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A KISS IS JUST A KISS: HETEROSEXUALITY AND ITS CONSOLATIONS IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

CAROLYN DINSHAW

The famous line from that modern romance—"A kiss is just a kiss"—is the message the *Gawain*-poet gave his listeners six centuries ago. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a poem so devoted to the surfaces of things (its lavish attention to courtly manners, occasions, and appointments is often remarked) and so preoccupied with keeping the depths and fissures from bursting forth (its narrative swerve from beheading to confession and penance is the most pointed example) that it labors to limit the significance of its signs, the nature of its characters, the meanings of their actions. This labor of limitation—the reduction of the polyvalent sign to the monovalent meaning—requires the operation of a principle of intelligibility, and it is just this principle in *SGGK* whose operations I want to track. The narrative begins in the bright courtly circle of Camelot in its youth, where kisses are the prizes in New Year's games among the ladies and knights. Such kisses seem unproblematic enough, just kisses, part of that young and breezy world of Arthur's court as we first encounter it ("al watz þis fayre folk in her first age [these fair folk were in their first age]" [54]).¹ But the dynamic of the guessing game—when the lady loses she receives a knight's kiss (or, perhaps: the lady loses *in order to* receive the kiss)—adumbrates more problematic kisses later on, the ones that are part of the seduction-exchange-testing plot orchestrated by Morgan la Faye and played out on Gawain when the scene moves to Bertilak's castle. Those later, problematic kisses, savory and solemn, are given by the eager lady of the castle to Gawain; Gawain eagerly gives them, savory and solemn, to the lord, Bertilak. Though the poem doesn't skip a beat—a kiss is a kiss is a kiss—I want to ponder the implications of those men's kisses. Such considerations will lead me into a discussion of the poem's analysis of heterosexuality as, precisely, a principle of intelligibility; the poem's representations of heterosexual identity and the threat to its possibility; the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexual relations in this text; and this romance's particular investment in the former. Such observations as I hope to make can go a long way toward explaining why *SGGK* and a twentieth-century romance like *Casablanca* can be said to have the same refrain.

Recall the situation in fit 3 of the poem: Gawain, a guest in Bertilak's castle, has contracted with Bertilak to render to him everything he receives in the course of his pursuits during the day; Bertilak will in turn give Gawain everything he gets. This

1. All quotations of *SGGK* are from the second edition, edited by Davis, of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Tolkien and Gordon. Translations of all the Middle English poems are mine, informed by the notes and glosses in Andrew and Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, and influenced by Borroff's translations.



agreement is renewed twice, so that exchanges between the two men occur three times, three days running. Bertilak spends each day on a hunt (for a doe on the first day, a boar on the second, and finally a fox). Gawain, back in the castle, is involved in a sort of indoor hunt: the lady creeps into his bedroom and tries to seduce him into sleeping with her while her husband is off in the woods (“we bot oure one [we’re all by ourselves]” [1230]). She only gets as far as to persuade him to accept a kiss from her on the first day, two kisses on the second, and three kisses and a “drurye” (a love token) on the third.

Each evening the spoils of the day are exchanged. Bertilak triumphantly presents his winnings to Gawain, gleefully rehearsing tales of his hunting adventures. Gawain, in turn, renders each kiss he has received, and in the manner in which he has received it: “comlyly [in a comely way]” [1389], “hendely [in a courtly way]” [1639], then “saueryly and sadly [tastily—feelingly—and seriously, solemnly]” [1937]. The kisses were seductive, erotic in their first instance; are they now? Invoking the precise letter of their bargain, Gawain refuses to give anything more to Bertilak—no answers to Bertilak’s questions about them. For once the poem will not elaborate.

To complicate the consideration of those kisses: remember that if Gawain had succumbed fully to the lady’s seduction *and* if he had honored the terms of his promise to the lord he would in fact have had to have sex with the lord—to yield his winnings, that is, his sexual conquest, in his own body, just as he has done with the kisses he received. Homosexual sex is thus one hypothetical fulfillment—in fact we might say *the* logical end of the interlocking plots the lady and Bertilak play out—but it is a forbidden end. Or rather, not forbidden, but *unintelligible* within the heterosexual world of this poem. It is in this way fully *inside* the culture of the poem (it is produced by the game the three are playing) however apparently *outside* it (unreasonable, impossible: Gawain and Bertilak?). Governed by heterosexuality’s powers of normativity—whose functions I, picking up from the recent work of lesbian and gay theorists, most notably Judith Butler, hope to delineate in the course of this essay—the poem both produces the possibility of homosexual relations *and* renders them unintelligible.² The narrative, that is, produces the possibility of homosexual relations only to—in order to—preclude it, in order to establish heterosexuality as not just the only sexual legitimacy but a principle of intelligibility itself. So that those kisses can and must mean nothing—or, truer and worse, their threat to a crucial principle of signification is neutralized.

It’s precisely those kisses that provide the lever with which it is possible to force heterosexuality, as it were.³ They make visible the particular strategies of normative heterosexuality in *SGGK*, and it will be my intention in this essay less to provide a reading of the poem than to delineate these strategies. Let me first explain my terms. I understand “sexuality” to denote a cultural structure that locates an individual in relation to his or her desire, and I think we can—*pace* Foucauldian historians of sexuality—talk about “sexuality” in the Middle Ages if we understand the concept both to allow for and to need historical particularizing.⁴ Foucault himself, in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, is

2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, especially chapter 2, “Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix,” and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* in particular chapter 2, “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary.” See also Cindy Patton, “Homophobia and New Right Identities,” paper delivered in the session entitled “The New Censorship, the New Homophobia,” at the MLA Convention, December 1991.

3. Compare Burger’s analysis of the kiss between the Pardoner and Host in the *Canterbury Tales*, a kiss that “exposes the limitations of the ‘identities’ [masculine, feminine] put into the discursive marketplace by the linguistic economy of this society” [“Kissing” 1148].

4. In this I’m steering a middle ground between the positions of scholars such as John Boswell and David M. Halperin, coming close to Leonard Barkan’s modest solution: he uses the term “homosexuality” “as generically as possible,” to denote “erotic relations of any kind between

notoriously expedient in his treatment of the Middle Ages, at times using it as a dark ages to offset the brightly recognizable innovations of modernity, at times using it as an age of protomodern subjectivity. But that's hardly the point; more important is that there is good late medieval evidence that sexual acts were fundamental to an individual subject's sense of self and location in larger cultural structures.

The first eighteen lines of the *Canterbury Tales*, to cite what is probably the best-known passage of early English literature, articulate a dense web of cultural relations that structures and locates individual subjectivity, a web that we may call "heterosexuality." The lines seek to situate humans in a grand scheme of the cosmos, in relation both to the physical and the spiritual realms. They do this by specifying a network of categories, of binary oppositions (as Joel Fineman has also remarked [37–39]), that structures the world of the *Tales* (and the world that produced the *Tales*)—and they begin with an act of masculine penetration of the feminine: "Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote, / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote." April/March, summer/winter, male/female, active/passive, desire/inertia (or desire/dullness, as T. S. Eliot would have it), fecundity/barrenness, generative/nongenerative, sky/earth, spiritual/physical, knowledge/the unknown, outside/inside, public/private, health/illness: a whole cultural paradigm, structuring the seasons, the labor, the physical life, and the spiritual development of humans, is set up: male pierces female to the root.⁵

those of the same gender, whatever mentality concerning psyche, society, or identity may accompany them" [Barkan 22]. I speak of "homosexual relations" but not "homosexuality" here, for reasons I specify below; nonetheless, I agree with what I take to be Barkan's general point, that we can speak of "sexuality" in the Middle Ages if we understand that the concept needs historicizing in relation precisely to "psyche, society [and] identity." Recent historically sensitive literary scholarship on sex in the Middle Ages concurs (see, e.g., Burgwinkle; but, for an opposed opinion, see Payer, Bridling [14–15]). John Boswell, in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, as well as in "Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," adopts both modern terms "homosexuality" and "gay," arguing that there were people who identified themselves—formed a culture—in terms of their sexual predilections, and that those proclivities can be seen as more or less continuous from then to now, even if the terms for them had not yet been invented. David M. Halperin, in "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality" (in his *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*), countering such a conception of "gay history" as a history of gay people throughout time, insists rather that, since sexuality is itself a modern invention, to seek "homosexuality" in history is an anachronism: "although there have been, in many different times and places (including classical Greece), persons who sought sexual contact with other persons of the same sex as themselves, it is only within the last hundred years or so that such persons (or some portion of them, at any rate) have been homosexuals" [29].

The real issue confronting any cultural historian of antiquity, and any critic of contemporary culture, is, first of all, how to recover the terms in which the experiences of individuals belonging to past societies were actually constituted and, second, how to measure and assess the differences between those terms and the ones we currently employ. [28–29]

This is gay history, too, "history written from the perspective of contemporary gay interests" [29]. Although I am attempting to contribute to this kind of gay history, I maintain that there is something we can call a sexuality in late medieval England; as Barkan argues, the alternative Halperin provides for classical Greece (that erotic relations between social unequals are "wholly submerged in the discourse of social inequality" [Barkan 22]) seems inadequate to both Greek antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages. See my suggestions about the Canterbury Tales, below.

5. The Riverside Chaucer perfunctorily glosses "his" in the first line as Modern English "its"—Middle English had no "its"—but there is ample justification, especially given the context of personification in the lines that follow ("Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth," "the yonge sonne / Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne") to read it also as "his." Chaucer's reversing the traditional genders of these months (it is usually female April and male March) draws even more

The milieux of Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet differ from one another, though they perhaps overlap in the household of Richard II (a site I shall mention briefly at the end of this essay). But I adduce the General Prologue here because it is the clearest late medieval articulation I know of heterosexuality as an invisible cultural structure of normativity, a hermeneutic according to which individuals read themselves and their worlds. There is no such grand and sweeping presentation of heterosexuality in *SGGK*, yet a specific cultural matrix constituting heterosexual identity is indeed operating in the poem. It is made visible by the narrative juxtaposition of bedroom and hunting scenes and their concomitant joining in the exchange of winnings scenes—especially in the kisses. I attempt in this paper to delineate normative masculine gender and sexual behavior as it is problematized in that narrative juxtaposition; I read the narrative placement of bedroom and hunt as the poem's analysis of the ideology of heterosexual identity, an explication that proceeds by showing that identity's illusory unity breaking down. I want to trace the disturbances of and threats to that straight identity and the principle of coherent meaning that underwrites it, to analyze the means by which heterosexuality is then naturalized in even greater force, and finally to speculate on the kind of interventions the poem's strategies might have made in its particular cultural world.⁶

The norms of this heterosexuality must be understood to exert pressure particularly and locally, but, nonetheless, some things are generalizable about its workings *as a norm*. I shall analyze *SGGK* as it presents a specific inflection of a broader cultural principle. As should be apparent from the vastness of the cultural space that it occupies, heterosexuality is not the property of one person, and cannot be controlled entirely by one poet. Thus what we are seeing in the General Prologue and in *SGGK* are the designs of heterosexual cultures seeking their own reproduction, articulated through, as it were, the poet.

My project, then, is not to find a homosexual character in this poem; nor do I propose that there is in the poem an opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. I do argue that the poet presents normative sexual relations as part of a sexuality—heterosexuality—as I've said; but the potential actions specified by the narrative logic—produced by the operations of heterosexuality here—are not organized into an alternative sexuality, as I hope will become clear by the end of this essay. They are an excess, an outside not only intrinsic to the workings of heterosexuality but also capable of breaking the artificial

attention to the sexual valence of these lines. A sexual act inaugurates this work; that act is the link between humans and the cycle of nature (it is the principle of all generation) and the spiritual world as well. It is associated with desire, fecundity, generation, health, knowledge, the freshness of outside, public space, spiritual life. This act is, I want to argue, heterosexual, and heterosexuality in Chaucer's England is just this dense web of cultural relations that structures and locates individual subjectivity. (For the analysis of modern heterosexuality's relation to homosexuality that has inspired my discussion here, see Sedgwick, Epistemology [11–12].) Note that there's no particular voice behind these lines; we're not told at any point in this grand sweep of a single sentence, "He said," or even "I said." With that magisterial diction and unvoiced quality creating an invisible authority, these lines produce an effect of truth, and that truth is the natural and normative quality of heterosexuality. The norm of human life established here is multifarious, conflicted (all those binary oppositions), and invisibly but cosmically and inevitably heterosexual.

6. David Lorenzo Boyd, in a brief article that condenses a reading of *SGGK* from his forthcoming book, *Sodomy, Silence and Social Control in Late Middle English Verse*, proposes an analysis whose contours and preoccupations are very similar to mine here: he, too, sees the potential homosexual activity as a means whereby "a dominant heterosexual male subject position" [14] is maintained. But the goal of his argument differs from mine in his intention to suggest that in *SGGK* "the underpinnings of the medieval male (homo)social order and its heterosexual desire/exchange of women" are revealed to be "displaced homosexual desire" [14]. With the concern to show that heterosexuality contains homosexuality, in both senses of the word, my analysis pivots around the point that the poet entirely precludes the possibility of (male) homosexual desire in the poem.

unity of “sex” [Foucault, *History* 154–57]. Male-male sodomitical relations, or homosexual relations (the terms are therefore interchangeable in my discussion here),⁷ because they deviate from normative gender behavior and the “proper” direction of desire, *would* break apart the matrix that structures heterosexual identity in this poem. Theoretically they *can* clear a space for deviant sexuality, but I argue that the poet closes such a space as quickly as he opens it up.

And one more note on terminology: in talking about homosexual sex in this paper I am specifically referring to *male* homosexual relations, but I do not thereby intend to reinscribe the medieval obliteration of female homosexual relations (the evidence of which scholars are now beginning to gather). The medieval Christian discourse of same-sex relations sometimes mentions female-female contacts (in prohibiting them)—Aquinas, for example, follows St. Paul in castigating as sodomitical all intercourse “with a person of the same sex, male with male and female with female” (“ad non debitum sexum, puta masculi ad masculum, vel foeminae ad foeminam, ut Apostolus dicit ad *Rom.*” [*Summa theologiae* 2a.2ae.154.11; 43: 244–45])—but that Christian discourse is clearly not preoccupied with female homosexual sex to the degree (and it is a high degree) to which it is preoccupied with male homosexual relations. Thus, my discussion of the workings of normative heterosexuality in this late medieval English romance must be modified by consideration of female same-sex relations; this poem, with its complex narrative motivated by the desire of one woman to get (at) another, requires such a discussion, which will be my next step beyond the analysis here.⁸

7. The term “sodomia” is quite inclusive in the late Middle Ages: Goodich notes that “All forms of homoerotic relations were indiscriminately labelled as sodomy (sodomia)” [ix], and Brundage writes that in the high and late medieval periods the term denotes “all kinds of deviant sexual practices, but . . . was also used in a more specific sense to mean anal sex” [213; cf. 533]. Precisely its indefinite reference makes “sodomy” useful in my analysis, since the exact sexual act between Bertilak and Gawain projected by the narrative is unclear (how would Gawain render his winnings unto Bertilak if he won sex with the lady?).

8. Just to hint at such a discussion: what does Morgan desire in relation to Guenevere? To terrify her, as the poem claims [2460–62]? Heng notes that Guenevere is “inextricably bound to Morgan by the push and direction of the desire in Morgan’s game” [“Feminine Knots” 502]. We might consider the almost completely buried “detail” of Morgan’s gambit as another unsettling of normative sexual identity, a desire of one woman for another motivating the entire plot that the heterosexualizing narrative wishes not to have to acknowledge. That desire denaturalizes heterosexual identity and makes clear both the potential in this androcentric culture for male-male bonds and the structural indifference of this androcentricity to female-female bonds. If, as I argue, there is a narrative trajectory of male homosexual relations that is adduced in order finally to reinforce normative heterosexuality, there is in the poem, as Heng has also observed [“Feminine Knots”], an even shadowier world of female-female desire, a self-sufficient world of women running parallel to that of men. The existence of two social worlds in the poem presents a problematic that, taken up and analyzed, would allow us to differentiate gender hierarchy within the operations of normativity, a potentially significant power differential that often gets lost in discussions and developments of queer theory. To begin to analyze this power differential we need, among other tasks, to articulate the antifeminism of the poem, especially visible in Gawain’s fulminations when he learns of this Morgan-Guenevere plot, with its refusal and rendering unintelligible of the male-male sodomy [see below].

Both Heng and Fisher [“Feminine Knots”; “Taken Men”] focus on the poem’s treatment of femininity, precisely analyzing the impact of gender categories in the poem, and I have learned much from their work. Heng, in “A Woman Wants,” analyzing the bedroom seduction scenes, discusses the poem’s treatment of feminine desire, thus engaging issues of sexual identity as well. She treats some of the same issues I take up here: the reversal of courtly roles [105]; identity as a process [118]; impersonation as an unsettling of identity [119]. Finally, Heng sees that the poem presents the lady’s desire as “boundless,” a phenomenon that breaks down all “received definitions of gender, identity, and the subject,” that is irreducible and mobile [124]. I am interested in how

But to return to those kisses in *SGGK*: it is certainly true that innocent kisses often occur between men at moments of heightened emotion in late Middle English texts—just kisses, as when Arthur and his court regretfully kiss Gawain goodbye as he sets out on his journey [596]. Such kisses represent conventional cultural practice, informed by the rules of courtesy and hospitality; there is nothing problematic about men’s kissing one another per se in the medieval romance context, as there might be today in the United States. The poem’s audience is surely used to seeing representations of kisses of peace, of greeting, of partings, of homage, and so on, between men [Burger 1153n6]. Yet the narrative of *SGGK* locates the particular kisses between Bertilak and Gawain in reference to a highly charged erotic plot and thus raises the question of their sexual force and valence. It might be useful, therefore, to recall that the Fathers and Doctors of the Church saw that kisses between men could be sinful, a possible first step in homosexual encounters that were spoken of in terms of one partner’s feminization—terms that make homosexual relations parodic of heterosexual ones. Though they are not in themselves mortal sins, Aquinas discerns in the *Summa theologiae*, kisses come to be treated as such “ex sua causa,” “because of a wicked intention,” as the Blackfriars edition renders it; kisses that are intended to arouse, to incite venereal pleasure, are properly called libidinous and are condemned as mortal sins. Earlier, Peter Damian (“The Jerome of our times,” according to Bernard of Constance) had written in his *Liber Gomorrhianus* that “whoever is found in a kiss alone . . . will be justly subjected to the whole range of ignominious discipline” (“qui solo osculo . . . omnibus illis probrosae disciplinae confusionibus merito subiacebit”). The comprehensive and influential Penitential of Cummean (seventh century) regards kissing, either “simpliciter” or in various degrees of erotic involvement, among homosexual acts to be censured.⁹

the narrative both allows the suggestion of such an irreducibility and then refuses such multiplicity. For the poem doesn’t end with the bedroom scenes; Gawain’s story of identity continues, and the power of the feminine, as Fisher sees, is severely limited.

9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2a.2ae.154.4; 43: 220–21, “Utrum in tactibus et oculis consistat peccatum mortale”:

Dicendum quod aliquid dicitur esse peccatum mortale dupliciter. Uno modo secundum speciem suam, et hoc modo osculum, amplexus, vel tactus, secundum suam rationem non nominant peccatum mortale: possunt enim haec absque libidine fieri vel propter consuetudinem patriae, vel propter aliquam necessitatem aut rationabilem causam. Alio modo dicitur aliquid esse peccatum mortale ex sua causa; sicut ille qui dat eleemosynam ut aliquem inducat ad haeresim mortaliter peccat propter intentionem corruptam. Dictum est autem supra quod consensus in delectationem peccati mortalis est peccatum mortale, et non solum consensus in actum. Et ideo cum fornicatio sit peccatum mortale . . . consequens est quod consensus in delectationem talis peccati set peccatum mortale, et non solum consensus in actum. Et ideo cum oscula et amplexus hujusmodi propter delectationem hujusmodi [delectatio] fiant, consequens est quod sint peccata mortalia.

[A sin is called mortal by what sort of action it is in itself and by what it is caused by. On the first count, kisses, embraces, and caresses signify no mortal sin. They can be done without libidinousness according to the custom of the country or from some fair need or reasonable causes. On the second count there can be mortal sin because of a wicked intention, for instance alms-deeds as an inducement to heresy. Now we have noticed already that consent to the pleasure, not merely the act, of a mortal sin is itself a mortal sin. And therefore, since fornication is itself a mortal sin . . . to consent to its pleasure is to be gravely wrong. Consequently when kisses and embraces and so forth are for the sake of this pleasure they are mortal sins.]

Liber Gomorrhianus, PL 145, col. 175 [trans. Payer 61]; *the Penitential of Cummean* [Bieler 126–27]:

In *SGGK* we are not reading a penitential or a homily, of course, but a romance; yet as I will discuss in more detail later, this poet also wrote *Cleanness*, a homiletic poem which details, among other catastrophes, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and does so in language that is revealingly similar to the discourse of love in *SGGK*. Moreover, this romance itself has, in addition to pervasive Christian thematics and calendar, a strong penitential cast at its conclusion. Courtly behaviors and the courtly discourse of love inform this romance and are in various ways at odds with Christian norms, as critics often point out; but in regard to normative heterosexuality, I shall argue, courtly and Christian ideologies are entirely consonant and mutually supportive. As with other disturbing Middle English kisses, such as the Pardoner's and the Host's in the *Canterbury Tales*, we are thus on complex and difficult terrain with the kisses in fit 3 circulating erotic power. What can we make of those kisses, given to Bertilak by Gawain acting like a woman?

Gawain acts like a woman. The structure of identity—gender identity, sexual identity, Christian chivalric identity (which partakes of both gender and sex)—is threatened in these narrative moments, and to get at some sense of this problematic I shall turn to the poem's repeated juxtaposition of those scenes in the bedroom and on the hunt. It is a commonplace to observe that the two scenes, seduction and hunt, are versions of each other—that the lady plays out a metaphorical hunt that is represented in all its literality as Bertilak's chasing after wild beasts. Marie Borroff has commented that the scenes serve to link humans and animals as at base bodies terrified of giving up life and breath [Borroff, "Sir Gawain" 108–09]. In fit 3 the heterosexual subject is in crisis: Gawain's subjectivity, his identity is unfixed in the bedroom, and that identity's unlacing is precisely represented, in its corporeal aspect, in the violent dismemberment of the hunt.

In the bedroom Gawain is the hunted, the object of a feminine gaze. The lady slips into his bedchamber in the morning while he sleeps, "ful dernly and styлле [very secretly and softly]" [1188]) draws the door shut behind her, and waits for him to stir:

*And ho stepped stilly and stel to his bedde,
Kest vp be cortyn and creped withinne,
And set hir ful softly on þe bed-syde,
And lenged þere selly longe to loke quen he wakened.* [1191–94]

*[And she stepped stealthily and stole to his bed,
Cast up the curtain and crept inside,
And sat herself very gently on the bedside,
And lingered there wondrously long to see his waking.]*

2. Osculum simpliciter facientes, .vi. superpositionibus; inlecebrosus osculum sine coinquinamento, .viii.; si cum coinquinamento siue amplexu, .x. superpositionibus corriganur. 3. Post annum .xx. [id est adulti] idem committentes .xl. diebus separati a mensa et extores ab ecclesia cum pane et aqua uiuant.

2. Those who kiss simply shall be corrected with six special fasts; those who kiss licentiously without pollution, with eight (special fasts); if with pollution or embrace, with ten special fasts. 3. But if after the twentieth year [that is, as adults] they commit the same sin, they shall live, at a separate table and excluded from the church, on bread and water.

Cf. 116, on heterosexual kissing. For very useful general discussion of these materials, see Bailey [107–20; Bailey cites Bernard of Constance on Peter Damian on 111]; for further discussion of the penitentials' handling of homosexuality, see appendix D in Payer [Sex 135–39].

Her long look fixes him, or at least intends to do so, just as, earlier, the poem has made him the object of her gaze on his first night at the castle: as Sheila Fisher has observed [78], when he is led in to Vespers by her husband, she peers out of her pew at this new arrival: “Into a cumly closet coyntly ho entrez. . . / penne lyst þe lady to loke on þe knyzt [She goes into a comely closed pew. . . / Then the lady desired to look at the knight]” [934, 941]. Now, keeping him unclothed and horizontal in his bed, she has him “prysoun,” prisoner, as he puts it [1219]. She has greeted him by name—“God moroun, Sir Gawain [Good morning, Sir Gawain]” [1208]—and a few lines later, she reiterates that name and specifies its significance: “For I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wowen ze are, / þat alle þe worlde worchipez quere-so ze ride; / Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely prayed [For well I know, indeed, that you’re Sir Gawain, whom all the world worships wherever you ride; your honor, your courtesy is courteously praised]” [1226–28]. After nominally laying hold of him she introduces her intentions: “Ze ar welcum to my cors, / Yowre awen won to wale, / Me behouez of fyne force / Your seruaut be, and schale [You are welcome to my person [or: body], to take your own pleasure [or: abode]; I must of necessity be your servant, and shall be]” [1237–40]. The reversal of courtly roles here couldn’t be clearer, and it seems to be the poet’s conscious choice when we consider traditional analogues (depicting either very active or passive wives here).¹⁰ Her gaze fixes him, she names him, she offers herself as *his servant* (just the night before, greeting the lady and her older companion for the first time, he offered himself as their “servaunt” [976]); the word “won” suggesting a metaphor of landholding, she tries to direct his desire by setting herself up as property to be inhabited.

It’s no surprise, then, that the conversation is punctuated with signs of identity confusion, mistakes, failure. When the lady first slips into his bedchamber, Gawain pretends to sleep, and internally schemes to find out what she’s up to. He may seem self-possessed and wily then, and in the next moment picks up her talk of truce and bondage by calling himself her prisoner [1210–20]; but he seems rather less solid when he doesn’t recognize himself as the knight she is addressing, the knight known to all: “I be not now he þat ze of speken [I’m not he of whom you speak]” [1242; cf. 1243–44; 1266]. This is courtly politesse, of course, and it goes on: he tries to counter her construction of himself as her master when he offers himself as her servant [1278]. And she flirtatiously interjects that since he hasn’t requested a kiss from her he can’t be Gawain at all: “Bot þat ze be Gawan, hit gotz in mynde [It slips my mind that you’re Gawain]” [1293].

But courtly games—literal and figurative fencing—such as this one, with its role reversals, are in fact a serious business in a world in which identity is constituted by the performance of acts precisely coded according to normative configurations of gender and desire. And that world, more than other medieval cultural worlds (because of its emphasis on display, on deeds), is the chivalric world. Gawain, responding to the lady’s challenge to his identity as Gawain, indeed allows her a kiss, as if he is attempting to reconfirm his status *as* Gawain, the one who kisses [1302–06; see Heng, “A Woman” 116]. But on the following day the uncertainty of his identity is again asserted in relation to what he hasn’t done—claim a kiss: the bedroom conversation begins with the threatening conditional “Sir, *ȝif ze be Wawen* . . . [Sir, *if you are Gawain* . . .]” [1481; my emphasis]. The lady goes on to explicate to Gawain the nature of knighthood: its essence is deeds of love, “þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes [the faithful practice of love, the doctrine of arms]” [1513]. Love of a lady is the rubric, the text of knights’ works [1515], and it is known only through “teuelyng” (striving) [1514]. The lady has been reading romances, clearly—consider the textual diction of her definition of the knight, which underscores the

10. See Loomis [300], citing Kittredge [79 ff.], on the analogues to SGGK that include a temptress who is the host’s wife and who either very actively seduces (Yder) or tests Gawain while passively lying in her bed (Carl of Carlisle, Chevalier à l’Epée, Hunbaut).

performative nature of knighthood (all language being, as Derrida reads Austin, itself performative)—but she might have been reading Auerbach as well, who in *Mimesis* gives a remarkably similar description of knighthood apropos of Chrétien's *Yvain*:

Except feats of arms and love, nothing can occur in the courtly world—and even these two are of a special sort: they are not occurrences or emotions which can be absent for a time; they are permanently connected with the person of the perfect knight, they are part of his definition, so that he cannot for one moment be without adventure in arms nor for one moment without amorous entanglement. If he could, he would lose himself and no longer be a knight. [Auerbach 122]¹¹

The behavior that makes a knight is intensely rule-governed; it proceeds either as game or in the form of a game—tournaments, quests, courtship, “*be le l layk of luf.*” Knighthood is a performance—is indeed a performative, conventional and iterable, not freely chosen but constrained by birth, class status, and other structures of the normative—and Gawain is always *in production* in this poem: his reputation has preceded him to Bertilak's castle; he is thus a constant living-up-to that reputation; throughout his time at the castle Gawain is especially anxious lest he fail in his manner, in the “fourme” [1295] of his speech and gestures; and he is time and time again through the course of the poem told, when he is not acting like the reputed Gawain, that he is not, after all, Gawain. When his active role is usurped by the lady here, when he is not *doing*, he has no proper, courtly masculine identity.¹² It may be argued that this is true of medieval “identity” in general, but this is not the way the poem has presented chivalric identity; the knight's identity has been mystified, rather, by its association with Solomon's sign, the pentangle, painted on Gawain's armor. With its interlocking lines and perfectly congruent angles delineating the “*endeles*” [630] unity of Gawain's physical, moral, and spiritual person, it is the poem's major and most insistent attempt to represent a unified identity. But where is that icon of unassailable chivalric identity now? It's never mentioned again by name after its intricate introduction in fit 2.¹³

Instead, Gawain's sexuality-troubling seduction is linked to the hunt, as those two tightly interlaced sets of scenes are bound together with conjunctions [lines 1178–79, 1319, 1560–61, 1730–31; 1893–94 are linked with an adverb]. The role reversal in the bedroom is represented on the first day as Gawain and the female deer—barren hinds and does—are hunted in narrative tandem. The animal whose slaughter is described is the mirror image of Gawain: finally killed, the throat is cut, the limbs are cut off, the doe is

11. Plummer attempts to analyze the relationship between Gawain's identity and language but is hampered from drawing the logical conclusion that identity is a performative by an essentialist view of the self.

12. See Fradenburg for an analysis of the “phenomenological crisis” that is knighthood: “a present without a past, an outside without an inside,” needing a constant conferral of “an inside upon an outside” [201, 203]; “the tournament is a scene in which chivalric culture acts out the choice—the taking up—of ‘masculinity’” [212].

13. See Heng, “Feminine Knots,” for this observation about the pentangle as the poem's blind, a wishful attempt at “*endeles*” unity. Davis, in his introduction to Tolkien and Gordon [xxi], observes incoherence in the poem's not returning to the pentangle after the icon has been so elaborately introduced.

The pentangle is not alone on Gawain's shield; there is, of course, the image of the Virgin Mary on the inner surface of the shield. But this doubling of icon and image, pentangle and Virgin, opens up the possibility of a gender duality within Gawain's identity that proves threatening to the poem's insistence on straight masculine identity. The poem's representing and gradually suppressing the feminine, as Fisher has detailed, is one strand (intertwined in the same narrative logic) of what I am analyzing as its general project of promoting heterosexuality.

eviscerated, and her insides are unlaced [cf. 1334]. In a passage whose length has always been a puzzle—we know the gentry must have loved this detail; but it does seem excessive in this carefully structured romance, and such detail is repeated in the narration of the following two hunts (of male animals)—the animal body is split to pieces. I suggest that this unlacing of the body is the poem’s visual representation of straight gender identity’s failing. When such identity fails, the body perceptually disaggregates, because it’s that heterosexual identity matrix that—ideally and tenuously—accords unity to the body in the first place. The straight gender behavior that Gawain enacts is so fundamental that without its guarantee of unity he is subject to—or, better, of—corporeal disaggregation. And such disaggregation threatens the possibility of meaning itself: “The image of [man’s] body,” says Lacan, “is the principle of every unity he perceives in objects” [*Seminar 2*: 166, qtd. in Butler, *Bodies* 77].

SGGK thus suggests an analysis of heterosexuality, in fact theorizes heterosexuality in a way that accords with the theoretical articulations of Foucault and, particularly, Butler. The poem suggests, in its vision of failure, that normative masculine subjectivity is constituted by a unity of gender, desire, and anatomical sex. Butler has theorized the imperatives of such “unity,” and argues that “regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” [*Bodies* 2].¹⁴ Intermeshing cultural configurations of gender and desire—in *SGGK*, the imperatives of Christian chivalry—configure “the” body.

Heterosexual gender, indeed, has historically worked to organize the body into an intelligible whole, to give form and coherence to a chaotic set of parts. At least over the long span of the Christian West, even as the forms of coherence differ, the principle of intelligibility itself is straight gender: it has determined what parts of the body are sexual and how they are related to each other, thus which of the “opposite sexes” each human must be. Straight gender has worked to keep people together, in other words, has intended to render people whole. It works like the mirror in “The Mirror Stage,” providing the “Thou art that”—or like the interpellating “Hey, you there!” of ideology as Althusser describes it—offering the proleptic vision of the body more coordinated than it actually is, that vision of coherence that is the ideal toward which the subject is always striving but that no body ever truly achieves. “The assumption of the armour of an alienating identity” is the phrase Lacan uses to describe the end result of the mirror “drama”; recall the exterior surface of Gawain’s armor, his shield with its unachievable but ever-yearned-for “endeles knot” [630]. I am not concerned to articulate a developmental psychoanalytic model of the subject, as will become clear by the end of this essay; nonetheless, figuring as specular the relationship of the subject to an ideology that we can identify as heterosexual strikes me as a forceful way of describing the function of a gender/desire matrix as a basic and powerful organizing principle, a hermeneutic.¹⁵ Bodily coherence is produced by a

14. *Laqueur has tracked historically the ways in which gender produces the aggregation or coherent unity of parts known collectively as “the” sexed body. Earl Jackson, Jr., stresses—and I want to pick up on this emphasis, which is shared by Butler in Bodies That Matter—that it is notions of heterosexual masculinity and femininity (that is, matrices of normative gender and normative, straight desire) that have produced “the” male body and “the” female body: the ideal-Ich is “identified with a body,” a body that is “an imaginary accomplishment in which are intermeshed the libidinal configurations of the drives and the potentials for action that will partially determine the subject in its specific relationship with its environment” [114]. See also Bodies That Matter.*

15. *My desire to read gender via Althusser and Lacan may seem paradoxical, since, as Teresa de Lauretis remarks, neither Lacanian psychoanalysis nor Marxist humanism “considers the possibility—let alone the process of constitution—of a female subject” [6]. Nevertheless, as de Lauretis comes around to acknowledge, Althusser is useful in enabling the formulation of gender*

gender/desire matrix; the particular union of body, gender, and desire that constitutes the heterosexual subject in a given culture is tenuous, a unity always needing to be reasserted because only asymptotically approximated.

SGGK is preoccupied with keeping things laced together, preoccupied, that is, with division and loss. This is not hard to see in a poem that begins with a beheading and threatens to end with one; but nearly everything, down to the Green Knight's axe with its green lace tied around it, not to mention the lady's sides laced up by her girdle, is either split apart or sutured tentatively together. In a poem so heavily laden with the burden of identity, the knight armored with an "endeles knot"—the knot of Christian knightly identity—it's surprising to have a character acting like someone else: Gawain, acting like the woman who kissed him, now kisses Bertilak. These kisses, the narrative consequence of the seduction-exchange plot, push even further the poem's analysis of heterosexual identity arising from that plot: they suggest that solid hetero-identity can be split apart without a cataclysmic dissolution. Gender, desire, and anatomy here are not, and don't have to be, unified. He kisses him just like a woman, but he doesn't break like a little girl. The parody of heterosexuality that emerges as we read these kisses serves to denaturalize for us such a notion of Christian heterosexual identity.

Such a denaturalization gives us room to read "against nature": we could read Bertilak's hunt of the "hyndez barayne" [1320] as the masculine version of his wife's hunt of the man; the late medieval discourse of male-male sodomitical relations saw the passive position as a barren feminine one. We could imagine that Bertilak had more agency in this whole plot than he finally admits to Gawain—that his sending his wife in to Gawain was a way of bonding himself, via the woman, to the man. Suppose Morgan's desire to scare Guenevere provided him with a formal cause for his desire to get Gawain. . . . The logic of the narrative, as we thus delineate it, starts to resemble something out of Genet: as in *Querelle*, we have a game whose loser, much desired, would have to take the consequences: sex with another man.

But Gawain is not a character given to parody, and neither is this poem interested in pursuing the homoerotic links that would unsettle its project of representing Christian knighthood. Any liberatory potentials of this parody such as recognizing a positive erotic impulse between Bertilak and Gawain and linking it to identity are unthinkable in the culture of this poem, and I want to track the textual ways in which they are rendered so.¹⁶

as "a primary instance of ideology," a "personal-political force both negative and positive" [9], however much he would disavow such a formulation. Similarly, Butler is concerned to "promote an alternative imaginary to a hegemonic imaginary" in Lacan, specifically positing the "lesbian phallus" [Bodies 91].

16. There is considerable debate even today about the liberatory potentials of parody. Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* tends to idealize parody; the decision to choose to emphasize the enabling, and not the restricting, force of "rule-governed discourses" [145] is an optimistic one. The analysis, further, considers the point of view only of subversive denaturalizers (drag queens, lesbian butch-femme couples), not of heterosexist observers of such gender performances. Leo Bersani [207–08] maintains that subversion may not at all be the message straights take from, say, seeing leathermen in all their macho style:

The [heterosexual] macho male's rejection of his representation by the leather queen can also be accompanied by the secret satisfaction of knowing that the leather queen, for all his despicable blasphemy, at least *intends* to pay worshipful tribute to the style and behavior he defiles. The very real potential for subversive confusion in the joining of female sexuality . . . and the signifiers of machismo is dissipated once the heterosexual recognizes in the gay-macho style a *yearning* toward machismo, a yearning that, very conveniently for the heterosexual, makes of the leather queen's forbidding armor and warlike manners a *perversion* rather than a *subversion* of real maleness.

Gawain is filled with dread of his impending adventure at the Green Chapel, where, he believes, he will have his head chopped off. Anyone might worry, you might say; yet we have seen one man—granted, a green man—live through the chopping, making as if he didn't really need his head to be attached for it to do its work (if his enterprise has really been to scare Guenevere, as Bertilak says it has been, then he has done this quite well by holding his severed head, Medusa-like, dripping and bloody, in her face). We could read this survivable beheading as a send-up, a revelation of castration anxiety as a heterosexualizing “publicity campaign” (as D. A. Miller has called it) for the phallus [Miller 129-30].¹⁷ Here we have a man who has had his head chopped off and (depending how you look at Bertilak)¹⁸ either just lives through it or simply grows another. The character's living through the symbolic castration might be read as another denaturalization of masculine heterosexual identity: no properly “sexed” body here. But the perspective of ecstatic subversive disaggregation is not allowed to Gawain; the poet insists on only one model of identity for him, and that is his armor with its pentangle. Seeking to save his neck from him who would “tohewe” it, he accepts the lady's girdle, which she offers as a last resort to get him to yield to some erotic advance (however small). The girdle is called a “drurye” when he winds it around himself later, a love token. Gawain hopes or believes that, as the lady promises, its magic powers will save him from being hacked into pieces. Here heterosexuality is being naturalized—or renaturalized—as the salvation from disaggregation. (In this light, consider the Patsy Cline song: “I Fall to Pieces” after the affair is over.)

“Drurye” here is a significant word, denoting both “love” and “token of love,” the thing and its sign. This poet uses the word in another of his works in the Cotton Nero A. x manuscript, in a fascinating passage that distinguishes him from other late medieval homiletic writers for its explicitness and prurience. The passage is in *Cleanness*; it is an open celebration of heterosexual sex, sung on the occasion of narrating the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. The narrator of *Cleanness* throughout the poem relishes the sins he has the chance to chronicle and denounce: consider, for example, his lingering gaze on the insultingly filthy wedding guest in the beginning of the poem, or on the carrion-gorged raven Noah first released from the Ark after the flood. In the whole poem, with its structure of biblical retelling that provides negative exempla of Christian behavior, normative Christianity produces the transgressions in order to show their suppression and thereby to reinscribe itself. In the case of homosexual relations, the norms of heterosexuality produce the deviant—Sodom and Gomorrah—as negative example; in fact God says precisely this: “Hem to smyte for þat smod smartly I þenk, / þat wyȝez schal be by hem war, worlde wythouten ende [I intend to smite them sharply for that filth, / That people shall be warned by them, for all time]” [711–12, rendering 2 Peter 2: 4, 6].¹⁹ That the deviant ends up performing a defining function is only one of the ironies of this structure in which deviance—like the kisses in *SGGK*—always threatens to take over and is thus vigilantly contained.

The poem thus produces and counters the forbidden but attractive homosexual relations with not only proper but passionate heterosexual sex, and carefully renders the latter as original. God has heard rumors about the inhabitants of the two cities, that “Uch

My analysis of SGGK suggests that in heterosexist twentieth-century literary criticism parody such as Gawain and Bertilak's kiss can easily be resorbed into a prevailing, heterosexualizing view of the narrative; it takes a queer view to see this as denaturalizing parody. Such a subversive view can be taught, of course, and this is what I want to do; but the subversion does not proceed inevitably from the nature of parody itself, which can just as easily be seen as devotion to the thing parodied.

17. Recall that Freud uses the image of Medusa's head to reassert the power of the penis in the face of castration in “Medusa's Head.”

18. On the name of this character see Loomis [297]: it is from the Irish “bachlach” (churl).

19. All quotations from *Cleanness* are from the edition entitled *Purity*, ed. Menner.

male matz his mach a man as hymselfen, / And fylter folyly in fere on femmalez wyse [Each male takes as his mate a man, just like himself, / And they join together foolishly in the manner of females]" [695–96], and He angrily purposes to confirm the reports' veracity. He goes on to explain that he has devised a proper way for people to love: heterosexual conjoining is the natural "crafte" that God has ordained [697]:

*I compast hem a kynde crafte and kende hit hem derne,
And amed hit in myn ordenaunce oddely dere,
And dygt drwry þerinne, doole alþerswetttest,
And be play of paramorez I portrayed myseluen. [697–700]*

*[I devised a natural way for them and taught it to them secretly,
And regarded it in My ordinance singularly precious,
And set love therewithin, intercourse sweetest of all,
And the play of love I Myself designed.]*

At the right moment—"a stulle stollen steven [a still, secret time]" [706]—a male and his "make" can honestly "welde" one another, "Luf-lowe hem bytwene lasched so hote, / þat alle þe meschefeze on mold mo3t hit not sleke [the love-flame between them blazed so hot, / That all the trouble on the earth might not slake it] [707–08]. This is "hote" sex, without even an obligatory mention of procreation: here is an exceptionally positive appropriation of typical burning-in-lust imagery that is so prevalent among writers of moral works—see, for example, the *Parson's Tale*.²⁰ The omission of procreation in the description of heterosexual relations complicates the poem's ostensible commitment to a structural opposition between natural and unnatural sex; in this way the poem opens a space in which to explore the complexities of sexual relations—in particular, the place of pleasure in proper sexuality. This is a fascinating adjustment of traditional Christian moral categories (deriving from Augustine) that are used to analyze sexuality, shifting priority from an opposition between natural and unnatural to an opposition between pleasurable and unpleasurable, and even between physically attractive and physically repulsive.²¹ Heterosexuality is thus subtly reconfigured here; at the same time, crucial structuring principles

20. *But note the chilly lining, the—apparently inevitable—hint of tainted fallen love even in this passage, as the appropriate acting out of sexuality must, according to the poet, occur in the dark, "unstered wyth sygt" [706]. Recall Augustine in De civitate Dei 14.18 [Dombart and Kalb 441; Bettensen 579–80], explaining why we don't do it in the road:*

Quid? concubitus coniugalís, qui secundum matrimonialium praescripta tabularum procreandorum fit causa liberorum, nonne et ipse quamquam sit licitus et honestus, remotum ab arbitris cubile conquirít? . . . Vnde hoc, nisi quia sic geritur quod deceat ex natura, ut etiam quod pudeat comitetur ex poena?

[But what of conjugal intercourse, whose purpose is, according to the prescriptions of the marriage contract, the procreation of children? It is lawful and respectable certainly; but does it not require a private room and the absence of witnesses? . . . What can be the reason for this, if it is not that something by nature right and proper is effected in such a way as to be accompanied by a feeling of shame, by way of punishment?]

21. *See Calabrese and Eliason for a discussion of the poet's deployment of a rhetoric of repulsiveness for the Sodomites and a concomitant deployment, in the representation of heterosexual relations, of a rhetoric of pleasure—a rhetoric that includes a discourse of paradise. They seek to counter critical discussion of the poem that might see in its embrace of pleasure a humanistic tendency; they insist that this representation of heterosexual relations is mandated by the poet's choice to represent homosexual relations as disgusting.*

stay traditional, including heterosexuality's association with sincerity as opposed to "japez" [864]. This latter binary structures heterosexuality as original: "When two true togeder had tyged hemselven, . . . / Wel nyze pure paradys mozt preve no better [When two true people have tied themselves together, . . . / Paradise can scarcely prove any better]" [702–04]. The "drwry" here (God says, "I . . . dyzt drwry þerinne" [699]) is heterosexual sex, and it recreates "paradys"; like the girdle, it is thought to produce wholeness and unity and coherence, to reunite those two parts of man, separated at Creation, as one flesh. And note how it does this: the language God uses is the language of courtly love, complete with "derne" love-craft and "doole alperswettest" [699]; in fact, the "play of paramorez" instituted by God can be nothing other than courtly love games and the roles of courtly men and women.²² If the poet, in *SGGK*, were coming close to an analysis of courtly discourse as itself a threat to heterosexual subjectivity—a possible extension of my discussion of the bedroom scenes would be that, as Lacan maintains, courtly discourse is the means by which heterosexual impossibility is manifested [*Feminine Sexuality* 141]—God has dispelled any such suggestion here by establishing the commensurability of straightness and courtliness.

The emphasis in *Cleanness* throughout this section is on the contrast between courteous—courtly, chivalric—speech and filthy talk, the difference between "mesurable wordez" and "hendelayk" (courtesy) [859–60], on the one hand, and "spitous fylþe," "zestande sorze," and "brych" (malicious filth, frothing filth, and sin, vomit) [845–48], on the other. Gawain, as the lady says, is known widely for his "hendelayk" [*SGGK* 1228]; further, the love talk between Gawain and the lady in the bedroom sounds just like this courtly discourse of love established by God. The context of *Cleanness*, brought to bear on *SGGK* here, makes explicit that such normative heterosexuality *contains* homosexual relations: homosexual relations, produced by the narrative as a possibility in the bargain Bertilak and Gawain have made, are further both *inside* the bedroom (because produced by the love talk between Gawain and the lady) and *outside* it (because suppressed by that discourse), "contained" by heterosexuality in both senses of the word. Tied up in the lady's girdle.

The girdle has only limited success, as it turns out, in guaranteeing the perpetuation of Gawain's "kynde." Gawain's accepting it in fact causes a slight wound, the "nirt" on the neck, as Bertilak explains the actual conditions of Gawain's trial. And Gawain's identity seems still unsettled, at risk: once again, the poem reiterates its hectoring "You are not Gawain"—"pou art not Gawayn, ' quoþ þe gome" [2270]. When *will* Gawain be Gawain? Only when he's acting like Gawain; chivalric identity is a performative, always in production. So threats to the Christian soldier must continually be banished, and the girdle comes to represent not only that identity but also the threats to it:

*Bot in syngne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte,
When I ride in renoun, remorde to myseluen
þe faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed,
How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylþe.* [2433–36]

*[But as a sign of my excess I shall see it often,
When I ride in renown, to remind myself of*

22. Compare Foucault's remark in a 1982 interview in *Salmagundi*, which contrasts a heterosexual emphasis on courtship with a (male) homosexual emphasis on sex acts: "You find emerging in places like San Francisco and New York what might be called laboratories of sexual experimentation. You might look upon this as the counterpart of the medieval courts where strict rules of proprietary courtship were defined" [20].

The omission of procreation as a motive here reinforces the courtly reference of this language. See Jacquart and Thomasset [96–110] for a reading of Andreas Capellanus that stresses the nonprocreative intercourse of courtly lovers.

*The fault and the frailness of the crabbed flesh,
How its tenderness entices the defilements of filth.]*

As Sheila Fisher has seen [94], the language here associates the weakness of the flesh specifically with femininity; it fuses the two women in Bertilak's castle, Morgan and the lady, old and young, "crabbed" and "tender," into "an icon of the filth and decay imputed by Christianity" to female physicality and sexuality. This is especially apparent in this passage's coming on the heels of Gawain's antifeminist diatribe, as it has come to be known, just a few lines before, after he has heard that this whole plot resulted from Morgan's desire to terrorize Guenevere ("For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled, / And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsones— [For so was Adam beguiled by one, when the world began, / And Solomon with many, and Samson again]" [2416–17]). The fault of the flesh is the human postlapsarian condition, as critics indulgently disposed to Gawain (seeking to exculpate him from charges of antifeminism) have pointed out, and as this poet himself, in *Cleanness*, makes clear: as descendants of Adam we are admonished not to "be founden" in the filth of the flesh [CI 547]. But further, this poet has worried about specific "fautez" in the "flesch," the ones that the men of Sodom and Gomorrah "han founden" [CI 694]. Gawain's fulmination at this climactic moment of recognition not only decries the powers of the feminine but also implicitly denounces homosexual relations because antifeminist discourse informs the figuration of homosexual relations as sinful: God objects to homosexual intercourse in *Cleanness* [695–96, quoted above] because it requires a man to act like a woman. That is against nature; it is not only disorderly but it is a debasement.²³ I have already detailed the ways in which such imitation, in the kisses between Gawain and Bertilak, unsettles heterosexual masculinity; the further point raised here is that the poem's very ostensible antifeminism functions not only to limit the power of the feminine gender as it is represented in female characters but also to serve in a larger system of heterosexual normativity. The poem's antifeminism, carefully detailed by Fisher, works by the same dynamic as the one I have delineated for heterosexuality: the poet creates a world of feminine power, going so far as to ascribe the motivation of the entire narrative to Morgan, only in order to obscure and contain it in the process of reinscribing masculine legitimacy. And that gender dynamic, whose analytical usefulness is distinct from heterosexuality's (it allows us to analyze the poet's treatment of female characters, for example), nonetheless serves heterosexuality when (as in the bedroom and kissing scenes) normative laws of gender are articulated with normative desire.

We might return to the notion that gender/desire matrices work like a mirror, to refine it a bit: the particular imago that is mirrored back to the Christian heterosexual subject is, of course, Christ, God's own image.²⁴ The process of engendering the heterosexual subject is accounted for explicitly in *Cleanness* in terms of modeling on a life, the body and life of Christ (this is implicit in *SGGK*, too, with its calendrical structure that charts the life of Christ). The true "drwrye," *Cleanness* states, should be rendered unto the Lord, Who via "Kryst" will render the Christian heterosexual subject whole in body, desire, and place in the eternal scheme of things:

*If bou wyl dele drwrye wyth Dryzten, þenne,
And lelly lovy by Lorde, and his leef worþe,*

23. On homosexual relations as a sin contra naturam, see Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 3.122 [2950–51; Pera et al. 3: 1820]; on homosexuality in the Renaissance as debauchery and disorder, see Bray.

24. See Althusser [179] on the doubly specular relation between God the Subject and the human subject; my emphasis here on Christ could work toward historicizing Althusser's theory of the Church ISA for England in the late fourteenth century.

*benne conforme þe to Kryst, and þe clene make,
bat ever is polyced als playn as þe perle selven. [C1 1065–68]*

*[If you wish to exchange love with God, then,
And loyally love your Lord and become his dear one,
Then conform yourself to Christ, and make yourself clean,
Who [Christ] is ever polished as clearly as the pearl itself.]*

Picking up on that pearl image, recall, too, that in *Pearl* courtesy, the manners of the court of Heaven, unites all in Christ—as members of Christ’s body, in fact; the poet adapts Saint Paul’s dictum in 1 Cor. 12 (“Etenim in uno Spiritu omnes nos in unum corpus baptizati sumus [For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body]”) to the poem’s courtly context, to suggest that the courtly rules of the Kingdom of Heaven construct Christian believers as a body.

*‘Of courtaysye, as saytʒ Saynt Poule,
Al arn we membreʒ of Jesu Kryst:
As heued and arme and legg and naule
Temen to hys body ful trwe and tryste,
Ryʒt so is vch a Krysten sawle
A longande lym to be Mayster of myste.’ [P 457–62]²⁵*

*[By courtesy, as Saint Paul says,
We are all members of Jesus Christ;
As head and arm and leg and navel
Belong to his [i.e., every Christian’s] body firmly and faithfully,
Even so is every Christian soul
A limb belonging to the Master of mysteries.]*

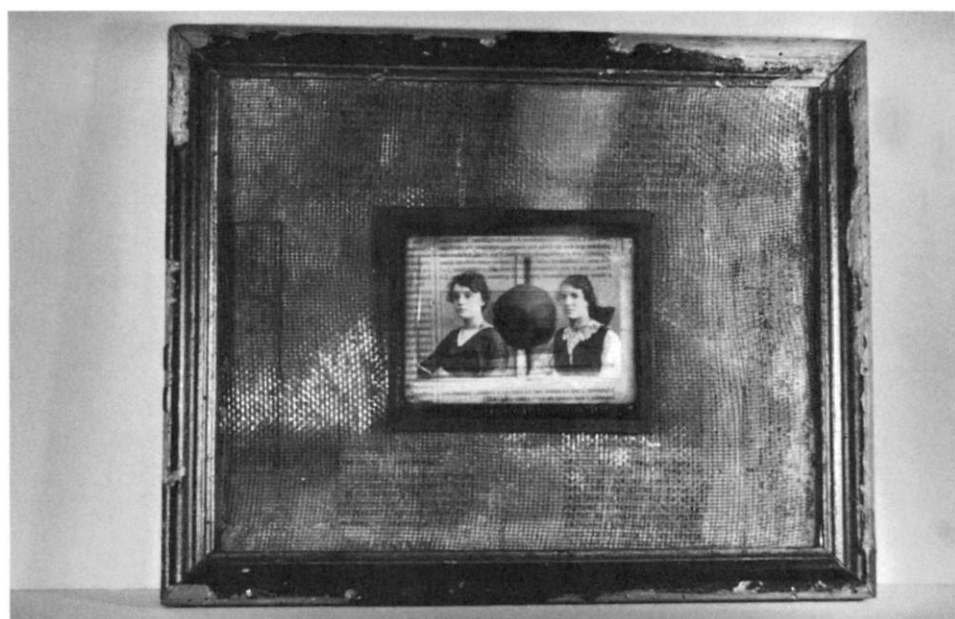
Christian courtliness is in part constituted by the discourse of normative sexuality, as I have been suggesting, and that is most fully represented in the body of Christ, as Leo Steinberg has demonstrated in his analysis of Christ’s virile “humanation.”²⁶ Conversely, the men who engage in sodomy are figured by Peter Damian as separated from the body of Christ; Peter clearly associates homosexual relations as forces of disaggregation against Christian wholeness, pitting one organ’s pleasure against the whole body’s welfare.²⁷

The plot of *SGGK*, following out such discourse, prefers a whole body (or one as whole as is possible in this postlapsarian age) and has thus made heterosexuality a fetish,

25. All quotations of *Pearl* are from Gordon, ed., *Pearl*.

26. Pace Caroline Walker Bynum’s critique of Steinberg [Fragmentation and Redemption 79–117], I think this point is apt for a writer like the *Gawain*-poet, for whom sex is so central and problematic a part of the embodied human condition, and for whom Christ is redeemer of a humanity that is so deeply flawed.

27. Peter Damian, *Liber Gomorrhianus*: “*Mox nempe ut quisque in hanc extremae perditionis abyssum fuerit lapsus, a superna patria exsul efficitur, a Christi corpore separatur [In fact, when one has fallen into this abyss of extreme ruin he becomes an exile from the heavenly homeland, separated from the body of Christ]*” [16]. “*Cogita quam miserum sit, quod per unum membrum, cujus nunc voluptas expletur, totum postmodum corpus simul cum anima atrocissimis flammaram incendiis perpetuo cruciatur [Think how miserable it is that because of the present satisfaction of one organ’s pleasure, afterwards the whole body together with the soul will be tortured forever by the most atrocious, flaming fires]* [23], in *PL 145: cols. 176–77, 186; trans. Payer, Book of Gomorrah* [65, 83].



as Monique Wittig has called it; the narrative has thereby precluded the consummation of homosexual sex even as it produced the possibility, in order to establish the heterosexual as the only legitimacy, the only intelligibility [40; Butler, *Gender* 111–28]. The unintelligibility of homosexual relations is related to the unintelligibility that is represented in those scrambled animal body parts as Bertilak and his men bring them, piece by piece, home from the hunt (“Syþen fonge þay her flesche, folden to home [Then they took their flesh and turned homeward] [1363]): the unintelligible kiss is produced by heterosexuality, the disaggregation by heterosexuality’s (constantly threatened) failing.

Thus far I have traced the strategies of normative heterosexuality in this poem, and have suggested that they are part of heterosexual culture’s seeking to reproduce itself. Finally, then, I want to ask: what might be the use, in its cultural environment, of this poem’s work of normalizing? *SGGK* is invested in a particular heterosexuality, a medieval English Christian chivalric identity; appropriating French romance (whose homoerotically charged audience Duby has discussed [115, 120–22]), *SGGK* recuperates Gawain’s reputation from the poems that depict him as a licentious knight: this Gawain’s impeccable courtly manners establish him as proper Christian of and for the English gentry, readers not only of romance but also, and enthusiastically, of homiletic works such as *Cleanness*. The still-feudal character of English social organization had a strongly homosocial cast which provided the general social setting of the poem; a society that retains the structure and forms of feudal relations, even as feudal relations were diminishing in significance, can be described as bonded by homosocial desire, even as it strove to suppress homosexual enactment of such desire. And specifically, according to Michael J. Bennett, in the interlocking societies of Cheshire and Lancashire in the late fourteenth century (the probable audience of the poem), even with their “curiously compressed social structure,” “homage had still to be performed, services personally rendered, rents paid, and wardship occasionally exacted” [240–41, 31].²⁸

Further, these societies may have been anxious about the young, unmarried men in their midst, the population Bennett refers to as “hordes of younger sons” [187]. Late-medieval English customs of primogeniture and inheritance encouraged (by guaranteeing the financing of) the marriage of first sons and left younger sons to shift for themselves, to marry or not; a man needed money to set up a household. As Bennett observes, “Local traditions of primogeniture were apparently harsh, and younger sons were set adrift with little to make their own way in the world” [249]. Bennett analyzes the “careerism” in which these young men engaged as they sought to “compensate” for their modest means. But I also suggest that these customs, setting young men adrift, may have in turn provoked anxiety about homosexual relations: to a culture of heteronormativity, homosexual acts, involving no women and by nature nonprocreative, may have appeared particularly likely in a situation where there were “hordes” of young men with relatively limited means.²⁹ *SGGK* depicts an ideal feudal society (the Round Table in its “youth”) that—however immanent homosexual relations might be—kept young men unmarried yet still heterosexually focused.

If scholars are right in linking *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to the household of Richard II (and it seems very likely the case), the strategy of promoting heterosexuality articulated in this poem may have had a particularly precise usefulness. There were rumors, suggested by Walsingham in his *Historia Anglicana*, that the monarch’s relationship with his very close friend and associate Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford, was marked by obscene intimacy (“familiaritatis obscenae”). Homosexual behavior is a common

28. On late medieval English feudalism see also Crane; McKisack. For general discussion of feudalism see Bloch. On homoeroticism in feudal relationships see Greenberg [257–59], who quotes Tripp [68–69]; and Duby [115, 120–22].

29. See Greenberg for such a suggestion apropos of feudal Europe and Bray for similar arguments about England a hundred years later.

accusation of a controversial monarch, as John Boswell points out; and, as several commentators hasten to add, the accusation was not repeated by other chroniclers and no case was pursued.³⁰ One scholar has recently called it an “old canard.”³¹ Yet even if its truth value is questionable, its ideological value is not; as a readily available political slander it suggests that homosexual relations were seen as the constantly abjected shadow of the heterosexual regime, produced in order to reinforce the claims to strength and propriety of the norm. And the normalizing work of heterosexuality such as is seen in *SGGK* might well be understood to inform the reception of Walsingham’s text here: commentators seek to interpret the claim as politically motivated slander—to limit its meaning—or to consign it to oblivion, to the realm of the senseless.

We return, then, to the kisses in *SGGK*, to read them as components of a specific inflection of a broad heterocultural strategy of unintelligibility. When, then, Gawain kisses Bertilak we ought not allow the heterosexual ideology of the poem to render unintelligible to us the fulfillment of their exchange bargain, a fulfillment that is right before our eyes: two men kissing feelingly, solemnly, seriously. In this poem or its community there is no opening up of a denaturalizing perspective on this identity matrix. But we have a much clearer prospect; when *we* read the lips of Gawain and Bertilak we read that text from a new perspective and contribute to a more accurate history, one we need: a history of the production of heterosexuality in Western Christendom via the containment of the deviant, and the concomitant history of various strategies deployed to resist that containment. In this discussion of *SGGK*, such resistance is enacted in the practice of reading, in constantly queering the text. When, after all, is a kiss *ever* just a kiss?

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30. “*Tantum afficiebatur eidem, tantum coluit et amavit eundem, non sine nota, prout fertur, familiaritatis obscenae*”: Walsingham [2: 148], quoted in Stow [192n219]; see Mathew [139]; Boswell, Christianity [229]. I thank Judith Ferster for bringing the Walsingham text to my attention.

31. Derek Pearsall, “The Consolations of Appropriation,” a response to a version of this paper given at Harvard University’s Center for Literary and Critical Studies in March 1992. I want to thank the many readers and audiences whose interest, questions, and provocations have helped me refine my ideas: I thank in particular Sue Schweik, Michael Lucey, Jim Rhodes, David Halperin, Judith Butler, Bidy Martin, Marsh Leicester, Linda Lomperis, and two anonymous readers.

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