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[*Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.* Note: yogh has been replaced with gh or y in the Middle English quotations.]

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# Bertilak Reads *Brut*:

History and the Complications of Sexuality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*

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Gawain's travels in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* suggest a world in which home--i.e., Camelot--is "normal," while away--the opposing castle of Hautdesert where Gawain perforce spends his Christmas vacation--is "other," characterized by unfamiliarity, dislocation, perversity. And in fact the atmosphere at Hautdesert appears somewhat peculiar, with various challenges to "normal" sexual identity, and with permutations of physical intimacy, or at least the suggestion of such intimacy, that are, to say the least, surprising. The typical journey of medieval romance juxtaposes a "real" world where things and people behave according to expectation with a "magical" world in which the usual rules are suspended. According to this paradigm, we might expect that this poem would place Hautdesert outside the bounds of tradition, separated by its difference from the expectations that govern Camelot and the remainder of the Arthurian world.

However, Gawain's journey away from Camelot and back is framed by references, in the first and last stanzas, to the journeys into exile of Aeneas and of Brutus, the legendary founder of Britain, that complicate this apparent opposition. As this paper will argue, this framework complicates the poem's presentation of gender and sexuality. Rather than a clear opposition between, say, marital sexuality and everything else, we find a situation in which potentially adulterous acts and kisses among men are vested with varied--and shifting--values. The poem uses references to the (imagined) British past to complicate any simple reading of the tale it tells in terms of sexual morality or transgression.[1]

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*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* opens with a summary of the events leading from the fall of Troy to the establishment of Britain:

> Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,
> þe borgh brittened and brent to brondez and askez,
> þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroght
> Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe:
> Hit watz Ennias þe athel, and his highe kynde,
> þat siþen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicome
> Welneghe of al þe wele in þe west iles.
> Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyþe,
> With gret bobbaunce þat burghe he biges vpon fyrst,
> And neuenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;
> Tirius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes,
> Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes vp homes,
> And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus
> On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez
> wyth wynne,
>
> Where werre and wrake and wonder
> Bi syþez hatz wont þerinne,
> And oft boþe blysse and blunder
> Ful skete hatz skyfted synne. (1-19)

> (After the siege and the assault had ceased at Troy, the city battered and burnt to coals and ashes, the fellow that there wrought the machinations of treason was tried for his treachery, the foulest on earth: It was Aeneas the noble, and his noble kin, who then subjugated provinces, and became masters of well-nigh all the wealth in Western Europe. Then noble Romulus directs himself hurriedly to Rome. With great arrogance he builds that city in that place, and gives it his own name, as it is now called; (likewise) Ticius (travels) to Tuscany and founds dwellings, Longbeard lifts up homes in Lombardy, and far over the French Flood [i.e., the English Channel] Felix Brutus with joy on many broad banks plants Britain, where war and vengeance and wonder have existed in alternation therein, and often both bliss and blunder have very often alternated since.)2

In thus contextualizating the action of the poem, the *Gawain*-poet subtly challenges the centrality of Camelot. The poet zooms in from Troy to Rome and finally to England, thus placing Arthur (named in the second stanza) and Camelot (introduced in the third) quite literally at the

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edge of the map. The late thirteenth-century *Mappa Mundi* which eventually found its way to the cathedral at Hereford, in western England near the *Gawain*-poet's Welsh origin, is typical of medieval presentations of the world. Oriented with east at the top, it depicts the land mass of the northern hemisphere in a circle, with Jerusalem at its center, Asia at the top, Africa to the right, and Europe to the left; England and Wales are placed at the bottom left of the map, wedged between continental Europe and the schematically represented Atlantic Ocean.3 Like maps of this type, the *Gawain*-poet situates Camelot at the distant margin of the world known to Trojans or Romans through his tour through the poem's first stanza.

In his movement inward, however, the poet simultaneously places Camelot at the center of the Arthurian world, the place where Arthur's retinue has converged for the Christmas season. When the Green Knight intrudes upon Arthur's joyous festival, he at first appears an apparition from beyond reality. However, in bidding Gawain seek him out a year hence he makes clear that his home is, if far from Camelot, still within the bounds of the real world in which Arthur and his knights live and travel. Gawain's long journey in search of the Green Chapel will emphasize the marginality of that place to Arthur's world. However, the narrative once again challenges that spatial positioning: the action at Hautdesert and the nearby Green Chapel occupy 67 of the poem's 101 stanzas, or fully two thirds of the poem. Moreover, the action at Hautdesert is enclosed like a Matrioschka doll by Gawain's journey there and back, in turn enclosed by action at Camelot, in turn enclosed by references to Brutus, in turn enclosed by references to Troy. Camelot is, in other words, at once placed within the center of the poem, yet shunted to its margins, in ways textual, narratological, and cartographical, thus refusing to allow any conclusive understanding of its spatial significance.

The poem's framing references to Brutus, and their significance, further complicate attempts to assign meaning to the Arthurian world and to Gawain's travels within that world. If the domain of the Green Knight is not an unreal counterpart to the real world of Camelot, it at least appears that Gawain travels from normativity to perversity and back. But Gawain's out-and-back journey is framed by reference to Brutus, the descendant of Aeneas who was, according to legend, founder of England and ancestor of Arthur. That this founding legend is not unambiguously glorifying is suggested by the reference in the first stanza to treason, an allusion that has puzzled scholars of the poem. A look at Layamon's *Brut*, the first English version of this particular English foundational myth, illuminates this puzzle but further problematizes the character of Brutus and the nature of the land that claims him as its founder. These questions ultimately cast a shadow over *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

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Layamon's poem begins, like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with the fall of Troy through treachery, followed by a brief account of Aeneas's odyssey to Rome and the tale of his great-grandson, Brutus, who, the poet explains, left Rome, brought his people to England, and named the new nation for himself:

> Þis lond was ihaten Albion; þa Brutus cum her-on.
> þa nolde Brutus na-mare; þat hit swa ihaten weore.
> ah scupte him nome; æfter him-seluan.
> He wes ihaten Brutus; þis lond he clepede Brutaine. (ll. 975-78)

(This land was called Albion when Brutus came here. Then Brutus did not wish that it would be so called any more, but shaped it a name after himself. He was called Brutus; this land he called Britain.)4

The narrative sequence in this passage--the seige of Troy, the reference to treachery, and the escape of Aeneas to become the conquerer of new lands--mirrors precisely the sequence in the opening stanza of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Moreover, while *Brut*'s structure is primarily chronological, and in fact chronicle-like, the longest single section of Layamon's narrative (nearly 5,000 of 16,000 lines, concluding near the end of the poem) deals with the birth, life and death of Arthur. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is, of course, likewise devoted primarily to a tale of the Arthurian court. The latter poem is far more intricately structured than *Brut*, and, unlike *Brut*, concludes with an enveloping reinvocation of Brut and Troy. However, the final scene in *Brut* is the return of the sons of King Cadwallader to England, where they gather their people--whose identity, it is emphasized, is British--for a journey to Wales. This return journey provides a sort of narrative closure for the poem echoed, though far more formally, by Gawain's return journey to Camelot and the *Gawain*-poet's final framing re-invocation of Brut and Troy.

However, Layamon's explanation of Brutus's departure from Rome to seek out a new nation places the situation in less than optimal light. Layamon explains that Brutus was forced to leave Rome and seek a new home elsewhere because he inadvertently killed his own father on a hunting expedition. The father, in trying to help the son make a kill from a herd of deer, drove them toward him:

To his sune he heo draf; him-seolfue to balewe.
Brutus sette on his flo;
he wende to sceoten þat hea der; & ihitte his ayene fader.
þurh-ut þere broste. wao wes Brutus þer-fore.

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Wa wes him on liue; þa þe fader wes on deaðe.
Þa þat iherde his kun; þe he of icumen wes.
þat he þe flo heuede idrawen; & his fader of-slawen.
heo hine flemden; out of þane londe.
& he iwende sorhful; ouer sea-streames. (*Brut*, 157-65)

(He [Brutus's father] drove them [a herd of male deer] toward his son, to his own destruction. Brutus notched his arrow; he intended to shoot that deer, and hit his own father through the breast. Woe was Brutus's therefore; woe was his in life, when his father was dead. Then his kin, those from whom he had come, heard it, that he had drawn the arrow and slain his father. They drove him out of that land, and he went, sorrowful, over sea-streams.)

The celebrated hero-founder of Britain is an exiled parricide, banished to the margins of his own world just as he is relegated to the narratological margins of both *Brut* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In framing the poem within this context, the *Gawain*-poet complicates the significance of categories of margin and center and frustrates efforts to read the poem in terms of simple opposition.

Camelot and Hautdesert, for instance, appear opposed spaces, balanced in the weight of their significance. Some possible interpretive pairs assignable to the two spaces might be margin/center; normative/perverse; Christian/pagan; masculine/feminine; real/faery. However, there are three locations, not two: Gawain leaves Camelot and stumbles across Hautdesert while searching for the Green Chapel. Moreover, Brutus's journey is a one-way flight into exile around the Mediterranean and across Europe, rather than a round trip with an ending at a familiar home. Rather than serving expected meanings, then, the layers of travel narrative serve to confuse and, perhaps, subvert expectations. The framing of Gawain's journey by the journey of Brutus to Britain unbalances the apparently neat pairing of the two worlds of Camelot and Hautdesert.

Moreover, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* opens with mention of treason, in line four of the stanza quoted above. Who is the traitor? Tolkien and Gordon, who insert the colon at the end of line four (the manuscript has no punctuation at that point),5 read the traitor as Aeneas, named in the next line, and cite medieval tradition as the reason for doing so.6 Although Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron replace the colon with a period, suggesting a transition

from an idea about treason to a different idea involving Aeneas, they follow Tolkien's and Gordon's reading, noting that medieval tradition also makes Gawain a descendant of Aeneas.7 However,

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*Brut* suggests two other possible answers, one direct and one allusive. According to Layamon, the traitor involved in the Trojan War was Paris:

> þa Grickes hefden Troye; mid teone bi-wonen.
> & þat lond iwest; & þa leoden of-slawen.
> & for þe wrake-dome; of Menelaus quene.
> Elene was ihoten. alðeodisc wif.
> þa Paris Alixandre; mid pret-wrenche. bi-won.
> for hire weoren on ane daye; hund þousunt deade.
> Vt of þan fehte; þe was feondliche stor.
> Eneas þe duc; mid erm[ð]en at-wond. (*Brut*, 38-45)
>
> (The Greeks had defeated Troy with torment, and wasted the land, and slain the people, for vengeance of Menelaus' queen, [who] was called Helen, alien woman, whom Paris Alexander won with complete treachery--for her a hundred thousand died in one day. Out of that fighting, which was fiendishly intense, Aeneas the duke escaped with anguish.)

The reference to treason in the prologue-like opening to *Brut* gives context to an additional occurrence of adulterous treason which occurs later in the same poem, when Mordred, nephew to Arthur, marries Queen Guinevere and declares himself king of Arthur's realm. This occurs while Arthur is in Rome; a thegn reports what has occurred in Britain in his absence:

> þus hafeð Modred idon; þine quene he hafeð ifon.
> and þi wun-liche lond; isæt an his ayere hond.
> he is king & heo is que[ne]; of þine kume nis na wene.
> for no weneð heo nauere to soðe; þat þu cumen ayain from Rome. (*Brut*, 4043-46)
>
> (Thus has Mordred done: he has taken your queen and placed your wonderful land in his own hands. He is king and she is queen, of your return is no expectation, for they do not expect it ever to occur that you will come again from Rome.)

Mordred's usurpation of the throne and incestuous marriage to Guinevere take place in Camelot, while Arthur is far away. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Camelot is a location of celebration and apparent peace, but it will

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become, as an audience familiar with Arthurian legend would have been well aware, a location of transgression, and specifically sexual transgression. Moreover, Mordred is "Arðures suster sune" ("Arthur's sister's son," *Brut*, 12715); Morgan le Fay, author of the Green Knight's journey to Camelot as a challenge to Guinevere, is, Bertilak tells Gawain, "þyn aunt, Arþurez half-suster" ("your aunt, Arthur's half-sister," *Gawain*, 2564): both are related to Arthur, one a half-sister, the other a sister's son. Through allusion, then, the *Gawain*-poet establishes both Troy and Camelot as places that contain--or rather, fail to contain--sexual transgression resulting in violence sufficient to destroy a civilization. Just as Paris' treason caused the fall of Troy, Mordred's will cause the fall of Camelot and the dissolution of the company of the Round Table.

Hautdesert, however, appears exempt from this pattern of disruption. Is the Lady's pursuit of Gawain, and the adultery implied by that pursuit, threatened by the same doom that hangs over Camelot, over Troy, even over Sodom and Gomorrah, as the *Gawain*-poet describes it in *Cleanness*?8 Gawain certainly sees it this way, when he mentions Adam and Eve, Samson and Delilah, and David and Bathsheba as couples doomed by women. On the other hand, several scholars have interpreted the events at Hautdesert as challenging sexual norms only to reestablish "sweet heteronormativity."9 Trying to unravel the skein of associations, the twisted threads of connection, involved with the events and the characters at Hautdesert can easily cause a headache.10 They cannot be unraveled any more than the

lines of a carpet page can be pulled straight--only followed under and over, around and around, leading to profound vertiginousness and, given sufficient stamina, back to the beginning. Where, then, does the path beginning with Paris's treasonous seduction of Helen at Troy lead us at Hautdesert? To a fork in the road, apparently, a fork leading in one direction to Gawain's humorless assessment of the situation and in the other direction to Bertilak's (or is the Green Knight's?) winking chuckle. Bertilak reads *Brut*; Gawain does not.

Sexual transgression has been the focus of a number of recent interesting studies of the poem. A particularly noticeable blurring of traditional gender roles is inscribed in the central sequence of hunts which occur while Gawain is resting at Hautdesert awaiting his re-encounter with the Green Knight. Bertilak, lord of the castle, informs Gawain on the evening of his arrival that he plans to go hunting the following day, but suggests that since Gawain has been traveling, he remain in the castle and rest, and "to mete wende / When ye wyl, wyth my wyf, þat wyth yow schal sitte" ("go to meals, when you will, with my wife, who will sit with you, " 1007-8). Moreover, Bertilak proposes a game: whatever he wins in the forest will be exchanged for whatever Gawain wins inside the castle.

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As Bertilak sets off for his hunt on the following morning, the poet makes a point of specifying the fact that the deer to be hunted are female, not male, in comparison to *Brut*, in which the hunters (Brutus and his father) as well as the hunted (deer) are male. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, male hunters pursue female deer while, within the walls of the Bertilak's castle, Gawain awakes naked in bed in the morning to find Bertilak's wife creeping into his room and climbing into his bed. She immediately begins her attempt to seduce him, telling him "Ye ar welcum to my cors, / Yowre awen won to wale" ("you are welcome to my body, to pursue your own course of action, " 1237-38). She tests Gawain's verbal dexterity, his resistance to her sexual demands, and his faith to his promise to her husband to return whatever he "wins" during his days in the castle in exchange for the fruits of his hunt out of doors. As Sheila Fisher has observed, the hunt within the walls mirrors the one outside, while the lady's bold pursuit of Gawain inverts traditional expectations of gender behavior.11

Moreover, the terms of Bertilak's "game" with Gawain open the door to the possibility of intimacy between the two men: each day, Gawain has to return his winnings to the lord. In fact, at the end of each day, Gawain "returns" to Bertilak the kisses he has received from the lady; on the third day, he gives Bertilak three kisses "[a]s sauerly and sadly as he him sette couthe" ("with as much relish and as vigorously as he could plant them," 1937). The suggestion, as Fisher has argued, is that if he had sex with the lady, he would have to have sex with the lord to even the score. Fisher concludes that the poem "raises the possibility" of physical intimacy between the two men but "then swerves in order to forefront not the homosexual, but the homosocial."12 In a nuanced essay further exploring the possibility of erotic interplay between Gawain and Bertilak, Carolyn Dinshaw considers the heterosexually dominant ordering of the world in contemporary documents ranging from the opening to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to the other poems attributed to the *Gawain*-poet, with a detour through Augustine's thought. Dinshaw argues, as does Fisher, that the poem produces the possibility of "deviant sexuality"13 in order to stage its "containment."14 Dinshaw herself swerves at the last minute from this conclusion, however, suggesting that "queering" the text in current critical discourse is a modern moment in the "history of various strategies deployed to resist that containment. . . . When, after all, is a kiss *ever* just a kiss?"15

However, the use of history in the poem functions to challenge and interrogate "normative heterosexuality."16 I have already proposed the possibility that the "traitor" of the poem's opening stanza is neither Aeneas nor Antenor, but the adulterous Paris of the prologue to *Brut*, which would in turn suggest the adultery of Mordred and Guinevere later in that poem. And in fact the

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only apparently heteronormative relationship observed by the poem is the flirtation between the lady of Hautdesert and Gawain, which has its beginning not with the lady's climb into Gawain's bed, but with Gawain's flirtation with her at the previous evening's feast.17 This flirtation, and the lady's subsequent pursuit of Gawain's affections, are, of course, potentially adulterous. This heterosexual coupling would, therefore, emphatically not be normative within the world of the poem: it would be adulterous in the same way as Paris' relationship with Helen and Mordred's with Guinevere: in each case, an unmarried man, a "taken" woman. Moreover, the lady's aggressive sexuality evokes not only the

prescribed "masculine" role, but also that other stereotype of feminine sexuality: the whore. The idea of woman as innately and perversely sexual, as responsible for the perversion of otherwise chaste men, permeates medieval ideology about women, as is suggested by Gawain's invocation of Eve.18

Yet it is not sex with the lady per se that would be deadly, in the logic of the poem, but refusal of subsequent sex with the man. Sex with the lady implies death for Gawain unless it is followed by sex with the man. The joke, then, is that intimacy between the two men would "cure" the fault of adultery. Ultimately, Gawain is punished by the Green Knight/Bertilak, not for his initial flirtation or subsequent sexual play with the lady, and not for accepting her gift of the green girdle--sexually charged as it is19-- but for keeping that gift from the lord, from violating the terms of the game. Hautdesert is, it appears, different after all from Camelot and Troy. Sexual expression, as long as it occurs in accordance with the rules of the game, is without violent punishment, for the rules here are different rules than those that govern either Camelot or Troy.

Gawain's interpretation of events is that he has failed miserably, and he vows to wear the green girdle forever in order to be constantly reminded of his own downfall. His rant against the women of the poem has been seen as a stain on his chivalry, as it may be, but it also makes explicit within the poem the problematic status of adulterous (hetero)sexuality, a theme only hinted at heretofore. When Gawain comes to understand that his punishment--a single nick along his neck--has to do with his gift from the lady, he begins to make sense of the events of the preceding days in terms of adulterous sexuality, and so he invokes a series of heterosexual couples. It would appear that the poet is suggesting a critique of all sexuality, whether between men and women or between men and men, in favor of the chastity demanded of servants of the Church.

However, the fact that Gawain's rant is not the poem's final answer is suggested by its placement--after Bertilak has told him that he himself instigated his wife's attempts to seduce Gawain, but before Bertilak tells him, further, that Morgan le Fay is behind his entire adventure. His rant is misinformed, misplaced, even uninformed. It takes too seriously his

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own transgression--a minor one, in any accounting--as well as the intertwined games that have been played upon him by Bertilak. And yet no one likes to be the butt of a joke, and Gawain's flight back to Camelot, refusing to see the lady of the castle again, seems a justifiable albeit yet again humorless response.

The games of the poem are, of course, interrelated and complicated, and reach outside the poem back once again to Layamon and *Brut*. The poet uses the word "game" with numerous denotations to link the two pursuits, of wild game and of Gawain, to one another, and also to their various contexts within the poem: the playful games of the Christmas season, the sinister game of the beheading exchange, and the framing references to Brutus. As feasting begins at Camelot, the Green Knight enters and requests "a Crystemas gomen" ("a Christmas game," 283): the exchange of one axe stroke for another. The same phrase (Christmas game) is used to refer to the less sinister games that characterize the season at Camelot (l. 495); at Hautdesert, the lords and ladies are similarly engaged in "gomnez in halle" (l. 989).

At Hautdesert, the lord Bertilak proposes not a game, but a "forwarde" ("covenant," 1105) that the two men should swap winnings for the coming three days, as Bertilak goes hunting while Gawain remains within the castle to rest. However, he will refer indirectly to the bargain as a game later in its course, calling Gawain "godly in gomen" ("gracious in game," 1376). The term "game" recurs twice in quick succession on the first day of this exchange, once indoors and once out, linking the two hunts. After Gawain extricates himself from the lady's seduction by granting her a kiss, they "made myry al day, til the mone rysed, / with game" ("made merry all day, until the moon rose, with game, " 1313-14). Five lines later the poet brings us back to the outdoor scene of Bertilak's hunt with this transition: "And ay þe lorde of þe londe is lent on his gamnes, / To hunt in holtez and heþe at hyndez barayne" ("And always the lord of the land is occupied in his games, to hunt the barren hinds in wood and heath," 1319-20). The poet uses "game" to refer to flirtation as well as hunting at several other points in the poem, reinforcing this linkage.

A particularly multivalent scene occurs at the end of the second day's hunt, when Bertilak presents Gawain with the head of the hog he has killed on that day's hunt. The semantic resonance of the lord's thegns who "hondled… the hoge head" ("handled… the huge head," 1633) with the Green Knight, who held up his own "hede in his honde" (444)

strengthens the link between the two scenes, clarifying the fact that the entire poem revolves around a hunt of one sort or another. Like the first day's deer hunt, moreover, this passage is linked to the framing references to Brutus through Bertilak's comment to Gawain about the hog's head: "þis gomen is your awen" ("this game

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[i.e., the animal] is your own," 1635). As I have shown, Brutus accidentally kills his father instead of the hunted deer, inadvertently making "game" out of his own father. Likewise, in Hautdesert, Gawain is the game, and while Bertilak's statement directly indicates the hog's head, it also suggests that Gawain is simultaneously recipient of the fruits of the hunt, and himself prey--himself at risk of losing his head to the hunter.

The question of who is hunting whom, and how this engages gender dynamics, is actually more complicated, however. We learn at the end of the poem--when Gawain does--that in fact not the lady, but in fact Bertilak himself--who has just been revealed as one and the same as the Green Knight--has been hunting him--but doing so at Morgan le Fay's behest. Moreover, as the Green Knight explains to Gawain (2452-62), Morgan has staged this entire incident in order to harass Guinevere. Ultimately, it appears that all of these machinations have been put into play so that a woman can hunt a woman.20 And inversely, Gawain has requested the contest with the Green Knight in order to protect Arthur, who has had to agree to it in default because of the stunned silence of all the knights in his court. The game itself is instigated by Morgan le Fay, but seems to have been given a different set of meanings by the Green Knight, in the additional game he has proposed to Gawain at Hautdesert.

The multiple connotations of the word "game" in the poem point to the multiple connotations of the game itself, a series of connotations played out in the conclusion to the poem, each enriching and compounding the others but none finally superseding the others.21 Gawain's rant is an effort to reinscribe gender roles whose solidity have been shaken in his mind by the course of events he has just experienced. His fury also suggests a possible response to the homoeroticism of the game at Hautdesert, a homophobic rage at being drawn in to something of which he wants no part. The Green Knight's laughter, however, is the laughter of the insider, of one privy to a set of second meanings for common signs, one who comprehends and encompasses all of the possibilities. They include his own dual nature--not only is he both Bertilak and the Green Knight, but he is also erotically linked to both male (through the game) and female (through his marriage). Gawain returns to Camelot to face the laughter of his compatriots, a Freudian giggle reflecting discomfited titillation22 in the face of which he finds himself once again made the object of meanings that compete with his own self-understanding.23 That the seeming middle path is also not the poem's final answer, however, is suggested by the conclusion, which refers once again to Brutus and to Troy, circling around to its beginnings and evoking once again the trope of journey to/from, a journey for which completion is impossible.

Like an endless knot, the questing/questioning of the poem has no end; the questions always lead through apparent answers to reformulated questions. There is no resting place, no final meaning, for this poem. If it

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privileges heterosexuality, the poem simultaneously hints at the doomed nature of the heterosexual couplings inside and outside of the action of the poem. Whatever norm of feminity or masculinity or sexuality is inscribed is also, implicitly or explicitly, challenged. Moreover, though Gawain flees home to the apparent safety of Camelot, where he is once again surrounded by the familiar faces of Arthur's knights, this return cannot undo what he has experienced, does not unwrite what the poet has written. The return of the endless knot to the place of its beginning does not negate the existence of the pattern that has been created.

Bertilak "reads" the ominous and the disruptive in Layamon's depiction of the origins of Britain. By locating the story of Gawain's flirtation with Lady Bertilak within the context of Layamon's chronicle of treason in Troy as well as at Camelot, the *Gawain*-poet complicates any reading of Camelot and Hautdesert as opposed places with opposed valuations. Treason is already and always present at Camelot, named with obscure referent in the first stanza of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*--and this very obscurity points to the difficulty of reaching any conclusions surrounding gender or sexuality in the poem. The use of history shows that femininity, masculinity, normative sexuality and transgression are all difficult, perhaps impossible, to define. Gawain, of course, does not read *Brut*, and is therefore left floundering in search of a finality which is unobtainable within the world of this poem.

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Notes

**1.** I have thus far avoided any reference to sexual acts as "straight" or "gay," "homosexual" or "heterosexual," because, as Allen J. Frantzen has pointed out (*Before the Closet: Same-Sex Love from* Beowulf *to* Angels in America [Chicago, 2000]), these terms are, "before the modern era, inaccurate" (p. 1). Besides implying categories of identification that may not be in existence in the medieval period, they certainly do not fit the behaviors of Bertilak, Gawain, and Bertilak's wife. Numerous scholars have investigated the ways in which this poem challenges norms of gendered behavior and sexuality, among them Sheila Fisher, Geraldine Heng, Carolyn Dinshaw, David Boyd, and Clare Kinney, all cited below. They point out variously, and valuably, how the poem works to inscribe and/or challenge our received notions of how gender and sexual activity should be perceived in the Middle Ages. My purpose in this essay is to consider how the poem's use of (pseudo-)historical material drawn from Layamon's *Brut* complicates its own presentation of norms and oppositions.

**2.** Quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon eds., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,

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2nd edition, revised by Norman Davis (Oxford, 1967 [1925]). Translations are my own.

**3.** I am grateful to Scott D. Westrem for allowing me to use an early version of his edition of the map, *The Hereford Mappa Mundi: A Transcription, Translation, and Analysis of Its Legends* (forthcoming from Brepols, 2001).

**4.** Quotations from *Brut* are from the Caligula manuscript edition of G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, eds., *Layamon's Brut, edited from British Museum Ms. Cotton Caligula A.IX and British Museum Ms. Cotton Otho C.XIII*, 2 vols., Early English Text Society, original series, nos. 250, 277 (London, 1963, 1978). Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, http://etext.virginia.edu/mideng.browse.html. Downloaded February 13, 2000. Translations are my own.

**5.** Tolkien and Gordon, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, include a facsmile of the first manuscript page. No punctuation is visible.

**6.** Tolkien and Gordon, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 70n.

*7. The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996 [1978]), p. 207n. Theodore Silverstein, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Critical Edition* (Chicago, 1984 [1974]) reviews the scholarship on the reference; he also prefers Aeneas over Antenor, citing the authority of Frederick Madden, p. 112n.

**8.** Jane Gilbert reads *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the context of the other poems in the same manuscript; see "Gender and Sexual Transgression," in *A Companion to the* Gawain-*Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 53-69. According to Gilbert, "*Cleanness* contains a clear depiction of gender and sexual transgression, and an equally clear condemnation of that transgression" (p. 53). Gilbert reads *Gawain* against this condemnation as also comdemming any suggestion of potential intimacy between Bertilak and Gawain.

**9.** David L. Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny, and Displacement: Occluding Queer Desire in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Arthuriana* 8.2 (1998), 77-113, at p. 83.

**10.** Clare Kinney has argued that "actions, people, and objects are regularly assigned competing identities" in the poem; see "The (Dis)Embodied Hero and the Signs of Manhood in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare Lees (Minneapolis, 1994), pp. 47-57 (quoted from p. 55).

**11.** Sheila Fisher, "Taken Men and Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings*, ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet Halley (Knoxville, 1989), pp. 71-105. Also see Fisher's "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *The Passing*

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*of Arthur: New Essays in Arthurian Tradition*, ed. Christopher Baswell and William Sharpe (New York, 1988), pp. 129-51. On the other hand, Clare Kinney has argued that the poem explores masculine behavior from a perspective of varied possibility, first creating an "essentialist" portrait of masculinity in the form of the Green Knight as he intrudes into the Christmas festivities at Camelot, but then modifying this conception by emphasizing the importance of Gawain's verbal ability in his encounters with the lady of Hautdesert. See Kinney, "The (Dis)Embodied Hero," p. 48 and p. 52.

**12.** Fisher, "Taken Men and Token Women," p. 86. Geraldine Heng has extended Fisher's analysis with the suggestion that the women of the poem are not simply occupied in exchanges among men, but also participate in a parallel universe of connections among themselves, in a pair of essays: "Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *PMLA* 106 (1991), 500-14; and "A Woman Wants: The Lady, *Gawain*, and the Forms of Seduction," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5 (1992), 101-34.

**13.** Carolyn Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss," *Diacritics* 24.2-3 (Summer/Fall 1994), 205-26, at 208.

**14.** Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss," p. 222.

**15.** Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss," p. 222. Boyd makes a similar argument (he appears to be unaware of Dinshaw's essay) in which he concludes that "the conscious return of the repressed as an act of denial is nonetheless the return of the repressed after all: transgressive reinscription at its best" ("Sodomy, Misogyny, and Displacement," p. 105).

**16.** Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss," p. 206.

**17.** This point was drawn to my attention by Andrew Ciravolo; Harvey De Roo has also discussed this earlier scene of flirtation and its consequences for Gawain's culpability in the later events of the poem. See De Roo, "Undressing Lady Bertilak: Guilt and Denial in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Chaucer Review* 27 (1993), 305 - 324.

**18.** And it lingers. Boyd describes Morgan's "sexual wiles and acquired magical skills," implying that she has learned magic, but that any trickery or cunning she employs which relates to sexuality is somehow innate. Any geek (male or female) at a high school dance knows that flirtation is indeed an acquired skill. Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny, and Displacement," p. 92.

**19.** De Roo, "Undressing Lady Bertilak," p. 317.

**20.** Heng, "Feminine Knots," p. 501.

**21.** Heng points out that the poem refuses to come to rest upon any concluding interpretation of the meaning of Gawain's performance, in-

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stead enacting "slippery reversals of hierarchy and priority asserted in the quick substitution of one construction [of the girdle] after another," in "Feminine Knots," p. 508. Arthur Lindley and C. Stephen Finley also argue that the poem resists closure. See Lindley, "'Ther he watz dispoyled, with spechez of myerthe': Carnival and the Undoing of Sir Gawain," *Exemplaria* 6 (1994), 67-86, and Finley, "'Endeles Knot': Closure and Indeterminacy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 26 (1990), 445-58.

**22.** On the relevance of Freud to the poem, see Boyd, "Sodomy, Misogyny, and Displacement," pp. 97-98. Boyd also raises the possibility of laughter as dismissive, p. 104.

**23.** Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss," *passim*, discusses readings and misreadings of Gawain in the poem.