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### **Games and Exchanges Within *Gawain and the Green Knight***

Are the ideas of games and exchanging goods positive (comedic and lighthearted) or negative (serious and revealing) (and how does this affect an interpretation of Gawain's development). This is one of the major debates between literary critics such as P.B. Taylor, Richard Trask, Britton Harwood, and Carl Grey Martin. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* strongly emphasizes games and the exchange of goods. But is the focus on exchanges and agreements positive or negative? This depends on how the reader chooses to analyze the text. P.B. Taylor (and/like Richard Trask) argues that the text is comedic and the exchange of goods throughout the story leaves Gawain in debt. Britton Harwood's analysis, however, argues for a more serious reading of the exchange of blows between Gawain and the Green Knight at the end. Harwood claims that the exchange is used to portray the Christian idea of forgiveness and reveal the faults of Arthur's court, a reading that parallels Victoria Weiss's and Carl Grey Martin's. I intend to take this conversation a step further by arguing that the emphasis on games and exchanges is significant because the way that they are read will directly influence the perception of Gawain's character development. If the text is meant to be comedic, then Gawain's character does not truly develop and is meant to exemplify negative character flaws. If the exchange of goods is meant to be taken more seriously, then Gawain does exhibit growth through the realization (and/or repentance) of his flaws. I agree with the interpretation that Gawain the system of exchanges throughout the text clearly leave Gawain in debt, but I argue that is not

meant to be comedic. Rather, it is meant to set up the final exchange between Gawain and the Green Knight (Bertilak) in which Gawain develops as a character by becoming aware of his flaws and choosing to acknowledge them.

The story begins with a feast and festivities that come in the form of games and exchanges as “the nobles hurried to hand out New Year’s gifts,/Cried their wares noisily, gave them by hand,/And argued excitedly over those gifts./Ladies laughed out loud, even though they had lost,/And the winner was not angry, you may be sure. All this merry-making went on until feasting time” (lines 66-72). The story begins with a festive and merry atmosphere in which there exists an equal exchange of goods. In the game of forfeiting kisses mentioned above, it is made clear that both participants, the giver and the receiver, are satisfied at the end of the game. Even the act of kissing which the story focuses on involves an equal exchange because by nature a kiss cannot be given without being received. This emphasis on “play” and “games” is present throughout the story. As Martin Stevens argues, because of the many serious themes within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the presence of laughter and games are significant because they present a positive undertone to the narrative which clashes with the serious nature of the story. The ideas of exchanges are a significant theme within the poem, and the opening scenes establish a sense of harmony through the equal system of exchanges.

This harmony, however, is disrupted “when there bursts in at the hall door a terrible figure” (line 136). The Green Knight’s entrance is significant because of the way in which it is later paralleled and contrasted with Gawain’s entrance to the Bertilak’s/Green Knight’s castle. Gawain enters fully armed and armored, prepared for battle. And yet he receives a warm welcome. This seems to be what should have happened with Bertilak had Arthur’s court been more open and less prone to violence.

When the Green Knight enters, the poet spends a long time focusing on his appearance, emphasizing how well the Green Knight is dressed. “Most attractive was this man attired in green” (line 179). The depiction of the Green Knight’s clothing seems to portray him as a man of high social standing who would be at the level of the knights of Arthur’s court. However, the knights of the court are not receptive to the Green Knight when he enters, nor when he subsequently proposes a game involving an exchange of blows. One of the significant aspects of the Green Knight’s description is that he wears no armor and although he carries a large ax, he also carries a holly branch (symbolizing peace). This is significant because he does not enter the court dressed for battle. So even though the Green Knight proposes an exchange of blows, his attire seems to indicate that he is not expecting hostility. This emphasizes the inherent tendency towards violence that Gawain reveals when he interprets that the exchange of blows are meant to be lethal and beheads the Green Knight (a point that Weiss focuses on).

As Carl Grey Martin writes, “the dominant act of the Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the grotesque physical breaking and disfigurement of one knight by another. In a courtly Christmas context, with its twin evocations of holiday merriment and spiritual renewal, the violence seems aberrant, to say the least” (Martin 311). Martin is arguing that the text’s emphasis on violence and the way it is contrasted with the holiday environment represents the presence of violence in the court and how this is problematic because it was viewed as “courtly play”. Victoria Weiss agrees with Martin’s perception that the text is dominated by themes of violence and aggression that represent the presence of violence within the court. Weiss, however, takes this analysis a step further. She argues that Gawain’s first failure is during this beheading scene when he decides to deliver a killing blow when he could have completed the game *and* spared the knight’s life. Before Gawain delivers his strike against

the Green Knight, the Green Knight provides a quick reminder of their agreement, asking Gawain to ““assure me, sir, on your word/That you will seek me yourself, wherever you think/I may be found upon earth, to accept such payment/As you deal me today before this noble gathering”” (lines 394-397). This section provides a revealing look at how the exchange could have been interpreted. Within this statement is the idea of whether exchanges are always fair or not. Following this there are many more exchanges throughout the story and some are fair while others are not. Some things are given/received and are never repaid (or at least not fully repaid), and this is bad because it creates a debt. The idea of fairness within this exchange stems from the Green Knight’s statement that Gawain will receive “such payment/As you deal me today” (lines 396-7). A heavy strike is meant to be repaid with a heavy strike. At this, Weiss claims that “Gawain, in his impetuous desire to demonstrate his knightly valor and (moved also by considerations of courtesy) to rescue his uncle from a dangerous challenge, fails to see that he can fulfill the terms of the challenge and still spare lives” (364). Gawain was not obligated to deliver a killing blow. This can even be seen in the way that the Green Knight dresses. He wears no armor, choosing instead to dress in fine clothes. His choice of attire hints that he does not necessarily expect to receive a heavy blow. And by the rules of this exchange, Gawain should give exactly the kind of blow that he wishes to receive, yet once his half of the exchange is done he regrets his choice and dreads his obligation to fulfill his end of the exchange (though it is important to his development as a character that he chooses to honor the agreement and receive his end of the exchange). However, if the exchange is meant to be a show of masculinity, the fact that Gawain delivers a heavy blow knowing he will receive the same could be interpreted as a masculine move. However, in this case masculinity will be analyzed as an inherent tendency towards violence because Gawain could still have delivered a heavy blow without killing the

knight. While being willing to receive a death blow and killing a strong foe is masculine, killing the opponent also negates this because Gawain would not be obligated to receive a blow any more. The true significance, however, is in the Green Knight's choice at the end to act with forgiveness and compassion by tempering his blow and creating an unequal exchange that leaves Gawain in debt. The strike that Gawain gives to the Green Knight is repaid, but not in full because the two strikes are unequal. This exchange becomes the heart of the narrative and drives the story as Gawain must travel to find the Green Knight in order to receive a blow and restore harmony.

Gawain journeys and eventually comes to a castle where he is received by Bertilak. Before his journey there is a description of the pentangle on his shield and how it represents his five virtues. The text focuses on describing his virtues and how they were tested, setting up the trials he will face by Bertilak. His journey skips over the battles he faced, showing that the story has a focus beyond a simple tale of action and adventure. Then he arrives at the castle and his appearance is contrasted with the entrance of the Green Knight in the beginning. When Gawain arrives at Bertilak's castle, "Knights and squires came down then/to escort this man joyfully into the hall/... Where a blazing fire was fiercely burning./Then the lord of that company comes down from his chamber,/To show his respect by meeting Gawain there" (lines 824-34). This scene is a direct contrast to entrance of the Green Knight at the beginning of the story and it reveals faults in Arthur's court. While the Green Knight was finely dressed and without armor (he dressed this way knowing he would face a blow), carrying an axe and a holly branch, his presence was not met well. He comes dressed appropriately and peacefully and yet his arrival caused the atmosphere to become tense and he was not welcomed or invited to join the festivities. Gawain, however, comes dressed for battle. This reveals a difference in what Gawain and Bertilak expect

to receive the context of their exchange. Bertilak receives a heavy blow and yet he dresses nicely and lacks armor, as though he does not expect to receive a violent blow. In addition to their attire, Gawain arrives at Bertilak's castle and he is received as someone of his status should be received. He is invited to stay and welcomed to join the community in celebration. Yet this is not how the Green Knight was received. The text seems to contrast the way the two characters were received in order to point out the flaws within Arthur's court and the way it excluded an outsider and had an inherently aggressive nature.

While Gawain stays with Bertilak, the lord proposes another system of exchanges to keep them occupied (and to test Gawain's character). Each day the lord will hunt and Gawain will remain in the castle, and at the end of the day they will trade whatever they acquired. This parallels the beginning of the story when Gawain was present in Arthur's court and there was a celebration involving games and exchanges, only this time the outsider is invited to participate. This system of exchanges, which becomes a test of Gawain's character, becomes linked to the other exchange between Gawain and the Green Knight. Each day, the exchange becomes larger until Gawain is tempted by the girdle that is offered to him and fails to uphold his end of the deal by concealing the girdle. This action leaves him in debt (in addition to his debt to the Green Knight) and it becomes the point that will either characterize the text as comic or serious and revealing.

Richard Trask argues that Gawain's guilt about accepting the girdle is actually out of place and characterizes the text as a comedy. The reason for this is that, similar to Michael Foley, Trask sees a difference between the exchange of blows agreement and the exchange of goods agreement. He argues that the second agreement is made in private in the context of a lighter and more festive atmosphere. In this respect, Gawain's guilt is excessive considering the

lightheartedness of the informal agreement. This interpretation of the text as a comedy is shared by P.B. Taylor, who argues that because of the many debts that Gawain accumulates and remains unaware of, the text is a comedy that centers around the idea of an unequal system of exchanges.

However, others (including myself) view Gawain's choice to withhold the girdle as a defining and serious choice that reveals a flaw within his character. In the article "Gawain's Two Confessions Reconsidered" Michael Foley argues that Gawain's acceptance and concealment of the girdle go against the "knightly code rather than the Christian code" (pg 6). He argues that Gawain accepted the girdle for its supernatural properties rather than for its material value. In this respect, his action dishonors his reputation as a knight and a noble but it still allows him to be classified as a Christian hero because he did not sin. This establishes Gawain as a hero because of his Christian ethics rather than his bravery and masculinity. In addition to this, Gerald Morgan argues that Gawain's confession of his sin (after accepting the girdle, Gawain goes to church for confession) is more significant than the sin itself. Although Foley would disagree that Gawain had sinned in a religious respect, both critics argue that Gawain still acts as a heroic figure (rather than a comic one) despite his acceptance of the girdle. Ultimately, Gawain's acceptance of the girdle sets up his character development by revealing a character flaw that is addressed at the end of the story, once Gawain has once again met with the Green Knight.

After the final exchange between Bertilak and Gawain, Gawain sets out and once again encounters the Green Knight. This final exchange is where Gawain's character is able to develop (if the story is not interpreted as a comedy) as he becomes aware of his faults. In this exchange, the Green Knight takes three swings against Gawain. The three swings are connected to trials Gawain faced in his exchanges with Bertilak (secretly the Green Knight) and Gawain's failure with the girdle will now affect this exchange. Initially, the Green Knight delivers a blow but

stops because Gawain flinches. Gawain says that it will not happen again and the Green Knight makes another cut. The Green Knight stops this time and takes a third stroke which only nicks Gawain's neck (whereas Gawain took the Green Knight's head off with his stroke). Once the Green Knight makes a stroke that connects, Gawain jumps away and guards himself in case the Green Knight intends to continue. The Green Knight, however, responds by saying:

'Brave sir, don't act so wrathfully in this place.  
 No one has discourteously mistreated you here,  
 Or acted contrary to the covenant sworn at the king's court.  
 I promised you a blow and you have it; think yourself well paid;  
 I free you from the rest of all other obligations. (2338-2342)

Although Gawain is ready to fight (and possibly expects one) Bertilak tells Gawain that he does not want to fight and that the exchange of blows has been completed. He parallels the three blows that he has given Gawain with the three trials that he secretly gave Gawain, saying that the blow which connected and ended their initial contract was only harmful because of Gawain's failure. Bertilak also says that he could have struck harder but he chose not to, creating a sense of forgiveness for Gawain's transgressions. This also emphasizes the fact that Gawain chose to make his blow a killing blow, showing aggression towards a foe that he had no reason to be aggressive towards. As Victoria Weiss says, "Gawain recognizes now what he did not recognize when presented with the challenge in the first fit- that the terms of the agreement do not call for decapitation. Gawain realizes that by sustaining a mere nick, he has fulfilled the terms of the challenge. The slight scratch represents a viable alternative to the attempted death blow Gawain delivered in the first fit" (365). This is the beginning of Gawain's development as a character.



But while this final scene fulfills the game of exchanges between the two, there is still an imbalance because within this exchange the blows dealt are uneven. Gawain only receives a light blow that is not equal to the strike which beheaded the Green Knight, but more importantly he is still in debt because of his transgression in keeping the girdle. This is solved, however, when the Green Knight reveals that he is Bertilak and he has been aware of Gawain's actions because he arranged for Gawain to be tested. In an act of forgiveness, Bertilak says that "The wrong you did me I consider wiped out./You have so cleanly confessed yourself, admitted your fault,/And done penance on the edge of my blade./I declare you absolved of that offence, and washed as clean/As if you had never transgressed since the day you were born. And I make you a gift, sir, of my gold-bordered belt" (lines 2390-2395). The Green Knight forgives Gawain for his lie and offers him the girdle, a gift that cannot be reciprocated because Gawain was returned to an equal standing with the Bertilak as a result of Bertilak's charity which means that Gawain is now going to be in perpetual debt. I agree with Harwood's claim that Bertilak's forgiveness of Gawain's debt and his gift of the girdle represent an end to the cycle of exchanges and gift giving which leaves Gawain in a perpetual debt. How this debt (and the text as a whole) is interpreted will now affect a reading of the way in which Gawain's character develops.

Gawain is placed into an irreversible debt by Bertilak's forgiveness and his gift of the girdle, and the way in which the story is read determines how Gawain's character develops. If, as P.B. Taylor and Richard Trask argue, there is a constant imbalance within the system of exchanges because Gawain gives more than he receives, then Gawain is meant to serve as an example of negative qualities. The fact that he is unaware of his own debt creates comic situations as he continually makes offers of repayment. In this case, when Gawain accepts the girdle from Bertilak's wife he would have been unaware of his fault in doing so. And then when

Bertilak bestows it upon him at the end of story, he would be unable to develop through a realization of his faults. His character remains the static and unchanged when he leaves to return to Arthur's court. However, the text does not seem to work with this interpretation because when Gawain accepts the girdle from Bertilak, he says "I accept it gratefully, not for its wonderful gold,/Nor for the girdle itself nor its silk, nor its long pendants,/Nor for its value nor the honor it confers, nor its fine workmanship,/But I shall look at it often as a sign of my failing" (lines 2430-2433).

By acknowledging his faults, Gawain signals that he has grown as a character. Weiss argues that when "Gawain assumes the wearing of the girdle as a sign of his imperfection, his concept of knightly virtues has changed: no longer does he speak of deeds of arms and knightly aggressiveness, but rather "larges and lewté þat longez to knyhtez" (2381). This new concern with "larges" or generosity marks a concern for others that is significantly different from the concerns of the early arms-wielding Gawain, who was quick to chop off an opponent's head" (pg. 365). I agree with Weiss interpretation; however I would not simply limit Gawain's development to an awareness of his previous propensity for violence and action. In the beginning of the story, the text describes the pentangle on Gawain's shield and how it represents his many virtues. Throughout the text, Gawain is held in high esteem and his virtues are highly reputed and without fault. By failing Bertilak's test, Gawain is brought down and his character is revealed to be flawed. However, by accepting the girdle from Bertilak Gawain acknowledges his flaws and chooses to wear the girdle as a sign of penance for his failure. I would also argue that by wearing the girdle he is choosing to visually mark his flaws in the same way that the pentangle (which he still carries on his shield) marks his virtues.

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