is described by Bertilak as a <u>forwarde</u> and Gawain is required to swear "with trawþe," just as in his agreement with the Green Knight. The first covenant between Gawain and the Green Knight had been given authority by Arthur's invocation of the knight's investiture ceremony:

> þen comaunded þe kyng þe kny3t for to ryse;
> And he ful radly vp ros, and ruchched hym fayre,
> Kneled doun bifore þe kyng, and cache3 þat weppen.
> And he luflyly hit hym laft, and lyfte vp his honde,
> And gef hym Godde3 blessyng, and gladly hym biddes
> þat his hert and his honde schulde hardi be boþe.
> (366-71)

[Then the king commanded the knight to rise from

the table; and he promptly arose and courteously made ready, knelt down before the king and took the weapon. And he graciously surrendered it and, lifting up his hand, gave him God's blessing, and cheerfully commanded that his heart and his hand should both be resolute.]

The ancient custom of drinking to seal a bargain is used to authorise the second contract between Gawain and Bertilak:

"Who brynge3 vus þis beuerage, þis bargayn is maked,"
So sayde þe lorde of þat lede (1112-13)

["If someone will bring us the drink to seal it, the bargain is made," so said the lord of the household]

The exchange of blows between Gawain and the Green Knight has been replaced by the exchange of winnings between Gawain and Bertilak.

The vocabulary of the poem from this point onwards becomes increasingly tied up, not only with the notion of commercialism, but with profit. On the occasion of the first exchange, Bertilak immediately demands:

How paye3 yow þis play? Haf I prys wonnen? (1379)

[How like you this sport? Do I deserve praise?]

The arbitrary nature of commercial value is being revealed here by the incongruence of the exchange. Gawain exchanges the lady's kisses for Bertilak's kill from the hunt. The lady's kisses and the kill are decontextualised, lose their value and significance

and become empty signifiers which signal no more than the act of exchange itself. The "play" that Bertilak refers to is paying and the play on the word prys reveals the confusion in values at the heart of the game. The archaic meaning of prys was a sense of inherent value or worth[30], which like the similar word costes, was becoming complicated by emergent notions of commercial value. At this time its significance was being fragmented, for up until this point it had subsumed the meanings of what subsequently became the words praise and prize[31]:

How paye3 yow þis play? Haf I prys wonnen? (1379)

[How like you this sport? Do I deserve praise?]

The translation loses much of the sense of the word-play here, for Barron glosses paye3 as "like" and prys as "praise," losing the ambiguity of his question. Prys could be "praise," "price," "prize" or all three. So, does Bertilak want praise, a prize or a price for his hunting trophies? The question is ambiguous but Gawain's response is very self-revealing:

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[30] "Price," The Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed.

[31] See P.B. Taylor, "Commerce and Comedy in Sir Gawain," Philological Quarterly 50.1 (1971): 1-15. Taylor comments that the pun on prize and praise was a common Middle-English word-play.

Tas yow þere my cheuicaunce, I cheued no more.
(1390)
[There, take my winnings, I gained nothing else]

Chevisance simply meant profit and usually in a negative sense. It was often associated with money-lending or sometimes merely dealing for profit[32]. At this point the issue of who is defining the terms of this contract is suddenly thrown into question. It is Gawain who unequivocally associates their winnings with profit, and from this point onwards their winnings are referred to as chevisance by the contestants and the narrator.

The following day, which Bertilak has spent hunting and Gawain being pursued by the lady, the two meet again in the evening to fulfill the terms of their contract. In the second exchange of winnings between Gawain and the Green Knight, where the play on the word prys is repeated but less ambiguously, the terms "praise" and "price" are drifting further apart:

> þat oþer kny3t ful comly comended his dede3,
> And praysed hit as gret prys þat he proued hade.
> (1629-30)
>
> [The other knight most courteously commended his exploits, and praised as outstanding the qualities which he had displayed]

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[32] "Chevisance," The Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed.

Again the translation glosses the text very blandly, "praised as outstanding" loses the commercial connotations of "praysed as gret prys" of the original. Praysed and prys are distinctly differentiated in this sentence. "Praise" no longer occupies the same semantic space as "price" and "prize" within the text; "praise" and "price" are no longer synonymous. The pun is used a third time in the final scene between Gawain and the Lady. In her description of the girdle the Lady encapsulates the whole discussion of value:

> Lo! so hit is littel, and lasse hit is worþy.
> Bot who-so knew þe costes þat knit ar þerinne,
> He wolde hit prayse at more prys, parauenture;
> (1848-50)

> [see! it is so small, and of even less value. But anyone who knew the powers that are associated with it would esteem it of more worth, perhaps]

What is the girdle worth? What is the price that Gawain will pay for it? By the final exchange of winnings on the third day, the knights' vocabulary is sexually suggestive, using mercantile language to refer euphemistically to the lady's favours:

> "Bi Kryst," quoþ þat oþer kny3t, "3e cach much sele
> In cheuisance of þis chaffer, 3if 3e hade goud chepe3."
> "3e, of þe chepe no charg," quoþ chefly þat oþer,
> "As is pertly payed þe porcha3 þat I a3te." (1938-41)

> ["By Christ," said the other knight, "you are very

> fortunate to have obtained this merchandise, provided you struck good bargains," "Oh, never mind about the price," said the other quickly, "since I have openly paid over the goods that I obtained."]

Bertilak is commending Gawain on the quality of his merchandise but immediately undermines Gawain's confidence by asking if he paid a good price for it. It is unclear what the price is that Gawain has paid for the gifts of the lady, both for her kisses and her magic charm.

It is only at the end of the poem, when Gawain finally meets the Green Knight to comply with the terms of the agreement he had made a year previously, that we get some kind of answer. The Green Knight swings his axe three times at Gawain, the first two times he feints only but the third gives him a sharp nick on the neck with the axe blade. The Green Knight explains afterwards that he is in fact Bertilak and the three strokes of the axe correspond to the three exchanges that he and Gawain made:

> Fyrst I mansed þe muryly with a mynt one,
> And roue þe wyth no rof-sore, with ry3t I þe profered
> For þe forwarde þat we fest in þe fyrst ny3t,
> And þou trystyly þe trawþe and trwly me halde3,
> Al þe gayne þow me gef, as god mon schulde.
> þat oþer munt for þe morne, mon, I þe profered,
> þou kyssedes my clere wyf, þe cosse3 me ra3te3.
> For boþe two here I þe bede bot two bare myntes boute scaþe.
> Trwe mon trwe restore,

þenne þar mon drede no waþe.
At þe þrid þou fayled þore,
And þerfor þat tappe ta þe. (2345-57)

[First I threatened you playfully with a single feinted blow, without inflicting a serious wound, treating you fairly in accordance with the agreement which we made on the first evening, and you, loyally and honestly keeping faith with me, gave me all your winnings, as a true man should. The second feint, sir, I offered you for the following day, when you kissed my lovely wife, and gave me the kisses. For both those days I just now offered you merely two feints without harm done. An honest man must make honest reparation, then need he fear no danger. On the third day you failed in that respect, and for that you must suffer that trifling wound.]

The Green Knight goes on to explain that the green girdle that Gawain is wearing is his, and how he set his wife to tempt Gawain in order to test him:

Now know I wel þy cosses and þy costes als,
. . . sothly me þynkke3
On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede;
As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,
So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay kny3te3.
(2360-65)

[Moreover, I know all about your kisses and your conduct too ... truly you seem to me the most faultless knight who ever lived; as a pearl in comparison with a dried pea is of greater value, so, truthfully, is Gawain beside other gallant knights]

In this passage, the tell-tale words costes and prys appear again. The Green Knight knows what the past events have cost Gawain and he values him "as a pearl beyond price." Gawain, however, believes that he has failed as a knight:

Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer

Of trecherye and vntrawþe (2382-83)

[Now I am lacking in fidelity and guilty of breach of faith, I who always have abhorred treachery and dishonesty]

The closure of the contract between Gawain and the Green Knight does not in fact represent any closure on the part of the text itself partly because of the poem's refusal to answer the question of whether or not Gawain has succeeded. According to his own standards, he has failed and he wears the lady's girdle as a public sign of atonement for his weakness. The laughter of the Green Knight and Arthur's court would seem to testify to the unimportance of what Gawain perceives as his terrible sin. The Green Knight's speech of legal release brings a fictional closure to his relationship with Gawain:

I hy3t þe a strok and þou hit hat3, halde þe payed;
I relece þe of þe remnaunt of ry3tes alle oþer.
(2341-42)

[I promised you one blow and you have had it, so consider yourself paid in full; I release you from all remaining obligations whatsoever.]

It is not made clear what these remaining rights are, but it is obvious that within the terms of the contract, Gawain has not paid his debt completely and would remain the Green Knight's bondsman unless legally released. The Green Knight values Gawain's love of life but Gawain himself remains entangled in

the terms of the commercial contract and derives his sense of personal failure from what he perceives as his inability to pay off his debt. For Gawain the festive game has become reality and the terms of the contract, which the Green Knight points out to be a fiction of Morgan's making, are now the terms by which he judges himself. The final ironic twist is that the girdle which he wears as a symbol of his continued status as bondsman is subsequently adopted by the entire court. It is therefore valid to infer that the entire court is implicated in Gawain's entanglement in commercial discourse. As their champion, his confusion of values testifies to the presence of mercantile values within their own system and their inability to resist the onslaught of more commercial values.

The Green Knight has the role of catalyst in the poem. He is an embodiment of the forces of flux and change that Arthur and his court attempt to deny. By denying the historical processes that have created their world, they deny the inevitability of change. The Green Knight is a powerful reminder of the court's own repressed past and the values of social classes excluded by Camelot's hierarchical chivalric code. He

is also the bearer of the emergent, commercial values of the court; he is what they will become. He is therefore the "return of the repressed" in many different senses. He physically embodies "otherness" and his green colour hints at the natural process that he embodies. As the poem progresses we see how he comes to represent the forces of inevitable historical change and how Camelot's world is based upon a denial of its own historical beginnings and by extension its inevitable end.

Chapter Two:

The Kiss: Gift or Commodity?

It is during the three encounters between Gawain and the lady that the battle of and for words reaches its height. Gawain and the lady are struggling for control of definition both of language and through language for control of Gawain's sense of self. Language is the vehicle for a conflict of values, which initially seems clear, but as these scenes progress the nature of the conflict becomes increasingly confusing. At first it seems that Gawain is being corrupted by the more commercial values of the lady, but as the exchanges between Gawain and the lady develop, it becomes clear that it is she who is being treated as a commodity in the exchanges between Gawain and Bertilak. Who is being bought and who is being sold becomes increasingly ambiguous and with that ambiguity comes an equal uncertainty as to where these apparently alien commercial values are coming from.

The lady approaches Gawain while he is still asleep in bed on three successive mornings when her husband Bertilak is away hunting. By using clever word-play, she attempts to entrap Gawain in a situation where he

has to accept her attentions and be disloyal to his host, her husband, or break the code of chivalry by insulting a lady. The lady's seduction attempts are all couched in the language of courtly love. However, the traditional courtly love roles are almost immediately inverted between Gawain and the lady. The three bedroom scenes are juxtaposed with Bertilak's three hunt scenes, drawing on the familiar metaphor of courtship as a hunt. The lady becomes the sexual aggressor and Gawain the pursued object of her desire. She says that she wants him to teach her about courtesy, the language and manners of courtship between men and women. However, courtesy is an ambiguous term which could refer simply to formal good manners or to the "courting" of a lady with explicitly sexual ends in mind.

Courtesy is one of the five virtues of the pentangle that constitutes Gawain's identity as a knight. Gawain wears the pentangle on his shield; it is first mentioned during the arming scene which takes place just before Gawain sets out from Camelot on his quest to find the Green Knight:

> Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle
> In betoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat hit habbe3,
> For hit is a figure þat halde3 fyue poynte3,
> And vche lyne vmbelappe3 and louke3 in oþer,
> And ayquere hit is endele3; and Englych hit callen

Oueral, as I here, þe endeles knot. (625-30)

[it is a symbol that Solomon devised once upon a time as a token of fidelity, appropriately, for it is a figure which contains five points, and each line overlaps and interlocks with another, and it is unbroken anywhere; and all over England, so I hear, it is called the endless knot].

The significance of the pentangle lies in the balance of the inter-connected five virtues, which are courtesy, purity, generosity, compassion, and fellowship. One virtue cannot exist without the others, just as the line of the pentangle is inter-linked and unbroken. Yet it seems that these virtues have come into conflict. Gawain's obligation of paying courteous attentions to the lady is in direct conflict with his loyalty to his host. The pentangle is intended to represent Gawain's identity as a knight. The conflict between different virtues of the pentangle is therefore an internal conflict within Gawain himself and, by extension, within the chivalric code of Camelot.

The lady is privileging cortayse over all other chivalric virtues as being the one that defines chivalry itself:

... of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed
Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes;
For to telle of þis teuelyng of þis trwe kny3te3,
Hit is þe tytelet token and tyxt of her werkke3,
How ledes for her lele luf hor lyue3 han auntered,
Endured for her drury dulful stounde3,

And after wenged with her walour and voyded her care,
And bro3t blysse into boure with bountees hor awen. (1512-19)

[in all the records of chivalric conduct, the thing most praised is the faithful practice of love, the gospel of the knightly profession; for, in describing the deeds of true knights, the inscribed title and text of these works is how men have ventured their lives for their true love, and for their love's sake endured grievous times, and have later vindicated themselves by their valour and put an end to their suffering, and brought happiness to their lady's bower by their own good qualities]

The lady is using "records of chivalric conduct" to support her argument. She claims that courtesy defines Gawain's identity as a knight, by saying that only by having a mistress and serving her faithfully can he truly be chivalrous.

It is clear that Gawain's behaviour is being evaluated; he himself feels that he .is being tested and is unsure what exactly the nature of the test is. The first morning the lady comes to his room, he lies in bed feigning sleep for a while trying to decide what the situation means:

Hit wat3 þe ladi, loflyest to beholde,
þat dro3 þe dor after hir ful dernly and stylle,
And bo3ed towarde þe bed; and þe burne schamed,
And layde hym doun lystyly and let as he slepte.
And ho stepped stilly and stel to his bedde,
Kest vp þe cortyn and creped withinne,
And set hir ful softly on þe bed-syde,
And lenged þere selly longe to loke quen he wakened.
þe lede lay lurked a ful longe quyle,
Compast in his concience to quat þat cace my3t
Meue oþer amount - to meruayle hym o3t;

> Bot 3et he sayde in hymself, "More semly hit were
> To aspye wyth my spelle in space quat ho wolde."
> (1187-99)
> [It was the lady, most beautiful to behold, who shut the door behind her very stealthily and quietly, and turned towards the bed; and the knight was embarrassed, and lay down artfully and pretended to be asleep. And she, stepping softly, stole up to his bed, lifted up the curtain and crept inside, and seated herself very gently on the bedside, and remained there a long while to see when he wakened. The knight lay lurking a very long time, turning over in his mind what this state of affairs might portend or signify - it seemed to him very strange; but yet he said to himself, "It would be more fitting to find out by asking immediately what she wants."]

From the beginning Gawain is being tested, but it is not clear which virtues are being tested. In these scenes it seems that his value as a courtly lover is being assessed but it subsequently turns out that it is his loyalty or trawþe to his contract with Bertilak that is under scrutiny.

The pentangle that Gawain carries on his shield signifies trawþe so the sum total of the five virtues is also troth. Troth basically means loyalty and steadfastness. A man's troth was the basis of all feudal relationships. His "word of honour," his plighted troth, cemented the system. If a man did not stand by his word or his oath then the relationship of mutual trust that existed between lord and vassal ceased to function. The conflict that Gawain feels

between his loyalty to his host and his desire to live up to the lady's expectations of his cortayse is made completely explicit in the poem:

> He cared for his cortayse, lest crabayn he were,
> And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne,
> And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t.
> (1773-75)

> [He was concerned for his courtesy, lest he should behave like a boor, and even more for his plight if he should commit a sin, and be a traitor to the man who owned that castle.]

Gawain's problem is that he is having to privilege one virtue of the pentangle over another. The balance of the pentangle, its most important quality is being lost. This is a well-known situation in Arthurian romance, when the tension within a set of virtues grows and the balance cannot be regained.

The juxtaposition of the hunting scenes and the bedroom scenes creates an interesting uncanny effect. Their initial effect is to increase the sense of warmth, intimacy and security in the castle. We are led to believe that Gawain is resting after the hardships of his adventures before moving on to his encounter with the Green Knight, but as we discover at the end of the poem, the seemingly safe "inside" world of the castle is more dangerous than the hunt taking place outside. According to W.R.J. Barron in his book

Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered,[1] the sin that Gawain comes close to committing is a breach of the host/guest contract. Decapitation is the usual punishment for sexual transgression in the romance. Barron compares the three hunt scenes to the medieval penalties for treason. The breaking of the deer is reminiscent of "the disembowelling, beheading, and quartering which was the distinctive form of execution reserved for traitors in the Middle Ages."[2] The boar is also disembowelled and beheaded but this time mid-stream which, according to Barron, is typical of trial by combat, which only took place after an accusation of high treason.[3] The fox was also associated with treachery but his punishment was to be placed beyond the community that medieval law represented, "The outlaw, like the wolf with a price on his head, may die at any man's hand."[4] The outlaw, like the fox, could be pursued by hue and cry. In breaching the host-guest contract and proving a

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[1] W.R.J. Barron, Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1980)

[2] Barron 30-31.

[3] Barron 61.

[4] Barron 74.

traitor to Bertilak's hospitality involves a series of savage punishments that are evoked by the contrasting hunting scenes.

The encounters between Gawain and the lady seem to be a light-hearted sexual game but the danger of the situation is hinted at on several occasions. In her first speech to Gawain, the lady describes him as her prisoner:

> Now ar 3e tan as-tyt! Bot true vus may schape,
> I schal bynde yow in your bedde, þat be 3e trayst
> (1210-11)
> [Now, in a trice, you are captured! Unless we can arrange a truce between us, I shall confine you in your bed, be sure of that]

Gawain answers using the same language of war and negotiation:

> Me schal worþe at your wille, and þat me wel lyke3,
> For I 3elde me 3ederly and 3e3e after grace;
> And þat is þe best, be my dome, for me byhoue3 nede
> (1214-16)
> [you shall do with me as you like, and I am quite content, for I yield myself at once and appeal for mercy; and that is the best thing to do, in my opinion, since I must of necessity]

The underlying threatening tone of the language in the poem continues in the later encounters between Gawain and the lady:

> þay lanced w[illegible]rdes gode,
> Much wele þen wat3 þerinne;
> Gret perile bitwene hem stod,
> Nif Mare of hir kny3t mynne. (1766-69)
>
> [They spoke fair words, and had much pleasure in so doing; there was great peril between them,

should Mary not be mindful of her knight.]

The use of the verb lanced to describe the conversation between Gawain and the lady suggests the combat that is in fact taking place. The translation loses much of the sense of the original by translating lanced as "spoke." Gawain is aware of the "great peril between them":

> þus hym frayned þat fre, and fondet hym ofte,
> For to haf wonnen hym to wo3e, what-so scho elle3;
> Bot he defended hym so fayr þat no faut semed,
> Ne non euel on nawþer halue, nawþer þay wysten
> bot blysse (1549-53)

> [In this way that noble lady tested him and tempted him repeatedly, in order to bring him to grief, whatever else she may have intended; but he defended himself so skilfully that no offence was apparent, nor any impropriety on either side, nor were they conscious of anything but contentment.]

Gawain has to "defend himself" against the advances of the lady. Violence is thus embedded in the very language of the narrative.

The sense of the uncanny is explained at the end of the poem, when we realise how close Gawain does come to losing his head. As readers, we are led to believe that the meeting between the Green Knight and the incidents that have taken place inside Bertilak's castle are completely unrelated. However, we realise at the same moment that Gawain does that his test is over, and that the Green Knight and Bertilak are one

and the same person. The only reason that the Green Knight does not chop off Gawain's head is because he did not succumb to the lady's charms.

The challenge to Gawain is to succeed in the test of resisting the lady whilst remaining true to the rules of courtesy, and remain within the chivalric code. Defining exactly what composes the true nature of a knight, is in fact the very heart of the contest. The lady's definition of courtesy is sexuality, poorly disguised as politeness. The lady expects a sexual aggressiveness from the knight that Gawain refuses to acknowledge to be the reality behind courtesy. At the end of their first encounter the lady expresses surprise and disapproval that Gawain has not yet made any sexual advances towards her:

> So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
> And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen,
> Couth not ly3tly haf lenged so long wyth a lady,
> Bot he had craued a cosse bi his courtaysye,
> Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at sum tale3 ende.
> (1297-1301)
>
> [anyone so perfect as Gawain is rightly held to be, and in whom courtliness is so completely embodied, could not have remained so long with a lady, without begging a kiss out of his courtesy, by a hint of some trifling kind at the end of a speech.]

By insisting on sexuality as an integral part of <u>cortayse</u> which is invoked twice in this passage, the lady is revealing the crude master/slave dynamics of

the conventions of chivalry. She expects to be the object of Gawain's sexual hunt. However, she is transgressing the code by revealing her awareness of the power dynamics of the sexual game. She gives Gawain lessons in love-play, all the while claiming to be ignorant of courtliness.

At the beginning of their second encounter, the lady is incensed because Gawain seems to have forgotten her lesson on the importance of a knight "þat cortaysye vses" asking a lady for a kiss:

> "3et I kende yow of kyssyng," quoþ þe clere þenne,
> "Quere-so countenaunce is couþe quikly to clayme;
> þat bicumes vche a kny3t þat cortaysy vses."
> (1489-91)
>
> ["And yet I taught you about kissing," replied the fair lady, "where a lady's favour is manifest to claim it at once; it befits every knight who practises chivalry so to do."]

By using the legal term clayme in this passage, the lady reveals her knowledge of the way that chivalry disguises the elite woman's function as property within her society. This is re-emphasised later in the bartering and exchange of kisses between Bertilak and Gawain. She goes on to shock Gawain by pointing out that her compliance is irrelevant to his courting; after all, if he wanted to, he could force himself upon her:

> "Ma fay," quoþ þe mere wyf, "3e may not be werned;
> 3e ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkþe, 3if

yow lyke3,
3if any were so vilanous þat yow devaye wolde."
(1495-97)

["Upon my word," said the fair lady, "no one could refuse you; you are strong enough to compel by force, if you choose, anyone who should be so ill-bred as to deny you."]

Poor Gawain attempts to recuperate the boy-next-door image of the chivalric lover by insisting that a kiss has to be a gift given freely:

Bot þrete is vnþryuande in þede þer I lende,
And vche gift þat is geuen not with goud wylle.
(1499-1500)

[but the use of force is thought improper in the land where I live, and taking any gift that is not given with a good will]

It is all very well to say that the use of force is thought improper in the land where he lives, but the fact remains that the Arthurian tradition is rife with abducted queens and damsels in extreme distress. The lady is here adopting a role usually occupied by Kay the Seneschal in the Arthurian canon; she is revealing the seamy under-side of Camelot's glowing self-image.

The power dynamics are present from the very beginning of the relationship. Before the lady makes her first advances, Gawain has already offered himself as her servant, an ambiguous thing to do within the conventions of courtly love, as its meaning was often intended to be sexual. During their first encounter, the lady offers herself to Gawain as his servant in

overtly sexual terms:

> 3e ar welcum to my cors,
> Yowre awen won to wale;
> Me behoue3 of fyne force
> Your seruant be, and schale. (1237-40)

[To me you are very welcome, and may do just as you wish; I am perforce in duty bound to be your servant, and I shall be so.]

The translation avoids the explicitness of the first line of this quotation, "You are welcome to my body," and glosses it more discreetly and ambiguously as "To me you are very welcome." At this point Gawain introduces the notion of price which permeates the other relationships he is involved in:

> Bi God, I were glad and yow god þo3t
> At sa3e oþer at seruyce þat I sette my3t
> To þe plesaunce of your prys. (1245-47)

[Truly, I should be glad if you thought fit that I should devote myself by word or deed to doing your ladyship's pleasure]

Barron's translation here glosses prys as pleasure, which avoids the issue at stake here in the text. The full ambiguity of the term is at work here; to what extent does Gawain wish to live up to the lady's estimation of his character? She could be "praising" or "pricing" him and his value ironically depends far more on his interaction with her than he realises. His character is being weighed in the balance and his life depends on his price.

Gawain is consistently concerned with notions of exchange and value in this relationship. The final scene in which the lady attempts to set up an exchange of gifts reveals this very clearly. She requests a keepsake but he refuses on the grounds that he has nothing to give worthy of her, nothing in other words that is worth her price:

> For 3e haf deserued, for sope, sellyly ofte
> More rewarde bi resoun þen I reche my3t. (1803-04)
>
> [for, truly, you have rightly deserved a reward many times greater than I could offer]

She has requested "sumquat of þy gifte," he has not enough to pay her a "rewarde." Similarly, he cannot accept a gift from her, because he has nothing to give in exchange:

> I wil no gifte3, for Gode, my gay, at þis tyme;
> I haf none yow to norne, ne no3t wyl I take. (1822-23)
>
> [I swear I will take no gifts at present, my fair lady,; I have none to offer you, nor will I accept anything]

For Gawain the gift represents power that the giver has over the one who receives his gifts. Mauss discusses the nature of this form of giving in The Gift:

> The bond that the gift creates between the donor and the recipient is too strong for them. As in all systems we have studied so far, as well as in others, the one is bound too closely to the other. The recipient is in a state of dependence upon the

> donor ... The gift is thus something that must be given, that must be received and that is, at the same time, dangerous to accept.[5]

The lady uses Gawain's language of commercial exchange in her offer of a final gift. Her description of the girdle matches Gawain's set of preoccupations:

> Lo! so hit is littel, and lasse hit is worþy.
> Bot who-so knew þe costes þat knit ar þerinne
> He wolde hit prayse at more prys, parauenture. (1848-50)
>
> [see! it is so small, and of even less value. But anyone who knew the powers that are associated with it would esteem it of more worth, perhaps]

Her use of the terms costes and worþy shows that she realises that the price simply has to be high enough - the girdle has magical powers to protect Gawain and Gawain will risk a lot in terms of honour to be able to save his life.

In her essay "Castration or Decapitation?" Helene Cixous discusses the taboo on the freely-given gift within the sexual exchange system:

> For the moment you receive something you are effectively "open" to the other, and if you are a man you have only one wish, and that is hastily to return the gift, to break the circuit of an exchange that could have no end . . . to be nobody's child, to owe no one a thing.[6]

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[5] Mauss 58.

[6] Helene Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" Signs 7.1 (1981): 48.

In this extraordinary and provocative essay, Cixous discusses an economy of the human emotions and psyche which is fruitful for my discussion of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Even its title is peculiarly resonant, when we realise that Gawain's possible decapitation is also a castration, and the outcome of the poem is dependent upon the unspoken sexual prohibition placed on Gawain by an absent lord, distinctly paternal and patriarchal in nature. Gawain's membership in his social group is dependent on a complex, inter-locking series of prohibitions, represented in the poem by the pentangle. The clan-like structure of Arthur's court and its dynamics correspond in an interesting way to Cixous' description of the Freudian family structure:

> the family is founded, as far as the little boy is concerned, on a fearful debt.[7]

Gawain is saved from decapitation because he remains true to the law of the Father, in other words, true to his contract with Bertilak:

> Everything must return to the masculine. "Return": the economy is founded on a system of returns. If a man spends and is spent, it's on condition that his power returns.[8]

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[7] Cixous 48.

[8] Cixous 50.

Acceptance of the lady's gifts could literally mean death to Gawain:

> . . . woman, for man, is death. This is actually the castration complex at its most effective: giving is really dicing with death.[9]

The relationship between Gawain and the lady is constantly defined in terms of the contract between Gawain and Bertilak. The function of the kisses given Gawain by the lady changes in its move from one context to the other. The lady and Gawain exchange kisses, which Gawain subsequently exchanges with Bertilak for his hunting trophies. An erotic kiss is therefore being transformed into a kiss of vassalage. The kiss in the context of the rite of investiture of the vassal derived its significance from the kiss of betrothal. Generally speaking, "the kiss marks the entry into a nonnatural family community, especially marriage."[10] The feudal community is an extended family for Le Goff, "the essential reference model for the symbolic system of vassalage was a familial model, a kinship system."[11] If the kiss signifies entry into a familial system, either by marriage or by the oath of

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[9] Cixous 48.

[10] Le Goff 256.

[11] Le Goff 256.

fealty, then the courtly love kiss and system of vassalage was profane by nature, for the kisses given by the courtly lady are usually adulterous and therefore threaten the stability of the kinship system. The erotic symbolism of courtly love used the kiss of vassalage to signify the reversed power roles of the man and woman in a courtly relationship:

> in courtly love, the man is the woman's vassal and ... an essential part of its symbolic system is the kiss.[12]

Courtly love is therefore an inherently destabilizing force, the lady is claiming Gawain as her vassal, in order to be a true knight he must serve cortayse or love.

The courtly love kiss given by the lady is transformed by Gawain back into the kiss of fealty to the lord. Le Goff emphasises the importance of the mutuality of the feudal contract, "the contract of vassalage created a system of mutual obligations; it was not the transfer of potestas over the fief from the lord to the vassal."[13] However, with regards to the contract between Gawain and Bertilak, there seems to be no notion of an underlying moral system of

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[12] Le Goff 262.

[13] Le Goff 256.

obligations. What appears to be a bond of lord and vassal is in fact a system of commodity exchange. The kiss comes to serve as currency in the exchange. Bertilak demands wages in return for his labour whilst hunting:

> How paye3 yow þis play? Haf I prys wonnen? (1379)
>
> [How like you this sport? Do I deserve praise?]

The cheuicaunce or profit that both gain from the contract is won from nature, in the hunting scenes, and from woman-as-nature, in the courting scenes. The lady goes so far as to describe herself in common with all women as an endless source of wealth:

> For were I worth al þe wone of wymmen alyue,
> And al þe wele of þe worlde were in my honde,
> And I schulde chepen and chose to cheue me a lorde,
> For þe costes þat I haf knowen vpon þe, kny3t, here,
> Of bewte and debonerte and blyþe semblaunt,
> And þat I haf er herkkened and halde hit here trwee,
> þer schulde no freke vpon folde bifore yow be chosen. (1269-75)
>
> [for were I the equal of all the multitude of mortal women, and all the wealth of the world were in my hands, and I could bargain and select in finding a husband for myself, because of the qualities which I have recognised in you here, sir knight, handsomeness and courtesy and pleasant demeanour, and which I have heard of before and now find to be true, no man on earth would be chosen in preference to you]

In this passage, the lady reveals her awareness of her status as commodity and her powerlessness to change

that situation.[14] The inversion that she imagines is only a hypothetical one, in which she can "chepen and chose to cheue" herself a lord. Chepen means to bargain for something and also contains the modern connotation of "to cheapen." Sexual bargaining, she implies, is nothing new; Gawain has high costes and is worth bargaining over. To evaluate human beings by placing them within the context of a money economy is described in terms that imply a degradation of their inherent or Platonic value.

It has been argued that the lady introduces these monetary terms and finally succeeds in corrupting Gawain with them. R.S. Shoaf does just that in his book The Poem as Green Girdle:

> During these scenes, Bertilak's Lady traps Gawain into insisting on private values to the exclusion of his numerous relationships and their attendant duties. She convinces Gawain that everything has its price, and she effectively reduces him, in doing so, to a consumer.[15]

But rather than simply being the evil seductress, who is trying to seduce Gawain into accepting her corrupt

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[14] For the status of women as property within feudal marriage see Shulamith Shahar The Fourth State: A History of Women in the Middle Ages, transl. Chaya Galai (London & New York: Methuen, 1983): 65-125.

[15] R.A. Shoaf, The Poem as Green Girdle: Commercium in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1984) 4.

commercial values as well as her sexual favours, the lady is making explicit the commercial terms which define her in the contract between Bertilak and Gawain, and by extension the medieval marriage contract in general. Gawain has been exposed to commercial values and affected by them before he ever lays eyes on the lady. The poem is far more complex than this argument of Shoaf's admits. The source of the commercial language in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is never made absolutely clear - at different times it is introduced by the Green Knight, Bertilak, Gawain and the lady.

Gawain's sense of identity is the single most important thing at stake during his encounters with the lady. It is how he identifies himself, rather than how she identifies him, that proves to be the real source of conflict. The way in which both Gawain and Bertilak discuss the lady, the bargaining tone of their language, point to the fact that commercialism was not alien to the feudal system of relationships. Elite women married with respect to the value of their property and dowry; in fact, they practically functioned as property themselves, exchanged and bargained over in marriage negotiations between noble

families. The only place that the lord/vassal relationship could be mimicked between a man and a woman was in the profane relationship of courtly love. In Arthurian romance, the bonds between the lover and his beloved finally threatened the relationship it was based on, that of the feudal lord and vassal. It is the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere that finally destroys the allegiances of the Round Table.

The interchanges between Gawain and the lady further complicate the issue of the commercial language in the poem. The lady reveals that the commercial terms first introduced into the poem by the Green Knight are not as alien to feudalism as they first seemed. Thus commercial language functions in an uncanny way in the poem. It initially seems alien but proves in fact to be deeply familiar. The noble woman's position within the feudal system was always defined by her "price," her value in terms of lands and goods. The poem shows how feudalism and commercialism relate to one another. The two main aspects of feudalism, the system of vassalage and the disposition of the benefice, had different emphases. Vassalage stressed the contract of mutual obligation between two consenting parties and

the benefice stressed the property aspect of this contract. The tension between these two aspects of the same system existed before the development of a more mercantile society, around the time this poem was written. Commercial values themselves have an uncanny role to play in the poem for they are first introduced as alien by the Green Knight. However, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify their true source as the poem progresses for they are ubiquitous. The lady reveals how important commercial values are within feudalism through her understanding of her own position in the marriage exchange system. Courtly love defies these commercial bonds between men and women and threatens to destabilize the feudal bonds between a lord and his vassal; the strain of allegiances between Arthur, Lancelot and Guinevere finally brings about the destruction of the brotherhood of the Round Table.

Chapter Three:

Gawain's Sense of Self.

Much of the conflict in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight arises from Gawain's identity, which becomes increasingly confused as the poem progresses. At the beginning of the poem his identity is derived from his role as a representative of Arthur's court, but his allegiances become confused almost immediately in his contract with the Green Knight and then further complicated by his involvement with Bertilak's court. The sense we have of Gawain developing as a personality during the unravelling of the narrative is in part a function of the choices he is unwittingly making between conflicting value systems. It is in and through the figure of Gawain that the drama of conflicting values finds its expression. To what extent Gawain's identity remains bound up with his community and to what extent we perceive him as an isolated individual reflects shifts in these different value systems.

There have been many recent claims that the modern concept of the individual emerged during the twelfth century, that medieval man rather than renaissance man

was the first "modern" man.[1] Robert Hanning, in his book The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance, is one advocate of this point of view. He describes the characters of romance as "individuals grappling with personal fulfilment."[2] He sees "a new desire on the part of literate men and women to understand themselves as single, unique persons - as what we would call individuals."[3] He conceives of this notion of the individual in a highly modern way without giving the reader any sense of where this modern sense of individuality has come from or why it should happen at this particular moment in time. Yet he also claims that it is a distinctly twelfth century phenomena that subsequently disappeared, again without any tangible reason:

> the particular, defining achievement of twelfth-

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[1] Claims for the existence of the modern concept of the individual in the twelfth-century can be found in:
Peter Dronke, Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages, (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1970)
Richard W. Southern, The Making of the Middle Ages, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1959)
Walter Ullman, The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages, (Baltimore: John Hopkins P, 1966)

[2] Robert W. Hanning, The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance, (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1977) 103.

[3] Hanning 1.

> century does not survive its cultural moment ... the particular balance of forces that created the individual focus in the twelfth century court-culture-based romance was modified or destroyed.[4]

Hanning discusses "courtly desires for an ethic of individuality which reconciles private and public needs."[5] He portrays the romance hero as torn between "public" and "private" demands:

> the theme and problem of individuality emerge from the constant interplay between the chivalric hero's inner and outer (or private and public) worlds, each with its own standards and goals.[6]

This opposition of "private" and "public" worlds is out of place in a discussion of medieval texts. This is a nineteenth and twentieth century dichotomy which is not wholly appropriate when applied to another socio-historical milieu. The ideology that "private" and "public" life are separate and distinct from one another presupposes that there is an autonomous self above and beyond the social sphere. The "private" corresponds to a transcendent idea of selfhood and the "public" merely to the oppressive demands put upon this self by the external forces of society.

Hanning refers to "the concept of the individual, in

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[4] Hanning 6.

[5] Hanning 59.

[6] Hanning 1.

something like our current sense of the term,"[7] making it clear that he sees the medieval self as almost identical to the modern individual. In the following quote, he relies on a subject/object dichotomy that fails to describe adequately the complexities of the medieval sense of self:

> The circumstantial rendering of the hero's larger cultural environment serves to define the external world as that which is outside of or opposed to him and possesses a sufficiently objective existence ... to be recognized as the "other" which helps to define the "self"; the individual enhances his awareness of his identity by trying to establish a precise place for himself within (or outside of) a fully developed system of social norms, activities, and relationships. Lacking such articulation, the environment can be presented as simply an extension of the self, or of God, especially in symbolic or ideological narratives like saints' lives.[8]

Here, Hanning tends to dismiss articulations of the self which are not based upon an opposition of the self and "other." The medieval sense of self is indeed often described as deeply involved with its environment to the point where the environment is "an extension of the self." In fact, the complexity of the medieval articulation of self is often revealed in texts such as saints' lives.

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[7] Hanning 12.

[8] Hanning 13.

In his book Medieval French Literature and Law Howard Bloch argues for the emergence of the concept of the individual during the twelfth century, particularly in the genre of courtly love literature. But unlike Hanning, Bloch sees the interior space of the individual opening for specific reasons, to serve specific interests, particularly the ideological needs of an increasingly absolutist monarchy:

> Monarchic policy was directed, during the period under consideration, toward weakening the unity of the feudal clan through destruction of its legal autonomy. Chief among the tactics of the Crown was the imposition of direct ties of dependence between each of the inhabitants of the royal domain and royalty itself, thus circumventing the intermediate jurisdiction of aristocracy. Beginning in the twelfth century the individual assumed a distinct legal personality by which he became less and less responsible to the clan, which was, in him, less liable to and for him.[9]

The creation of an internal space in the subject, therefore corresponds to an internal monitoring system needed by a new set of social relations between that same subject and the state:

> The internalization of objective social relations, their transformation into psychological qualities, is symptomatic of an investment of the courtly individual with a moral responsibility for the governance of himself in accordance with his

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[9] R. Howard Bloch, "The Ideology of Courtly Love," Medieval French Literature and Law, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: U of California P, 1977) 228.

changing relationship to the monarchic state.[10]

Bloch believes that the tool used by the monarchy to effect these ideological changes was the legal system, particularly the move from the trial by combat to the inquest:

> Inquest transformed trial, the mediatory locus of violence within any society, from a test of physical strength implicating the warrior group as a whole into an abstract, verbal encounter between the individual and the state.[11]

However, I disagree that the opposition between individual and state in the later Middle Ages was as absolute as Bloch argues. Neither "individual" nor "state" were completely in place yet as opposed categories, and the medieval self did not operate as a function of that dichotomy.

In her book on the monastic life in the middle ages, Jesus As Mother, Caroline Walker Bynum recognises the complexity of the medieval self. She is discussing religious communities in the twelfth century but her observations serve as a useful commentary on secular communities as well. She sees the medieval subject not in opposition to an external world of abstract social forces but continually defining itself in relation to

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[10] Bloch 232.

[11] Bloch 224.

others:

> My purpose is therefore to place the often discussed discovery of the individual in the context of another equally new and important twelfth-century interest in the process of belonging to groups and filling roles. For twelfth-century religion did not emphasize the individual personality at the expense of personal awareness. Nor did it develop a new sense of spiritual and psychological change, of intention, and of personal responsibility by escaping from an earlier concern with types, patterns and examples. Rather twelfth-century religious writing and behaviour show a great concern with how groups are formed and differentiated from each other, how roles are defined and evaluated, how behaviour is conformed to models. If the religious writing, the religious practice, and the religious orders of the twelfth century are characterized by a new concern for the "inner man," it is because of a new concern for the group, for types and examples, for the "outer man."[12]

The medieval self did not therefore define itself through opposition to the other but through identification with the other:

> The twelfth-century discovery of the self or assertion of the individual is therefore not our twentieth-century awareness of personality or our stress on uniqueness; the twelfth-century emphasis on models is not the modern sense of life-style as expression of personality nor the modern assumption of a great gulf between role or model or exterior behaviour and an inner core of the individual. The twelfth-century person did not find himself by casting off inhibiting patterns but by adopting appropriate ones.[13]

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[12] Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus As Mother (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) 85.

[13] Bynum 90.

Caroline Walker Bynum describes how medieval man derived his identity from identification with the social group to which he belonged. Rather than defining himself by the ways in which he was "different," medieval man defined himself by finding others with whom he could identify.

After Arthur's initial acceptance of the challenge, Gawain requests permission from the king to step forward in his place, to be not only the king's champion but the representative of the entire court. He in fact implies that Arthur himself does not have the right to accept the challenge when surrounded by so many men eager to prove themselves:

> For me þink hit not semly, as hit is soþ knawen,
> þer such an askyng is heuened so hy3e in your sale,
> þa3 3e 3ourself be talenttyf, to take hit to yourseluen,
> Whil mony so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten,
> þat vnder heuen, I hope, non ha3erer of wylle,
> Ne better bodyes on bent þer baret is rered. (348-353)

> [For it seems to me not fitting, as is manifestly true, when a challenge like this is voiced so arrogantly in your hall, that you should take it upon yourself, though you personally may be eager to, while on the benches around you sit many men so bold that none on this earth, I believe, are readier in temper, nor better men on a battlefield when strife is stirred up.]

Arthur is clearly not an absolutist monarch, but primus inter pares, a leader amongst a group regarded

as his equals. It is made clear at the outset that the individual, even the king, exists within this group only to serve the interests of the group. In The Gift, Mauss explains that exchange in primitive societies took place between groups, rather than individuals:

> In the systems of the past we do not find simple exchange of goods, wealth and produce through markets established among individuals. For it is groups, and not individuals, which carry on exchange, make contracts, and are bound by obligations; the persons represented in the contracts are moral persons - clans, tribes, and families; the groups, or the chiefs as intermediaries for the groups, confront and oppose each other.[14]

The scene in which Arthur surrenders the axe to Gawain has the ritual significance of the investiture of a knight with the collective status of the group:

> þen comaunded þe kyng þe kny3t for to ryse;
> And he ful radly up ros, and ruchched hym fayre,
> Kneled doun bifore þe kyng, and cache3 þat weppen.
> And he luflyly hit hym laft, and lyfte vp his honde,
> And gef hym Godde3 blessyng, and gladly hym biddes
> þat his hert and his honde schulde hardi be boþe. (366-71)
>
> [Then the king commanded the knight to rise from the table; and he promptly arose and courteously made ready, knelt down before the king and took the weapon. And he graciously surrendered it and, lifting up his hand, gave him God's blessing, and cheerfully commanded that his heart and his hand should both be resolute.]

[14] Mauss 3.

However, at the moment of the investment of collective significance in the combat about to take place, the Green Knight intervenes and insists on repeating the contract on an individual basis with Gawain:

> Refourme we oure forwardes, er we fyrre passe.
> Fyrst I eþe þe, haþel, how þat þou hattes,
> þat þou me telle truly, as I tryst may. (378-80)
>
> [Let us restate the terms of our agreement, before we go any further. First I beg you, knight, that you will tell me truly what you are called, so that I can rely on you.]

A forewarde was already an archaic term by this stage and seems to have had a mainly colloquial usage but although archaic, it referred to a compact between two consenting parties as individuals.[15] It is at this point, however, that the court begins to fade into the background for the pact is re-articulated laying its emphasis upon the legal significance of the individual's name. Instead of remaining a game taking place within the social context of Arthur's court, the combat is becoming a binding contract between two individuals.

The Green Knight stops addressing the court at large and directs the remainder of his speeches to Gawain:

> ...þou hat3 redily rehersed, bi resoun ful trwe,
> Clanly al þe couenaunt þat I þe kyng asked,
> Saf þat þou schal siker me, segge, bi þi trawþe,

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[15] "Foreward," Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed.

> þat þou schal seche me þiself, where-so þou hopes
> I may be funde vpon folde, and foch þe such wages
> As þou deles me to-day bifore þis douþe ryche.
> (392-97)

> [you have correctly repeated, in exact terms, without omission, the whole compact which I requested of the king, save that that you shall give me your word, sir, that you will seek me on your own, wherever you think I may be found on this earth, and yourself receive such payment as you mete out to me today before this noble assembly]

It is here for the first time that the word covenant appears in the Green Knight's challenge and only now when Gawain has agreed to represent his court and monarch is it made explicit that what he has entered into is going to conflict with those very bonds that he is supposed to defend. From now on Gawain is no longer interchangeable with any other knight of Arthur's retinue within the terms of the Green Knight's agreement. In the quotation above, the syntax of the Green Knight's sentence is broken by his constant reiteration of "thou":

> þat þou schal seche me þiself, where-so þou hopes
> I may be funde vpon folde . . . (395-96)

> [that you will seek me on your own, wherever you think I may be found on this earth]

The Green Knight demands that Gawain shall embark on the search **himself** to fetch **himself** such wages as he deserves. The emphasis on Gawain as an individual is

heightened by this reiteration.

In this passage, the Green Knight is requiring Gawain to swear, not upon his allegiance to his king, but upon his troth, his word of honour. Troth, like many other key words in this text, was undergoing subtle changes in emphasis during the period in which Gawain and the Green Knight was written. Prior to the fourteenth century it referred to the relationship between a person and a contract. It meant the disposition to be true to a person, principle or cause. The Green Knight is therefore demanding that Gawain be true to him and their contract before considering his ties of allegiance to Arthur and Camelot. Thus even in its older meaning troth could provide a threat to the stability of feudal ties. This notion of troth or "truth" was based on the person's relations and ties with others. At this time however the word was becoming more abstract. It no longer simply referred to loyalty to a specific person or cause but implied an interiority in the subject it was used to describe. It began to mean truthfulness in an abstract sense, honesty, uprightness and righteousness

as characteristics of particular people.[16] Rather than being a function of a certain situation, troth is becoming a personal characteristic. Therefore, by appealing to Gawain's troth the Green Knight is implicating him in an agreement which would seem to exclude Arthur's court, which was the initial object of the test.

Troth had come to refer to a personal form of oath-taking which replaced an earlier form of oath more closely tied to the community as a whole. In his book A Social History of English Law[17], Alan Harding describes the movement from a legal system in which the group is responsible for the actions of the individual to a system which treats the individual as an isolated entity. In the feudal trial the defendant had to rely upon oath-helpers to swear to the reliability of his oath that he was innocent. One's ability to swear an oath was tied up closely with one's standing in the community:

> The opinion of the neighbours always prevailed, and a trial was a test of character: the question was, "can the oath of the defendant be relied

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[16] J. A. Burrow discusses the meanings of troth in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965) 43.

[17] Alan Harding, A Social History of English Law, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966)

upon?[18]

Eleventh century kings tried to keep order by putting the whole community in the place of kin, making it responsible for a man's behaviour.

It is also at this point that commercial discourse first enters the poem. The Green Knight insists that it be Gawain and no other who comes to seek him out at the Green Chapel to collect his "wages." As I pointed out in the first chapter the word wages was originally used to refer to the payment of mercenaries and was associated with the breakdown of feudal military obligations. In the 1300's it referred to payment to a person for a service rendered. It is therefore appropriate that its appearance should coincide with that of language referring to a more individualistic ideology of selfhood.

It is made clear that Bertilak is a feudal lord in his own right. In fact the size of his court rivals that of Arthur himself. A relationship is established between Bertilak and Gawain through the medium of the exchange of winnings game. The terms in which that playful contract is established define the relationship between them as a whole. Bertilak appeals

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[18] Harding 22.

to Gawain not as a representative of Arthur's court but as an isolated individual and Gawain increasingly comes to identify himself in the same way. The contract between them is based upon troth, Gawain's personal word of honour:

> "3et firre," quoþ þe freke, "a forwarde we make:
> Qat-so-euer I wynne in þe wod hit worþe3 to youre3,
> And quat chek so 3e acheue chaunge me þerforne.
> Swete, swap we so - sware with trawþe -
> Queþer, leude, so lymp, lere oþer better." (1105-09)
>
> ["Moreover," said the lord, "let us make an agreement: whatever I take in the woods shall become yours, and whatever fortune you come by here, give it to me in exchange for that. Good sir, let us exchange in this way - swear it honestly - whether, sir, we gain or lose by it."]

The word troth is constantly present throughout their dealings. Gawain returns the kisses he has won from the lady to Bertilak, placing heavy emphasis upon the oath he has sworn:

> "Hit is sothe," quoþ þe segge, "and as siker trwe
> Alle my get I schal you gif agayn, bi my trawþe."
> (1637-38)
> ["That is true," said the knight, "and just as faithfully, upon my word, I shall give you all my winnings in exchange.]

Within the feudal system of mutual obligation the notion of franchise meant the freedom of or full membership of a body corporate or politic; it conveyed the sense of some kind of citizenship. Freedom was therefore defined as inclusion within a community; to

be outlawed from this community was regarded as a form of slavery, a state of non-existence in terms of the law. However, at this time various connotations of the word franchise were emerging which were in fact in direct conflict with this concept of freedom. Franchise was coming to mean special rights held by individuals above and beyond normal community rights. Franchise meant immunity and privilege, sometimes specifically freedom or licence of speech or manners. In other words freedom was becoming associated with the right to differentiate oneself from the community. In this sense it was creating an interiority within the self; franchise was coming to be seen as a personal characteristic because it also referred to nobility of mind, liberality, generosity and magnanimity. These qualities posit a self which must judge and choose. It is no longer a general characteristic of all members of a community but a quality that some individuals inherently possess and others do not.

The concept of fellowship contains similar contradictions. Its archaic meaning simply conveyed a general notion of participation in anything from an action to a condition. It meant any kind of

communication and dealings with another. During the feudal period it specifically referred to partnership or membership in a society. The modern political meaning emerged around the time Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was written. Fellowship came to mean an alliance of any kind; again the notion of personal, social and political **choice** is entering the semantics of the word. Pity had a strong connotation of compassion, of experiencing another's pain with him, and therefore of powerful identification with others. It is perhaps the least ambiguous of these terms. One of the highest virtues in a knight is his ability to identify with others rather than differentiate himself from them.

By the time Gawain reaches the Green Chapel to meet with the Green Knight, he has subtly changed and his perception of his role in the challenge has also changed. When the Green Knight reveals to him that he is in fact Bertilak in disguise and that the test has already taken place, Gawain is mortified. In accepting the girdle from the lady, not giving it to Bertilak as promised and finally receiving a nick on the neck from the Green Knight's axe, Gawain feels that he has betrayed his trawþe:

Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer

Of trecherye and vntrawþe - boþe bityde sor3e and care! (2382-84)

[Now I am lacking in fidelity and guilty of breach of faith, I who have always abhorred treachery and dishonesty - may sorrow and care befall both of them!]

Gawain wears the lady's girdle as a sign to himself and to the world of his breach of faith, as "þe token of vntrawþe." On his return to Camelot, however, he finds his companions of the Round Table refuse to take him seriously:

þe kyng comforte3 þe kny3t, and alle þe court als
La3en loude þerat and luflyly acordeṅ
þat lordes and ledes þat longed to þe Table,
Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
A bende abelef hym aboute of a bry3t grene,
And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were. (2513-18)

[The king consoled the knight, and all the court likewise laughed loudly over it, and agreed for friendship's sake that the lords and knights who belonged to the Round Table, every member of the brotherhood, should have a baldric, a band of bright green worn crosswise about him, and, for the knight's sake, to wear it just like him.]

This final twist of significance is interesting. What to Gawain is mourned as a personal failure, is celebrated by the court as a success for the brotherhood. What is worn as a symbol of shame by one individual is worn as a token of pride by the group as a whole.

Whether or not Gawain accepts the commercial

discourse that he is increasingly surrounded by, is closely linked to how he identifies himself. As a representative of Arthur's court, he identifies himself as a member of a group representing their values and interests. He identifies himself through his relations to others, in particular his relationship to his feudal lord, Arthur. The more commercial contract that he establishes with Bertilak depends upon Gawain having a sense of separate, almost individual, identity. The language of commercial contract is usually closely associated in the text with concepts such as troth, which indicate a more isolated notion of the self.

Chapter Four:

The Text Within The Text.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a highly self-conscious poem. It draws attention to its own status as text by leading the reader through a contorted series of narrative twists. The events of the poem form a tight pattern of related situations, which qualify and shed light upon one another. Gawain's relationship with Arthur is qualified and called into question by the intervention of the Green Knight. His feudal contract with Arthur is questioned by the more commercial nature of his contract with the Green Knight, which in turn is qualified by his contract of exchange with Bertilak, which of course affects his relationship with the lady. Gawain's relationship with the lady is constantly returned to the context of the exchange with Bertilak at the end of each day. This constant process of reassessment is characteristic of the reader's progress through Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. There are various incongruities and anachronisms in the text that further complicate this process of assessment.

Morgan la Fay's involvement at the end of the poem functions as a narrative device which leads to a complete reassessment of the action of the poem. Gawain is told by the Green Knight at the Green Chapel that both his testing by the Green Knight and by Bertilak has been part of a plan by Morgan la Fay to test the true value of the knights of Camelot. Many critics disapprove of this final twist in the plot; it seems to be nothing more than the intervention of an arbitrary "dea ex machina". J. Eadie's comment in his essay "Morgain la Fee and the Conclusion of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" is characteristic of this viewpoint:

> Most people on reading the poem find these lines more than a trifle incongruous, because they appear to contribute nothing to the meaning and may even be said to detract from the high moral tone of the poem in that Gawain's moral pilgrimage is revealed finally to be no more than a small part of a sordid personal vendetta.[1]

However, the brief mention of Morgan la Fay at the end of the poem has serious implications for the entire action of the poem. It is the culmination of the series of re-evaluations that are demanded of the reader. It returns us from the strange world of

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[1] J. Eadie, "Morgain la Fee and the Conclusion of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Neophilologus 52 (1968): 299.

Bertilak's fairy-like castle and the Green Chapel to the original social context of the poem, the court of King Arthur. What seems to have become a test of Gawain's personal honour is returned to a more collective context. Whilst appearing to move towards more "individual" responses and sense of personal identity, it becomes obvious that Gawain has all along been considered as nothing more or less than a representative of Arthur's court.

Morgan la Fay is an interesting figure to choose to perform this function. She is in a sense the forbidden motif of the later Arthurian romance. She is the exile from Arthur's court, in some retellings of the story his own half-sister, unheimlich because of her very familiar and familial status.[2] Her antagonistic, possibly incestuous relationship with Arthur, is half-revealed in this poem by her jealousy towards Guinevere. This act of incest is the half-articulated

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[2] Geoffrey of Monmouth first identifies Mordred as the son of Arthur's sister Anna and thus brother of Gawain. The Vulgate Mort Artu (ca. 1215-35) makes Mordred the issue of Arthur's incest with his half-sister Morgause, though the couple are unaware of the relationship at the time. In the Suite du Merlin (13th century), Arthur unsuccessfully arranges for his infant son to be exposed in a boat.

Morgan Le Fay was always closely associated, even interchangeable with Morgause. Chretian de Troyes first notes Morgan's relationship as Arthur's sister.

taboo at the heart of the Arthurian tradition. For her to be testing the virtue of Arthur's court is a strange paradox, to say the very least. This paradox is part of the large-scale structural reversal that her involvement implies. The uncanniness, seeming "otherness" of the figure of the Green Knight, is revealed to be deeply familiar, produced by the enchantment of Arthur's lover and sister, and Gawain's own aunt. The Green Knight is in fact Bertilak, whose court within the fairy castle[3], is strongly reminiscent of Arthur's court, which Gawain has left behind him. The effect of this constant juxtaposition of the "real" and "other" worlds is to question the immutability of Gawain's values, and hence the values of Arthur's court. Morgan's influence upon the events of the poem is only perceived retrocactively which has the effect of throwing into question the apparent autonomy of Gawain's actions. The "game" of Sir Gawain

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[3] The association of Bertilak's castle with the fairy other world is discussed in Mother Angela Carson's article "Morgan la Fee as the Principle of Unity in Gawain and the Green Knight" in the Modern Language Quarterly 23 (1962): 3-16. The miraculous appearance of the castle, the crossing of water and the presence of oak, hazel and hawthorne trees, the traditional composition of the fairy wood, are all cited as evidence that Gawain is crossing the boundary into the "other" world of fairy.

and the Green Knight takes on the disturbing nature of fatalistic manipulation. Morgan is described as a fairy but also as a goddess:

> Morgne þe goddes
> þerfore hit is hir name. (2452-53)
>
> [so Morgan the goddess is her name]

The goddess Fortuna is subtly invoked but also the Celtic triad of goddesses of late, embraced under the one name of Morrigan.[4] The involvement of Morgan threatens to deprive Gawain's actions of their autonomy and makes the action of the poem merely an inevitable episode in the larger cycle of events that compose the history of Camelot.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight makes constant references to its status as one text among many in the Arthurian tradition. Written late on in this tradition, the poem is itself a comment upon the Arthurian romance. The idea that the poem is a reflection upon the whole Arthurian myth is a common one. As Moorman has suggested the poem is "not simply

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[4] In his article "Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" in Speculum 35 (1960): 260-274, Albert B. Friedman refers to:

> the conflicting portraits of Morgan handed down by tradition: the beautiful healer, the beautiful witch, the ugly witch.

These were in fact always perceived as different aspects of the same figure.

an isolated adventure of Gawain, but a highly compressed allegorical commentary on the entire Arthurian history."[5] The conflict of social ties experienced by Gawain, undermined further by the possibility of sexual infidelity foreshadows the experiences of Lancelot and Guinevere. The poem serves as a microcosm of the forces that eventually shatter the brotherhood of the Round Table. I have already discussed the way in which the condensed "history" of Britain framing the poem, places it within a context of social and political flux; this also creates a sense of nostalgia for a lost world, immediately reminding the poet's audience of the end of Camelot at the very beginning of the poem:

> Bot of alle þat here bult of Bretaygne kynges
> Ay wat3 Arthur þe hendest, as I haf herde telle.
> (25-26)
> [But of all who lived here, of the kings of Britain, Arthur, as I've heard tell, was the noblest ever.]

Invoking the name of Morgan at the end of the poem returns us to this sense of sad fatalism present from the very beginning.

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[5] See Charles Moorman, "Myth and Medieval Literature: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Medieval Studies 18 (1956): 172.

At the beginning of the poem Arthur's court is presented in the youth and joyfulness of its early days. Arthur himself is an energetic and enthusiastic youth:

> He wat3 so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered:
> His lif liked hym ly3t, he louied þe lasse
> Auþer to longe lye or to longe sitte,
> So bisied him his 3onge blod and his brayn wylde. (86-89)
>
> [he was so youthfully light-hearted, and rather boyish: he liked an active life, and was all the less wiiling either to lie idle or to sit still for long, his youthful blood and restless brain stirred him so.]

The Green Knight mocks the company of knights for their youth and inexperience:

> Nay, frayst I no fy3t, in fayth I pe telle.
> Hit arn aboute on þis bench bot berdle3 chylder. (279-80)
>
> [No, I seek no fight, I tell you honestly. There are none but beardless boys on these benches round about]

Gawain requests the contest using a modesty topos of elevated which at the same time, on the literal level, emphasises his inexperience:

> I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest,
> And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes þe soþe. (354-55)
>
> [I am the weakest, I know, and the most deficient in understanding, and my life would be the smallest loss, if the truth be known.]

This is an interesting contradiction to the convention throughout the Arthurian tradition of Gawain as the experienced knight who takes the newcomers to the court under his tutelage. The traditional stability and high moral seriousness of the mature Arthur are thrown into relief by this playful and festive variant of Arthur. But the curious anachronisms that become a characteristic of this poem are already evident, for despite their obvious inexperience the renown of the Round Table is already widespread:

> "What, is þis Arþures hous," quoþ þe haþel þenne,
> Þat al þe rous rennes of þur3 ryalmes so mony?"
> (309-10)
> ["What! is this Arthur's house," said the man then, "about which all the talk runs through so many realms?"]

A good question - is this what we think of as Arthur's house, which has renown throughout so many realms?

The sense of anachronism becomes even more exaggerated when Gawain arrives at Bertilak's castle. Gawain is sent out by Arthur's court as an untried knight[6], emphasised by the new coat of arms he bears:

> Forþy þe pentangel nwe
> He ber in schelde and cote,
> As tulk of tale most trwe
> And gentylest kn3t of lote. (636-39)

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[6] I am indebted for this part of my discussion to M. Victoria Guerin's thesis "Mordred's Hidden Presence: The Skeleton in the Arthurian Closet." (Yale: 1985)

[For this reason he bore the pentangle newly painted upon shield and surcoat, as being a man most true to his word and in bearing the noblest of knights.]

Mysteriously, and impossibly, Gawain's reputation has preceded him, not only as a knight but also as a courtly lover:

And alle þe men in þat mote maden much joye
To apere in his presense prestly þat tyme
þat alle prys and prowes and pured þewes
Apendes to hys persoun, and praysed is euer;
Byfore alle men vpon molde his mensk is þe most.
Vch segge ful softly sayde to his fere:
"Now schal we semlych se sle3te3 of þewe3
And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble;
Wich spede is in speche, vnspurd may we lerne,
Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture.
God hat3 geuen vus his grace godly for soþe,
þat such a gest as Gawan graunte3 vus to haue,
When burne3 blyþe of his burþe schal sitte
and synge.
In menyng of manere3 mere
þis burne now schal vus bryng;
I hope þat may hym here
Schal lerne of luf-talkyng." (910-27)

[and all the people in the castle took great delight in appearing as quickly as possible in his presence to whose person belong all excellence and prowess and refined conduct, and who is praised perpetually, above all mortal men his reputation is pre-eminent. Each one said quietly to his neighbour: "Now we shall have the pleasure of seeing masterly displays of good manners and hearing the polished phrases of courtly discourse; we can learn without inquiry what profit there is in the art of conversation, since we have welcomed here this perfect master of good-breeding. God has indeed graciously favoured us, in permitting us to have such a guest as Gawain, at the season when men are to sit singing with joy at His birth. This man will now instruct us in the appreciation of refined behaviour; I believe that whoever has the opportunity of hearing him will learn something of

the language of love."]

Benson points out the dissonance between the poet's Gawain and the Gawain of the received Arthurian corpus:

> Whereas the poet had to create the Green Knight, Gawain came to him fully formed by the tradition, complete with a set of conventional characteristics so well known that the poet could play upon them, defining his hero through the interplay of the traditional Gawain and the Gawain of the poem.[7]

There is a certain teasing humour in poor Gawain's situation; Bertilak's lady is obviously expecting to be seduced by some experienced man of the world:

> For I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wowen 3e are,
> þat alle þe worlde worchipe3 quere-so 3e ride;
> Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely praysed
> With lorde3, wyth ladyes, with alle þat lyf bere.
> (1226-29)
> [For, indeed, I know very well you are Sir Gawain, whom all the world reveres wherever you ride; your honour, your courtly reputation are handsomely praised by lords and ladies, by all men whatsoever.]

Gawain's obvious embarrassment at her sexual advances adds to the comedy in the situation. His answer is interesting in its ambiguity:

> "In god fayth," quoþ Gawayn, "gayn hit me þynkke3,
> þat I be not now he þat 3e of speken
> To reche to such reuerence as 3e reherce here
> I am wy3e unworþy, I wot wel myseluen." (1241-44)

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[7] Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1965) 95.

["Really and truly," said Gawain, "this seems to me very agreeable, even though I may not be now the man you speak of; I am unworthy to attain such an honour as you have just mentioned, I myself know very well.]

Gawain is not **now** the man the lady speaks of but he will be; he has stepped into the text of his own future. "I wot wel myseluen" has been glossed as "I myself know very well"[8] but in fact could just as well be "I know myself very well." The use of the verb "reherce" is also interesting; it implies practice for an as yet unperformed event.

I have already commented on the familiarity of Bertilak's court, its similarity to Arthur's court despite the fact that it is housed within a fairy castle. There is an interesting difference within that similarity, however. Bertilak is the enthusiastic leader of his court's revels in much the same way as Arthur is but it is continually emphasised that he is older:

A hoge haþel for þe none3 and of hyghe eldee
Brode, bry3t, wat3 his berde, and al beuer-hwed.
(844-45)
[a huge man, indeed, and of mature age; broad and bright was his beard, and all of a beaver-hue]

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[8] Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, trans. W.R.J. Barron (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1974) 93.

The contrast is immediately made with the beardless knights of Camelot. When we realise at the end of the poem that the old lady at Bertilak's court is Morgan, Arthur's sister, the strange disparity between Arthur's youthfulness and her extreme age becomes obvious. Bertilak's castle is clearly another Camelot[9] but a Camelot at a later stage of evolution. The drama to be enacted at Bertilak's castle is therefore a drama that will take place in Camelot's future. Hence the reflexivity of the poem; indeed, "the subject of this romance is romance itself."[10] The testing of Gawain is simultaneously the testing of the values of Arthur's court; Gawain is enacting in the court of his own future the drama of seduction that will be re-enacted between Lancelot and Guinevere and will lead to the tragic downfall of the Round Table. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a comic rehearsal of this later conflict.

The very personal nature of the bond between lord and vassal, its great strength, was also its greatest

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[9] See J.A. Burrow A Reading of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965) 65.

[10] Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1965) 208.

weakness. Allegiance is demanded of Gawain from every quarter and he does not seem to hesitate to give it. He is already bound by oath to both Arthur and the Green Knight before he arrives at Bertilak's castle and yet he involves himself in further commitments both to Bertilak and his lady. The first time Gawain meets the lady he offers to be her knight:

> þay kallen hym of aquoyntaunce, and he hit quyk aske3
> To be her seruaunt sothly, if hemself lyked. (975-76)

> [They desire his acquaintance, and he instantly begs to be their faithful servant, if they so please.]

It is emphasised how quyk and impulsive his request is. After three days, Gawain offers his services to Bertilak:

> "Grant merci, sir," quoþ Gawayn, "in god fayth hit is yowre3,
> Al þe honcur is your awen - þe he3e kyng yow 3elde!
> And I am wy3e at your wylle to worch youre hest,
> As I am halden erto, in hy3e and in lo3e,
> bi ri3t." (1037-41)

> [Many thanks, sir," said Gawain, "for, indeed, it is to you they are due, all the honour is on your part - may the Lord above reward you! And I am your man at your command, to do your bidding, as I am duty bound to do, in all matters great and small.]

Even in the first moment of this oath being made, the possibility of future strife can be seen. Gawain hopes

that Arthur, "þe he3e kyng", will reward Bertilak (the "high king" is far more likely to refer to Arthur than to "the Lord above" as Barron glosses it) implying that he presumes Bertilak is also Arthur's vassal. Gawain reveals his own loyalty to another lord at the same time as offering his allegiance to Bertilak. He renews his allegiance to Bertilak on leaving the castle:

> Your honour at þis hy3e fest, þe hy3e kyng yow 3elde!
> I 3ef yow me for on of youre3, if yowreself lyke3. (1963-64)
>
> [For such a wonderful stay as I have had here, your hospitality at this high festival, may the Lord above reward you! I will give you my services for those of one of your men, if it please you]

He again calls on the authority of Arthur but the word 3elde which is glossed as "reward" in both cases in Barron's translation, also means "yield." It is therefore ambiguous as to whether the high king will reward Bertilak or yield to him. One line in the manuscript refers to Bertilak as kyng, which has been edited out and changed to "lord" from the Tolkien and Gordon edition onwards:

> þe lord comaundet ly3t (992)
>
> [the host called for candles].

Editions and translations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight seem to have elided the ambiguity of Bertilak's role in the poem and of Gawain's relationship to him.

If, as has been frequently argued, Bertilak's lady is the younger aspect of Morgan, the old lady[11], then the use of Morgan takes on another important significance. The author is structuring the whole poem to make it clear that the seeds of Camelot's destruction were present from the very beginning. Mordred was born from Arthur's incestuous union with his sister, who broke his oath of fealty, usurped his father's throne and lived in an incestuous marriage with Guinevere.If, then, the lady in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is associated with Morgan and the conflict of allegiances mirrors the later betrayal of Arthur by Mordred we can see the ambiguity in the third pentangle virtue, clannes or purity. This particular notion of purity is tied up closely with the idea of pollution and defilement. To be "clean" is

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[11] The earliest to argue this seems to have been Roger Sherman Loomis in Wales and the Arthurian Legend (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1956) 89.
Mother Angela Carson believes that the poem's audience would have connected the wife and the old lady by the scene in which the older leads the younger by the hand. See "Morgan la Fee as the Principle of Unity in Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Language Quarterly 23 (1962): 5.

to be "free from any defiling or deteriorating ingredient; unmixed with foreign matter, pure, unadulterated."[12] It descends directly from Mosaic law, which insisted upon the absence of ceremonial defilement for involvement in the community. Sin is therefore perceived as something that invades from the outside, and is in fact closer to the ancient Greek notion of pollution than to the modern concept of sin. Sin is alien and thus other to the self. This brings us back to the poem's underlying concern with the self and other. Initially it appears that Gawain is being seduced by a fairy-lover in a strange other-world. Yet, as I have continually insisted, this other-world and the lady are intimately associated with a member of Gawain's own family. Incest is the sin from within and it is the conflict within Camelot that brings about its downfall, not invasion from without. This poem, and indeed the entire later Arthurian tradition, is haunted by a fear of what lies within. This is emphasised in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight before Gawain even arrives at Bertilak's castle to begin his test:

For werre wrathed hym not so much, þat wynter was

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[12] "Clean," in The Oxford English Dictionary, 1933 ed.

wors,
When þe colde cler water fro þe cloude3 schadde,
And fres er hit falle my3t to þe fale erþe.
Ner slayn wyth þe slete he sleped in his yrnes
Mo ny3te3 þen innoghe in naked rokke3,
þer as claterande fro þe crest þe colde borne
renne3,
And henged he3e ouer his hede in hard iisse-ikkles.
þus in peryl and payne and plytes ful harde
Bi contray carye3 þis kny3t tyl Krystmasse euen,
al one. (726-35)

[Yet fighting did not so greatly trouble him, the winter weather was worse, when the cold, clear rain was shed from the clouds, and froze before it could fall on the faded earth. Almost slain by the sleet, he slept in his irons night after night amongst the naked rocks, where the cold burn came crashing down from the cliff-top, and hung high above his head in hard icicles. So through pain and peril and the greatest hardships this knight went riding across the country until Christmas Eve, all alone.]

Fighting dragons, wolves, trolls and ogres does not deter Gawain, it is the struggle against his own cold and lonelinesss that really tests him:

Oft leudle3 alone he lenge3 on ny3te3
þer he fonde no3t hym byfore fare þat he lyked.
Hade he no fere bot his fole bi frythe3 and doune3,
Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp.(693-96)

[Often, companionless, he spent the night alone where he found no food to his liking set before him. He had no company save his horse among the woods and hills, and no one but God to speak with by the way]

Enemies such as dragons and ogres offered a useful distraction from internal tensions in the court. Creating external "others" to the brotherhood of the Round Table re-inforced the group's shared identity.

Ironically and perhaps inevitably, the world of Camelot is not destroyed by one of these enemies but finally tears itself apart from within. The Green Knight first appears to be utterly alien and different from the world of Camelot but as the poem progresses he becomes more and more familiar. It is finally made clear that his challenge to the court comes from Morgan, a member of Arthur's own family who has been driven out of Camelot. The self-consciousness of the text reminds us both of the beginning and the end of the cycle of tales surrounding the court of Camelot.

Conclusion.

Throughout this thesis, I have worked with the notion that language, far from being a static structure, is itself a historical process. This process is far from being arbitrary; words such as "price" evolved into their modern meaning at specific times for specific reasons. However these changes do not take place without a struggle. Archaic meanings can co-exist in constant tension beside emergent meanings. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight many of these key terms are associated with the changing concept of value. Ambivalence in certain key terms is a sign of the struggle for control of meaning that is taking place. This tension between different meanings shows us that language is not merely a reflection of ideological conflict happening in a world supposedly outside of language but is itself an actual site of conflict.

If conflicts of meaning can take place within one key term, then how much more likely they are to exist within a text. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a particularly interesting text in this respect. It consistently refuses closure within its narrative structure, refuses to commmit itself in the conflicts

of value that it sets up and constructs a series of endings, which actually correspond to possible readings of the text, each more ironic and artificial than the last. What Sir Gawain and the Green Knight means is largely revealed in **how** it means, how the structure of the text constantly reveals meaning as something constructed, and therefore as something that can be reconstructed in different ways. Meaning itself is a perceived of as a historical process in this text, not as a reified, immutable system that imposes itself upon the subject.

The highly self-conscious tone of the poem leads me to believe that the poem is finally concerned with this struggle for meaning. It is also concerned with who has the power to define the meaning of language and thereby controls the currency of communication. Not only words but actions are interpreted by different characters and groups in the poem and these interpretations define the ground of the subject's being, in this case Gawain. Bertilak describes Gawain as the purest knight he has ever met. Gawain perceives of himself as a fallen sinner, differentiated from the rest of Arthur's court by his very sin. Arthur and his court see him as a returning hero who is taking

himself rather too seriously.

Critics have generally accepted one of these three points of view and read the whole text retrospectively to prove their case. It is important to realise that the text can bear all three readings equally easily, which would tend to invalidate any of them as "absolute" readings of the text. It is far more fruitful to examine the process of the struggle for the control of meaning as it takes place from the very beginning of the poem. It is interesting that critics have resisted the reading of events provided by the text itself, that the whole narrative is an effect of the wishes of Morgan la Fee. Its artificiality merely points out the artificiality of all narrative endings. We cannot believe in this ending so we are left with no ending. We are left with an absolutely open-ended text.

It is possible therefore for a text to reveal as much about itself through its absences and inconsistencies as through smooth, convincing narrative. This is not a comfortable text, we are not permitted ready suspension of our disbelief. The contortions of this text leave us with more questions at its end than we had at its beginning. The process

of reading this text is a re-enactment of its meaning. It is a text that demands that its reader make choices, that the reader be involved in the process of creating its meaning. Its multiple readings do not negate each other, we are not left with a bundle of ever receding signifiers, but instead we have a historical process of the creation of meaning in which we are expected to be active agents rather than passive receptors.

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