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Game Play in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*¹ is a quest story that consists of a game. The game effectively creates the story by giving the events of the text a premise. Often, the game is looked at through lenses which emphasize its moral implications and how the game is a challenge of Sir Gawain’s moral fortitude, and while the game is indeed a challenge with moral implications, it is also simply a game.² The poem itself is a game as well, which means that the text is a game and is about a game. By looking at how the idea of a “game” functions in the text, we notice that there are many different games

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¹ The poem exists in only one manuscript, believed to date from around 1400 (Tolkien 1). This manuscript contains four other poems, these four texts have been analyzed and are believed to have been written by the same person; the names by which the works are referred to were created by modern editors (Tolkien 1, Boroff xi). The lack of clear authorship is a marker of the era (Boroff xi). All four poems are written in the northwest Midlands dialect of Middle English, which is much more challenging to read than Chaucer’s Middle English (although the two dialects are roughly from the same time) (Tolkien, 2). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is divided into alliterative “paragraphs,” or stanzas, which end in a bob-and-wheel construction. The “bob” is two syllables that are, in print, heavily indented from the “paragraph” and connects the paragraph to the “wheel” (which is also indented, although less than the bob) and is four lines long. The four lines of the wheel rhyme in an *abab* pattern. The style of writing goes back to Anglo-Saxon and Old English verse (Boroff, 167). It is an example of the Alliterative Revival of that era (Tolkien, 1, 3). The alliterative poem fell out of style by the 15th century and was replaced by a preference for rhyming verse (Boroff, 167).¹

² An example of the moral implications found in the game can be found in “The Third Fitt,” by J.A. Burrow and and “Structure and Symmetry in *Sir Gawain*,” by Donald R. Howard. In his essay, Burrow discusses Gawain’s fear of death and how Gawain falls away from his “truths” because of this fear and exhibits human weakness. Howard’s analysis concludes that the parallelism in *SGGK* ultimately creates a comic, ironic effect. In the early part of his essay, however, Howard looks at the symbolism of the pentangle and girdle and how those reveal the moral significance of the lessons Gawain learns on his journey.
and different layers to those games played in the poem. The greatest game is that which the Green Knight presents at Arthur's Christmas dinner. This game leads to game-within-a-game that occurs at Bertilak's castle. The game at Bertilak's castle in turn reveals how the players play with each other and are played by each other. When we reach the end of the poem and look back on all of the game playing that has taken place, it becomes clear that the relationship between the poet and the reader in this text is itself a game.

The Start of the Game

Before I discuss the word game and its function as the essential event of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is necessary to define what a game is to me in a "conventional," "everyday" sense. Firstly, it must be said that a game is never dangerous or life threatening in the sense that dying is not one of the objectives of play and it would be an unfortunate side effect if it did occur. Perhaps the most important element of what a game is that it exists to provide entertainment and therefore that it is fun. Unless you are a poor loser, playing a game should be an enjoyable activity. Another part of the definition is that a game is played, and this playing is most often done with an other or several others. The play in a game is constrained by another defining aspect of the game, the rules. Rules are essential to a game because the limits of play must be defined somehow and without rules it could not be a fair game. Games are supposed to be fair. Fair means that the players follow and obey the rules of the game and do not cheat in any way by violating or altering them. This then, is a game: enjoyable, played, social, rule-bound and fair. Reading is also a game in many of the same ways that "real" games are, especially in this text. The rules are our expectations
as a reader, these are dictated by the author's choice of genre and our previous read experience which allows us to understand genre. The author is the one who designs the game, he makes the rules and we agree to play by them when we pick up the book. Play takes place when we read, although this game play is never fair because the reader does not. The social aspects of the reading game are less concrete than in "real" games because the other person with whom we play (because reading is not a solitary game at all) is not present. The author has already made all his moves and we must read along to make ours without his active present.

Furthering this definition, I have looked at the origins of the word game. In the OED, the first written use of the word "game" as a noun was recorded in a manuscript from around 1000 C.E., and the first use of "game" as a verb comes from the same time (OED). These records of the word in very early manuscripts show that it was a sort of "original" word to the English language. The meaning of the word in its earliest citations also indicates that "game" has basically always been game. The earliest meaning of the word game is cited as, "Amusement, delight, fun, mirth, sport," with secondary meanings arising in the 13th century of "Jest, as opposed to earnest," and "An amusement, diversion or pastime" (OED). These meanings continue through time in the citations and are how we think of "game" today. This idea is supported by the etymology of the word game which reveals a journey, with stable meaning, through Northern European languages all the way back to reconstructed ideas of proto-germanic (online etymology dictionary). The sense of a game being a "‘contest played according to rules’" comes up around 1300, and the sense of "‘wild animals caught for sport’" dates to the late thirteenth century (online etymology dictionary).
It is from these definitions of game that I will frame and analyze *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The Green Knight's proposed game is interesting because it pushes the idea of game to its limits. The game seems to violate what a game is/is understood to be and yet, because it is Christmas and the hosts must be polite (and the story must take place), it has to be played. The court is formed by its standards of behavior and politeness: they both define and make up the social structure which necessitates that the game be played. The Green Knight’s challenge is not out of order in the sense that the Christmas festivities at King Arthur's court consisted of games (Martin 312). It is entirely acceptable, for the unexpected guest, the Green Knight, to participate in the festivities and propose a game but it is the nature of the game, its objectives and the time span that are out of the ordinary and surprise Arthur and his court. Because of the form of the court and the obligation to entertain guests that is part of it, the Green Knight cannot, however, be refused in his desire to play a game (Martin 314). Someone must take up the “giserne” (line 288).

The “gomen” commences on line 282. The Green Knight is speaking and says, “I crave in this court a Crystemas gomen,” and this “gomen” is foundational to everything else that will happen. The Green Knight’s demand is much of why the

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3 The Green Knight, “interpreted by critics as everything from a force of nature to a demon” in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is not one of the most common characters in Arthurian tales. The Green Knight also appears in “King Arthur and King Cornwall,” and *The Greene Knight* (a later retelling of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) (Lupack, 302, 307, 124).

4 Arthur, or King Arthur is “the central figure of the Arthurian legends, though he is only occasionally the protagonist of medieval Arthurian tales. ... The knights of Arthur’s court undertake quests, many of which the king himself has little part in except to choose the knight for the task” (Lupack, 431-432).

5 An axe, as in a battle axe.

All translation notes are based on translations given in the glossary of Tolkien and Gordon's edition of *SGGK*. Where I have directly lifted their phrasing, it appears in quotes. In some notes I include Simon Armitage’s translations of the lines as well as my own to give a better impression of the feel of the line rather than simply its literal words.

I have chosen to use Armitage’s transcription in my quotes because I refer to his translations and because his transcription is easier to read for readers not specialized in Middle English.

6 Game

7 Literally, “I crave/ want in this court a Christmas game.” Armitage translation, “So at this Christmas in this court I lay down a chalenge” (284).
untypical, schema-disrupting game must be played. Because we expect the story, the author makes the Green Knight frame his challenge as a game, and then insults the members of Arthur's court until someone agrees to play. These insults appear to be something that has been said before, a sort of form that any knight would use to get someone to "play" with him. They again seem to follow what a game typically is. The Green Knight calls them "berdles chylder," like a school boy spoiling for a fight and the says, "What, is this Arthures hous," implying that he is disappointed in what he found here and that it does not correspond to "al the rous renes" he has heard (280, 309, 310). He is insulting their ability to live up to expectations and to be courteous hosts because as well as being known for bravery, Arthur's court was also known for its courtesy and hospitality. Playing the game would prove the reputation of Arthur's court to be true. All the Green Knight has asked for is a "gomen," so it would seem impolite to refuse him. A game is just a little thing we play for fun, afterall. While what the Green Knight is asking "appears to subvert the tenants of courtly chivalry and of Christian fellowship," the way he is asking and obeying convention in his insults and requests is not (Martin 311, 314). This creates an interesting place for the game. The game is a challenge made in the court which also challenges the court as its own structure rather than the just the individual members of it. The court knows it must play, but the game does not fit into normal definitions and is pushing the boundaries of both game and play.

The idea of a game undermines the seriousness of what the Green Knight is asking. The definitions of game make it seem impossible that what he is asking is true.

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8 Beardless children.
9 Literally, "'What is this Arthures hous?'... 'That all the talk of fame runs through so many realms?'" Armitage translation, "'So here is the House of Arthur,'... 'whos virtues reverberate across vast realms" (lines 309-310).
By pushing the limits of our understanding of what a game is the Green Knight is creating a large amount of tension around the idea of his game. If this were the real world, beheading could not be a game, and this would be almost laughable, but because we are in a world of myth, we know that it can be a game. Nevertheless we cannot guess how that will work. Beheading as a game makes no sense to the men of Arthur's court (as it would not to anyone with a conventional understanding of "game") and therefore none of them want to play the game. Perhaps, we as readers and even those present at the scene should see the word game as a warning flag that this is not beheading as we usually think of it. For the Green Knight to frame what should be certain death as a game, it is hard not to think that something might be strange about how the beheading will work. It is the rules of the reading-game that make us accept the Green Knight and his strange request. If we did not accept the fiction of this poem (and game) we would have to quit reading. To not accept the set up of the text would be to refuse to play because we would be rejecting the rules which create the fiction and therefore the game of the fictional text itself (8). If we did not want to play and accept this fiction, then we would not be reading. Going along with the strangeness of the game is fundamental to our contract with the poet.

The Green Knight sets out the terms of the quest as well as the rules of the game when he explains it; he offers to let his challenger cut off his head in return for the same privilege in "a twelmonyth and a day"\textsuperscript{10} (298). The game the Green Knight is proposing is death (for what else could be meant by axe blows to the neck?) but he presents his terms like any normal game. The game is also the story. This game is to "stifly strike a

\textsuperscript{10} Twelve months (a year) and a day. This meant exactly one year in Middle English (it was an idiomatic expression).
stroke for an other"\textsuperscript{11} and the Green Knight graciously offers himself as the recipient of the first blow, saying "I shal bide the fyrst bur"\textsuperscript{12} (lines 285, 288). The Green Knight maintains one level of requisite formality of a game (the level of presentation or proposal), even offering his axe as a prize to the knight who is willing to play with him (line 293). The court must try to make the Green Knight’s proposition fit the idea of game because if it does not then the social form of the court would also be violated because they would not be able to offer hospitality to their guest. They must try and adapt to the implicit violations of what the Green Knight demands to avoid any further violations of form (Martin 314). The terms of the Green Knight’s game are violations in the sense that they are unexpected within the definition of game and go against everyone else’s expectations of how a guest should behave.

At one level, in terms of some social rules and literary conventions, nothing seems out of place with the Green Knight’s game. However, the game will possibly risk the challenging knight’s life and the prize is merely a “giserne ryche”\textsuperscript{13} (line 286). Somehow, the Green Knight does not realize the incommensurability represented by the terms of the game, or at least there is no hint of this realization in the text. Games usually have risks and prizes that are at least roughly equal. At some level, I have to think that the Green Knight knows how strange what he demands is; however this is not evident to a first time reader because we know nothing more of the Green Knight’s character and motives than the knights of Arthur’s court do. When we read for the first time, it is as though we are part of Arthur’s court because the story forces us into the same position of narrative ignorance that the members of the court are. For all we

\textsuperscript{11} Stiffly strike or take a stroke (with the axe) for another (stroke). Armitage translation, "to strike me one stroke and be struck in return" (287).
\textsuperscript{12} I shall withstand the first blow.
\textsuperscript{13} Rich battle axe (rich as in valuable or "nice").
know at this point, the Green Knight could think what he is proposing is perfectly reasonable or could be a normal game wherever it is the Green Knight originates from. He seems to think he is proposing a “Chrystemas gomen”\textsuperscript{14} like any other and is therefore perturbed when no one will agree to play his game which, according to Hark\textsuperscript{15}, requires “the subordination of human instincts to the strictest chivalric regulations” (line 281 and Hark, pp. 4). Or, perhaps the value of playing the game is being put above the value of living.

When we re-read the text, of course we know that the Green Knight is doing nothing of the sort. The Green Knight cannot die when he is beheaded, because he is protected by some kind of magic, he is actually Lord Bertilak who will test Gawain in other ways to try and avoid beheading him. We learn this in the Green Chapel where it is revealed that the Green Knight’s proposition involves magic and therefore does not propose any real risk of death for the Green Knight, but could nevertheless pose one to Sir Gawain; it does however violate the rules of a game because the terms of the game are not literal in the sense that there is magic protecting the Green Knight from death. The rules of the Green Knight’s game are literal as well because the Green Knight’s head does get chopped off however they still do not fit into the spirit of game play because they most definitely are unfair. The game is not fair because one player (Gawain) does not know all the rules. The “truth” of the story also removes the Green Knight as the agent of the game, in some ways. It is “really” Morgan Le Fay\textsuperscript{16} who is making the Green Knight challenge Arthur’s court for her own amusement. This much

\textsuperscript{14} Christmas game.
\textsuperscript{15} Hark’s broader argument is that Gawain’s quest is atypical in that it challenges him not to act, to be passive rather than active as the heroes of so many quest stories are (“Gawain’s Passive Quest”).
\textsuperscript{16} Morgan le Fay is, in the realm of Arthurian legend, “Arthur’s half sister, the daughter of Arthur’s mother.” She and Arthur do not get along, in several stories she takes actions to provoke or harm Arthur. In \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight}, she sends the Green Knight to Arthur’s court, in an attempt to scare Guinevere (whom she also dislikes) (Lupack, 462).
of the plot (the Green Knight's appearance at the court and challenge to Arthur's knights) was devised by Morgan Le Fay, but it is debatable whether she devised the game and sent the Green Knight to carry out her orders or whether she just told him to go play a trick on Arthur's court or challenge them in some way. We learn this near the end when the Green Knight admits, "Bertialk de Hautdesert I hat in this londe. / Thurgh might of Morgne la Faye, that in my hous lenges, / And koynyse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned. / The maystrés of Merlyn, mony ho has taken, .../ How wayned me upon this wyse to your wynne halle"17 (2445-2448, 2456). This understanding brought from a second reading changes the scene and affirms our suspicions that even though this game looks dangerous, Gawain will be allright. A second reading also reveals the game as a device being used to tell the story. At first reading, we suspect the game is being used somehow, but we cannot yet see how exactly or know if there will be other more important plot devices yet to come. This adds to the significance of the idea of a game as something that can be used as part of something else. Games are used as entertainment at Christmas, to create a space to tell a story and to let Lord Bertilak get what he wants from Sir Gawain. We, as readers, are also being challenged because the text is pushing the limits of our preconceptions; our challenge is to keep playing a game we are uncertain of and to trust the author/text that the story will be entertaining even though we are unsure of what will happen because it does not fit our existing ideas about stories.

The determination of the Green Knight to get his game to happen is shown in his insults which he directs at the knights. He is using the formality of life at court to try and undermine its basis. The Green Knight wants to play a violent game that should

17 I am called Bertialk de Hautdesert in this lande. Through the power of Morgan la Fay, who statys in my house, and is well learned in the skills of magicians. The arts of Merlin, many she has learned, .... She sent in this manner to your delightful hall.
logically cause death and no other outcome rather than one of the more ritualistic forms common in the era such as the joust (Martin pp. 322). These insults lead Arthur himself to finally agree to take up the axe, believing the Green Knight's game to be "foly"\(^{18}\) (line 325). This belief goes with the normal definition of a game rather than with the boundary pushing nature of the Green Knight's proposal.

The game of the text serves as a guide through which other important elements become clear. Now that we are in a world of game, things which fit into the spirit of game become more important. One of these is laughter. Laughter serves to bring humanity back to a story which could seem super-human. Laughter serves as an indicator of where systems of belief are being broken in the poem. The second peal of laughter in the poem is after the Green Knight makes his challenge and insults the men of Arthur's court: "he laghes so loude that the lorde greved"\(^ {19}\) (316). The Green Knight has violated standards of behavior for guests and the standards of games (even typically violent ones of the Middle Ages). The game is lacking the spirit and the fun of competition. His laughter emphasizes that he knows what he has done. The system of beliefs the court holds for guests and gaming has been over turned in a matter of moments. Arthur also "greved," which means he was distressed by the insults and wronged by the Green Knight's behavior but I think also indicates that the Green Knight's behavior is distressing at another level, at the level where the structure of life is being over turned. By magic and the pagan violating the Christian and the conventional we see how the Green Knight's game reveals the boundaries present within the story. These boundaries are the social ones that define Arthur's court and make the Green Knight both an outsider and a guest.

\[\text{18} \text{ Folly}\]
\[\text{19} \text{ He laughs so loudly that the lord was took offence.}\]
After the Green Knight proposes his game, the word "game" is next used when the game is beginning. The narrator says, "Ryche togeder con roun, / And sythen thy
tredden alle same / To ryd the kyng wyth croun, / And gif Gawan the game."
20 in the wheel of this stanza (362-365). Arthur is being excused from his offer to cut off the
green Knight's head because the "game" can be given over to Gawain. The "game" has
become a gift of sorts; a gift that will spare the King's life if the beheading must be
reciprocated and a gift that will burden Gawain with this duty. The link between
"game" and gift here emphasizes the Christmas season in which the events are taking
place. It also highlights a common link between the idea of a gift and the idea of duty.
Duties are often seen as honors or gifts rather than burdens on those who have to
perform them; here, Gawain is being given another duty, almost as thought it is a
privilege, when in fact it will burden him and possibly risk his life.

The game is explicitly mentioned again when Gawain sets off on the quest
portion of the game. Here, Gawain's words hint at those of the Green Knight saying,
"Who knew ever any kyng such counsel to take / As knyghtes in cavelaciouns on
Crystemasse gommes?" 21 (683). Here, instead of a request for a game like the Green
Knight made, Gawain is asking a question. He is wondering how or why a simple
game could motivate something so potentially tragic. He is asking how a game came to
be so important that the king had to take the advice of his lesser to let someone else play
for him. The game here is again a negative; it is a specter hanging over Gawain's head
rather than a source of entertainment as one would generally suppose a game to be; a

20 Literally, "The nobles together did take whispered counsel, / And afterwards advised all together /
To relieve the king with the crown, / And give Gawain the game." Armitage translation, "The
knighthood then unites / and each knight says the same: / their king can stand aside / and give
Gawain the game."

21 Literally, "Who ever knew any king to take such advice / Of knights in trifling Christmas games?"
Armitage translation, "How unkown for a king to take counsel of a knight / in the grip of an
engrossing Christmas game."
game should be entertaining and at one level this one is. The poem is entertainment and
the poem is a game, so, for the reader, if not for the characters, this game is a source of
entertainment.

The game(s) in the text are framed by other details, one of which is the presence
of laughter. Once the game has begun and the Green Knight's head is off, laughter
appears to illustrate how normalcy is being violated. When the Green Knight has
picked up his head and talked with it and then left, Arthur and Gawain's response is
that they "laghe and grenne"²² (464). Of course, the laughter and grinning are
indications that they are happy the Green Knight and his severed head have left the
court. The laughter is also a sort of shocked response, I think. It is one of those you-
can't-help-but-laugh moments where what has happened was so strange and awful that
it is funny and laughable. This was a game in which we cut off someone's head and he
walks away. That was strange and yet somehow expected because we are in a mythic
realm. This laughter also marks a return to celebration and the spirit from which they
agreed to play the game in the first place. Immediately following the King and
Gawain's reactive laughter is another description of the court: "to laghe and to syng /
Among thise kynde caroles of knyghtes and ladyes"²³ (472-473). Here, again I think, the
laughter is staging. We are again immersed in a world where games are supposed to be
played and people are supposed to enjoy themselves. The laughter reminds us that the
game should be fun.

Another detail that becomes obvious in the game is that the body is crucial to
game playing in this text. Before the game is even outlined by the Green Knight, there
are indications that whatever he is there for will be physical. When the Green Knight

²² laugh and grin
²³ to laugh and to sing, among these courtly dances and songs about knights and ladies.
arrives at Arthur's court, the description we get of him is bodily. The poet describes how impressive the Green Knight's stature is with his “his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete”\(^{24}\) (139). The Green Knight's most distinguishing feature is his physical size at this point in the text. His “wombe and his wast were worthily smalle,”\(^{25}\) even though “his bodi [was] sturne”\(^{26}\) (144, 143). This description paints the Green Knight as having a commanding physique. He is very big and strong and he is even handsome. What is interesting about this description is that it focuses on his body, not his general appearance, not even his face, not why he is there, but just his body. It is not until the stanza after he arrives that any mention is made of his more general, or more typically described, appearance. The entire first stanza about the Green Knight is devoted to the appearance of his body; the very last line of the wheel continues the bodily focus even while transitioning to the second paragraph. It says that the Green Knight is “overal enker grene”\(^{27}\) (150). This line is transitioning to the next description which is of the Green Knight's general appearance, clothing and horse, and it does so by introducing the concept that the Knight is, indeed, “overal” dark green. Even though it is transitional, the adjectival phrase is referring to the Green Knight's body still. This introductory description makes it clear that the body will be important to the Green Knight's presence in the story and therefore to his game.

The emphasis the game places on the body makes it a physical game rather than a game of skill that would rely on mental acuity. The game is physical even when Gawain must be mentally agile later in the story. The game at Bertilak's castle between Sir Gawain and Lady Bertilak is still physical because it is based on physical/sexual

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\(^{24}\) his loins and his limbs so long and so big  
\(^{25}\) his stomach and his waist were becomingly small  
\(^{26}\) his body had a forbidding appearance  
\(^{27}\) entirely dark green
seduction and is testing Gawain's ability not to physically act. The initial game is also clearly physical because it is about taking physical action and cutting off the Green Knight's head.

The body is further highlighted in the beginning of the poem by the Green Knight's game itself. The beheading game follows the idea of bodily description because the action of the game relies very heavily on the presence of the body. As I mentioned earlier, the Green Knight's game requires that he allow himself to be beheaded by Sir Gawain. The Green Knight lays "His longe lovelych lokkes ... over his croun" to "let the naked nec" be visible to Sir Gawain (419, 420). Then, when Gawain strikes the Green Knight's neck, the axe "schyndered the bones, / And schrank thurgh the schyine grece" (424-425). This description talks about body parts, the "lokkes," "croun," "nec," "bones," "grece," and nothing else. The game's action emphasizes the physical body involved in its playing. Even the end of the description, when the Green Knight is holding his head, focuses on body parts rather than more general appearances or clothing or spaces or anything else. The Green Knight is described as "That ugly bodi that bledde" after he collects his head off the ground (441). He is a bodily entity more than a person here. The Green Knight is referred to as "That bodi," which underscores the importance of his physical presence. The focus on bodily details grounds the story in the physical, earthly world. The body, and its parts makes the game real and dangerous; it is played in the real world where bodies exist and they are mortal.

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28 his long fair locks over the crown of his head
29 to let the bare neck
30 Literally, "cleaved the bones, and penetrated through the white fat and flesh." Armitage translation, "cleaved the spinal cord and parted the fat and the flesh."
31 that ugly body that bled
Even though it seems as if Gawain is signing up for his own death (or a ridiculous and unfair game where he will kill his opponent for no reason) by agreeing to the Green Knight's game, the reader can sense that this is not the case. The form of the text tells by the genre we are in, and by the way the plot begins to take form that Gawain almost certainly will not die. He cannot die because this is not a Christ tale: it is a hero quest with a catch, because at least on the surface and at first reading, Gawain is headed for death, except he does not seem holy enough to be allowed to die. The reader sees Gawain's surroundings of Arthur's court, hears him take up the challenge, and watches him be prepared for his journey. All of this puts us in a position of relative comfort; although the challenge may be unusual, everything setting it up is not. We feel assured that this game and the entailing quest will fall into our expectations and that all will be well in the end. We enter into this agreement with the author not to tell Gawain he will be fine. We feel the drama the characters are experiencing because we allow ourselves to believe the fiction and withhold our expectations of what should happen in the story. There is the added suspense of "this time it could end differently," which is enhances by the strange game that makes up the story; the game concept is already different to normal, so maybe other parts could be too. The story is in effect a safe space for the reader to experience danger and drama; it is the literary equivalent of riding a roller coaster. The reader/listener is also distanced from the action by the genre. The lack of first person narration and internal thoughts leaves us imagining what it would be like to be the characters rather than "living" their experiences through the text. We are watching events take place in an almost mythic setting where characters conform to expectations and the hero may fail, but he will not die.

Our expectations of genre are not as explicit with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as with other stories from other genres. The modern reader is not as familiar with
Arthurian romances as with realist novels or fairy tales, yet pre-existing knowledge of what should and will happen is still there. The genre we are placed in is that where courtly love is considered normal, magic is real and fealty determines lives. In my mind, we have vague knowledge of all of these things when we begin to read the poem, even with no specialized background in these areas. Part of what is going on here is what T.S. Eliot was describing when he wrote, "No poet, no artist of any sort has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (Eliot, 808). Eliot’s argument is that the value of literature is not determined without looking at what has gone before because all written work has knowledge of, and functions in relation to, all that has gone before. There is no way to appreciate literature without a knowledge of the past, because no writer can write without an awareness (conscious or not) of what has gone before him. The structures that created the world where Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was written had a lasting impact on literature afterwards, even if we did not know it. As Jacques Lacan said, "'[C]ourtly love has... left races in... a traditional unconscious that is sustained by a while literature, a whole imagery, that we continue to inhabit’" (Dell, 58). This explains how we have expectations of the text without knowing that we do. While not necessarily "unconscious," as Lacan’s statement theorizes, the lingering traces of courtly love in other texts would create our expectations of the poem. Because we have read before, because feudalism and courtly love left a lasting mark on Western culture and because no text can be written without relating to those works which have gone before it, we have, in a way, read Sir Gawain and the Green Knight without having read it. We know what to expect because we are readers and therefore cannot be innocent of the cues that genre gives us. As we read, we fall into the game of the text which is enhanced by the genre and our previous reading experience. We almost become Sir
Gawain and set out on our own quest to find out what will be different or special about this version of this story. The end of the game will feel the same for us and Sir Gawain because we have all been wondering where the story will end and what it will all mean.

**The Game-Within-A-Game**

The first game we are presented with in the text is that which the Green Knight uses to challenge Arthur’s court. This game sets in motion the action of the rest of the poem and leads us directly to the game-within-a-game at Lord Bertilak’s castle. The game-within-a-game is a set up by Lord Bertilak (a.k.a. the Green Knight) to test Gawain. Gawain has come to Lord Bertilak’s castle while on his quest for the Green Chapel and the Green Knight; Gawain is persuaded to take a break from his quest and spend the holidays at the castle by Lord Bertilak.

The game in this instance is a happy one. Gawain and the others at Bertilak’s castle were “glade” at the entertainment of the evening. This is not a fearful game like the one presented by the Green Knight at Arthur’s court, but rather gaming in the conventional sense, or as we know it, for the purpose of having fun and being entertained for a few hours. This notion of game as entertainment is peculiar in the text up to this point. The other mentions of the “game” were either associated with burden, death or impending doom. After the mention of “gomen” on line 683, Gawain’s eyes fill with tears (line 685). The associations of games in the text until Gawain is at Bertilak’s castle have redefined the notion of what a game is for the reader, so it stands out here that the “gomnes” being played fit into our out-of-text game schema. The

32. Cheered
game at Bertilak's is framed with laughter like the bigger game we saw designed at Arthur's court.

Gawain is at Bertilak's castle where they are celebrating the season by playing “gromes in hall that nyght” (989-990). This association of gaming with Bertilak is a clue as to his double identity (when viewed through the perspective of a second-time reader). There is no mention of game playing at Arthur’s court, but it is the main event of the evenings at Bertilak’s castle. This reveals Lord Bertilak’s true identity and the links to the broader game because we remember the game that was earlier introduced to us by the Green Knight and are suspicious of the idea of gaming because of how deceptive and atypical it was earlier. The reader is aware that games mean something in this poem and they are worth paying attention to by the time we arrive at Lord Bertilak’s castle.

When Bertilak is told of Gawain's arrival at his castle, he “Loude laghed ... therat, so lef hit hym thoght” (909). This is evil villain laughter that feels very familiar to me. Bertilak/The Green Knight's plan is coming to fruition. The victim has fallen into the trap, the real test of Gawain's quest is about to begin, and he does not even know it. This is why Bertilak laughs. Again, it is expressing a quality beyond words, like the humanity illustrated by laughter in other scenes. Bertilak's laughter is a hint to the audience of his true identity, I think, although the following text implies that he laughs because he is excited to have such a famous guest. This intentional explaining of the laughter makes it stand out as strange even more, however, and that is why I think it is meant to indicate something about Gawain’s quest and journey as well as Bertilak's

33 Games in the (great) hall that knight.
34 laughed loudly at it, so delightful he thought it
purported excitement over playing host (910-913). Of course, here again, the laughter is two things at once.

It is also the main description we get of Bertilak’s personage in the beginning; he is a jovial host, excited to have a guest to entertain at Christmas. This duality exists for the reader, rather than in the text. We know who Bertilak really is and so think of other times we have met him in the text where he, as the Green Knight was simultaneously jovial and sinister (at Arthur’s court while proposing his game).

Gawain himself is next to laugh. At Bertilak’s castle, Gawain has just been informed that the Green Chapel is not far at all from the castle he is now staying in. Completing the game looks easy to him now. At this news, “he laughed”35 (1079). This laughter comes from a happy surprise; it is an emotive reaction that cannot be conveyed with other words. We know how Gawain feels when he laughs at this, for we have all laughed out of relief and surprise at some point or another and that is what the laughter in this scene illustrates. The laughter is a release of worry for Gawain, it is as Stott says, “the product of a lowering of anticipated ideas” (Stott 139). Gawain was expecting another long, arduous journey, and laughs because that expectation is not accurate. The laughter also serves to further the agenda of the game in this context because it keeps Gawain at his way-station in order to complete his mini-game or test.

Laughter continues to be associated with Lord Bertilak’s presence in the game as well. When he returns from hunting on the second day and “The lord, ful lowde with lote, laghed myry / When he seye Sir Gawayn”36 (1622-1623). Lord Bertilak laughs when he sees Gawain again, which indicates his happiness over having a guest and shows his enjoyment of entertaining. As the second time reader, with the

35 he laughed
36 The lord, loudly and with full noise, laughed merrily / When he sees Sir Gawain
foreknowledge of the end of the poem, his laughter seems to be another sort of hint that
this is a test for Gawain on his quest.

The Seduction Scenes

The game at Bertilak's castle consists of three parts: seduction, hunt and trade. The seduction scenes reveal reflections on how seduction and desire are game like, if not actually games (as they are part of one here). These scenes also lead to a discussion of the significance of laughter in the game setting (or in any setting) because it becomes clear that laughter is an inextricably important part of what is going on in the game between Lady Bertilak and Lord Gawain.

The word game continues to have happy meanings at Bertilak's castle. During the seduction scenes it is said that Gawain, and Lady Bertilak "made myry all day til the mone rysed, / with game," and that Gawain finds the Lady's advances to be "gomen to [him] huge" (1313-1314, 1536). The first use of "game" emphasizes the game as an entertainment device already established. Using "game" as an adjective to describe how they "made myry all day" gives it more positive connotations; "game" means enjoyment here in the most direct sense. This fits into the redefinition of game for the text that occurs at Bertilak's castle. The second use of "gomen" shows Gawain accepting this redefinition. He sees the Lady's unconventional behavior as a fun sort of game.

37 Literally, "made merry all day until the moon rose, / with game (pleasure)." Armitage translation, "was merry and amused till the moon has silvered / the view."
38 Literally, "huge game to me" (as in "lots of fun"). Armitage translation, "seems a good game."
There are also ideas of love as a game brought up by this usage. The Lady uses courtly love language (and courtly love could also be looked at as a game), in a reverse-courtly-love situation to pursue Gawain, which he terms a "gomen." The Lady's advances seem like a game to Gawain and they are also actually part of a game for the reader with narrative foreknowledge. Lady Bertilak is trying to seduce Gawain because Lord Bertilak asked her to as part of the game he is playing with Sir Gawain. The literal use of "love" or loving behavior as a game reminds us of love being a game or game like. Our concept of love as a game even includes the idea of "losing your head" although in a less literal sense than in the game of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Another use of the word game occurs at Bertilak's as well. Lord Bertilak says to Gawain, "this gomen is your awen / Bi fyn forwarde and faste, faythely ye knowe" (1635-1636). Bertilak is reminding Gawain of the terms of the other game-within-a-game (the seduction can be seen as another), that of the hunt and exchange pact. This brings the idea of game back to a more unpleasant connotation. Bertilak is reminding Gawain to give him everything he "won" that day, and we know he is expecting more than a kiss because Bertilak sent his wife to seduce Gawain and lead him to sin. The game should serve as a sort of daily punishment in *The Green Knight*/Bertilak's eyes but does not because Gawain held himself to his ideals of virtue. Gawain does, however, feel like he failed at the end of the story, and therefore suffers a type of internal punishment, but it is after the fact, rather than immediate.

During the first temptation scene, when Gawain is trying to get Lady Bertilak to go away, he "bourded ayayn with mony a blythe laghter" (1217). His laughter is

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39 Literally, "this game is your own / By perfect and binding agreement, truly you know." Armitage translation, "I give you this game, / as our wager warranted, as well you remember."

40 Literally, "jested in return with many a merry laugh." Armitage translation, "loaded his light-hearted words with laughter."
reactive to the Lady’s advances as well as an attempt to undermine her actions. Gawain uses the laughter here as a game playing strategy. He is trying to restore order to the situation by making it funny or laughable; by trying to make the situation humorous through his speech, Gawain is giving Lady Bertilak the social opportunity to back off and restore the situation to fit social propriety. Gawain’s words following this description emphasize his attempt to gain control over what is happening to him and make it fit into the formal order he is used to, to fit his beliefs about how people interact with each other. The laughter in this scene is a place-holder for the awkward conversation that could take place. The laughter replaces what it would be rude for Gawain to say. Laughing things off is a permissible strategy in this game. It is a permissible strategy and reaction in the reading game too, because the text seems made to make us laugh, or even to laugh it off when things get too strange and serious.

The temptation scenes also have another kind of replacing or place holding laughter. This laughter can best be termed as flirty, which is in contrast to the uncomfortable laughter mentioned earlier. The laughter is being used by Lady Bertilak to accomplish her own goals in this game (or to fulfill her role in its playing). Here, Lady Bertilak “settes hir sofly by his syde, and swythely ho laghes”\(^\text{41}\) (1479). This laughter adds a dimension of realism to the scene. She laughs as she starts trying to seduce Gawain again. The laughter eventually spreads from Lady Bertilak to Gawain during these scenes. On the second day of seduction, “Thay laghed and layked long; / At the last scho con hym kysse”\(^\text{42}\) (1554-1555). The laughter indicates enjoyment and sort of typical romantic relations. The laughter is both emotionally expressive, i.e.

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\(^{41}\) Literally, “Seats herself gently by his side, and quickly she laughs.” Armitage translation, “settling by his side and giggling sweetly.”

\(^{42}\) Literally, “They laughed and played long, / Finally she kissed him.” Armitage translation, “At length, when they had laughed, / the woman kissed Gawain.”
expressing flirtation, and a bodily action. Laughter is a bodily action in that thought does not go into it (unlike speech). Laughter functions here beyond the realm of language, although not without meaning and communicative function. Stott writes that “Laughter is never just fun,” which means that although laughter seems to be part of play and enjoyment and not have evident function or meaning, it really does fulfill an important role in our ability to communicate. The communication that takes place through the act of laughter is extra-linguistic, it serves to tell others what we do not have the words to say.

The Lady’s laughter is flirtatious at first reading, and almost sinister at second. In a second reading of the text, I get the impression that she is laughing because she is seducing Gawain and because she knows something that she cannot say to him (that she is on a “secret mission” of sorts to test Sir Gawain). The laughter is replacing Lady Bertilak’s blurtng out the rules of the secret game in front of Gawain and ruining it. The game is not explicitly stated here, but a knowledge of it is expressed by Lady Bertilak’s laughter when considered with full knowledge of the plot. This game-within-a-game scenario is further emphasized by the placement of the laughter within the physical verse. The laughter is in the first line of the wheel which makes it more significant. The placement of the word indicates that it is part of the summary of the preceding paragraph and therefore important to it.

The flirty laughter of Lady Bertilak appears again, “The lady luflych com laghande swete”43 (1757). The description of her laughter hints at this being genuine seduction rather than just a game or a test. Her actions are not half-hearted; she is fulfilling her role in the game to the point where her desire for Gawain seems believable

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(even when we know the "truth" of her motivations). Her laughter is "swete" and immediately precedes her kissing Gawain. The laughter here adds impulsive and seemingly genuine qualities to the scene. It adds a level of detail that could not otherwise be described. The laughter conveys a mood not easily conveyed through other words. By saying that Lady Bertilak laughed as she was going to kiss Gawain, we can picture the scene and sense the emotion. The first reading of this scene has the reader caught up in the emotionality of the scene and caught up in the seduction narrative. A second reading of this same word adds another otherwise unidentifiable level to the word laughter too. With the end of the poem in mind, it becomes possibly sinister again. I am left guessing as to how genuine the Lady's advances are because while I identify with the emotion of the scene, I cannot help but wonder at her true feelings when I know the "cause" of the seduction scenes.

Gawain uses a different kind of laughter as part of his deflection of her advances, "With luf-laghyng a lyt he layd hym bysyde / All the speches of specialté that sprange of her mouthe"44 (1776-1777). He is at once imitating her, or acting in as genuine a manner as she is, and rejecting her advances. The laughter again shows a duality of spirit in the text. There is certainly a part of Gawain (particularly evident at first reading when all we want is for them to have sex because the narrative is so captivating and we have no or few inclinations that this is a test for Gawain) that wants to give in to the flirting and fun, yet he does not and uses the Lady's own devices of seduction against her. Gawain acts as if he is playing along yet continually says "no." This difference between expression and meaning creates suspense for the reader because Gawain's apparent desire to play with the Lady, expressed by his laughter, leaves open

44 Literally, "With a loving laugh he laid aside / All the words of partiality that sprang from her mouth." Armitage translation, "With affectionate laughter he fenced and deflected / all the loving phrases which leapt from her lips."
the possibility of his saying "yes" the next time she propositions him. This aspect of our
game with the author is interesting because although the game is already finished for
the author, we experience the suspense of playing as we read since the game is not yet
over for us. We are responding to the author's "moves" so to speak, when we
experience suspense and drama in the text.

The Hunting Scenes

The hunting that takes place in parallel to the seduction in the Third Fitt is not
only part of Lord Bertilak's game with Sir Gawain but another sort of game in and of
itself. The hunt creates the "winnings" for Bertilak's half of the exchange agreement
with Gawain at the end of each day. The hunt also serves as a form of entertainment for
the people participating in it in a similar way to the games at Lord Bertilak's castle that I
described earlier.

The hunting begins after the first seduction scene. Lord Bertilak, "the lord of the
londe is lent on his gamnes"45 (1329). Here, the word "gamnes" is used to describe the
hunt in the first line of the stanza. This makes it clear that the hunt is fun for all of the
party (keeping in mind that games are good things at Bertilak's castle, a pattern I have
already established). Interestingly, only a few lines are devoted to the process (or
playing) of hunting, and many more are written about the dismemberment of the deer
that they catch on this day.

The description of the dismemberment is interesting because it adds to the idea
of games and the body being linked in the text. The hunting party is seen to "undo"46

45 the lord of the land is occupied by his games
46 cut them up
the deer “as the dede asks”\textsuperscript{47} (1326-1327). The description of the deer is reminiscent of our introduction to the Green Knight where he is presented as body pieces, and therefore can be seen as another hint that Lord Bertilak and the Green Knight are the same person. The game of the hunt is being played via body parts, in a way because the description of the hunt is a list of body parts more than anything else here. The passage describing the first day’s hunt details the “gres,” “slot,” “erber,” “gargulun,” “wynt-hole,” “guttes,” “schulderes” and “bones”\textsuperscript{48} of the deer during their “undoing. The dismemberment of the animal emphasizes its material nature by describing the process of disassembly rather than showing the purpose of the deer as food or as prizes for the hunters or as what is going to be exchanged at the end of the day. The wheel of this stanza continues the physical description of the dressing of the deer saying, “Bi the byght al of the thyghes / The lappes thay lauce bihynde; / To hewe hit in two that hyyes, / Bi the backbon to unbynde”\textsuperscript{49} (1349-1352). This is an example of how the wheel of the verse functions to repeat and reemphasize what has already been said in the stanza. We already knew the deer was being taken apart, these four lines just add more detail to that concept. The wheel tells us how the hunters cut the deer down the middle into two which follows the process of cleaving the meat off the bones described in the body of the stanza. By presenting the reader with such a physical, I might even say graphic or violent description of what Lord Bertilak and his hunting party do to the deer on the hunt, the poem is putting the association of game as bodily and deadly into the reader’s head. The game of hunting that takes place in this stanza is a game of

\textsuperscript{47} as the task requires
\textsuperscript{48} fat, “hollow above the breast bone at the base of the throat,” gullet, “throat of a deer, includes gullet and wind pipe,” wind pipe, guts, shoulders and bones
\textsuperscript{49} Literally, “By the fork of the legs all of the thighs / The loose end they cut behind / To cut it in two they hasten / By the backbone to undo.” Armitage translation, “Its hind legs pulled apart, / they slit the fleshy flaps, / then cleave and quickly start / to break down its back.”
dismemberment, sort of like the game originally presented by the Green Knight at Arthur’s court. This carries a theme of games that affect the body through the poem.

After the first day of hunting, with the vivid dismemberment of the deer, two more days of the hunting game follow. On the second day, Lord Bertialk and his party defeat a stubborn boar and on the third they vanquish a wily fox. The significance of these scenes is best observed when looked at in light of the argument that the seduction and hunting scenes are allegorically parallel such as that presented by John Speirs in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” This argument is crucial because it makes it clear that what happens in the hunting scenes is supposed to speak to what happens in the seduction ones (and therefore the body is important to both).

Speirs explains how “The hunts are symbolically the doing-to-death of the qualities of the natural man which Courtesy has to vanquish; the deer is timidity or cowardice, the boar ferocity, the fox animal cunning” (Speirs, 93). Gawain’s attempts to foil the Lady’s advances are parallel to how the animals try to escape death at the hands of the hunters. This observed parallelism makes it so that anything that is important to the hunt is important to the seduction scenes. The presence of the body and its material and mortal nature, which was acknowledge through kisses in the seduction parts of the text, is doubly identified as important in its parallel scenes at the hunt.

Keeping in mind that the hunt is parallel to the seduction scenes in the structure of the poem (which is not incidental, but rather adds to the meaning of both kinds of scene), we see Lord Bertilak’s game with Sir Gawain as body-focused. One part of it shows the social body through seductive behavior and the act of kissing while the hunting part shows the more gruesome and physical aspect of the body by describing the dismemberment that takes place during the hunt. If life is a game, and I think the
poem implies that it is, then the poem is also telling us that our bodies are our game pieces.

*The Exchange*

The exchange element is vital to Lord Bertilak's game as well. At the end of each day Lord Bertilak and Sir Gawain exchange winnings. What is most interesting about this part of the game is what Sir Gawain must give Lord Bertilak and what this means about the origins of Lord Bertilak's game.

The kissing in the seduction scenes of the Third Fitt is interesting because of what it tells us about the relationship between Lord Bertilak, Lady Bertilak and Sir Gawain. That is revealed in the game play. Literally Lady Bertilak kisses Sir Gawain who then kisses Lord Bertilak. Significantly, Lord and Lady Bertilak never kiss each other directly. There is never any variation on this patter and Gawain never directly takes the agency in kissing Lady Bertilak or Lord Bertilak. Gawain is playing the game only as far as he has to. Lady Bertilak "Loutes luflych adoun and the leude kysses;"\(^{50}\) then "At last scho

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\(^{50}\) Bows down graciously and kisses the man

\(^{51}\) I am at your bidding to kiss when you like
con hym kysses,” “Felle over his fayre face and fetly hym kyssed”\(^{52}\) (1306, 1501, 1505). Lady Bertilak is using courtly love language when she says that she is at Gawain’s “comaundement” to kiss. However, the further language undermines this relationship which would give Gawain (in the typically female role of a courtly love relationship) power over the kissing. Lady Bertilak resumes agency over the kisses when she “comly” and “fetly” “hym kysses.” The kisses can be seen as forced physical manifestations of “sin.” Gawain does not have agency in what is going on because he holds himself to Christian moral standards and standards of politeness that take it away from him in this situation. The game he must play violates what he believes. He is so bound by what he thinks is his obligation to behave that he lets her almost force herself on him. Gawain’s actions, or rather lack of action with Lady Bertilak in this part of the game only makes sense and is only reasonable in the strictest Christian world; he is being even more well behaved than the structure of courtly love and the expectations of Arthurian legend would require. This means that it is hard to view what Gawain does as sin because

I think we are supposed to laugh at Gawain in these scenes (and yet at the same time take the intentions of his character very very seriously). The game is funny and deathly serious at the same time, once again. The only time he gives in to Lady Bertilak’s advances is when he is offered another set of beliefs than the covenants of Christianity and Chivalry to which he already subscribes. Only the “magic” girdle, with pagan associations and powers beyond those he already believes in can tempt him to give in to the Lady’s offers (Burrow, 41-42).

Gawain kisses Bertilak as part of their pact. This makes the kissing another part of the game, but in a different way to the farewell kisses at Arthur’s court. Gawain,  

\(^{52}\) Bent down over his fair face and kissed him daintily
"kysses [Bertilak] comlyly as he couthe awyse," 53 "hendely hym kysses," 54 and "acoles he the knyght and kysses hym thryes" 55 (1389, 1639, 1936). These adjectives show Gawain kissing Lord Bertilak in the same way that Lady Bertilak kisses Sir Gawain. Gawain only takes the action in kissing when it is out of obligation. He must kiss Bertilak because it is part of the game they have agreed to. Gawain is following his manners when he kisses Bertilak. He "kysses hym comlyly," or graciously, and then "hendely," or courteously; this is the gracious, courteous, extremely polite Gawain of his reputation that Lady Bertilak was expecting. Lord Bertilak gets the behavior out of Sir Gawain that Lady Bertilak was expecting.

The kissing game has another level of significance, which is particularly evident at first reading. The game reveals Lord Bertialk's desire for Gawain as seen through the structure of the kissing. The game is set up by Lord Bertilak; he knows what Gawain will "win" each day of the game because Lord Bertilak set his wife out to seduce their house guest. (We learn this at the end of the text, when the Green Knight/Lord Bertilak says, "And the wowying of my wif; I wroght hit myselven. / I sende hir to assay the" 56 (2361-2362)) Because Lord Bertilak knows what Gawain will win, it can easily be said that he wants Gawain's "winnings," i.e. that he wants Gawain to kiss him. Probably, Lord Bertilak wants Gawain to sleep with him too because that is Lady Bertilak's mission in Gawain's bedroom. The game "legitimizes" Lord Bertilak's desire for Gawain. Lady Bertilak provides this legitimization. 57 By structuring the game to force

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53 kisses him as graciously as he could devise  
54 kisses him courteously  
55 embraces the knight and kisses him three times  
56 and the wooing of my wife ("unlawful lovemaking, the temptation by") I devised it myself. / I sent her to assay (test) you  
57 This argument was inspired by "Masculinity, Modernity, and Homosexual Desire," by Andrew Michael Roberts, where in an analysis of Heart of Darkness, Robert's postulates that the Intended legitimizes the homosexual desire that exists between Marlow and Kurtz.
the kissing through a woman, the desire and actions are technically no longer directly
male-to-male, but rather "legitimized" through the rules of the game by being pushed
through a woman.

This structure is important for two reasons. Firstly, it pushes a significant social
boundaries (the boundaries of homosexual/homosocial relationships, the boundaries of
marriage and infidelity, the boundaries of the game agreement and the boundaries of
the expression of desire). This boundary violation creates tension in these scenes. The
underlying desire Lord Bertilak has for Gawain creates tension in the temptation scenes
because it makes the desire relationships more complicated; it makes the Lady a game
piece rather than a player. Secondly, it undermines Lord Bertilak's explanation of
Morgan Le Fay motivating the events of the text. While Morgan Le Fay did incite the
Green Knight to challenge Arthur's court, the game-within-a-game is, as far as I can tell,
the inception of Lord Bertilak; he even goes so far as to say "I wroght [the temptation
plot] myselven" when admitting that it was all a test to Gawain in the Green Chaple.
This game cannot be easily blamed on Morgan Le Fey; the structure of the game was
not necessary to test Gawain's moral or chivalric fortitude. Because the test could have
been different and accomplished the same goal of testing Gawain that Morgan Le Fey
set for the Green Knight (aka Lord Bertilak), the desire for Sir Gawain revealed by the
structure can be seen coming from Lord Bertilak rather than any outside magical force.

End Game

At the end of the poem, we know that the game is complete. Our hero has
returned home, and we think he has "won." Our perception of his victory is inspite of
the fact that Gawain himself disagrees with the assessment that he has won, and the
fact that it is hard to say what winning means in this text because not everyone agrees
about it at the end. The game feels as though it has been a success; it has brought the
story to a comfortable place of completion.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a story where the reader is constantly aware
that it is a story. It is as though another game is going on in (and out of) the text
between the poet and the reader, or more accurately the listener. We are reminded that
the poet was aware of his audience three times during the text. At the beginning of the
poem, he writes, "If ye wyl listen this laye bot on little quile, / I schal tell hit astit, as I in
toun herde"58 (30-31). The poet's acknowledgement of the reader/listener so early in
the text indicates that he wants us to know he knows we are there. This poem was not
written to be kept on a shelf (although that is what happened to it for four-hundred
years) but rather to engage actively with a reader in a "game." The second time the
author addresses us it is to guide us through the story. Before the great pentangle
description, he says, "And quy the pentangle apendes to that prynce noble / I am intent
yow to telle, thos tary hyt me schulde"59 (623-624) This direct address to the reader
directly tells us that the poet is playing with us; he is telling us that what he is about to
say is so important that he will make a diversion from the plot to explain it. The third
time the poet acknowledges us is similar in function to the second. He writes, "And ye
wyl a whyle be style, / I schal telle yow howe thay wroght"60 (1997). This final
moment of direct contact between reader and poet exists so that the poet can tell us
more of the story is yet to come. Gawain's journey is not yet done, he will continue to
the next phase of his game and the poet reminds us that we are still playing one too.

58 Armitage translation, "So listen a little while to my tale if you will / and I'll tell it as it's told in the
town."
59 Armitage translation, "And why the pentangle was appropriate to that prince / I intend to say, though
it will stall our story."
60 Armitage translation, "In time I'll tell if tricks / work out the way they ought."
The move the poet makes here is to create suspense for the reader and remind him that the author is in control of the game.

We have expectations of what should happen in a text from our previous experience as readers and the poet plays with it. Enough about the story is not what we anticipate that the game stays interesting and fun to play until the end. Gawain's quest challenges the reader's expectations of form; while everything fits within the expected guidelines, the details of the story are unusual. Gawain is on a quest to be beheaded, and it is his ability not to act which is tested, rather than his physical prowess. This is a surprise move by the poet. The conclusion of the story, with its traditional markers and sense of bringing things full circle and back to where they should be is interesting in that it almost overrules the earlier alterations to a typical story by explaining them away. It no longer matters that the Green Knight's game was disturbingly dangerous because everything ended up all right. This lets the reader feel like he has won, but the reader is left wondering what the significance of all that conscious choice, intentional framing and clear interaction with the reader that the poet created was supposed to do. The game was played, but we are not sure if we won or if the poet did.

The poet takes Gawain's unusual experiences and has them integrate into the typical, completing ending found in many other quest tales and fitting our anticipation of completion. When we meet the Green Knight, Gawain's quest begins; after the true nature of the "gomen" is revealed to be an enchantment courtesy of Morgan Le Fay, the Green Knight ceases to be significant and Gawain must return home (Armitage, line 281). Now, the homeward journey typical in other quests may begin; it does not so much matter how Gawain got back as that we see the conclusion of the game. The poet tells us that Gawain had "mony adventure in vale and venquyst ofte, / That I ne tyght
When Gawain has returned to Arthur's court and recounted his tale, "The kyng confortes the knyght, and all the court als, / Laghen loude therat" (2513-2514). The laughter is dismissive, healing and boundary re-defining. By laughing, the court is sympathizing and making everything Gawain did acceptable and all right; his sin has become laughable, a good story and a source of entertainment.

Gawain failed to keep all of these obligations of his world yet is welcomed back into it with open arms. Gawain's internal guilt is in stark contrast to his welcome home at Arthur's court and everyone else's perception of him. He is "gode Gawayne" returned who "The kyng kysses... and the whene alce," before he even tells his story (Armitage, lines 2491, 2492). When his story is over, "[Gawain] groned for gref and grame; / The blod in his face con melle / ... for schame" (Armitage, lines 2502-2504). Gawain is grieved and mortified by his own flawed actions. However, the court is not. His blushing and shame are lost on them, for he returned victorious from the impossible quest. He has won a game it seemed impossible to win. While Gawain says he is showing his "token of untrawthe," the court "Laughen loude therat" (Armitage, lines 2509, 2514). To be laughable, Gawain's fault must not have been so grave in the eyes of the court. In fact, "the Table" decides that "Uche burne of the brotherhede, a bauderyk schulde have," and all that wear it "he honoured... evermore after" (Armitage, lines 2516, 2520). Gawain's personal feelings of shame and disgrace are refuted by the other members of the Round Table. They see their knight, Gawain, as

62 Literally, "The king comforts the knight and all the court, / laughs loudly." Armitage translation, "The king ave comfort, then laughter filled the castle."
63 good Gawain
64 the king kisses and the queen also [does]
65 Literally, "[Gawain] lamented in grief and mortification; / The blood in his face did stream / for shame." Armitage translation, "He grimaced with disgrace, / he writhed in rage and pain. / Blood flowed towards his face / and showed his smarting shame."
66 sign of disloyalty
67 laughed loudly there at
68 each knight of the brotherhood, should have a sash
at this tyme in tale to remene\textsuperscript{61} (Armitage, lines 2482-2483). The poet basically dismisses the return journey. It is not how Gawain got back that matters here, but rather that he did and what happened then that is important to the poem. This signals the reader/listener that the game is over. The poet maintains the formal symmetry off the poem and does not describe in detail the trials of Gawain’s journey home just as he did not describe the monster slaying adventures of his journey to Bertilak’s castle; in this sense, we can anticipate what he is doing. Instead of distracting the reader/listener with tales of monsters and dragons, the poet glosses over this portion of the journey and this forces our focus onto Gawain’s homecoming. The poet returns us to the essentials of his narrative; the end of the poem ends all of the games we have witnessed.

The end of the game presents a new paradox to the reader about the nature of winning. To summarize, Gawain thinks he has lost, but everyone else, including me, thinks he has won. He feels he has failed in his obligations as a hero, a knight, and a Christian because he could not hold himself up to his ideals when challenged; this shows the reader/listener “the gap between Gawain’s natural impulses and the stifling, morally false abstraction of his codes” (Hark, pp. 11). Gawain’s failure was deeply personal; he violated his chivalric agreement with the Green Knight by accepting the Lady’s gift, the apparent terms of the quest by not dying (although he does technically receive a blow to the neck, which was exactly what the Green Knight demanded; the challenge is technically complete, but the spirit of the game has not) and his faith in Christianity by fearing death and flinching at the Green Knight’s axe (Armitage, pp. 142-144, 174, and 172).

\textsuperscript{61} [Gawain had] many adventures in the land and often won, / That I will not take the time in this tale to recount
wondrously successful and choose to wear his mark of personal shame as their mark of collective honor (for one of them came back alive from a quest for death). To them, the sash will serve as a remembrance of Gawain's success and greatness. The social order is reestablished; the court welcomes Gawain back and changes its formal boundaries to incorporate what Gawain has done (or rather not done) on his quest. And it is here that the poem effectively ends. A few more lines follow again inscribing the poem in the Greco-Roman history by referring back to Troy and Brutus as in the introductory lines. It then concludes with a prayer for peace (a funny ending for a poem telling a story of violence). In my mind, the paradox of winning/losing can be resolved by saying that Gawain won as far as was humanly possibly (i.e. without being godlike or having magical help). He has temporarily avoided death and won his game, he could not win in any more real way because as humans we are mortal and therefore cannot ever win completely in the face of death, but only win this challenge for today.

Gawain's winning, as far as it goes, goes much further than that of either the author or the reader. The game we have just played, or more accurately been forced to play by the poet (for he knows all the rules, while they are slowly revealed to us by the text after we have started playing therefore making the game unfair) is not about winning and losing so much as it is about making the text mean something. As Iser writes, "Authors play games with readers, and the text is the playground" where the game of reading takes place (Iser 207). Our play is about finding meaning within the text. Meaning is enhanced by reading and then re-reading, and it is through the "game" we play with the author of the text that we realize that "the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations" (Iser "The reading process: a phenomenological approach"). My reading is different to yours is different to other critical essays about the poem; we all "realize" the text differently because we do not
think alike, it is “infinitely richer” than anything anyone of us can see in it or write about because someone else can always come along and find something else to say or understand. Our participation in the game of the text is how we find our analysis and meaning, but because it is a game, the end I reach is not the only way the game could play out. The nature of the reading game makes it so that we can go back and start again, play through the same exact game, but find different meanings and think different things are significant. We are not defeated by the game either, just as Sir Gawain is not. Like Gawain, we do not die in our game, in any sense literal or figurative because the text can be played over and over again by us and other readers. The game of the text will continue as long as we continue to read and interpret what we have read. The process of reading brings us to a game that has been played before and will be played again, with each person taking something different away from their reading.
Works Cited


Works Referenced


