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**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2219z32q>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 18(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

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**Publication Date**

1987-10-01

Peer reviewed

## THE GAMNES OF SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Lauren M. Goodlad

The enormous body of critical commentary concerning the meaning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is remarkable not only for its sheer volume, but even more so for the extent to which varying interpretations disagree. One way of approaching the abundance of commentary is to focus on what is not being contested. For example, critics and editors have long appreciated the *Gawain*-poet's delight in wordplay—his use of double and even triple meanings to engender many levels of significance. No doubt the poet's ingenious use of language is in no small part responsible for the degree of scholarly dissension. Yet while most commentators acknowledge the poet's formidable wordplay, few make it a substantive part of their understanding of important thematic issues. This kind of approach, however, has great analytical potential, especially if we focus on the poet's extensive wordplay on the theme of man (as represented by the Middle English *gome*) and games (especially *gomen* and its variations). Indeed, by tracing the poet's linguistic identification of man with games, a new understanding of many of the poem's most problematic issues may be elucidated.

In her thorough investigation of the language of *Sir Gawain*, Marie Borroff notes that the poet makes use of "ten synonyms of high alliterative rank" which fit under the category of "Persons."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, explains Borroff, "the large number of words for 'man, warrior' and [their] frequency in alliterative poetry have certain stylistic implications."<sup>2</sup> Borroff makes such a distinction with the word *freke*. Whereas in ordinary 14th century usage *freke* was taken to mean "bold one, warrior" or "strong man," the word was in the process of assuming a newer meaning of "impertinent fighting man." Borroff therefore surmises that "for the *Gawain*-poet *freke* . . . must have had associations with the idea of everyday boldness and recklessness which could be exploited in certain contexts." Hence, in ll.149 and 196 *freke*, as applied to the Green Knight, connotes beligerency, whereas in l.703 the usage is of the more general meaning, "man, warrior."<sup>3</sup>

A similar although more far-reaching distinction may be proposed for the word *gome* based not only on its actual Middle English meanings, but also on its prevalence in *Sir Gawain* and its association through wordplay with the thematically prominent role of games. The word *gome* appears twenty one times in *Sir Gawain*: fifteen times in reference to the Green Knight<sup>4</sup> and an additional six times in other contexts.<sup>5</sup> Of course, it may be argued that the recurrence of the word *gome*, especially in relation to the Green Knight, is a result of the alliterative potentiality of the common "g" sound. Nevertheless, this "incidental" explanation is in fact inadequate. First, consider that the word *gome* also alliterates with the name Gawain and yet the poet never once uses these two words in conjunction.<sup>6</sup>

A close look at the *Middle English Dictionary* reveals that *gome* may in and of itself carry associations (unnoted by Borroff) which distinguish it from the "man, warrior" category. In addition to 1(a) "a man [or] statue of a man" and 2(a) "a warrior," *gome* may also describe 3(a) "a husband," 3(b) "a servant," 3(c) "God (either Christ or the Trinity)," or 4(a) "a male child; baby boy."<sup>7</sup> In other words, *gome* is a very versatile word, capable of suggesting many roles. Perhaps this is one reason why the *Gawain*-poet has made such prominent use of it to designate his most protean character—the Green Knight. Without stretching things too far one might argue that the Green Knight is associated with all of these definitions: he is a man; a warrior; a husband (in his role as Bertilak); a servant (of Morgan le Fay); a God-like figure (to the extent that he survives the beheading and, in some critics' views, passes final "judgment" on Gawain); and finally, to the extent that he is boisterous, an avid game-player and somewhat impudent, there is a "boyish" element to his personality.

However, the poet's usage of the word *gome* derives its most powerful resonance from its association with the Middle English *gomen* (game, pleasure, sport) along with its variations (*game*, *gamen*, *gomnez*, *gomnes* and *gamnez*). The repeated association of man and games through an intricate network of wordplay seems to explain not only why the Green Knight is so frequently referred to as a *gome*, but also why Gawain (who is after all, also a man and a warrior) is so infrequently called a *gome* despite equal alliterative possibilities. The association becomes even more salient when we consider that *Sir Gawain* is essentially a poem about man (*gome*) and games (*gomnez*). Even a cursory reading of the poem manifests the centrality of both the "Beheading Game" and the "Exchange of Winnings Game." Moreover, the word *gomen* (and its variations, including the adjectival *gomenly*) appears in the text eighteen times.<sup>8</sup> This figure does

not include the related wordplay on synonyms such as “*play*,” “*layk*,” and “*bourde*.”

Furthermore, the meanings listed for *gomen* (*game*, n.) in the *M.E.D.* are pregnant with symbolic and thematic relevance to the poem. They are (in part) as follows:

- 1(a) joy, happiness; pleasure, delight, gaiety, mirth
- 1(b) in (with) *game*—with pleasure; for one’s pleasure
- 2a(a) festivity, revelry, a pastime, amusement; music; a play
- 2a(c) no *game*—no laughing matter
- 2(b) accomplishment; skill in entertainment or amusement
- 2(c) any of the sports of hunting, fishing, hawking or fowling
- 2(d) amorous play, love-making; especially sexual intercourse
- 3(a) an athletic contest; a tournament or jousting; also, a battle; a debate
- 3(b) behavior or success in a contest
- 3(c) the prize of the victory
- 4(a) a joke, jest; also a ridiculous circumstance
- 4(b) in (on, with) *game*—in fun, jokingly, playfully
- 4(c) a pleasant tale
- 4(d) a humorous spectacle or illusion
- 5(c) a play, project; a scheme, trick, plot
- 6(a) game killed or caught, the kill, the catch<sup>9</sup>

Having thus established a comprehensive understanding of the Middle English conception of man as *gome*, and *gomen*, let us now turn to the text of *Sir Gawain* to explore the prevalence of wordplay concerning man and man’s games, and also the extent to which such an analysis is thematically relevant. Gordon M. Shedd describes *Sir Gawain* as a “classic metaphor of human existence—that man stands midway between the angels and the animals, partaking of both natures, and capable of moving in either direction.”<sup>10</sup> Shedd’s assessment is essentially correct and especially reflective of the way in which the poet begins his story with a celebration of man’s eminent fallibility (11.1–25). Although the tone of this introductory passage is deceptively heraldic, it effectively establishes Britain as a land rooted in war and destruction (11.1–2), treachery (1.3), the lust for wealth and power (11.6–7), and excessive pride (1.9). In just a few lines the poet has created an historical basis for a land wherein “*werre and wrake* (war and vengeance)” coexist with “*wonder*” (1.15) and “*blysse*” alternates with “*blunder*” (1.17).

Given this context, our first exposure to Arthur's court is uncertain. As J. A. Burrow suggests, the emphasis on seasonal revelry (or *gomen* in the sense of *M.E.D.* 2a[a]) and the description of Arthur himself as being "sumquat child-gered (somewhat childish)" (1.86), are not necessarily a condemnation of the court.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, as Charles Moorman points out, the poet's depiction of the preceding Christmas celebration seems to be entirely lacking in religious piety.<sup>12</sup> What is most important for our purposes is that Arthur has decreed "thurgh nobelay (for the sake of noble protocol)" to forego his dinner until some form of entertainment is provided (f11.92-102): "sum auenturus thyng (something adventurous) . . . an vincouthe tale (an extraordinary tale)," a challenge, or a joust—some sort of *gomen*, so to speak.

His response comes in the form of a "gome gered in grene (a *gome* dressed in green)" (1.179) who has come to request a "Crystemas gomen" (1.283).<sup>13</sup> Shedd further contends that the Green Knight's "Beheading Game" essentially constitutes a test of the court's "sourquydrye" (1.311); i.e., it is especially designed to measure the courage, honor, loyalty and courtesy of Camelot's representative.<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, Robert Kindrick suggests that the Green Knight's questioning of the court's identity (11.310-313) "suggests that renoun, fame and honour are empty unless they are deserved through personal integrity."<sup>15</sup>

These arguments are perceptive in so far as they align the poem's motives with those of the Green Knight. However, an alternative point of view may be discovered through the association of man and games. As Burrow argues, in spite of the implicit criticism of Arthur and the court, the poet has a special admiration for "this fayre folk in her first age (these handsome people in the prime of life)" (1.54) which is inclusive of their "angardez pryde (arrogant pride)," their penchant for game-playing and partying, and their love of material splendor. Although Arthur's rash acceptance of the challenge—"I know no gome that is gast of thy grete wordes (I know no *gome* that has been frightened by your boasts)" (1.325)—reads like the act of an impetuous, reputation-conscious youth, our judgment of his character is moderated by his early display of courtesy towards the unwelcome stranger (11.250-4) and by his bravery (1.251).

There is no question that the intrinsic faults of Camelot—boasting, intemperance and precipitation—are partially an extension of the world of "blysse and blunder" which the poet established in the opening lines. Yet it seems that Arthur's court is imbued with an almost prelapsarian innocence that sets it apart from the grim reality of "werre and wrake." The

“merthes (merriment)” of Arthur’s court may be “rechles (reckless)” (1.40), but it is nevertheless essentially harmless. Furthermore, the poet goes to great lengths to conjure up a strong sense of the court’s youthfulness: they are “folk in her first age, (people in their prime)” (1.54), “yonge blod (young blooded)” (1.89), “ful yep in that Nw Yere (as young as the New Year)” (1.105) and the year itself is “so yep that hit watz nwe cummen (so new that it had just arrived)” (1.60). The aura of resilient juvenescence is intensified by the observations of the Green Knight himself:

There are about me on this bench but beardless children 1.280<sup>16</sup>  
and,

There is no man here to match me, among such weaklings  
Hence, from this court I seek a Christmas *gomen*,  
For it is Yuletide and New Year, and here are many youths.  
11.282-4<sup>17</sup>

There is an unmistakable suggestion here that Arthur’s court is incapable of taking on anything more serious than a *gomen*. Even the “los (renoun)” which has drawn the Green Knight to Camelot is largely that of “preue for to play wyth in other pure laykez (their proven reputation for excellence in games)” (1.263) and “gryndellayk” (1.312), literally “fierce play.”

Neither Arthur nor anyone else seems to know what to make of the “meruayl (marvel)” they have witnessed. After the departure of the Green Knight, the king is loath to reveal his perplexity and says:

Such sport well becomes the Christmas holiday—  
The acting out of plays, and laughing and singing. 11.471-2<sup>18</sup>

In other words, Arthur cannot quite admit that the predicament of Gawain is a serious one; he is not entirely certain that what he has just seen is not a seasonally appropriate *enterlude* or play (compare to *gomen* in the last sense of *M.E.D.* 2a[a]). It is this very inability on the part of the court to readily discern the tragic nature of the Green Knight’s challenge which is responsible for the single (and rather ominous) note of discord which we find in this “Eden”—the court’s rather unchivalrous criticism of its king’s mismanagement of “Crystmasse gomnez” (1.683) in the second fitt.

This is not to say that the court is “childish” or immature (although it exhibits many instances of such behavior). On the contrary, it is innocent—not because its members are in a state of grace, and not even

because they are virtuous, but—like the maiden in *Pearl*—simply because they have yet to be proven guilty. Thus, the poet interrupted his quasi-realistic historiography of Britain<sup>19</sup> to place Arthur's court in an indeterminate, but nascent age and thereby narrate his own and very contemporary story of the fall of man. Like Adam, Gawain is at first purported to be the perfect man. Like Adam (whose name he will later invoke in defense of his fallibility) Gawain's "fall" will be abetted by a woman (actually by two women). But unlike Adam, Gawain's tragic flaw will not be a breach of "clannesse (purity)," but something which we suspect the poet found even more crucially lacking in his world of "blysse and blunder"—profound spiritual faith.

It is spiritual faith, which is most conspicuously lacking in the poem's elaborate depiction of courtly life. In so far as we can measure them in terms of a sober religious attitude, faith and piety are lacking in the court of Arthur where, as Moorman points out, "even [the] priests join in the general merriment,"<sup>20</sup> and they are lacking at Bertilak's court where the obligatory "masse," we suspect, has been consumed as "hastyly" as the soup the lord and his men drink down before rushing off to their "gamez" (11.1135; 1319). In fact, as will later be demonstrated, the poem's single locus of spiritual faith is the incipient faith of Sir Gawain, especially as represented by the ideal of the pentangle.

But what has all of this to do with man and games? It would seem that the distinctive resonance of the word *game* as derived from its association with the ubiquitous theme of *gomen* (especially in the sense of pleasure-seeking, playfulness, sport and jest) is symbolic of "fallen" man. Man as *game*, may very well be an exemplar of secular values. At his very finest he may possess all the virtues which Shedd contends are necessary to survive the "Beheading Game": courage, honor, loyalty and courtesy. However, the *game* of the *Gawain*-poet, no matter how successful he is in fulfilling his obligations to other men, fails in his obligation to God. He does so precisely because he is a *game*—that is, a gaming man; a man who judges his actions in terms of his earthly reputation (compare to *gomen* is the sense of *M.E.D.* 3[b]); a man whose enjoyment of earthly pleasures (*M.E.D.* 1[a]) supercedes his submission to God's will.

Gawain, the emissary of "prelapsarian" man, is the poet's single candidate for transcendence of the spiritually faulty designation of *game*. First, Gawain's behavior in accepting the challenge distinguishes him from the rest of Arthur's court. Not only does the action demonstrate that Gawain's bravery is about equal to Arthur's, but an additional and even more noteworthy character trait here emerges. A. Francis Soucy's sugges-

tion that Gawain's acceptance of the challenge (like Authur's) is in response to the Green Knight's "rebuke to the Round Table's reputation,"<sup>21</sup> misinterprets Gawain's action. On the contrary, Gawain's forbearance until Arthur is actually handling the axe, demonstrates that the knight's acceptance is not a precipitate gesture motivated by injured pride, but an act of conscience, motivated by loyalty and courtesy towards one's king. This point is essential to our understanding of Gawain as unlike a *gome*. Moreover, it is generously supported by the text: for if Gawain's motives were identical to Arthur's, why did not the poet simply have Gawain accept at the first sign of "rebuke?" Clearly, the poet sought to manifest Gawain's sensible reluctance to accept so "nys (foolish)" a challenge on the grounds of pride. At the same time, he wished to demonstrate Gawain's unconditional acceptance, once the protection of his king's livelihood and reputation were in question. In other words, Gawain accepts, not because he is "so bolde in his blod" and "brayn in hys hede" ("so hot-blooded" and "wild-headed") (1.286), but because of the strong inner morality which renders him the most likely candidate for spiritual perfection. It is for this reason, it seems clear, that Gawain is never once designated a *gome* while at Camelot.

Let us now return to the thematic importance of spiritual faith, especially as elucidated by the poet's description of Gawain's shield. Kindrick describes the pentangle as a "clear link" between "the chivalric code, Christianity, and internalized value systems."<sup>22</sup> His analysis thus indicates the way in which the poet has elevated secular values to a level of equality and interdependence with faith in God—yet another manifestation of the poet's profound admiration for man's inherent nobility.

Richard Hamilton Green goes one step further in isolating the shield's spiritual relevance. Noting first that "[for] the Middle Ages, the basic figurative meaning of armor . . . especially [the] shield" was that of a "shield of faith," he goes on to cite this passage from a commentary on "Wisdom" by Robert Holcot, a near-contemporary of the *Gawain*-poet:

Our shield is our faith. . . . In the history of Britain it is written that King Arthur had a picture of the glorious Virgin painted on the inside of his shield, and that whenever he was weary in battle he looked at it and recovered his hope and strength. So, too, if we wish to triumph . . . we should bear on the shield of our faith the image of the Virgin and her son; we should look at her and be confident in her, because from her we derive virtue and strength.<sup>23</sup>



No doubt in creating the pentangle shield with its interior image of the Virgin, compounded by the pentangle's incorporation of "afyaunce . . . in the fyur woudez (faith in the five wounds [of Christ])" (1.642) and "the fyue joyez of Mary (Mary's five joys)" (1.646), the *Gawain*-poet was proclaiming a similar message. The poet's religious conception (like Holcot's) seems to convey the idea that consummate faith in God (along with Mary) is the source of man's resilience in the face of evil and hardship.

Ironically, Gawain is able to sustain his faith and invoke it against such hardship only during his journey—in the absence of others. Kindrick suggests that by "removing [Gawain] from the court, the poet has attempted to show that the hero is forced more and more to rely upon his integrity and inner values."<sup>24</sup> Moorman is even more explicit, describing Gawain's journey as a "spiritual task" which "in a sense becomes the journey of the individual towards a spiritual ideal higher than himself."<sup>25</sup> Both of these statements implicitly convey a sense of the extreme isolation of Gawain's quest. Indeed, on his way to "sech the gome of the grene (seek out the *gome* of the green)" (1.549), Gawain, "thagh hym no gomen thocht (though he thought it no *gomen*—See *M.E.D.* 2a[c])" (1.692), is "oft leudelez alone (often without another soul)" (1.692), with "no fere bot his fole (no friend but his horse)" (1.695), "ne no gome but God bi gate wyth to karp (nor any *gome* than God with whom to converse)" (1.696), in a land where "auther God other gome wyth goud hert louied (only a few honored either man or God)" (1.702), "fer floten from his frendez (far gone from his friends)" (1.714), a "mon al hym one (man on his own)" (1.749).

It is in the midst of this extreme isolation that the poet makes his only direct reference to Gawain as a *gome*. This occurs on the morning of Christmas Eve, just before the knight's poignant plea to God and Mary to provide him with "sum herber ther heyly I myght here masse/And thy matynez (some shelter where I might honorably hear mass/And your matins)" (1.755–6). Gawain is riding through a harsh wilderness:

Where many unhappy birds were perched upon bare twigs,  
Pitiously piping for pain of the cold.

The "gome" upon Grygolet glides beneath them

Through the swamps and the marshes, a man on his own.

11.746–9<sup>26</sup>

There are a number of ways to explain this single inconsistency. Perhaps, as Borroff explains in reference to *freke*, the poet is here using *gome* in its general context. However, it is even more likely that at this point—with

Gawain seemingly the only man on earth, and at the moment of his greatest spiritual proximity—the poet is invoking the irony of the knight's eventual fall. This irony is heightened by the fact that unbeknown to Gawain, the principal agent of his "fall" is just around the corner—Bertilak de Hautdesert who we will shortly be introduced to as "the gome that godly hym gret (the *gome* that heartily greeted [Gawain])" (1.841).

At this point it should be clear that an exhaustive analysis of both the linguistic and thematic implications of the poet's man and game wordplay is beyond the scope of a short essay. Hence, commentary on the third fitt will be reduced to just a few key observations. Gawain's brief stay at Bertilak's castle is replete with game imagery, game conceits, and puns on the word *gomen*, its variations and synonyms. Even the structure of the third fitt, as W. R. J. Barron remarks, "reproduces the superficial formality of games—three days, three wooings, three exchanges."<sup>27</sup>

Barron goes on to cite Ronald Waldron who has noted that the poet's usage of *gomen* in respect to Gawain's merriment on the one hand (*M.E.D.* 1[a]) and Bertilak's hunting on the other (*M.E.D.* 2[c]), provides a linguistic bridge between the two separate events (11.1314, 1319, 1352, 1536, 1894):

The play upon the word *gomen* links the boudoir battle of wits with the slaughter in the field and hints that the sort of *gomen* enjoyed by Gawain and the lady may possibly have bloody consequences too.<sup>28</sup>

To this we may add that *gomen* in the sense of *M.E.D.* 2(d)—"amorous play, love-making; especially sexual intercourse"—adds yet another layer of meaning to the poet's wordplay. Consider the lady's words to Gawain during the second temptation scene: "I come hider sengel and sitte/To lerne at yow sum game (I come alone hither to sit by you/and learn some game from you)" (1.1530). This seems an even more suggestive pun that the oft-cited "yowre awn won to wale (your own dwelling to choose)" (1.1238). Moreover, just as Bertilak emerges as a *gome* who is fond of *gomez*: "The olde lorde of that leude/Couthe wel halde layk alofte (The old lord of that land/Well knew how to keep up a joke)" (1.1513), his wife is a "burde (woman)" with a keen interest in the "lel layk of luf (the courtly game of wooing)" (1.1513) who "bourdez (jests)" (1.1213) with Gawain. Perhaps the poet's most clever play on words is achieved during the second exchange when, proffering Gawain a huge severed boar's head (*M.E.D.* 4[a] and 6[a]), Bertilak says, "Now Gawayn . . . this gomen is your awen (Now Gawain . . . this *gomen* is your own)" (1.1635).

Another noteworthy element of the third fitt pertains to the much disputed relationship between the hunting and wooing scenes. In structuring these episodes so as to produce the effect of simultaneous action, the poet's intent is to produce an affective synthesis. Hence, in contrast to Gawain's assiduous effort to balance a code of ethical perfection, we see Bertilak in the "noble" exercise of man's predatory drives. What is most striking about the hunting scenes is the tenacity and the versatility with which man pursues his *gomen*: the implementation of system to maximize the kill in the deer hunt (11.1153-68); the resort to high-risk "hand-to-hand" combat in the boar hunt (11.1584-1594); and the use of strategic planning and strength in numbers to outwit and wear down a quick and clever catch in the fox hunt (11.1895-1916). In each case the poet makes certain to introduce a note of sympathy for the defeated (11.1163; 1568-87; 1916). Yet this sentiment is entirely lacking in the hunting party: they are exhilarated by the chase and pleased to have won their *gomnes*.

By contrast, Gawain's rewards in having maintained his virtue (on the first and second days) are exceedingly uncertain. He is identified with the hunted rather than the hunters. There is a strong sense that Gawain is "trapped" by the Lady's *bourdez* and figuratively by the parallel hunts. Moreover, the intrusion of the Green Knight (11.1284-86, 1751-4) casts a shadow of impending doom over Gawain's struggle, reminding the reader—and perhaps the knight himself—that he is already committed to sacrifice his very lifeblood in order to uphold a code. It seems that at least part of what the poet intended to demonstrate here is that Bertilak's earthly *gomnes*, however crude and ruthless, harmonize with his humanity. By contrast, Gawain's *gomen*—and that is precisely what the poet calls the pentangle in 1.661—simply does not.

Gawain fails the Green Knight's test because he cannot live up to his own standards. There is a surprising degree of dissent concerning the nature of Gawain's fault, but it seems fair to say that in substituting his belief in the protection of God and Mary for a "noble sleyt"—or a bit of magic—Gawain has suffered a lapse of faith. No doubt the lone, journeying Gawain, with "no gome bot God bi gate with to karp" (1.696), would have readily trusted in and submitted to the will of God. But the Gawain who "made myry al day til the mone rysed/With game (made merry all day til moonrise/With games)" (1.1313-14) is distracted and confused. Hence, he forsakes his "shield of faith" for the illusion of the girdle, momentarily believing that:

The *gome* who is equipped with this green belt

...

Cannot be smote by any man under heaven. 11.1851-53<sup>29</sup>

The "grene gome" (1.2234) disabuses Gawain of his self-deception and the effect is cataclysmic:

Stricken and vexed he shuddered within;  
 All the blood in his breast rushed into his face,  
 And he shrank for shame from the man who spoke.  
 The first words upon earth that the knight uttered. 11.2370-73<sup>30</sup>

The last line just cited carries the unmistakable suggestion that Gawain has "fallen" from his ideal of spiritual perfection. Reborn as an imperfect man, his first words are a bitter condemnation of his own fallibility: he is a "coward" because his faith was insufficient to render him intrepid; he is "covetous" because he valued his earthly life even more than perfect communion with God. Those commentators who accuse Gawain of taking himself too seriously, and express surprise at his refusal to befriend Bertilak's wife and his outburst against women have failed to recognize that Gawain is a most reluctant *gome*—or in today's parlance, a "bad sport."

Hence, we should not be surprised that Gawain is aggrieved despite the beneficent "judgment" of Bertilak:

One of the least faulty of men that ever set foot on earth.  
 As pearls are of greater value than white peas 11.2363-4<sup>31</sup>

and

. . . I would name thee as well, knight, by my faith,  
 Above any other "gome" of God's, for thy great honor.  
 11.2469-70<sup>32</sup>

On the contrary, Gawain is entitled to both his remorse and contrition: he strove to be an impeccable "pearl," but must instead settle for being a pearl in comparison to peas; he sought to embody the perfect *trawthe* of the pentangle only to discover that his honor, however exceptional, is as subject to error as that of "any gome vnder God."

Yet perhaps the poet did not intend us to despair. The Green Knight is satisfied with Gawain's performance, impressed by his virtue, and even heartened by this fallibility. As Burrow remarks, Bertilak emerges as a "powerful and impressive figure" at the end of the fourth fitt, "somehow exemplary," dispensing an "authoritatively tempered blend of justice and mercy."<sup>33</sup> It seems clear that while he denied humanity its perfection, the poet did not wish to strip man of his *sourquydrye*—neither the "courage, honor, loyalty and courtesy," nor the (perhaps excessive) pride. The pentangle was, after all, only a *gomen*, however idealistic and complex.

Moreover, it was the *sygne* of *Salamon*—yet another illustrious example of man's imperfectability. We may surmise—and the circularity of *Sir Gawain* supports us—that the poet found infinite inspiration in a “fallen” world wherein:

Many adventures heretofore  
Have fallen just as this  
Ever since He who bore the crown of thorns,  
Brought us to His blysse! 11.2527–2530<sup>4</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Marie Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study* (New Haven, 1962), 53. These are *burne, freke, gome, hathel, lede, renk, segge, tulk* and *wyghe*.

2. *Ibid.*, 56.

3. *Ibid.*, 54–5.

4. 11.151, 178, 179, 375, 405, 549, 842 (refers to Bertilak), 1383 (refers to Bertilak), 1753, 2118, 2227, 2239, 2259, 2270, 2461. Text used is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Malcom Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Berkeley, 1978). Translations are my own.

5. 11.325, 696, 701, 748, 1851, 2470.

6. Gawain is referred to as a *gome* in 1.748 and indirectly in 1.2470, but in each case, the name “Gawain” is not used. Moreover, I will argue that in each case the poet's usage was purposeful and ironic.

7. *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Sherman M. Kuhn (Ann Arbor, 1962–3).

8. 11.271, 283, 365, 496, 661, 684, 692, 989, 1011, 1078, 1314, 1319, 1375, 1532, 1535, 1635, 1894, 1933.

## 9. M.E.D.

10. Gordon M. Shedd, "Knight in Tarnished Armour: The Meaning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Modern Language Review*, 62 (1967): 4.

11. J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London, 1965) 7-8.

12. Charles Moorman, "Myth and Medieval Literature: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medieval Studies*, 18 (1956): 171.

13. The Green Knight is referred to as a *gome* five times during his visit to the court: 11.151, 178, 179, 375 and 405; the "Beheading Game" is called a *gomen* in 11.273 and 283.

14. Shedd, "Knight," 4.

15. Robert Kindrick, "Gawain's Ethics, Shame and Guilt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Annuaire Mediaevale*, 20 (1971): 16.

16. "Hit arn aboute on this bench bot berdlez chylder."

17. "Here is no mon me to mach, for myghtez so wayke  
Forthy I crave in this court a Crystemas gomen,  
For hit is Yol and Nwe Yer, and here are yep mony."

18. "Wel bycommes such craft vpon Cristmasse—  
Laying of enterludez, to laghe and syng."

19. Burrow, *Reading*, contends that "the legendary history of Britain" was not yet recognized as legendary in the *Gawain*-poet's day," 173.

20. Moorman, "Myth," 171.

21. A. Francis Soucy, "Gawain's Fault: *Angardez Pryde*," *Chaucer Review*, 13 (1978): 172-3.

22. Kindrick, "Gawain's Ethic," 16.

23. Richard Hamilton Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," *E.L.H.*, 29, 2 (1962): 126-7.

24. Kindrick, "Gawain's Ethic," 16.

25. Moorman, "Myth," 166.

26. "With mony bryddez unblythe vpon bare twyges,  
That pitosly ther piped for pyne of the colde.  
The gome vpon Gryngolet glydez hem vnder  
Thurgh mony misy and myre, mon al hym one."

27. W. R. J. Barron, *Trawthe and Treason* (Manchester, 1980), 1.

28. *Ibid.*, 35.

29. "For quat gome so is gorde with this grene lace  
.  
.  
.  
There is no hathel vnder heuen to hewe hym that myght."

30. "So agreued for greme he gryed withinne;  
Alle the blode of his brest blende in his face,  
That al he schrank for schome that the schalk talked.  
The forme worde vpon folde that the freke meled:"

31. "On the fautlest freke that euer on fote yede.  
As perle bi the quite pese is of prys more."

32. ". . . I wol the as wel, wyghe, bi my faythe,  
As any gome vnder God, for thy grete trauthe."
33. Burrow, *Reading*, 139-40.
34. "Many aunterez herebiforne  
Hat fallen suche er this  
Now that bere the croun of throne,  
He bryng vus to His blysse!"

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