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## MEDIEVAL MISOGYNY AND GAWAIN'S OUTBURST AGAINST WOMEN IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

His clannes and his cortaysye croked were  
neuer.

(*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 653)

An old religious uncle of mine taught me to  
speak, who was in his youth an inland man;  
one that knew courtship too well, for there he  
fell in love. I have heard him read many  
lectures against it, and I thank God I am not a  
woman, to be touched with so many giddy  
offences as he hath generally taxed their whole  
sex withal.

(Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, III. 2. 329)

The view has been gaining ground of late that the Gawain of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a knight renowned as 'pat fyne fader of nurture' (l. 919) and as 'so cortays and coynt' of his 'hetes' (l. 1525),<sup>1</sup> degenerates at the moment of leave-taking from the Green Knight, his erstwhile host, to the level of a churl capable of abusing the ladies of that knight's household (ll. 2411–28). In an article provocatively entitled 'Gawain's Antifeminist Rant, the Pentangle, and Narrative Space', Catherine Batt claims that in this 'anti-feminist passage' (so-called), 'Gawain imposes an unsatisfactory rhetorical patterning on experience, in order to make it intelligible in already-known terms' and that he 'does not later show regret for his illogical calumny of women, because its expression exists as a discrete encoding of received wisdom'.<sup>2</sup> The assumption of anti-feminism in this passage has become something of an article of faith. Thus Richard Newhauser refers without explanation to 'Gawain's misogynous outburst',<sup>3</sup> and Derek Pearsall without sympathy to Gawain's willingness 'to bluster', whereby 'he turns on women and blames them'.<sup>4</sup> By Pearsall's account Gawain does this not in the bitter moment of self-discovery but 'when he has gathered himself somewhat'. In other words Gawain's bitterness has the character not of an emotional spasm but of a considered insult. We seem to be

<sup>1</sup> References are to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn, rev. by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> 'Gawain's Antifeminist Rant, the Pentangle, and Narrative Space', *YES*, 22 (1992), 117–39 (pp. 136–37).

<sup>3</sup> 'Sources II: Scriptural and Devotional Sources', in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), pp. 257–75 (p. 269).

<sup>4</sup> 'Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment', in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, pp. 351–62 (p. 355). See also Susan Powell, 'Untying the Knot: Reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *New Perspectives on Middle English Texts: A Festschrift for R. A. Waldron*, ed. by S. Powell and J. J. Smith (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), pp. 55–74, where reference is made to Gawain's 'excoriation of women' (p. 59, n. 10). For an explanation of the contrary view that 'Gawain's chivalry and social tact are most in evidence here', see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by R. A. Waldron, *York Medieval Texts* (London: Arnold, 1970), p. 134.

on the verge here of substituting our own commonplaces for what we may take to be the commonplaces of the Middle Ages.

In the line in which the poet of *Sir Gawain* introduces his hero into his masterpiece, 'There gode Gawan watz graybed Gwenore bisyde' (l. 109), we are led at once to recognize not only Gawain's moral virtue and his exalted status in Arthur's court but also the fitness of his presence in the company of a lady, and not only a lady, but the most beautiful of ladies, worthy indeed to be seated in the centre of such a noble gathering of knights:

Þe comlokest to discrye  
 Þer glent with yȝen gray,  
 A semloker þat euer he syȝe  
 Soth moȝt no mon say.

(l. 81)

The presence of a beautiful lady is impossible to ignore, and Gawain can hardly be indifferent to Guinevere's beauty. So much is evident when he first sets his eyes on the lady of the castle at Hautdesert, for her radiant beauty strikes him at once as surpassing even that of Guinevere:

Þenne lyst þe lady to loke on þe knyȝt,  
 Þenne com ho of hir closet with mony cler burdez.  
 Ho watz þe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre,  
 And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oþer,  
 And wener þen Wenore, as þe wyȝe þoȝt.

(l. 941)

Beautiful ladies are drawn to the presence of great knights and by the same token such knights must learn to accustom themselves to the company of beautiful ladies. This is true in life as in fiction, and thus we acknowledge, for example, the fitness of the marriage of the Black Prince to Joan, the Fair Maid of Kent.<sup>5</sup> If we wish to conduct an investigation into misogyny in the Middle Ages we should be better advised to look to philosophers and churchmen such as Valerius, Theophrastus, Jerome, and Tertullian, or to a 'joly clerk' such as Jankyn, than to a knight like Gawain.<sup>6</sup> Knights are inspired by ladies and are prepared to die for ladies.<sup>7</sup> They humiliate themselves for ladies (Lancelot enters the cart of ignominy and dishonour after hesitating for only two steps) and are humiliated by ladies (Lancelot is snubbed and rebuked by the Queen for his momentary hesitation).<sup>8</sup> They languish for ladies (Troilus and Arcite)<sup>9</sup> and they sometimes succeed in marrying ladies (Palamon and Arveragus),<sup>10</sup> and even after marriage they can lie subject to the sovereign power of ladies (Chrétien's Erec).<sup>11</sup> It is not surprising that the destinies of great knights and beautiful ladies are thus interwoven, for it is the very function of a knight to fight for

<sup>5</sup> See B. Emerson, *The Black Prince* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), pp. 154–64.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, ll. 628, 669–710, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by L. D. Benson and others, 3rd edn (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> See R. W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy, *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context, and Translation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), Section 19, ll. 177–222, and Section 20 (pp. 116–23).

<sup>8</sup> See Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, ed. by M. Roques, *Classiques Français du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Champion, 1972), ll. 321–77, 3924–99, 4458–500.

<sup>9</sup> See *Troilus and Criseyde*, l. 358–546, and *The Knight's Tale*, ll. 1355–82.

<sup>10</sup> See *The Knight's Tale*, ll. 3070–108, and *The Franklin's Tale*, ll. 729–806.

<sup>11</sup> See Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, ed. by M. Roques, *Classiques Français du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Champion, 1970), ll. 2430–573.

justice for the weak and helpless, for women, widows, and orphans. Indeed, as Sir Geoffroy de Charny tells us, a knight can save his soul by fighting for such a cause:

Encores, se aucun vouloient oster l'onnour ne l'eritage de povres pucelles ne de povres femmes vesves, et autrement ne les peust l'en destourner de ce sanz guerre ou bataille, l'en y doit entrer seurement et pour les corps et pour les ames sauver, et tout en autele maniere pour povres orphelins et orphelines. (Section 35, l. 195)

Criseyde is moved by the figure of Troilus when he appears before her eyes and to popular acclaim as the very protector of Troy:

So lik a man of armes and a knyght  
He was to seen, fulfilled of heigh prowessse,  
For bothe he hadde a body and a myght  
To don that thing, as wel as hardynesse;  
And ek to seen hym in his gere hym dresse,  
So fressh, so yong, so weldy semed he,  
It was an heven upon hym for to see.

His helm tohewen was in twenty places,  
That by a tyssew heng his bak byhynde;  
His sheeld todasshed was with swerdes and maces,  
In which men myghte many an arwe fynde  
That thirled hadde horn and nerf and rynde;  
And ay the peple cryde, 'Here cometh oure joye,  
And, next his brother, holder up of Troye!'

(II. 631)

A knight is not a terrorist but a warrior who has been civilized by the life of courts and above all by the company of ladies. The Green Knight frames the second game or Exchange of Winnings with Gawain on the assumption that a knight will be at his ease in the company of ladies (in the public rooms of the castle, it is implied, not in the privacy of the bedroom):

3e schal lenge in your lofte, and ly3e in your ese  
To-morn quyle þe messequyle, and to mete wende  
When 3e wyl, wyth my wyf, þat wyth yow schal sitte  
And comfort yow with compayny, til I to cort torne.

(I. 1096)

Thus the refinement of manners is at the very heart of the definition of a medieval knight, and we are led to see that this is also the case in respect of the experienced warrior who has proved himself on the field of battle for forty years or more. Such a man is Chaucer's Knight, who was present at the siege of Algeçiras in 1342–1344 and is now in the late 1380s on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. The Knight has not been brutalized by the violence of war. Chaucer has conjoined in the figure of the Knight the arts of war and of peace, for indeed the object of war is the establishment of peace.<sup>12</sup> So interwoven are these elements in a knight that the very word 'chivalry' that defines the practice of knighthood and the prowess of a knight has come primarily to denote a gracious and honourable manner in the dealings of a man with women.

<sup>12</sup> Gower in his poem *In Praise of Peace*, addressed to the newly crowned Henry IV (1399–1413) who was himself as the Earl of Derby a crusading knight, writes: 'Good is teschue werre, and natheles | A kyng may make werre uppon his right, | For of bataille the final ende is pees' (II. 64–66). See G. C. Macaulay, *The English Works of John Gower*, Early English Text Society (ES) 81–82, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1900–1901), II, 481–92.

For Aristotle, virtue is a mean between extremes of excess and defect (*Ethics*, II. 6, 1106b 36–1107a 6; Aquinas, *Commentary*, 322–25), and this essential moderation characterizes the knightly virtue of courage as it does other virtues. Courage is the virtue that stands between the vices of rashness and cowardice in confronting the danger of death (*Ethics*, II. 7, 1107a 33–1107b 4; Aquinas, *Commentary*, 335–41), and as a moral virtue it is linked to other moral virtues (*Ethics*, VI. 13, 1144b 32–1145a 2; Aquinas, *Commentary*, 1286–88).<sup>13</sup> Strictly speaking, then, courage cannot degenerate into either harshness and cruelty, or arrogance, or boastfulness and boorishness, that is, if it is to retain its character or name of courage. Rather, it is fitly accompanied by the virtues of temperance, such as gentleness, humility, and courtesy, and these are conspicuous and humanizing elements in Chaucer's portrait of the Knight in the General Prologue.

The virtue of gentleness moderates the passion of anger. Such anger is hardly a passion a knight can be without when fighting in battle. Beowulf in the Old English epic poem customarily named after him awaits the monster Grendel in mounting anger ('wrapum on andan | bad bolgenmod' (l. 708)), and Grendel, the monster, comes to attack the Danish hall at Heorot in anger ('ða he gebolgen wæs' (l. 723)). Indeed the two mortal foes are united in anger: 'Yrre wæron begen, | reþe renweardas' (l. 769).<sup>14</sup> The Italian epic poet, Tasso, wonderfully conveys the deadly menace of anger in his representation of Tancred, both in Tancred's first inconclusive combat against Argantes after the humiliation of Otho (*Gerusalemme Liberata*, VI), when he fights in ignorance against Clorinda and slays her (Book XII), and when he slays Argantes in single combat in the penultimate book (XIX). However, the necessity for a knight to moderate anger when it is no longer appropriate is also very evident. This is certainly true of a misplaced anger, such as that wrongly directed by Sir Guyon, the knight of temperance, against the Red Cross Knight in the first episode of Spenser's Legend of Temperance (*The Faerie Queene*, II. 1. 8–34), but it is also requisite in the case of a justified anger, as when Theseus is angered by the violation of a solemn agreement, one of banishment and another of imprisonment, on the parts of Arcite and Palamon respectively (*The Knight's Tale*, ll. 1714–47). Here the passion of love is a mitigating circumstance (ll. 1753–54, and 1785–820), and Theseus is moved by the appeals of the queen, Hippolyte, of Emelye herself, and of their ladies to show compassion to the young knights:

Til at the laste aslaked was his mood,  
For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte.  
And though he first for ire quook and sterte,  
He hath considered shortly, in a clause,  
The trespass of hem bothe, and eek the cause,  
And although that his ire hir gilt accused,  
Yet in his resoun he hem bothe excused.

(l. 1760)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Quotations are from *Ethica Nicomachea*, trans. by W. D. Ross, in *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, ed. by J. A. Smith and W. D. Ross, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908–52), IX, revised by J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), and to *St Thomas Aquinas: Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by C. I. Litzinger, O.P., rev. edn (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> F. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3d edn (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1950).

<sup>15</sup> See also *The Knight's Tale*, ll. 1772–73, 1782.

Theseus is a great ruler and not merely a worthy knight, so that, in him, gentleness is accompanied by the virtue of clemency, that is, a moderation in the infliction of punishment. This is an important issue in *The Knight's Tale*, especially when Theseus has been branded by Terry Jones as a tyrant.<sup>16</sup> This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the misinterpretation of the Knight of the General Prologue as an unscrupulous mercenary.

The virtue of humility is the tempering of pride, that is, the immoderate pursuit of great things that are beyond one's power to achieve. Chaucer describes the humility of his Knight in a striking (and, for modern readers, surely a surprising) image: 'And of his port as meeke as is a mayde' (General Prologue, l. 69). The Knight has achieved great exploits in the course of his life, but they are such as are within his power to achieve. The Knight's deeds speak for themselves, and he has no need to assert his own excellence by boastful or arrogant behaviour. The great example of humility is that of Dante's Trajan, whose story is carved on the white marble bank of the first terrace of purgatory (*Purgatorio*, x. 73–96).<sup>17</sup> The great emperor shows his humility in acknowledging the fitness of a poor widow's rebuke of him for neglecting his own goodness in putting a military campaign before the execution of justice on behalf of her dead son. Like Theseus, Trajan is moved both by the requirement of justice and by compassion for a lady:

Ed ella: 'L'altrui bene  
a te che fia, se 'l tuo metti in oblio?'  
Ond'elli: 'Or ti conforta; ch'ei convene  
ch' i' solva il mio dovere anzi ch' i' mova:  
giustizia vuole e pietà mi ritene.'

(*Purgatorio*, x. 89)

The virtue of courtesy is the moderation of one's external conduct, both in speech: 'He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde | In al his lyf unto no maner wight' (Gen. Prol., l. 70) and in dress: 'But for to tellen yow of his array, | His hors were goode, but he was nat gay' (l. 73). The Knight is not showily or richly dressed, like his son (ll. 89–93), but as a fighting man is concerned that his horses are in good condition. This is a point of considerable importance in the delineation of chivalric virtues. It is not conducive to the advantage or the honour of a knight to be obliged to go on foot, and we are not to admire the knight (Lancelot) whom Chrétien presents from Gauvain's vantage-point on horseback (the proper vantage-point of a knight) making his way fully armed and on foot beside a cart (*Charrete*, ll. 314–20). Such an indignity is in large part Lancelot's own fault, for he has driven his first horse to the point of exhaustion and death (ll. 270–73, 279–81, and 296–98), and in his impetuosity he does not take care to choose the better of the two horses offered him by Gauvain (ll. 290–95). The later comparison of the knight as a lover to Pyramus (l. 3802) is indeed well judged, for Pyramus is the very type of an impetuous lover. Thus a knight should exercise the utmost care in the choice of a horse, for his well-being as a knight depends on the serviceability of his horses. Such solicitude is indeed shown by Chaucer's Knight. Chaucer draws a distinction between the great warrior who cares about the condition of his horses and less about his personal

<sup>16</sup> *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), pp. 175, 192–202.

<sup>17</sup> See the text and translation of J. D. Sinclair, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, 3 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

appearance and his handsome young son, elegantly and colourfully attired in the manner of an ardent lover (Gen. Prol., ll. 89–98).

In the system of moral virtues outlined by Aristotle in the *Ethics*, the virtue of courtesy is of wide scope (Aristotle, *Ethics*, II. 7, 1108a 9–30; Aquinas, *Commentary*, 350–54), comprising as it does the virtues of truthfulness or sincerity (the mean between boastfulness and mock-modesty), friendliness or affability (the mean between obsequiousness or, what is much worse, flattery, on the one hand and quarrelsomeness on the other) and wittiness (a mean between buffoonery and boorishness). It is hardly necessary to stress the importance of courtesy in the chivalric literature of the Middle Ages (not least in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* itself), but it may be noted that this ideal of behaviour continues unimpeded into the Renaissance. Indeed Spenser's Legend of Courtesy treats of courtesy as one of the culminating virtues of *The Faerie Queene*, the subject not of a first or second book but of the sixth book. We can see from the description of Sir Calidore, the knight of courtesy, that he stands in the direct line of descent from Chaucer's Knight and the Gawain of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

But mongst them all was none more courteous Knight,  
Then *Calidore*, beloued ouer all,  
In whom it seemes, that gentlenesse of spright  
And manners mylde were planted naturall;  
To which he adding comely guize withall,  
And gracious speach, did steale mens hearts away.  
Nathlesse thereto he was full stout and tall,  
And well approu'd in batteilous affray,  
That him did much renowme, and far his fame display.  
(VI. I. 2)<sup>18</sup>

Spenser's definition of courtesy also recalls Aristotle's sense of the inclusiveness of virtue, and this connection is strongly reinforced by Calidore's providential meeting at the beginning of his quest with Sir Artegall, the knight of justice. Each knows himself in the knowledge of the other: 'Who whenas each of other had a sight, | They knew them selues, and both their persons rad' (VI. I. 4). The justice of Artegall and the courtesy of Calidore are alike in the sense that justice is virtue in relation to one's neighbour whereas courtesy or moral worth is virtue complete in itself.<sup>19</sup> Hence Spenser, in the Legend of Courtesy, sets out to demonstrate the perfecting of the self or of the individual person. It will be evident that by means of the symbol of the pentangle (*SGGK*, ll. 619–65) the *Gawain*-poet makes a similar and extended claim on behalf of the hero of his own romance.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as is well understood, is constructed around two games, the Beheading Game and the Exchange of Winnings, each of which is played out to its conclusion (as the best games are) in deadly earnest. In each of them Gawain plays to the full the part that has been assigned to him.

In the Beheading Game Gawain plays his proper part in a series of successive actions. He decapitates the Green Knight with a swift and assured blow of that

<sup>18</sup> Edmund Spenser: *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by A. C. Hamilton, Longman Annotated English Poets (London and New York: Longman, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> On courtesy in the general sense of moral worth or excellence, that is, *honestas*, see my article, 'Spenser's Conception of Courtesy and the Design of the *Faerie Queene*', *RES*, n.s. 32 (1981), 17–36 (pp. 19–20).

knight's huge and monstrous axe (ll. 421–26). He sets out for the return blow in due time once the feast of All Saints' Day has been celebrated on 1 November (ll. 534–36) and on his own without the aid of companions (ll. 693–97). He stays at Hautdesert over the Christmas season only when he has been assured that his stay will not prevent the completion of his quest (ll. 1081–82), and also when he has been reassured on this very point by the lord at the end of the second day of a new game, the Exchange of Winnings (ll. 1670–75). He sets out promptly from Hautdesert for the Green Chapel in the morning of New Year's Day (ll. 2006–14, 2060–76), and is not deflected from his purpose by the temptation of the guide (ll. 2118–35), the desolation of the place (ll. 2189–96), or the hideous noise of the grinding of the Green Knight's axe (ll. 2199–211). Gawain's courage and fidelity to his word in performing his part of the bargain are flawless, or at any rate as nearly flawless as it is possible in this imperfect world to be.

The same moral scrupulousness is to be seen in the part that Gawain plays in the Exchange of Winnings game at Hautdesert. He rests in bed on the three days covered by the Exchange of Winnings agreement not in accordance with his own inclination, but in accordance with the terms of the agreement set out by the lord:

'For 3e haf trauayled,' quop þe tulk, 'towen fro ferre,  
And syþen waked me wyth, 3e arn not wel waryst  
Nauþer of sostnaunce ne of slepe, soþly I knowe;  
3e schal lenge in your lofte, and ly3e in your ese  
To-morn quyle þe messequyle,

(l. 1093)

He is impeccably courteous in his conversations with the lady in his bedroom on all three days, being both gentle towards her and at the same time unyielding, showing indeed his command of the art of the conversation of lovers for which he is justly famous and which causes him to be so eagerly welcomed by the company at Hautdesert as a guest:

'In menyng of manerez mere  
Þis burne now schal vus bryng,  
I hope þat may hym here  
Schal lerne of luf-talkyng.'

(l. 924)

He is courteous indeed in receiving the lady into the privacy of his bedroom, however much he is surprised to see her there: 'to meruayle hym þo3t, | Bot 3et he sayde in hymself, "More semly hit were | To aspye wyth my spelle in space quat ho wolde"' (ll. 1197–99), and he suffers her flattering attentions in public in silence even at the cost of his own embarrassment rather than subjecting her to an outward rebuke: 'Bot he nolde not for his nurture nurne hir a3ayne3, | Bot dalt with hir al in daynté, how-se-euer þe dede turned | towrast' (l. 1661–63). At the same time he is proof against all the lady's importunities, at least in so far as they bear directly upon the question of love. In him courtesy is reconciled with 'clannes' or chastity (as near as may be),<sup>20</sup> as we are assured it will be in the pentangle passage: 'His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer' (l. 653). Thus we see from the other direction, as it

<sup>20</sup> Some critics (perhaps a majority) prefer 'purity' to 'chastity' as a gloss to *clannes* (SGGK, l. 653), but it can hardly be doubted that sexual purity is at the centre of the meaning of the word, especially as linked to courtesy and in the setting of a bedroom. See Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (London and New York: Longman, 1996), pp. 202–03, and n. 1.



were, that chastity is not in itself a grim and cheerless matter, a stern self-abnegation. Cleanness is 'miry Clannesse' in *Patience* (l. 32),<sup>21</sup> that is, it is a pleasant and joyful thing, the mark of a true state of love. Chastity has this deeper meaning for Spenser, and hence it is formally distinguished by him from a mere temperance. Gawain does not place courtesy to the lady above his own sense of sexual purity (that is, chastity), or his obligation of fidelity to the lord her husband:

He cared for his cortaysye, lest craþayn he were,  
And more for his meschef ȝif he schulde make synne,  
And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde aȝt.

(l. 1773)

When he accepts the lady's girdle into his possession as a talisman to ward off the danger of imminent death from the Green Knight's axe, he not only honours his promise to the lady to conceal it faithfully from her lord, but as ever suits the action to the word in doing so at the first opportunity:

When ho watz gon, Sir Gawayn gerez hym sone,  
Rises and riches hym in araye noble,  
Lays vp þe luf-lace þe lady hym raȝt,  
Hid hit ful holdely, þer he hit eft fonde.

(l. 1872)

Courtesy and fidelity are here reinforced by generosity, that is, *fraunchyse* (l. 652), in the manner suggested by the symbolism of the pentangle. Indeed, courtesy and chastity are always fittingly accompanied by a generous and disinterested regard for the feelings and needs of others and also by a willingness in the absence of certain knowledge not to impugn the motives of others. Thus Gawain is puzzled rather than outraged by the lady's initial appearance at his bedroom door. He does not attribute the rudeness of ignorance or design to his hostess, but simply tries to make sense of what is on the face of it an extraordinary violation of a social code. Perhaps it is an accident and the lady has mistaken his bedroom for her own. Such things can happen. Perhaps the lady is impelled by the sudden promptings of an innocent and vulnerable love. No doubt such a circumstance is not unusual in the world inhabited by a paragon like Gawain. She comes to him not apparently unsure of herself and eager to learn:

'I com hider sengel, and sitte  
To lerne at yow sum game;  
Dos, techez me of your wytte,  
Whil my lorde is fro hame.'

(l. 1531)

When her amorous longings are turned aside by Gawain, gently but firmly and repeatedly, she manifests all the signs of innocent distress, suggestive to readers of romance, perhaps, of a Fair Maid of Astolat: 'Kysse me now comly, and I schal cach hepen, | I may bot mourne vpon molde, as may þat much louyes' (l. 1794). Such generosity of spirit on Gawain's part amounts indeed to a recognition of love, and he is led to reflect upon or at least to acknowledge the emptiness of heart that must have brought her to him. Thus when he finally takes his leave of Hautdesert for his momentous meeting with the Green Knight and his axe, he thinks fondly of her and

<sup>21</sup> *Patience*, ed. by J. J. Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969).

wishes for her the love that will satisfy her womanly nature, even though he knows that it has not fallen to his lot to supply it: 'Ðe leue lady on lyue luf hir bityde' (l. 2054). It is a private reflection on Gawain's part, and certainly not one that he would wish to share with the husband and the world. Pearsall is wrong to think that 'the embarrassment of the lady's bedroom visits is an acceptable embarrassment' and that 'Gawain could have talked about it to his friends'.<sup>22</sup> Such boastfulness would not be courteous and a public disclosure of these private events could not possibly be to the advantage of the husband or his lady. Such delicate personal issues are easily misinterpreted and misrepresented. Hence the knight Geoffroy de Charny urges secrecy in all such affairs of the heart:

Tout le bien, l'onour et l'amour que vous y trouverés, gardez le secretement sanz vous en venter en nulle maniere, ne faire aussi les semblans si tres grans qu'il conviegne que autres ne pluseurs s'en apperçoivent, que nul bien en la parfin, quant il est trop sceu, n'en vient mie volentiers, mais en peuvent avenir moult de durs emcombriers qui puis tournent a grant ennui. (*Livre de chevalerie*, Section 19, l. 188)

So too Chaucer's Criseyde, in her anxious and fearful contemplation of taking Troilus as a lover, is able to comfort herself (justifiably as it turns out) with the thought that Troilus is not a boaster:

'And ek I knowe of longe tyme agon  
His thewes goode, and that he is nat nyce;  
N'avantour, seith men, certein, he is noon;  
To wis is he to doon so gret a vice.'

(*Troilus and Criseyde*, II, 722)

Such awareness of the need for discretion prompts Gawain's refusal on the first day's exchange of winnings to disclose to the host the source of the gracious kiss that he bestows upon him in accordance with their agreement (ll. 1385–91), for he is under no obligation to do so: "Ðat watz not forward," quoth he, "frayst me no more. | For 3e haf tan þat yow tydez, trawe non oper | 3e mowe" (ll. 1395–97). Gawain's behaviour is both legitimate and honourable, for he himself is guilty of no offence towards the lady in the bedroom on the occasion of her first visit.

However, all is not as well in the end as Gawain believes it to be, for on the third day in the bedroom he is compromised by the lady into making mutually contradictory promises:

And bisoȝt hym, for hir sake, disceuer hit neuer,  
Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde; þe leude hym acordez  
Ðat neuer wyȝe schulde hit wyt, iwysse, bot þay twayne  
for noȝte.

(l. 1862)

The spectator often sees more of the game than the players involved, or at least sees different things and from different perspectives. Thus we as readers or auditors see Gawain's moral lapse, but Gawain himself does not. We need to appreciate this fact, and to temper our criticism of Gawain accordingly. Two factors soften our judgement. Gawain's fear for his life in view of the impending axe-blow comes to the surface on the third day of the Exchange of Winnings game. The poet shows both Gawain's moral soundness and also his mental disturbance:

<sup>22</sup> 'Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', p. 359.

Whyle þe hende knyȝt at home holsumly slepes  
 Withinne þe comly cortynes, on þe colde morne.  
 (l. 1731)

He watz in drowping depe,  
 Bot þenne he con hir here.

In dreȝ droupyng of dreme draueled þat noble,  
 As mon þat watz in mornyng of mony þro þoȝtes.  
 (l. 1748)

It is the incapacitating presence of fear that explains how Gawain can overlook the moral reality of what the lady proposes in offering him the girdle. He possesses the requisite knowledge by which he can see through and so thwart her stratagem, but because of fear he fails to exercise it (Aristotle, *Ethics*, VII. 3, 1146b 31–35, and Aquinas, *Commentary*, 1338):

But (a), since we use the word 'know' in two senses (for both the man who has knowledge but is not using it and he who is using it are said to know), it *will* make a difference whether, when a man does what he should not, he has the knowledge but is not exercising it, or *is* exercising it; for the latter seems strange, but not the former.

Gawain is overwhelmed here by the sudden hope of life when he had resigned himself to the prospect of imminent death, and is thus distracted from the true realities of his present circumstances. Troilus undergoes a similar experience when his love for Criseyde is finally returned:

And right as he that seth his deth yshapen,  
 And dyen mot, in ought that he may gesse,  
 And sodeynly rescous doth hym escapen,  
 And from his deth is brought in sykernesse,  
 For al this world, in swych present gladnesse  
 Was Troilus, and hath his lady swete.

(TC, III. 1240)

Gawain's sin is therefore diminished but not abolished by passion, here the passion of fear, as Aquinas explains: 'Si igitur accipiat passio secundum quod praecedit actum peccati, sic necesse est quod diminuat peccatum' (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a 2ae 77.6).<sup>23</sup> Mortal sin becomes venial in such circumstances, that is, venial from the cause.<sup>24</sup> It is hard, indeed almost impossible, to think clearly when under the pressure of powerful and well-justified fear for one's life.

At this moment of moral failure (if only of partial failure) Gawain is rescued by the habit of virtue, and in particular by the habit of piety. This is the 'pité, þat passez alle poyntez' (l. 654), the culminating moral virtue of the pentangle passage.<sup>25</sup> Thus he makes a clear and complete confession of his sins as of one on the point of death:

Pere he schrof hym schyrly and schewed his mysdedez,  
 Of þe more and þe mynne, and merci besechez,  
 And of absolucioun he on þe segge calles;

<sup>23</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. by T. Gilby and others, 61 vols (London: Blackfriars, 1964–81).

<sup>24</sup> On the definition of Gawain's sin as venial from the cause, see my article, 'The Validity of Gawain's Confession in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *RES*, n.s. 36 (1985), 1–18 (pp. 10–12).

<sup>25</sup> On *pité* as meaning 'piety' and not 'compassion', see my article, 'The Perfection of the Pentangle and of Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Essays on Ricardian Literature: In Honour of J. A. Burrow*, ed. by A. J. Minnis, C. C. Morse, and T. Turville-Petre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 252–75 (p. 256, n. 9).

And he asoyled hym surely and sette hym so clene  
As domezday schulde haf ben diȝt on þe morn.

(l. 1880)

Only our modern ignorance of penitential doctrine and practice creates difficulties here and introduces the suspicion (contradicting the explicit evidence of the text) of an invalid confession. The act of confession is inclusive, and so includes a general confession of possible sins obscured from view as well as the enumeration of particular sins that the penitent is able to call to mind, as explained in the *Supplementum* to *Summa Theologiae*: 'Sed ille qui confitetur omnia peccata, quae scit, accedit ad Deum, quantum potest: plus autem ab eo requiri non potest: ergo non confundetur, ut repulsam patiatur, sed veniam consequetur (3a 10.5 *sed contra*).<sup>26</sup> Thus Gawain leaves Hautdesert for the Green Chapel made clean of all his sins by the sacrament of penance, including his venial sin of withholding the lady's girdle from her lord in the game of the Exchange of Winnings.

Ignorance is understandable, but it is not fitting that one should remain in a state of ignorance. It falls to the Green Knight to disclose to Gawain the nature of his sin, and, in so doing, the part the lady has played in his moral downfall. Gawain is not only humiliated by this realization of his sinfulness but also frustrated and embittered by the thought that his own virtues have made their contribution to that downfall. He has indeed lacked the courage to see through the lady's deceit, but the courtesy and generosity of spirit that make him wish to protect the lady from her feelings of sorrow have rendered him vulnerable to his own feelings of fear. He expresses this bitterness in what appears to many modern readers to be a classic piece of medieval anti-feminism:

And comaundez me to þat cortays, your comlych fere,  
Boþe þat on and þat oþer, myn honoured ladyez,  
Pat þus hor knyȝt wyth hor kest han koynȝly bigyled.  
Bot hit is no ferly þaȝ a fole madde,  
And þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe,  
For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled,  
And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsoneȝ —  
Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde — and Dauyth þerafter  
Watz blended with Barsabe, þat much bale þoled.

(l. 2411)

A modern reader, sensitive to questions of equality and bias in respect of the relation between the sexes, is liable to misconstrue the purport of these lines, but the supposition that Gawain is unsporting in defeat and at the same time filled with a hatred for the generality of womankind is more than unwelcome. It is entirely at odds with the argument of the poem as a whole and our sense of Gawain's humanity.

The issue of anti-feminism or misogyny in the Middle Ages is too long and complicated a subject to be adequately dealt with here, but we can hardly suppose that the hatred of women was normal for men in the medieval world or even that it underpins the thought of the greatest medieval philosophers. On the contrary, we may note the following assumptions of principle on the question of sexual differentiation in the mainstream of scholastic Aristotelian thought. It is certainly the view of Aquinas that the difference of sex is as natural as the difference of size.

<sup>26</sup> *Divi Thomae Aquinatis Summa Theologica*, 2nd edition (Rome, 1894), Vol. v, *Tertiae Partis Supplementum*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Baker, 1917).

Thus as one person may be six feet tall and another five feet six inches, so one person may be male and another female:

Dicendum quod sicut, considerata natura individui, debetur quantitas diversa diversis hominibus; ita, considerata natura individui, debetur diversis diversi sexus; et haec etiam diversitas competit perfectioni speciei, cuius diversi gradus implentur per dictam diversitatem sexus vel quantitatis. Et ideo sicut resurgent homines in diversis staturis, ita in diversis sexibus.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed the difference of sex is not a source of defect at all, but is required for the perfection of the species: 'Quamvis feminae sit praeter intentionem naturae particularis, est tamen de intentione naturae universalis, quae ad perfectionem humanae speciei utrum sexum requirit; nec ex sexu erit ibi aliquis defectus, ut ex dictis patet' (*Scriptum in IV Libros Sententiarum*, 44. 1. 3c ra 3). Further, the woman is not made primarily for procreation, but for understanding, that is, she is a human being before she is female just as the man is a human being before he is male: 'Homo autem adhuc ordinatur ad nobilius opus vitae, quod est intelligere. Et ideo adhuc in homine debuit esse majori ratione distinctio utriusque virtutis, ut seorsum produceretur femina a mare, et tamen carnaliter conjungerentur in unum ad generationis opus' (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a 92.1). Philosophers such as Aristotle and Aquinas are not woman-haters. No more is a poet such as Chaucer, who in his creation of the Wife of Bath directly confronts the issues of anti-feminism in the last decade of the fourteenth century (possibly the period of composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* itself). The Wife of Bath is no doubt the product of the anti-feminist Latin sources specified in the text of her prologue, and, indeed, D. W. Robertson Jr identifies her as 'a literary personification of rampant "femininity" or carnality'.<sup>28</sup> Such a negative view of the Wife of Bath, however, runs counter to the response of most modern readers of Chaucer's poem. J. L. Lowes responds to 'Chaucer's sheer delight in her creation' and compares her to Falstaff as 'that other gorgeous old sinner'.<sup>29</sup> Thus Chaucer shows that the potential goodness of feminine nature is contained even in the anti-feminist account of woman, and he has superimposed upon it the Wife of Bath's own point of view.<sup>30</sup> Chaucer softens the impact of the anti-feminist critique of the estate of woman while at the same time exploiting the central assumptions of that critique. Moreover there is a vein of moral idealism in the Wife of Bath's insistence on freedom and trust as a basis for happiness:

Thou sholdest seye, 'Wyf, go wher thee list;  
Taak youre disport; I wol nat leve no talys.  
I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, dame Alys.'  
We love no man that taketh kep or charge  
Wher that we goon; we wol ben at oure large.

(The Wife of Bath's Prologue, l. 318)

<sup>27</sup> Aquinas, *Scriptum in IV Libros Sententiarum*, 44. 1 3c, co. I owe this and the following reference to the important article by Michael Nolan, 'The Aristotelian Background to Aquinas's Denial that "Woman is a Defective Male"', *The Thomist*, 64 (2000), 21–69. Nolan refutes the attribution to Aristotle (and hence also to Aquinas and Bonaventure) of the view that a woman is a defective male, that the female is passive whereas the male is active, and that the male human embryo receives a rational soul earlier than the female. All three attributions are based upon a misreading of Aristotle.

<sup>28</sup> *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 321.

<sup>29</sup> *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), p. 187.

<sup>30</sup> See The Wife of Bath's Prologue, ll. 721, 740, 747, 757.

The mode of address here, 'dame Alys', emphasizes her desire for both respect and affection (one may note in passing that Alisoun in *The Miller's Tale* is never referred to by such a shortened form of her name). The lack of jealous concern she requires of husbands is exemplified in the conduct of Arveragus in *The Franklin's Tale* (ll. 1094–97). In other words, this is not merely a self-interested assertion on the Wife of Bath's part but the expression of an authentic ideal. Thus Chaucer makes us aware that not even the context of anti-feminist ideas can annihilate the reality of individual choice. General tendencies are always subject to modification in the light of personal experience. Chaucer's Criseyde is the classic type of a courtly lady, but she is also a traitor (1.52–56). In the end she must be seen not as a representative of her sex but as an individual woman who betrays her lover. This is a point of sufficient importance for Chaucer to make it explicitly, for he does not wish his great poem of tragic love to be misconstrued as a diatribe against women:

Bysechyng every lady bright of hewe,  
And every gentil womman, what she be,  
That al be that Criseyde was untrewē,  
That for that gilt she be nat wroth with me.

(v. 1772)

N'y sey nat this al oonly for thise men,  
But moost for wommen that bitraised be  
Thorugh false folk — God yeve hem sorwe, amen! —  
That with hire grete wit and subtilte  
Bytraise yow.

(v. 1779)

All human beings (knights and ladies alike) are capable of deceit and treachery, for moral virtue is difficult and hence rarely found. However, in the case of Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* we have to allow also for the rareness and excellence of moral virtue, and hence resist the temptation to reduce Gawain to the level of an embittered male. In taking his leave of the Green Knight (and through him of the ladies at Hautdesert) Gawain is not in the first place offering a statement of universal feminine nature, but invoking the fact of his personal experience. He was deceived as a guest at Hautdesert and it was the young lady who was the immediate agent of deception and the ready instrument of his downfall. Only now does he realize the extent of her deception and the discovery is accompanied by shock and disillusionment. He is not the first man, and no doubt will not be the last, to be undermined by a woman he loves. In other words, his own experience, hard to credit in itself, is validated by the experience of others. It is only the very best of men who are vulnerable to women in this way. The point about Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David is precisely that they were the most excellent of men: 'For þes wer forme þe freest, þat folzed alle þe sele | Exellently of alle pyse oper, vnder heuenryche | þat mused' (ll. 2422–24). Had Gawain been a lesser man he might simply have asked the lady to leave his bedroom. Had he been prepared to use violence against a woman, as Yder does in the romance of *Yder* (ll. 370–78),<sup>31</sup> he no doubt could have protected his selfish interest in that way. The author of *Yder* is indeed prepared to defend the brutal action of his hero in these circumstances: 'Jo nel sai pas de ço reprendre | Kar il ne se poeit defendre' (ll. 379–80). Gawain is assuredly not to be

<sup>31</sup> *The Romance of Yder*, ed. and trans. by A. Adams, *Arthurian Studies* 8 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983).

blamed for rejecting both these courses of action. Above all, Gawain does not stoop so low as to 'account for his actions by blaming women' (Batt, 'Gawain's Antifeminist Rant', p. 119). That would indeed be a crude and merely misogynistic reflex. Such is the response of a figure like Chaucer's Merchant who lays the blame for his misery in marriage unambiguously upon his wife in the prologue to his tale:

I have a wyf, the worste that may be;  
For thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were,  
She wolde hym overmacche, I dar wel swere.  
(l. 1218)

By way of contrast, Gawain confronts his own blameworthiness by accusing himself on three separate occasions of cowardice, infidelity, and covetousness (ll. 2373-75, 2379-81, 2507-10). If anything, to modern taste such self-accusation is overdone, but it would have been seen by Gawain's contemporaries as a willed displeasure for sin, and so fitting in a penitent sinner. Further, it behoves a knight returning from a quest to tell the truth, for the reputation of a knight should not depend upon a falsehood. Thus in the early-thirteenth-century Prose *Lancelot*, Arthur's knights have to swear an oath to tell the truth about their adventures on their return to Arthur's court, and these truthful reports are solemnly recorded by clerks in the royal household. The knights of the Company of the Star had to swear such an oath, as Jean le Bel records in his *Chroniques*:

Et y [at the Maison de l'Etoile] devoit le roy, chascun an, tenir court plainiere de tous les compaignons au mains, et y devoit chascun raconter toutes ses aventures, aussy bien les honteuses que les glorieuses qui avenues luy seroient des le temps qu'il n'avoit esté a la noble court, et le roy devroit ordonner .ii. ou .iii. clerks qui escouteroient toutes ces aventures, et en ung livre mettroient affin qu'elles fussent chascun an raportees en place par devant les compaignons, par quoy on poeut sçavoir les plus proeux et honnourer ceulx qui miex le deserviroient. (ll. 204-06)<sup>32</sup>

We may think that Gawain's words of self-criticism have a completeness and severity that contrast with the Green Knight's humane and more detached judgement, but Gawain says nothing 'bot þe trawþe' (l. 1050). Moreover, the respective judgements of the Green Knight and of Gawain himself are not at odds but rather are a part of that discriminating moral harmony and sense of proportion that characterizes the poem as a whole. Neither the poet nor the hero of the poem deserves the censure of ranting that has been placed upon them.

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<sup>32</sup> I am indebted for these references to Elspeth Kennedy's editorial introduction to Charny's *Liure de chevalerie*, pp. 67-69 (see n. 7).