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A Woman Wants: The Lady, Gawain, and the Forms of Seduction

Was will das Weib? Sigmund Freud, letter to Marie Bonaparte

But there is one thyng is alle oure fantasye,
Ande that nowe shalle ye knowe,
We desyren of men above alle manner thyng,
To have the soveraynate, withoute lesyng,
Of alle, bothe hygh ande lowe.

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell

La séduction de la femme opère à distance, la distance est l’élément de son pouvoir. Mais de ce chant, de ce charme il faut se tenir à distance, il faut se tenir à distance de la distance, non seulement, comme on pourrait le croire, pour se garder contre cette fascination, mais aussi bien pour l’exprouver.

Jacques Derrida, Œuvres: Les Styles de Nietzsche

We know this perfectly well: it happens that women talk, that they step out of their function as sign.

Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, The Newly Born Woman

When reviewing the critical reception of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it is impossible to avoid encountering certain assumptions about sexuality, one effect of which appears to be that a drama of sexual success and failure has been gradually engendered, in every sense of the word, through the accumulation of a critical tradition on this extraordinary Middle English alliterative romance. We have grown to believe that the Lady fails to seduce Gawain and that Gawain successfully eludes the sexual act, even if we believe he may be marked by feminine desire as it is communicated through the girdle. Concomitantly, the three seduction scenes are almost universally referred to as episodes of “temptation,” and the Lady as a “temptress,” with no recognition that these are not by any means neutral terms. To call a seduction a “temptation” in this instance ensures that the man and masculine desire are located at the center of our attention: it imagines a focal point determined by one gender, around which another is forced to revolve. The descriptions simultaneously yoke the seduction scenes to a religious polemical frame-
work and fabricate an atmosphere of moral inquisition, since “temptation” is a word that inevitably brings to mind an originary scenario of temptation, sin, and fall, and “temptress” recalls the original female sinner accused of engineering primal catastrophe for man. In a swift, double-edged movement, the descriptions at once fix the centrality of the man and decide the guilty marginality of the woman, whose place then no longer matters, since she has been positioned as always already in the wrong. A second proposition would automatically follow. If the Lady is a “temptress,” Gawain must be the object of her efforts, for temptation is an exercise that requires a human object; concomitantly, Gawain’s own object, in order to avoid the stigma of repeating the primal sinful response, must be unequivocal disengagement and flight. Explanations proliferate to account for the motivations of Gawain and the Lady in these scenes, but all concur in assuming this to be the operative paradigm.²

I should like to suggest an alternative mode of sexuality, a different dynamic at work in these episodes. The first two sections of this article will argue that a seduction does indeed occur, and that not an escape from sexuality but the radical mobility, the radical character, of sexuality is dramatized in these scenes. When the sexual-act-as-biology is closed off, what is generated is an infinite spectrum of the sexual, as the act negotiates alternative registers, specifically transacting here the field of language. Rather than constituting a verbal preliminary that fails to develop into a successful, full-blown seduction, therefore, Gawain’s and the Lady’s speech convene a literal seduction—quite literally a seduction in and of language, devising conditions in which desire can be most intensely activated and sustained. For part of this complex, elegant poem’s appeal lies precisely in its brilliant elaboration of desire, its teasing withdrawal of closure in seduction, and sophisticated manipulation of the sexual/ textual resources available to the erotic register.³

More importantly, as sections three to five of the article argue, a seduction that takes place in language cues us to the possibility of a strategic seduction of language, a resourceful negotiation of the textual economy for productively invested ends. For the Lady’s attentions to Gawain are quite as interested in a more covert object—the seduction less of Gawain than of his identity and hers: or rather, a seduction of the discursive practices and ideological relations through which a gendered courtly identity, sexual identity itself, is created and stabilized. Her initiatives and strategies function to anesthetize, exploit, and redeploys the technologies of definition, subverting the gendered construction and representation of the courtly subject—the subject as knight and lady, lover and beloved—and foisting a symbolic representation of her desire, the girdle, upon Gawain. I argue that in the course of the Lady’s performance, the closed circuit of an infamous question in contemporary critical theory, the Freudian-Lacanian conundrum, What does woman want? (Was will das Weib?), discovers a more open trajectory: the question issues, not in the usual fashion, in a single, unendurably banal, requisite response (“the phallos”), but in other directions, toward more open vistas. That contemporary theory might be surprised by medieval romance, in the figure of a courtly lady speaking her desire, is one of the stories of reading that emerges.

I

In the first volume of his History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault shrewdly reports that the compilation of a discourse on sex in the Western world has historically provided quite as great a pleasure as the having of sex, almost to constitute, he insinuates, another kind of “having,” another way by which an ars erotica is accomplished, with its own reward of pleasure.⁴ Within the compass of this playful formulation we might read, if we like, the tantalizing prospect of a second, more serious consideration: if speaking about sex brings a quotient of pleasure very like or coeval with sexual pleasure, might not the speaking itself constitute a type of sexual practice? Speech here would not be grasped as merely performing a sexual substitution—speech in place of sex, replacing or displacing sex—but be understood as being sex, demonstrating a specific form of sexual enactment. In the context of Sir Gawain, we cannot help but notice that for all Gawain’s protestations (because of his protestations), and inhibiting the triumphs and defeats of each speaker in the keen verbal competition, is a refrain of the intense, pleasurable excitement afforded by amorous speech:

With smoge smyling and smot pay smeten into merpe,
Pat al wartis his and bonchef pat breke hem birwene,
and wyme.

Pay lanced wordes gode,
Much wele ben wart perinne; . . . (1769–67)

Excellent studies on the syntax and grammar of these exchanges have long stressed the eroticism inhering as much in Gawain’s speech as the Lady’s, and have concluded that strong verbal similarities in the idioms of both indicate a mutual involvement in each other’s speech, and their preoccupation with an exclusive language distanced from that of all others.⁵ Indeed, the proposition that it is an amatory language to which both Gawain and the Lady are committed— the “ril-talkynge” in which
Gawain affects so little skill and displays such a facility—draws less
scholarly fire altogether than the issue of why the sexual act ought
rightly to be avoided at all. To the many reasons that have been cited
for the necessity of avoidance, one more should at least be raised: the
requisite absence of the biological act as a generative precondition for
the sexualizing of speech. This turns an axiom on its head, for in the
lore of that common sense which informs current and past critical debate
on the poem, erotic speech conduces to sex, and is intelligible only as
a prelude to the physical act which would be its logical end (the attain-
ment of which, it is necessary to point out, would also mean the "end"
of sex, a termination). But the purpose or other end of sex can equally
be conceived, anthropetically, as the making of a beginning for speech,
since sexual ends are also served when sex itself is able to become quite
literally endless—without conclusion or closure, capable of indefinite
self-extension and elaboration—by engaging an erotics of voice, and
articulating itself through a language of desire. Speech then occurs not
in place of sex but in the place of sex, in the sexual position, and acts as
the form and medium of the sexual relation: love-making composed as
speech-making.

The absence of a sexual relation, conventionally defined, between the
Lady and Gawain thus expresses not only the fine force of a prohibition
but also the continuing, creative reduplication of that lack which
prompts and releases desire—the impossibility of the one provisioning
the possibility of the other. A notable object and condition of desire is,
of course, speech. Foucault elsewhere sums it up neatly: "speech is not
merely the medium which manifests—or dissembles desire; it is also
the object of desire." Between Gawain and the Lady, desire in its most
impersonal manifestation, "the sexuality at work in all practices of the
sign," speaks and is spoken, one modality of the pleasure of the text.
Both characters, in addition, speak the manifold turns of their desire,
as it evolves and is specified ("He kysses his comely, and knytly he
mele" [974]); they speak, moreover, of the desire to speak, to interro-
gate the other, defend themselves, explore the ramifications of their
self-positioning in speech. Ultimately, from the pleasure taken and
received in the "Much speche" that "pay per expoun / Of druyes greme
and grace" (1506), we understand that to desire is to speak, and that
speech is a necessary though not sufficient field for the operations of
desire.

More fundamentally, and subtending the objectives of speech, desire
is also its own object, invested by its very nature with a demand for
self-continuation. In order for desire to be satisfied, therefore, the expe-

rience of final satisfaction or absolute gratification which would bring
about the cessation of desire must, paradoxically, be held off; for desire
seeks out not its own succease in utter fulfillment, purest pleasure—
this condition being, if not altogether impossible, at least impossible to
imagine or represent in the ordinary way—but the guarantee of per-
petual existence. Desire desires, above all, the maintenance of desire.
Its perpetuation depends in part on the activity of a certain irritation
that ensures a state of pleasure as ever only partial, instantly reversible
into its opposite, and coextant with that opposite, from which, in some
circumstances, it would be virtually indistinguishable. In the encounters
between the Lady and Gawain, the irritation making for an unpleasure-
within—pleasure—both a pleasurable unpleasantness and an unpleasant
pleasure—is typically experienced as the modulation of tension in the
sexual-verbal excitation of the seduction episodes.

The process is inaugurated before the seduction scenes even begin, at
the introduction of the Lady to Gawain. Here, a dazzlingly fulsome
impression of the Lady's beauty, in all its sexual coloring and charming
promise, is splendidly detailed through Gawain's eyes (942-45, 951-52,
955-56, 968); and the moment of excited, unqualified pleasure—cul-
minating in Gawain's happy use of the occasion to take her in his arms
and kiss her—is played out and enjoyed (971-74). The suggestion of
purely, and intensely, pleasurable tension is thus set in place by the time
we arrive at the first seduction. That pleasure is equivocated almost at
the outset, however, for a ripple is quickly introduced in the form of
the Lady's active efforts to direct the uses of sexual attraction at their
first private meeting. She induces the sudden, overwhelming escalation
of sexual-verbal stimuli, an exess of excitation: at once raising the stakes
and overrunning the coordinates of pleasure, her actions lodge a gen-
minal uncertainty and surprise, and set in place a counterreaction. For
the roles are too forcefully and astonishingly reversed between Gawain
and herself: it is the Lady who now aggressively initiates speech,
embracing, and kissing, all the while boldly giving voice to her delight
in Gawain, even as the momentum of his delight appears to flicker and
hesitate. Although a richly joyous, galvanizingly sexual excitement is
still detectable in the provocative banter and flirtatious play between
them ("And þus he bounted agayn with mony a blute laster" [1217]),
the character of tension has noticeably complexified. Pleasure now coex-
ists with an unpleasant perceptible in Gawain's nascent unease.

Tension can give rise to pleasure or unpleasantness, or to both, as a
bedeviled Freud conceives. Gawain's experience confirms this as either/
or and both: equally the seductive, gratifying game of challenge-and—
response with a lovely, dangerous companion, stimulatingly repeated, as well as that unnerving underside to stimulation which prompts him to assent with hasty relief when the same beautiful companion offers to break off an episode ("Pe lady hem spek of leue, / He granted hem ful sone" [1288–89]). For a complication, we may read Freud's celebrated account of the fort/dy game in Beyond the Pleasure Principle as suggesting that even where unpleasantness is predominant, its repetition may yield the unexpected yields of pleasure "of another sort." Or in another way (BPP 8–11). Many critics rightly notice that the prominence of Gawain's dismay eclipses the evidence of his pleasure, and gains in unpleasantness would appear to accumulate with every engagement with the Lady, so that by the end of the second day, Gawain is already writhing with noticeable discomfort, and explicitly "wroth with hymselfen" (1660).

In a provocative coincidence, it is only after the repeated rehearsal of encounters, private and public, with their graduating pattern of discomfort, that Gawain is yielded his intense experience of pleasure in this romance. On the third and final morning he receives the gift of a sensuality so powerful and erotic, so complete in its sweetness, that the occasion teeters dangerously on the edge of consummation and plenitude. Verbal and sexual excitation move swiftly toward a perfect pitch of pure, unconditional pleasure: and desire comes under the shadow of an end.

The possibility is evaded, however, when Gawain savagely shatters the "blis and bonchef pat breke hem bitwene" (1764), instantly converting pleasure into its opposite, namely, the refusal of gratification in any measure or form. He brutally tells the Lady that he neither has, nor will consider having, a mistress (1788–89); he will neither render nor accept a token keepsake for her consolation (1803–07); indeed, he will not give or receive pleasure at all. Yet in this very attitude of uncivil, churlish insouciance—denying the Lady even the delicate fiction she invents for their imposed continence, the pretext of a prior loyalty—may be discerned something akin to an undercurrent of partial pleasure. For in truth a part of Gawain's pleasure throughout the seduction episodes consists precisely in inflicting a quotient of unpleasantness upon the Lady: an unlikely "yield of pleasure from another source" (BPP 11) coincident with the repetition of unpleasantness. In the course of verbal and physical play, Gawain defiantly transfers a portion of his unpleasantness to the lady, and receives, in the transference, his other pleasure. We notice, for example, that although he honors her requests for a kiss readily enough, his compliance is nonetheless acted out with such a show of passivity and indifference as to deny a substantial quotient of satisfaction to her erotic demand:

Emphasizing the social necessity of compliance ("as a knyght falles"), the words sound remarkably ingrunguid, ungenerous, and indeed, imperious in spirit. By making desire seem one-sided, and his own cooperation merely pro forma, Gawain cleverly denies to these moments and to the Lady their full share of charged erotic pleasure. It is a stunting that is skillfully reinforced by other moments of selective denial. On the second morning, in spite of his manifest talent for the niceties of "huf-talking," and after having dwelt at length on the subject of love (1506–07), Gawain implacably refuses to narrate the tales of love to the Lady craves (1140–45), though her request is fully in the spirit of their verbal play. He responds to the so-called "rape" fantasy with which she teases him when flattering his manliness and strength ("3e may not be wreme, /3e ar stinnoth to constrayn wyth strenkbe, 3if yow lyke, / 3if any were so vilean pat yow devaye wolde" [1495–97]) with a prim, moralizing lecture. His pleasure resides as much in piously rebuking her for her attempt to afford him pleasure as in the smug display of his own pompos acquaintance and superiority ("3e, be God," quoq Gawaw, "good is your speche, / Bot hrete is vnpyrue, in pide per I lende, / And vche gift pat is geu en not with guod wylle" [1498–500].

At the narrative level, a homology with Gawain's actions exists in the form of an implicit textual unwillingness to allow extensive access to moments where an unchecked, unmotivated pleasure might be fully enjoyed by the reader. Where like the Lady one might long to hear more—of, for instance, the intricacies and subtleties, the delightful inventions and sleights in the verbal sparring of Gawain and the Lady—one is circumvented by a flat narrative tautology, or the abrupt, inconclusive petering-out of an episode. Although the narrative hints at the protraction of time in conversational dalliance, it reports but a fraction of such pleasures to us. Informed only that "Much speche" is expended (1506), that "bay meled of muchquat" (1280), or that "Pay laged and layked longe" (1554), but not granted further elaboration of these sequences of gaiety and mirth, we find that our wish for, and indulgence in, the pleasures of prolonged narrative description is, like the Lady's, maddeningly regulated. Even at the level of a single speech,
conditions allowing only partial pleasure—pleasure mingled with, and tipping into, displeasure—are legion. The Lady’s choice of metaphors in the opening speeches of the first seduction, where she couches a succession of invitations to Gawain that are either tantalizingly sexual, or nonsexually social, or both (1224–25, 1230–40), presents a witty illustration.16 Her words give pleasure in that they are roundly suggestive, richly equivocal, and pregnant with possibility: thrillingly, one cannot ever tell their meaning for certain, their pleasure deriving from the very suspension of explicit intention. Yet just as pleasure is generated and received, a counterpressure can also be discerned that is recognizably disagreeable, for the same words are also annoyingly evasive, secret, and disingenuous: one cannot ever tell their meaning for certain.17 The pull between pleasure and displeasure, to our chagrin, enacts itself within even a single rhetorical operation.

The relationship between tension/excitation and pleasure/unpleasure, a perplexed Freud concedes in “The Economic Problem in Masochism,” is finally of mysterious character, less likely to be contingent upon variations in the quantity of stimuli than on some “qualitative peculiarity” whose distinctive action might well be “rhythmic.”18 It is tempting to suggest that the rhythm which structures and accommodates their vital relationship in the seduction episodes is principally linguistic in character, arising out of the order and activity of language in these scenes as much as from “the periodical duration of the changes, the risings and fellings of the volume of stimuli”—a psychic rhythm that, in this instance, also accords directly and inseparably from the exercise of speech, and from which it is therefore perhaps not usefully differentiated. Since the cut-and-parry, press-and-retreat, protraction-or-contraction of verbal argument in these episodes play upon and determine both stimulus/tension and pleasure/unpleasure—to shape pace, mood, pitch and tone in every moment—the linguistic functions as the metaregister of negotiation and mediation, its peculiar rhythm being, in this instance, irreducibly constitutive.

II

It is particularly crucial to observe, at this point, that the grammar of excitation animating the language of desire in the seduction is also prominently a gendered grammar, and self-consciously rendered to a remarkable degree by the erotic female body. The narrative returns to the Lady’s body obsessively, over and over, to linger on her eyes (970, 1290, 1480), lips (1207), cheek (1204), skin (943–44, 952, 956), breast (955, 1741), throat (955, 1740), and face (943, 1740), as if by such selective demarcation of disarticulate bodily parts to articulate a magic territory of the senses, the ground of a fascinating compulsion. Punctually, like a refrain, it calls attention to the argument of the Lady’s physical person, the parts of her body, as well as to her verbal argument, the parts of her speech (“so glorious . . . So fautes of hir futes and of so fyne hewes” [1760–61], “With chynne and cheke ful sweete” [1204], “Wyth lyppez smal lyeande” [1407], “Hir brest bret before, and bhinde eke” [1741], etc.), so that the features of the feminine body come to carry a special rhetorical valence, functioning, like the elements of language, on multiple registers of persuasion: one might say, without exaggeration, that the body here is structured like, and actively structured, a language. Incorporating the body of the Lady’s language, we are to understand, is the language of her body, and vice versa, both of which operate interchangeably—the verbal and the extraverbal comingling—in the rhetorical apparatus she commands. Gesture, movement, facial expression and speech cohabit a rhetorical continuum of fluent and sinuous physicality, marshalling persuasion through an expressive and dynamic, a speaking, corporality (“And with a layde hym bo layde hym byse wordes” [1480; emphasis mine]; Gawain by comparison, except on the occasions he imitates or reproduces the Lady’s actions, features alongside her as almost a disembodied voice.

By performing “in the flesh,” with her body as (well as) her speech, the Lady incarnates a language of desire: produces, in other words, a bodily script that represents desire as momentarily visible and legible. Her performance of the body as sexual text/representation—the representation of (her) sexuality—is a tactical enunciation or staging of desire, whose apparent iterability and readability then work to confirm its presence and support its continuation. For desire must be represented, to oneself and to the other, in order to be sustained, perhaps in order even to exist;20 correlative, and reflexively, the demonstration of desire’s existence corroborates and reifies its motive capacity (in the other, and possibly, oneself).21 Excitation is strongly responsive, in particular, to the spur of visual representation22 (perhaps because—if we follow the lead of Laplanche or Bersani in reading Freud—it is ultimately self-directed, autoerotic in character, routed through an identification by the subject with the object seen or represented). Tapping the mutually bound libidinal processes of scopophilia and exhibition, the Lady’s calculated projection of an erotic feminine body fuels excitation by playing off Gawain’s desire to see, his impulse to look, against her provision of something that desires to be seen, a desirable self-display for her own private purposes. Voluntarily, deliberately, she
submits herself to the prospective mastery of the gaze, seeming to let
Gawain take the full measure of what he surveys, but only to turn
potential mastery into something else, and in other directions, when
she manipulates its compulsions to subserve another aim than that of
which it is aware: the incitement and maintenance of a strategically
conditioned state of agitation in Gawain. 23

Ultimately, the Lady works across the spectrum of sensory registers
—sight, speech, hearing, touch, pressure—to invest the entire envelope
of her body, all its points, with libidinal meaning. 24 With a smile, a
look, a touch; a tone of voice, or beguiling speech; the charm of her
laughter, or artful bodily composition ("hir profe brown al naked"
[1740]), she invents a growing catchment of invasive, libidinally charged
spaces. Over the three mornings, a network of bodily zones is incremen-
tally cathedected which focalize erotogeneity. Through the eroticized
bodily limits of eye, ear, and skin, excitation is introduced, induced
psychically into Gawain. The infiltration is gradual and persistent;
incalculably, Gawain is coaxed into introjecting the Lady’s laughter and
patterns of speech, and into reproducing these mimetically in dialogue
with her ("Al layande pe lady lancd pe bounle. . . . And þus he bouted
again with mony a blyfe lege"
[1212-17; emphasis mine]). The terms
of their interaction, psychically and literally, are hers.

III

There is a point at which any reading of the seduction scenes, however
well-intentioned, might find itself besieged by a curiosity that resides,
tenacious and scarcely suspected, at the heart of its own desire. A qu-
estion may be shaped which assumes an oddly familiar form, to be
articulated, not without misgiving perhaps, in some awkward variant
of the following: What, then, in the final analysis, might the Lady really
want here? For it is impossible to evade the overwhelming supposition
that the Lady wants (even if we reject the notion of a simplistic object
of desire), so powerfully does feminine desire speak in and across these
scenes. A problem arises, however, once our demand is issued, for an
unmistakable ush of telltale impatience clings disturbingly to the ques-
tion, and sounds an instant alarm. Here again, we realize, making its
appearance with depressing regularity, is the familiar temptation to put
on the mantle, and occupy the place, of the authoritative (and tradi-
tionally male) critic who contemplates (with what appearance of detach-
ment he can muster) a female and invariably troublesome object of
critical speculation. The speciously benign regard and magisterial air
the question favors (tinged with the merest hint of exasperated con-
servation) would once more position the woman in an age-old, recur-
ing equation, whereby she is forcibly produced as the object of
investigation. 25 Thus scrutinized and interrogated, a woman is again
predictably defined as a problem—the problem, that perennial one, as
old as Eve and older (and reiterated so memorably in medieval literature
by Dame Ragnell and Alison of Bath)—to be, yet again, (re)solved.
Was will das Weib? What, after all, does the woman want? Whether the
demand issues from Freud 26 or late twentieth-century male feminists, 27
the desire in the question, we suspect, is to settle the question, settle
on a satisfactory answer—but satisfying whom?

This is not to suggest that the question of feminine desire cannot ever
be articulated, that it must, when it is raised, necessarily be compro-
missed by the politics of its voicing. Quite another politics of voice can
be heard (as it were, another ear) when the question is addressed
in the first person, by the of whom it was to have been demanded.
Attention to the Lady’s speech in the seduction episodes would at once
recover the question differently—from a different place, with a different
force and trajectory—by allowing the woman to pose the question.
Following her speech, one is cued into a position that allows the Lady
to exist as the (speaking) subject of the question, rather than its object
or predicate, when we take on, to the extent that it is possible, her
desire as our own. 28 When it is she who investigates the question, what
unfolds before us is less an answer than a productive unsettling of
answers, an unsettling even of the question itself: the opening up of the
question to other questions.

And the Lady does insist throughout the seduction episodes on the
feminine viewpoint, systematically generating, with remarkable per-
sistence, the description of a Gawain that women desire. From the
earliest moments of his arrival at the castle, before even his introduc-
tion to the Lady, an interested configuration of Gawain is already published
and circulated by Bertilak’s household. They represent Gawain as a
courly, sophisticated knight (a “fyn fader of nurture” [191]) whose
very courtliness and sophistication would conveniently entail an implicit
willingness to oblige expectations, and fulfill all that is hoped for from
him (916-27). In that happy anticipation, the emphasis accordingly falls
not so much on Gawain’s personal excellences in themselves, but rather
on the enjoyment that these would devise—that which “Pis burne now
scha ulus bryn” (925; emphasis mine). Indeed, the knight’s sudden
appearance in their midst is construed as the gracious gift of a kindly

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God in a fortunate season, meant for their pleasurable instruction and delight (120–23). When the Lady takes over the function of characterizing Gawain, therefore, the way has been paved for a reprise of this emphasis on the exquisite pleasure that the knight, acting in accordance with his enviraged reputation, would help to bring forth. In her hands, however, the theme quickly acquires a novel twist—the unexpected dimension of gender. For it is now feminine pleasure that takes priority, and claims especial attention. The question of what women desire—in the male courtly subject, in the courtly relationship, in a multiplying series of instances—takes precedence. The qualities in Gawain she selects for admiration ("bêwete et de bonerté et blype semblaunt" [1271]) are significantly those many "costes" which most directly support feminine pleasure—such "prys" and "prowes" as would bring delight to a woman, and "blysse into boure" (1519). The cumulative effect of the Lady's extensivist valorization of specific knighthly qualities and acts, as these are putatively exemplified by Gawain, is to suggest that the Gawain women desire—the ideal knight invoked, so to speak, in the particularities of name and reputation—would be a Gawain who desires what women desire: whether it is to "Keer hem comfort and colen her care" (1284) in private dalliance, to plught a faith and loyalty that will not be broken (1783–84), or to risk life and limb in hazardous action for feminine love, enduring "for her druely dulful stroundes" (1517). By definition, that ideal knight is dedicated to meeting feminine ends and purposes; the virtue of his tractability to feminine agency and command inscribes his desirability. The object of masculine desire, the Lady's words purposefully suggest, should consist in a willing submission to the female will. A woman's desire should become both the knight's spur and his reward.

Though speaking in an individual voice, and of her own desire, the Lady's discourse also shades daringly into that of others ("hit ar ladyes innoxe pat leuer wer nowpe..." [1251], "were I worth al he wone of wymmen aluye..." [1269]), of, in fact, an entire generation and gender who are absent, or barred in other ways from the opportunity of such speech as hers. As her discourse gathers momentum, her voice is increasingly offered as one immediate, particular representative of the voices from that generalized and largely silent constituency whose desire is able to speak because of, and through her speech. For feminine desire and its interests can find a channel to partial expression when there is even a single female speaking subject:

... hit ar ladyes innoxe pat leuer wer nowpe
Haf he, hende, in hor holde, as he habbe here.

To daly with derely your daynte wordex,
Keer hem comfort and colen her carex.
Pen much of pe garyson oper golde pat pay hauen. (1255–55)

The enunciation of desire, explicitly and in a first-person female voice, at once acts to establish certain stakes. First, women are claimed as the subjects of desire (rather than masculine desire's objects) in the courtly relationship—as agents with a volition and a desire of their own that can be specified, witnessed, urged, and thus legitimized. Second, the Lady's account of the ideal knight as one who is bound by the objectives and dictates of feminine desire polemically locates the woman at the center of the courtly relationship, and describes the knight's place as adjunctive. The Lady asserts this freely on the second morning, when she moves, with tactical precision, from professing an interest in a limited model of relations between two courtly subjects, herself and Gawain, to asserting a larger hypothesis of gender relations that subsumes all courtly subjects. She offers a model that binds ladies and knights in general to a universal principle of value, and to a hierarchy of gender that valorizes the feminine. This model constitutes an ethical universal:

... of alle cheualry to chose, pe cheif pyng aloset
Is pe ley layk of luf, pe letrut of arnet;
For to telle of pei tenelyng of pei trwe knytester,
Hit is pe cytelet tokon and tyxt of her werke;
How ledes for he ley layk of lysez han sundered,
Endured for her druely dulful stoundes,
And after wenged with her walour and voved her care,
And brost blysse into boure with bountees hor awen— (1512–19)

A woman, we note, sustains the topographic and ideological focus in this prescriptive geometry of gender relations. The trajectory of the knight's route issues from the feminine (the love, or desire, of the woman) and returns to the feminine (the woman's "boure"). Feminine love impels the knight, directs his usages, and orders the ideological basis and value of his identity. Furthermore, if the "cheif pyng aloset" in "alle cheualry" is "pe ley layk of luf," the very institution of knighthood itself is conceptually brought under feminine jurisdiction, with the "boure" operating as a feminized reference point by which knights orient themselves, and the institution of knighthood is pulled into focus. In short, feminine desire ascribes a province to itself, reasigns values and priorities to gender relations and identity, and decides the terms by which these are to be defined. Through a trope of seduction and a cunning seductress, a peculiar ideological seduction is uncannily exercised.
While describing the Gawain of her choice, a Gawain that women desire, the Lady’s speech and discursive acts also work, at the same time, to produce that Gawain, through the seduction of the identity currently borne by the knight before her (who goes by the name of Gawain). That is to say, the Lady’s rhetoric of seduction is aimed at seducing the representation of Gawain, retroping the instruments of his name and identity in order to substitute and implement a persona of her preference, an identity construction consonant with, supporting, and ideologically advancing the interests of the feminine. In spite of the knight’s spirited resistance, an alternative representation is accomplished, with his minimal cooperation, and a Gawain produced who conforms, symbolically and formally—if not in the measure, say, of a Lancelot—to feminine demands. For Gawain’s resistance is circumvented by the outer by internal and external paradigms operating in tandem—by qualities of character on which the Lady is able to play, to induce particular responses from him, and by the efficacy of the courtly idiom she employs. Sensitive primarily to her more obvious ploys, Gawain assiduously defends himself against her flattery (1226–29, 1234, 1257, 1272–73, 1511, 1520–21, etc.)—one technique for the reprocessing of his identity—by insisting that her selective account of his reputation is exaggerated, unbelief the man, and disproportionate (“To reche to such reuerence as se reherce here / I am wyse wynbor, I wot wel my seluen” [1243–44]; “pe daynté bat pay delen, for my disert nys euen” [1266]). In the course of swift and prudent demurral, however, a fractious element creeps into his speech, effecting a correction, and he lets slip the surprising hint, subtly nuanced but distinct, that he might once indeed have been the Gawain of the Lady’s description, the Gawain of her desire—“I be not now he þat se of spoken” [1242; emphasis mine]. The admission of a prior identity, now supposedly defunct, at once renders the prospect of future identities, further reconfigurations, less than improbable. Gawain’s pungent concern with the “fourme of his castes” and his sensitivity to the hint of some lack or inadequacy in his conduct determine his susceptibility to manipulation, and testify to the possession of a subterranean vanity: a wish, at some level, to be thought deserving of the Lady’s praise, and the splendid reputation it proffers. He is accordingly tantalized by a volatile mix of vanity and cautious wariness: by a wish to display, discreetly and allusively, certain traits of the legendary persona the Lady describes with such lavish admiration, and, equally and at the same time, by an earnest wish to distance himself from the obligations governing that persona.

The confused resentment that results is fluently expressed in the dynamics of the first kiss: Gawain’s passive, grudging acquiescence measures precisely the distance he is willing to travel to meet the requirements of the Lady’s ideal of chivalric identity, an identity that would compel a knight, in the present circumstances, to render pleasure, obediently and gallantly, at a lady’s behest. The first two kisses the Lady wins from Gawain thus serve as a benchmark of her early success in interpellating him as a subject of her design, through a discursive modality that facilitates and protects her access to crucial constructions, while duly restricting Gawain’s own access to effective mechanisms of opposition. From her opening greeting, the Lady envelops Gawain in a verbal contest whose terms she supplies, drawing him into the use and practice of her rhetorical categories, and her particular inflection of the courtly idiom. By accepting the structures and rules of discourse presented to him—e.g., the playful metaphor of battle (1209–10, 1215, 1219, 1223) with its tilltillingly sexual overliterations; the bantering, flirtatious atmosphere that at first seems to offer the promise of evasion through verbal gallantry; even the irrefragably challenging style of minute legalistic debate, where wit and mental prowess might be gratifyingly exercised for display (“Pe knyght with speches skere / Answered to vche a cace” [1261–62])—the knight is introduced into an ideological system of the Lady’s determination, in which his freedom for invention, as he comes to realize, is increasingly forfeit. Only at the beginning does an unexposed lightness of tone and easy wit characterize Gawain’s response. On the first morning, the Lady’s opening gambit, with its playful trope of capture (“Now ar se tan ast-yel! Bot true vus may schape” [1209]), is promptly answered by Gawain with a matching playfulness and delicate charm that evince a sly facility for turning her desire for pleasure to his advantage (“I glede me 3ederly, and 3ege after grace. . . Bot wolde se, lady lovelly, . . . deprec yres pynson, and pray hym to ryse, / Wolde bose of his bed, and buske me better; / Schulde keuer be more comfort to karp yow wyth” [1245–21]). As the game accelerates and its stakes increase, however, it becomes plain that the idiom and style she adopts, though eminently suited to the Lady’s uses, do not afford Gawain sufficient room or instrumentality to counter her aggressive constructions. To her challenging supposition on the second morning that a knight’s principal devotion must be to “pe lely llyn of luf”—a proposition situating masculinity in an orbit around the feminine—Gawain responds, not with his own counterdescription of knighthood, but with only a temporary self-extraction from the exigent necessity of behaving like a knight of the Lady’s definition, leaving the definition itself crucially
unchallenged and intact. As the game nears an end, and potential for all but the most nominal courtesy is gradually foreclosed, Gawain is reduced to a smilingly savage directness (1788-91) or grating bluntness ("I will no gift, for God, my gay, at his tyne; / I haue none yow to borne, ne nogt wyll I take" [1822-23]), the illusion of maneuverability and witty resourcefulness all but hopelessly abandoned. The game is, of course, a genuine competition of wills and discourses, the underlying seriousness of which is disguised by its surface gaiety. For the Lady it provides a useful format in which to subvert the processes of gender definition and positioning that are crucial to the formation of identity, with stakes in sexual politics that are considerable: the opportunity, no less, of subverting and displacing, with lavish good humor, the courtly conventions whose practices order the relationship of lady and knight, and produce the determine courtly subject of sexed and gendered identity.

In each of the first two instances, the kiss she wins from Gawain is engineered within a drama of identity-in-crisis. It immediately follows a moment when the Lady points to the noncoincidence between Gawain, the subject physically present, and the name of Gawain, the signifier and title of identity. The kiss is specially performed, that is, under the threat of an imminent disjunction of the man from the symbolic system that recognizes his access to, and serves to index, a personal identity. Ostensibly on the verge of departure, after having toyed at length with the reconstruction of Gawain's reputation on the first morning, the Lady suddenly brings the issue of identity to crisis, by raising the startling hypothesis that Gawain might not, in fact, be Gawain—or more accurately, "Gawain":

But pat 3e be Gawain, hit gotz in mynde.

So god as Gawayn gauynly is halden,
And cortasyse is closed so clem in hymself;
Couth not lyhtly haf lenged so long wyth a lady,
Bot he had cruad a cosse, bi his cortasyse,
Bi sum towch of summe tryde at sume tale end. (1293-1301)

The kiss to which Gawain promptly agrees (thus sealing an implicit if temporary bargain to close the matter) is hence completed by him under the formal aspect of a proof ("I kiss, therefore I am Gawain"). More importantly, it functions as the provisional condition whose fulfillment awards double satisfactions. For Gawain, it covers over the suspicion of a fracture momentarily glimpsed, and grants him permission to resume the legitimate name and identity of Gawain through a single gesture of affirmation. At the same time that the confirmation is allowed and the ownership of identity momentarily upheld, an evolution in the nature and terms of that identity has already transpired to the Lady's advantage. Imperceptibly, one Gawain is surrendered for another who is fractionally but crucially different, a more tractable knight whose obedience to a lady's wishes can be formally enforced through the sagacious application of discursive pressure, and who will move, however reluctantiy, in directions of the Lady's preference. So vulnerable is Gawain to the slightest insinuation of personal defect ("... freschly he askez, / Ferde lest he have fayled in fourme of his castes" [1394-95]), and so intent upon conforming to at least the outline of the desired reputation, that the deed passes without immediate recognition of what has been mobilized under its aegis. For until now, the knight has resisted with commensurate agility the Lady's rhetorical project of the morning, the specification of a knightly identity she would address as belonging to him, an identity whose distinctive feature is the accommodation of feminine will. Where she has sought to uphold the construct of this preferred Gawain ("I wene wel, twysse, Sir Woven se are" [1225]), he has sought to deflect its emergence ("I be not now he... "). With the undertaking of the kiss, however—under the threatened dispossession of a celebrated name, and sealed by the element of surprise ("And as he stod, hi stonied hym wyth ful stor worder" [1291])—a version of that Gawain inductibly re-forms; a Gawain materializes who will yield (if sufficiently) a symbolic measure of domestication to the Lady's desire and will. A seduction is enacted; one identity is unobstructively exchanged for another, furnished and adjusted for the knight by the Lady; it is symbolically conferred and accepted in an instant, with a kiss.

The same schematric ritual is set in motion the following morning ("Sir, 3if 3e be Wawen, wonde me bynke..." [1481]). This time it occurs, appropriately, at the beginning of the encounter rather than the end, and only in rudimentary form, since it functions now merely to confirm something that was settled the day before. Having thus concluded her arrangements, the Lady thereafter dispenses kisses without announcement (1555, 1758, 1860), in incremental progression (twice on the second day, and thrice on the third). The kiss takes on the appearance of a signature by the Lady, a marking of Gawain's body that precedes, and culminates in, the ultimate mark of her desire—the girdle—while Gawain's mute acknowledgment of her right to kiss when she pleases mires him ever more deeply in her reconstructed version of chivalric cooperation.

The suggestion put forth in the schema of the first kiss, that identity can be detached from a subject and reconfigured, discovers the subject's
relation to identity as problematically unstable and revealingly dependent for its stabilization on the reproduction of an appropriate set of legalizing procedures, legal fictions. Identity is exposed as a discursive construct—a cluster of properties inhabiting a temporary setting, and dubbed by a proper name, “Gawain”; or the site, if we prefer, of an arrangement of attributes whose pattern can be disarrayed and reconstituted indefinitely. The Lady’s resourcefulness suggests that, in contrast to the other, well-advertised model of identity as given, immobilized a priori—exemplified early in the poem in the pentangle description—identity is a condition that is entered into and arbitrated contingently, coordinated from moment to moment by a series of acts and circumstances on which it depends for meaning. 44 Like its correlate, the human subject, identity is (to borrow a phrase from the early Kristeva) ineluctably en process—in process and/or on trial. The Lady’s strategy in the seduction game, moreover, foregrounds the radical mobility and constructed nature not only of personal identity, but of group or social identity as well, by submitting to inspection, mimicry, and irony the practices by which two mutually dependent categories of courtly identity, “lady” and “knight,” come to be positioned. It is a measure of her success that by the end of the seduction scenes these appellations have become, for us, defamiliarized and estranged, their customary lineaments of gender skewed, so to speak, by an impudent process of designification and re-signification.

V

The Lady, as many have noted (with appreciation or censure, delight or derision), mimics the ways and manners whereby a knight, or male courtly lover, woo a lady in romance. 45 Her repertoire includes, among other things, the persistent demonstration of passionate devotion (“And ay þe lady let lyk as hym lough much” [1281]); the eager seeking-out of affectionate tokens, such as kisses, from the beloved; ardent admiration of the beloved’s beauty and many graces (“3e ar knyxt comolkest kyd of your elde” [1520]; “so long and so sepe as 3e . . . So cortyse, so knyntly . . .” [1510–11]); hyperbolic gallantry in the preference of compliments (“I haue in his hous hym þat al lykez” [1234]); even a ritual offer of service, in the common masculine pattern (“Me behovez of syne force / Your servaunt be, and schafe” [1239–40]). Where it is usually the knight who comes into his identity as an active, desiring subject, a male courtly lover, through such commonplaces—by establishing a love relation with a desired female, the object of love, in time-

honored custom—here it is the Lady who usurps the active masculine function, thereby unsettling with her activity the routine accomplishment of manly and familiar sexual identity by the courtly subject. 46 Her humorous replication of masculinity—a species of sexual impersonation—draws forceful attention to the organizing power of conventional practices to define and impart sexual identity, and to order that identity into place around the love relation. 47 At the same time that the Lady’s pastiche of the courtly relationship uncovers for inspection the legalizing function and authorizing force of courtly conventions, however, the sexual inversion she enacts also cannily describes a means by which the definitional process is liable to illegal inscription, thus investing its powers of identity construction with a keen irony that is skillfully subversive. From the very conventions that arrange the orderly assumption of legal sexual identities, unauthorized, incongruent alignments of gender can emerge, and improper forms of sexual identity conjured. As the Lady’s performance declares, a coercive technology of definition might be made to yield disorderly alternatives by harnessing and rechanneling the institutional force of its own coercions.

Amusingly, the Lady interprets masculine identity and behavior in whimsically parodic fashion, with irresistible energy and large gestures. Kisses, in particular, tend to be bestowed with a swoop, from on high:

Ho comes nere with þat, and cacez hym in armez.
Loutez lyftcy chadoun et leude kysses. (1305–06)
Pe lady loutez adoun,
And comlyly kysses his face. . . . (1504–05)
Felle ouer his fayre face, and fetly hym kyssed. . . . (1758)
Sykande ho sweze doun and semly hym kyssed. . . . (1796)

However, the establishment of the courtly subject as a determinately sexed being, an entity of firmly grounded gender, is cunningly circumvented in these lines. For the subject who initiates the boisterous moves here with such jaunty self-possession seems at least doubly sexed—at once masculine and feminine, a woman (“Pe lady”) who behaves like a man, with an arrogant physicality and bold command (“comes nere with þat . . . cachez . . . in armez”), and who is poised over the recumbent figure of a passive creature on whose body she acts (always we note, still she, “ho”), planting kisses “fetly,” “comelyly,” and sighing. Emphasis is directed, in other words, away from the ascription of a determinate gender to the subject, and toward proximate intimations of gender in the positions she occupies from moment to moment, so that the subject’s sexual-social identity as a courtly individual seems
indeterminately or multiply marked, overridden (overwritten) by contingent acts of gender. The Lady's infinitesimal oscillations between proximately gendered acts takes that sexual-social identity with critical uncertainty: the conventional sexual bearings of the term "lady" are disavowed, the composition of the term heterologized. No longer simply or singly gendered, "courtly lady" comes to indicate a sexual identity that is ambiguously and heterogeneously constituted, and displays the unexpected character of a riddle.

Courtly identities being interdependent, the Lady's prosecution of the masculine role necessarily compels the reinvention of the sexual-social status of the knight's identity as well. Critics have bewailed what they view as the feminization of Gawain, whose status as a knight is undermined by his assumption of subject positions sexually incongruent with, or foreign to, the conventional moorings of knightly identity. In order to evade the Lady's request "to schewe / And teche sum tokenez of tweluf craftes" (1526-27), for instance, Gawain retreats behind a improvised image that represents him as a species of passive, maidenly innocent, a reluctant, demure naff whose acquaintance with erotic knowledges remains modestly underachieved and slight, in sharp contradiction to the expertise of his seducer, a smoothly sophisticated practitioner of "pat art" ("yow...I wet wel, wylde more slyf / Of pat art, bi pe half, or a hundred of secche / As I am" [1542-44]). Gawain's improvisations would seem to extend as well to the repertoire of the sexual tease, the artful poses and attitudes of the female coquette. In answer to the Lady's reproach of the second morning, "Pou hatz fer seerly pat systerday l ettte" (1485), he responds with a wide-eyed, ingenuous taunt, "What is pat?...I wyss I wot neuer" (1487), feigning an artful dimness of wit and memory that is belied by his alert readiness and quick anticipation of his opponent's moves on this occasion ("Sir Wawn her welcumde wooy on fyrst" [1477]). Chuffed with the reminder that she "kende" him "of kysstyng," Gawain archly retires and deepens the mischief with a coquettish affectation of timidity — "pat durst I ono do, lest I dawaye, / If I were werm, I were wrong, iwyss, 3if ly proffered" (1493-95)—an absurdly coy pretense, given the Lady's eager amorousness, but useful for sexual withholding (1498-500).

In the unfolding of seduction, then, the Lady's desire introduces a break or caesura into the disposition of two familiar terms, "lady" and "knight," so that the identities they en-gender are recoded, at her instigation, as multiple—seduced, so to speak, into surprising heterogeneity by the infusion of difference. That is to say, the definition of each of these sexual-social constructs and the technology of definition by which such constructs are accomplished are exposed to question in the course of the Lady's performance—opened up or made vulnerable to strangeness and uncertainty. The articulation of desire in these scenes thus produces not resolution or answer in this instance, but the proliferation of questions on and investigations into the nature of sexual identity and its representation. Significantly, the sexual impersonation the Lady conducts throughout the seduction is by no means restricted merely to an infamous transsexual display, an exaggerated demonstration of the gestures and moves of institutional masculinity alone. Her self-conscious deployment of feminine wiles and gestures—exquisitely staged, theatrical exhibition of her entirely feminine and desirable woman's body, her adroit management of courtly discourse to valorize femininity, the operatic, serio-comic attitudes of femininity yearning she strikes, even her notorious attempt at recapitulating a classic mise-en-scène of feminine passivity with the suggestion that Gawain take up an aggressive masculine stance in a projected fantasy of sexual force (1495-97)—all bear the marks, as well, of a feminine masquerade in progress. The Lady is a woman who plays a man in the demonstrable act of courtship, but she is equally a woman who plays a woman in that same process. Most critically, the dual character of her sexual impersonation announces that all sexual identity is enacted as a masquerade. As a result of her performance, sexual identity in the seduction scenes is represented as a series of stances and moves, a relay of gestures and moments that dispense now femininity, now masculinity. The Lady's oscillation—her sliding—between masculine and feminine modes, roles, and moments raises, furthermore, the discretional specter of a secondary turbulence: the prospect of a corresponding slide and oscillation in sexual division itself—a fluctuation in the status of that separating boundary between feminine and masculine that, as we have seen, complicates the recovery of that boundary in each moment of her performance. Her vacillation between genders necessarily subjects the site of gender division to continual displacement, and, under the pressure of constant revision, the gender bipolarity it customarily secures becomes precipitously unstable and precarious. As acts and positions in the Lady's double masquerade grow interchangeably continuous, reversible and slippery, the division of masculinity and femininity into categories of mutual exclusion and opposition itself becomes insupportable, and erodes.

The Lady's performance in the seduction scenes can thus justly be characterized as at once appealing and disturbing—a coefficient of fascination and dread that tracks the hold she exercises over critics and readers of the poem as much as over Gawain. The sexualized drama the Lady concocts pulls us along a horizon of attraction and anxiety—
along a charged, unsteady divide between the immediate pleasures of reception (our massive delight at the energy and sensuousness of the erotic spectacle) and tensions that belong to a properly critical reading (acute discomfort as we interpret the ramifications of that spectacle). For once they are acknowledged, the questions that arise from the articulation of the Lady's desire threaten to spin out of control with a reckless profanity matching her own: How is a definition of the gendered courtly subject to be accomplished and sustained, for instance, when conduct intended to distinguish between the genders shows itself flexibly amenable to appropriation across sexual borders? Is, under the circumstances, a "knight" or a "lady"? As categories of identity, what is the range of meanings each term can perform or signify? What mediations would structure their relationship, if the familiar supports of opposition, exclusion, and complementarity are not recognized, and do not obtain? Which mechanisms would, in turn, organize and determine those mediations? From the problem of the courtly subject, moreover, a ragged edge of crises spreads further afield: What is a woman or a man? What positions are available to each, in the masquerade of sexual identity? Is the availability symmetrical? Can it be arrested? What, if any, limits are there to the retroging of identities? Thus it would go.

Fueling these questions, with their palpable threat of chaos, is the irresistible glimpse, in the Lady's acts and stances, of a radically mobile sexuality, and its lively resistance to immobilization and curtailment. The Lady's sexual delinquency attracts with its buoyant, erotic playfulness at the same time as it unsettles a certain protean obstinacy, an imperviousness to exhaustion. Her capacity to mutate from position to position, to deploy a formidable array of sexual roles—to fall back, divert, confound, persist, refigure, transform, and multiply—signals a creative outlawry in the sexual apparatus, a transgressive libidinal energy whose headlong progression cannot be readily checked.

Against the lure of that ludic lawlessness fueling these uncertainties, it might then be tempting to counterpose a bulwark, perhaps in the form of a speculative hypothesis. We might posit an activating core, let us say, within the Lady's desire: a limited, definable, and knowable center, or set of "wants" out of which (we can imagine) she acts. For if we can know what the Lady wants (thereby stripping of restless perplexity the uncertain mystery of "what-so such and such"

1550), we can by inference establish what the Lady is; and by that catachrestical momentum, we can proceed after all to anchor the female courtly subject, the woman, through the invested fiction of a universal, essential representative of the subject ("das Weib"). Thus, by a question—a desiring question, a question precisely of desire, and desire's precision—the escalating proliferation of questions set off by desire would be neatly halted. What, then, does the Lady want? Was will das Weib?

It is in the nature of such questions (and to their purpose) to be implicitly preceded by an answer—which is to say that the rhetorical compulsions superscribing their utterance are inclined to commit the question in advance (if covertly) to a preferred trajectory and destination. For instance, when the desired answer is (to cite the most celebrated example of one theoretical discourse) the penis/phallic, every question of feminine desire asked by Freud, Lacan, and neo-Freudian orthodoxy travels along the itinerary of a judiciously familiar route, without surprise, to the anticipated answer that is also its antecedent condition. The asking of predestined questions tends to press, moreover, upon a suspicion that what is wanted in the particular instance by the subject is potentially endless and unknowable, threatening the structures of the known with its irreducible, unassimilable exorbitance. (A desire that is felt to be transitive—that is, adequate to the objects at hand, the referents with which it is lined up by the text—is not generally experienced as destabilizing.)

To this regime of anxious discomfiture, and its nostalgic wish for the instrumental convenience of a relay of essences—an essence of desire to recuperate an essential definition of the subject, and rescue that old essentialistic category of gender, Woman—the Lady's project affords little real comfort or satisfaction. For all that her performance demonstrates is the fact of her desire—the unqualified existence of an "I want" whose predicates, though specifiable under present circumstances, are hardly limitable to, or exhausted by, the instances of their immediate specification. Nor is there any claim to a universal subject of enunciation in the voicing of desire, a universally representative "I" who wants ("das Weib"). The enjoined lesson of the Lady's theater is, if nothing else, that there is no essence whatever, nor even immovable attributes, to the subject, who exists only as the fractured site where a multiplicity of discursive operations compete by temporary arrangement. There is merely a single female entity who by her presence and speech is able to point to, and suggest, a shifting backdrop of other feminine presences between and beyond, and provide a partial channel for the various, multiformal, unfinished shades of their desire. By putting in jeopardy, and under the stress of constant revision, received definitions of gender, identity, and the subject, the Lady turns away the demand that would make feminine desire finite and reducible, a transparent object of knowledge, and vulnerable therefore to mastery and assimilation. (For to turn the question of desire around, if we cannot be sure what a woman is—let alone what Woman is—how can we pronounce the limits of what
she wants? To the vexed question of the Lady's desire, then, the spectacle of her performance returns only the impressively enigmatic legacy of a boundless desire: a desire without borders, closure, or adequate objects, and one that allows only the rarefied ghost of a tentative, attenuated reply, in a grammar that must assume the intransitive.

What does the Lady want? She wants.

Notes


2. The widespread adoption of the word "temptation" for critical use appears to rest on extratextual assumptions, since only one instance exists where "temptation" may be specifically inferred from the language of the text: the verb "foined" in line 1540 ("Put hym frayed but fer, and foined hyme ofte"). This is commonly glossed in the definitive as "to try," "test," "prove," "assay," "endure," "tempt," etc. (from OE "gāndien"). Although the notion of tempting is one of the possible meanings here, where "foined" appears in other lines 291, 593, 980, the more general idea of trial or testing, not the narrower construction, is the controlling designation.

3. The deployment of the synonym "frayed" ("made trial of," "tried," etc.) in the antecedent clause of 1540, and the narrative's fondness elsewhere for chiasmus and repetition ("hym frayed..." and "foined hyme"), suggest moreover that we would do no injustice to retain the neutral idea of testing carried by the word, without recommending the gender accusation and unequal moral weighting incurred in privileging one meaning over the others. That the Lady tests and tries Gawain in these scenes, is, of course, perfectly consonant with the reading I offer.

4. Vital to this project, of course, is the requirement that the Lady desire more than merely (to sleep with) Gawain—that desire be in excess of a simple (and single) category of sexual demand. We see what happens, by contrast, when the Lady is merely a sex act of the most basic kind that is wanted, in the example of the cruder later poem, The Green Knight, whose events roughly follow those in Sir Gawain, but which misses the point entirely in having the witch's daughter just want Gawain "par amour."


7. Speech that occurs in place of sex would approximate sublimation in the traditional sense, as formulated by Freud: "an abandonment of sexual aims, a desexualisation" (The Ego and the Id, trans. Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey [New York and London: Norton, 1960], 20); "disavowal of sexual instinctual forces from sexual aims and their direction to new ones" (Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, trans. James Strachey [New York: Harper, 1963], 44); "a process that concerns the object-libido and consists in the instinct's directing itself toward an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual gratification, . . . [T]he accent falls upon the deflection from the sexual aim" ("A Note on the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis," in General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology, ed. Philip Rieff [New York: Macmillan, 1963], 74). By contrast, speech that occurs in the place of sex suggests, not a swerving away from the sexual aim or sexual gratification, with the substitution of nonsexual activity for the sexual, but the continuation of the aim, and the complicating of gratification, through an extension of the sexual register: a process that would sexualize sexual activity not necessarily cáchted by the object-libido in ordinary circumstances. This comes closer to Bersani's retroping of sublimation, following the lead of Laplanche, in highly informed readings of Freud: sublimation as coexistent with sexuality, as an appropriation and elaboration of sexual impulses rather than as a special form of renunciation of such impulses; "not a transcendence of desire but rather a kind of extending of desire," "not . . . a mechanism by which desire is denied, but rather
... a self-reflective activity by which desire mutates and diversifies its representation." See Leo Bersani, The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 45, 47, 49. Despite Freud's teleological model of sexuality, which privileges genital sexuality as the normative, and form of human sexuality over other forms, Freud is led, even as early as the Three Essays, "to the position that every function and, finally, every human activity can be epi-
10 Stuart Schneiderman almost suggests this, in declaring that "We are important about desire... how to sustain it, how to prolong it in time, how to put off the satisfaction of that desire, in order, strangely enough, to make the experience of satisfaction satisfying. The experience of satisfaction is equivalent, as the metaphysical poet said, to dying." Schneiderman, Jacques Lacan: The Death of an Intellectual Hero (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 74. For Schneider-
man, however, "desire" and "satisfaction" are still framed in a relationship akin to "forepleasure" and "endpleasure" in the Freudian equation: one condition still exists primarily to subsist and produce the other, to which it looks forward, and that is its logical and necessary end. My interest, by contrast, is in a non-teleological model of desire, specific (though not exclusive) to language.
11 Gauvin's swift, intense attraction to the Lady is unmistakable. As she makes her first appearance, going toward a private entrance in the chapel, "Gauvin gyesse ful gay and go peder done" (935), so that Bertilak must pluck him away a little hastily and uncivilly ("Pe laches hym by lapppe and leder hym by sytte") (936). At their formal introduction, he jealous the opportunity to embrace and kiss her (972-74), and takes the initiative to speak first, offering his service (976). He sits beside her throughout dinner (993), absorbed in close private conversation ("Such camfor of her compannye causet long / Pure dure dalyance of her seen wordes") (1011-12), virtually lost to the world ("Vche mon tented hys / And pay two tented bares") (1018-19). On the ambiguity of the "dene wordes" exchanged, with their hint, not only of intimacy and secrecy, but of double entendre, see Theodore Silverstein, ed., Sir Gauvin and the Green Knight: A New Critical Edition (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 131 n. 1013-13.
13 Freud's insistence that the very (fact) of repetition must somehow be pleasurable in itself, to be compensated for the unpleasure of whatever is being repeated, suggests that pleasure is located in the opportunity repetition affords for mastery (hence, "unpleasure for one system and simultaneously satisfaction for the other"). This discovery, one explanation for the repetition-compulsion, interestingly privileges form or structure over content, since the pleasure of the communicating mechanism seems to check the unpleasure of what is communicated. I have turned the assertion in a different direction by arguing for the persistence of a certain (unconscious?) sadism in Gauvin, in his treatment of the Lady, from which a supplementary pleasure would derive for him. The masochism implicit in repeating the unpleasure may also of course itself afford a certain pleasure, and Gauvin's behavior perhaps servilely illustrates how two kinds of pleasure are inextricably bound.
14 That the Lady describes an erotic fantasy here should probably be emphasized, since she is periodically cited by scholars and critics who would detect, in her words, an invitation to rape (though it is in fact the forcible taking of a kiss that is under
discussion). We might remember that the Lady offers her mental image of aggressive seduction in the context of a deliberate flirtation, for purposes of flirtation, titillation, and arousal, and that by definition one cannot be invited to rape. The Lady's erotic willingness, and the hopeless character of her imaginings, should cast us here to the presence and activity of a fantasy. In the parlance of modern popular culture, you; Lady's words amount to her saying, in effect, "You big, strong, forceful man; how could anyone possibly refuse you?" To respond, therefore, by casting the Lady inadvertent reproduction of Gawain's moral uncouthness, and to fall into unconscious sympathetic identification with him. By way of narrative design, we might wish to note here the play of tension between the unpleasure that would actual forcible aggression, and the pleasure of its representation here in fantasy by the Lady.
15 In the second seduction, for instance, considerable time passes in conversation, of which only a fraction is reported to us by the narrative. The Lady arrives "Full erly" (1474). She and Gawain explore the subject of love at such length (1506-07), laughing and playing "longe" (1544), that when Gawain has completed his task, it is two in the afternoon, and time for "dinner," the meal of the day (1548-49). On the first morning, too, a large expance of conversation gone unreported, though we are treated to a sense of its length, and of the passing of time ("pain mede of mouchat til mynymore past") (1590).
16 The teasing undecidability of her words in the opening gambit has long been noted. John A. Burrow's commentary on that notorious invitation, "Ye or welcum to my cors" (137), sums it up neatly:
There is ... a saving ambiguity about the Lady's offer. She can claim to have said no more than she says in the following lines: 'I am at your service' (compare her husband's words in l. 837-7). One can find the corresponding French idiom used quite routinely in just this way, as part of a polite expression of gratitude or obligation; as when a perfectly respectable rescued maiden says to Gawain:
Sire, ducte-elle, guerendon
Vous doi, tout vous met a bandon
Mon cors et trent mon avoi.
On the other hand—and here there is very clear evidence of ambiguity, in French at least—almost the same words can be used by another lady with a plainly erotic intention:
Sire, fail elle, an abond
Vos met mon cors et vos present
'Mamor a tore jor's laison.
Of course the lady's offer of service is itself highly ambiguous.
See Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gauvin and the Green Knight (London: Routledge, 1955), 81-2. David Mills, in what is still one of the finest close readings of the seduction scenes, detects in the Lady's lines a play "upon cors (body) and corv (court), and upon won (delight) and won (dwelling)
[...] On a social level the passage would mean 'You are welcome to my courts, to choose your own dwelling.' As her hostess, the Lady must be Gawain's servante, and of yone force would refer to the social duties imposed upon her by her lord which she must fulfil (and shalke). Yet, in the bedroom setting of yone force sees an allusion to Gawain's helplessness, recalling the capture-image of kyle, while shalke is the most empathic form of the earlier shalke.' The idea of compulsion conveyed in force and shalke is at odds with the idea of service. Conventional social conduct is overthrown, and conventional social terminology has become invested with sexual significance. See Mills, 'An Analysis of the Tempation Scenes in Sir Gauvin and the Green Knight,' Journal of English and German Philology 67 (1958): 616-7.
instance. Linda Williams's reading of the 1922 film, "Nosferatu," in Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 80. Because work on the gaze in feminist theory has so overwhelmingly tended to emphasize masculine mastery and feminine victimage—whether it is a masculine look mastering its female object, or a feminine look being undermined and mastered by the male object on which it falls—it has seemed especially urgent to find and read possible instances of a reverse operation of power, such as occurs here in the Lady's manipulation.

The Lady's visual assault seems to come from the gap between the linguistic (1872, 1874-07, 1860, 1459, 1730-41, 1784), but also by the looking looks and expressive glances she sends Gawain's way (1890, 1480), with powerful effect on the knight (1760-62). The look is caught through, of course, speech and laughter (1207, 1351, 1290, 1479, 1354, 1737); and —the Lady's most effective weapon—what she laughs with, kisses with, and, above all, talks with ("Myra Stokes, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Feminist View," Nottingham Medieval Studies 25[1981]:43)—and skin through kisses (1500, 1505, 1555, 1758, 1790, 1850).

On how psychoanalysis and philosophy have traditionally produced and, in producing, mastered the woman as the object of their investigation, see Louise Irigaray's this theory and iconic perspective Sade: The Other Woman, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Houston: Cornell University Press, 1989).

In the Democratic primaries of the 1988 Presidential elections, the only nonwhite candidate among the major contenders, Jesse Jackson, was persistently single out and favored by most electronic media journalists with a version of this question: What, they demanded to know, did Jesse Jackson want? The irony of posing the question to someone energetically seeking the presidential nomination from his party was that it was often customers to feminists and women's rights groups; it would appear to be the special destiny of women and minority races to be dogged by permutations of Freud's question, since hardly anyone thinks to ask "what does a (white) man want?" or to assume that there could be only one single, unambiguous answer in such an instance.

The Lady's answer to the question, duly suited to a feminized form of the question, is glimpsed now and again in male feminist discourse, usually expressed with a certain plaintiveness, or an attitude of heavily tried patience. The question implicitly materializes, for instance, in the volume, Men in Feminism (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), in the exasperated tones of the male editor, Paul Smith, in recorded dialogue with the female editor. Alice Jardine: What does a feminist want?

It is necessary to grant that the reader's desire is nonetheless inscribed in the very act of listening to the Lady (and describing her) as a subject who speaks a desire recoverable from the text. That is to say, an inescapable necessity exists between the desire of the reading subject ("my" desire, a feminist reader's desire) and the desire of the Lady, a character in the text, since the relationship between reader and text is inevitably a dialectic and transferential one. Within such an economy, it is impossible for us to designate either reader or text as the controlling or controlled term in each moment of reading—to reassure ourselves of separation and distinction between the two modalities of desire involved in every instant. It is that aporia, Barbara Johnson observes, which underlines the traditional "opposition between objectivity and subjectivity," thus doctoral, we might add, the very equation that produces a woman as the object of a purer subjective scrutiny. See A World of Difference (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 13.


The Lady's desire as expressed here by the Lady (desired, indeed, by all the women who encounters) is, of course, Lancelot—the perfect lady's knight of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the OF prose Lancelot, the stanzaic Great Arthur, and Malory. The most powerful of men, Lancelot is also the most perfect servitor of women, directing...
every act and ascribing every triumph to the fulfillment of his lady's will, and linking his very identity with his lady's desire. "And all my greet deeds of arms that I have done was for the pleasure was for the queens sake, and for her sake wolde I do batayle were her right ther wronge. And refud I batayle, but for to wynne worship and to cause me the best is to be beloved." Sir Thomas Malory, The Workes of Sir Thomas Malory, 3 vols., ed. Eugène Vinaver (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), 897. For an argument that Malory's defeminization of Lancelot and Lancelotlike characters, see Henley, "Endowed Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory," in County Literature: Culture and Context, ed. Keith Busby and Erik Kooper (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1990), 283-300.

Admittedly, as Kaja Silverman notes, "the female voice is, within the existing social order, a reading voice, one which repeates what has already been written or spoken elsewhere." See Silverman, "Disc-Embodiment of the Female Voice," in Re-Vision, 140. It is fair to say, however, that it is the Lady's highly selective and polemically reading of the text of romance and its ideology of love—apportioning emphasis here, devaluing there—that enables her to insist upon a script which specifically privileges feminine desire, as this, and thus to recover women as agents of desire, in this poem and in Arthurian tradition.

While the courtly relationship described here by the Lady is an entirely familiar literary tope, the inflection given to the model of relations is her contribution. Courtly literature (and its critical tradition) too often grants the knight the central focus, with the lady positioned to one side of him. Indeed, in some courtly texts more than others (such as, arguably, the lyric, which dramatizes the narcissism of a single speaking voice uninterrupted by other voices), the feminine may be constructed as a mere reflecting surface, or specular, for masculine desire. On the courtly lyric, see, for example, E. Jane Burns, "The Man Behind the Lady in Troubadour Lyric," Romance Notes 25 (1983): 252-70; Frederick Goldin, The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959); and Susan Gilbert, "Amorous Imitation: Bakhth, Augustine, and Le Roman de la Rose," in Romance: Gender Transformations from Chrétien de Troyes to Courtesans, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Marina Sordini Brownlee (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1985), 477-87. For a brief account of how the woman's place in courtly relations may shift across a range of genres and texts in French courtly literature alone, see E. Jane Burns and Robert L. Kroger, "Courtly Ideology and Woman's Place in Medieval French Literature," Romance Notes 25 (1983): 205-19.

Stevens, in characterizing Gawain's adventure as a form of play and contest quotes Huizinga in Homo Ludens: "the function of play... can largely be derived from two basic psychological aspects under which we meet it: as a context for something or a representation of something (p. 125)." See Stevens, "Laughter and Game in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum 47 (1972): 68-9. My own reading of the nature of play in the seduction episodes brings together both these aspects—by reading play, that is, as a context for representation.

The Lady wins her first kiss from him with a pretty syllogism: If Gawain is tantamount to courtesy (1298), and courtesy requires kissing (1300), then Gawain must kiss (1299-300). Gawain surrenders... and renders his due. As in Camelot, Gawain's actions run counter to his words of modesty. Paul Beekman Taylor, "Gawain's Garland of Girdle and Name," English Studies 55 (1974): 9.

Myra Stokes, in her fine article "Fitt III," recognizes the structures of "covert debate" in this subtle verbal competition. "What the hero is primarily required to resist is the insidious pressure of language", she argues. "Here the context is that of Gawain's flight (1210-68), the debate that occurs, as it were, upside down, with each contestant vying for "the subordinate rather than the dominant position" (40). The speakers, she observes, "share with debaters a tendency to take up each other's words", although here the "petition and counter-charge" carry "the important comic difference" of complaining, rather than insulting the opponent (44-45). Stokes awards the Lady points for flexibility in the manipulation of tone and variations in tactics, finally conceding her the contest. "The Lady has... induced Gawain to stoop to an exploitation of the language of courtesy similar to her own" (40).

"Lady Bertilac... staunchly places herself before Gawain, as resolute an opponent as any knight blocking the roadway" (Novak, Meyer, 213); "the military metaphor does change the focal point in the battle fought into that of a metaphorical battlefield" (Crisp, "The Feminine Subtext in Malory," 4). "Gawain must struggle against the forces that cover him, public and private, to free himself from the prison to which his captor submits him" (Mills, "An Analysis of the Temptation Scenes," 615). For a Lucanian reading of the intrinsically competitive relationship between Amors and Amors in Arthurian romance, see Charles Méja, "Perceval," in Literature and Psychosynthesis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 253-79.

On the riddling individualism in the exchange and seduction games, and Gawain's nearsighted trust in, and adherence to, the letter of the law, see, especially, Halpem, "Last Temptation."

Critics not infrequently make the point that Gawain is asked by the Lady to conduct himself as a knight in a romance. See Mills, "An Analysis of the Temptation Scenes"; Eagan, "Color Symbolism"; and Wendy Klein, "La Lettre d'Amor: Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Diss., University of Connecticut, 1985. As importantly, the Lady's verbal tactics illustrate that the very definition of the term "knight" is uncertain, that it is a term used in different ways, in which its meaning is subject to the discursive context in which it appears (or is intended). She positions a reminder, in other words, of how easily knighthood may be startlingly reimagined and reenacted by an unruly advocate such as herself. The recognition that she enforces—of the instability and arbitrariness of institutional definitions—is unsettling.

Gawain is perhaps already conscious of this by the end of the second seduction, as suggested in his extremely discomforted talk to his (half-remembered) lady (1327). That is with "humberdren" is presumably attributable to frustration at his own helplessness, his annulled recognition of an inadequacy of resources on his part, rather than to any new advance being publicly attempted by the Lady, that she has not already attempted, to better advantage, in private.

It is not uncommon for critics to read the adventure in Sir Gawain as a "test of identity," by which is meant something quite different, however, from the argument here. Such readings usually claim that the test functions either to reinforce Gawain's original identity, or to make minor adjustments to it so as to produce a finer understanding of "Man's" (Gawain's) fallen, "human," imperfect "nature." Discussions of the issue tend to assume a naturalized, unproblematic conception of identity and its relation to the subject, a conception whose essentialist ultimate represses invariability, such discussions also read Gawain's interests as central to the poem, and offer a tacit advocacy of that supposed centrality. Taylor's article, "Gawain's Garland of Girdle and Name," provides one such example: "The Green Knight's awful incursion into Camelot and the lady's perilous flitting at Haudesert test and testify of identities of both court and knight. The... offer an occasion for a tenuous and spacious identity to be shaped into a secure and true one" (6). Gawain's vulnerability comes forcefully into play again in what has sometimes been called the "last temptation" (Halpem), when his nameless guide, en route to the green chapel, makes a curious—ostentatiously generous, but also gratuitously insulting—offer to Gawain to turn back and save himself, and promises to conceal from him the knowledge of Gawain's flight (1218-24). The guide couches the offer in such terms as almost to guarantee that the knight must find the offer offensive and thus impossible for him to accept. "I shal lelly yow layne, and lance neuer tale / Pat ever yf se fonde to flie for freke pat I wyte" (emphasis mine). Significantly, the offer is couched in words closely associated with the Lady's successful entrapment of Gawain, when she imposes her girdle on him in the last seduction scene. (And biscuit...
hymn, for his sake, discover his newer, / But to tell you laye fro his lordes" [1663-64]: "I schal tell ye yow layne" (emphasis mine). If this is not an attempt to play upon Gawain's sensitivity to any intimations of weakness, in order to ensure his continuation to the chapel, it is a notably successful one. Gawain, true to form, repudiates the offer with contemptuous indignation and a slightly swaggering nonchalance, rudely returning the guide's polite social address "(yow)" with the second person form reserved for one's inferiors and servants, "pou."

43. The pattern of kissing follows directly the advantage the lady wins in her assault on Gawain's name. We have reason to suspect that the kiss has no value for itself to the lady. ... The kiss, then, is a measure of her advantage and Gawain's progressive weakening (Taylor, "Gawain's Garland of Girdle and Name," 9).

44. The girdle's formal designation as a love gift or amorous token ("kift-lace" [1587], "k driye" [1603]) organizes a drama of signs that functions to install Gawain in the long-avoided role of male courtly lover, and the Lady as a courtly mistress, by triangulating their relations through a guilty conspiracy of silence against the lawful husband (1683-95). That is to say, the existence of adultery can be rhetorically inferred, or intimated, through the girdle's signifying effect. In the words of George Sanderlin, "Lady Berclayk at last confirmed a femail courtly love relationship with Gawain through the gift and the secrecy." See Sanderlin, "Lady Berclayk of Hautedeuer," Studies in the Humantitie 1 (1975): 23. Gawain is thus the victim of more than one rhetorical operation in the seduction scenes, testifying to the power of representation to effect a series of identity seductions. On Gawain's unfortunately "consistent truth in literals," see L. Clark, and Julian N. Wasserstern, "Gawain's Animalism Reconsidered," Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association 6 (1983): 69.

45. For R. A. Shafro, the tacit reprocessing of Gawain's identity is accomplished through the facilitating agency of the anonymous, a trope he reads as overwhelmingly active in the poem. Shafro's reading of lines 1342-44 contains an emergent recognition that identity is dislocated from the subject, that more than one Gawain exists, and that a subject between the knight and the Lady is in process for control of which Gawain will be linguistically produced: "In having to distinguish his Gawain from the Lady's Gawain—I am not now to be set of spoken—Gawain must face, quite abnormally, the fact that he is not his own, that someone else can lay claim to his identity in a world of relative values." See Shafro, The Poem at Green Girdle: "Commercium in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," University of California Press of the University of California Press (1984), 36.


47. "Medieval (and particularly, Arthurian) romances have long been held to concern themselves with questions of identity—personal, familial, social, martial, feudal, economic, etc. It is insufficiently emphasized, however, that the attainment and maintenance of sexual identity in courtly romances is accomplished primarily through the love relation, whose structural hierarchy as a rule privileges the male courtly term over the female. Since in any relationship of paired opposites, "[o]ne of the two terms governs the other (aesthetically, logically, etc., or has the upper hand)" (Jacques Derrida, Poetics, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago University Press of Chicago, 1981], 41), an implicitly hierarchical equation between male (desiring) subject and female (desired) object is produced with the courtly couple. Because they "submit the other to the subject," the subject and object and "displace the traditional notion of what a subject is" (Johnson, A World of Difference, 13), the Lady's inversions in effect perform a deconstructive reconstruction of the love relation, as a construction, as a practice, as a story. Interestingly, Cixous and Clément's remark: "The Arthurian mode, that "woman is situated at the furture where norms hang in balance, where values overturn, where medieval escuion reverses itself." See Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, The Newly Born Woman, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 32.


50. Gawain's sudden discovery of timidity here, and exaggerated display of hesitation ("pat durst I not do"), can be ironically contrasted with his eager clapping and kissing of the Lady—without permission, warning, or invitation—at their introduction (97-74).

51. She speaks in the person of the woman when it furthers her purpose (ll. 1297-1301) and when she is trying to make Gawain take the initiative" (Kiteley, "Courtesty," 12).

52. On femininity as masquerade, see Joan Riviere's 1929 article, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," reprinted in Formations of Fantasy, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cara Kaplan (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 3-4; and Stephen Heath's thoughtful commentary, "Joan Riviere and the Masquerade," in the same volume. That it is a woman who oversees the poses, tricks and contrivances here, in the exposition of sexuality and desire, has particular significance. French psychoanalytic theory after Derrida has often focused on the woman as (bi)sexual masquerader—"un homme qui vit cette époque et cette dame" (Derrida, Spots: Nietzsche's Style, trans. Barbara Harlow [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979]). Finding (and naming) as feminine the action of a certain sexuality that intervenes between and subverts traditional sexual oppositions "the perfidious shifting back and forth between masculinity and femininity...constitutes the whole enigma of "woman"" (Sarah Kofman, The Enigma of Woman: Women in Freud's Writings, trans. Catherine Porter [Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985], 223); "The significans 'femininity' no longer fits into...any representational unequivocal code...nor is it any longer representative of a given sex. It is precisely constituted in ambiguity, it signifies itself in the unnameable space...between the institutions of masculinity and femininity...to threaten the smooth functioning of the very institution of representation" (Shoshana Felman, "Rereading Femininity," Yale French Studies 62 [1981]: 32).

53. Contrast, for example, Egan's insistence that "the lady...is made to look ridiculous, that she suffers...humiliation," "she is herself", "appears to be satirized, is prompted by bad will," "is further ridiculed," and extirpates "selfishness" ("Color Symbolism," 38-50), with Sanderlin's delightfully observation that "Lady Berclayk is certainly one of the poet's most fascinating characters" (Lady Berclayk of Haut-desert, 21).
H. Porter Abbott

Writing and Conversion: Conrad’s Modernist Autography

I. The Conversion of an Idle Man

Nineteen years into his writing career, Joseph Conrad produced a conversion narrative that he eventually entitled A Personal Record. It remains one of the more anomalous texts in its subgenre, yet as I intend to argue, its very status as a generic anomaly made it a culmination of Conrad’s modernist endeavor.

The central anomaly of the narrative was its rendering of the conversion experience itself—a conversion from seaman to writer—which Conrad described as “a completely masked and unaccountable phenomenon.”1 Closing in on the moment when he took up his pen to begin writing his first novel, Almayer’s Folly, Conrad devoted nine pages to a meandering, interrupted succession of details that seems continually to say that nothing had to happen the way it happened: “That morning I got up from my breakfast, pushing the chair back, and rang the bell violently, or perhaps I should say resolutely, or perhaps I should say eagerly—I do not know. But manifestly it must have been a special ring of the bell, a common sound made impressive, like the ringing of a bell for the raising of the curtain upon a new scene.” In writing like this, narrative detail fails to lead. More accurately, it both leads and abandons. Something’s up, but anything could happen. “I pulled the cord casually,” he continues (contradicting himself), “and while the faint tinkling somewhere down in the basement went on, I charged my pipe in the usual way and I looked for the match-box with glances distraught indeed, but exhibiting, I am ready to swear, no signs of a fine frenzy” (PR 115–116). Even while the table was being cleared, the odds were “ten to one” that he would read a book as usual. This is, in short, narrative without narrative necessity. It fails to promote the “confusion of consecution and consequence” that Roland Barthes called “the mainspring of narrative.”2

The idler depicted in the text is matched by the idler who composes it. As Conrad the breakfaster meandered without direction then, so Conrad the writer meanders without direction now, ready for anything. Within a few pages, he has taken us years back and a thousand miles

The Yale Journal of Criticism, volume 5, number 3. © 1992 by Yale University.