Feminine Knots and the Other

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

WHEN DEREK BREWER, writing in 1976, declared that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* "is self-evidently the story of Gawain: Morgan and Guinevere are marginal, whatever their significance to Gawain. . . . [T]he protagonist is central, and all must be interpreted in relation to his interests" ("Interpretation" 570, 574), he was arguing from textual assumptions that we now recognize, with the unfair judgment of hindsight, as implicated in a fantasy of textual closure and command.¹ His homogenizing of the text—underwriting, as such acts often do, a gender hierarchy—is observable today as a routine deployment and affirmation of the protocols naturalized by a critical-scholarly establishment. That meaning is produced rather than unproblematically "there" for discovery, and that hidden ideologies stalk each instance of seeming interpretive obviousness, has become axiomatic. We are careful to announce the politics of our reading, to admit at the outset the inevitability of a dialogic and transferential relationship between readers and texts.²

Underpinning present stories of reading and textuality is a view of the text as a ground simultaneously occupied by presence and absence, a site divided ever and always against itself by conscious and unconscious reflexes. A text is a "weave of knowing and not-knowing" (Sivak 120), a heterogenous signifying field that, because it is constituted only in and through language, is infected with all the investments of desire, resistances, unrepresentables, and repressions of language itself. "A" text is thus a heuristic fiction, since a text is really many texts in the same body and to select among them for significance is to draw attention to the programatics of choice. Because analysis is invariably partial (that is, both incomplete and discursively inflected), traversed like the textwork it questions (and through which it is ques-
tioned) by its own unthought and unsaid (impensé, non-dit), the impossibility of mastery must be acknowledged. What remains is the explicit acknowledgment of the specificities of one’s particular reading pact.

Under present conditions of reading it is possible to distinguish a feminine text in *Sir Gawain* in those regions where the logic of the poem as the stage of the masculine actors founders and fails. There, at the limit of the masculine narrative—in the repeating moments where masculine command slips and misses—appear the sedimentations of feminine desire: a desire always plural in nature, accommodated to a tracery of spaces in the poem coded as feminine, and signaling its presence through a medley of practices, figures, and signs.

It has disturbed many, for instance, that the founding fiction of the poem turns on the inexplicable design of a woman, the infamous Morgan la Fée, and on the game she sets in motion for reasons so apparently tenuous that they require continual scholarly rehearsal. At once dismissed and elaborately justified by readers, reviled for its improbability and defended as crucial, Morgan’s responsibility for the plot mechanism has been resurrected, debated, minimized, multiplied, classified, and reimagined—only to be reappropriated once again (albeit with difficulty) to serve the masculine narrative, whose priority customarily goes unchallenged. Yet the unsettling of the poise and presumed knowledge of that narrative’s logic should hinge attention on precisely what escapes and vexes its command, thus serving to gravitate attention toward the vectors of another, intersecting text—a drama of feminine presences in dynamic relationship, whose field of play is referenced, not to the masculine text and its signifieds, but to the figures and turns of a different desire. Repeatedly crisscrossing the narrative plane established by such characters as Gawain, Arthur, and Bertilak and by the worlds of the two courts are, after all, the reticulated angles and interstices of a feminine nexus, a spacing of women; and this other script, read for itself, recuperates the movements of another desire, in a feminine narrative folding into and between the masculine.

To receive the poem from this other direction is to acquire the familiar outlines unfamiliarly, to reconceive their foreignness and difference. Morgan, named “je goddes,” directs an emissary to the Arthurian court to trigger a drama whose intended destination is Guenevere, the secular queen who is the desired audience or reader of its effects. A player, Gawain, is drawn into Morgan’s game, under the apparent patronage of the “heuenquene,” the Blessed Virgin. In the course of his journey, Gawain’s supplication to this Christian goddess for a safe residence in which to perform Christian religious rites, a plaint invoking the personal name of this sacred mistress, Mary (736–39, 754), seems to occasion the appearance of the castle where an aggressively secular courtly mistress (the nameless Lady) resides—the scene for the performance of amatory rites. There a feminine game of seduction is enacted, a seduction of language and identity that forms the principal aventure of this romance, but its precise outcome and consequences are veiled from the knightly participant’s understanding, being hidden within the screen game of a masculine economy of exchanges. The Lady marks Gawain with her personal sign—a “luf-lace,” or sexualized signifier, which is later disseminated throughout the Arthurian court—as well as with a small neck wound, a token cut that leaves a scar. The end limit of her play is signaled by the Virgin’s rescue of “hir kny3t” from “[g]ret perile.” Finally, when the feminine subscript is read to him, Gawain in self-defensive fury attributes all responsibility and power to women, in what is commonly cited as his “antifeminist diatribe,” a tirade witnessing the belief that women dominate and shape the destinies of men. Morgan’s signature in the drama is deciphered by the Green Knight, who unravels it backward to the beginning of the poem’s action.

This familiar-unfamiliar story transmits the registers of the feminine text, whose key players are curiously elusive, enigmatic women. Plans initiated by one woman are directed at another, performed by a third, and modulated by the actions of a fourth: read in this fashion, the romance is the theater of its feminine figures, a field in which forces of tension and filiation circulate within a feminine relay. Each woman, moreover, even the most shadowy (the Blessed Virgin and Guenevere, who exist principally as names and attenuated presences), is intricately elaborated in multiple identifications with every other woman, so that a
sense of the limits of individual identity is never accomplished, troubled always by the repeated crossing over of division among the women. The result is the emergence of a feminine example in the text of identity as plural, heterogenous, and provisional, elusively reforming elsewhere just as it might seem most fixedly locatable.

The Shadow of a Knot: Multiplying Identity and Desire

Where they first appear, for instance, Guenevere and the Virgin share the status of fetishized objects: Guenevere, evoking the puissance and grandeur of the Arthurian court, by being set in state on her dais, a royal jewel amid other gorgeous treasures; the Virgin, signaling Christian adventitiousness and advocacy, by being blazoned on the inner surface of Gawain's shield like a talisman (74-84, 649). In the framework of the poem, however, Guenevere is also inextricably bound to Morgan by the push and direction of the desire in Morgan's game, which claims Guenevere for its subject; as the desired recipient of the game's meaning or affect, she is to be drawn, willingly or not, into an intersubjective relationship with Morgan. The significance of this uneasy alliance, whose ambiguities bear silent witness to the existence of a prior relationship of undecidable tension between the two women, finally escapes the text, and perhaps Arthurian tradition altogether. Critics who wish to stabilize the meaning of the women's relationship in the context of the poem, however, have sometimes sought to normalize the uncanniness of Morgan's game by characterizing the game itself as a convoluted “chastity test” for Guenevere (e.g., Carson 14; Hulbert 454; Kittredge 132; and Moon 48).

Partnered thus with the Virgin and Morgan, Guenevere is also deliberately linked by spatial and verbal continuities with the Lady, for the Lady's first appearance is peculiarly designed to trigger our memory of Guenevere, whom she simultaneously reproduces and supplants. Like Guenevere in an earlier setting (109), the Lady is seated near Gawain at a magnificent court (1003). Indeed, that tableau of knight and great lady together seems lifted out of one context and transplanted into another—different, yet spatially familiar—with little alteration in format. The (ap)proximity of the women is skillfully highlighted, moreover, by a remarkable play upon Guenevere's name to describe the Lady's physical person: by being “wener þen Wenore”—the orthography here is arguably unique (Silverstein 141n945)—the Lady's bodily beauty is caught and communicated through the body of Guenevere's name, itself the embodiment of beauty in the Arthurian universe (Tolkien, Gordon, and Davis 102n945).

Other interconnections are hinted at or suggestively relayed. Morgan and the Virgin are like each other in being, unlike others, powerful supernatural figures. Both the Lady and the Virgin, however, perform variations of the courtly mistress—the Virgin materializing in this capacity during a fractional hiatus in the last seduction scene, where she and the Lady are momentarily shown to contend explicitly for Gawain as their desired prize (1768-72). The Lady's desire functions in this instance to create a breach wherein an otherwise unsuspected vein of desire, the Virgin's, may appear, when the Lady's blandishments to Gawain provoke an urgent response from the Virgin—not as “moder,” but simply as “Maré,” a jealous mistress calling back “hir knygt” from the brink of erotic surrender to another woman (1769; italics mine). At this brief intervention, the only explicit textual recognition of the Virgin as a player in Morgan's theater, one more nucleus of desire is suddenly made visible. In that instant, another scene breaks through, displacing the male-female contest between Gawain and the Lady and at the same time reversing the earlier relationship between that knight and the sacred patron whose image is caught on his shield, for it is now not the Virgin but Gawain who stands revealed as the captive, prized object; he is contended over by two female players in a drama that is suddenly elsewhere—no longer between the sexes but within the psychomachia of a feminine narrative.

The example par excellence of conjunction and identification among the women in the poem remains, nonetheless, the extraordinary relationship
between Morgan and the Lady. Critics whose arguments may dramatically diverge in other respects often concur in identifying each of them as the other's double (Carson 6, 15; Clark and Wasserman 69n22; L. H. Loomis 535; R. S. Loomis 89; Moon 44–46; Williams 49, 52)—that is, as a split in the subject that has been projected outward. While every woman in the poem may be said to refigure another—to function as a point of reference and construction, an other for the others—the twinned descriptions of Morgan and the Lady adopted by the text particularly insist on the characters' simultaneous differentiation and nondifferentiation.11 As nonidentical doubles, they are awarded diametrically contrasting, virtually symmetrical qualities at their first appearance, each establishing a specular surface for the other as its near opposite, and being thoroughly constituted therefore as the other's reference. The specular relationship between the two women situates both in an exchange, a filiation of identities, that finally works to obscure the horizon of their division:

Bot vnlyke on to loke tPo ladyes were,
For if Pe 3onge watz 3ep, 3ol3e watz pat őber;
Riche red on őat on rayled ayyquere,
Rugh ronkled chekez őat őper on rolled;
Kerchofes of őat on, wyth mony cler perlez,
Hir brest and hir bry3t Prote bare displayed,
Schon schyrer ben snawe pat schedez on hillez;
řat oJ\]\] wyth a gorger watz gered ouer be swyre,
Chymbled ouer hir blake chyn with chalkquyte
ayles,
Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled ayyquere,
Toreted and trelted with tryflez aboute,
řat nɔŋt watz bare of ţat burde bot ţe blake
broges,
Ře tweyne y3en and ţe nase, ţe naked lyppez,
And źose were soure to se and sellyly blered;
A mensk lady on molde mon may hir calle,
for Gode!
Hir body watz schort and źik,
Hir buttokez balǵ and brode,
More lykkerwys on to lyk
Watz ţat scho hade on lode. (950–69)

That is to say, Morgan and the Lady form a hyphenated term in the narrative of desire—their representation a conspicuous instance of doubling, which at the same time doubles up as the representation of, or figure for, a conspicuous slippage of meaning and decidability in the text.12 By being alike and unlike, by appearing now as subordinate, now as superior, to each other, Morgan and the Lady figure the ease of misrecognition and the concomitant difficulty of anchoring textual significance or responsibility. For the Lady, who appears the dynamic (and sole) female speaking subject, that individual whose desire seems to activate and dispose the drama of seduction, is discovered in her articulation with Morgan to be herself spoken, a term in the lexicon of Morgan, who is silent, the subject without speech, but the accents of whose desire nonetheless apparently play upon, and at least in part produce, the Lady's own desire, which then assumes the character of a ventriloquized double.

Having thus argued that the construction of each woman entails a point of anchoring in another—and, through the dissemination of traces, in the others of that other—one might go on to suggest that a simple, schematic graph of feminine relationships in the poem would plot an interconnected, overlapping tracery, culminating in a pattern not unlike the familiar one invoked in the pentangle description. Like each constituent of the pentangle, the path of every woman in the poem is articulated with that of every other, so that each approximately "vmbelappez and loukez in ober," "vchone . . . in ojer, bat non ende hade" (628, 657), a knitting together that reproduces the shadow of a different "endeles knot" in the poem—a knot of the feminine and the figure of another desire and its text.13

A Tale of Two Knots: Or, Desire in the Sign

Unsurprisingly, a knot of some kind in Sir Gawain is always a place where the pressure of an investment speaks itself—a moment of becoming visible. It offers up that revealing "detail" which Naomi Schor theorizes in her now historic feminist readings, Breaking the Chain and Reading in Detail, that peculiar hitch or halting point in a text on which attention catches, and which announces the working of a certain demand. The pentangle and love lace, notorious examples of the knot, are also knots of this kind. In the narrative ambit, the
pentangle marks the site of a second model of identity, one contextualized as masculine by association with Gawain. Although the example of the women in the poem would seem to set forth a view that identity (and desire) remains always multiple and unfinished, there persists nevertheless a competing suggestion—expressed more explicitly through the intertwined descriptions of pentangle and Gawain—that knightly identity can still in some circumstances be somehow singular and undivided, static and finished. As the sign for Gawain and his perfect knighthood, the “perfect” knot is glossed as that which is permanently in place, whole. Never requiring to be tied, untied, or retied, the pentangle is the ultimate guarantee, on the symbolic level, for the existence of fixed and stable identity: the basis of that identity, its completeness and closure, being here predicated on a reassuringly exact equivalence between the announcement of Gawain’s attributes and his actual possession of them—or, expressed in linguistic values, on the absolute adequacy of referent to sign. Just as the pentangle is the sign for which Gawain is the perfectly corresponding referent, we are to understand, so must the declaration of Gawain’s virtues—the sign—find its own perfect referent also in his possession of them. This wishful vision undergoes an important correction when the pentangle as a personal emblem for Gawain is subsequently overtaken by an “imperfect” knot (Eadie, “Sir Gawain”; Englehardt 225; Kiteley 48; Malarkey and Toelken 20; Taylor 10), that which fastens and unfastens the love lace and, therefore, stands as its synecdoche (Hieatt 342–43). With the substitution of an imperfect knot, the Lady’s lace, for the pentangle, a signifier is produced that situates identity as more tenuous and incomplete—a fragile, uncertain prospect that is always on the verge of unraveling and reconstitution in infinitely varied sequences of possibility.

Significantly, pentangle and love lace can organize the question of identity and its representation only through an intimate association with the Virgin and the Lady, the two female figures for whom they exist as markers. For the pentangle is no more than the outside of what is inside Gawain’s shield: the image of the Virgin (as, in a parallel example, the host’s exchange-of-winnings game is the outside of, and camouflage for, the hostess’s seduction game). When the five sets of virtues that trace the outline of the pentangle are being described, the image of the Virgin suddenly appears, interrupting and displacing the series that supposedly produces her (the fourth set of virtues being the apparent trigger of her emergence), as she later displaces and substitutes for the pentangle in her protection of Gawain during his severest testing. Hieatt astutely notices that the pentangle, mentioned once and never again, is something of a decoy, a tactical diversion:14

Gawain’s chief fealty seems to be to the Virgin. Her image appears on one side of his shield; the pentangle, the symbol of 5 in the poem, appears on the other. One of his 5 classes of excellences has to do with the 5 joys of Mary (646–47). She apparently helps him in his most need when Bertilak’s wife is closest to seducing him (1768–69). (354n25)

Pentangle and Virgin’s picture together collocate (co-locate) what Jacqueline Rose has called in a different context “the twin axes of identification and fantasy” (141), the continuousness of the pentangle allegorizing the linking up of all points of Gawain’s imaginary subjectivity, in order that a particular fantasy of identity might be authorized and sustained. The pentangle hypothesis is thus a metaphysical statement of presence, the presence of a fully confirmed and locatable identity in a ground of ultimate reference. It stands, moreover, for an aspiration, a psychic yearning that takes up and reenacts an archaic, preoedipal moment of fantasmatic plenitude—the moment of presubjunctal infancy, where loss and uncertainty, division, are still absent—since it leads back inexorably, umbilically, via the route of an uncut knot, the pentangle, to the (divine) mother whose image appears on the other side, “[i]n De inore half.”15

But however compelling this fantasy of an uncut knot leading back to a mother might be, the force of its authority has already begun to slip away with the attempt to make of the pentangle an absolutely intact knot, always and everywhere present to itself. For it must be remembered that the comforting illusion of unity and continuity that the pentangle design supports is also a condition that renders impossible a sufficient separation, or a proper spacing, of the five points and
their constituent sets of virtues in such a way as to discriminate their meaning(s): since the possibility of establishing such meaning, such differentiation, is contingent on the activity of that punctuated series of breaks which, paradoxically, enables individual units of signification to combine for the making of overall intelligibility. If the points and virtues of the pentangle can never be "sundred" or "samned" (659), neither can they be held apart and distinguished: lacking lack, or imperfection, their meanings run one into another endlessly without the punctuation of a gap. The apparently different (and meaning[full] qualities gathered by the pentangle are then finally indifferent: faultlessness in actions ("fyngres"), senses ("wyte"), and trust (in "be fyue wonden") would absorb, or seamlessly vanish into, "fraunchyse," "felaischyp," "clannes," "cortaysy," and "pite"; and even as a group, though claimed in the poem's critical history for specifically Christian virtues, these properties are equally indifferent, collectively, from courtly ones (Spear- ing, Gawain-Poet 197).

The inference is useful in a cautionary way for the rest of the poem, since it positions a reminder that the determined pursuit of determination invariably misses its object, issuing instead in an indetermination that signals the failure of every attempt at containing and regulating, policing, a sign. Such an attempt would require abbreviating the sign—which, qua sign, is characteristically unstable and traversed by excess—into a cipher, with the incidental but concomitant effect here of also rewriting Gawain into a simplified palimpsest, the subject of (and subjected to) the pentangle's abstract geometry, itemized over forty-three lines in the poem (an effort sometimes thought to be wholly improvised, its signification here being arbitrary rather than traditional). Only produces an overinvested sign and an overdetermination of meaning, that is the very symptom of excess; so that it quickly becomes difficult even to tell whether the pentangle "acordez" to Gawain because it functions as a description of, a prescription for, an aspiration by, an inspiration to, or a flattering idealization of that knight. In the end, to the questions, What exactly—and, as important, how exactly—does the pentangle, in its sum and parts, signify? and, What is the precise relation of that signification, if any, to Gawain? there remains only the suspension of the possibility of answer.

Inasmuch as the pentangle is an abstract, bodiless sign, the girdle is a sign that is also a fully material object, one that carries, in its function and appearance, the impress and memory of the body itself. It is a detail of encirclement bearing the mark of the body and becomes metonymically, in the course of the Lady's theater of seduction, a sexualized, desiring, feminine term. It is an object, moreover, that mirrors the concentricity of other encirclements mapping out the poem: the circle of the Lady's arms pinioning Gawain (1224); the circumambient, overlapping spheres of influence (the Green Knight's, the Virgin's, Bertilak's, the Lady's) in which the knight is caught; Gawain in the circle of Bertilak's household; the brief, enframing histories, or "chronicle" accounts that trace the circumference of this romance; the beheading game that surrounds and holds within it the other two games, the exchange of winnings and the seduction; and Gawain's innumerable physical adventures with "wormez," "wolues," "wodwos," "bullez and berez, and borez," "etarynez" that are constructed as a circling outer edge, the before and after of his feminine adventure with language. A narrative within narratives, a game inside games, an adventure enclosed by adventures: reading anatomically, concentrically, from this term of the body, the Lady's, we arrive at "the odd truths revealed in the accidental [but never innocent] material of language . . . a different kind of reading, no longer a sublimated relation to the spirit of the text, but an intercourse with its body" (Gallop 29)—a reading enabled, invited, by the imprint of a female body on a sign and its macrostructural reverberations throughout the text. By contrast, the cut that Gawain receives, extending causatively from the Lady's successful imposition of her girdle, is the imprint of a sign on a body (the Lady's on Gawain's). Transferred from the pentangle, where it does not appear, to the girdle (a circle with a break in it, a cut), where it does, and thereafter to Gawain's body, this cut may be read there as the vestige of a displacement, the trace of a symbolic behead-
ing that is itself displaced from, and vestigially symbolic of, castration: the organizing dynamic in a psychic economy marked as masculine. That this gash vanishes, leaving only the residue of a scar to suggest its former place, even as the girdle travels successfully across several signifying systems, passing from the Lady's, to the Green Knight's, to Gawain's, and finally into the signifying system of the entire Arthurian court and its history, might be read, therefore, as a fantasied, fabulous parable of the subtextual narrative—a "speculative turbulence" that imagines another, feminine, organization of greater mobility imbricated with and overtaking the masculine (of which something nonetheless remains, in the scar that is the entre-deux).20

Feminine Terms: Signifying Mobility and Transformation

If the pentangle is the "too much," an overspecification that must fail, the girdle is the "too little," or underspecification that facilitates the girdle's retroping at an exigent moment in the Lady's third engagement with Gawain21—in order that her desire, momentarily blocked and at an impasse, can negotiate a passage by being mapped onto and disseminated through the object. Before the transfer can be accomplished, however, Gawain's objections and extreme suspiciousness, roused to keenness by the Lady's theater of seduction, have to be overcome. In the intimate circumstances of this final appointment (a man's private bedchamber, a beautiful seductress, provocative "luf-talkying," the exchange of kisses—all in an aura of intimacy and secrecy, "we bot oure one") any gift from the Lady, especially one worn on her body (whether a personal token of jewelry, such as her ring, or an item of clothing, like her girdle), would carry a strongly sexual coloring, be inflected by an unmistakably erotic charge. Gawain's polite but determined refusal of the Lady's ring aptly communicates his recognition of the field of suggestion the offer invokes.22 The prospect of the girdle as a gift is complicated, moreover, by a further difficulty, in that the girdle's meaning as a sign, even outside the context of seduction and lacking commentary of any kind in the poem, is perhaps already overfamiliarly cathexed. Friedman and Osberg brilliantly argue, for instance, that the history of the girdle in tradition and literature conveys so heavy a burden of intimate contact with the feminine—with female sexuality and fertility, genitalia, "cosmic sovereignty," heroism and magic (304)—and so forcefully communicates the idea of binding, to exact the "psychic adherence" and "mystical incorporation" of whoever accepts and wears the girdle, that these intimations must be carefully veiled or dissembled when the object is presented (303, 309).

The Lady, in an inspired retroping, accordingly codes her proffered gift as a magical rather than a sexual object (perhaps "magical because sexual," say Friedman and Osberg [307]), a move assisted by conspicuous textual silence on the meaning of this sign. Already caught in an appearance of churlishness, having repeatedly denied the Lady's requests, Gawain responds with relief to this other form of seduction and hence arrives at a serious misrecognition: he mis-takes the detour and occlusion of the Lady's desire for its renunciation. For, undetected by him, her desire has already turned aside, and by covering over its apparition, the Lady manages to trick Gawain into receiving the instrument of its conveyance, as she makes her gift appear entirely innocent, a mere aid to Gawain's earnest wish to escape imminent death in the beheading game. With the acceptance of her girdle for its putative magic, however, the desire Gawain believes to be his own becomes annexed to that of the Lady, the Other—and functions, thereupon, as the deflected-reflected form of the other's desire. The apparent integrity of Gawain's will, carefully maintained through all his encounters with the Lady, also proves to be an illusion, since his will exists here only as a mirrored sliver of the will of the other to which he has become accomplice. The girdle is then the join at which two registers of desire meet, the junction of a triumphal capture:23

'Now forsake ze pis silke,' sayde þe burde þenne,
'For hit is symple in hitselfe? And so hit wel semez.
Lo! so hit is littel, and lasse hit is worly; Bot who-so knew þe costes þat knit ar þerinne,
He wolde hit prayse at more prys, parauenture; For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,
While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,
Per is no habeal vnder heuen tohewe hym Pat myȝt,
For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erJe.'
Pen kest þe knyȝt, and hit come to his hert
Hit were a juel for þe joparde pat hym iugged were:
When he acheued to Pe chapel his chek for to fech,
Myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn, Pe sleȝt were
noble.
Penne he pulged with hir þepe and þole hit hir to
spike,
And ho bere on hym þe bêt and bede hit hym
swyȜe—
And he granted and hym gafe with a goud wylle—
(1846-61)

With the Lady's subsequent plea to Gawain to
"lelly layne" her gift "fro hir lorde," however, the
temporary attribution she has improvised for the
girdle falls away, and the girdle is returned to its
role as a guilty prop in a presumed love scene—

And bisȝȝt hym, for hir sake, disseuer hit neuer,
Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde; þe leude hym
acordez
þat neuer wyȝe schulde hit wyt, iwyss, bot þay
twayne
for noȝȝt;
He þonkked hir oft ful swyȜe,
Ful þro with hert and þoȝȝt.
(1862-67)

—the very scene that has been acted out, though
never to its completion and always with great care
on Gawain's side to prevent self-incrimination, in
all their private encounters together, including this
final occasion. As something to be concealed from
a rightful husband, the girdle is by inference a love
gift; and the necessity of its concealment entails
a guilty conspiracy of silence that instates two per-
sons, "þay twayne," in an apparent transgression
against a third, in effect producing a version, al-
beit here in a form empty of content, of the com-
mon courtly theme of triangulated, adulterous
love. The text goes on to hint of the return of the
girdle's other cathexis: "Twice (ll. 1874, 2438) the
girdle is called a 'luf-lace,' once (2033) a 'drurye,'
glossed by the editors as a 'love-token,' the same
word later applied by the poet to the illicit dalli-
ance of Merlin and Morgan" (Friedman and Os-
berg 307).

Thereafter, each occasion of unknotting and
re knotting witnesses the girdle's passage into and
out of other, subsidiary vocabularies and lexical
frames. It is a magical prophylactic to Gawain
when it leaves the Lady (doubly prophylactic, in
that it is thought to ward off both death and fur-
ther sexual demands from the Lady). Immediately
after the Green Knight's revelations, however,
Gawain seeks to make of the girdle the conveniently
extrovertible carrier of his moral unease—that
part of him he attempts to excoriate from his
"kynde," or true authentic nature, in an orgy of
symbolic excision: flinging away the offending
(part)-object and transferentially attributing to all
womankind, woman's "kynde" (including, by tacit
accusation, the Lady), the worst, false, and now
presumably extruded portion of that nature.24 The
expurgation apparently complete, Gawain can
then take up the girdle again, but explicitly as
"syngne"—that is, as a thing that he sees as a-part
from him, separate, and with which he exists only
in a proximate confabulation. Gawain's rendering
of the girdle as "syngne" thus slyly testifies to the
tactical apprehension of a distinction between an
inside characterized as Gawain and an outside
characterized as an overlay, his "faut," "surfet,
"fayntyse." That division is interposed through the
subtle deployment of two tropes during his pub-
lc self-accounting to Arthur's court: first, a trope
of capture, where an unsuspecting Gawain is sup-
posedly "tan" by "vntrawpe" imaged like a wait-
ing trap; and second, a trope of infection, where
the same "untrawpe" is visualized as a kind of ex-
trinsic disease, which fastens ("is tachched") upon
Gawain, creating an ailment that is then "caȝt" by
the hapless victim (2508-12). Even as Gawain is
passionately averring that his "harme" can never
be removed from him, therefore ("twynne wil hit
neuer"), his mechanism of strategic distancing, of
inserting a space between what is self and what is
not-self (but an unfortunate supplement or addi-
tion devised by a woman), has already enacted a
scenario of self-removal, an escape through the
disjunctions afforded by metaphor.25

Where the girdle as a sign is intended by Gawain
to deliver an alibi of sorts, it appears to promise
his erstwhile adversary, the Green Knight, the pos-
sibility of mastery and command over the Lady's
text and all its strategies. By claiming the girdle as
his possession ("my wede") in his disclosures to
Gawain, the Green Knight is able also to lay claim to rightful ownership of the seduction game after the fact ("I wro3t hit myseluen") and thereby assert his dominion over its supervisor, the Lady ("my wyf"). To legitimate his access to the girdle, he artfully alludes to its colors, green and gold, which are pointedly his own colors as well ("For hit is grene as my goune," "pat is golde-hemmed"), and stealthily reintroduces the motif of the hunt, a motif we are habituated to think of as belonging to him, by casually offering Gawain the girdle for a souvenir: "And I gif þe, sir, þe gurdel . . . ." (2358-96). That single gesture at once recalls all the earlier instances when, in his role as Bertilak the hunter, he had offered other prizes to Gawain, and it surreptitiously reconstructs the girdle as merely another of his trophies to give away, a prize, this time from a manhunt. It is a move that seeks to eclipse the primacy of the Lady's part and her responsibility for the stalking of Gawain, since it works to dissolve the specificity of her particular subtle hunt and all its scenes into a panoramic generality of hunts dominated by Bertilak—the Green Knight: the Lady's project is to appear as only one act in a grander, vaster design overseen by a male supervisor, with its crucial preeminence accordingly withheld.

The potential violence of the move is immediately disengaged, however, by the slipperiness of the girdle as a sign. Once Gawain's brief, furious outburst has served its intended task of suggesting his innate innocence, he lapses quite unself-consciously into calling the girdle a "luf-lace," a reference that meaningly signals the quiet surfacing, once again, of the Lady's discourse (2438). With this recurrence, the layers of signification wrought by the Lady return to haunt the text, and her desire overshadows the momentum of refiguration, fleetingly halting it. That is to say, feminine desire breaks in to dispel the masculine assertion of mastery at the very juncture where that control and mastery would seem most secure: riding the protean elusiveness of the sign, feminine desire doubles back on, and ironizes, in a countermovement, the process of the girdle's refiguration. In that moment when masculine discursive command falters—at the point where the sign slips away from the narrative in which it has been ambitiously embedded—the feminine text ineluctably emerges once again. To expand and consolidate its moment, this incursion by the feminine dilates into a celebratory testament to Morgan lan Fée: in a dizzying turnaround, the Green Knight not only admits Morgan's overarching authority and powers in an astonishing, prolonged excursus—an admission that represents him no longer as master-manipulator but only as a servant, and Morgan's obedient creature—but also hints at the extent of her reach and possible status, when he respectfully describes her as "Morgne be goddes" (2446-67).

The slippery reversals of hierarchy and priority asserted in the quick substitution of one construction after another (the Lady's, Gawain's, the Green Knight's, the Lady's again, then Morgan's) echo once more when the girdle, in its final appearance toward the end of the poem, metamorphoses into a "bauderyk" and multiplies in number at the Arthurian court. There, Gawain's gloomy projection of the girdle as a penitential sign—his lodging it, in other words, within a closed signifying system that would stabilize its meaning along a moral-ethical axis, with himself at the center—is given short shrift by Arthur and the knights. The court refuses Gawain's melancholy prognosis, with its joy and laughter, and Arthur overturns the girdle's signification once again by quite literally turning the sign over on its side, an act that records its entrance into yet another order of reference by mutating it into another object altogether, a girdle-become-baldric. But even here in its celebrated afterlife the referent(s) of the once-girdle cannot be grasped with any finality. So much may be hazarded by that sign—perhaps joy, affection, honor, esteem, renown, a lesson, a romance, a counternarrative, a postscript, and, not least of all, the allegorized fable of an endless desire—that its signifying horizon vanishes at the very point where its multiplication and dispersal take effect. With the girdle-baldric firmly ensconced as an institution, the chronic uncertainty and dilation of desire staged through it are dramatically enshrined also as permanent conditions.

It is because the girdle is furnished as a material structure organized around a break (a girdle, by definition, can only be built around an imperfect knot, whose provisionality holds open the possibility of continued use) that the object so
aptly lends itself to a demonstration of the properties of the linguistic signifier. For the infrastructural detail that accommodates the girdle to repeated use also accommodates it to the accumulation of diverse referents as it moves across the levels of the text, unknotting from within one discursive modality to be remade within another, in a progression that attests, perhaps invites, continual attempts at rescripting its signification. After a time, something very like an allegory of language or a narrative of the sign is collected, a signifier for language, for the operation and play of linguistic difference, a signifier for the signifier, no less. Yet something further takes place with this staging of the sign, this putting-into-effect of the girdle-as-sign within the poem. Etymologically, Shoshana Felman remarks in an extraordinary aside, "analysis" (a word we may identify as coextensive with the reading process, and for which, perhaps, it may do service) means "the undoing of a knot" ("Postal Survival" 71). That is to say, the specter of a knot coalesces at the precise moment and location in the text where analysis-reading is to occur; and our performance of that twin activity takes on, or mimes, the activity of the open, imperfect knot, the knot of the girdle, in that we constantly repeat the gestures of unraveling and reconstitution that are conditioned—indeed, demanded—by the character of the knot itself.29

For a polemicized afterword to this never-ending story of the sign, it would be timely to recapitulate that it is by the agency and operation of the sign that Gawain is marked over twice in pivotal sequences in the poem, first by the pentangle, and then by the girdle—he is re-marked, re-signed—in a kind of double writing, or writing double, by the feminine, in the style and signature of the feminine text.30

Notes

1 Another instance where feminine agency is bypassed or minimized by an influential critic is represented in an otherwise unexceptionably fine reading by Spearing: it is, he says, "the poet" and "the plot of the poem," not Morgan or the Lady, that act against Gawain (Gawain-Poet 190). Shoshana Felman seems to speak to just such attitudes as these when she suggests that we learn "how to read femininity; how to stop reading through the exclusive blind reference to a masculine signified, to phallocentric meaning" ("Rereading" 27). Unfortunately—but perhaps unsurprisingly—Brewer extends his confident pronouncements on female marginality to the readers of poems as well. Writing some ten years before Valerie Krishna's production of a critical edition of the alliterative Morte Arthure (and eighteen years before Mary Hamel's), he finds this text "a fascinating poem for any middle-aged soldiers and politicians who may be able to read a slightly difficult Middle English dialect: not much likely to attract women and undergraduates" ("Courtesy" 82).

2 Dramatically changing interests perceptible in the reception of the poem over the last several decades might in themselves force a recognition of this relationship. See Bloomfield for a brief survey of general trends in criticism and scholarship from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century; see also the annotated bibliography by Blanch (Reference Guide).

3 The practice is so habitual that it escapes particular notice. Examples include Benson; Burrow; Edie, "Morgain" 303 and "Sir Gawain" 60-61; Eagan 83; Hubert 454; Kittredge 132-36; L. H. Loomis; Spearing, Gawain-Poet; Williams; and the lively Baughan-Friedman dispute—with Mertens-Fonck representing a curious exception. More recently, feminist essays, while continuing to read the poem as the narrative of its masculine characters—thus unintentionally colluding with the masculine text once again to confirm the marginality of the women—have nonetheless argued the putative marginality in politically useful ways. (See, e.g., Fisher's "Leaving Morgan Aside." Her more nuanced "Taken Men and Token Women," which unfortunately appeared after the completion of my paper, could not be taken into account here.) My own retroping of the narrative pretext in the register of an unfamiliar-familiar story of elusive, enigmatic women aims at evoking, not (inherently) marginalized figures, but the resonances of a countertext that erodes the assumption of an all-powerful masculine narrative.

4 All line references to Sir Gawain, henceforth designated by numbers alone, are to the Tolkien, Gordon, and Davis edition. Like the editors, I follow Israel Gollancz's lead in spelling the Green Knight's name Bertilak. A reader's report leads me to believe I should clarify my use of citations from the poem's critical tradition in support of my arguments. It might appear to some that by selectively abstracting material from the poem's critical history that happens to coincide with my views (much of this material often being buried in, or incidental to, the writing of the authors I cite), I am generating an impression of critical continuity for my reading strategy. I should therefore perhaps state the obvious—that the authors I quote in my support would not, in fact, necessarily support or approve the ways in which I deploy their work, and that the points of convergence that seem to emerge effortlessly between parts of my arguments and theirs are sometimes the result of a highly inflected, polemical, and
admittedly interested retroping of the criticism and scholarship on the poem.

Because limitations of space require me to focus my discussion narrowly, I concentrate on two important structural cruxes in the poem—the pentangle and the girdle—though they make up only one skin of the feminine narrative summarized here. I am, however, currently revising a paper that teases out another strand of the feminine text, examining sexuality, erotic speech, theatricality, courtly relations, and gender identity in the seduction scenes (see the biographical note accompanying this article).

4. Guenevere ... seems transformed from a person into an elegant courtly artifact" (Hanning 11). We may wish to remember, in the context of her talismanic place in the Arthurian court—on display, framed by other precious objects, each announcing the court's magnificence and plenitude—that Freud's essay “Fetishism” apportioned to the fetish the work of both marking an absence and simultaneously warding off any recognition of absence.

One purpose of the game, according to Bertilak, is “to haf greud Gaynour and gart hir to dyse” (2460). Guenevere is also strategically conjoined with Morgan in being a silent presence at court, like Morgan accessible only through the response of others to her. Fisher observes, with wit and acuity, that the women are positioned at opposite ends of the poem—Guenevere at the beginning, Morgan at the close—with the Lady occupying the middle (“Leaving” 135).

Among the critics invoking the tradition of hostility or competition between Guenevere and Morgan are Carson 14; Clark and Wasserman 64; Friedman 268; R. S. Loomis 88, 115; Mertens-Fonck 1075; Moon 56–57; Novak 122; and, most notably, Paton, esp. 60. The Middle English Sir Launfal and Marie de France's Lanval dramatize tension between Guenevere and a fairy mistress—and many believe (following Paton or Loomis, French or Celtic schools of source scholarship) that Morgan is a celebrated representative of this type. Myra Olstead's persuasive hypothesis that the “larger than life” figure of the courtly mistress has its origin in supernatural women, including the fae, would further reduce the distance between Guenevere and Morgan—perhaps finally conflating them (128–29).

5. Eagan hints at another connection between Guenevere and the Lady (72), through the nearly identical descriptions of the tapestries that form part of the backdrop against which each of the women appears, the “tapes” from “tars” around Guenevere and the “t[j]apiez ... of tuly and tars” in Gawain’s bedchamber, the Lady’s setting (77, 858).

6. Many have argued or assumed that the Virgin, though a divine figure, functions for Gawain as a courtly mistress. Novak remarks that, viewed as Gawain’s lady, she conjoins the themes of chastity and troth (127–28); Spearin describes Gawain as the Virgin’s “man” (Gawain-Poet 196); McAlindon calls him “Mary’s knight” (126); Taylor mentions his “allegiance to Mary” (11); and Hieatt points out that Gawain’s “chief fealty” belongs “to the Virgin” (354n25). Gawain thrice invokes the personal form of her name, Mary—when he is cold and lonely on Christmas Eve (737, 754) and again on the first morning with the Lady (1263). Significantly, it is as “Maré” that she intervenes between him and the Lady at the critical moment on the third morning (1769). Thus deployed, a commonplace medieval topos—the eroticized (but necessarily sublimated) relationship between a knight and the Blessed Virgin—assumes a strategic discursive shape and significance in this text.

10. The images of the Lady and the Virgin telescope complex psychic discourses of the feminine that extend far beyond the poem to operate an infinitely suggestive tension between secular and sacred forms of literature in the Middle Ages. Since C. S. Lewis's Allegory of Love in 1958, much has been written on the courtly mistress’s vexed relationship to the Virgin Mary. Kristeva’s distinguished formulation in the brilliant and provocative “Stabat Mater” falls somewhere between strictly historicist and broadly universalizing models: “Initially, the cult of the Virgin, which assimilated Mary to Jesus and pushed asceticism to an extreme, seems to have contrasted sharply with courtly love for the noble lady. . . . Yet even in its carnal beginnings courtly love had this in common with Mariolatry, that both Mary and the Lady were focal points of men’s aspirations and desires. Furthermore . . . both were embodiments of an absolute authority that was all the more attractive because it seemed not to be subject to the severity of the father. This feminine power must have been experienced as power denied, all the more pleasant to seize because it was both archaic and secondary, an ersatz yet not less authoritarian form of the real power in the family and the city, a cunning double of explicit phallic power” (106–07). For a representative Anglo-American feminist account, see Penny Schine Gold's Lady and the Virgin.

Interestingly, the Lady and the Virgin also appear in a line Spearin identifies as the “sovereign mid point” in Sir Gawain: “‘Madame,’ quof pe myry mon, ‘Mary yow zelde . . . .’” (1263). Applying to medieval texts Alastair Fowler’s suggestion that a symbolic, iconological, or organizational center can be located, where kingship or “sovereignty” is apt to manifest itself, or be figured, in a poem, Spearin identifies this line as the point at which a “sovereign” (Arthur) should appear, but fails to. It must be Gawain himself, then, Spearin reasons, who displaces the king in this romance, to occupy the poem’s most significant location: fittingly, since the knight is “Arthur’s surrogate,” “the hero,” a possessor of royal blood, and so forth (“Central and Displaced Sovereignty” [260]). A feminist reading accepting his notion of an all-important textual fulcrum might wish to emphasize instead the two feminine presences that are unarguably inscribed, along with Gawain, in this august position, a double inscription Spearin himself glances at in recommending Gawain’s claims: “At the centre of the poem’s central line, we find . . . Gawain himself. Appropriately enough, he is accompanied by his seductive hostess . . . but l. 1263 does not merely pair together Gawain and the lady; it places him between two ladies, with both of whom he is linked by alliteration—‘Madame,’ the hostess, and ‘Mary,’ the Blessed Virgin. This arrangement is powerfully symbolic” (261; italics mine). If two feminine figures materialize where a masculine figure of sovereign power might be expected, hedging between them a principal player of the masculine text, their appearance
might well indeed make a "powerfully symbolic" statement—on behalf of the feminine text.

11 Morgan and the Lady's most extensive and elaborate linking occurs, of course, at their introduction. The text nonetheless continues to refer to the presence of "je ladys" together on each occasion of communal merrymaking, and at least twice takes special pains to ensure their unmistakable identification ("Pe alder and pe zonge" [1316-17], "Boe pe ladys" [1373]).

12 Both Kane and Hanning discuss the notorious difficulty of anchoring meaning, value, and emphasis in this poem. This metaphorical "knot of the feminine" is of course—like the "luf-lace"—an "endeles knot" different in kind from the pentangle.

13 The "consaunce of je clere werke / Ennurned upon veluet" (2026-27) might or might not refer to the pentangle, since there is no earlier mention that the pentangle is displayed anywhere except on Gawain's shield.

14 The "virgin knot" (185), itself a metaphor, while Kiteley seems to assume that the images function as interchangeable figures "virgin knot" (185), itself a metaphor, while Kiteley seems to assume that the images function as interchangeable figures (48-49). Marina Warner, in contrast, finds a metonymic relation between the Virgin's girdle and the state of incipient or actual motherhood in late medieval art (278-79). One might also suspect that the Virgin's image on Gawain's shield is a residue from an earlier period of Arthurian legendary history, since in the Historia Britonum Nennius also describes Arthur as carrying an image of the Virgin on his shield: "Arthur portavit imaginem sanctae Mariae perpetuae virginis suae" (line 217). He reads line 2226, furthermore, as referring to the image of the holy Mary, the everlasting Virgin, on his [shield]," not "on his shoulders" 'super humeros suos' (Morris 76, 35).

16 Long before the advent of deconstructive readings, Englehardt made the casual but shrewd remark that "the 5 virtues assigned to Gawain in that dilutario are not determinative or even quite discriminable" (219). Finlayson, moreover, reads the "papiayez," "peruyng," "tortors," and "trulofez" in lines 611-13 as the devices of the courtly lover: "the author is quite prosaically spurred attempts to read a relationship between them. To Novak, for instance, the pentangle is a metaphor for Mary's "virgin knot" (185), itself a metaphor, while Kiteley seems to assume that the images function as interchangeable figures (48-49). Marina Warner, in contrast, finds a metonymic relation between the Virgin's girdle and the state of incipient or actual motherhood in late medieval art (278-79). One might also suspect that the Virgin's image on Gawain's shield is a residue from an earlier period of Arthurian legendary history, since in the Historia Britonum Nennius also describes Arthur as carrying an image of the Virgin on his shield: "Arthur portavit imaginem sanctae Mariae perpetuae virginis suae" (line 217). He reads line 2226, furthermore, as referring to the image of the holy Mary, the everlasting Virgin, on his [shield]," not "on his shoulders" 'super humeros suos' (Morris 76, 35).

19Practices of this kind might constitute "a hermeneutics focused on the detail, which is to say, on those details of the female anatomy generally ignored by male critics and which significantly influence our readings of the texts in which they appear" (Schor, Breaking 160). On "concentricity" and the organization of female sexuality and the feminine unconscious, see Montrelay's "Inquiry into Femininity."

20 Although I have coded the neck wound as masculine, reading from a conventional Freudian model of castration, it might also be argued that by virtue of its suggestive shape, the wound (and the consequent scar) can be retroed as feminine; as a cross-sectional representation of the circle, it is after all powerfully reminiscent of the vulvaic or vaginal "gash."

21 There is "a peculiar imbalance in the symmetrical opposition of pentangle and girdle. For though the poet spends forty-three verses [sic] (623-65) carefully, almost pedantically, expounding the symbolism of the pentangle, he says nothing explicitly about the symbolism of the girdle" (Friedman and Osberg 301-02).

22 Both "a ring [and] a girdle . . . are, under one aspect, universal vaginal symbols, under another, instruments of binding magic" (Friedman and Osberg 308-09).

23 In an excellent structural reading of the poem, Hieatt mentions the OED's gloss of the word lace as "a net, noose, snare" (341). Like Benson (40), he discovers a second lace beside the Lady's—wrapped around the shaft of the Green Knight's ax when that character appears at the Arthurian court (line 217). He reads line 2226, furthermore, as referring to a third lace, distinguishable from the Lady's lace on Gawain's body. All three nooses wind up, by a suggestive coincidence, around either the trunk of a man or the protruding shaft of a weapon (Hieatt 344, 350)—a coincidence in positioning that seems curious, to say the least.

24 One critic notices that "the girdle is presented almost as an active agent of deceit—be falsysng" (Mills 637). Gawain's flaw, by his own reasoning, did not exist in him in any form whatever, neither as a trace nor as the possibility of a trace, before the seduction game. Rather, he imagines it as produced by the Lady's game, as an unjust effect that is subsequently laid to his charge and interfaced with him ("Now am I fawy and false, "cowardys me tayt," "my kynde to forsake" [2382, 2379, 2380; italics mine]). Dove contributes the important reminder that in both Middle English and Old French literature an antifeminist and misogynist Gawain is as fully a part of the Gawain tradition as is a courtesian one.

25 By resorting to the blasme des femmes tradition, Gawain deftly codes his own "faut" and masculine weakness in general as feminine, naming as "woman" all that is demonstrably wrong with man and invoking in shorthand form ("Adam,"
their helpful comments. A special group of readers—Janadas

"Salamon," "Samson," "Dauyth") certain misogynist strains
in biblical history to support his weighting of the figure. In his
hasty conversion of what Barbara Johnson calls "a difference
within ... into a difference between" (105), Gawain naively
fails to notice, however, that his assignment of blame inadvert-
ently registers an implicit assumption that ultimate power over
men's actions and destinies rests with women—an assumption
useful to feminist readings (see, e.g., Heng).

Much has been said about the traditional, innovative,
or ambiguous use of color in Sir Gawain (see, e.g., Blanch,
"Games"); Eagan; Kittredge; Robertson; and Zimmer), par-
ticularly by critics taking anthropological, folkloric, or reli-
gious approaches to the poem. An entire branch of the poem's
scholarship is in fact devoted to the interpretation of color.
As indicated in this paper, my interest in the use of color is
strictly local and limited.

More traditional views on how a trope of disenchant-
ment functions in the poem (represented by scholars ranging
from Kittredge to the Indologist Ananda Coomaraswamy)
center primarily on the interaction between the Green Knight
and Gawain.

Gawain's insistence that the girdle is "the token of
vntrawpe hat I am tan inne," a claim as subtle as it is exag-
erated, represents a last, late attempt at fixing an identity
for himself—even if it is that of the shamefaced wrongdoer
and sincere penitent. This final stab at securing a known and
knowable, clearly defined identity is little different from the
earlier, more conspicuous attempt with the pentangle. As a
ploy, however, it is no more successful: the court, by turning
back Gawain's moralizing, defers not only the girdle's mean-
ing but also the temptation and opportunity to stabilize an
identity. A poignant misunderstanding is also registered in
Gawain's use of "trawbe" and "vntrawpe" here—apparently
terms of considerable meaning for him. Critics rightly point
out that "trawbe" to one idea, value, or character in the poem
is instantly "vntrawpe" to another; the concepts, as they are
exercised in the poem, are treacherously shifty and elusive,
impossible to anchor.

The cutting of a knot, Felman observes (an act whose
prototypical example leaves the navel scar), performs again
the unloosening of the tie with the mother: a "cut" knot is
thus the witness of a necessary separation and rebeginning.
Interestingly, the description of the pentangle also recalls, in
its vulnerability, Lacan's "Borromean knot": everything comes
apart once a crucial cut is introduced (Clément 184).

R. A. Shoaf's close readings of the pentangle and girdle
come to this conclusion: "The knots people tie in or with the
green girdle . . . are signs of the human and human signs:
they will submit to analysis, and life will go on. Unlike such
geometrically perfect knots as the pentangle, transcendental
in the universality of their form, these knots, knots like the
knot of the green girdle, are not the termination of signification.
They are rather terms of signification, leading to more
terms, more signification, the endless finitude of interpreta-
tion" ("Syngne" 165; italics mine).

I would like to thank Eugene Vance, Ann C. Watts, and
Jane Chance for their careful attention to this paper and for
their helpful comments. A special group of readers—Janadas
Devan, Sam Otter, Suvir Kaul, Alison Case, Paul Sawyer,
Dorothy Mermin, Sandra Siegel, and Carol V. Kaske—
constituted an indispensable community at all stages of
writing.

Works Cited

Arthur, Ross Gilbert. Medieval Sign Theory and Sir Gawain
——. "The Signs of Sir Gawain: A Study in Fourteenth-
Baswell, Christopher, and William Sharpe, eds. The Passing
of Arthur: Essays in Arthurian Tradition. New York: Gar-
Baughan, Denver Ewing. "The Role of Morgan le Fay in Sir
Gawain and the Green Knight." English Literary History
Benson, Larry D[ean]. Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and
Bersani, Leo. The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art.
Blanch, Robert. "Games Poets Play: The Ambiguous Use of
Color Symbolism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.
——. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Reference Guide.
Bloomfield, Morton W. Essays and Explorations: Studies in
UP, 1970.
Brewer, D[erek] S. "Courtesy and the Gawain-Poet." Patterns
of Love and Courtesy: Essays in Memory of C. S. Lewis.
——. "The Interpretation of Dream, Folktale and Romance
with Special Reference to Sir Gawain and the Green
Knight." Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 77 (1976):
569–81.
Brooks, Peter. "The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criti-
cism." Discourse in Psychoanalysis and Literature. Ed.
Burrow, J[ohn] A[nthony]. A Reading of Sir Gawain and the
Carson, Angela. "Morgain la Fée as the Principle of Unity
in Gawain and the Green Knight." Modern Language
Clark, S. L., and Julian N. Wasserman. "Gawain's 'Anti-
feminism' Reconsidered." Journal of the Rocky Moun-
tain Medieval and Renaissance Association 6 (1985):
57–70.
Clément, Catherine. The Lives and Legends of Jacques La-
can. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Columbia
UP, 1983.
Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. "Sir Gawain and the Green
Dove, Mary. "Gawain and the 'Blasme des Femmes' Tra-
Eadie, John. "Morgain la Fée and the Conclusion of Sir

——.


———. “The ‘Syngne of Surfet’ and the Surfeit of Signs in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*” Baswell and Sharpe 152–69.