

To: Professor Heidi Breuer  
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From: Melanie James  
Re: Thesis Proposal, Thesis Outline, Tentative Schedule, and Partial Bibliography  
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### Thesis Proposal

The medieval literature featuring King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table often reflects the prescriptive gender roles of courtly love, a construct wherein women are endowed with the illusion of power to control their own sexuality and, potentially, the sexuality of men. Love outside of marriage is not only acceptable in courtly love romances, but is encouraged. Adulterous relationships thereby sidestep the issue of marriage for political, social, or monetary gain, placing the emphasis on a woman's emotions and control of her own body. Often, men are seen as subservient to women, allowing them to dictate the terms of their relationship. Despite this potential power and autonomy for women, however, traditional medieval gender roles are still firmly instilled in courtly love traditions. Men maintain masculine qualities of activity (such as choosing which lady upon whom he will bestow his love and thereby *grant* power, as well as hunting, questing, and performing numerous perilous tasks in order to prove his love. In contrast, the female courtly lovers maintain their positions of passivity (such as being the objects of physical attraction, awaiting men to return from their quests, and being carried off by rival knights and villains and awaiting rescue). These roles of activity and passivity firmly establish the positions of gendered power. Men maintain their control and power over women while granting them the mere appearance of control and autonomy.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a poem where these traditional gender roles maintained by courtly love are not only defied, but openly inverted: Gawain becomes feminized (passive) whereas Morgan le Fey and Lady Bertilak become masculinized (active), reversing

actual social positions of power. This inversion of gender roles signals an inversion of the courtly love power construct: the women of the text then enjoy actual realized power due to this (previously masculine) active position, whereas Gawain is placed in a passive feminized position where he is not merely powerless, but where he, like the females of courtly love, has only the appearance of power.

The majority of critics agree that Gawain is feminized within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I would like to focus on the four main ways in which Gawain's gender roles are inverted—all four of which have been discussed at length by various critics. First, Gawain leaves the normative court of Camelot and enters the subversive court at Hautdesert.<sup>1</sup> Second, Gawain's masculinity—or lack thereof—can be contrasted with the masculinity of Sir Bertilak. Contrasting the two men and their activities highlights the medieval gender roles expected of men (activity) versus the gender roles expected of women (passivity).<sup>2</sup> Third, the relationship between Gawain and Lady Bertilak during the seduction sequence inverts these prescriptive gender roles of activity and passivity.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the homoerotic kisses shared by Gawain and Bertilak place Gawain in a feminized role and create potential homosexuality.<sup>4</sup>

Not only does Gawain become a feminized character, but the women within the text, Morgan le Fey and Lady Bertilak, are masculinized and enjoy positions of power traditionally assigned to male courtly lovers—that is, positions of activity. Lady Bertilak aggressively

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<sup>1</sup> See Susan Carter's "Trying Sir Gawain: The Shape-shifting Desire of Ragnelle and Bertilak" and A.C. Spearing's "Public and Private Spaces in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," both of which discuss masculine and feminine spaces within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

<sup>2</sup> See J.D. Burnley's "The Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*."

<sup>3</sup> See David Boyd ("Sodomy, Misogyny, and Displacement: Occluding Queer Desire in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*") and Catherine Cox ("Genesis and Gender in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*") who focus on the temptation and hunting sequences in Fit III to argue that Gawain becomes feminized.

<sup>4</sup> See Gail Aston, David Boyd, Susan Carter, Catherine Cox, and Carolyn Dinshaw. These critics in particular all agree that some form of homoeroticism or potential homosexuality exists within the poem.

attempts to seduce Gawain, and Morgan le Fey plots against King Arthur's court. Lady Bertilak's dominating sexuality undermines feudal ties (as Gawain flirts with and nearly succumbs to the seduction by the wife of Bertilak, who is both his host and his aristocratic superior), as it too undermines the precepts of chivalry (as Gawain completely abandons his chivalric duties and codes) and Christianity (Lady Bertilak causes Gawain to supplant the pentangle with the girdle). Morgan le Fey is also an autonomous—and consequently dangerous—female in the text. She is the master manipulator who transforms Bertilak into the Green Knight and sends him forth to Arthur's court in order to both frighten Guinevere to death and test the pride of the Knights of the Round Table.

Courtly love maintains the gender roles of activity and passivity, but grants temporary power and autonomy to women. However, this is not actual power—rather, the control and authority stays invested in the male courtly lover. In contrast, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reverses the courtly love structure: the gender roles of activity and passivity are inverted and so too are the positions of power. With their activity, Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey gain actual power. Gawain, with his passivity, has the appearance of power, but is in fact rendered powerless in the face of both Lady Bertilak and the Green Knight. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is thus a critique of female power as it transforms the threat of power implied by courtly love into actual power in the world of the text.

The anxiety over female power is not surprising when one places *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* within the historical context of courtly love and England in the fourteenth century. Within this tradition, women exercised at least the appearance of autonomy and power. The text is a response to the historical fourteenth-century climate in England, wherein women were seen

to have been invested with power from courtly love and men were anxious over the resulting consequences.

### Proposed Outline

#### Introduction:

In the introduction, I present a history of my project. I then offer an overview of my argument that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a counter courtly love narrative.

Following this overview, I outline the chapters of my thesis.

#### Chapter One:

Before I can argue that courtly love is hyperbolized within the text, I must first establish its non-hyperbolized form. Within Chapter One, I offer examples of traditional courtly love romances, such as Chrétien's *La chevalier de la charette*. I establish the normative gender roles for men and women within courtly love romances, covering areas such as sexuality, positions of power, and physical and clothed bodies. Only then may I transition to my second chapter, wherein I illustrate the ways in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* deviates from these norms.

#### Chapter Two:

In Chapter Two I argue that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a counter courtly love narrative. A corrupted form of courtly love exists within the text, which causes women to take on the gender roles traditionally performed by men, and vice versa. I first discuss how the text sets up the heteronormative gender roles for both men and women: men are expected to be active participants in society and uphold the chivalric code whereas women are expected to be passive participants in society. However, the clear division of

gender breaks down within the text: Gawain is feminized and Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fey are masculinized.

#### Chapter Three:

Chapter Three argues that the inversion of courtly love gender roles causes the female power that exists within normative courtly love tradition to become hyperbolized within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I will further suggest that this courtly love alteration is an attempt to critique power that women possessed within courtly love. Inherent in this critique is an anxiety that that courtly love undermines masculine authority. To provide evidence for this argument, I will offer a close reading of Gawain's fall from chivalry (a construct representing masculine power), which is caused by the two females in the text whose courtly love gender roles are inverted.

#### Chapter Four:

In this chapter, I will place courtly love within a historicized context in fourteenth-century England. I plan to illustrate that women had the potential to enjoy not only political power, but also personal power (that is, power over their own sexuality, the sexuality of other men, and also power within the household). Regardless of whether or not this autonomy was ever exercised, it nevertheless induced anxiety and panic (as manifested in the text) that the power invested in women by courtly love would undermine male power and their code of chivalry.

## Partial Bibliography

Amey, Michael D. "Clothes Make the Man: Parzival Dressed and Undressed." *Journal of Gender Studies* 13 (2004): 63-75.

Amey suggests that clothing descriptions in the Middle Ages gives credence to the identity/gender of the character. For example, disfurnishing between the three estates. While Amey's article focuses on Parzival and the role his clothing/nudity plays in shaping his identity, it will be helpful to draw parallels between Gawain and Parzival.

Ashton, Gail. "The Perverse Dynamics of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Arthuriana* 15 (2005): 51-74.

Unlike other critics (as Ashton herself points out) Ashton argues that *SGGK* exceeds the mere hint of homosexual desire. She argues that gender is never truly normative (referring to Judith Butler) and cannot be classified in simple terms. The article primarily deals with gender transformation. Ashton details the ways in which Gawain is feminized and suggests that always he possesses a duality of the masculine and feminine: his shield and armor, while masculine, was worked on by women. Ashton also argues that the Green Knight is feminized: despite his overtly masculine outward appearance, the way in which he is described (the long hair, the admiring eyes of the court on the tight contours of his clothing) marks the inward feminine aspects. Women, too, are discussed in the article. Ashton suggests that Guinevere is paragon of femininity—marked not only by her appearance but also her silence and static behavior. With this model, Lady Bertilak and Morgan can be seen to encompass definite masculine qualities of gender (Lady Bertilak actively seduces Gawain and Morgan is at the center of the entire episode). Therefore Ashton suggests that *SGGK* deals not only with male-male homosexual desire, but

female-female as well, citing Morgan's desperate attempt to scare or "touch" Guinevere as evidence. Ashton concludes by saying *SGGK* is *not* a homosexual poem, nor is it a heterosexual normative poem. Rather it illustrates sodomitical behavior that must be repressed. This article deals directly with my topic: the feminization of Gawain—therefore it will be extremely useful.

Batt, Catherine. "Gawain's Antifeminist Rant, the Pentangle, and Narrative Space." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992): 117-139.

Batt's article argues that the *Gawain*-poet scrutinizes alliterative poetry and does so with the structure of *SGGK*. Additionally, she focuses on narrative space (i.e. social and cultural spaces) and the importance of the pentangle and the number five. Batt also analyzes the discourse used in the seduction scenes. While this article does not directly deal with the feminization of Gawain, it does mention little pieces of gender analysis: Batt argues that the hunting scenes illustrate both male dominance and Gawain's vulnerability, that the knight's residence is a part of his identity, and that Lady Bertilak uses masculine language in her seduction of Gawain. These will be helpful in crafting my own argument.

Battles, Paul. "Amended Texts, Emended Ladies: Female Agency and the Textual Editing of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Chaucer Review* 44 (2010): 323-343.

Battles examines the editing of the poem and how that changed the reading of the roles of the women in the text. I'm excited that this is a fairly recent piece of scholarship.

Breeze, Andrew. "Sir John Stanley (c. 1350-1414) and the *Gawain*-Poet." *Arthuriana* 14 (2004) 15-30.

Explores identity of Gawain poet. Might be interesting/not particular necessary for my

paper.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge 2006

Burns, Jane. "Courtly Love: Who Needs It? Recent Feminist Work in the Medieval French Tradition." *Signs* 27 (2001): 23-57.

While this deals with French literature, there still might be some parallels between the courtly love traditions.

Burnley, J.D. "The Hunting Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 3 (1973): 1-9.

While this article is a little older than most of the scholarship I've been looking at, it is one of the few that deals with the hunting scenes in particular. I should focus my research to locate newer/gender-related scholarship that deals with the hunting scene.

Burns, Jane E. "Refashioning Courtly Love: Lancelot as Ladies' Man or Lady/Man?" *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*. Ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. 111-134.

Carter, Susan. "Trying Sir Gawain: The Shape-shifting Desire of Ragnelle and Bertilak." *Reinardus* 18 (2005): 29-51.

Carter looks at *SGGK* and *Wedding* with an eye toward the monstrous shape-shifters (i.e. Ragnelle and the Green Knight). Carter argues that the shape-shifters (via female agency and magic) destabilize heterosexual gender roles. In both works, female agency acts as the impetus for the shape-shifting: the step-mother in *Wedding* transforms Ragnelle and Morgan in *SGGK* transforms Bertilak into the Green Knight. Carter also examines the setting of both the works (the forests, the Green Chapel, etc.) and argues that they are representative of both magic and feminine gender. While discussing the kiss-exchange

between Bertilak and Gawain, Carter focuses on the kissing shape-shifting flesh, rather than on the homosexual possibilities (although she mentions in passing that homosexual possibility is present). Carter concludes by suggesting that *Wedding* endorses the feminine and thereby converts Gawain back to heterosexual loyalty. In *SGGK*, Gawain is taken back into the folds of the hetero-normative brotherhood, but he keeps the girdle as a symbol of the “unstable signification.” The article highlights masculine and feminine spaces and therefore could be useful when discussing Gawain’s gender roles.

Cox, Catherine S. “Genesis and Gender in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” *The Chaucer Review* 35 (2001): 378-390.

*SGGK* is analyzed through a biblical lens in this article. Specifically, Cox draws a parallel between the temptation sequence in Genesis with the temptation sequence in *SGGK*. Gawain takes on the role of an Adam-like character who is the figure of a good man seduced by a woman to sin. Lady Bertilak, Cox suggests, can be read as a temptress Eve figure, but also as a *Havvah* figure (the more specific word for woman in the Bible). Cox discusses gender roles in *SGGK*. She suggests that Gawain is feminized. Namely, cowardice is a cultural sign of being female, and Gawain displays cowardice: he hides behind the bedchamber curtain, he pretends to sleep to avoid the lady, and he kisses Bertilak as if he himself were the lady. Cox suggests that Gawain’s anti-feminist diatribe is a way to reestablish himself as masculine after feminine cowardice. Cox concludes the article by arguing that the court of Camelot takes back the focus of *SGGK* by bringing back the homosocial normative culture. This article discusses the feminization of Gawain via cowardice—which will be helpful in my overall discussion of Gawain’s feminization.

De Roo, Harvey. “Undressing Lady Bertilak: Guilt and Denial in *Sir Gawain and the Green*

*Knight.*” *The Chaucer Review* 27 (1993): 305-324.

Discusses Gawain’s rant.

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*The Chaucer Review* 31 (1997): 232-255.

Identifier, unidentifiers, etc.

Dinshaw, Carolyn. “A Kiss is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and Its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” *Diacritics* 24 (1994): 204-226.

Dinshaw argues that the male-male kissing sequence between Gawain and Bertilak serves the primary purpose of introducing homosexuality only to refute it—the poem is *not* interested in exploring homoerotic desire. In this way the hypothetical homosexuality is being introduced only as a tool to clearly outline the correct path of pleasurable desire—heterosexual desire. When Lady Bertilak gives Gawain the girdle, it is called a “drurye” (a love token). This (heterosexual) love token saves Gawain from the symbolic castration. Dinshaw places an emphasis on identity and physical ties in the cultural structure of the poem: homosexual acts would break apart the cultural Christian and chivalric structure. Gawain’s antifeminist diatribe is also given as evidence for denouncing homosexuality: it illustrates the importance of keeping the heterosexual boundaries. Dinshaw goes on to discuss both *Cleanness* and *Pearl*: both poems try to place sexual pleasure (here a differentiation is made from procreation) into a correct heterosexual construct. Finally, Dinshaw links the poem to the court of Richard II, who was rumored (or possibly slandered) to have had sexual relations with Robert De Vere. Regardless of whether or not Richard II did indeed engage in sexual relations is a moot point. Rather, it illustrates the heterosexual norm of the fourteenth-century culture and the anxiety over homosexual

relations. The article does not specifically address gender transformation, but its discussion of homosexual and heterosexual boundaries will be useful.

Fisher, Sheila. "Taken Men and Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writing*. Ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1989. 71-105.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1-3*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.

As many of the gender studies critics mention Foucault in their articles about Gawain, I need to have that working knowledge.

Gross, Gregory W. "Secret Rules: Sex, Confession, and Truth in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Arthuriana* 4 (1994): 146-174.

Gross begins the article with a discussion and overview of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Foucault's ideas on confession. Foucault is the primary mode of analysis in this article. Through this lens, Gawain is argued to be "ascending" character in the beginning of *SGGK*, but a "descending" character once he begins to keep secrets. Gross analyzes the temptation and hunting sequences. No mention of gender transformations is made in the article: Gawain's submissive qualities are merely labeled "chivalric submission."

Lady Bertilak is given the title of both temptress and confessor, and Gross seems to suggest that Gawain is in no danger of succumbing to Lady Bertilak's seduction until day three when he finally is swayed by her beauty. However, Gross argues that his fidelity to Bertilak was more binding than any duty to be a courtly lover, and therefore Gawain was able to resist. The girdle is heavily discussed: it is a symbol of secrecy, it supplants the shield with the pentangle, and Gawain proudly wears it (wrapped twice around his waist)

to the Green Chapel. Gross is interested in the confession scenes as well: both to the priest and to the Green Knight. He argues that the confession to the priest is faulty whereas the confession to the Green Knight is the true confession. Finally, Gross discusses the definition of truth, or “trawþe.” Gross concludes by suggesting that sex has been supplanted with truth (a subjective moral truth) via confession. This article is not highly relevant to the gender transformation of Gawain. However it does present an opposing view in that Gawain was submissive solely in a chivalric capacity.

Harwood, Britton. “Gawain and the Gift.” *PMLA* 3 (1991): 483-499.

This article deals with Christianity and aristocracy in SKKG. I’m not sure if it will be useful or not.

Hinton, Norman D. “The Language of the Gawain Poems.” *Arthurian Interpretations* 2 (1987): 82-94.

Might offer linguistic history/background. While not directly related to my argument, it would be good knowledge to have.

Lewis, C.S. *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*

Margeson, Robert W. “Structure and Meaning in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” *Papers on Language & Literature* 13 (1977): 16-24.

Margeson argues that through an examination of the poem’s structure, one can extrapolate meaning. He makes a distinction between both linear and circular progression. Gawain sees his quest as linear, but the court sees it as circular. The circular patterns in the poem include the two beheading blows, the endless knot, the two Christmas feasts, etc. But there is also a clear progression of linear time. For this reason, Gawain sees his quest as a failure because he has move (in a linear fashion) from perfect

to imperfect knight, whereas the court sees his quest merely as a successful completion of the beheading game (in a circular fashion). This article is not relevant to my gender analysis, but I thought that the discussion of the temptation structure could (loosely) tie into my argument.

Mills, David. "An Analysis of the Temptation Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 67 (1968): 612-630.

Even though this is an "outdated" piece of scholarship, I'm curious to see the ways in which the temptation scenes were treated before feminist/gender studies readings.

Morgan, Gerald. "Medieval Misogyny and Gawain's Outburst Against Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Modern Language Review* 97 (2004): 265-278.

Morgan delivers an impassioned argument in support of Gawain's so-called anti-feminist tirade. He suggests that Gawain and the *Gawain*-poet have been unfairly subjected to censure for the rant and that Gawain is not the misogynist many critics claim him to be.

Morgan uses Aristotle and Aquinas in his defense of Gawain (both of whom he also argues are not anti-feminist). Chaucer is then brought into the argument, and Morgan suggests that Chaucer is no more a misogynist than the *Gawain*-poet. He further suggests that Gawain's rant is not directed toward women in general, but merely the one female who deceived him and who (Morgan suggests) was the agent of Gawain's downfall.

While Morgan's article does not address gender roles, it is an interesting counter-argument to many critical arguments I have thus read and therefore helps address potential counter-arguments to my own topic.

Rowley, Sharon M. "Textual Studies, Feminism, and Performance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Chaucer Review* 38 (2003): 158-177.

Schultz, James A. *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006.

Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.

Spearing, A.C. "Public and Private Spaces in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Arthuriana* 4 (1994): 138-145.

Spearing takes the medieval romance structure of enclosed and open spaces and applies it specifically to *SGGK*. Enclosed spaces (i.e. cities and Camelot in particular) symbolize civilization and safety, whereas open spaces (i.e. the forest and the wilderness) symbolize change and danger. Spearing (and other historians whom he quotes) assigns gender constructs to certain spaces: the hall is a masculine space and the bedroom or chamber is a feminine space. Spearing argues that at Hautdesert those clearly assigned spatial genders are blurred: Gawain is shown almost immediately to the chamber, the chamber is where the temptation sequence occurs, and a stark contrast is made between the masculine hunting scenes in the open space with the feminine seduction in the enclosed space. Spearing glosses over the Green Chapel scene completely, and concludes his analysis with Gawain's return to Camelot—the more clearly defined public and masculine hall. He suggests that readers are unable to draw a conclusion as to whether Gawain can incorporate the wilderness and blurred boundaries of Hautdesert back into the public space of Camelot. The parts of this article that discuss feminine space (the chamber) will be particularly useful to my argument.

Sleeth, Charles R. "Gawain's Judgment Day." *Arthuriana* 4 (1994): 175-183.

Confession and absolution scenes in *SKKG*. Green Chapel. Biblical scholarship.

Spurlin, William. "Theorizing Queer Pedagogy in English Studies After the 1990s." *College*

*English* 65 (2002): 9-16.

More on queer theory. Good background to look into.

Walker, Greg. "The Green Knight's Challenge: Heroism and Courtliness in Fitt I of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Chaucer Review* 32 (1997): 111-128.

Zeikowitz, Richard E. "Befriending the Medieval Queer: A Pedagogy for Literature Classes." *College English* 65 (2002): 67-80.

While this isn't specifically about Gawain, at a quick glance it seems to offer insights to reading medieval literature with a queer critical eye. This might be useful for getting additional sources and upping my critical knowledge about queer/gender studies.