Chivalry, Love Physiology, and a Reevaluation of Sir Gawin's Sin

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For most people, Arthurian legends make wonderful bedtime stories: they are full of heroism, courage, romance, and triumph. To me, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to be a different kind of Arthurian legend; in this case, the hero is fearful, conscience-stricken, and persistently seduced by another man’s wife—and this, in my opinion, just scratches the surface.

**AN INTRODUCTION TO *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT***

The story goes like this: during a fairly raucous holiday party in King Arthur’s court, a mysterious green knight rides in with a dare for anyone brave enough to accept it—the green knight will allow anyone in the court to deal him a blow with a battle axe, as long as the challenger will meet up with the green knight in exactly a year to receive his blow. Sir Gawain bravely steps up to take Arthur’s place at the dare and promptly severs the green knight’s head, only to witness the green knight pick up his head, bid farewell, and walk calmly out of the castle. Bound by his word, Sir Gawain sets off after a year to hold the fateful reunion with the green knight, but on the way he runs into a winter storm and takes refuge in Lord Bertilak’s castle. The two quickly become friends, and Lord Bertilak makes a deal with Gawain: the two men will exchange whatever they win or otherwise obtain during the day. The deal is soon complicated, however, by the romantic advances of Bertilak’s wife, who unsuccessfully tries three times to seduce Gawain. At the end of each day, Gawain valiantly bestows upon Lord Bertilak a kiss (representing the one he had received earlier from Lady Bertilak), but on the third day Gawain receives from the lady a green girdle designed to protect him from any physical harm and, true to his word to the lady, keeps it a secret from the lord of the castle. Upon his meeting with the green
Gawain is indeed protected, but is chastened by the knight, who turns out to be Lord Bertilak in disguise, transformed by a spell of the witch Morgan le Fay. The members of Camelot instantly pardon Gawain’s sin, but the reader is left feeling as if Gawain’s sin is still somehow unresolved.

Most scholarship concerning Sir Gawain and the Green Knight argues that Gawain’s sin, if indeed he did commit one, lies in the withholding of the green girdle from Lord Bertilak. My disagreement with that argument lies in the detail that Gawain attempts repentance before actually lying to Lord Bertilak—but immediately after his third encounter with Lady Bertilak. Gawain does not try to repent after the first two meetings; only after the third. This paper deals with what exactly happened during that third seduction and explains it in the context of prevalent notions of courtly love and Renaissance love physiology. The latter of the two considerably postdates Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, but I assume that Renaissance writers read texts that in turn considerably predated them.

Traditional scholarship dealing with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight considers Gawain’s sin to be that of withholding the green girdle from Lord Bertilak, thus violating the knightly ideals of honesty and truth. Gawain does, in fact, lie to Lord Bertilak, but this does not constitute the sin of which he repents before meeting the Green Knight. Rather, an analysis contrasting chivalric love and medieval love physiology reveals that Gawain’s true sin is a shocking and unorthodox form of fornication: Gawain’s rejection of Lady Bertilak is, in fact, a paradoxical effort to augment the passion he feels for her—this is the sin which torments Gawain so profoundly.

**THE SIN: GAWAIN’S WOOING OF LADY BERTILAK**

Gawain at first seems to be a passive victim of Lady Bertilak’s advances, but he is actually an active seducer. When Gawain first meets Lady Bertilak, he feels she is even more beautiful than Guenevere (945). Gawain’s attraction does not consist of a pure admiration of beauty; upon being formally introduced to the lady, he takes her “briefly into his arms, / Kisses her respectfully and courteously speaks” (973–74). Later, at a banquet, Gawain and the lady sit together, while her husband goes to sit by the “ancient lady” later revealed as Morgan le Fay. Until this point, Gawain’s actions toward Lady Bertilak are completely conventional; kissing, embracing, and sitting next to one another would probably be
normal ways for a lady to associate with a guest. However, the Gawain-poet makes reference to attitudes and desires that go above and beyond the norms of hospitality, and all before Lord Bertilak officially awards Gawain his wife as a “charming companion” while Bertilak is away hunting (1099). For example, he mentions that, during the evening festivities, “Each man fulfilled his wishes, / And those two followed theirs” (1018–19). Here, the two are not merely participating in hospitality; they are pairing off and following desires. Furthermore, the Gawain-poet mentions that Gawain and the lady

> Found such enjoyment in each other’s company,
> Through a playful exchange of private remarks,
> And well-mannered small-talk, unsullied by sin,
> That their pleasure surpassed every princely amusement,
> for sure. (1011–15, italics added)

The Gawain-poet, for some reason, deems it necessary to distinguish that the two speak in a non-sinful way; the implication is that they have spoken, or will speak, in a sinful way. At the very least, the Gawain-poet does not consider speaking a purely benign activity. If Gawain is evaluating Lady Bertilak’s beauty, making a conscious effort to be near her, and fulfilling desires with her, then he is not a passive recipient of Lady Bertilak’s advances. While we will later discuss whether or not Gawain’s actual seduction was conscious, the fact remains that Gawain—in a seemingly subtle combination of thought and judgment hidden in propriety—has begun to consider Lady Bertilak as much more than the host’s wife.

**Magic, Physiology, and Psychology in Gawain’s Seduction**

Gawain’s seduction is a complex concoction of words, images, and rhetoric—all components of a magical recipe for love. Before modern times, love was possibly more physiological than emotional and therefore something that could be controlled, inflicted, and diluted at will. In his book *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, Ioan P. Couliano writes of the physiology expounded in Bruno’s *De vinculis in genere* [“Of Bonds in General”], “the goal of Bruno’s erotic magic is to enable a manipulator to control both individuals and crowds” (91). This magic “occurs through indirect contact (virtualem seu potentialem), through sounds and images which exert their power over the senses of sight and hearing” (Couliano
Erotic magic, or the magic of love, is essentially a tool of manipulation; the magic spell works through indirect contact through sounds and images—either seeing or hearing a specific thing or combination of things can magically induce love in the one who sees or hears.

The ancient Greek schools of medicine likewise considered the infliction of love to consist of the interaction of the *pneuma* and *hēgemōnikon* of two people. Members of Empedocles school believed the *pneuma* to be a blood vapor that circulated in the arteries, distinct from the blood, which circulated in the veins (Couliano 7). According to Aristotle, the *hēgemōnikon*, or “cardiac synthesizer,” “receives all the pneumatic currents transmitted to it by the sensory organs and produced by the ‘comprehensible phantasms’ [phantasia kataleptike] apprehended by the intellect” (9)—a phantasm being a sensory image transformed into, for example, a unit of currency that the intellect can accept. Marsilio Ficino’s explanation of the act of initiating romantic feelings is this: the *pneuma* brings to the eyes “thin blood”; love-arrows are later equipped with pneumatic tips and fired, through the eyes, at a target. These arrows will enter the eye and travel down to the heart, or *hēgemōnikon*, where severe damage is done. Whether the man is the target or the archer, he is the one injured by the transmission of *pneuma* in such a manner (29–30).

Gawain’s seduction of Lady Bertilak employs these aforementioned tactics and physiological principles. The *Gawain*-poet describes the first formal meeting of the two lovers in terms of images and sounds: first, Gawain greets the elderly companion with a deep bow (thus imparting an image of his chivalric virtues), and then he verbally offers himself as a servant (972–76). Specifically, the *Gawain*-poet speaks of the hero in terms of his speech: “I think that those who hear him, / Will learn what love-talk is” (926–27)—it is talk, or the verbal organization of sounds, that defines Gawain’s prowess as a lover. Likewise, Gawain employs Ficino’s physiology of love: the *Gawain*-poet’s first descriptive phrase of the introduction mentions eyes: “Gawain glanced at that beauty, who favoured him with a look” (970). That they were exchanging pneumatic glances is undoubtable, since later Lady Bertilak confesses being “wounded in her heart” (1781); the arrows had already entered her eye and registered in the *hēgemōnikon*. Furthermore, the *Gawain*-poet chooses to juxtapose the temptation scenes with scenes of Lord Bertilak’s hunt; in the first two hunt scenes (in accordance with the first two temptation scenes) the hunters use arrows to gather in their prey. The juxtaposition suggests that arrows are also flying between Gawain and Lady
Bercilak. In the third hunt, however, the Gawain-poet does not mention archery. Why?

The third temptation scene is the only time that the Gawain-poet mentions that Gawain is beginning to experience “hot passionate feeling” (1762) in his heart (again, the hegemonikon—Lady Bertilak has also been firing arrows at him). Before this time, the Gawain-poet goes to great lengths to show that their conversations were unsullied by sin, and that Gawain had no interest at all in love due to his impending trial. If Ficino’s physiology is indeed factual, then Gawain must have been physiologically seducing Lady Bertilak, but the possibility exists that, up until this point, it has been inadvertent. Couliano notes that, in the use of magic-manipulation, there is a need to “take account of the subject’s personality for, though there are some people easily influenced there are others who react in an unexpected way to the magic of sound” (91). Gawain’s absence of romantic feeling indicates that he might not have accurately assessed Lady Bertilak’s personality, making his seduction of her accidental. Likewise, his behavior is the same in all three temptation scenes, with the exception of receiving the green girdle, but he confesses only after the third temptation. The girdle, however, cannot possibly be the motivation of the confession in the Green Chapel because, at this point, Gawain has not yet withheld it. The third temptation scene—in the bedroom with Lady Bertilak—must be the scene in which Gawain realizes his inadvertent seduction of Lady Bertilak and instead of suppressing those feelings, accepts them. At this point, rhetorically, the arrows have ceased flying because the damage has already been done; “capture” has already taken place. By not rejecting the passion he feels, Gawain’s inadvertent actions become dangerously purposeful.

**Gawain’s Chivalric Barriers**

Gawain’s seduction is not unusual behavior for a knight, who was, because of his office, expected to be romantically aggressive. The language Lady Bertilak employs in her seductions is tinged with allusions to the romantic responsibilities of a knight—an aspect of an ideal of the code of chivalry. Just before leaving Gawain after her first round of temptation, Lady Bertilak taunts Gawain by questioning his identity: if he really were the renowned Gawain, he would have asked her for a kiss (1293–1301). In a subsequent visit, Lady Bertilak asks Gawain why someone “So courteous and chivalrous as you are known far and wide— / And of all the aspects of chivalry, the thing most praised / Is the true practice of love,
knighthood’s very lore” never utters “a solitary word / Referring to love” (1511–13, 1523–24). In these questions, the Gawain-poet introduces the notion of chivalry, with all its implications and responsibilities (it is implied that Gawain might feel social pressure to comply with the lady’s requests), into the relationship between Gawain and Lady Bertilak.

By mentioning chivalry, Lady Bertilak colors all her dealings with Gawain. Chivalric love is eternally platonic; to consummate it would end it. Obstacles, then, are inherent in chivalry. Denis de Rougemont explains chivalry in the context of the story of Tristan and Iseult: the two lovers part repeatedly, yet “not one of the barriers to the fulfillment of their love is insuperable. . . . When there is no obstruction, they invent one” (37). The story is about the parting of the lovers “in the name of passion, and for love of the very love that agitates them, in order that this love may be intensified and transfigured—at the cost of their happiness and even of their lives” (de Rougemont 37). It is in this aspect that love is often described as a painful business and is illustrated in the relationship between Gawain and Lady Bertilak. At one point, the two discuss “Love’s misery and bliss” (1507); Lady Bertilak’s wounded heart indicates the pain she feels at Gawain’s rebuffs.

We have shown thoroughly that medieval love physiology manifests itself in much of the diction of the poem, but in order to show that the physiological notions, which considerably postdate Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, constitute a relevant interpretation, it is necessary to demonstrate its link to the chivalric attitudes also present in the poem. Bruno’s vinculum, according to Couliano, are bonds that link one person to another; however, “to maintain the strength of a bond, it must not be enjoyed.” Couliano further observes that Bruno recommends that one be both continent and intensely desirous of the other (101). These notions of unfulfilled desire, in all their possible explicit manifestations, are strongly reminiscent of the courtly love just discussed. In both cases, barriers are erected to intensify and preserve affection, at least in an erotic sense. Thus when we refer to courtly love and Renaissance physiology, we are, at least by my definition, referring to the same thing; both therefore serve as a useful heuristic in evaluating the events of the third temptation scene, in spite of differences in date.

1James Winny observes that the Gawain-poet is “unusually cultivated and well acquainted with the literature of courtly manners and ideals” (xi); he likewise notes that the French romance Le Chevalier à l’Epée is a likely source of the temptation plot (xiii). Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, therefore, fits into a specific chivalric context, influenced by the French (de Rougemont 75–91).
De Rougemont’s comments on chivalry illustrate an important, yet subtle, point: the barriers to love serve to intensify and transfigure the passion. The relationship between Gawain and Lady Bertilak is already fraught with barriers—Gawain’s impending reunion with the Green Knight, Gawain’s knightly code that forbids him to consummate the relationship, and Lady Bertilak’s marriage (though that doesn’t seem to stop her much)—but the addition of obstacle to obstacle actually serves to augment the passion. Since it is clear that Gawain purposefully rejects Lady Bertilak, his intention is not to quell the lady’s passionate overtures, but to nourish them. His complete acceptance of Lady Bertilak comes at the end of the third temptation scene when, realizing his passion for her, Gawain acts to augment the passion rather than resist it. His sin, then, is sexual: by acting to augment the passion he feels for Lady Bertilak, Gawain “covets his neighbor’s wife” and violates the trust placed in him by Lord Bertilak.

It must be borne in mind that it is only after the third temptation—the temptation in which passion finally wells up in his heart—that Gawain begins to fear for the state of his soul: he goes to confession to learn

> How his soul could be saved when he leaves this world.  
> There he confessed himself honestly and admitted his sins,  
> Both the great and the small, and forgiveness begs,  
> And calls on the priest for absolution. (1879–82)

As previously mentioned, Gawain at this point has not yet withheld the green girdle from Lord Bertilak, so the withholding cannot be the sin of which Gawain here tries to repent. Though for different reasons, Robert Goltra notes that “Gawain is obviously in a state of sin” at the end of the third temptation scene, and “The fact that he has not yet physically withheld the girdle from Bertilak nor lied by omission concerning his possession of it does not alter his situation”; Gawain’s “disposition” prevents his confession in the green chapel from being valid. Goltra’s concept of “sins,” “dispositions,” and their results differs slightly from my interpretation, but the idea is the same: Gawain’s sin lies in his heart, as he has turned it over to another lover.

**CONCLUSION**

Although at first an accident, Gawain uses the psychology and physiology of love to seduce Lady Bertilak; by rejecting her advances, Gawain
actually augments the passion between them by erecting a barrier to their love. The fact that Gawain's greatest sin lies with him in the bedroom illustrates a new direction in Gawain studies.

Bibliography

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