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Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Volume 47, 2016,
pp. 163-188 (Article)

Published by Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, UCLA



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TWO SETS OF TWO HUNTERS: THE ILLUSION OF GOMEN IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Sarah J. Sprouse *

Abstract: The parallel hunting and bedroom scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have been much discussed by scholars, though the argument usually centers on Lady Bertilak's role as a hunter. Exploring the poem through the lens of game theory demonstrates that not only is Gawain a hunter, but also that the central Exchanges Game is not a game, but rather an illusion of a game. This revelation opens up a means of investigating the Anglo-Norman and Welsh roles of the landscape and characters that both facilitate such an illusion but also cause a political tension in the poem. This article contends through close readings and historiographic analysis that the reader's identification with Gawain sets up an unease by the end of the poem when the figures of Bertilak, Lady Bertilak, and Morgan La Fay are revealed as both Otherworldly and decidedly Welsh. This discomfort is a means of reacting to and interrogating Anglo-Norman appropriation of Arthuriana.

Keywords: game theory, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, courtly romance, Plantagenets, medieval, Otherworld, Morgan La Fay, Johan Huizinga, Wales, illusion.

The *ludic* function of the narrative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is well attested by both scholars and the text itself. The narrative incorporates games and play while the form of the poem itself offers playful engagement with its readership. Scholars are still in the process of understanding the ways in which the manuscript page interacts meaningfully with its audience, but the games that structure the events in the narrative have been discussed at length. However, few have approached the narrative with game theory,¹ as developed by Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois. Considering Caillois's definitions of types of game, the central event of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Exchanges Game, turns out to not be a game at all, but rather an illusion of a game.

The poem, which depicts a young Arthurian court and its encounter with the otherworldly Green Knight, centers on two primary gaming apparatuses. The first is a beheading game. The Green Knight appears in Arthur's court on Christmas day and insists that a representative of

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¹ John Leyerle, "The Game and the Play of Hero," *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Norman T. Burns and Christopher J. Reagan (Albany 1975) 49–82; Tison Pugh, "Gawain and the Godgames," *Christianity and Literature*, 51.4 (2002) 525–551; Victoria L. Weiss, "The Play World and the Real World: Chivalry in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" *Philological Quarterly* 4 (1993) 403.

the Arthurian court must play. In all his monstrous splendor, the Green Knight terrifies and stupefies all in the court. Gawain, as the self-selected representative, beheads the Green Knight on Christmas, and then the Green Knight must return the favor in a year and a day. So, Gawain must seek out the Green Knight at his Green Chapel, located in Wales, in order to be decapitated by the alarming figure's green axe. Along the way, Gawain encounters an Anglo-Norman castle in the Welsh landscape, echoing the tensions of the Welsh Marches in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. It is here that we encounter the other major gaming apparatus. The apparent lord of the castle, Bertilak, makes an agreement with Gawain in which they each shall act as hunters during the day and then exchange their winnings in the evenings. Bertilak hunts animals and Gawain hunts the lord's wife. What Gawain does not realize is that both primary gaming structures have been orchestrated by the fairy woman of Welsh Arthurian origins, Morgan La Fay, in order to terrorize Arthur's court.

It would be natural on the part of the reader to assume that the Exchanges Game, the Christmas game between Bertilak and Gawain, is a game. It has rules, structure, and players. The rules are fairly simple. Each man hunts during the day, whatever that might mean, and exchanges completely in the evenings whatever they won in such hunts. The game occurs over three days, leading up to the time that Gawain must leave to meet the Green Knight for his beheading. However, one thing this game lacks is the proper name *gomen*. Bertilak and Gawain refer to it by other names such as "forwarde," "bargayn," "play," and "couenaunt" ("forward," "bargain," "play," and "covenant" lines 1105, 1112, 1379, 1384).² Yet the common critical discourse refers to this event as a game and takes the term *gomen* because it is used to describe the Beheading Game. Gawain also seems to understand the Exchanges Game as a *gomen*. Curiously, the argument that is repeatedly made by scholars, beginning with Henry L. Savage's 1928 article, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," is that the hunters involved in the game are Bertilak and his wife—not Bertilak and Gawain. In other words, something is happening under the surface of this Exchanges Game that disrupts its

² All quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are taken from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, eds. Malcolm Andrew & Ronald Waldron, 5th ed. (Liverpool 2007). Translations are my own.

established structure. To interrogate the nature of the duplicity at work here, one must turn to Huizinga and Caillois. In his seminal book *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga analyzes the functions of *game* and *play* historically while cultivating criteria and classifications of each. The two critical functions of *play* in the higher forms articulated by Huizinga are *contests for something* and *representations of something*.³ These two forms of *play*, while not mutually exclusive, do in some way represent the functioning levels at work in the centralized Exchanges Game plot of *Sir Gawain*. Caillois defines Huizinga's classifications as *agôn*, which is a competition of opponents, and *mimicry*, which is imaginative play involving actors who must avoid breaking the spell.⁴ To assert that the Exchanges Game is a *game*, is to also argue that it is an *agônistic* competition between Gawain and Bertilak. The rules are made between these two players in the poem and reaffirmed each evening upon the exchange of winnings. However, the critics and Bertilak know that Gawain has been deceived and the competition actually involves Lady Bertilak. The Exchanges Game is actually a play of *mimicry*, an illusion. Further interrogation of this illusion will reveal the ways in which the poem itself fails to adhere to the genre conventions of courtly romance and instead produces conflicting motifs that constrain Gawain's already awkward position as player in the games in the narrative. It is in this failure of conventions that the narrative engages in a different kind of play. This article will assert that the illusion of *gomen* is intentional to the extent that it opens up the narrative for the critique of cultural engagement with courtly romance as a genre in fourteenth-century Anglo-Norman England. This critique facilitates an assertion of Welshness, through the figures of the Bertilaks and Morgan La Fay, that complicates the Anglo-Norman identification of the Arthurian court and reveals the Norman appropriation of it.

³ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston 1950) 13. Huizinga's work has been foundational for the development of game theory, though the early applications were tied to such areas as anthropology, philosophy, and psychology. In later years, Huizinga's work influenced the development of video games. Brian Sutton-Smith has been instrumental in cultivating the use of game theory in literary criticism with his book *The Ambiguity of Play*. See Brian Sutton-Smith, "Rhetorics of the Imaginary," *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA 1997) 127–150. More recently, game theory has emerged as a lens for examining medieval literature, including games featured in narratives, games played with the audience, and the manuscript itself as a gaming object.

⁴ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York 1961) 12, 14, 22–23.

Sir Gawain operates under the guise of such a genre, though it plays with conflicting English and French conventions.⁵ Carolyne Larrington notes that the poem “relies for much of its literary effect on its audience’s knowledge of French Arthurian tradition and of the habitual behavior of the main characters in the Arthurian intertextual universe.”⁶ The poem deploys the Trojan connection of Brutus founding the English land of Britain, which is based in the Anglo-Norman Galfridian tradition, while also relying on characterizations established in the French romances. For example, Lady Bertilak anticipates that Gawain will live up to his reputation as a lover:

So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
 And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen,
 Couth not lyztly haf lenged so long wyth a lady,
 Bot he had craued a cosse bi his courtaysye,
 Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at sum talez ende. (lines 1297–1301)

So good as Gawain rightly is, / And who has so cleanly and courteously
 enclosed himself, / Could not lightly have lounged so long with a lady, /
 But he craved a kiss, by his courtesy, / By some hint of some trifle at some
 tale’s end.⁷

Patricia Clare Ingham suggests that the hybridity of English and French conventions serve to emphasize a postcolonial identity for a “fractured regnal community.”⁷ Ingham investigates the Welshness of the Other in the poem and the English centrality that situates the Welsh as an ethnic Other.⁸ The poet’s use of Morgan as a Welsh trickster allows for the *gomen* illusion to upset the Anglo-Norman Arthurian court from the margins. This positioning is common in English and French romance, as evidenced by the bumbling, Welsh Perceval. *Sir Gawain* demonstrates a potentially menacing Welsh presence in the form of Morgan and the Bertilaks, though the surface adherence to this convention obscures an agenda of resistance that comes to fruition

⁵ *Sir Gawain* additionally plays with French poetic forms, incorporating the Old English alliterative tradition to French verse as well as the bob and wheel form. A book forthcoming from Julie Nelson Couch and Kimberly Bell explores the function of the “floating bob” as a play on such French conventions.

⁶ Carolyne Larrington, “English Chivalry and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Malden 2009) 252.

⁷ Patricia Clare Ingham, ““In Contraceyze Strange”: Sovereign Rivals, Fantasies of Gender, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Sovereign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain* (Philadelphia 2001) 107.

⁸ Ingham, ““In Contraceyze Strange”” (n. 7 above) 109–114.

by the end of the poem. That surface level engagement with the intertextual Arthuriana of English and French romance includes such other conventions as the feast day marvel, the heroic adventure, and the temptation of the knight. As Larrington and Tison Pugh note, these conventions are further complicated by the poem's manuscript context, which places it just after three religious poems, *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Cleanness*.⁹ This perhaps plays a role in the poem's divergence from the typical happy ending in which the aristocratic knight both performs his duty and successfully earns the lady, thus restoring the status quo.¹⁰ While Gawain does not lose his head, his ending is an uneasy one. The childish Arthurian court opts to don sashes of "bryzt grene" ("bright green" line 2517) to memorialize the adventure and thus also memorialize Gawain's shame. These sashes clearly echo Edward III's Order of the Garter, the motto for which appears at the end of the poem, perhaps further connecting Gawain's shame to Edward III's court.

The Exchanges Game, which superficially appears to engage in the courtly romance apparatus, is a central episode in *Sir Gawain*. Gawain arrives at Bertilak's castle on his way to seek out the Green Knight, a journey precipitated by the overarching Beheading Game that governs the rest of the narrative. Bertilak offers Gawain both warm hospitality and light amusement in the form of various *gomen*. After a couple days, Bertilak suggests they play the Exchanges Game. They shall each go about their day—Bertilak to the hunt with his woodsmen and Gawain in Bertilak's home—and exchange at the end of it any winnings they should happen to accrue. The narrator tells us that "[p]is bargayn is maked" with "beuerage" ("this bargain is made" with "beverage" line 1112). Gawain does not seem at all perplexed by the rules as presented to him. They are perhaps perceived as a drinking jest. Gawain does not point out that there is nothing to be exchanged. After all, anything Gawain might win in his host's castle, including physical affection from servants or members of Bertilak's court, already belong to Bertilak by default. Similarly, the animals hunted by Bertilak and his men are presented to Gawain although they appear to be served to

⁹ Larrington, "English Chivalry" (n. 6 above) 252–253; Pugh, "Gawain and the Godgames" (n. 1 above) 525–551. The manuscript is London, British Library Cotton Nero MS A.x. (art. 3), hereafter referred to as the "Cotton Nero manuscript."

¹⁰ Ad Putter & Jane Gilbert, "Introduction," *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* (Essex 2000) 1–15.

the court and, theoretically, Bertilak's men would be hunting regardless of Gawain's presence either as a Christmas sport or for the sake of food.¹¹ What is perhaps more perplexing is Bertilak's lack of active participation in the three hunts that ensue.¹² Instead, Bertilak assumes the suitable Anglo-Norman aristocratic role of overseeing the hunting activities of his woodsmen. Hunting as *play*, according to the fifteenth-century Plantagenet hunting manual, *Master of Game*, is facilitated by the experienced and knowledgeable efforts of the aristocrat's woodsmen.¹³ The final swing of the sword or the killing shot of the arrow may come from the aristocrat, but the situation that allows for that kill is strategically arranged by these men in the lord's employ. In other words, the hunt is a kind of illusion as well, serving as a mimicry of masculine and aristocratic work. Additionally, this form of hunt is predicated upon the Anglo-Norman seizure of lands post-Conquest, which facilitated a particularly Norman recreational form of hunting practice.¹⁴ This act of hunting serves to further the illusion of Anglo-Norman nobility in the Welsh Marches.

In order to analyze the apparatus of the *gomen* illusion and its role in undermining the courtly romance genre, we must first consider its effects in the narrative. Savage's article first established the parallels between Gawain and the prey of Bertilak's hunts, noting how the bedroom and hunting scenes invite the reader to see a symmetry between them.¹⁵ However, Lady Bertilak could serve as an equally fitting parallel figure for the deer, boar, and fox, as will be elaborated through

¹¹ For information regarding the purposes of hunting in such contexts, see: Catherine Bates, "Masculinity and the Hunt," *Masculinity and the Hunt: Wyatt to Spenser* (Oxford 2013) 1–43; Trevor Dodman, "Hunting to Teach: Class, Pedagogy, and Maleness in 'The Master of Game' and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" *Exemplaria* 17.2 (2005) 413–444; Ryan R. Judkins, "The Game of the Courtly Hunt: Chasing and Breaking Deer in Late Medieval English Literature," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 112.1 (2013) 70–92; Marcelle Thiébaux, "The Instructive Chase: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Stag of Love: The Chase in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca 1974) 71–88.

¹² Dodman, "Hunting to Teach" (n. 11 above) 430. Dodman comparatively analyzes Edward Plantagenet's fifteenth-century *Master of Game* alongside *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to reveal the plural masculinities inherent to aristocratic gaming in the late medieval period.

¹³ Dodman, "Hunting to Teach" (n. 11 above) 416.

¹⁴ Dominique Battles, "Forest Landscapes and Forest Exile," *Cultural Difference and Material Culture in Middle English Romance: Normans and Saxons* (New York 2013) 85–86.

¹⁵ Henry L. Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 27.1 (1928) 5–6.

close readings below. If we think of the Exchanges Game as an illusion, falling within a larger gaming framework, then Bertilak and his wife are the primary hunters. Since they are not rival competitors, Caillois would argue that they are not engaged in a formal game.¹⁶ It's a far more collaborative engagement of *play*. They are playing a game of *make believe* by cultivating a pretend game in an illusory game space. Huizinga terms this space the "magic circle" which he defines as a "temporary world[] within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."¹⁷ This temporary world is governed by its own set of rules and aesthetics that must be upheld or the game is spoiled.¹⁸ This definition of the magic circle aligns nicely with the ways in which critics have described and imagined the fairy Otherworld of both insular British folklore and the courtly romance topos built upon that folkloric base. Take, for example, James Wade's recent book *Fairies in Medieval Romance*. Wade writes in his introduction that:

Romances are always concerned, first and foremost, with the lives of men and women, and fairies are only important in romance narrative when they intrude upon the hero's or heroine's world, or when these human characters are led into their world. It is through this sort of interaction, this crossing between two worlds—the human and the Other—that fairies become narratologically significant.¹⁹

This description of the interventions of the fairy aptly addresses Bertilak's dual roles in *Sir Gawain*. As the Green Knight he intrudes upon Arthur's court, and as the man, in cooperation with Morgan La Fay, Bertilak leads Gawain to both his castle and then to the Green Chapel at the end of the poem. The *Gawain*-poet even provides the folkloric cues to suggest that Gawain has traipsed across the boundary from the world of man to the fairy Otherworld through the depiction of the Wirral, with its dragons, rivers, crags, and mounds (lines 701–821). And he finally encounters a moat, which he must cross to enter the magic circle—the game space. This fictive game space is convincing

¹⁶ Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (n. 4 above) 15. See also the following essay pertaining to medieval conceptions of agonism: Ward Parks, "Prey Tell: How Heroes Perceive Monsters in 'Beowulf,'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 92.1 (January 1993) 1–16.

¹⁷ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (n. 3 above) 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ James Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*. (New York 2011) 1.

for Gawain and the *Gawain*-poet's audience because of the dichotomy established by such a rugged, Welsh landscape and the Anglo-Norman castle Bertilak inhabits. It is a respite from the wilderness which does not arouse suspicions, therefore cementing the illusory quality of the castle and the Exchanges Game.

Gawain is fully immersed in this temporary world simply because he is not aware of its fictive quality. From his perspective, the Exchanges Game is a real game with real rules that were agreed upon by both hunters. These two hunters, in Gawain's mind, are Bertilak and himself. What his perspective bars him from seeing is the alternative dynamic that situates Bertilak and his wife as the primary hunters or *players* of the game. Gawain's understanding of the events that transpire is ultimately revealed to be a superficial one, but it is valid for him at the moment of the game. He believes in the rules and understands his role as a hunter, which asserts Lady Bertilak as a valid parallel figure for the hunted prey. By reimagining the Exchanges Game as serving the dual functions of *game* and *illusion of game*, two sets of hunters are revealed. In this way, the *Gawain*-poet engages in play with the reader by cultivating a deeper understanding of the players in the narrative.

The roles of Gawain and Lady Bertilak in the poem become clearer when we examine the differences between the terms of *play* and *game*. Huizinga writes that "all play is a voluntary activity."²⁰ Huizinga's primary stated characteristic of play is that it is an act of freedom (8). In the schema of the Exchanges Game, Gawain is certainly not free. While he freely enters into the game, he is bound by the rules as an agreement (lines 1105–1112) that is later reaffirmed as "couenauntez" ("covenant" line 1408). *Covenant* could bear significant moral weight, though this argument has been challenged in recent years by such critics as Alice F. Blackwell, Michael M. Foley, and Gregory W. Gross.²¹ These scholars argue that the term *covenant* could be construed as simply another word for agreement and that it did not gain the more serious connotation until much later. In fact, Wade suggests that the

²⁰ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (n. 3 above) 7.

²¹ Alice F. Blackwell, "Sowing Wild Oaths in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Medieval Perspectives* 29 (2014) 93–108; Michael M. Foley, "Gawain's Two Confessions Reconsidered," *Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 9.1 (1974) 73–79; Gregory W. Gross, "Secret Rules: Sex, Confession, and Truth in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" *Arthuriana* 4.2 (1994) 146–174.

Exchanges Game is arbitrary in light of the more serious test of the Beheading Game.²² Stepping back for a moment to consider *Sir Gawain* in its manuscript context, we can see that readers could be meant to understand *covenant* as a moral obligation. The preceding poems in the Cotton Nero manuscript include two biblical paraphrases, *Cleanness* and *Patience*, and a dream vision poem, *Pearl*. Each of these poems serve as religious lessons on the dangers of sin and the values of virtuous living. Perhaps through this lens, we are meant to anticipate the moral severity of the *covenant* Gawain makes with Bertilak, even if Gawain does not. He is, after all, drinking each time these agreements are made. It seems likely that Gawain sees the *covenant* as a jest. However, as the conventions of courtly romance dictate, one must not break an agreement with an Otherworldly creature.²³

The problem for Gawain is that he does not recognize that he is dealing with Otherworldly figures, nor does he realize that he has moved beyond the realm of French Arthurian romance. His immersion in the illusion prevents such recognition. Even if the connotation of *covenant* is not the later sense of weighty moral obligation, it still carries a note of caution when one considers the circumstances. Since Gawain is not yet aware of the true circumstances of the Exchanges Game, he can easily laugh it off and partake in drinking with Bertilak after they reaffirm their agreement. Bertilak's wife is never bound by such agreements or rules of the kind governing Gawain's engagement with the game. Caillois supplements Huizinga's definitions by noting that games require rules and when the player is forced into a game it is no longer play.²⁴ Instead, the game has become work but is still a game by its pure definition.²⁵ Tison Pugh's argument favoring characterization of the games in *Sir Gawain* as "godgames" aligns more closely with this notion of the game becoming inescapable and unpleasant.²⁶ Conversely, Bertilak's wife is described during their first bedside encounter in this way: "Al lazande þe lady lauced þo bourdez." ("All laughing the lady released him with those jests" line

²² Wade, *Fairies* (n. 19 above) 34–35.

²³ See, for example, the consequences of Lanval revealing the existence of his fairy lover. Marie de France, "Lanval," *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Glyn S. Burgess (New York 1999) 77–78.

²⁴ Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (n. 4 above) 6–7.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 6.

²⁶ Pugh, "Gawain and the Godgames" (n. 1 above) 542.

1212) She laughs and teases, enjoying the way she cajoles Gawain into kissing her. Lady Bertilak engages in play, only bound by rules in the sense that Gawain himself adheres to them. In this context, Gawain is right to assume that he and Bertilak are the hunters because they are apparently bound by the rules of their agreement. What Gawain does not see, and therefore cannot assume, is Lady Bertilak's participation as a hunter. Through close readings, I shall demonstrate the ways in which Lady Bertilak serves as an alternative parallel to Bertilak's hunted prey, thus affirming the illusion for Gawain.²⁷

THE HUNTING & BEDROOM SCENES

Lady Bertilak's role as a hunter has been widely discussed in *Sir Gawain* scholarship. For example, Gerald Morgan argues that she "reveals the cunning that is necessary for one in pursuit of a deer, for the deer is a wise animal."²⁸ Here Gawain is the deer. However, Morgan argues that this cunning is tied to quietly stalking one's prey and he uses a hunting example from a different text entirely rather than referring to the hunting scene of the first day in *Sir Gawain* in order to draw these connections. Of course, many compelling comparisons have been made between Gawain and the prey hunted by Bertilak and his men. It is a relatively obvious parallel that establishes a promising symmetry between the hunting and bedroom scenes. Drawing the parallel between Lady Bertilak and the three animals—the deer, the boar, and the fox—produces a slightly different perspective on the poem by revealing how Gawain must have envisioned the game within the context of the narrative. If we think again of the hunters for a moment, we realize that it is the hunters who engage in the activity with rules. Many hunting manuals, such as the English *Master of Game*, from this period are still extant. They extoll the virtues of hunting and the moral obligations of the hunters, praising the aristocratic hunt. The animals could be said to play, but they do not follow game-based rules just as Lady Bertilak does not adhere to the rules agreed to between Gawain

²⁷ For greater exploration of Gawain's connections to the hunted animals, see: Dodman, "Hunting to Teach" (n. 11 above); Muriel Ingham and Lawrence Barkley, "Further Animal Parallels in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Chaucer Review* 13.4 (1979) 384–386; Leyerle, "The Game and the Play of Hero" (n. 1 above) 49–82; Gerald Morgan, "The Action of the Hunting and Bedroom Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medium Aevum* 56.2 (1987) 200–216; Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes" (n. 15 above) 1–15.

²⁸ Morgan, "The Action of the Hunting and Bedroom Scenes" (n. 27 above) 202.

and Bertilak.²⁹ Gawain participates in the Exchanges Game by fully believing in the illusion of it and imagining the Anglo-Norman hunting rules that metaphorically govern his actions. He follows the rules of the supposed game until they are superseded by the conventions guiding the Beheading Game in the overarching structure of the poem. Gawain must break rules in order to follow others. Anglo-Norman rules of the hunt act as an overlay, obscuring the overtly Welsh character of Morgan La Fay and her domain. Gawain and his readers are so distracted by Lady Bertilak and the gaming nature of Bertilak's demeanor, that they miss her machinations behind the scenes. Morgan is the one who introduces Gawain to Lady Bertilak (lines 947–971). Indeed, Morgan sits at the highest seat on the dais during meals: “Þe olde auncian wyf heȝest ho syttez; / Þe lorde lufly her by lent as I trowe.” (“The old ancient woman, highest she sat; / The lord courteously by her sat as I believe” lines 1001–1002) In the case of each of these little reveals of Morgan's trickery and real power, the narrator suddenly shifts focus away, allowing Morgan to continue hiding in plain sight. Thus, Gawain and the *Gawain*-poet's audience are not likely to catch the Welsh influence in the gaming space. This deception facilitates the challenge to the Anglo-Norman Arthurian court initiated by Morgan's desire to terrorize them. To examine Gawain's perspective, we must look at the hunting and bedroom scenes.

The first day's hunt is the pursuit of the hind or doe. Rather than quiet stalking, Bertilak's men sound their horns and give a wild chase. The *Gawain*-poet writes: “Þe does dryuen with gret dyn to þe depe sladez” (“The does were driven with a great din into the deep valley” line 1159). The poet further emphasizes that the does “brayen and bleden” (“cry and bleed” line 1163). All in all, the hunt goes easily as the hunters do not meet any active resistance from their prey. It is worth noting that Bertilak is mentioned only at the beginning of this passage to state that he dressed and then again at the end of the passage. As a proper aristocrat, he is not described as participating in the action of the scene. In the bedroom, Lady Bertilak is certainly the aggressor in their playful encounter, but Gawain is ready to play too.

²⁹ “it would seem that *agôn* is unknown among animals, which have no conception of limits or rules, only seeking a brutal victory in merciless combat . . . Yet, in considering the facts, it seems that animals already have the competitive urge during encounters where limits are at least implicitly accepted and spontaneously respected, even if rules are lacking.” Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (n. 4 above) 15–16.

The castle inside the moat is like Huizinga's magic circle; it is the site of gaming and Gawain believes himself to be the player – not Lady Bertilak. The *Gawain*-poet writes that Gawain, “vnlouked his y3e-lyddez and let as hym wondered / And sayned hym, as bi his sa3e þe sauer to worthe,” (“opened his eyelids and acted as if he wondered, / And he crossed himself, as if by this gesture the safer he would become” lines 1201–1202). The use of “as” in each line indicates that Gawain is pretending to be startled rather than expressing actual surprise at Lady Bertilak's appearance in his bedchamber.³⁰ Gawain is hunting just as much as she is here. Lady Bertilak is then portrayed as being wild like the deer as she asks for kisses. The deer are described as “quaked þe wylde” and “drof in þe dale” (“the wild animals trembled” and “poured into the dale” lines 1150–1151). However, Gawain “ferde with defence and feted ful fayre” (“acted defensively and behaved properly” line 1282). The frenzied movements of the deer, while more evocative of their alarm, parallel Lady Bertilak's eagerness. Lady Bertilak easily laughs off Gawain's reticence and asks, like the pleading doe, for the kiss. Gawain bestows it because a simple kiss falls within the parameters of the temptation motif of courtly romances as well as the rules of the game he has engaged in with Bertilak. Indeed, as Roberta L. Krueger notes in her summation of feminist readings of Old French romances, women are often cast “as desired objects rather than as active subjects in chivalric adventures or quests.”³¹ In other words, the temptation is an acceptable French courtly activity so long as the woman does not continue the seductive pursuit beyond the kiss. Gawain is seduced into the illusion of French courtly gaming, not realizing the very real threat of the Welsh Morgan just under the surface. There is no further resistance from Bertilak's wife once she receives a kiss. Gawain exchanges that kiss with Bertilak as the lord presents the cleaned and dressed deer. The two hunters exchange their winnings of the day, which, as noted earlier, does not amount to any tangible prize.

³⁰ Indeed, “as” is used throughout the poem to emphasize the pretense of the proceedings. Bertilak is often described with “as” in this manner. Almost the entire narrative is characterized by illusion in this way. Even Arthur's court playfully engages in illusion at the end of the poem by wearing green sashes, echoing (and perhaps critiquing) Edward III's Order of the Garter.

³¹ Roberta L. Krueger, “Questions of gender in Old French romance,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge 2000) 137.

However, the game as an illusion does facilitate the imagined commodification of Lady Bertilak. Given Gawain's perspective, which frames the narrative, the *Gawain*-poet engages with this French genre convention of objectifying the aristocratic lady. This commodification is so complete that Lady Bertilak is never even actually named by the poet. This act is part of the illusion since, as becomes clear later, Bertilak's wife is actively engaged in the playful hunt of Gawain. As an object for masculine handling, Lady Bertilak is, in effect, presented in exchange for the cleaned and dressed deer carcass. Of course Gawain cannot exchange the woman herself since she already belongs to Bertilak and he has not engaged in anything more than a conversation and a kiss, so it is her kiss that Gawain happily bestows: "He haspez his fayre hals his armez wythinne / And kysses hym as comlyly as he coupe awyse" ("He grasps his fair neck within his arms, / And kisses him as properly as he could manage" lines 1388–1389). The perceived commodification of Lady Bertilak's actions for the sake of exchange neatly prevents Gawain from seeing her actual role as a hunter and thus allows him to continue to participate in the illusory quality of the Exchanges Game. By ensnaring Gawain into this deception, Bertilak and his wife are leading him into a conflict of rules systems that will ultimately challenge his self-perception as a noble member of Arthur's court.

The second day is when the aggression properly begins. The boar is a fearsome challenge for Bertilak's men just as Lady Bertilak becomes a more aggressive foe for Gawain to resist. The *Gawain*-poet describes the bedroom encounter in this way:

Bus hym frayned þat fre and fondet hym ofte,
 For to haf wonnen hym to woʒe, whatso scho þoʒt ellex;
 Bot he defended hym so fayr þat no faut semed,
 Ne no eucl on nawþer halue, nawþer þay wysten
 Bot blysse. (lines 1549–1553)

Thus she tried him out, that noble man, and tested him often, / For to bring him to woe, whatever else she thought; / But he defended himself so nobly that there seemed to be no fault, / Nor nor evil on either part, nor did they understand anything but bliss.

Similarly, the woodsmen and hunters assert extreme caution and defense while facing the boar:

Whettez his whyte tuschez. With hym þen irked
 Alle þe burnez so bolde þat hym by stoden
 To nye hym onferum, but neze hym non durst
 For woþe (lines 1573–1576)

Whet his white tusks. With him then irked / All the men so bold that stood
 around him / to hurt him at a distance, but near him none dared go / Be-
 cause of the danger

The boar, like Lady Bertilak, is a dangerous opponent here and fuels the trepidation of the hunters. Getting close could mean the untimely end of a man. Despite her efforts, like the boar, Lady Bertilak is subdued. Here is a description of the resistance of the boar:

Per he bode in his bay, tel bawemen hit breken
 And madee hym mawgref his hed for to mwe vtter,
 So felle flonez þer flete when þe folk gedered. (lines 1564–1566)

There he was in his defensive stance, until the bowmen broke it, / and made him move into the open despite his displeasure, / So into his hide the arrows there sped when the men gathered.

Of course, this is not the end of the boar. Ultimately Bertilak steps in and engages in an almost agonistic single combat with the beast,³² stabbing the boar through the heart. Just as Bertilak stepped in at the end of the hunt on the first day, so too does he finally participate in the hunt of the boar after his men have tracked, worn down, and attacked the animal. Dodman notes that it is actually rather absurd for Bertilak to stab the boar with a sword.³³ However, it is appropriately aristocratic. One can imagine the comparison Gawain might make that night as Bertilak relates the story of the feisty boar. Gawain subdued his own prey, fending off sexual advances and coming away with two kisses as his reward. Perhaps Gawain should begin to notice that Lady Bertilak is moving beyond the realm of courtly romance conventions, but as of the second day he is still caught up in the illusion of the Exchanges Game. As such, he is also still comfortably operating within the illusion of French romance. Lady Bertilak playfully questions the identity constructed by such French Arthurian progenitors as Chrétien de

³² As noted elsewhere, animals do not have the wherewithal to engage in agonistic combat.

³³ Dodman, "Hunting to Teach" (n. 11 above) 440.

Troyes, but Gawain is entrenched in the appearance of the castle's protection from the dangerous Welsh landscape outside the moat.

As many scholars have noted, there are obvious parallels between Gawain and the boar.³⁴ If we think of the Exchanges Game as the illusion it is, then Lady Bertilak is hunting the knight for her husband and Morgan La Fay. Indeed, Bertilak presents the boar's head to Gawain, reminding the audience and the knight of the Beheading Game that is afoot in the overarching narrative. This plurality of perspectives demonstrates the dynamism of the poem. Not only does the *Gawain*-poet engage the reader in play through various structural features such as the floating bob³⁵, but he also produces a narrative in which the parallelism offers the reader options in how he or she chooses to read the poem. One can choose to see Lady Bertilak as the hunter here, or the reader can decide to approach the narrative from Gawain's perspective, in which he is the hunter participating in a game with his fellow hunter, Bertilak. Both the narrative and the manuscript itself serve as meta-gaming devices for the reader, though it would seem that part of the game here is for the audience to deduce Lady Bertilak's role as a hunter. This playful deployment of the seductress as hunter in kind lends itself to humorous effect in the poem. Like a modern detective novel, the solution is only revealed at the end of the narrative, but the *Gawain*-poet incorporates clues along the way.

In anticipation of the third day's hunt, Lady Bertilak engages in sly "countenance" at the feast that evening ("countenance" lines 1658–1663). The good knight Gawain rejects these lures politely. The next morning brings the hunt of the fox. Savage is the first to make the connection of Gawain to the fox. His characterization of this parallel is: "a false beast is roused in the forest, and a false man revealed in the castle; a sly fox caught in the wood, a "sly fox" in the castle."³⁶ The argument Savage and many others make is that Gawain resorts to

³⁴ Each of the following previously identified articles takes such a parallel as its premise: Dodman, "Hunting to Teach" (n. 11 above); Pugh, "Gawain and the God-games" (n. 1 above); Bates, "Masculinity and the Hunt" (n. 11 above); Judkins, "The Game of the Courtly Hunt" (n. 11 above); Thiébaux, "The Instructive Chase" (n. 11 above); Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes" (n. 15 above); Ingham & Barkley, "Further Animal Parallels" (n. 27 above); Morgan, "The Action of the Hunting and Bedroom Scenes" (n. 27 above).

³⁵ Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, "Major Middle English Poets and Manuscript Studies, 1300–1450," *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts: Literary & Visual Approaches*, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Maidie Hilmo, and Linda Olson (Ithaca 2012) 59–64.

³⁶ Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes" (n. 15 above) 5.

trickery to avoid death while also breaking the rules.³⁷ Really, it seems that the rules of the courtly romance genre, or even those of the Beheading Game, supersede the rules of the simple Exchanges Game. For the sake of drawing the connection within the context of the illusion at hand, then it is perhaps not entirely incorrect to suggest that Gawain is “sly”. However, this does not rule out the parallel to Lady Bertilak. If we consider the description of the fox from the bestiary preserved in Cambridge University Library MS 11.4.26, it becomes evident that Bertilak’s wife also bears a resemblance to the fox:

He is a fraudulent and ingenious animal. When he is hungry and nothing turns up for him to devour, he rolls himself in red mud so that he looks as if he were stained with blood. Then he throws himself on the ground and holds his breath, so that he positively does not seem to breathe. The birds, seeing that he is not breathing, and that he looks as if he were covered with blood ... think he is dead and come down to sit on him. When, thus he grabs them and gobbles them up.³⁸

Of course, a description from a bestiary unconnected to the Cotton Nero manuscript that contains *Sir Gawain* is insufficient evidence for comparing Lady Bertilak to the fox in the text. However this description appears in the bestiaries contained in other manuscripts as well, including London British Library MS Arundel 292 and Aberdeen University Library MS 24.³⁹ These descriptions all bear resemblances to the *Gawain*-poet’s fox and Lady Bertilak, who is described as approaching Gawain dressed up in a cloak “furred ful fyne with fellez wel pured” and “Hir brest bare bifore” (“That was fully furred with pelts well enhanced and colored” and “Her breast bare before (him)” lines 1737 & 1741). Just as the fox costumes himself in mud to entice his prey, so too does Bertilak’s wife seek to entice Gawain with her disguised attire. To further obscure Lady Bertilak as a hunter and player in the narrative, Gawain is dressed up in a similar cloak at the evening’s festivities directly following this bedroom scene:

He were a bleaunt of blew, þat bradde to þe erþe,

³⁷ Savage, “The Significance of the Hunting Scenes” (n. 15 above) 6.

³⁸ T. H. White, *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (New York 1984) 53–54.

³⁹ Arundel 292 contains a Middle English bestiary and Aberdeen 24 is the Aberdeen Bestiary, composed in Latin. The Arundel 292 bestiary’s description of the fox specifically uses feminine pronouns. See Kerby-Fulton, *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts* (n. 35 above) 43–44.

His surkot semed hym wel, þat softe watz forred,
 And his hode of þat ilke hinged on his schulder;
 Blande al of blaunner were boþe al aboute. (lines 1928–1931)

He wore a mantle of blue, that reached to the earth, / His surcoat seemed good to him, which soft garment was furred, / And his hood of that ilk (also furred) hung on his shoulder, / Both were lined all about with blaunner (a type of fur).

If anyone should consider Gawain a “sly fox,” it should be Gawain himself since he imagines his role as a player seeking after kisses from his host’s wife. He is so ensconced in the French courtly romance genre that he cannot see the dangers lurking in plain sight. However, he is aware (and indeed anxious about) the illusion of danger in the form of the Green Knight waiting for him in a day’s time.

The *Gawain*-poet describes his fox, Reynard⁴⁰, as “wylé” and “he lad hem bi lagmon, þe lorde and his meyny” (“wily” and “he led them away by his tail, the lord and his household” lines 1728 & 1729). The fox engages in playful dance as he dashes away from his pursuers. Just as Lady Bertilak is stripped of her girdle, given to Gawain to protect his life in the overarching Beheading Game, so too is the fox “tyruen of his cote” (“stripped of his coat” line 1921). While the fox’s coat is a symbol of his death, the girdle is allegedly a symbol of life. What clenches the connection between Lady Bertilak and Reynard the fox is not exactly her offer of the girdle as love token, but her desire that Gawain keep it secret. Bertilak’s wife is the one who first requests a love token. When Gawain replies that he possesses nothing of value with him there, Lady Bertilak makes three offers of a love token to him, thus tempting Gawain. This refusal further demonstrates the jovial nature of the Exchanges Game in Gawain’s mind. It does not even occur to him to accept a token and produce it to Bertilak as the day’s winnings. Instead, Gawain interprets the offer in the context of the lady’s seductive wiles and thus through a gendered and cuckolding lens. When he finally agrees, she asks that he keep the girdle secret. Lady Bertilak “bisozt hym for hir sake disceuer hit neuer / Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde” (“beseeched him for her sake to reveal it never / But to faithfully conceal it from her lord” lines 1862–1863). It is Lady Bertilak who asks Gawain to break the covenant he has made with her

⁴⁰ For a discussion of Reynard the fox’s history in French folk tradition, see Patricia Terry, “Introduction,” *Renard the Fox* (Berkeley 1992) 3–24.

husband, though his earlier refusal suggests he already had such a plan in mind. It is the potentially life-saving benefit of the girdle that clenches his decision. From Gawain's perspective, Bertilak's wife is sly here and encouraging him to be secretive too. They are both foxes. As hunters, both have had a relatively unsuccessful day in the sense that Lady Bertilak did not manage to fully seduce Gawain, and Gawain now has something shameful he must hide. However, Lady Bertilak's cunning use of the girdle achieved other ends. Gawain's internal conflict, interpreted through a Christological lens by scholars such as Pugh, is instigated by the girdle. The conflict occurs through a clash of rule sets. The crisis of this conflict sets up a victory for the Welsh figures metaphorically reclaiming the Arthurian court from its Norman appropriators.

BREAKING THE CONVENTIONS OF THE COURTLY ROMANCE GENRE

Many of the common conventions of courtly romance, as it was developed between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, appear in *Sir Gawain*. As Susan Crane notes in her critical work *Insular Romance*, most Middle English romances arise out of Norman or continental French sources.⁴¹ Of course, many of those Old French source romances gather their subject matter from Welsh, Irish, and Breton folk material.⁴² This appropriation of Arthuriana seems to precipitate Welsh reclamation efforts in the form of the fairy figure of Morgan La Fay in *Sir Gawain*. Of course, this reclamation is merely metaphorical and occurs through the use of illusion to terrorize the French Arthurian court and Gawain as its representative. While such conventions proliferate throughout the narrative, the attention here shall be on two specific genre conventions that comprise a significant part of the illusory Exchanges Game. These two motifs are the temptation in the bedchamber and the magical, life-saving talisman.

Elisabeth Brewer explores the many analogues for the beheading and temptation themes in *From Cuchulainn to Gawain*, which include

⁴¹ Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley 1986) 6.

⁴² In his recent book, Patrick Sims-Williams carefully analyzes such analogues and source materials, examining the ways in which the folk narratives were transmitted between Ireland and Wales. Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford 2011).

both Celtic and French sources.⁴³ The temptation scenes in these analogues bear a great resemblance to that which is found in *Sir Gawain*, including the agential and playful lady testing the knight. However, the significant difference that arises upon comparison is that any capitulation to the lady's seduction does not involve a secret, magical talisman for a love token. It is here that the *Gawain*-poet stands out in how he arranges the structure of his narrative. Brewer writes of the poet's deft handling, "To read the sources and analogues of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not only to be aware of the poet's skill in handling traditional episodes, but also to realise how much he added in the way of narrative and descriptive material."⁴⁴ In other words, the *Gawain*-poet's divergences from his sources are evidence of his careful crafting of the poem's structure or at least evidence of his intentional deviations for the sake of such structure.⁴⁵ By compounding the temptation motif with that of the magical, life-saving talisman, the *Gawain*-poet inflicts upon Gawain through his Bertilak characters the problem of conflicting sets of rules.

These two conventions each have their own rules that govern the knight's safe navigation through the narrative in this genre. The temptation must be resisted at all costs, though a knight may be permitted to secure kisses from the testing lady. In some cases, such as that of titular protagonist in the *Romance of Yder*, the knight goes so far as to physically assault the lady in order to prevent any further temptations. When the lady kissed Yder, he "pushed her off, called her a stupid whore, and did not even take her hand and hold it. He gave her such a kick that she fell over on the floor."⁴⁶ Gawain, of course, never physically attacks Lady Bertilak, opting instead for a more genteel approach. As was noted earlier, Lady Bertilak is much more aggressive in their bedroom encounters, which not only fits into the temptation trope but also is indicative of her role as one of the hunters undermin-

⁴³ Elisabeth Brewer, *From Cuchulainn to Gawain: Sources and analogues of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge 1973). The beheading game, which is a motif with Welsh and Irish origins, could function in *Sir Gawain* as a beheading of power structure of Arthur's court through its representative.

⁴⁴ Brewer, *From Cuchulainn to Gawain* (n. 43 above) 3.

⁴⁵ For example, Edward I. Condren has identified and explained the numerical structure of the Cotton Nero A.x. (art. 3) MS. Many of the structural moves seem to be not only intentional, but carefully orchestrated. Edward I. Condren, *The Numerical Universe of the Gawain-Pearl Poet: Beyond Phi* (Gainesville 2002).

⁴⁶ Brewer, *From Cuchulainn to Gawain* (n. 43 above) 50.

ing the conventional understanding of the Exchanges Game as a proper game between Bertilak and Gawain. Gawain participates to the letter of the game, even going so far as to refuse Bertilak the identity of the sources of the kisses obtained: “‘Þat watz not forward,’ quop he, ‘frayst me no more, / For 3e haf tan þat yow tydez” (“‘That was not the agreement,’ he said, ‘ask me no more, / For you have taken what you were owed” lines 1395–1396a). By the same token, Gawain carefully follows the rules of the temptation trope by refusing advances and securing only kisses from his prey.

Gawain’s assured rule-following is disrupted when another set of contradictory rules are imposed upon him. The talisman carries its own set of conventions followed in courtly romances, particularly quest narratives. If a mysterious, potentially supernatural lady offers a life-preserving token, it is the duty of the knight to take it. Gawain’s interpretation of the situation is crucial to the audience’s understanding of it, which means Lady Bertilak’s lack of a name aids the obscuring of her as a hunter. Instead of a wily seductress, Gawain interprets her actions as part of her genre-controlled role as an objectified lady without agency. Her role in the illusory Exchanges Game furthers such commodification of her body and character. So, her offer of a life-preserving talisman connects more easily to this motif when constructed through Gawain’s perspective. Wade has an entire chapter of his book dedicated to the gifts and taboos of fairy women.⁴⁷ He writes that “the favor of [the fairy mistresses’] love are often accompanied by supernatural gifts that aid their chosen knights in social, economic, and political terms: gifts of unlimited wealth, supernatural healing, magical objects, protective aid, even prophecy”.⁴⁸ Of course, Wade notes that not all such gifts are good and goes on to define “dangerous gifts” as those that have the potential to be either rewarding or inextricably volatile for the knight in question.⁴⁹ Lady Bertilak’s girdle could be considered one of these “dangerous gifts” in the sense that Gawain understands it to be life-preserving; but he does not see it for the test that it ultimately is and earns a nick on his neck from Bertilak’s axe as his punishment for taking and concealing it. Gawain could give the girdle to Bertilak and thus forge a third option, but this would again prevent him from securing the protection of the talisman and, as noted

⁴⁷ Wade, *Fairies* (n. 19 above) 109–146.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 109–110.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 110.

above, Lady Bertilak specifically insisted that Gawain not tell her husband.

The girdle as magical, life-saving talisman intrudes upon the set of rules Gawain is already following under the convention of the temptation in the bedchamber. The temptation motif demands that Gawain not take any such love tokens from the testing lady; further, the artificially constructed rules of the illusory Exchanges Game dictate that Gawain give to Bertilak anything he acquires in the bedroom. This contradiction creates a problem for an already anxiety-ridden Gawain because he must choose which set of rules to break. Does he follow the conventions of the temptation trope and abide by the Exchanges Game while forsaking his only chance at survival under the Green Knight's blade? Or does he choose to accept the token, break the Exchanges Game rules, and live with the shame of giving in to temptation? The pragmatic answer is to take the love token and survive the Beheading Game. The French appropriation of Arthuriana has accommodated for problems of shame and spiritual penance with a whole new set of conventions. Living with shame is, theoretically, better than death by beheading.

Of course, what Gawain does not see is the cunning behind implementing the motif of the talisman to contradict the rules already in play. Indeed, the audience for this poem would not necessarily detect the illusory nature of the game either and thus identifies with Gawain's crisis that arises out of such contradictions. Bertilak had no intention of actually beheading Gawain, but he does opt to give Gawain a slight nick on the neck for breaking the one set of rules in favor of the other set. Lady Bertilak sets Gawain up to fail. Returning to the two sets of hunters for a moment, we can see here the playful exchange between Bertilak and his wife. They both pursue Gawain in their own way. One set of rules followed would permit Bertilak to behead Gawain while the other set would permit Lady Bertilak to reveal Gawain as a morally false knight. Either way, Gawain is going to lose. Morgan's efforts to upset Arthur's court via its representative Gawain are completely hidden until the end of the poem. However, he can see none of these machinations under the surface of the illusion because of his full participation in the imaginative Exchanges Game and his preoccupation with the impending conclusion to the Beheading Game.

One convention that seems to arise out of the French *chansons de geste* and romance cycles rather than Celtic folklore is the almost childish Arthur's impatience at the beginning of the poem. The poet writes:

And also anoþer maner meued him eke,
 Þat he þurȝ noblelay 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 myȝt trawe,
 Of alderes, of armes, of oþer auenturus;
 Oþer sum segg hym bisoȝt of sum siker knyȝt
 To jayne wyth hym in justyng, in jopardé to lay (lines 90–96)

And also another custom motivated him, / That he as a matter of nobility
 had undertaken: he would never eat / on such a dear day, before he saw /
 some adventurous thing, a strange tale / of some great marvel that he might
 believe, / Of princes, of arms, of other adventurous things; / Or some man
 sought him out for some trustworthy knight / To join in jousting with him,
 to lay together in jeopardy

It has become Arthur's habit, which is described here as "noblelay" to refuse his Christmas meal until something exciting happens. This is clearly conditioned upon the French trope of quests and marvels arising during feasts. While this assertion rests on a solid foundation of French romances, the *Gawain*-poet depicts a petulant, young king who is of "ȝonge blod" and "brayn wylde" ("young blood" and "brain wild" lines 89). The tropes are so commonplace that Arthur's petulance is regularly rewarded, as it is in *Sir Gawain* when the Green Knight appears. The image of a childish Anglo-Norman Arthur is difficult to reconcile with more noble characterizations found in other romances, which calls into question the role of Arthur and his court in *Sir Gawain*. Given the context of the illusions at play in the poem, Arthur's depiction seems to be politically motivated.

CONTRADICTORY RULES AND THE TENSIONS OF ARTHURIANA

The Exchanges Game as an illusion of a game provides an alternative gaming space for toying with and ultimately undermining the Arthurian court through its representative knight Gawain. By forcing Gawain into the dilemma discussed above, Bertilak and his wife position him such that he must confront the conventions imposed upon Arthuriana

by Anglo-Norman developments of the courtly romance genre. In his discussion of the Other Worlds of romance, Jeff Rider writes:

[Other Worlds] disrupt the order of a peaceful, stable aristocratic world, bring about the hero's departure from that world, and launch the narrative. Narrative-launching otherworldly interventions may also occur, however, in response to pre-existing problems or tensions within the central aristocratic society which it cannot resolve on its own, or in order to bring to light faults in that society which might otherwise go unnoticed and uncorrected.⁵⁰

In the case of *Sir Gawain* the tensions explored in the gaming space are those born of the appropriation of Arthuriana from its Welsh and Briton sources. This move occurred significantly under Henry II's rule in the twelfth century in response to the Welsh messianic conception of the Arthur figure. The revisionist campaign involves not only killing the Welsh Arthur through the "discovery" of his grave site,⁵¹ but also by redressing Arthur's lineage in order to directly connect him to the Plantagenets.⁵²

The project of making Arthur French did not end in the twelfth century. Ordelle G. Hill makes a compelling case for the Arthur of *Sir Gawain* as a representation of Edward III, the Plantagenet king and 'Prince of Wales' who never really went to Wales. Hill notes that Edward III founded the Order of the Garter in 1348, whose motto appears at the end of *Sir Gawain*.⁵³ Edward III came to his reign as a teenager, which perhaps bears resemblance to the childish Arthur at the beginning and end of the poem. Hill notes that Edward III envisioned himself as an Arthur and operated his court on the model of the Arthurian Round Table.⁵⁴ So, if Arthur and his court in *Sir Gawain* are meant to represent this Anglo-Norman king who fancied himself an Arthur and if we have Welsh sources and analogues for the Green

⁵⁰ Jeff Rider, "The other worlds of romance," *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (New York 2000) 118.

⁵¹ See the accounts of the Arthur and Guinevere's graves in the works of Giraldus Cambrensis. Giraldus Cambrensis, *Gerald of Wales: Concerning the Instruction of Princes*, trans. Joseph Stephen (repr. Dyfed 1991); Giraldus Cambrensis, *Gerald of Wales: The Jewel of the Church*, trans. John J. Hagen (Leiden 1979).

⁵² Crane, *Insular Romance* (n. 41 above) 140–145.

⁵³ Ordelle G. Hill, *Looking Westward: Poetry, Landscape, and Politics in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Newark 2009) 79.

⁵⁴ Hill, *Looking Westward* (n. 53 above) 78–79.

Knight,⁵⁵ there would then seem to be a representation of the contemporary political tension. That tension is further heightened by the placement of Bertilak's castle and the Green Chapel in a Welsh landscape. As Tony Davenport argues, "by the fourteenth century Wales has a role in romance as a suitable wild place" that gets equated in the English mindset with lawlessness because of the "crossing from an area of English law into one of Welsh law."⁵⁶ The terrain is evocative of such lawlessness, which sets an unease for Gawain, a knight guided by the conventions and principles of Anglo-Norman romance. The role of the Exchanges Game would appear, in this context, to be to inflict contradictory courtly romance conventions on a figure of this Anglo-Norman Arthurian court in order to interrogate the appropriation and revision of Arthuriana.

Huizinga's concept of the magic circle plays an important role in thinking through this tension in the text. The *Gawain*-poet engages the problematic Arthurian court in a specifically Otherworldly space that Gawain must access by crossing several folkloric tropes of liminal features such as the bodies of water and mounds in the Wirral. Despite anxiety over his impending beheading, Gawain agrees to yet another Christmas *gomen* and thus ultimately compounds his conventional obligations. The *Gawain*-poet sets the reader up to see the *gomen* from Gawain's perspective and thus encourages the reader to also see Gawain as one of the two hunters in the Exchanges Game. This imposition on the reader is furthered by Bertilak's hunting activities, which Dominique Battles notes is a characteristic post-Conquest activity.⁵⁷ Battles argues particularly that Bertilak engages in a doubling of Anglo-Saxon monster as Green Knight and Norman baronial lord with a castle and hunting grounds. The *forest*, a term derived from the French *fôret* means in the medieval English context an aristocratic hunting grounds privately owned and enjoyed by predominantly Norman aris-

⁵⁵ Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (n. 42 above); Proinsias Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llyr: A Study of the Irish Affinities and of the Composition of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff 1958).

⁵⁶ Tony Davenport, "Wales and Welshness in Middle English Romances," *Authority and Subjugation in Writing Medieval Wales*, ed. Ruth Kennedy and Simon Meecham-Jones (New York 2008) 149–150. To set the stage for this argument, Davenport examines portrayals of Wales and the Welsh in contemporary sources including Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales.

⁵⁷ Battles, "Forest Landscapes" (n. 14 above) 85–86.

toocrats.⁵⁸ Given this context, Battles is right to argue that Bertilak plays two roles – monster and lord. The Exchanges Game as an illusion and mode of play is strengthened by Bertilak mimicking the Norman function of the forest. This expression of Norman aristocracy keeps Gawain from thinking he has been led too far astray. Note his relief at finding such a lordly castle after all his suffering in the Welsh wilderness of the Wirral:

Penne hatz he hendly of his helme and heȝly he þonkez
 Jesus and Sayn Gilyan, þat gentyle ar boþe,
 Pat cortaysly hade hym kydde and his cry herkened. (lines 773–776)

Then he graciously took off his helmet and solemnly he thanks / Jesus and Saint Julian, who are both gracious, / who had shown him courtesy and heard his entreaty.

Gawain is not in a position to interrogate the illusion of the Exchanges Game after such overwhelming relief to find Anglo-Norman civilization in the Welsh wilderness. This mimicry of Anglo-Norman courtliness could have a similar effect for contemporary audiences since hunting is such a distinct symbol of the Norman aristocrat.

The likely audience for *Sir Gawain* has a considerable body of romances, which are relied upon in this intertextual poem, as a frame of reference for identifying both Gawain's characterization and the dilemmas he faces. That background combined with Bertilak's wife as a nameless lady facilitates the obfuscation of Lady Bertilak's role as playful hunter. The illusory nature of this game does not become apparent until the final beheading, though the *Gawain*-poet does offer his reader clues along the way, as was noted above in the close readings. The Exchanges Game closely mimics the strictures of a courtly game until the third day when Lady Bertilak forces Gawain to make a choice between the two conventions of temptation and talisman. That mimicry hides the role of Lady Bertilak as hunter. It is not until we see and explore this alternate perspective that the game is revealed to be an illusion of gameplay. According to Huizinga, a game cannot be proper if one of the opponents already knows the outcome.⁵⁹ The Bertilaks engage in play, toying with Gawain in turn for the sake of Morgan La Fay's orchestrated scheme of frightening the Arthurian court

⁵⁸ Ibid. 84–85.

⁵⁹ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (n. 3 above) 10–12.

and reminding them of her presence. The Welshness of Bertilak and the presence of Morgan in the narrative are not revealed until the very end of the poem at the Green Chapel. After the courtliness of the illusory Exchanges Game, the assertion of such Welshness is a confrontational act for both Gawain and contemporary audiences. The Welsh figures have managed to trick the Anglo-Norman Arthur's court and inflict shame upon their representational knight. Since beheadings and Morgan herself are both tropes of the Welsh Arthurian tradition, the *Gawain*-poet sets Morgan and Bertilak up as reminders of the Welsh presence, which will not simply go away.