

ЛІТЕРАТУРОЗНАВСТВО

"WHERE TH' OFFENSE IS": OEDIPAL TEMPTATION IN *SIR GAWAIN
AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

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The paper focuses on the text of a well-known literary work and makes an attempt to provide certain insights into applying psychoanalysis to literature.

Key words: history of English literature, psychoanalysis.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, at once the greatest and most psychological of Middle English romances, commands admiration for the unequalled elegance and economy of its plot. The anonymous late fourteenth-century author is generally agreed to have been the first to combine the three separate motifs from folklore that make up the action of the poem. The first of the poem's four parts turns on the 'Beheading Game', in which an unknown challenger demands that one member of a group of warriors volunteer to cut off his head and agree to accept a retaliatory stroke at some future date. The hero, who undergoes this ordeal, is miraculously spared and hailed for his bravery upon his return to the court. Subsequent action interweaves the 'Temptation Story', where the protagonist is obliged to resist the attempts at seduction by a beautiful woman, and the 'Exchange of Winnings', in which two men make an agreement to give to the other what each has received during a given period of time.

These three stories are intimately linked in *Sir Gawain*, since Gawain, having represented King Arthur's court in the Beheading Game with the Green Knight, is unable at first to find the Green Chapel where he is to meet his opponent a year later. Instead, he comes upon a magnificent castle, belonging to Bertilak de Hautdesert, who induces Gawain to pledge to exchange winnings on three consecutive days, during which Bertilak goes out hunting while Gawain is visited in his bedchamber by Bertilak's alluring wife. On the first two days, Gawain faithfully returns to Bertilak the kisses bestowed on him by the Lady, but on the third day he conceals from his host a green and gold lace, which the Lady tells him will protect his life in his impending ordeal. The climax of the poem comes in the fourth part when Gawain, after receiving a nick from the third blow of the Green Knight's ax - corresponding to his transgression on the third day - learns from the Green Knight that he and Bertilak are the same person.

Even this skeletal summary of the plot should indicate why *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems made to order for psychoanalytic interpretation. The story is in many respects simple and has only a handful of characters: in addition to the hero, only King Arthur, Guinevere, the Green Knight/Bertilak, Bertilak's wife, Morgan le Fay, and the Guide who leads Gawain to the Green Chapel play any significant role. As I shall argue, moreover, the key characters - Gawain, the Green Knight/Bertilak, Bertilak's Lady, and Morgan le Fay - represent a son and his split parental imagos, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a quintessential family romance. The poem thus bears out Melanie Klein's contention that

"there are in fact very few people in the young infant's life, but he feels them to be a multitude of objects because they appear to him in different aspects" [19].

In a family romance, the controlling perspective on the action is that of the hero. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* takes the form of a detective story in which the reader shares Gawain's process of discovery. Both Gawain and the reader initially believe that the Beheading Game is the main subject, whereas the Temptation Story, seemingly an interlude, actually proves to be crucial. The resolution of the Beheading Game thus brings, in A. C. Spearing's words, "not the expected climax, but only knowledge of what has happened, and consequent self-knowledge" [32]. Because the chief mystery of the plot - that the Green Knight and Bertilak are the same person - is revealed at once to Gawain and the reader, our perspective is conflated with his. In "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" Freud remarks of psychological novels that "only one person - once again the hero - is described from within. The author sits inside his mind, as it were, and looks at the other characters from outside" [32], and the same holds true of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

That the plot of *Sir Gawain* is a detective story, in which the central characters are the hero and his parental imagos, gives this medieval romance a striking affinity to *Oedipus the King*. Just as Gawain at first mistakes the nature of his ordeal and must come to terms with his culpability in concealing the lace from Bertilak, so Oedipus' initial quest to find the murderer of Laius gives way to the quest for his own origins, and he gains self-knowledge through a recognition of the crimes of incest and patricide that he himself has committed. The self-discovery of Gawain, who is overcome by guilt when confronted by the Green Knight's awareness of his conduct, is accompanied in Aristotelian fashion by a reversal of fortunes; and in both *Oedipus the King* and *Sir Gawain* a drama of interpretation underlies the drama of action [20].

The comparison between *Sir Gawain* and *Oedipus the King* could be pursued to include the resemblance between the Arthurian court and the Greek Chorus as backdrops to the action; the function of Oedipus and Gawain as heroic scapegoats.

Unlike Sophocles' drama, however, where the myth is known in advance and the audience possesses a godlike omniscience that checks the tendency to identify with Oedipus, in *Sir Gawain*, as in *Tom Jones*, the plot is invented and the solution to the riddle of origins is not disclosed in advance. Marthe Robert observes that the family romance "only emerges from individual day-dreams when the transition from one social class to another is not obstructed by insuperable prohibitions," a phenomenon she discerns in middle-class novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* [26]. Although the heroes of romance are uniformly aristocratic, and its presuppositions thus inherently more conservative, medieval romance prefigures the modern novel in its preoccupation with generic innovation and social mobility [27, p. 80].

Oedipus the King is the paradigmatic text of psychoanalysis not only because it lays bare the deeds of incest and patricide that are held to be the cornerstones of unconscious fantasy, but also because its action, as Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "can be likened to the work of a psycho-analysis" [8, p. 262]. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* likewise enralls its readers not only because it awakens the same unconscious fantasies, but also because it too imitates the process of psychoanalytic investigation. When Gawain volunteers to represent Arthur's court in the Beheading Game, the Green Knight insists that he pledge to "seek me thyself, wherever thou hopest / I may be found upon earth" [11. 395-96]; and after his decapitation, the Green Knight unruffledly picks his head up from the floor and reiterates: "if you seek to find me, you will never fail" [1. 455]. This assurance that Gawain will inevitably reach his destination can only mean that unconsciously he knows it already. Like the analysand enjoined to practice free association, Gawain sets off on his journey without realizing that it will lead him to his own origins, which symbolically recapitulate those of his society and indeed of the human race as a whole.

Quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are my translations from the edition of J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, revised by Norman Davis, with line numbers given parenthetically in the text. Quotations from *Oedipus the King* are from the translation of David Grene, with line numbers given in the text, and subsequent quotations from Shakespeare will give act, scene, and line numbers in the text.

Gawain's quest ventures into a region of the mind characterized by a belief in what Freud called the 'omnipotence of thoughts' [*Totem* 85-90]. The entrance of the outsized mounted knight arrayed in green and gold renders Arthur's court Medusa-like 'stone-still' [I. 242], and the feeling of uncanniness intensifies after his decapitation. But though the poem employs marvels, it does so sparingly and in a way that does not detract from the psychological plausibility of the action. [In this too it resembles Sophocles' drama, which does not dwell on Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx.] On his way to Bertilak's castle Gawain passes through a landscape populated by giants, dragons, and other exotic menaces [II. 713-25], but these are peripheral to the poet's concern. As Gawain, in the dead of winter, reaches the limit of his endurance, he crosses himself, calls on Christ and Mary, and suddenly sees before him a castle so lovely that "pared out of paper purely it seemed" [I. 803]. This apparition comes as a wish-fulfillment, an answered prayer, but a psychologically credible one; and it alerts the reader that, once inside the castle, Gawain will be in a domain where, as in the Freudian unconscious or the Christian heart, thoughts are equivalent to actions.

For both Sir Gawain and the reader identified with him, what takes place in the poem is experienced in fundamentally 'projective' terms, as though everything that befalls him in the external world were actually a creation of his own inner psychic reality. Although an awareness of the importance of unconscious fantasy is integral to psychoanalytic theory generally, it has received greatest prominence in the work of Melanie Klein [18] Elsewhere [*Vocation*] I have criticized Klein for neglecting the environmental factors that must also be taken into account in emotional development, but her theory contains many valuable insights and is, I believe, particularly applicable to this medieval romance, where psychic processes are similarly overvalued.

Above all, the projective quality of the romance supports my contention that the Green Knight and Bertilak and Bertilak's wife and Morgan le Fay are split parental imagos for Gawain. Taken together, these insights imply that the action takes place at the level of psychic reality that Klein has denominated the 'paranoid-schizoid position'. According to Klein, "object relations exist from the beginning of life, the first object being the mother's breast which to the child becomes split into a good [gratifying] and bad [frustrating] breast" [Schizoid 2]. Unlike the Green Knight and Bertilak, Bertilak's wife and Morgan le Fay are not literally the same character, but rather twin aspects of femininity conjoined in the medieval 'Loathly Lady' topos, found also notably in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. But the equation of Bertilak's wife with the good-breast mother and Morgan le Fay with the bad-breast mother is nonetheless irresistible, and this splitting is reenacted on the paternal plane in the dichotomy between the beneficent and idealized Bertilak and the punitive and castrating Green Knight. [Despite being the youthful Arthur's half-sister, Morgan is described as an 'ancient lady' [I. 2463], an inconsistency that can be explained by her psychological function as a bad mother.] It follows then that Gawain's discovery of the identity between the Green Knight and Bertilak, which induces paroxysms of guilt, heralds his transition from the paranoid-schizoid to the 'depressive position'. As Klein explains this momentous development: "with the introjection of the object as a whole the infant's object relation alters fundamentally. The synthesis between the loved and hated aspects of the complete object gives rise to feelings of mourning and guilt which imply vital advances in the infant's emotional and intellectual life" [Schizoid 3].

In *Caradoc*, the French romance held to be the source of the Beheading Game in *Sir Gawain* [1, p. 16], the challenger in fact proves to be the hero's disguised father, thus presenting in undistorted form the psychological reality in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The Lady's thrice-repeated visits to Gawain in his bedchamber are unmistakably attempts at sexual seduction. "My lord and his liegemen set forth long ago" [1. 1231], she informs Gawain on the first morning, "The door is drawn and fastened with a strong bolt" [1. 1233]. If she could bargain for any lord in the world, the Lady continues, "There should be no knight on earth chosen before you" [1. 1275], to which Gawain dutifully replies: "Indeed you have selected much better" [1. 1277].

But though the sexual component of the Lady's temptation of Gawain is undeniable, it could be argued against a psychoanalytic reading that Gawain successfully resists these blandishments and accepts the green and gold girdle she offers him on the third day only out of a desire for self-preservation. After divulging his identity, the Green Knight minimizes Gawain's transgression: "But that was due to no work of intrigue nor of wooing, / But because you loved your life; I blame you the less" [11. 2367-68]. But this attempted refutation founders on the fact that Gawain's surrender to the Lady requires him to conceal the 'love-lace' [11. 1874, 2438] she gives him from her husband. Thus, as Lacan has written of the purloined letter that the Queen must keep secret from the King in Poe's short story, "the letter is the symbol of a pact and [...] situates her in a symbolic chain foreign to the one which constitutes her faith" [23]. The reading I am proposing is admittedly allegorical, but I believe that it reveals a hidden psychological meaning of the text. Also commenting on Poe, Marie Bonaparte has formulated a pertinent axiom of classic psychoanalytic criticism: "though, on the surface, a literary work relates a manifestly coherent story, intertwined with it and simultaneously, another and secret story is being told which, in fact, is the basic theme. Though, therefore, the manifest tale normally obeys the rules of logic, this deeper current is subject to other laws" [2].

As a drama of Oedipal temptation, the 'secret story' of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has centrally to do with the threat of castration. That this is so can be inferred on theoretical grounds, but finds historical corroboration in the reliance of the romance on the liturgical calendar as an organizing principle of the action. Instead of the customary Pentecost, the poet specifies New Year's Day as the occasion on which Arthur's court engages in its ritual of tale-telling and adventure. [Later Gawain sets out on All Saints' Day.] In addition to stressing the youthfulness of Arthur and his retinue, this innovation is significant because New Year's Day, on which the poem both begins and ends, is the Feast of Circumcision. Thus, as Judith S. Neaman has maintained, Gawain's covenant with the Green Knight is analogous to that sealed by the circumcision, and when he is nicked by the third blow of the Green Knight's ax, "the literal cut is Gawain's spiritual circumcision by means of which he becomes a new man" [25]. The contribution of psychoanalysis is to add that Gawain's 'spiritual circumcision' is a symbolic castration. In *Moses and Monotheism* Freud speculates that circumcision is "the symbolic substitute for the castration which the primal father once inflicted on his sons [...] and whoever accepted that symbol was showing by it that he was prepared to submit to the father's will, even if it imposed the most painful sacrifice upon him" [8, p.122]. Circumcision is thus a sign of being 'under the law', and its inscription in the male genitals shows that the primordial crime for which it is a condign punishment is the son's desire to usurp the father's place with the mother.

The mark of castration in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is found not only on Gawain's body - displaced upwards from the genitals to the nick on his neck that he exhibits on returning to Arthur's court [1. 2498] - but also in the girdle that the Lady foists on him. The girdle, as A. Kent Hieatt has observed, contains a "geometrical imperfection" in "needing to be knotted" [16]. In the symbolic economy of the poem, it contrasts with the

"endless knot" [l. 630] of the pentangle displayed on the outside of Gawain's shield, which defines him as the knight of the Virgin Mary, whose image adorns the inside. Consequently, the cut that Gawain receives from the Green Knight's ax, as Geraldine Heng has proposed, "is the imprint of a sign on the body [the Lady's on Gawain's]," and the flaw in the lace may be read "as the vestige of a displacement, the trace of a symbolic beheading that is itself displaced from, and vestigally symbolic of, castration" [15, p.505-506].

In his analysis of "The Purloined Letter", Lacan insists that the missing letter stands for the woman, who herself embodies the principle of lack or castration: "For this sign is indeed that of woman, insofar as she invests her very being therein, founding it outside the law, which subsumes her nevertheless, originarily, in a position of signifier, nay, of fetish" [23]. But because the letter, like the girdle, symbolizes the wife's infidelity, these signifiers connote also the castration of her seemingly omnipotent husband - the King or Bertilak. The green and gold color of the girdle links it to the Green Knight, who upon revealing his identity to Gawain claims it as his own [l. 2358]. Finally, when Gawain returns to Arthur's court at the end of the poem, its members resolve that "Each knight of the brotherhood should have a baldric," which is to be worn "obliquely," ironically transforming what had been a "token of untruth" into an emblem of "the renown of the Round Table" [ll. 2509-19].

If the emotional dynamics of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* lend themselves to analysis in Kleinian terms, the function of the girdle as a signifier is thoroughly Lacanian. Its circulation among disparate characters - the Green Knight, the Lady, Gawain, and Arthur's court - exemplifies Lacan's dictum that "the displacement of the signifier determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny" [18]. The girdle forms the nodal point at which the three plots of the poem converge. It is given to Gawain in the Temptation Story; its concealment from Bertilak implicates it in the Exchange of Winnings; and it is donned by Gawain at the close of the Beheading Game. By combining the Beheading Game with the Temptation Story, and making the latter dependent on the Exchange of Winnings, the poet has shown the inseparability of the crime committed by Gawain with his symbolic mother with his punishment at the hands of his symbolic father. The meaning of this conjunction is thus identical to that of the incest and patricide in *Oedipus the King*, where the womb of Jocasta is the real crossroads - the meeting place of three generations - at which Oedipus slays Laius in a struggle for priority.

In its circulation, the girdle also recalls the handkerchief in *Othello*, another floating signifier that possesses the subjects who ostensibly possess it. If, as I have argued elsewhere [29], the handkerchief in *Othello* is both a fetish in the classical Freudian sense - a substitute for the absent maternal penis without which Othello cannot love Desdemona - and a strawberry-spotted 'feminine napkin', the same ambiguity of gender suffuses the girdle in *Sir Gawain*. As Heng has remarked, the masculine symbolism of Gawain's castrating wound on the neck "can be retropped as feminine," since it is "powerfully reminiscent of the vulvaic or vaginal 'gash'" [15]. As Othello warns Desdemona that the handkerchief has "magic in the web of it" [3.4.69], furthermore, so the Lady promises Gawain that, though the girdle seems unprepossessing, those who know "the virtues that are knit therein" [l. 1849] will prize it more highly. And as Gawain's nick in the neck symbolizes a circumcision that is also a castration, so Othello ends his suicide speech by inflicting on himself the punishment he had once meted out on a Turkish enemy of Venice: "I took by th' throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him - thus" [5.2.355-56].

When the Green Knight confronts Gawain with the knowledge of his deception, Gawain launches into a misogynistic tirade:

But it is no wonder though a fool dote,
And be won to sorrow through women's wiles;

For so was Adam beguiled with one on earth,
 And Solomon with many others, and Samson no less - Delilah
 dealt him his fate - and David thereafter
 Was deluded by Bathsheba, so that he endured much woe
 [11. 2414-19].

Although Burrow has deemed this diatribe "a departure from the true course of the poem" [3], Gawain's assimilation of his lot to that of Adam and his uxurious descendants accurately pinpoints the sexual root of his transgression. At the culmination of his quest for origins, Gawain discovers in himself the guilt of original sin; and this dovetailing of Christian and psychoanalytic explanatory myths suggests that the Fall is another name for the Oedipus complex.

The incestuous aspect of Gawain's temptation at the hands of Bertilak's wife is borne out by the maternal cast to her seductiveness as she visits Gawain in his bedchamber, and by his reciprocally passive and childlike demeanor. On the first morning, Gawain pretends to be asleep, but the Lady approaches "and catches him in her arms, / Bends down sweetly and kisses the knight" [11. 1305-06]. On the third morning, the Lady arrives in a provocative state of undress: "Her fair face and her throat exposed all naked, / Her breast bare in front, and also behind" [11. 1740-41]. This flaunting of the torso of the female body, but not of the nether regions, evokes the situation of the nursing infant, who has access to the mother's breasts The unconscious significance of the Lady as a mother-figure for Gawain enhances the parallel between her attempts at seduction and Bertilak's three days of hunting. His prey, in succession, are a timorous deer, an aggressive boar, and a crafty fox. The animals serve as emblems of Gawain's strategies for warding off the Lady's assaults; his attempt to play the fox proves his undoing. Not only does the violence of the hunting scenes strip away the façade of decorousness and restraint in the Lady's repartee with Gawain, but the disembowelling of the slaughtered animals - a medieval ritual, to be sure - functions in Kleinian terms as a displaced enactment of the infant's desire to "possess himself of the contents of the mother's body and to destroy her by means of every weapon which sadism can command" [18, p. 239].

The psychological artistry of the *Gawain-poet* reveals itself as much in touches of detail as in the fearful symmetries of the text as a whole. When the Lady enters Gawain's bedchamber on the third morning, she finds him having bad dreams:

In heavy torpor of dreams muttered that noble,
 Like a man who was troubled by many heavy thoughts,
 How destiny that day should deal him his fate [II. 1750-52].

His state of lowered resistance leads him to accept the lace. After Gawain leaves his bedchamber, he goes to confession. He has not yet violated his agreement with Bertilak, but has resolved to do so. It is not necessary for a psychoanalytic critic to enter into the theological debate over the validity of Gawain's confession in order to claim that the depiction of his state of mind is a masterful study in unconscious guilt. By taking the talisman from the Lady and agreeing to conceal it from Bertilak, as George Englehardt observes, Gawain placed himself in a dilemma: "he could not fulfill one compact without breaking the other. This, however, was a dilemma Gawain chose not to face; he repressed it" [4].

Englehardt's use of the term 'repressed' should be given its full psychoanalytic force, and Gawain's unconscious awareness of wrongdoing continues to manifest itself indirectly in his behavior when he exchanges gifts with Bertilak. In the first place, as Burrow has remarked, "for his one act of duplicity, Gawain wears 'blue' - the traditional color of faithfulness, occurring here and nowhere else in the poem" [3]. Secondly, on this occasion, as W. O. Evans has pointed out, "in contrast with the other three evenings, [Gawain] hurries to his host to give him the three kisses, and [...] is concerned to have the business over with

as soon as possible" [5]. Following his silence at confession, both Gawain's putting on of a blue mantle and his volunteering to go first in the exchange of winnings with Bertilak are attempts to conceal - from himself as well as others - his guilty state of mind; but like all neurotic symptoms, these actions inadvertently betray what they are meant to hide. Finally, after the spurious exchange of winnings - Gawain receives only a fox pelt for his three kisses - both Gawain and Bertilak are unnaturally elated: "So glad grew both Gawain and the good man, / As if they had been either besotted or drunk" [11. 1955-56]. Bertilak's exuberance results from his secret knowledge of Gawain's downfall, but that of Gawain exemplifies Klein's concept of the 'manic defense': a "'utilization of the sense of omnipotence'" for the purpose of warding off anxiety and depression [18, p. 277].

On his way to the Green Chapel, Gawain is accompanied by a Guide furnished by Bertilak. As a last temptation, the Guide urges Gawain to flee and promises to keep his confidence if he should do so. But Gawain rebuffs this offer "with displeasure" [1. 2126] and vows to press on to his destination. To invoke yet another Kleinian category, Gawain's self-reproaches cause him to employ 'projective identification' and use the Guide as a container for "hated parts of the self," which can then be subjected to destructive attacks [Schizoid 8]. Although Gawain disdains the Guide's temptation, his anger, in Englehardt's words, "serves less to obscure than to heighten the ironic analogy between the oath preferred by the Guide and an earlier promise of secrecy - that tendered by a more compliant Gawain to the more persuasive chatelaine" [4, p.223]. The poet signals the connection between these two episodes by having the Guide echo the paradoxical phrase "loyally conceal" [1. 2124] that the Lady had employed when she vanquished Gawain [1. 1863]. That Gawain ignores the Guide's advice to save himself by flight, whereas he succumbed to the blandishments of the Lady, confirms that the primary motive for his earlier surrender was sexuality and not fear. Like Jocasta in *Oedipus the King*, the Guide timorously importunes the hero to give up his quest, but Gawain, like Oedipus, resolves to seek the truth at all costs.

According to Freud in *The Ego and the Id*, "it is possible to regard the fear of death, like the fear of conscience, as a development of the fear of castration" [10]. Although this view seems counterintuitive, since it derives a greater existential fear from a lesser, it is vindicated by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which culminates by staging the genesis of the superego. When Gawain dons the girdle "As a sign he was taken with the stain of a fault" [1. 2488], he internalizes the authority of Bertilak. Freud describes the process exactly in "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex": "The authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis" [176-77]. Having experienced oedipal guilt, that is, Gawain accepts the stigma of his castration and renounces the incestuous object of desire. This process is analogous in Kleinian terms to the arrival at the depressive position.

When Gawain returns to Arthur's court, its members, as we have seen, decide to wear his girdle as a badge of triumph. Unlike those eminent critics who believe that the courtiers' laughter "shows that they have learned even more than Gawain" [1, p. 205] and that the ending of the poem portrays "the reincorporation of the hero into his society" [1, p. 152], however, I am convinced that their response evinces a tragic incomprehension of the meaning of Gawain's quest. King Arthur springs from an adulterous union between his father, Uther Pendragon, and Igrayne, the wife of one of his vassals. The downfall of the Round Table results from the adulterous love affair between Guinevere, Arthur's queen, and Lancelot, his noblest knight; it is wrought by Mordred, a bastard incestuously begotten by Arthur on his half-sister, Morgause. The latter events lie in the future at the time the romance takes place, but would have been known to both the poet and his audience.

Gawain's quest, and the girdle he brings back from it, thus prefigures the ultimate disintegration of Camelot, which stems from violations of the taboos against adultery and incest.

In my reading thus far I have stressed how Gawain's temptation is at bottom an oedipal one and how this psychological constellation is superimposed on the Christian archetype of the Fall. Seen in this light, the plot of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, like that of *Tom Jones*, articulates what Christine van Boheemen has termed a narrative of 'transcendent subjectivity', that is, a conception of human identity that grounds meaning in "the relationship to a singular principle of origin, which in Western discourse is conceived of as the father" [7]. But though the discovery that Bertilak and the Green Knight are the same delivers to Gawain a symbolic father, the conclusion of the romance has another surprise in store. Bertilak declares that his initial challenge to Arthur's court was instigated by Morgan le Fay out of a desire "to have afflicted Guinevere and caused her to die" [l. 2460]. In order to assimilate this crucial piece of information, which subverts an exclusively patriarchal reading, it is necessary to invoke feminist as well as psychoanalytic categories.

Like Gawain's misogynistic tirade, this twist in the plot has been censured by some critics. Benson objects that "the reader cannot help feeling that the last-minute revelation of Morgan's scheme is too weak a foundation for this poem" [1]. But from a Kleinian standpoint it makes sense that Morgan should lie behind Bertilak as the cause of Gawain's ordeal since the mother is a more primary object of love than the father and, as Klein has maintained in contrast to Freud, "it is the mother who in the deepest strata of the unconscious is specially dreaded as the castrator" [8, p. 129].

As my psychoanalytic interpretation conflates the myths of Oedipus and the Fall, so my feminist revision likewise relies on a bifold hypothesis. This is that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presupposes the practice of the 'traffic in women' as the basis of its social order [Rubin], but this entails the transformation of Morgan le Fay into a 'spectral mother', that is, the repressed but threatening figure from the preoedipal period who cannot be accommodated within the framework of classical Freudian theory [33]. In addition to yielding rich dividends to psychoanalytic interrogation, the romance exhibits the same anxieties that pervade the work of Freud. As van Boheemen has remarked, "The idea of the mother - matter as original presence - is not and cannot be acknowledged, for in the patriarchal culture we live in, origin and meaning are necessarily designated as spiritual, 'geistlich'" [20]. This repudiation of the mother that grounds the patriarchal tradition - exemplified by the characters of Bridget Allworthy and Milton's Eve, as well as by Freud's theories of female sexuality - is already at work in the marginalization of Morgan le Fay.

The Arthurian world of *Sir Gawain* rests upon a homosocial arrangement [31]. Britton J. Harwood has highlighted the recurrent exchange and gift-giving in the romance, pointing out that for Mauss no less than Hobbes "war is the 'hidden substructure' of primitive society; disguised by gift exchange, it is transformed into its opposite" [14, p. 484]. Harwood, however, overlooks the unique status of women as objects of exchange who are themselves human subjects. When Bertilak and Gawain agree "to change their gain" [l. 1406; cf. l. 1678], the principal commodity in question is Bertilak's wife. The use of the word 'covenant' in the Exchange of Winnings plot recalls the Beheading Game [e.g., ll. 393, 1384], and in both cases the decorous ceremonies of potlatch conceal the perils of mortal combat. But contrary to a Hobbesian or Freudian view, a feminist analysis reveals that the violence underlying the rituals of exchange in the romance may be due less to human nature than to the exigencies of the patriarchal social order.

Although the romance treats women as commodities of exchange between men, because Morgan le Fay underlies Bertilak as the prime mover of the narrative, men are also the objects of manipulation by feminine desire. Concretely, Gawain is confronted by the Lady's aggressive advances. As the nephew of both Arthur and Morgan le Fay, Gawain

incarnates the conflict between patriarchal and feminist principles. By violating his covenant with Bertilak in the Exchange of Winnings, as Sheila Fisher has elucidated, Gawain "has betrayed a fundamental economic principle of feudal society. Rather than trafficking in women, he has traffic with them" [7]. That Gawain's relationship with Bertilak is one of host and guest - like Paris or Tristan, he is a typical 'stranger in the house' who sets in motion the plot of adultery [34, p. 24-52] - only makes his betrayal of the masculine code of honor worse. Morgan le Fay's enmity against Guinevere, moreover, is traditionally held to derive from the fact that Guinevere exposed her adulterous affair with a knight named Guiomar, which resulted in Morgan's banishment from the court. In contrast to the feminized Gawain, by having extra-marital sexual relations, as Ivo Kamps has remarked, "Morgan assumes power over her own body and takes herself [...] out of the 'traffic in women' customary" in a male-dominated social order. The homosocial structure of the work prompts Fisher to pose an intriguing question: "what if Gawain had slept with the Lady and honored the terms of his contract with Bertilak? What if he had repaid Bertilak in kind?" [7]. Gawain, that is, could have committed adultery but avoided decapitation at the Green Chapel on only one condition - that he then also had sex with Bertilak. That this possibility is unthinkable within the horizon of the poem illustrates Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's axiom that the homosocial order is defined above all by "fear and hatred of homosexuality" [1]. The heterosexual imperative in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, that is, as elsewhere in the patriarchal tradition, not only subjugates women but also constitutes a symptom of homophobia. On the other hand, the ease with which we can now read the logic of the poem against itself - and shift the power of "Morgan the goddess" [1. 2452] from the margin to the very center - shows how uncannily it anticipates a gay or feminist critique.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, then, demands both an oedipal reading as a projection of the family romance of its hero and an antioedipal one that foregrounds the agency of its female characters. Among these must be numbered the Virgin Mary. Although, as Fisher 'has observed, Mary is "included in the pentangle explicitly through connection with her son and through the five joys that she derived from him," and her privileged status in orthodox Christian theology is "determined more by what she lacks than by what she has" [7], her image on Gawain's shield is significantly concealed on the inside, an arrangement that makes her, too, into a spectral mother and the double of Morgan le Fay. The Virgin's answer to Gawain's prayer, moreover, leads him, as we have seen, directly to Bertilak's castle where his ordeal is to take place. Gawain's fate is decided not in the public arena of the Beheading Game but when he does not realize that he is being tested, in the private sphere of the Temptation Story. This sphere is not only private but specifically domestic and feminine. To quote Fisher again, the romance "feminize[s] privacy," and it does so less for reasons of historical accuracy than "to conflate the dangerousness of privacy with the dangerousness of women themselves" [7]. Romance as a genre upholds the claims of the private and the feminine against the public and masculine ethos of epic, and Gawain's field of battle is a consummately inner space: inside not only the castle but his bedchamber and his canopied bed.

In addition to the sexual implications of his surrender, by accepting the Lady's girdle and seeking to save his life, Gawain abdicates his responsibility as an emissary of Arthur's court in favor of purely personal considerations. His downfall prefigures that of other patriarchal heroes such as Othello or Milton's Samson.

"Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone" [3.3.358], laments the Moor as he surrenders his identity as a warrior to jealousy over Desdemona, breaking his vow to the Venetian Senate that he would never "Let housewives make a skillet of my helm" [1.3.272]. What John Guillory has written of *Samson Agonistes* applies equally to *Othello* and *Sir Gawain*: "Seduction by the female means really what seduces the male away from the public

vocation, means really seduction by the domestic realm itself [...] Where the division of social life promises to deliver an area of relaxation from discipline [the private household], 'there' is the crucial arena of struggle" [116]. That the Lady's seduction of Gawain draws on the idiom not of a gift economy but of a commercial marketplace - as we recall, she fantasizes buying him in preference to any other husband [1. 1275] [7, p. 83] - attests that the feudal world of fourteenth-century romance is already beginning to register the pressures of capitalism that grow increasingly acute in the texts of Shakespeare and Milton. The opening stanza of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* places the poem against the backdrop of the fall of Troy, brought about by a knight who was "tried for his treachery, the truest on earth" [1. 4]. Scholars have debated whether this knight is Antenor or Aeneas, both of whom are depicted as duplicitous in medieval lore though not in Virgil's *Aeneid*. This undecidability at the threshold strikes a keynote for the interpretative ambiguities in the romance to follow, and the same paradoxical double nature is exhibited by Gawain, who convicts himself of "treachery and untruth" [1. 2383] despite being acquitted of sin by the Green Knight. As befits a narrative of transcendent subjectivity, the end of the poem circles back to the fall of Troy invoked at the outset, but the universal history inscribed in Gawain's fate has expanded to take in the paradigms of Adam and Oedipus. Although the spectral presence of Morgan le Fay reminds us that the allegedly transcendent subject is in truth a masculine subject, and that its history may therefore not be universal, we can still gloss Gawain's drama of oedipal temptation with Claudius' line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "And where th' offense is, let the great axe fall" [4.5.219].

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**“ТАМ, ДЕ ЗЛОЧИН”: ЕДІПОВА СПОКУСА У РОМАНІ
“СЕР ГАВЕЙН ТА ЗЕЛЕНИЙ ЛИЦАР”**

Пітер Л. Рудницький

У статті зосереджено увагу на тексті літературного твору та зроблено спробу показати пізнавальні можливості психоаналізу під час його вивчення.

Ключові слова: історія англійської літератури, психоаналіз