

Graduate Student Paper Competition

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Women and Community: Marginalized Women in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*

The vastly popular medieval poem, *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, explores several prevalent subjects within the middle ages from the Arthurian legend and courtly love to religion and the personal, political, and historical identity. One element that the poem touches on is the role and place of women. The poem itself, while containing numerous female references and portrayals of women, never fully explores the positions of these women, who each live under or with the objectification of their male-oriented society.

Because the Gawain poet diminishes these women's contributions at the same time that he displays just how influential they are, he places women solely within the personal and domestic realm, treating them as inferior to the heroic, historical male figures he includes in his poem; ironically, while these female figures are marginalized, they each have extraordinary existences, and their power as females have shaped the way the past, present, and future unfold and connect. In relegating women to the fringes of his story, the Gawain poet, though briefly acknowledging the impact of woman, is unable to distinguish women's contribution within the political realm as positive, blind to the fact that the male view of women has undermined the feminine function and the notable roles of women within the community. Despite their lack of recognition, the Gawain poet's depiction of women throughout his tale indicates that females are inextricably linked to the workings of the community, and once their place and their role have been subverted, the strands of unfolding histories are likewise deteriorated.

The first line of *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* places the romantic poem within a cultural and historical context by referencing Troy at the very onset. The poem begins, "When

the siege and the assault were ended at Troy,/The city laid waste and burnt into ashes,/The man who had plotted the treacherous scheme/Was tried for the wickedest trickery ever./It was princely Aeneas and his noble kin/Who then subdued kingdoms, and came to be lords/Of almost all the riches of the western isles” (Winny line 1-7). In beginning the poem with depictions of ruin and desolation, the Gawain poet not only sets the mood for his tale and engages in foreshadowing, but he also invokes his story’s placement in history. Just as cultures and kingdoms rise and fall, so too does the action and fate of this story as it is bound to the cyclical nature of history. Discussing Troy within this poem “places the story in a familiar and serious context and suggests to its knowledgeable hearers the nobility of its line” (Silverstein 191). The Gawain poet not only historicizes Arthur’s identity, displaying his gallant and aristocratic lineage, but he also suggests that *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* is a historical and political poem that deserves its place beside such tales as Troy and the conquering of England.

In discussing Aeneas, the Gawain poet traces Britain’s past, highlighting the characteristics of those who first settled the isles. James Winny’s modern translation refers to Aeneas and his kin as noble, but the Middle English version states, “Hit watz Ennias the athel and his high kynde” (Winny line 5), while Marie Borroff’s translation intones, “It was high-born Aeneas and his haughty race” (Borroff line 5). Looking at the Middle English and Borroff’s interpretation, suggests that Aeneas was less than noble and was guilty of pride. However, since Aeneas was valiant in the Trojan War, he could encompass both qualities. His nobility kept him steadfast, reliable, and courageous, while his pride caused him to invade other lands and seek glory for himself. In fact, the theme of pride runs throughout the poem and can, arguably, be seen as the cause for Arthur and his court’s downfall.

The poem continues,

“And far over the French sea Felix Brutus/On many broad hillsides settles
 Britain/with delight;/Where war and grief and wonder/Have visited by
 turns,/And often joy and turmoil/Have alternated since./And when Britain
 had been founded by this noble lord,/Valiant men bred there, who thrived on
 battle./In many an age bygone they brought about trouble./More wondrous
 events have occurred in this country/Than in any other I know of, since that
 same time./But of all those who dwelt there, of the British kings/Arthur was
 always judged noblest, as I have heard tell” (Winy line 14-26).

Here, the Gawain poet transplants the actions of the warriors of Troy to the country of England, and he suggests that just as men fought fearlessly at Troy, so too have they fought in England. The Gawain poet states that past events have led to more fascinating stories from within England than those found in Troy, and he points out that while Brutus has been a popular and gallant figure, Arthur has more renown and his tales are more dazzling. Scholar Theodore Silverstein states that “The legend of British Brutus, like that of *pious* Aeneas, is the legend of an imperial founder” (Silverstein 198). Therefore, the Gawain poet merges historical beginnings and endings, as with the fall of Troy and the exploration of lands, and he draws attention to the interconnected relationship between past, present, and future. In this way, the Gawain poet displays how communities develop, coexist, and are destroyed.

While Helen of Troy is never specifically mentioned within the poem, her presence is felt strongly through the depiction of the fall of Troy. The fact that she is not referenced within the discussion of Troy further serves to reduce the importance and role of women, although, as the

Gawain poet will detail, this diminishing of the female function leads to damaging consequences. Helen's position, as a woman, is intricately linked with her community, and her story is also associated with pride. Within many legendary and mythical accounts, Helen is said to be the reason for the Trojan War. Researcher Colvile comments that in regards to the Trojan War, "Even the excavators and the critical experts have not determined what really was the history of Troy" (Colvile 1). While it is nearly impossible to validate such variant recounts, one thing that is clear is that Helen is mentioned in nearly all literary accounts of this event, and was associated and involved in the fall of Troy to some degree.

The traditional account of Helen's role in the Trojan war began when "Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, competed in a beauty contest before the Trojan prince Paris, the prince awarded the prize to Aphrodite, who had bribed him by promising him marriage to Helen of Sparta, the most beautiful woman alive" (Kovacs 3). Aphrodite is another female figure who is not presented in such a positive light, and it is her desire to win the prize that causes her to put ideas about Helen into Paris' mind, although Helen will marry Menelaus. The pettiness of Aphrodite instills in Paris a desire to see Helen, and after he "saw Helen, face to face" (Erskine 12), he is said to have abducted her from her husband Menelaus, sparking "the later siege of Troy and 'all that woe'" (Colvile 3). Discussion of Aphrodite and Helen places the women's role within *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* in a much wider context, for just as the Gawain poet demonstrates the interconnected aspects of events and actions and cause and effects, he implies how women are very much a part of this rich heritage, and are impossible to diminish, no matter how negative their influence.

Helen's abduction is only one version of the story, for Euripides' play, *Helen*, recounts that a phantom figure was substituted for Helen and the phantom is what Paris took to Troy

(Erskine 3); in Homer's *Iliad*, "Helen serves as a pretext for the war...." where "The warriors in a sense fight over Helen's phantom, for they have transformed her into an emblem, a construct of their own minds..." (Suzuki 16), while in the *Odyssey* and in subsequent accounts, "Helen is always present in the texts to be studied, but as a myth—either an emblem of doubleness or duplicity on the one hand, or a trivial cardboard figure on the other—to be scapegoated and repudiated" (Suzuki 17). Despite her role, the beautiful Helen is continually depicted within these stories and proscribed a function in the siege of Troy. While some of the views are more optimistic and hold to Helen as virtuous and innocent, others present her as purposely malicious and deceitful. What is significant however, is that Helen's role is redefined through each retelling, and she is ascribed various faults based on the patriarchal system that is discussing her. Instead of remaining within the domestic sphere prescribed to women, Helen is thrust into the political forefront, often seen as the very impetus for the violent destruction of Troy's community.

Scholar Mathew Gumpert notes that "There is no 'original' or 'real' Helen: only a perspective of innumerable Helens receding backward into the past and forward into the future. We may turn to Homer for a glimpse of the original or real Helen, only to find that this Helen herself unsettles our faith in origins and realities" (Gumpert 10). With the Gawain poet's concern over the origins of events and how they construct subsequent occurrences, the discussion of Troy would have naturally led him to contemplate the role that Helen played; however, Helen is an invisible character within the poem, and the silence on this issue clearly indicates how women's place within society and the community has been devalued, while male heroism and chivalry is accentuated. Helen herself lives outside the cultural role for women, either causing or unwittingly sparking political and historical action and change.

Critic Mihoko Suzuki explains that a woman was viewed as “an object of desire and yet less valuable than a man” (Suzuki 5-6). Though women like Helen are sought after by men, it is for personal purposes, and women’s political and historical contributions are often overlooked. Suzuki adds that Helen, in “The fall of Troy, then as the myth of national origins for Western Europe, became a secular Fall; accordingly, Helen attained the status of a secular Eve. Like Eve and Pandora, Helen became a type of all women who brings woe to man” (Suzuki 12-13). As a result, in the Gawain poet referencing Troy at the beginning of his poem, he not only references the cultural and historical implications that history lends to his tale, but he also silently raises the issue of women’s place within society. Helen, the female who has become synonymous with Troy, is a universal symbol for a deceptively beautiful woman who will lead men astray, and therefore, through his allusion to Troy, the Gawain poet portrays his opinion of women, viewing them as petty, manipulative, and malevolent beings who have no place within the political realm.

For the Gawain poet, as for most men of his age, women are regarded as chattel, and Gumpert states that Helen is a commodity and a “valuable piece of property-but one that has a marked tendency, as we have seen, to change hands” (Gumpert 58). This exchanging of hands not only relates to the numerous stories about Helen, but also to the opinions of the various storytellers who propagate these tales. As the pride of her husband and a physical sign of his wealth and possessions, Helen, like other women, is counted among her husband’s assets, and when she disappears, it is expected that Menelaus would reclaim his property. Therefore, the Trojan War could be seen as resulting from pride, and certainly was induced in some way by the perceptions and actions, forced or voluntary, of Helen. However, Helen herself, as an objectified and economic being, does not have much freedom of choice, and whether she willfully ran away

with Paris or was abducted, she, like the other women within this poem, is a product of the male-dominated society that has diminished the place and influence of the female position.

While Helen is only a shadowy allusion within the poem, her contribution to the Trojan War lays an adequate foundation to the Gawain poet's opinion of women. The first actual feminine depictions within the poem are located at the very beginning with the description of Arthur's court. The Gawain poet writes of "the loveliest ladies who ever drew breath" (Winy line 52), and that these same ladies were playing festive games with Arthur's knights in which they "laughed out loud, even though they had lost,/And the winner was not angry, you may be sure" (Winy 69-70). Although this is Christmas, the description seems to belay the fact that such gaiety and merriment is customary at Arthur's court, and that part of the gaiety comes from the fact that the ladies act as archetypal models for the knights because they exist in their proper roles within this domestic area. Critic Carolyn Dinshaw states that "The narrative begins in the bright courtly circle of Camelot in its youth, where kisses are the prizes in New Year's games among the ladies and knights. Such kisses seem unproblematic enough, just kisses, part of the young and breezy world of Arthur's court as we first encounter it" (Dinshaw 205). In the game that the knights and ladies are playing, even the loser receives a kiss, and therefore, there is no real sense of competition or strife, but everything is done in good spirit and in jest. These kisses are innocent and are given in fun, and through this scene, the Gawain poet depicts the often seen intricacies of courtly love, which underlines much of the action in romances.

Translator and Editor James Rosenberg notes that within courtly love, "the lady was enshrined as an almost unattainable, idealized individual..." and that "Love, was considered an ennobling passion from which stemmed all the major virtues which the knight was supposed to exhibit-bravery, generosity, fidelity, loyalty, and refinement of manners. The lady, in turn, was

expected to be aloof and insistent on the maximum performances of valor from her devotee” (Rosenberg LIII). The idea of an idolized woman is represented as the object of affection in courtly love ideals, and here the women are fulfilling their courtly roles by inspiring the knights to prove themselves in order to win a kiss. This description suggests the liveliness of Arthur’s court, at the same time that it delineates the proper feminine sphere. The Gawain poet uses this description of the loveliest of ladies within Arthur’s court to parallel the later activities of the major feminine figures within the work. Here, the Gawain poet presents a positive view of female behavior, for these courtly women remain within their domestic role and please and inspire the males in their lives.

The next reference to a woman is with the description of Guenevere, who is a silent and passive observer. Guenevere’s place within the poem is very small, and though she is mentioned, her function, as a woman, is never fully explored. The poet writes of

“Queen Guenevere gaily dressed and placed in the middle,/Seated on the upper level, adorned all about;/Fine silk surrounding her, a canopy overhead/Of costly French fabric, silk carpets underfoot/That were embroidered and studded with the finest gems/That money could buy at the highest price/anywhere/The loveliest to see/Glanced round with eyes blue-grey;/That he had seen a fairer one/Truly could no man say” (Winy line 74-84).

Through this elegant and sensual description, Guenevere is placed upon a pedestal at the same time that she is objectified by those in the court as an ideal of feminine beauty. Like Helen, Guenevere is renowned for her beauty, and her introduction within the poem revolves around her physical appearance and her physical placement within the court. As a result, the Gawain poet

emphasizes placement, for Guenevere is the queen of the fair ladies of the court and her role is to inspire them to behave in a womanly fashion. Therefore, it is significant that Guenevere is seen as a passive observer and not as an active participant, for traditionally, action is associated with the political realm of men. Critic Sheila Fisher comments that Guenevere is “a token of Arthur’s wealth, still the chaste queen who is the sign and symbol of the king to whom she refers,” and “Not moving or speaking, Guenevere here is marginalized to such an extent that she is buried in the plot of the poem” (Fisher 82). Guenevere, as a commodity, is a sign of Arthur’s status and accomplishment, and her lack of voice within the poem not only signifies how the Gawain poet decreases her impact upon history, but how Guenevere is seen as the proper lady, who is silent, demure, and submissive.

Within this poem, Arthur’s court is still fairly young, and Guenevere remains faithful to him. However, “The love of Lancelot for Guenevere remains a tragic central theme...” (Rosenberg LVI). While there is no indication of Guenevere and Lancelot’s relationship, and Lancelot is barely discussed within the poem, the very mention of Guenevere invokes the presence of her relationship with Lancelot, and although the Gawain poet does not discuss this, he does not necessarily have to, for it is impossible to separate Guenevere’s affair from Guenevere herself. In other versions of her tale, Guenevere is said to even have an incestuous relationship with Arthur’s son, Mordred, while in other tales, she is said to have resisted all advances, including Lancelot’s (Fries 62). As a female and an object, Guenevere, like Helen, does not have much freedom of choice, and although she is a queen, she is kept in the background and in the private sphere. Although the story of Guenevere is also presented with different retellings, she is a central figure within the Arthurian legend, and she circumvents the domestic boundaries imposed upon her. Through the traditional story, in having an affair with

Lancelot, Guenevere chooses to leave behind her proscribed role as a passive object, and engages in the masculinized world of action. Indeed, Guenevere's actions spur the downfall of Arthur's court, and Guenevere, like Helen, plays a significant political and historical role. Fisher adds that "Guenevere and her betrayals of her king are, of course, notorious in the dissolution of the Round Table; she is most famous, in other words, for her association with the end" (Fisher 80). Here again, the Gawain poet invokes an investigation into the origins of events, sidestepping Guenevere's relationship with Lancelot at the same time that his lack of discussion evokes it. While Guenevere does not single-handedly bring on the ruination of Arthur's court, her infidelity displays a lack of respect and is the spark that leads to Camelot's consequent doom. Here again, a woman is displayed in a negative light with an unfaithful relationship and is viewed within the context of a male-dominated society. Guenevere's contribution to history is as much a product of her subverted role as it is a matter of pride.

With the entrance of the Green Knight and his beheading game, the court is silent and petrified by his proposal. The Gawain poet adds that

"Although inwardly Arthur was deeply astonished,/He let no sign of this
appear, but loudly remarked/To the beautiful queen with courteous
speech,/'Dear Lady, let nothing distress you today./Such strange goings-on are
fitting at Christmas,/Putting on interludes, laughing and singing,/Mixed with
courtly dances of ladies and knights./None the less, I can certainly go to my
food,/For I have seen something wondrous, I cannot deny" (Winny line 467-
475).

This passage hints at the fact that Arthur is hiding his own fear and consoling himself in consoling Guenevere. He implies that all Guenevere should be concerned with are courtly

dances, laughter and singing, and therefore, Arthur trivializes and decreases her importance. There is no mention as to whether Guenevere is truly frightened or not, and Scholar Denver Baughan comments that “though the poet has said much about the wonder and fear of the court, nothing is said about Guinevere’s reactions in particular until after Bercilak has retrieved his head and made his departure” (Baughan 247). Guenevere’s reaction is unclear, although fear is naturally assumed. In not even giving Guenevere a voice or a description of her reaction, the Gawain poet again reduces her significance within his poem and even within a historical context.

However, Baughan inserts that “In short, by insisting during the beheading business that even the boldest were filled with terror and by having Arthur solicitous of his queen’s comfort, the poet achieves more by implication than could have been achieved by outright statement” (Baughan 248). In such a situation, it is fairly obvious that Guenevere would be frightened, and through having the Gawain poet insert this evocation from Arthur, he subtly displays how women are intricately connected to their men, and how males desire to protect females, as their property and as their duty. Arthur’s statement to Guenevere is significant in that he naturally reaches to comfort her, and in so doing, the feminine link with community is strongly established yet undervalued as women are inert objects dependent upon men.

One of the most puzzling and noteworthy feminine relationships within the poem is that between Gawain and the Virgin Mary. Gawain carries a shield with a pentangle on the outside and the image of the Virgin Mary on the inside. The Gawain poet writes that Gawain had the Virgin Mary’s “image depicted on the inside of his shield,/So that when he glanced at it his heart never quailed” (Winny line 648-650). Despite the Catholic connections within this poem and Gawain’s sense of religious duty, Gawain is relying upon a female, albeit supernatural and divine, for his protection and support. Rosenberg’s translation adds of Gawain, “when he cast

his eyes thereto his courage never/cooled” (Rosenberg line 649-650). Within these passages, it is evident that Gawain is putting his full belief and faith in the Virgin Mary and is using her as a protective emblem. He not only turns to her for transcendent hope, but for courage in present circumstances. While Gawain’s religious duty is laudable, it is interesting that he chooses the Virgin Mary as his spiritual guide, for as a warrior, it would stand to reason that Gawain would want to choose a manly saint in which to put his hope and trust.

Researcher Geraldine Heng notes that “Guenevere and the Virgin share the status of fetishized objects: Guenevere, evoking the puissance and grandeur of Arthurian court, by being set in state on her dais, a royal jewel amid other gorgeous treasures; the Virgin, signaling Christian adventitiousness and advocacy, by being blazoned on the inner surface of Gawain’s shield like a talisman” (Heng 502). While the extraordinary example of the Virgin Mary is more than a mere symbol, the Virgin Mary is also objectified within this poem by being emblazoned on Gawain’s shield for him to enjoy and to inspire in him transcendent feelings. Not only is the Virgin Mary physically objectified, but Gawain seems to use her as a good luck charm. As Gawain is searching for the Green Chapel and encounters strange beasts, lands, and weather, he prays to the Virgin for help. The Gawain poet writes that “Earnestly Gawain then/Prayed Mary that she send/Him guidance to some place/Where he might lodging find” (Winny line 736), and later, when Gawain laments not being able to attend Mass, “he prayed, ‘I beg of you, Lord,/And Mary, who is gentlest mother so dear,/For some lodging where I might devoutly hear mass/And your matins tomorrow, humbly I ask;/And to this end promptly repeat my pater and ave/ and creed’” (Winny line 754-758). Almost as soon as Gawain finishes his second prayer, he comes upon the lord’s castle. The indication is that the Virgin Mary has assisted Gawain in his search, honoring his request to honor her and the Christian tradition, and has directed him to the lord’s

castle. However, instead of simply talking to the Virgin Mary, Gawain makes a point to invoke her help, almost as if he, as a male speaking to a female, is subjecting her supernatural powers to his will and expecting her to assist him. Therefore, Mary's guidance and support for Gawain is paradoxical, for she is not only used by Gawain, but she is also relegated to a societal role.

Rosenberg discusses the connection between courtly love and the Virgin Mary by asserting, "It is evident that the structure of feudal society played its part, in defining the love relationship, and one source of the exalted position assigned to the lady may well have been the veneration in which the Virgin Mary was held" (Rosenberg LXIII-LXIV). In a chivalric culture centered on the idealization and objectification of ladies, it is not surprising that Gawain would treat the Virgin Mary in a similar manner, both venerating her and yet expecting her to behave aloof, yet favorable towards him.

It is also interesting that the lord's castle is the answer to his prayer, for while Gawain is greeted warmly by the lord, his encounter at the castle presents him with great temptation and testing, and it would seem that such a saintly lady would not have directed Gawain to this trial by fire. Heng comments that "In the course of his journey, Gawain's supplication to this Christian goddess for a safe residence in which to perform Christian religious rites, a plaint invoking the personal name of this sacred mistress, Mary seems to occasion the appearance of the castle where an aggressively secular courtly mistress (the nameless Lady) resides..." where "a feminine game of seduction is enacted, a seduction...hidden within the screen game of a masculine economy of exchanges" (Heng 501). Mary's role within the community is also invoked but then forgotten later in the poem, and the reason Gawain is not consist in his supplications to her, is that his cultural tradition views females as essentially unimportant to the world of action. Although Gawain's physical needs are met at the castle, he is tempted and his

character ultimately falls short. It is true that Mary is above male-domination and worldly objectification in her divinity, yet Gawain and others continue to place her within the domestic and courtly sphere assigned to women. While Gawain recognizes her contribution to society and her helpful virtues, he fails to grasp the fact that his male-oriented view subverts his supplications to Mary, thereby convoluting the help he receives from her.

Within the castle, the lord's wife proves to be the most depicted female throughout the poem, and she is the only woman who is given a voice. In her first appearance, she is heavily juxtaposed with Guenevere, and even stated to be superior. Of the lady, the Gawain poet writes, "She was the loveliest on earth in complexion and features,/In figure, in colouring and behaviour, above all others,/And more beautiful than Guenevere, it seemed to the knight" (Winny line 943-945). Comparing the lady to Guenevere is significant, for both represent sensual temptation, and in describing the lady as more attractive than Guenevere, the Gawain poet seems to state that the lady is much more dangerous than Guenevere. However, although the lady is given a voice within the poem, it is a subjected voice. Fisher comments that "the containment of the Lady within the castle or the closet or the bedroom echoes her containment within the text, a containment that, while it places the Lady at the center, simultaneously underlines her marginalization," and she is "so marginalized, in fact, that a poem that names everything, including Gawain's horse Gringolet, never names her" (Fisher 84). What all the females lack within this poem is a sense of personhood and identity, and this is particularly apparent with the lady's lack of a given name. The lady's identity is connected to that of her lord, and she is never separated from this relationship. Although she, unlike the other female characters, is allowed to speak, she has been told what to say and do by her lord, her husband, in

order to test Gawain. Therefore, the lady is also constrained and her function as a female is diminished, for she simply comes to represent sexual temptation and sensuality.

When the lovely lady visits Gawain in his bedchamber and Gawain pretends to sleep and to be surprised to see her, the lady states, “Now you are caught in a moment! Unless we agree on a truce,/I shall imprison you in your bed, be certain of that!” (Winny line 1210-1211). Here the lady is the aggressor and has taken the initiative to slip into Gawain’s room in order to test his character. Gawain responds by saying, “You shall do with me as you wish, and that pleases me much,/And that is best, in my judgment, for I simply must” (Winny line 1214-1215). Here the traditional gender roles are reversed, particularly in regards to action and passivity, for it is Gawain who is passively lying in bed and receiving the actions of the lady. Not only does this scene highlight this gender reversal, but in doing so it emphasizes the natural gender order that exists, for women are silent and sedate, while men are the ones who take initiative and are seen within the political realm of the community.

Dinshaw states that “In the bedroom Gawain is the hunted, the object of a feminine gaze” (Dinshaw 211), and that “courtly games—literal and figurative fencing—such as this one, with its role reversals, are in fact a serious business in a world in which identity is constituted by the performance of acts precisely coded according to normative configurations of gender and desire” (Dinshaw 212). The lady, as a seductress, is the culmination of the evil notions of women latent within the poem, and her attempted seduction of Gawain not only tests Gawain’s virtue and manhood, but also displays how women are objects to be used at will and behave according to the cultural restrictions that dominate and define them.

The bedroom scene continues with the lady stating, “You are welcome to me indeed,/Take whatever you want;/Circumstances force me/To be your true servant” (Winny line

1237-1240). This passage is clearly sexual, and although the lady takes the initiative and the dominant role, she, ironically, is unable to do much without Gawain's action and consent, and this, once again, reiterates how women depend upon men for any affirmative action. Gawain responds by deferring to another female figure, the Virgin Mary. Gawain adds, "may Mary repay you,/For I have truly made proof of your great generosity" (Winny 1263-1264). Instead of addressing the lady's obvious intent, Gawain jokes with her and turns to the subject of the Virgin Mary, letting the saint's chastity speak for him. However, the lady also invokes the name of the Virgin Mary, but she does so as more of an oath and a jest. In this way, the two wage a sexual battle with words in which they use Mary as a tug of war to gain validation for their decisions.

Heng asserts that "it is now not the Virgin but Gawain who stands revealed as the captive, prized object; he is contended over by two female players in a drama that is suddenly elsewhere-no longer between the sexes but within the psychomachia of a feminine narrative" (Heng 502). Although Gawain, through invoking Mary, asks her for guidance, her protection of him is thwarted and rivaled by the lady who tempts him. Here again, Gawain calls upon the Virgin Mary as a good luck charm, a figure who is able to save him from not only the lady, but himself. Caught between his religious convictions and the lady's appeal, Gawain himself is pulled between the two. Ruben Miyares comments that the reader can not "assign a final meaning to Gawain's devotion to the Virgin Mary, though one might suspect that the young lady replaces her as the Life-preserving aspect of the Goddess in Gawain's psyche" (Miyares 196). While Gawain references the Virgin twice in the first visit and once in the third and final visit, he does not pray to her again or ask for her guidance or help. It is almost as if Gawain loses faith in all women with this temptation of the lady, viewing them as conniving, and here again, Gawain

ascribes his cultural objectivity to his thoughts about the Virgin, dismissing her as a commodity and as a supernatural being whose ubiquitous help he can summon at his will.

With each subsequent visit, the lady becomes more insistent and more alluring, paralleling her husband's hunting and capture of the deer, boar, and fox. "Thus the lady made trial of him, tempting him many times/" (Winny line 1549), and with the lady's last visit, "Her lovely face and throat displayed uncovered,/Her breast was exposed, and her shoulders bare" (Winny line 1739-1740). On her last visit, the lady is the most demanding and alluring. She truly comes to represent nothing more than the female body that is subjected to male desires. The lady uses Gawain's desire against him in her quest to corrupt his honor, in a sense, manipulating the established gender codes of conduct, for despite the fact that she has been ordered to do this, she is still able to twist this relationship and cause Gawain extreme uneasiness.

As Gawain looks at her, a "Hot passionate feeling welled up in his heart" (Winny line 1762), and "Great peril threatened, should/Mary not mind her knight" (Winny line 1768-1769). While Mary is referenced here, Gawain does not specifically pray to her, although the Gawain poet implies that praying to the Virgin is his last hope in this tense situation. While Gawain is on the defensive and the lady is on the offensive, nothing can be accomplished without Gawain's action, and this clearly upholds the distinction of the genders, even indicating the Gawain poet's thoughts about women in their proper role of domesticity and silent dependence on men. The Gawain poet ironically gives the control in this scene back to Gawain with his comment that Gawain "felt small interest in love because of the ordeal he must face/very soon ---" (Winny line 1285-1287). Part of Gawain's lack of interest in granting the lady's request is that his thoughts are preoccupied with his own impending doom, and as a result, he is able to keep his firm

resolve. Fisher adds that “For Gawain to yield to the Lady would, in fact, involve more than yielding to the Otherness of her sexuality. Implied in that yielding to otherness would be the Round Table Knight’s capitulation to privateness, to private desire, and to the feminization of the private that has been inscribed in this poem” (Fisher 86). In yielding to the lady’s temptation, Gawain would also be yielding to her influence over him, and for the Gawain poet, this is something that must not happen. Women must remain in the private realm and not rule over men or be assigned political roles within their community, for in allowing women the power to rule, communities and cultures are damaged through women’s pettiness. In contrast, the opposite is true. The Gawain poet does not discern how women have been shaped and restructured by males, so that when they do wield influence within their communities, their own feminine function is subverted at the same time that they are subject to masculine dominance and criticism.

When Gawain is finally reunited with the Green Knight and has withstood three mock blows, the Green Knight confesses his involvement in the lady’s temptation by stating, “I know all about your kisses, and your courteous manners,/And my wife’s wooing of you: I arranged it myself./I sent her to test you, and to me truly you seem/One of the most perfect men who ever walked on the earth” (Winny line 2361-2164). The idea that a husband would send his wife to seduce another man, bespeaks of the true objectification and property statuses of women, for the lady does not have a choice in the matter, and whether she wants to or not, she is commanded to seduce and sleep with Gawain. With this confession of the Green Knight, Gawain launches into what has become known as an “antifeminist diatribe” (Dinshaw 219), and what could be argued to be the Gawain poet’s position on women. Gawain states,

“But it is no wonder if a fool acts insanely/And brought to grief through
womanly wiles;/For so was Adam beguiled by one, here on earth,/Solomon by
several women, and Samson was another—/Delilah was cause of his fate—and
afterwards David/Was deluded by Bathsheba, and suffered much grief./Since
these were ruined by their wiles, it would be a great gain/To love women and
not trust them, if a man knew how./For these were the noblest of old, whom
fortune favoured/Above all others on earth, or who dwelt/under
heaven./Beguiled were they all/By women they thought kind./Since I too have
been tricked/Then I should pardon find” (Winny line2414-2428).

This passage is one of the most emotionally charged of the entire poem in its expression of anger towards women. Here Gawain blames unwise and foolish actions and grief on “womanly wiles,” and he references Biblical examples to strengthen his claim that women bring only ruination and are all, to some extent, manipulative vixens. However, what Gawain, and the Gawain poet fail to comprehend, is that women have been so objectified and subjected within their male dominated cultures and continually relegated to the private and domestic sphere, that the influence they exert in both the personal and political realms is based upon the desires and expectations of the very males who have subverted their feminine functions. The women within this poem have been dictated to by men; the lady herself was ordered to seduce Gawain by her own husband. While the feminine influences and contributions throughout this poem are not exactly positive, as they lead to ruination of kingdoms, all of these women are subjected to the society that seeks to control them. Therefore, they are all the unwilling products of marginalized survival, unable to exist in the freedom of the feminine role, and reduced to subverted shadows of their individual potential.

The last feminine figure noted within the poem is that of Morgan Le Fay, who is described in the most unappealing manner. After Gawain's diatribe, the Green Knight tells Gawain that

“Bertilak of Hautdesert I am called in this land./Through the power of Morgan le Fay, who lives under my roof,/And her skill in learning, well taught in magic arts,/She has acquired many of Merlin's occult powers--/For she had love-dealings at an earlier time/With that accomplished scholar, as all your knights know/at home./Morgan the goddess/Therefore is her name;/No one, however haughty/Or proud she cannot tame./She sent me in this shape to your splendid hall/To make trial of your pride, and to judge the truth/Of the great reputation attached to the Round Table./She sent me to drive you demented with this marvel,/To have terrified Guenevere and caused her to die/With horror at that figure who spoke like a spectre/With his head in his hand before the high table./That is she who is in my castle, the very old lady,/Who is actually your aunt, Arthur's half sister” (Winny line 2445-2464).

This is probably the last bit of news Gawain needs to hear after his speech on the evils of women, for in hearing that the Green Knight is actually under the control of and a servant to the sorcerer Morgan Le Fay, Gawain no longer wants to remain in the presence of the Green Knight and hastily departs for Camelot. Within this passage, the Green Knight reveals that the reason for the beheading game was to ascertain and make visible the pride of Arthur's court as well as to scare Guenevere. Rosenberg's translation states, “And Guenevere to grieve, to goad her unto death” (Rosenberg line 2460), while Borroff's translation reads, “To afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death” (Borroff line 2460). Rosenberg's translation seems to literally mean to

cause an actual death, whereas Borroff's version simply implies an act of scaring Guenevere profoundly. Whatever, the case, Morgan intended to cause Guenevere distress, and with Morgan's power and control as the impetus for the entire tale, the Gawain poet again, not only marginalizes Morgan's role within the story, but suggests that women in power in the political realm of activity only lead to damaging results. Particularly since Morgan's purpose is to harm Guenevere, the Gawain poet is suggesting that women would use their political power as a tool to achieve an end to their petty quarrels.

The reference to Morgan as the old lady recalls the scene in which Gawain first meets the lady and sees her companion whose "rough wrinkled cheeks hung in folds.," and "With body squat and thick,/And buttocks bulging broad,/More delectable in looks/Was the lady whom she led" (Winny line 953-969). Such an unflattering description is truly indicative of the physical sensuality that men ascribed to women and judged them by. Because the older woman is not attractive, Gawain passes her over as and does not see her as either an amusing distraction or a dangerous temptation. It is puzzling why Morgan would appear in such a form, but Scholar Raymond Thompson states that Morgan Le Fay is known for her ability to fly through the air and to change shape (Thompson 331). It is possible that Morgan, knowing the cultural views of women, has intentionally changed her shape in order to detract attention from herself, for women with more beauty possess more power and are able to effect more changes in the hearts of men. With the contrast between the lady and Morgan, and the constant discussion of the beauty of women, the Gawain poet points out how dangerous beauty can be, for it can cripple men and easily manipulate them to the feminine will as seen with Helen, the ladies of Arthur's court, Guenevere, and the Lady.

While there are varying reasons for Morgan's dislike of Guenevere, two plausible explanations that are traditionally upheld within the Arthurian legend include Morgan's affair with Guiomar that was thwarted by his cousin, Guenevere, which enraged Morgan, and the fact that Arthur is said to have been "but one of the many lovers Morgan welcomes to her bed," (Thompson 332). Therefore, Morgan would be jealous of Guenevere's position within Arthur's life. Whether forced, deceived, or coerced, Arthur, according to legend, did sleep with Morgan and produced a son named Mordred. As a result, within this story, Morgan le Fay can be seen as cast aside and rejected, and her role, as a woman, has also been diminished. Albert Friedman comments, "For though the poet, speaking through Bercilak, would clearly like us to think of Morgan as the 'only begetter' of Gawain's adventure, effectually she is not. Her effective life in the poem is local, restricted to the few lines in which Bercilak tells us the reason for his journey to Camelot" (Friedman 274). Therefore, Morgan's role is similar to the other females within the poem, for she too, despite her power and her magic as the driving force for this tale, is restricted and confined within the poem and within her culture.

Fisher states that "Morgan and her marginalization are the means to the poem's end, because women are centrally implicated in the collapse of the Round Table and the end of the Arthurian Age....To deny the female would be to save the kingdom, and, in its revisionary agenda, that is precisely what *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* attempts to do" (Fisher 78). Feminine control and political presence is a threat to the dominate, patriarchal system that has been established, and the Gawain poet suggests that there is no place for the female ruler. He uses the female figures within this poem as examples to suggest that the influence of women is damaging and destroys the natural workings of the political world. The poem ends much as it began, with the reference of Troy and the discussion of historical implications. The Gawain poet

writes, “So in the time of Arthur this adventure happened,/And the chronicles of Britain bear witness to it;/After the brave hero Brutus first arrived here,/When the siege and the assault were ended at Troy,/indeed/Many exploits before now/Have happened much like this./Now may the thorn-crowned God/Bring us to his bliss!” (Winny line 2521-2530). Framing the story as he does, the Gawain poet draws the reader’s focus back to the social and historical impact of the tale, once again placing the emphasis on how this story fits into the larger context. By stating that this tale mirrors similar exploits, the Gawain poet anticipates the downfall of Arthur’s court, and with a return to the Trojan War, the shadow of Helen is once again looming in the background.

While the Gawain poet displays the dangerous consequences of giving women power and control in the political realm, and depicts females as malevolent and petty, he overlooks the role that men have played in shaping women whose femininity have been subverted by male desire and control. The Gawain poet is able to weave together the tales of Helen, the courtly ladies, Guenevere, the Virgin Mary, the Lady, and Morgan le Fay, in order to display how they were influential in political and historical transformations. While all of the female figures within *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* are objectified, they circumvent the prescribed cultural domestic roles to which they have been reduced, gaining a measure of identity within a male-oriented world. The Gawain poet unintentionally succeeds in depicting women as inseparable from the community, not only in the personal, but in the political space as well, and he also indicates that the personal affects the political, displaying how the two are likewise interconnected, just as the genders are irrevocably linked within the strands of history.

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